

Now is Not the Time

by [Peter Hitchens](#) (December 2019)



The Clock, Karl Knaths, 1951

Until the October day when I flew backwards across the International Date Line, I was clueless about time. When I say backwards, I mean that I went, in a very short and chilly journey, from a late Monday morning in Providenya, Russia, straight into the previous Sunday afternoon in Nome, Alaska. When I say clueless, I mean that I had never really thought about what a strange and political thing time is before. In simple physical fact, I had travelled across a short stretch

of snow, ice, and freezing water. In the minds of men, including my own, I had done a completely impossible thing, and returned to the middle of a departed day which I had already spent once on earth.

I celebrated my eastward crossing of the Bering Strait with an unhealthy Sunday lunch (my second Sunday lunch that week) at an establishment called Fat Fred's Diner which I still remember with delight. Its simple fried and grilled pleasures and gassy Milwaukee beer were especially enjoyable, after two years of Communist catering. It was a good occasion to seize a little time back from the ever-turning world. I had not merely come out of the rear entrance of the Evil Empire into the USA, after more than two years of life in the USSR, which was a big enough event in itself. I had gone from one world to another. I had also lengthened my official life, a gift I hope to hold on to. How fitting that on this occasion I should have to reset my calendar, as well as my clocks.

[Read more in New English Review:](#)

- [The Catalan Case: A Challenge for Spanish Democracy](#)
- [Hypocrites and Heroes](#)
- [Portsmouth in England](#)

But what I also held on to was a growing awareness that time and its measurement are very peculiar things. Just as Lord Peter Wimsey warns in *The Nine Tailors* against the disturbing strangeness of bells, cats, and mirrors, I warn you to be wary of clocks.

At some point in all this travelling I also began to wonder

why it was that we spent so much time putting clocks forward or backwards. I remember at four o'clock one Moscow midsummer morning stepping out on to my elite balcony (the Brezhnevs were my neighbours) into blazing sunlight and a clear blue sky. The reason for this disturbing experience was that, in an anti-Stalinist measure, the authorities had thrust Moscow time several hours back. They had done this precisely because Stalin, in his years of power, had done the opposite each summer.

The following year, in some sort of pro-Stalinist counter-reaction, the Russian capital's clocks were pushed severely forwards again. Thanks to this equally unnatural change, I was treated to a major state-sponsored firework display—of which there were many in those days—taking place in broad daylight. It was a rigid rule that all such displays, which were conducted by a unit of the Red Army, began at nine in the evening. And so it did that August day, with the sun still high in the western sky. The event looked and sounded like anti-aircraft fire, the colours almost invisible, the smoke everywhere, the noise oddly intensified. It left little black clouds, like flak, slowly dissolving in the still evening air. It was one of the most sinister things I have ever seen and, as it turned out, it presaged a KGB putsch against Mikhail Gorbachev the following morning. Tanks came up my street, and lies came out of my radio. Once again, times were out of joint.

Years later I travelled to the Chinese-controlled city of Kashgar, in the very far west of Peking's empire, in Chinese Turkestan (NB: those who kowtow to Peking's insistence on place-names would refer to 'Beijing' and 'Xinjiang' here, but, as I also don't call Moscow 'Moskva', Prague 'Praha' or Crimea 'Krim', I won't do this). Kashgar is an ancient Silk Road city

well behind the back of beyond, dating from before the time of Christ. It was there long before China began to stretch westwards into central Asia. Now the Chinese despots, not content with simply owning it, are literally smashing it up, because they hate old things and especially old things built by other cultures. It is inhabited by Muslim Uighurs, a Turkic people who have almost nothing in common with the Han Chinese who rule the People's Republic. During my visit, and even more since, the Uighurs faced unfair discrimination, and repression of their culture and language. They also endure what looks very like an attempt to out-populate them with migrant Han Chinese, in what had been their own land. And, as I went out one winter's morning to watch the ancient ceremonies of the Muslim Korban sacrifice in old Kashgar (now, I suspect either banned or highly restricted under tightening oppression), I found that it was still pitch dark at ten o' clock. This casual official insult was a fact of colonial domination. The subject Uighurs were not allowed their own time zone, and so must abide by the imperial clocks in Tiananmen Square, however absurd the results.

In all these cases, it was only politics that made it so. Once, the peoples on either side of the Bering Strait would have held to the same time, fished the same seas, spoken the same language. Now on the two neighboring Diomed Islands, less than three miles apart in the midst of the strait, and divided by the Date Line, you may see yesterday happening if you look East, and tomorrow taking place, if you look west.

The deep political division that runs through that bleak and icy piece of ocean made it convenient to route the zig-zagging International Date Line between the two superpowers, and there it was. The wild fluctuations of time in the old USSR were likewise the result of political gestures. And the black

mornings in Kashgar were a pure demonstration of Chinese Communist power over the Uighur Muslims. It said: "We rule here. You do not. Even the dawn obeys us."

A few years later, safely home on my small island, the home of what we British alone—in a final trace of empire and dominion—still fondly call Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), I found myself involved in a campaign about clocks. There was a plan to abandon GMT forever, and to place us on Central European Time. Its boosters, tricksily calling themselves "Lighter Later," grew very cross as I and my newspaper pointed out that they could equally well call themselves "Darker Later," because that is what would happen in the winter mornings. And they were truly livid when we successfully christened their plan "Berlin Time," a name which stuck and which (in a country which often still seems to be at war with Germany) did them no good at all. Why, they complained peevishly, did I call it "Berlin Time?"

Well, that is because it is what it was. The German Empire, before 1914, was keen to establish what it referred to as *Mitteleuropa Zeit* as the standard throughout its large domains. This was regardless of their convenience; it suited Berlin, and that was that. For Berlin, nearly 15 degrees of longitude east of Greenwich, was the nearest large city to The Kaiser's meridian. (For a comparison, almost 14 degrees of longitude separate Chicago and New York City, and if Manhattan switched to Chicago time it would be awfully dark on winter mornings.)

Then war came—a war in which Germany intended to establish its dominion (and its time) from Antwerp to Kiev, and very nearly succeeded. As it marched east and west, it promptly instructed

its conquered dominions to set their clocks to the same time as those on the Unter den Linden in Berlin. They did this even though, or perhaps because, this compelled the newly subject peoples of Belgium and Northern France to suffer murky mornings all winter, and to wait until after ten o'clock at night for darkness to fall in summer.

Then, in one of these wild gestures which wartime governments are given to, an age of madness began, which is still troubling us. Kaiser's state decreed the adoption of what was then called "Daylight Savings Time" in April 1916 pushing the clocks under its control an hour forward. This tyrannical gesture (swiftly copied in Britain) has never as far as I know been justified by any known practical effect. Germany, after all, lost the war despite messing around with her clocks. This was the first great triumph for a bizarre campaign waged for years before the war by various Victorian and Edwardian eccentrics. One of them, a bug-hunter from New Zealand called George Vernon Hudson, seemed to think that making other people get up earlier would also provide more daylight for him to go about the country, chasing insects in the evening. It did not seem to cross his mind that a few adjustments to his own daily timetable could achieve the same effect. A similar bizarre conceit gripped William Willett, a British property developer and pestilential innovator who was annoyed one summer morning to see that, while he was up early riding his horse around the edge of London, many other people were still annoyingly fast asleep with their blinds drawn. If only these snoring sluggards could be made to get up earlier, he reasoned, then there would be more time for him to play golf on autumn evenings. Benjamin Franklin, astonishingly, had foreseen this sort of nonsense as long ago as 1784, and had written a Swiftian satire proposing police guards on candle shops, a severe tax on window shutters, and the rousing of the populace from sleep at sunrise by cannon fire and incessant church

bells. His shade might have been amused to find that, in our crazier age, his jest was mistaken by some for a serious plan.

Moving the clocks to make people get up earlier was one of those fads, like Esperanto, Volapuk, international currency unions, wearing wool next to the skin, or Knickerbockers, which captured the minds of reformers in an age when everyone believed in "progress" and confused novelty with brilliance. As far as I know none of its claims, to save energy or make us all more efficient and healthy, has ever been shown to be true. It was only in the collective lunacy of wartime, when appeals to patriotic spirit can be used for almost any purpose, that it could take hold of actual governments. The USA sensibly held out against this folly until 1918, but was eventually lobbied into submitting.

Though many countries promptly abandoned the idea as soon as the war was over, the damage was now done. During the Second World War, the clocks were jammed forward even further, which must certainly have made civilians feel they were suffering for victory if it did nothing else.

Great Britain, for the sunnier half of the year, has ever since abandoned the Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) for which it once fought so hard. The zero meridian is arbitrary. It could have been anywhere. But the adoption of Greenwich in 1884, as the starting point of all the world's time, made London the official centre of the world. That was why France, where everyone knows that Paris is the centre of the world, never really accepted it. The French simply refused to acknowledge the Greenwich meridian as the beginning of the global day until 1911. They would absolutely not use the name "Greenwich." Instead, they sulkily referred to the zero

meridian as "Paris mean time, retarded by 9 minutes and 21 seconds."

Nowadays, in a perfect example of spite gone mad, they set their clocks by Berlin rather than (much nearer) Greenwich, so forcing themselves to eat their breakfast croissants in the dark all winter. Better German time than British time, they think. It is a real passion. France, cheated in the 19th century of being the international capital of time, never ceased to try to reverse it. And, in the end, they won—but only after the British Empire, on which the sun legendarily never set, weakened and fell. Patient, relentless, French diplomacy persuaded the world that, if Paris couldn't be the home of time, neither could the hated Greenwich. A new international agreement in 1978 wiped out the word "Greenwich" for good, renaming GMT as "Co-ordinated Universal Time" (UTC). How they must have skipped and sung in the Elysee Palace and the French Foreign Office in the Quai D'Orsay when they brought that triumph home.

Poor Spain, most of it west of Greenwich, suffers an even worse fate. Its unloveable dictator, General Francisco Franco, imposed Berlin time on his people in 1940 to please Adolf Hitler, so imposing almost endless summer evenings on Madrid. It is said this is the main reason for the strange Spanish habit of dining close to midnight. Madrid's small Western neighbour, Portugal did the same in 1992, but this time to please the European Union, which strongly favours Berlin Time in most of its sprawling dominions. The Portuguese were told (as usual) that moving the clocks forward by one hour would create jobs, reduce road deaths and encourage participation in sport. This was, as usual, propaganda. Four years later they changed back. They had been fooled. The promised joys never materialised. Children could not get to sleep, school results

deteriorated, stress levels rose, the consumption of sleeping pills rose, there were more road accidents and energy bills climbed.

And people still say that time zones are unimportant and that nobody cares about them.

I am always amazed by the way many insist this matter is trivial, given the attention incessantly devoted to it by politicians, lobbyists, and ambassadors. Once, nations all chose our own times, within reason. In my treasured copy of the Baedeker Continental Railway timetable of 1913, just before the deluge of the Great War, a note on time remarks that there are three times common in Europe, Greenwich time, mid-European time (an hour ahead) and East Europe Time. But this conceals a far greater variety. Travellers are warned that the time in Amsterdam is 20 minutes ahead of Greenwich. Athens has a special time which is simply not explained. And trains in Russia run to St Petersburg time, which is two hours and one minute ahead of Greenwich.

[Read more in New English Review:](#)

- [Traversing the Landscape of Transgender Politics, Pt.2](#)
- [A Partisan Pentagon](#)
- [Too Late for a Conversation with John Lukacs](#)

Something similar ruled in the USA until time was tamed into zones. This, by contrast with most other clock-based politics, made sense. Railways, airline and broadcasting cannot function unless we agree to compromise a little. Of course, they had to. In the days before this happened, in 1883, noon at

Washington DC was 12:02 in Baltimore MD, 12:21 in Worcester MA 11:36 a.m. in Columbus OH, 11:18 in Chicago IL, 10:49 in Galveston TX and 9:02 in Sacramento CA. The railroad and the telegraph wire made this arrangement ridiculous. But not as ridiculous as the annual spring festival in which governments force all the clocks under their control to lie. Imagine how it would be if they could do the same to weighing machines and speedometers.

Time is real. You may divide it up as you like. But the Planet Earth will continue to rotate in what we now call 24 hours, and would take the same objective length of time to do so if we instead decreed that it took 72 Gimbeks, or 6 Tediums. Likewise, noon is a real event, about which sundials are more truthful than clocks. But there are some who simply can't accept that there are 360 degrees of longitude, normally divided into 24 time zones of 15 degrees. You cannot, in this arrangement, change the relationship between Paris and London, or Chicago and Washington DC. This, too, is a fact. If you do, you only inconvenience your fellow-creatures, as the poor Uighurs of Kashgar are inconvenienced.

I have found, in discussing this, that two types of people are keenest on fiddling with the clocks. The first type are despots, who are at least aware of how unpleasant they are. The second type are urban bourgeois bohemians, who rise late and go to bed late, and only experience dawn if they have been at a particularly good party, and are surprised by sunrise on their bleary way home. "Whatever is that!?" they cry. Otherwise, the hours before nine in the morning are something of a mystery to them, inhabited by dreary workaday people of whom they know little and care less. These BoBos are the ones who will try to tell you that, if they can only rearrange your national time, millions of people will play

tennis or run marathons, or perform open-air versions of “Hamlet” in the miraculously lighter evenings which will result. They won’t, of course. They will sit at home slumped in front of the TV or go out to bars, as they always did and always will, while the sun blazes uselessly outside. But the rest of us will have to get up at night, all winter, just to please them. Worse, they won’t even be awake while we are doing it. Seize the time. Resist the clock-meddlers. Daylight cannot be saved, stretched or otherwise altered. Enjoy it while it is there, and try to avoid firework displays before dark.

«[Previous Article](#) [Table of Contents](#) [Next Article](#)»

Peter Hitchens is a columnist for the *London Mail* on Sunday.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)