

ONE

A World Apart

Europe and Russia

Let us begin with this evident fact: Russia does not belong at all to Europe, but to Asia. It follows that judging Russia and the Russians by our European standards is a mistake to be avoided.

—GONZAGUE DE REYNOLD, *1950*¹

In methodological terms, one should de-Europeanise any analysis of Russian policy.

—THOMAS GOMART, *2006*²

The superficial resemblance of Russia to a Western country, and of the majority (not all) of its people to white Europeans and North Americans, presents an obstacle to objective understanding of the country because it takes an effort of mind to grasp and remember the underlying differences. An assumption based on appearances that Russians are not so different, and that they see the world and react to events in the same way as Westerners, has obstructed understanding of those ideals, values, prejudices, hopes, fears, and motivations that are shared by many Russians but are distinctive or alien to the West.³

This misconception has real and important implications for managing the relationship with Russia as a country. The assumptions and preconceptions of its leadership are so much at odds with what is taken for granted as

common ground in the Euro-Atlantic community that a false impression of similarity provides fertile ground for misunderstandings, miscommunication, and miscalculation. In particular, Western audiences often struggle to understand why Russia's ruling elite still has such a different worldview from the West's more than twenty-five years after the end of the Soviet Union.⁴ This difficulty is compounded by an apparent commonality of terminology to describe Western and Russian politics. Russia borrows Western terms to describe its own system—"president," "parliament," "elections," "Liberal Democratic Party"—but none of these terms means quite what it implies in a Western context, and any assumption that it does, though on the face of it reasonable, only leads to further confusion for the unwary.

Paradoxically, the sector of Russian society that the West finds easiest to understand constitutes a further barrier to understanding the country as a whole. Russia's liberal, educated, cosmopolitan class can communicate easily with the West because it shares the West's general views, values, and esteem for democracy. But because the message sent to the West is comprehensible and amenable, it tends to be enormously overstated in assessments of Russia overall. As put by one representative of this class, Professor Ivan Kurilla, "Many primary sources about Russia came to the West from people like myself—relatively educated, Western-connected, mostly opposition-minded people. They tend to look at Russia like Westerners do."⁵ But this is misleading. Russia's liberals say things that the West would like to hear, but their views are not representative of attitudes in the country as a whole.

The story of the liberal intelligentsia is an integral part of the story of Russia. But it is not a part that has any bearing on the country's current trajectory except insofar as it stimulates state policy to suppress its political inclinations. Still, the predominance of this group in Western sources of information about Russia, and especially the repeated appearance of a very limited number of well-known Russians of liberal or Western orientation in interviews with Western writers, commentators, and journalists, not only distorts the West's image of Russia but also exacerbates the inclination to mirroring—to assuming that Russians see the world in the same way and with the same points of reference and historical and conceptual framework as Westerners do.⁶

It is therefore essential to look beyond the individuals most widely quoted in Western descriptions of Russia. This necessarily involves leaving

behind descriptions that are comforting and familiar and instead considering those elements of Russian behaviors and worldviews that are less palatable to Western sensitivities. To consider Russia as a whole requires noting the vastly different attitudes deriving from the vastly different impact of recent history and social development on each of the “four Russias.” This term, formulated by geographer Natalia Zubarevich, divides Russians into categories by location, urbanization, education, and income, arriving at four groups with very distinctive views of their country and, by extension, the rest of the world.⁷ Zubarevich’s First Russia is urban, educated, and relatively affluent; the Second Russia is urban and industrial; the Third Russia is rural, apolitical, and impoverished; and the Fourth Russia is ethnically non-Russian and primarily concentrated in the southern republics.⁸ Importantly, the liberal, Western-leaning Russians encountered by foreigners in person or through the media tend to come almost exclusively from the First Russia, but even then they represent only a relatively small subset of it. This leaves aside the great majority of Russians holding a distinctly non-Western set of historical beliefs, attitudes, presumptions, and values.

At times, the dawning realization of these different values has caused Western writers on Russia to recoil in horror and resort to emotive language to try to convey the alien nature of the culture they are describing. In the early stages of the Cold War, the U.S. Army noted that “the characteristics of this semi-Asiatic are strange and contradictory. . . . The Russian is subject to moods which to a westerner are incomprehensible; he acts by instinct.”⁹ A decade later the South African author and traveler Laurens van der Post attempted to understand and rationalize the Russian cultural phenomena he encountered by placing them within a familiar frame of reference, repeatedly comparing Russians to “the primitive black people of Africa.”¹⁰ It has even been suggested that under the influence of their history, Russians as a people are not motivated by the same needs and drivers as other human beings. The U.S. Army general Walter Bedell Smith served as ambassador to Moscow, and later as director of Central Intelligence. In his view, “It is not enough and basically it is not true to say, as so many have said to me, that the Russian people are like people everywhere and only the Government is different. The people, too, are different. They are different because wholly different social and political conditions have retarded and perverted their development and set them apart from other civilizations.”¹¹ Russian

authors too can write angrily and damningly of their own country's psychological peculiarities, and "diagnose 'manic-depressive psychosis . . . acute megalomania, persecution complex and kleptomania' [even if] foreigners who write like this are accused of Russophobia."¹²

These differences become most evident when Russia and the West encounter each other without the filters of distance. Even before Soviet times, the deceptive superficial resemblance between Russians and Europeans did not long survive first contact. Henry Kissinger notes that on Russia's arrival in European politics after the defeat of Napoleon, "Western Europeans . . . viewed with awe and apprehension a country whose elites' polished manners seemed barely able to conceal a primitive force from before and beyond Western civilization."¹³

Today the stark differences between one side of the Russian border and the other are especially striking in northern Europe. The Estonian border town of Narva and its Russian counterpart, Ivangorod, are a case in point. To the British novelist Gerald Seymour, visiting in 2017, the border crossing represented "a collision point in two worlds, tectonic plates, where great forces either tolerated each other and stayed apart, or collided."¹⁴ There are persistent alarmist claims that Moscow might create and exploit discontent among the largely Russian-speaking population of Narva to attempt to destabilize the Estonian government. This view tends to discount local reality, where the advantages of living peacefully in Estonia—even if expressed only in terms of quality of life and public services—are immediately obvious to residents on both sides of the border.¹⁵

But in the front-line states along Russia's western periphery, it is the memory of Russian domination and occupation that echoes most strongly. This memory too can reinforce national stereotypes that border on racism. Intermingled with the knowledge that neighboring peoples have been subjected to repression, deportations, and mass murder at the hands of Russians are more recent portrayals of Russians in the post-Soviet era as remaining chaotic, primitive, brutalized, and insanitary.¹⁶ Although with the passing of generations, the direct memory of being under Russian rule may fade, the consciousness of stark societal differences at the Russian border is still strong.¹⁷ Few cultural artifacts speak of this divide as clearly as the Russian-language signs at Finnish truck stops explaining the correct way to use a Western toilet.

These differences are highlighted still further on the rare occasions

when Russia welcomes large groups of foreigners who may previously have had little interest in or knowledge of the country. It was normal and natural that the Olympics hosted by Russia, whether in Moscow in 1980 or in Sochi in 2014, were preceded by a frenzy of beautification so that visitors would receive as little exposure as possible to the natural state of the country and its infrastructure; the same applied in full measure, for instance, to the London Olympics in 2012. But cultural trivia such as—again—the notorious twin toilets and other lavatorial oddities¹⁸ combined with more sinister reminders of state control, such as official references to surveillance cameras in the showers, to emphasize just how far European and North American visitors were from home.¹⁹ The Sochi Olympics could have been an effective instrument of soft power for Russia, and were promoted as demonstrating the country's attraction, hospitality, and openness to the world, but instead they became known as a case study in corruption and gross mismanagement, the high point of Russia's state-sponsored doping program, and a precursor to the annexation of Crimea.²⁰ They also provided many foreigners with their first understanding of how profoundly different Russia is from Europe—not least in the country's lack of self-awareness in how it presents itself to the rest of the world.

By the time of the soccer World Cup four years later in the summer of 2018, there were signs that Russia had at least recognized that it had an image problem. The Russian leadership went to considerable lengths to create “an image of Russia as a country that is safe, modern and open to the world.”²¹ Russian police and security forces were at pains to tone down their normal level of response to expressions of public enthusiasm for the duration of the tournament, with one regular visitor to Russia expressing surprise that they resorted to “polite requests rather than baton charges.”²² But other steps taken to make Russia seem less alien and more inviting served to highlight still further the cultural differences between the host nation and its visitors. Volunteers tasked with escorting and assisting fans had been sent to classes in which they were taught how to appear friendly, including the art of smiling (a display of friendliness in much of Europe and North America but in Russia a cause for suspicion).²³ According to travelers' reports, these efforts had widely varying results.²⁴

Nevertheless, the difficulties experienced by the West in grasping the nature of Russia are not insurmountable. To the Western mind, Russia

abounds in contradictions and paradoxes derived from its unique history and its precarious balance between Europe and Asia in terms of politics, culture, social development, and simple physical geography. But these contradictions can be resolved, or at least accommodated and lived with, if Western preconceptions of history, truth, and logic are left behind. According to the American author and long-term Russia correspondent David Satter, “Understanding Russia is actually very easy, but one must teach oneself to do something that is very hard—to believe the unbelievable. Westerners become confused because they approach Russia with a Western frame of reference, not realizing that Russia is a universe based on a completely different set of values.”²⁵

Above all, Russia should not be treated as fundamentally inexplicable or impenetrable, or comprehensible not through rational analysis but only through mystical invocations of the Russian soul.²⁶ Instead, in order to understand the roots of the persistent failures in the multiple relationships between Moscow and the West, Russia “has to be treated not as a monstrous, unfathomable apparition to be contemplated helplessly, but as one country among others (with startling peculiarities, of course).”²⁷ Later chapters of this book seek to explore, and if possible explain, some of these peculiarities.

Russia and Europe

“Mount up! On the road! To Europe now, and seize it!” . . . The way winds on across an unknown, unknowable planet.

—ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN, *Prussian Nights*²⁸

Problems of alienation and mutual incomprehension also apply in reverse; the same complex of “otherness” in large part governs how Russia views the West. The notion that there are special, eternal cultural qualities of the Russian people that distinguish them fundamentally from other peoples, in particular from those of Western Europe, means the West ordinarily serves as the constituting “other” for Russian nationalist sentiment.²⁹

Historically, this use of the West as a benchmark against which Russia measures itself has referred to Europe; the relatively recent emergence of North America as a center of values and power has not diluted the role of geographic proximity in Europe’s traditional role as both a model to emu-

late and an opponent to be feared or hated.³⁰ In one of the many instances of repetitive cycles in Russian history, this ambivalent view of Europe, alternately or simultaneously envied and despised, has swung back and forth according to a familiar pattern, all the while providing not only Russia's principal foreign policy dilemma but also a substantial part of the philosophical preoccupation of thinking Russians.

The perennial debate between the *Zapadniki* or Westernizers, who saw integration with the West as Russia's only hope, and the Slavophiles, who preferred to retreat from Europe and stand apart as a distinctive and unique people, was an expression of this combination of allure and hatred. Naturally enough, this debate has tended to peak after periods of increased contact or interaction with the West. After the Napoleonic Wars, suggestions that the West enjoyed a superior system of government were displaced by explanations of Russian moral superiority to liberal Europe. A similar pattern could be observed following Russia's defeat in the Crimean War in the 1850s, and again at the end of the nineteenth century. On each occasion, as described by historian Tibor Szamuely, the blend of "admiration and hatred, envy and contempt, superiority and inferiority, that has so often characterized the Russian attitude towards Europe [meant that] their standing in the world had to be measured by Western yardsticks, even while stressing their differentness, yet to feel truly proud of their country they had to be assured that they were not merely as good, but even better than 'abroad.'"³¹

Eventually, with the return of Russian self-confidence, it became axiomatic that Europe was effete, played out, and convulsed by insoluble social problems.³² This view continues today: according to Aleksey Levinson of the Levada Center polling organization, polls asking Russians whether they are Europeans or not show constantly changing results. During the 1990s the majority wanted to be European. By 2017 the majority said they did not. In part, of course, the difference in poll results reflected unambiguous direction from the state aimed at stimulating nationalist feeling. But the Levada Center's director, Lev Gudkov, adds that the recent "propaganda-driven patriotic surge among Russian citizens goes hand in hand with the open and envious hostility toward the West. The collective consciousness always paints an ambivalent picture of the West."³³

When Russian government or society has recognized the necessity of reform, be it in law, industry, the economy, or social relations, the West

has been available as a model and a source of innovations. But every time the Russian government addresses the task of stabilizing the country, suppressing social unrest, or just holding on to power, and consequently turns more conservative or autocratic, the West is portrayed instead as a danger and a menace, and a force working to sabotage Russian achievements.³⁴ Another persistent driver for the rejection of Europe is the perception that even when it is a positive role model for modernization, Europe is a negative one in terms of culture and values—and seeks constantly to impose its culture and values on Russia. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has compared this tendency unfavorably with the country's centuries-long domination by the Mongols, who, he argues, allowed Russians to retain their customs, language, and religion.³⁵ And yet the submission and regular deliveries of tribute that the Mongols demanded, together with the rise in fortunes of those Muscovite princes who allied themselves with them, shaped Russian history more profoundly than any influence from the distant West ever has.

The conflict between these irreconcilable views of Europe, and hence of Russia's place in it, reinforces Russians' views of their country's own exceptionalism and singularity.³⁶ Deciding that it is neither of the West nor of the East leads to a compromise conclusion of uniqueness.³⁷ The other available approach is to reject compromise and attempt to resolve the issue of whether Russia is Western or not by simply declaring that it is. Repeatedly throughout history, Russia's rulers have attempted at times to demonstrate to themselves or their audience that Russia is an integral part of Europe. In President Putin's annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in 2005, he suggested that Russia was "a major European power" that had

for three centuries . . . together with the other European nations passed hand in hand through the reforms of the Enlightenment, the difficulties of emerging parliamentarianism, municipal and judiciary branches, and the establishment of similar legal systems. Step by step, we moved together toward recognizing and extending human rights, toward universal and equal suffrage, toward understanding the need to look after the weak and the impoverished, toward women's emancipation, and other social gains. I repeat—we did this together, sometimes behind and sometimes ahead of European standards.³⁸

And yet few outside Russia would recognize this description of Russian history or of Russia's relationship with Europe, any more than two and a half centuries earlier they recognized Catherine the Great's categorical assertion, with far less attempt at justification, that "Russia is a European country."³⁹ Instead it is the persistent desire throughout history to "prove" that Russians are Europeans that is most telling. If it were true, it would not need to be proved.

In any case, just over a year after Putin's appeal to commonality with Europe, increasing frustration and alarm at Western behavior had already led Russia to begin to seek another path.⁴⁰ In fact, this same cycle of aspiring to and then rejecting the West had already played out under the previous president, Boris Yeltsin, at the very start of the post-Soviet period. While serving as foreign minister of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (the Soviet predecessor of the Russian Federation), Andrey Kozyrev suggested that Russia should join the developed countries of the West, and structure Russian foreign policy and diplomacy in such a way as to seek "entry into the world community."⁴¹ The implication that Russia itself was a backward, undeveloped supplicant was hard to swallow and incompatible with the conflicting notion that Russia as a historical great power automatically deserved respect. Consequently, the idea of a Russian "return to civilization" quickly fell out of favor in the debate over the state's relationship with Europe. This was evident as early as January 1993, when Yeltsin remarked that while "Russia's independent foreign policy started with the West," it was now time to "build relations with any country, be it from the West or East, Europe, or Asia."⁴²

The issue of respect is a recurring obstacle to Russia's reaching mutual understanding with the West. While it is true that many Russians perceive not only that Western countries boast higher standards of living and opportunities for social mobility but also that life and social order in those countries are organized more humanely and justly than in Russia, this observation in itself is not sufficient to seek to be one of them.⁴³ The admiration must be returned, and due homage must be paid to the image of a mighty Russia. As André Gide observed in the 1930s: "What really interests them is to know whether we admire them enough. What they are afraid of is that we should be ill-informed as to their merits. What they want from us is not information but praise."⁴⁴ "Do you respect me?" is one of the classic

existential Russian questions, traditionally associated with advanced stages of vodka consumption; but it is consistently addressed en masse to the West as well as individually to drinking partners. Time and again, Russia takes offense when its feelings are not requited, and retreats into contemplation of its own unique destiny and the comfort of doctrines like Eurasianism, with its implicit rejection of the West.⁴⁵

At the same time, “respect” is another term with far more implications in Russian than its simple translation into English suggests. Westerners might, for example, hold Russia in high esteem for its cultural achievements; but this has little in common with what the Russian state envisages when it makes its demands for respect. Instead, Russia equates respect with fear, and expression of respect by other nations with ensuring that Russia is consulted—and deferred to—on all major aspects of international affairs. Failure to display this deference prompts another reaction from Russia, one that is more dangerous than simple rejection of the West: it fosters the instinct to insist on Russia’s own perceived status as a great power, and to seek to assert this status in confrontation with the West.