

A Story of Russia

Book Review by Kim Petersen

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Contemporary Russian politics are too often analysed without sufficient knowledge of Russian history. — Orlando Figes, [The Story of Russia](#), p 268

The conflict among nations in Ukraine and the breakaway Donbass oblasts/republics has been magnified in western monopoly media since Russia backed up its security demands. To the extent that people want to ascertain the verisimilitude of media information, people ought to become familiar with the region, its peoples, and the history. With this intention and with an open mind to a viewpoint counter to my orientation (I am decidedly of a socialist orientation, but, I trust, with allegiance to verifiable evidence),

I read [The Story of Russia](#) (Metropolitan Books, 2022) by the “bourgeois” historian Orlando Figes.

Thus, it did not surprise me that on page 1, Figes opines,

“Vladimir Putin... managed to look bored. He seemed to want the ceremony to be done as soon as possible.” On page 2, “Putin looked uncomfortable.”

In the introduction more bias is evident; Figes writes of “the Russian annexation of Ukrainian Crimea,” (p 2) “the ‘putsch’ in Kiev, as the Kremlin called the Maidan uprising,” (p 4) “history writing in Russia, since its beginning in medieval chronicles, has been intertwined in mythical ideas,” (p 5) and Putin’s “authoritarian regime.” (p 6) In contemporary understanding, [*regime*](#) is pejorative for a totalitarian/autocratic government.

In the second chapter, “Origins,” Figes says that Putin asserts “the old imperial myth that the Russians, the Ukrainians and the Belarussians were historically one people.” In succeeding chapters, *The Story of Russia* runs through the intercourse between myriad groups of peoples, the Vikings, Finns, Mongols, Khazars, Turks, Arabs, Germans, French, etc that have intermixed knowledge, languages, cultures, religious beliefs, and commerce with Slavs. Russia has been conquered and has conquered others many times.

Figes lays out an eminently comprehensible historical sequence that led to rule by a revered *tsardom* with its concomitant corruption along with an exploited and impoverished peasant class. Traditionally, tsarist Russia leaned favorably toward western Europe which did not have the same favorable inclination toward Russia. This changed with Catherine the Great who envisioned Russian greatness stemming from a southern orientation. (p 127)

Serfdom would be identified as holding Russia back in wars and competition with the West. (p 154) The tsar would, when forced, in due course relinquish some powers, such as the establishment of zemstvos (self-government in Russian provinces), but eventually the corruption of the autocratic tsarist class would lead to a revolution that violently deposed the Romanovs. (For a dramatization of the history, see the Netflix series *The Last Czars*.)

Post-revolution, the Bolsheviks (Majoritarians) emerged victorious over the Mensheviks (Minoritarians). Figes writes that the tsar continued afterwards in “Soviet cults of the Leader.” (p 191)

Whereas Lenin, in his cult, appeared as a human god or saint, a sacred guide for the Party orphaned by his death, the cult of Stalin portrayed him as a tsar, the ‘little-father tsar’ or *tsar-batiushka* of folklore ... (p 225)

Unfortunately, *The Story of Russia* suffers from being replete with many unsubstantiated claims, rumors, and opinions. One would expect that a book written by a professor of history who specializes in Russia would source most pertinent information, especially information that is debatable. For example, Figes writes of “Nikolai Yezhov, an unscrupulous henchman, who fed Stalin’s paranoid fears.” (p 229) Maybe this is so, but what is his source for a scrupulous reader to scrutinize in order to confirm or deny this? During the Great Terror, Figes writes that in 1937, “1,500 Soviet citizens were shot on average every day...” (p 232) Elsewhere, he relates that the Gulag population reached 2 million prisoners in 1952. (p 250) There is no sourcing to evaluate this information.

Figes is derisive of Joseph Stalin and Russian militarism during World War II:

There was almost no limit to the number of lives that the Stalinist regime was willing to expend to achieve its military goals.... Only by this ruthless disregard for human life can we explain the shocking losses of the Red Army — around 12 million soldiers killed between 1941 and 1945...

Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev fares no better in Figes’ estimation:

Khrushchev's erratic leadership, his tendency to act on intuition and then attack his critics, his meddling in affairs where he lacked expertise, and his dangerous confrontation with the USA in the Cuban Missile Crisis ...

It is written as if the confrontation was entirely provoked from the Soviet side, that the John Kennedy administration was not dangerously confronting the Soviet Union. Unmentioned is that, since 1959, the US had had nuclear missiles deployed in Turkey which bordered the USSR.

Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev was "a grey and mediocre functionary" (p 253) who "had more practical than intellectual capacities." (p 254)

The Soviet Union would collapse on President Mikhail Gorbachev's watch. Boris Yeltsin's ascent to the Russian presidency would coincide with the political demise of Gorbachev; however, Yeltsin would personify the Peter Principle. He was completely out-of-his-depth. Figes asks, "How can we explain the failure of democracy under Yeltsin, and the reemergence of dictatorship under Putin's leadership?" (p 268) Figes explains that under Yeltsin, the people called the system a "shitocracy." (p 270) Was this solely due to Russian incompetence? There is scant attribution to [the role played by western nations and institutions](#) such as the IMF that advised Yeltsin's team to apply the shock therapy of neoliberalism (a "social disaster" says Figes, p 269) that helped precipitate the downfall of Yeltsin and pave the way for a new face and new direction.

Figes writes that Vladimir Putin became the successor to Yeltsin by agreeing to protect Yeltsin and his family from their corruption. (p 271) Putin is also accused of corruption; Figes footnotes harsh Putin critic Masha Gessen's book *The Man without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (2012) as substantiation. As testament to her analytical prowess, Gessen [predicted in her book's epilogue](#), "Putin's bubble will burst." Yet in July 2022, Putin still enjoys [immense popularity](#) in Russia.

Figes likens Putin to a grand prince where Russian oligarchs are "totally dependent on his will" much as the boyar clans were reliant upon the royal court in Russia. (p 54)

According to Figes, Putin's Russia is a managed democracy where electoral results are determined beforehand.

The author criticizes laws he identifies as protecting an ahistorical image of Russia; for example, a law requiring foreign-funded NGOs to register as a "Foreign Agent." (p 278) Not mentioned is that the US has its own [Foreign Agents Registration Act](#) (FARA) (FIRA in Canada) and that NGOs are cited as [instigators behind so-called color revolutions](#).

Figes further criticizes Putin for weaponizing the memory of war against foreign powers. Here a bias of Figes stands out by referring to a non-aggression pact between the USSR and Nazi Germany (commonly referred to as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) as the Hitler-Stalin Pact. (p 279) Is Figes unaware that the West collaborated with Nazi Germany? In his book *The Myth of the Good War*, historian Jacques Pauwels told of European elitists's support for fascism as a bulwark against Bolshevism, (p 42, 47) which was also true in the US. (p 53)

Figes also takes issue with Putin for comparing "Ukraine's nationalists to collaborators with the Nazis in the war." (p 279) The evidence of Nazism in Ukraine is so prolific that one must be either ignorant or purposefully blind:

- [“Inside A White Supremacist Militia in Ukraine,”](#) *Time*
- [“Neo-Nazi threat in new Ukraine: NEWSNIGHT,”](#) BBC
- [“Canada’s meeting with Ukraine’s self-professed Nazi paramilitary,”](#) *CityNews*
- [“‘Captive Nations’: From Nazi trope and CIA meme to Cold-War trump card,”](#) COAT.ca

Not being a professional historian, I will focus on Figes’s rendering of contemporary history, which seems particularly disputable on factual and logical grounds.

1. As stated, Figes pooh poohs the “Ukraine-Nazi myth” (p 298): “The Kremlin’s Russian media outlets consistently referred to the interim Ukrainian government as a ‘junta’, backed by ‘neo-Nazis’ and ‘fascists’, an obvious propaganda tactic They [the Kremlin] staged protests against the new authorities in Kiev...” (p 290)

This is a one-sided presentation. According to the [World Socialist Web Site](#):

The background and implications of the 2014 far-right coup in Kiev, which overthrew the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich, is critical for understanding the current Ukraine-Russia war. This coup was openly supported by US and European imperialism and implemented primarily by far-right shock troops such as the Right Sector and the neo-Nazi Svoboda Party.

Salon [wrote](#) of US machinations:

When Ukrainian President Yanukovich spurned a U.S.-backed trade agreement with the European Union in favor of a \$15 billion bailout from Russia, the State Department threw a tantrum.

Hell hath no fury like a superpower scorned.

2. “the Kremlin launched a new Crimean War.... At the end of February [2014], Russian special forces occupied the peninsula, ... oversaw a hurried referendum ... in which 97 per cent of the people voted for reunion with Russia.” (p 290-291)

Figes paints the expression of self-determinism in sinister language, but Figes doth protest too much, as he admits, “Even with a properly conducted plebiscite [in Crimea] the same decision would have been reached with a large majority.” (p 291) Since the Russians were so welcomed by Crimeans, this basically refutes Figes’s claim of a military occupation.

3. “The warring parties failed to find agreement on the Minsk II Accords...” (p 291)

From Wikipedia, the [signatories](#) are listed as:

1. Separatist’s leaders Alexander Zakharchenko and Igor Plotnitsky
2. Swiss diplomat and OSCE representative Heidi Tagliavini
3. Former president of Ukraine and Ukrainian representative Leonid Kuchma
4. Russian Ambassador to Ukraine and Russian representative Mikhail Zurabov

4. Regarding Putin’s identification of NATO bases in Ukraine as a security threat, Figes writes, “From a western point of view this seemed mad and paranoid. NATO, after all, was a defensive alliance and had no reason to attack Russia.” (p 293)

To paint NATO, after all, as a purely “defensive alliance” is disingenuous. Did NATO attack ex-Yugoslavia in self-defense? Guised as a European-Canada-US alliance was Libya a threat to NATO? With all due respect to the people of Afghanistan, was a country largely populated by sandal-wearing goat herders with a Kalashnikov rifle strapped over one shoulder a threat to NATO?

Conversely, does the history of myriad western interventions not point to a potential threat for Russia?

5. Figes claims the invasion of Ukraine has revealed that the “Russian army, it turned out, was not as good as people thought.” (p 296) “Putin, it was said, was hoping to announce a victory ... on 9 May, Victory Day...” (p 297) It was said? Who said this? Figes applies his military analysis and reaches the [same conclusion](#) as another non-professional military analyst Noam Chomsky. They both equate the prowess of the Russian military to the duration of the military engagement.

6. Figes writes of a mass-based opposition led by Alexei Navalny. (p 299) Yet this “mass-based” opposition leader, as Figes describes Navalny, is without any party members in the Russian State Duma.

7. “The Russians carried out a number of atrocities in towns such as Bucha...” (p 296)

Concerning the massacre in Bucha, Drago Bosnic, an independent geopolitical and military analyst, [wrote](#):

The Ukrainian side claims Russian troops killed at least 412 people, while so-called ‘independent’ sources state there were 50 victims. The peculiar claims were completely unsupported by any actual official investigation by any neutral side. The Kiev regime and their Western sponsors flatly refused to allow an international investigation, while any claims contrary to the official narrative were immediately suppressed.

Why prevent an investigation that one claims should reveal war crimes perpetrated by the enemy? (Yes, US president Biden in a [televised message](#) tells Russian citizens: “You are not our enemy.” Biden [expresses his scorn](#) for the “war criminal” Putin.)

Former US Marines intelligence officer Scott Ritter — who graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in the history of the Soviet Union and departmental honors at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania — names the culprit behind the Bucha massacre: [Ukrainian national police murdered Ukrainians](#).

Without exception, without exception all of the data points to the Ukrainian national police carrying out a cleansing operation on April 1st that targeted pro-Russian collaborators and what they called saboteurs. And when we say cleansing operation, it means killing them. There is a video where a member of this national police unit asked permission to shoot people who aren’t wearing the blue armband, and he was given permission to fire.”

The US has the satellite images of this says Ritter, who emphatically states:

The US knows exactly what happened, but the US is not in the business of telling the truth. They are in the business of promulgating Ukrainian lies, and this lie was to create a narrative of Russia as a genocidal state trying to massacre innocent Ukrainian

civilians. That is not what happened. The evidence is clear. If we took this to trial today Judge, I could guarantee you that I'd be able to make a very strong circumstantial case that this crime was committed by the Ukrainian national police and that they'd have nothing to defend with.

Months afterward, Ritter remains firmly convinced that [Ukraine was behind the massacre of its own people in Bucha](#) (start watching video at 1:33:50):

All the forensic data points to the absolute incontrovertible fact that Ukrainian security services carried out crimes against pro-Russian elements of the population of Bucha in late March, early April of 2022.... I will debate anybody, anytime, anywhere, on any platform, hell, I'll travel to Ukraine to do it in front of the Ukrainian parliament if they want. I am not running away from these facts.

Ritter has thrown down a figurative glove. Will Figes pick it up? Ritter looks at the evidence, does his research, and applies logic in reaching a conclusion. Too often, when evidence is demanded, Figes comes up wanting.

Figes has made many claims and predictions, if the presence of Nazis breaks through the monopoly media censorship and propaganda, if Russia defeats Ukraine (and it already has according to Ritter), then what does that signify about Figes and his historical scholarship?

Given all this, it is argued that *The Story of Russia* is, more accurately, *A Story of Russia*, a story according to Orlando Figes. As for what *the* history of Russia is, that is something to be discovered by curious and discerning readers and researchers.

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