

Russia is Not Going to Change

by [Brandon J. Weichert](#) (September 2018)



The Moscow Kremlin in the March Sun, Leonid Pasternak, 1917

The recent Helsinki summit [between](#) U.S. President Donald J. Trump and Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin was the apotheosis of 25 years of deteriorating relations between Moscow and Washington. President Trump claimed that Russo-American relations were at their lowest point in history. He

is likely right. This situation has arisen because the West has spent the last 25 years trying to convert Russia into a Western country—which it is not.

Naturally, Russia has pushed back, first in Georgia in 2008 and later in Ukraine in 2014. Yet, Westerners still cling to the fantasy that beneath that rugged exterior of autocracy in Russia is a wellspring of liberalism waiting to be unleashed. This assumption is wrong. Russia *is not* a Western state. Thus, it could never—and does not want to—be like the West.

The Wild East

Russia is a schizophrenic place. Having long looked to the European nations along its western borders for inspiration, Russia could not simply turn its back on the bit of Asian culture that was imposed upon it when the Mongols invaded Russia and [conquered it](#) in 1240 A.D. Russia's identity crisis is visible and is best viewed in Moscow's legendary architecture. Specifically, the [St. Basil's Cathedral](#) in the center of Moscow's Red Square. Here is an iconic façade that is a symbol of Russian culture—it is a holy site in the Eastern Orthodox Christian faith; and the building itself is a fusion of European and Asian architectural concepts.

It is the uneasy mixture of European and Asian cultures in Russia that has driven Moscow to such unparalleled levels of aggression throughout the country's thousand-year history. During the long reign of the tsars, the imperial family ruled Russia with an iron fist. They insisted on strong central control over the vast expanse of territory that Russia

inhabited. Most Russian elites spoke French; they could dance to the most elegant Western classical pieces as well.

But, even the most Europhilic Russians could not help but to glance eastward. In Leo Tolstoy's [*War and Peace*](#), the Western-educated, French-speaking aristocrat, Natasha Rostov, journeys out of the capital and into the Russian countryside to visit an eccentric family member who abandoned the life of an aristocrat to live with a peasant woman. When Natasha meets with her estranged family member, he begins playing an old Russian folk song only heard in the countryside. As if overcome by an exclusively Russian instinct, Natasha begins dancing with an intensity that no European waltz could—or would—imbue.

In fact, this scene is the basis of Russia scholar, [Orlando Figes's](#) book, [*Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*](#). Throughout his epic work, Figes, posits a simple (though impossible to answer) question: despite its history of constantly looking outward to its neighbors for cultural inspiration, is Russia—and its people—bound together by “the unseen threads of native sensibility?” While Figes refuses to answer this question in his 2003 book, I believe that the answer is most-assuredly, yes. Although, the “native sensibility” is, like the rest of Russian culture, inspired by another culture: the Asian culture to its east.

Pugachev's Paradoxical Coup d'état

Another historical example of this cultural schizophrenia comes during the reign of Catherine the Great. Born in Prussia

and sent off to marry Tsar Peter III as a teenager, Catherine brought with her the secular ideals of Enlightenment Europe. At the time, Russia was stubbornly feudal and fanatically committed to the Eastern Orthodox Christian faith.

After a turbulent marriage, Catherine conspired with her lover to depose Tsar Peter III, and ultimately became the tsarina. Once in power, she befriended Enlightenment thinkers, such as Voltaire and Diderot, and expressed her desire to use their philosophical insights as inspiration for the creation of Russia's Legislative Commission. This was intended to bring liberty, equality, and the rule of law to the Russian Empire. Instead, it brought misery and more autocracy.

One of the first things Catherine did, upon Voltaire's insistence, was to reduce the importance of the Eastern Orthodox Christian faith in public. Catherine (like Westerners today) believed that a country could only overcome its primitive state by shedding its reliance on religion. Further, Catherine's reforms upended the traditional relationship between serf and master—de-linking the serf from the lands he usually tilled and empowering the aristocratic land owners as never before.

After nearly a decade of implementing sweeping reforms, Catherine was met with opposition and vitriol from the very same people she had staked her entire reign on liberating: the serfs. A disgruntled lieutenant in the Russian Army—a Cossack—Yemelyan Pugachev ultimately rallied a violent uprising in the Russian east. Pugachev's Rebellion aimed at preventing Catherine's reforms (which he believed had empowered the aristocratic land owners at the expense of the serfs. He and the rebelling serfs also resented Catherine for

being a foreigner who diminished the importance of the Christian faith in Russia).

As Martin Sixsmith [assesses](#):

[Pugachev's Rebellion] was a foretaste of the revolutionary terror that was about to sweep away Louis XVI in the French Revolution of 1789. Unlike revolutionary France or America, though, where the people were demanding ever more radical changes to society, in Russia the spark for revolt, paradoxically, *was a reaction against reform [emphasis added]*.

Recognizing that her rule was at stake (and that the Russians were not like the French, who readily embraced Enlightenment ideals), Catherine renounced her reforms and returned Russia to a more autocratic form of rule under her control. According to Sixsmith, "The paradox of the Pugachev rebellion is that the peasants and common people had shown themselves to be more conservative than the reformers who set out to improve their lot. [The Russians] simply didn't want Catherine's newfangled 'Western' ideas."

Following her disastrous first decade as tsarina, Catherine the Great [wrote](#):

The possessions of the Russian Empire extend upon the globe to 32 degrees of latitude and to 165 degrees of longitude. The sovereign is absolute, for no authority but the power centered in his single person can act with the vigour [sic]

proportionate to the extent of such a vast dominion. The extent of the dominion requires that absolute power be vested in the one person who rules over it. It is expedient so to be, that the quick dispatch of affairs, sent from distant parts, might make ample amends for the delay occasioned by the great distance of the places. All other forms of government whatsoever would not only be prejudicial to Russia, but would provoke its entire ruin.

Russia is Not Rhode Island

A similar attempt at liberalization occurred both during the early 20th century and, later, in the 1990s. In the former case, the democratic revolution eventuated in the rise of an autocratic party (the Bolsheviks) that plunged the country into another round of aggression and tyranny. In the latter example, the Boris Yeltsin-era reforms were haphazard and ended with the rise of the autocratic (and the bogeyman of all Western Leftists today) Vladimir Putin.

Presently, the heavily-nuclear-armed Russia is considered the number one national security threat to the United States by secular, democratic globalists throughout the West. Certainly, Russia is not a trustworthy or friendly actor. But, Russia has been made into the eternal enemy it has become not so much by Russian actions (those were predictable to anyone who understands Russian history and culture).

Instead, Russia has become the great bugaboo of Western Leftists because, despite their best efforts *over centuries*, Russia is immune to their attempts at social re-engineering.

Russia has embraced state religion and strong, central, autocratic rule for almost its entire existence. In the rare instances it challenged these realities, such challenges, in the words of Catherine the Great, almost provoked Russia's "entire ruin."

Or, as Alexander Blok agonized over in, "[Are We Scythians?—are we Asiatics?](#)":

Oh yes—we are Scythians! Yes—we are Asiatics,
With slanting, rapacious eyes!

. . . Like obedient slaves,

We held up a shield between two enemy races—

The Mongols and Europe!

Rejoicing, grieving, and drenched in blood,

Russia is a sphinx that gazes at you

With hatred and with love.

We can recall the streets of Paris

And shady Venice,

The aroma of lemon groves

And the hazy monuments of Cologne.

. . . But now through the woods and thickets

We'll stand aside

Before the comeliness of Europe—

And turn on you with our Asiatic faces.

Liberalism as we understand it dominates only Western countries. Russia is not a Western country. Western Leftists hate Russia because it stubbornly refuses to bend to their will and embrace their preferred theories. Instead of insisting on internal change within Russia, the United States should make a deal with Russia over our shared interests but forego any hopes of fundamentally changing the nature of that country. Russia is simply too torn between the centrifugal forces of Western liberalism and Eastern autocracy. Therefore, Washington should lower its expectations—and its demands—and work realistically toward achieving a modicum of peace.

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