Review Essay: Putin's Wars

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Marcel van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. 296 pp. Bibliography. Index. $79.00, cloth. $29.95, paper.

Marcel van Herpen's monograph, devoted to the "new imperialism" of the Putin era, is a thematic continuation of his previous book (2013), which analyzes the political nature of the so-called "Putinist" regime. I have already had occasion to write that, for all the undoubted merits of the latter work, its historical section leaves much to be desired (Kravchenko). In the book under review, the historical section has been expanded considerably, bearing the telling title "Russia and the Curse of Empire." Van Herpen analyzes the phenomenon of Russian imperialism, its origins, evolution, ideological foundations, and reciprocal ties with despotic rule in general. He offers a detailed account of Putin's revival of imperial doctrine and his neocolonialist project of reintegrating post-Soviet space under the aegis of the Kremlin.

In the second section, titled "The Internal War," the author presents a thorough analysis of the Putin regime's policy of eliminating democratic institutions in Russia, especially its reorganization of the country's political landscape and its effective return to a one-party system, hidden behind the window-dressing of political pluralism. This part of the book also deals with the ideological doctrine of Russian imperial nationalism, the Kremlin's organization of a youth movement, and its revival of Cossackdom in the role of a Praetorian guard for the current master of the Kremlin. Van Herpen demonstrates that Russia's aggressive policy is directly related to the country's authoritarian system.

The third section of the book deals with the "hot" wars started by the Putin regime within Russia and abroad—the First and Second Chechen Wars, as well as the Georgian War of 2008. Van Herpen considers them in conjunction with the Afghan War, which the Soviet Union started in the now distant year of 1979. He also offers a detailed analysis of the mysterious explosions of apartment buildings in Volgodonsk and Moscow that preceded the Second Chechen War and raises the question of war crimes

and the genocidal policy pursued by the Russian leadership in Chechnya. Van Herpen leaves no doubt about who was the aggressor in the Russo-Georgian War: according to the facts presented in his book, Moscow was preparing to intervene in Georgia and make use of separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia long before 2008.

The book concludes with reflections on the Russian leadership's "obsession" with the "Ukrainian problem" and its efforts to coerce Ukraine into joining the Eurasian Union by force. Van Herpen convincingly demonstrates that Ukraine is the actual target of Putin. In this connection, the author concludes that even a deeper voluntary integration with Russia cannot save Ukraine from a repetition of the Georgian scenario. Here, too, the author's logic is impeccable. His book, published before the annexation of the Crimea and the Putin regime's decision to make war on Ukraine in 2014, now reads like a prediction of those dramatic events. Today it is clear that in Ukraine Putin is trying to play out the subversive scenario elaborated earlier in Georgia, with the participation of separatist bands and FSB officers.

Van Herpen realizes that the nature of the "new" Russian imperialism can hardly be understood without reference to Ukrainian affairs. He shares Zbigniew Brzezinski's view of the decisive role played by Ukraine in Russia's historic choice between imperialism and national statehood. The book proves that the Ukrainian Maidan of 2004 influenced the further evolution of the Putin regime in the direction of right radicalism and neofascism (125). One hopes that the author will be able to make broader use of Ukrainian subject matter in his further work. This, however, will require him to turn his attention to history and reconsider many stereotypes concerning Ukraine that were worked out in works of nineteenth-century Russian classics and adopted by the West.

Moscow's current stereotypes of Ukraine remain unchanged from those of two centuries ago, when Little Russia, formerly part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, acquired in the Russian Empire an image of a "folk of singers and dancers," simple-hearted provincials and buffoonish eccentrics whose historical development had been arrested. Such a Little Russia aroused no concerns and was even desirable as a repository of the last remnants of Slavic pagan antiquity, conservative provincialism, and anti-Western rhetoric. Anything that went beyond the sphere of the *hopak*, dumplings, and perogies was attributed and continues to be attributed to Western Catholic intrigue. Such ideas made it impossible for the Kremlin leaders to notice the difference between Soviet, Russian, and Russian-speaking Ukrainians—a difference that decisively upset the Kremlin's plans for the annexation of Ukraine's southern and eastern lands. This is where

the border and the near future of Eastern Europe will undoubtedly be decided.

Putin's Ukrainian war has shown that all earlier fears and apprehensions associated with the Kremlin's plans for the restoration of the Russian Empire were fully justified. The rhetoric of Russian politicians and the Kremlin's house analysts about market mechanisms and democracy in Moscow's integrationist plans, as well as the assumed compatibility of the Eurasian Union with the European Union, has proved to be no more than a smokescreen, concealing the cynical "social Darwinism" modelled on the previous century. It is van Herpen's virtue to have seen through the smokescreen and perceived what certain political leaders and analysts stubbornly refuse to see: the rebirth of Russian imperialism in its most conservative form. Against this background, the assurances of some intellectuals that Russia is "overcoming" its imperial complexes (Trenin) look like naïve, wishful thinking at best.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the foreign and domestic political goals of the current Russian regime are by no means pragmatic, as many observers assert. What we have before us is one more "utopia in power," to borrow a phrase from Mikhail Heller: a geopolitical paranoia in whose fog loom so-called "Russian" Alaskas, Mongolias, Finlands, and Baltics. This is a clumsy empire brandishing a nuclear club. Instead of communism, it now propagates the Orthodox fundamentalism of the "Russian World"—an intellectual throwback not just to the empire but all the way to the Russo-Muscovite Tsardom; not to Peter I but to Ivan the Terrible. Hence, it is not George Orwell's dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but Vladimir Sorokin's *Den' oprichnika* [Day of the Oprichnik] that might be unfolding in Russia today.

What gives away the utopia completely is not so much the pathological lying and misleading rhetoric of official propaganda as its distorted perception of reality. The good old days are back with a vengeance. Under political influence, the devaluation of institutions and values borrowed from the West proceeds apace. They become a mere façade that conceals something wholly opposite. It suffices to glance at today's "communists" and "liberal democrats," the stench of whose overheated nationalism is felt a mile away. Putin's regime follows Soviet tradition in availing itself of propaganda along with economic, military, and blatantly subversive, diversionary, and terrorist means of attaining its goals.

What is all of this meant to accomplish? The material presented in this book paints a picture of some genetic imperialist disorder with which the Russian state came into the world (21). Van Herpen maintains, in particular, that Russia has always been distinguished by the despotism of its rulers, lack of freedom, and desire for territorial expansion (11). In support of this thesis, he cites numerous examples of xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and Black

Hundredism—all of which smacks of traditional Russian hatred of the West, individual freedom, and civil society, as well as the politics of isolationism and religious fundamentalism. The author traces parallels between the ideological doctrines of Pan-Slavism and communism, demonstrating the historical continuity of Russian imperialist policy over the centuries (33–41), and he tackles the roots and causes of the Russian *Sonderweg.*

Van Herpen seeks the causes of Russian imperialism in the country's geography and economic system, as well as in the expansionist traditions and policies of Russia's ruling elite (16). However, this version of historical teleology is hardly convincing. The author himself appears to sense this, since, along with the aforementioned roots of Putin's imperialism, he makes reference to the "mystical monster" of Russian despotism (15). Is this an echo of Fedor Tiutchev's "Russia is not to be grasped by the mind"? Why not postulate instead that the roots of Russian imperialism are wholly earthbound and go much further back into the past than the book makes it appear? They have their origins in the model of political culture inherited from Byzantium and incarnated in the Tsardom of Muscovy. It is no accident that Putin's Russia is now seeing the revival of the cult of the Byzantine Empire with its opposition to the West[1] and that corresponding efforts are being made to sanctify the most despotic Russian rulers, from Ivan the Terrible to Stalin.

In the present book, van Herpen repeats his previous conclusions about the resemblances between Putin's regime and that of Mussolini's fascist Italy (112). In this connection, the author has managed to avoid the temptation to counterpose an "evil" regime to a "good" society. What is vital for the reader to grasp is why contemporary Russian society has rallied enthusiastically around its newfound messiah. Why has the annexation of the Crimea produced such a touching consensus among independent intellectuals, marginalized elements, and church patriarchs? Why has the vaunted Russian intelligentsia acquired no immunity to imperialism, and why is it prepared to forgive its leaders all their misdeeds if they throw it a chunk of foreign territory once in a while? The author analyzes such developmental tendencies of post-Soviet society in the context of the "rebirth" of Russian nationalism that was once suppressed by communism. For a number of reasons, the syndrome of "empire-weariness" was overcome by nostalgia for the empire in present-day Russia. Those reasons include the rise of material standards of living, counterrevolutionary and

[1] *Gibel' imperii: vizantiiskii urok* [An Empire Falls: The Lesson of Byzantium] is a film made in 2008 under the supervision of an Orthodox priest of the Sretenskii Monastery, Father Tikhon Shevkunov, who is rumoured to be Putin's spiritual adviser.

restorationist attitudes in society, and the official policy of promoting nationalism (51). Van Herpen mentions the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, which serves the political interests of the state. He also takes account of societal values, noting a weakly developed sense of personal dignity and self-respect in Russia, which makes the population vulnerable to manipulation. Unfortunately, the latter problem receives little attention in the work under review.

In reality, there is nothing new about the "new" Russian imperialism. Circumstances change, as do cultural and political contexts, as well as the external appearances of the characters, but Russia's concurrent drives to seize new territories and to remain isolated from the Western world continue as before. There remains the question why the country keeps going around in circles, moving erratically between "East" and "West" and reproducing one and the same model of relations between state, society, church, and individual. There is no prospect of Russia's escaping this vicious circle in the near future. The only consolation is that the fall of the Soviet Union, now the dream object enrapturing all social strata of Russian society, was also barely foreseen by anyone twenty years ago. And yet the monograph begs the question: why is the imperial model so unfailingly attractive to Russian society; why does the permanence of empire as a phenomenon persists in the Eurasian space (to borrow an idea from Mark Beissinger)?

Finally, van Herpen's book is not only about Russia but also about the West. His brief historical sketch of the critique of Russian despotism in the works of the writers of the European Enlightenment looks somewhat one-sided. One has the impression that the author included this only as confirmation of his own conclusions. In fact, as Martin Malia demonstrates, the Western view of Russia has always remained ambiguous. Relentless criticism of "Oriental despotism" in the works of Western writers has invariably proceeded hand-in-hand with an apotheosis of "enlightened absolutism." One need only refer to the works of the very same Enlightenment philosophers, who created the cult of Peter I and Catherine II in Western literature (not without financial stimulus from the Russian government). Western ambiguity vis-à-vis Russia continues to the present day. The results of this attitude are plain to see: having forgiven the regime its crimes in Chechnya, Western leaders paved the way for aggression against Georgia; by closing their eyes to the annexation of Abkhazia, they gave the Kremlin licence to occupy the Crimea. And even as political leaders begin to reconsider their relations with Russia in an effort to check its aggressive imperialism, many representatives of Western business circles and even of the academic community are actively lobbying in favour of the Kremlin's interests.

At one time, the saying goes, Voltaire received a "fur coat" from the Russian empress to recruit him to the cause of Russian propaganda. President Putin's Valdai Club has received no such gifts, but still keeps mum about events in the Donbas and the Crimea. One must assume that many Western pragmatists continue to regard Russia as an incorrigibly "barbarous" land best left in peace, which gives it full freedom of action in the endless expanses of post-Soviet space. Conservative idealists, on the other hand, keep looking to Moscow for some spiritual alternative to the globalism represented by America. There is nothing new in any of this. All one has to do is to recall the Holy Alliance of European reactionaries headed by the emperor of all the Russias in the early nineteenth century.

History repeats itself. The countries and peoples living in post-Soviet space are nowhere near a happy ending. They continue to build a future out of the materials of the past. Therefore, historical study of that space remains no less relevant than analysis of its current status. Ukrainian studies, like Russian studies, Slavic studies, Sovietology, East European and Eurasian studies are among the most dynamic of the humanities concerned with the study of society. Van Herpen's book attests to their positive dynamic. One can only wish the author success in making himself heard and properly understood, if not in his own country, then beyond it.

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