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‘Putin could fall in hours’

Russia’s finest living novelist on centuries of despotism — and grounds for hope

POLITICS

Victor Sebestyen

My Russia War or Peace?
by *Mikhail Shishkin*
riverrun £18.99 pp242

Mikhail Shishkin wrestles daily with the agonising dilemma so many great Russian writers – Pushkin, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn – have faced over hundreds of years: if your country is a monster, do you love it or hate it?

In wartime, as now, the problem has profound urgency. Do you want your fatherland to win or lose? “It seems a strange question to ask someone who loves his country,” he writes in this passionate *cri de coeur*. “But when it concerns a state that has spent centuries letting neither its own nor other people live, it turns out not to be strange at all.”

Shishkin is the most prominent Russian novelist of his generation. To compare him to Solzhenitsyn is no exaggeration. He is the only contemporary Russian author to have won all three of Russia’s most prestigious literary awards (including the Russian Booker). With a Russian father and a Ukrainian mother, he has lived in exile in Switzerland for the past 18 years; he opposed the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and is an outspoken critic of Putin and the “special military operation” in Ukraine.

His novels and stories deal with the classic theme in so much of Russian literature:

how to live truthfully within a despotism built on lies. But *My Russia* is more direct and journalistic than his fiction. For anyone who wants to understand how Russia has remained the state it is – whether under tsarism, communism or Putinism – this is a good place to start.

Many people in the US and western Europe assumed that when communism collapsed, capitalism and an open society would “return”. But that fundamentally misunderstood Russia and is at the root of why western policy since then has been so deeply flawed.

Shishkin’s essential point – and the crucial thing that westerners should grasp about his homeland (but often don’t) – is just how deep-rooted “unfreedom”, as Christopher Hitchens called it, has been, and continues to be, in the Russian way of life.

He traces Russian history from the Mongol invasion by Genghis Khan, through Muscovy under Ivan the Terrible, the three centuries of autocracy under the Romanovs, the Soviet Union under Stalin and the *siloviki* – “the men of force” – around the leader now. Theories of government have barely changed among those in power, and nor has the ingrained acceptance of the state of things among most of the Russian people.

Serfdom was officially abolished in 1861, but continued under the communists – albeit with a different name because in the USSR nobody believed themselves free, but, rather, the property of the state. For

most Russians the cult of personality around the *vozhd* (the boss) is as strong as ever.

Westerners have also struggled to grasp Russia’s economic history. Shishkin points out rightly that there has never been a free market in Russia as we understand it, principally because there were and are no western-type laws about ownership. Russia possessed rich aristocrats, but under the semi-feudal system of the Romanovs the state (that is, the tsar) effectively owned the land and merely granted certain rights to the nobility. Under the communists nobody was allowed to own anything – even top communist magnates lived in state-owned palaces. It has been said that in the mafia-capitalism that Boris Yeltsin created, and Putin built on, a few oligarchs stole the state. This is only partially true. Even the oligarchs don’t have real freedom; the state is still in control. Nobody can own anything significant in Russia unless the state – ie the boss – permits it.

That is the principal reason, as Shishkin brilliantly explains, why the new breed of mega-rich Russians stashed their loot in the West. In a sense, everyone in Putin’s Russia is still a serf. “Today you have a business; tomorrow someone in a uniform with epaulettes takes it away,” he writes. “Today you own a flat in Moscow; tomorrow there’s a ‘clean-up’ and you’re ‘voluntarily’ rehoused. Today you’re an oligarch; tomorrow you’ll be lying in a cot in a prison cell.”

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There were two points at which Russia's ever-repeating cycle of one autocrat replacing another equally ghastly one might have been broken. In 1917 the Bolsheviks permitted a democratic parliament to exist for 13 hours before closing it down for the next 70 years. Then, after 1991, there was a brief halcyon period when anything seemed possible. But economic and administrative chaos, uncontrolled inflation when millions of people lost their life savings – and a desperate yearning for order and a strong leader – brought the new *vozhd* to power, where he has remained since the first day of this millennium.

Soviet lies about equality have been replaced by ultra-nationalist lies about restoring Peter the Great's empire. So-called victory, according to Putin, starts – it does not end – with Ukraine's return to Russia. Still, Shishkin, like so many Russian exiles before him, is hopeful. He sees a path forward in which the depressing cycle of Russian history can be broken. For him, it's possible to be patriotic and to believe that the only victory for Russia is defeat for Putin in Ukraine. He concludes this important book with a wish, and a plausible prediction: "The empire of the Tsars dissolved within months. The Soviet Union broke up in three days. The Putinist 'vertical of power' will fall apart in hours." It is not far-fetched to believe he will be right. 🇺🇸

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**Shishkin has
been rightly**

**compared to
Solzhenitsyn**



Pre-Putin Nikolai Cherkasov
in the film Ivan the Terrible