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De-Putinisation won't be easy

A Russian novelist on why his country is 'mentally stuck in the Middle Ages'

By Colin FREEMAN

MY RUSSIA: WAR OR PEACE?
by Mikhail Shishkin,
tr Gesche Ipsen

256pp, Riverrun, T £16.99 (0844 871 1514), RRP £18.99, ebook £10.99
★★★★☆

When Soviet tanks quelled the Prague Spring in 1968, eight Russian dissidents gathered outside the Kremlin, denouncing the "occupation" of the Czech people. Minutes later, they were beaten senseless by KGB thugs and hauled off to spend years in jails, penal colonies and psychiatric wards.

So quickly did the Kremlin stamp it out that even today, "The Red Square Demonstration" remains little known in Russia – a point not lost on Mikhail Shishkin. "Being ashamed of your own country is the first step on the long road to freedom," he writes in *My Russia*. "These people saved their honour, and that of their fellow citizens, with this self-sacrificial protest."

Shishkin, who lives in Zurich, is regarded as one of Russia's best living novelists, winning the Russian Booker Prize for *The Taking of Ismail* (1999), a postmodern journey through his country's violent past. Like many exiled Moscow intellectuals, he is ashamed at Russia today, and its war against Ukraine. As he puts it: "The language of Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy... has become the language of war criminals and murderers."

His new book – an elegant blend of history, biography and polemic – explains to Western readers why things have gone wrong. Which means he has had to write about not one Russia, but two. The first is populated by "Russian Europeans" – educated liberals like the Red Square Eight, and the thousands who followed in their footsteps in anti-war protests in Russia last year. The second is the much bigger group that actively supports the war – the Russia that "devours its own and other countries' children". Why do they defend a despot like Putin? And why, historically, has Russia had so many autocrats?

Shishkin traces the rot right back to the Russian state's traumatised birth in the early Middle Ages, when it was invaded by Genghis Khan's Mongol Horde. The occupiers, lightly spread in such a vast land, forced Russia's princes to collect taxes on their behalf, creating an extortive relationship between ruler and ruled. "Since their own lives depended on tributes, they [the princes] behaved like occupiers in their own country," Shishkin writes. "Mercilessly robbing the citizens of their own towns and villages was their survival strategy."

That culture, he argues, continued when Russia became an imperial power itself, with tsars like Peter the Great seeing citizens merely as footsoldiers for Russia's expansion. In time, the citizens knew of nothing else. What other nations regarded as slavery, Russians saw as "selfless participation in a collective struggle".

The tsars, of course, weren't Europe's only autocrats. But Russia, Shishkin says, suffered a further setback because its Orthodox Church used Old Slavonic rather than Latin, the lingua franca of European scholars developing notions of liberty and equality: "It is not least for linguistic reasons that the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment passed Russians by."

With a populace accustomed to blind obedience, Communism arguably suited some. For every frustrated dissident, many were happy as long as they had a house, food and vodka at the end of a day's work (Russia has appalling alcoholism rates). When the Soviet Union collapsed, those same people yearned not to escape its prison, but to build a new one: "Suddenly forced to take responsibility for their own lives... they missed the guiding hand of the authorities."

The chaotic 1990s, when banks collapsed and gangsters ruled, were seen as proof that a strongman like Putin was better than democracy. By then, all Russians had left to be proud about was their role in Stalin's defeat of Nazi Germany, in which, by one estimate, 26 million Soviets died. This, according to Shishkin, is why Putin's rehabilitation of Stalin has proved popular. He remembers how his own father fumed at glasnost-era documentaries suggesting Stalin was as bad as Hitler. "They were saying that, rather than helping to free other countries, my father had helped to redeliver them into slavery."

Shishkin recounts how he himself learnt a lesson when he holidayed in Estonia in the late 1970s, and noticed that the locals weren't friendly: they saw all Russians as "the occupier". Most Russians, though, never learn how their neighbours see them, as they never travel abroad. Mentally, Shishkin claims, they are "still in the Middle Ages, and believe the zombie box that is television when it tells them the holy fatherland is surrounded by enemies". Hence, also, their support for the Ukraine war, even when their own sons come back in coffins. As Shishkin asks: "Who finds it easy to admit that their own homeland is a nasty aggressor and their own son... a fascist?"

What is to be done? Shishkin says that just as Germany underwent de-Nazification, Russia will need "de-Putinisation". Both leaders and people must atone for Ukraine's invasion – and acknowledge that, for most of its neighbours, the

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USSR was just Russia's empire with a people-friendly name. He is less clear on how that will actually happen. Russians themselves must do the de-Putinising, he says. Yet de-Nazification was only imposed on Germany after a total defeat by the Allies, something no one contemplates for Moscow.

His calls for reform sound more like those of an intellectual than a pragmatist. He says grandly that "the word is the one weapon the new Russian opposition has", pointing out that since the younger generation get their news from the web, they aren't susceptible to state TV propaganda. He doesn't really grapple, though, with the practicalities of galvanising the opposition, given that its supporters are now mostly in jail or – like him – abroad. Indeed, many Russia analysts fear that if Putin is toppled, it won't be by cuddly liberals but by hawks from his own camp.

Shishkin is right to remind us that Putin does not speak for every Russian. But right now, the chance of a Red Square Demonstration changing anything looks as slim as in 1968.

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Mind-forged manacles: a 1970 propaganda poster by Veniamin Briskin

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