

## BOOKSHELF

# ‘The Return of the Russian Leviathan’ Review: A Lust for Suffering

Putin’s domestic policies, says a Russian critic, are motivated by revenge, self-pity and a search for those who betrayed the wonderful U.S.S.R.



Russian President Vladimir Putin looks at a Soviet era banner depicting Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Lenin.

PHOTO: ALEXEI NIKOLSKY|, SPUTNIK|, KREMLIN POOL PHOTO VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

*By Leon Aron*

March 17, 2020 6:44 pm ET

The original Russian title of this dazzling collection of essays by Sergei Medvedev, a social-science professor in Moscow and one of Russia’s leading political commentators, was “The Crimean Period Park” (*Park krymskogo perioda*). The echo of “Jurassic Park” was surely intended. Mr. Medvedev sees Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its war on Ukraine—both of which followed the ouster of Ukraine’s Russia-backed leader in 2014—as marking a new geologic era in Russian politics and foreign policy. This book is an invitation to explore the park.

A more astute, knowledgeable and eloquent guide is hard to imagine. Steeped in Russian culture and history, Mr. Medvedev is witty and sardonic in the laughter-through-tears (*smekh skvoz slyozy*) tradition of Russian literature. He draws on political sociology, linguistics and social psychology, yet his prose, even in translation, is sparkling.

Mr. Medvedev ranges widely over the many ways in which Vladimir Putin—he first was elected president in 2000 and, de facto, has been in charge ever since—has returned Russia to a corrupt, oppressive and illiberal past. The state—the “Leviathan” of the title—has been steadily extirpating all vestiges of Mikhail Gorbachev’s and Boris Yeltsin’s revolutions of the late 1980s and 1990s: uncensored media, fair courts, real political competition, freedom of speech, government transparency and, most of all, a civil society independent of the Kremlin.

Meanwhile, a new ruling caste of security officers-turned-racketeers surpasses the Soviet *nomenklatura* in corruption, rapacity, hauteur and the shameless display of wealth. One of the many metaphors Mr. Medvedev deploys to highlight the key features of the regime is Kutuzovsky Prospekt, a Moscow thoroughfare where lethal car accidents are more frequent than on any other stretch of Russian asphalt. The reason is the absence of the usual dividers and safety barriers between lanes running in opposite directions. In their place is a central lane reserved for members of the *newnomenklatura*, zooming at breakneck speeds to their dachas outside the city. Someday, Mr. Medvedev hopes, the lane will be allowed to grass over. “But that will happen in a different, parallel and more humane Russia,” he writes. “Until then the elite highway, which was built not for the people but for the powerful ones who live in their own world, will continue to maim and kill, turning power and oil into death in this ruthlessly accurate model of the Russian state.”

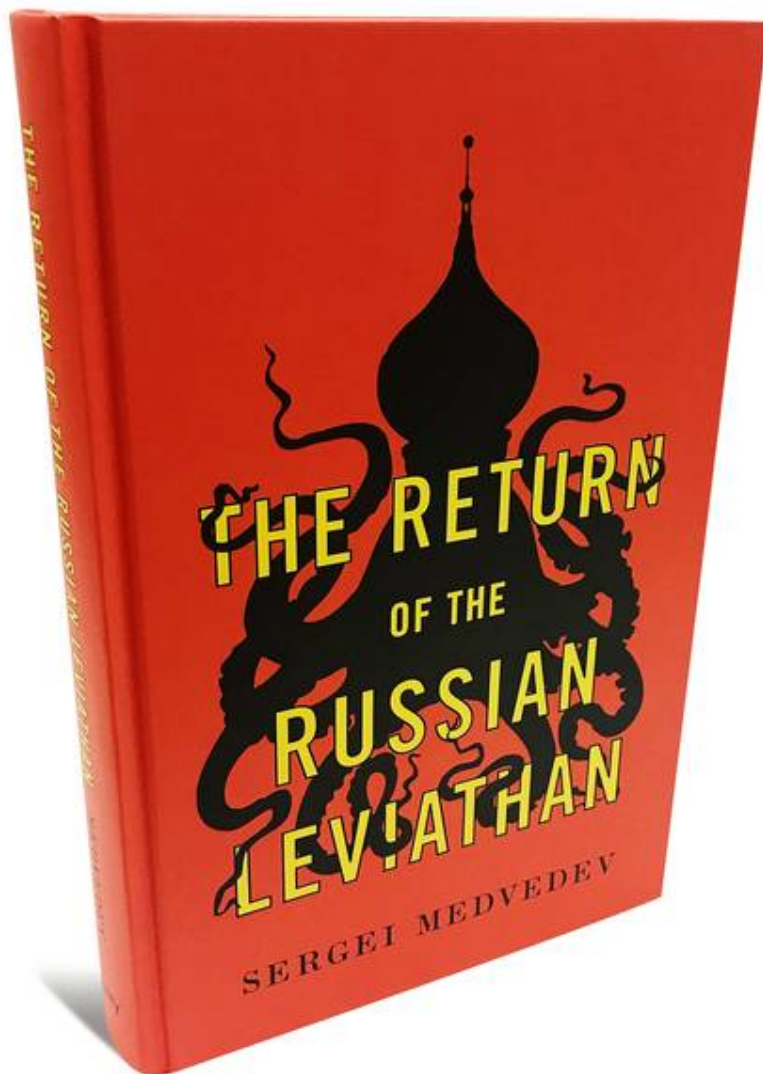


PHOTO: WSJ

---

## THE RETURN OF THE RUSSIAN LEVIATHAN

---

By Sergei Medvedev

*Polity*, 286 pages, \$24.95

---

According to Mr. Medvedev, a key part of what might be called the Putin restoration is a state creed in which mythology has replaced the facts of history. The Kremlin denies, distorts or whitewashes the Soviet past, most conspicuously the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, a nonaggression treaty between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union that led to the carving up of Poland between them as well as the Soviet Union's annexation of the Baltic States and parts of Romania. The rehabilitation of Stalin as an "effective manager" and a military genius is by now well under way. The author compares such mythmaking to the narrative advanced by the

rightists in Germany's Weimar Republic in the 1920s. There is a similar self-pity, a similar "passion for suffering," and a similar search for traitors—those who stabbed in the back the wonderful, mighty Soviet Union.

It is out of this toxic mix that the Kremlin's foreign policy arises. Mr. Medvedev dismisses "realpolitik" and "national interests" as its key engines. What drove Mr. Putin into Crimea and southeastern Ukraine—and, some years before, into Georgia—is to be found not outside Russia but within: in the "ideology that justifies imperial ambitions and the state's priority over the individual in the allegedly eternal clash between Russia and the West." Mr. Putin's "messianic" foreign policy, he says, aims at revenge and glory, making fear Russia's main export, next to oil. To explain the motives at work, one needs to turn, Mr. Medvedev observes, not to the speculations of foreign-policy "realists" like Henry Kissinger or Zbigniew Brzezinski but to Dostoyevsky's novels.

"At first," Mr. Medvedev writes, "Russia simply criticized the West for its moral degeneration" and built "a protective perimeter." But eventually it "decided to spread the borders of the empire, doing so, what's more, on the same conservative and moralistic foundations it has used to create order at home." In an astute one-sentence description of Mr. Putin's credo, Mr. Medvedev labels him an "Orthodox *Chekist* with a slim volume by Ivan Ilyin." This is a reference to Mr. Putin's suddenly found religious belief; his pride in being the successor to the first Soviet secret police, the Cheka; and his fascination with the works of Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954), whom the historian Timothy Snyder has called the philosopher of "Russian fascism."

Yet, a true Russian patriot, Mr. Medvedev never confuses Mr. Putin's regime with Russia itself. Like other restorations that follow a revolution, the current regime, he believes, is not likely to forge anything lasting beyond Mr. Putin's life-span. He borrows from Marx's description of a coup in mid-19th-century France: at once tragedy and farce, the last gasp of the Soviet imperial heritage, a chimera.

Russia today is like a Russian village at night, when, as folklore has it, roosters crow three times: at midnight, then around four in the morning, and then at sunrise to celebrate the departure of the evil spirits that prowl in the night. We must wait for the "third roosters," Mr. Medvedev tells us.

We should be grateful for Mr. Medvedev’s optimism—and hope that, meanwhile, the poisonous regime that he deconstructs so well in this book doesn’t inflict larger catastrophes on Russia and the world.

*Mr. Aron’s most recent book is “Roads to the Temple: Truth, Memory, Ideas and Ideals in the Making of the Russian Revolution, 1987-1991.” He is a resident scholar and the director of Russian studies at the American Enterprise Institute.*

Copyright © 2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.