

Intelligence in Public Media

The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia

Masha Gessen (Riverhead, 2017), 515 pp., dramatis personae, notes, index.

The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past

Shaun Walker (Oxford, 2018) 278 pp., maps, notes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

Explaining Russia to American audiences long has been an industry among academics and journalists. Such figures as Hedrick Smith, Richard Pipes, George Kennan, and Robert Kaiser for decades have informed and shaped popular views of a land that is culturally and politically mysterious to most US readers, but which at the same time looms large in world affairs and our national debates. Now, as Vladimir Putin begins his fourth term as Russia's president, two journalists offer analyses of how Russian political and public life has come to its present condition and where they might be headed.

The first book, *The Future is History*, is by Masha Gessen, who lives in self-imposed exile—a wise choice, given the fates of opposition journalists in Russia—in New York. She has emerged during the past decade as a prominent explainer of Russia, becoming a frequent contributor to op-ed pages, intellectual journals, and publishing a biography of President Vladimir Putin, among other works. *The Future is History* is Gessen's most ambitious work to date, chronicling Russia's descent from a brief period as an emerging, if badly flawed, post-Soviet democracy, to what she sees as an updated totalitarianism.

Gessen tells her story by weaving two narratives. In the first, she follows several Russians who came of age in the decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union and then moved into intellectual and political activism. In the other, she summarizes major Russian political events since 1991, especially after the turn of the century, to chronicle Putin's rise and consolidation of power. About two-thirds of the way through, she pauses to review the major theories of totalitarianism—essentially, Hannah Arendt's and Zbigniew Brzezinski's writings from the middle of the 20th century—and argues that they apply to Russia today. All of this is presented in the vivid, passionate prose that marks all of Gessen's writing.

Unfortunately, this book simply doesn't work. Its fundamental problem is that it is far too long. At almost

500 pages, it seems to go on almost endlessly, like Russia itself. This would be less of a problem if the people Gessen used to tell her story had been interesting, but they are not. Most of them come from the privileged strata of late Soviet and post-Soviet society—the late opposition leader Boris Nemtsov's daughter, the grandson of Aleksandr Yakovlev, one of the intellectual godfathers to Gorbachev and glasnost—or, like the gay intellectual whose coming out, loves, and academic progress Gessen chronicles in excruciating detail, come from too rarified a world to teach us much about the recent Russian experience. They also are mostly too young to have accomplished much and too self-absorbed for readers to care about them. Nor do Gessen's historical sections work very well. She goes over familiar events and says little that she has not said in earlier books; it's as if she recycled her old notes and accounts.

Nor does *The Future is History* succeed in backing its claim that Putin runs a totalitarian regime. Gessen's summary of Arendt's and Brzezinski's descriptions of totalitarianism makes it clear that she understands the term and its development in studies of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist USSR. She also sees, however, that it does not apply to Russia today—Putin's regime lacks the all-encompassing ideology, mandatory membership in state and party organizations, pervasive terror, control of information, and isolation from the outside world that marked classic totalitarian regimes.

Gessen tries to get around this problem with a little sleight of hand, modifying the definition a bit to conform to the conditions of the late Soviet period rather than the 1930s and 1940s. To do this, she falls back on arguing that lingering habits of mind shaped by Soviet-era totalitarianism left Russia's democratic experiment vulnerable to slipping into a form of authoritarianism, one that maintains power by sharing the fruits of corruption among the elites and using an occasional cautionary murder or crimi-

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nal show trial to keep everyone in line. It's a confused and confusing argument that tries, but fails, to convince the reader that this is the same as totalitarianism. Reading it, one realizes that Putin's Russia resembles nothing more than a banana republic and that to call it a totalitarian state is to drain the term of meaning and allow passion to supersede analysis.

Shaun Walker, a Moscow-based British journalist, takes a much different approach in *The Long Hangover*. As correspondent for *The Guardian*, Walker has traveled throughout Russia and Ukraine, going not only to major cities and areas where events are taking place, but also to places that few Westerners venture. Thus, he reports not only from Moscow and the rebel-held towns of eastern Ukraine, but also from the ruins of abandoned labor camps deep in Siberia and the almost-deserted villages nearby. Wherever he travels, Walker talks to ordinary people and local officials, and his accounts and observations give his book a granular sense of Russian views that Gessen, writing of elites from 5,000 miles away, simply cannot match. Walker, moreover, lets his subjects and experiences speak for themselves, and *The Long Hangover* is unencumbered with distracting theoretical discussions.

Walker describes a country and people imprisoned by a warped version of their history. Since the 1990s, numerous commentators have pointed out that Russia has not reckoned with Soviet history the way modern Germany has with the Nazi period. The result is an almost complete lack of understanding of the Soviet era and the damage it did to Russia and its peoples. Walker is firmly within this school, but his contribution is to show what this has meant down at the level of individuals. He finds few who desire the return of communism or the Soviet state, but a gauzy nostalgia for World War II—named the Great Patriotic War by the Soviets—and the memory of shared sacrifice and the victory over fascism. In terms of common purpose and success, the war was the pinnacle of Soviet success; from there it was generally downhill, especially in the catastrophic 1980s and 1990s.

Consequently, as Walker shows, Russians who seek a model of national greatness and purpose view the world through the prism of the war. In this process, history is simplified and caricatured and then blended with common prejudices, to create an incoherent mess. Russians today, Walker writes, understand the Nazis as a “generalized enemy, the specificity of their evil . . . rarely discussed . . . [Soviet accounts] glossed over the leader cult, the

militarism and the gas chambers and stripped it bare to one quality: the war against the Soviet Union.” (207) The Soviet side of the story, too, is stripped of any nuance or unwelcome inquiries into such matters as the costs of Stalin's poor decisionmaking or how the deportations of entire peoples during the war affect perceptions and events today. The type of historical examination and questioning that routinely goes on in the West now is essentially forbidden in Russia as an unpatriotic attempt to slander the memory of suffering and victory.

Out of this come the simple conclusions of Soviet innocence and that Russia today needs to be unified and strong to face the resurgent fascists who plot its destruction. In eastern Ukraine, Walker finds, it is ordinary for someone to “express furious hatred for ‘fascists’ and then in the same breath rant about the Jews or the gays as the root of all evil in the modern world.” (207) Similarly, a man who has dedicated his life to recording the history of the labor camps in Kolyma rails against Gorbachev for destroying an “incredible country.” “A person who had spent half his life memorializing the camps . . . had over time come to believe the camps had been somewhat justified . . . the country [had] pursued a difficult but necessary course, en route to its historic victory in the war.” (92)

For Putin, historical memory—or its absence—is something to use to manipulate popular opinion and build support for his policies. He's hardly the first strongman to do this, and certainly will not be the last, but much of the value in Walker's reporting is how it shows the cumulative effects of such propaganda—the spread of a truly astonishing cynicism and the willingness of Russians to support Putin's lie-based gangster regime. For that reason, anyone who has ever asked, or been asked, “Do Russians really believe this?” and cannot understand the answer will benefit from reading *The Long Hangover*.

With Putin now set for another six years in office, neither *The Future is History* nor *The Long Hangover* will be anything close to the last word on his regime. Of the two, however, *The Long Hangover* is better written and more informative, which makes it the better choice for looking at the foundations of Russian views and politics today. *The Future is History* is best read critically by those already familiar with the topic or interpretations of totalitarianism. Both, however, can be read profitably by anyone interested in understanding the Russian condition and the roots Moscow's behavior.

