

Two Problems for the Next President of the United States

by Michael Curtis

For the next President of the United States, it is important to take account of two pressing issues, the continuing war in Afghanistan, and the political and strategic intentions of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

At a moment when there is controversy over American policy and troops in Afghanistan where 3,500 troops have been killed, it is useful for the President to be given a timely warning of the consequences of incursion into the graveyard of empires. A moving and sad account of the predicament of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 -1988, is provided in the book *The Hidden War*, by the courageous young Russian journalist, Artyom Borovik. Though young he was a major figure in investigatory journalism in Russia before his untimely death in an airplane crash in March 2000, a death that may not have been accidental.

Borovik writes of a war of aggression in a rugged country, badly led, fought without a clear strategy and with self-deception of Russian leaders. He tells of the feelings and the stories of soldiers, their commanders, the deserters, the suicides, the pain and sufferings and the sagging morale of the troops, the brutality to each other, the bribery, profiteering and corruption, the use of drugs and hashish, and the post war traumatic stress.

It was a war that, in Borovik's view, produced nothing. Few knew what they were fighting for. More than 14,500 Russians were killed, and more than a million civilians lost their lives. It was the Soviet Union at its twilight, nine years of

wasted effort and resources.

Why was the war fought? Various answers have been given, some tracing it back to events of 1956, 1968, and 1978, but Borovik carefully refuses to give a definitive answer, though he points out that Leonid Breznev was, because of his physical condition and perhaps alcoholism, incapable of making decisions.

Because of its critical appraisal of Soviet behavior, Borovik's book could not be published before glasnost (openness) challenged political power. The Writer's Union of the Soviet Union refused to admit him to membership, and the book only appeared in 1990, the year of his death.

Not coincidentally, perestroika (reformation within the Communist Party) started in 1985, the year the Afghan war reached its peak. The Soviet Union was dissolved in 1991. For the West the concern now is whether some counterpart of it may reappear, and the present crucial factor connected to it is Vladimir Putin.

Putin's political agenda remains an enigma, but his personality and behavior has been well examined. A product of the infamous KGB and the secret police milieu in which he participated, Putin in his improbable strong ascent to power has removed all obstacles and stifled all opposition, physically and literally.

He has created a regime run by a small elite and a system in which ethnic minorities are subordinated. Inherent in it is a policy of assassinations, rigging of elections, breaking of treaties, and seizure of Abkhazia and south Ossetia, Crimea, and east Ukraine.

In a merciless, and somewhat exaggerated, book *The Man Without A Face*, Masha Gessen has written of Putin as a gangster, a vulgar, cruel, emotionless figure who imprisoned opponents and is guilty of or involved in murder of critics, including

Alexander Litvenko in London, Anna Politkovskaya, Sergei Magnitsky, and Boris Nemtsov in Moscow. Gesse also accuses him of amassing personal wealth, almost a kleptomaniac, greedily involved in embezzling state funds as the godfather of a "Mafia clan" ruling the country.

Whatever the truth of these personal accusations, Putin strengthened both his own position as well central power in Russia. He has falsified election results in December 2011, an action that led to a large demonstration in Moscow, and he is the automatic victor of the presidential election to be held in September 2018. He has noticeably relied heavily on an inner circle, many related to the former KGB, now the FSB. In a surprising action in August 2016 he replaced his long time aide, his chief of staff Sergei Ivanov, a former KGB agent, with his deputy Anton Vaino. None of those aides appear to have any political clout or identity.

Putin has used Parliament to increase penalties for social media users who are critical of Russian policy in Ukraine, and to control freedom of expression in the media and elsewhere, conscience, and right to privacy.

During the years of the Soviet Union most religious schools and mosques were closed. A small number were allowed to exist under the control of state appointed imams, and some councils in some areas adhered to Sharia law. After the end of the Soviet Union, mosques reopened, but it was the Chechen wars of 1994-6 and 1999-2002 with its Muslim extremists that caused problems. In addition to those wars, Putin was forced to deploy troops in Daghestan against the militant Shariat Jameat, the Salafist preachers, and the Muslim extremists who had invaded from Chechnya.

The American President should take note. Putin is well aware of Radical Islam. A considerable number of Muslims from that Daghestan area have gone to fight for ISIS in Syria. Putin response was swift, "We cannot let them use the experience

they have gained in Syria back home.”

The U.S. President will also be concerned with the real intentions of Putin? At present they seem to be ambiguous: is he to be regarded as an Eurasianist or an Atlanticist? Are there two Putins? One is seen as the heroic patriot, the savior of Russia during the second Chechen campaign, the liberator of Ossetia and Abkhazia, and hero of the Crimea, and the other may be inclined to some aspects of liberalism and to compromises with the west. If not mysterious, Putin is an unpredictable ruler, pursuing if not equally both points of view. However, what is noticeable today is that the summit meetings in August 2016 with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Iranian President Hassan Rohani indicate Putin's interest in creating alliances or as a minimum establishing friendships with those regimes and Eurasians.

In his policy Putin may have been influenced by an academic Alexander Dugin, a Russian political scientist and sociologist, prolific writer, adherent of the Old Believers, a Christian sect, and often regarded as both a neo-Stalinist and a neo-Fascist. He has seemed to be close to the Kremlin, and said to be an intellectual force behind Putin's annexation activities. Dugin is an extremist, a believer in the restoration of the Russian Empire, starting with control of the former Soviet republics, Georgia and Ukraine, and an advocate of a Turkic-Slavic alliance, especially with Iran.

Dugin has advocated Eurasianist ideology, with the accompanying view that the threats to Russia are Atlanticism, the control of the US and liberal values. Whether Putin followed his advice or not, Putin did create the Eurasian Economic Community with Kazakhstan and Belarus that came in force on January 1, 2015.

Dugin was fired last year from his post as Sociologists at Moscow State University. Will this mean a change in Putin's policy?