



The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past

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In *The Long Hangover*, Shaun Walker provides a deeply reported, bottom-up explanation of Russia's resurgence under Putin. By cleverly exploiting the memory of the Soviet victory over fascism in World War II, Putin's regime has made ordinary Russians feel that their country is great again.

Shaun Walker provides new insight into contemporary Russia and its search for a new identity, telling the story through the country's troubled relationship with its Soviet past. Walker not only explains Vladimir Putin's goals and the government's official manipulations of history, but also focuses on ordinary Russians and their motivations. He charts how Putin raised victory in World War II to the status of a national founding myth in the search for a unifying force to heal a divided country, and shows how dangerous the ramifications of this have been.

The book explores why Russia, unlike Germany, has failed to come to terms with the darkest pages of its past: Stalin's purges, the Gulag, and the war deportations. The narrative roams from the corridors of the Kremlin to the wilds of the Gulags and the trenches of East Ukraine. It puts the annexation of Crimea and the newly assertive Russia in the context of the delayed fallout of the Soviet collapse.

The Long Hangover is a book about a lost generation: the millions of Russians who lost their country and the subsequent attempts to restore to them a sense of purpose. Packed with analysis but told mainly through vibrant reportage, it is a thoughtful exploration of the legacy of the Soviet collapse and how it has affected life in Russia and Putin's policies.

The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past Details

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Sebastian says

The Long Hangover is an introduction to several key topics in Modern Russia (Chechnya, the Sochi Olympics, Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, Putin, and general gestalt of the population) through the lens of the collapse of the Soviet Union and how that process influenced where we are today. I found it to be incredibly eye opening. As a child of the 90s, the Soviet Union had already been replaced by China as the Great Other and Rival to American Hegemony by high school. And we did not discuss Russia much as a result. Putin meanwhile is depicted as a despotic caudillo, and Crimea was apparently a great tragedy and act of aggression. There are elements of truth in those characterizations -- but like most things reality is far, far more complex and *The Long Hangover* excavates the layer beyond the superficial.

We begin with Putin's inheritance of the Russian Federation of the late 90s and early 00s: squalid, poor, stray dogs, brutal winters. A significant portion of the population drinking chemical ethanol, which gets you drunk but may burn a hole in your esophagus (15). You begin to understand why the percentage of Russians expressing regret over collapse of the Soviet Union went from 63% to 75% from 1993 to 2000 (14). It was not that people were especially fond of the Soviet Union, but per Putin himself: "I wanted something different to rise in its place. And nothing different was proposed. That's what hurt. They just dropped everything and went away" (11). With living standards stagnant or declining, at least the Soviet Union had some kind of national spirit and purposefulness. Russia was a vacuum, Rome after Romulus Augustulus.

How do you unite a people and rebuild a nation from there? If you're Vladimir Putin, you start a program of worship around the Soviet victory over the Nazis in WW2. There is an annual Victory Day parade, complete with re-enactment of the storming of the Reichstag (63). Putin revived the orange and black St. George's ribbon, a symbol of the successful war effort, and it begins showing up everywhere. It is important to appreciate just how big of a deal this is in modern Russia, the latest great and celebrated success of a people. Banks offer "VICTORY IS OURS" accounts with special discounts on 5/9, billboards throughout Moscow flash "ONWARDS TO BERLIN" and most ominously "1941-1945. We can do it again if necessary" (37-38).

In light of the cult of Victory Day, Chechnya, Crimea, and Eastern Ukraine make more sense. Chechnya: how could Putin possibly permit any kind of devolution mere months into his presidency? Crimea: can the same country that beat the Nazis possibly give up its best warm water port and access to the Mediterranean? (side note -- Crimea had a lot else going on as well... vast majority of the population was unsupportive of the Ukrainian government and favored closer union with Russia). Walker dives deeply into these stories.

In this deep diving is where the book really shines -- the personalities, the anecdotes, the interviews that give credence to the larger narrative conveyed by the book. There is the tragic story of Olga (68-77), deported to Siberian hell-hole Magadan in the 60s and doomed to remain there for the rest of her days. And Oleg (97) who runs a museum for the Gulag Olga was sent to. While they are obviously critical of the Soviet Union, they have no lack of pride in Russia and have much harsher words for Gorbachev and Yeltsin than Stalin and Putin: qualified competency trumps chaos. Then there are the Ukrainian rebels, the pro-Russian warlord of eastern Ukraine known as "The Demon" (212-215), journalists, minor government officials. These depictions are rich and lovely and could be read on their own for pure enjoyment.

Overall: I recommend the book, especially to my Sinophile 90's-baby friends.

And a thought: what if Russia formed its national cult around Yuri Gagarin and the Soviet space victory instead of the military victory of WW2? It's a cool alternative universe to imagine.

Uncomplicatedi says

An exceptionally easy to read book on the way that the purposeful crafting of the narrative around the great patriotic war (WWII) has altered the conscious and unconscious thoughts of Russians. The Author is clear and concise and uses his own experiences to show effects on ordinary Russians he encounters. Author also includes statistics and data to reinforce key points. The Russian Federation media landscape and its propaganda and disinformation campaigns against perceived enemies Internal and External (the West) are clearly demonstrated. The effects of this campaign on recent events in Russia are the main topic of the book. Author has lived and worked in Moscow for many years and his Russophile leanings are clearly evident. Shaun Walker writes in a vivid style that felt very "video documentary" at times as the author has a real skill at evoking characters and place.

Mandy says

In this accessible and jargon-free exploration of contemporary Russia and the rise of Putin, who has so expertly manipulated the nation's sense of identity by emphasising Russia's victory in the Second World War, the author provides an insightful and comprehensible window into the Russian psyche. He knows Russia well and has a firm grasp of how ordinary Russians view the world. His first-hand knowledge of the country gives authority to the book, and it's a clear-sighted and comprehensive attempt to explain Putin and the country he rules so successfully. I found the examination of the situation in Ukraine particularly useful and I now understand the conflict there much more fully. Walker's journalistic skills allowed him to gain the confidence of many interviewees throughout the country, thus gathering many points of view and enabling him to give a balanced and thorough account. Essential reading for anyone interested in modern Russia.

Bud says

Shaun Walker is a reporter for the Guardian and covered events in Russia over the past 4 years including Russia's takeover of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine. He covers events and national feelings about conquering Nazis from World War II (including Stalin's movement of hundreds of thousands of ethnic people from their homeland during the war). The conquest of Hitler is the great motivator of the Russian people that Putin has been successfully exploiting. Walker's on-the-ground interviews with people at the point of conflict on all sides helps illuminate why and how things happened in Ukraine.

Anna Carr says

It is kinda my hobby to look for malarkey in books on modern Russia, Ukraine, the war in Ukraine - you name it. Almost none was found here even though I stayed vigilant and alert through all the 270 pages. There was one place, however, where Shaun Walker got lost in his liberal views on Ukrainian nationalism and sort of started contradicting himself. See if you can spot it; I won't spoil here.

All in all, can't recommend this book enough if you want to know the following:

1. Who is Putin?

2. Why is he such a mean little thing?
3. Who started it in Ukraine?

Language and writing--you can't ask for more.

Dusty Wilmes says

Outstanding modern history of Putin-era Russia by Shaun Walker, journalist at The Guardian who spent the last 10+ years living in and covering Russia and E. Europe. Having read several other modern histories of Russia—such as Pomerantsev's "The Invention of Russia" and Garrels' "Putin Country: A Journey Into The Real Russia," Walker's book is the best, providing both nuance and clarity.

Edina says

Amazing book and easy to read and understand even English is not my first language. Couldn't put it down! Wish to read more similar books! If you know some please recommend!

Antenna says

With the chilling downward spiral back into Cold War politics, it seems more vital than ever to understand why the Putin regime operates as it does and most Russians accept it.

This impressively clear and insightful analysis gains authenticity from the journalist author's fluent grasp of Russian, his study of the country's history, and time spent living and travelling widely in the Former Soviet Union (FSU). He has sought a fresh perspective in his focus on "the ghosts of the past", which in various ways cripple and distort the current state of society.

As a student, Shaun Walker saw first-hand the "poverty, widespread squalor and rampant exploitation" in Moscow a decade after the collapse of communism, which left many Russians feeling disoriented and rootless. In the vacuum created by the sudden break-up of the USSR, Putin was resolved not merely to stabilise the economy but to establish Russia in what he saw as its rightful place as a "first rank" global power.

Shaun Walker repeatedly returns to the "memory politics" which Putin has used to raise morale and forge a sense of unity: at the heart of this is the continued celebration of Russian victory in "saving the world from fascism" in World War Two, without any admission of Stalin's tyranny, such as the mass deportation to remote labour camps of hundreds of thousands of ethnic minority villagers for alleged collaboration with the Nazis. Walker cites the headteacher in a rundown Irkutsk suburb where some families have had to cut back on food recently. "Patriotism is the most important thing" she declares, having reintroduced the old Soviet uniform for her pupils, to improve morale. The parents approve of Putin's efforts to fight corruption, probably unaware of the extent of his own unreported wealth together with that of his cronies.

As suggested by these examples, Shaun Walker proceeds through a series of case studies mainly based on peripheral regions closer to Western Europe where there is more history and risk of uprisings: Georgia, the Ukraine and Chechnya. In the latter, generous investment for the reconstruction of places like Grozny

combined with the desire for stability, have encouraged people to treat as “an inconvenient and ignored detail” the fact that their leader Ramzan Kadyrov’s father led Chechens to fight the Russians in the 1990s. Grozny’s central avenue has been renamed from “Victory Avenue” to “Putin Avenue”. The author writes of how Chechens “build walls around certain events in their lives, so that they can often only speak in half-memories and platitudes” and quotes Koestler: “If power corrupts, the reverse is also true: persecution corrupts the victim, though perhaps in subtler and more tragic ways”.

We are shown how Putin’s attitudes have evolved. Initially wishing to be a respected and reliable ally of the west, even suggesting that Russia might join the EU or NATO, he began to feel cold-shouldered and threatened by western support for rebels in Georgia and Ukraine. This pushed him towards a kind of continuation of the old tsarist empire, supported by a mixture of renewed religious Orthodoxy, political autocracy with a “window-dressing” of democracy and pride in nationality. A “natural state of confrontation” with external powers has now “won the day” as illustrated by the annexation of the Crimea, justified by the need to “right the wrong” of Krushchev’s relinquishment to Ukraine of an area which was historically Russian until 1954.

There is passing reference to the distorted reporting of foreign affairs and failure to investigate and bring to convincing justice the murderers of journalists who threaten to “rock the boat” by probing the system too deeply, but this grim legacy of a ruthless authoritarian past is not explored in great depth. Although fascinating, the analysis seems incomplete in its neglect of other major relevant aspects, like Putin’s suppression of true democracy in the form of Alexei Navalny, a potentially major opponent denied from standing for election on what sound like bogus charges of embezzlement. The same applies to the implications of the suspicious death in custody of the tax lawyer Sergei Magnitsky, alleged moves to undermine western democracy by influencing elections, and renewed assertiveness in bombing Syria. To be fair, Putin’s recent vaunting of “new weaponry he claims will render NATO defences completely useless” and the bizarre poisoning of the Skripals in Britain came too late for this book.

John Plowright says

In 1962, the former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson observed that, “Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role.” Britain could at least take comfort from the fact that, whilst far from painless, its experience of decolonisation was nothing like as traumatic as that of the French or Dutch, and it could, moreover, bask in the moral authority which came from its being the only European state to have fought Nazi Germany continuously from September 1939 until victory in May 1945. Indeed, Churchill’s prophecy regarding “our finest hour” seems to have been realised and pride in its part in the Second World War has become, at least according to some foreign observers, a defining characteristic of British national identity.

The only other country which celebrates the Second World War with the same degree, or even greater, fervour, and whose culture is as deeply impregnated by the conflict is Russia, although for Russians it is, of course, the ‘Great Patriotic War’ of 1941-45 that is commemorated.

Although the victory cult dates from Brezhnev, it is under Putin that the presentation of this aspect of the Soviet past - affording most Russians something of which they could be proud - has assumed centre stage, as Putin strove to offset the domestic and international humiliations of the Gorbachev-Yeltsin years and restore Russia to the status of a first-tier nation.

How this happened and its consequences for Russia’s relations with other nationalities which were once part of the USSR is what Shaun Walker addresses in his excellent book ‘The Long Hangover. Putin’s New

Russia and the Ghosts of the Past’.

Walker is a first-rate journalist (first for ‘The Independent’ and now for ‘The Guardian’) and at the heart of his book are many interviews with both the powerful and the powerless, many of which were conducted in perilous circumstances, all of which are recalled very vividly and some of which are very moving. In addition to a superb eye for detail, Walker has a great turn of phrase, for example, talking of the way in which some interviewees would gradually open up to reveal new layers of confidences he refers to a “matryoshka nesting doll of painful memories.”

Putin is shown by Walker as having been very successful in manipulating the past so as to give Russia a new sense of national identity and purpose, filling the void left by the 1991 triple blows of implosion of the Soviet system, transformation of the USSR into the Russian Federation, and the loss of lands on the imperial periphery. The human costs of that process are also coolly examined, particularly in relation to the people of Ukraine. Indeed, a secondary theme is how Ukraine, or at least elements in western Ukraine, developed their own rival, anti-Russian, national-historical narrative centring upon the Second World War.

The Orwellian nature of such enterprises is well illustrated by reference to the Kremlin’s ‘Commission to Prevent the Falsification of History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests’, which as Walker points out, carries in its name the implication that falsifying history for the benefit of Russian interests is considered quite acceptable. Most, if not all, countries have their historical blind-spots but Russia has employed all the means open to the state to engage in forced amnesia on a positively industrial scale.

The book is open to criticism on some grounds. Walker’s understanding and application of the term ‘genocide’, equating it with physical extermination, is unduly narrow. He could also be accused of overstating his case when he claims that in addition to his strategic concerns, Putin “could not countenance a Ukraine in which the Soviet period was viewed as an occupation, and the glorious Russian war narrative was turned on its head.” On the contrary, the threat to the Russian Black Sea Fleet base in Crimea was quite sufficient to explain Russian intervention, just as the threat to the Russian naval base at Tartus is sufficient to explain Putin’s intervention to support the Assad regime in Syria. I also think the book deserves a title which better represents its contents, such as ‘Putin’s manipulation of the past’ or ‘Contested versions of the Great Patriotic War in the former Soviet Union’ but these are very minor quibbles when set against the book’s general excellence.

Reading ‘The Long Hangover’ will greatly profit all those seeking to understand recent events in Russia and Ukraine. Gerard Depardieu, Hilary Swank, Seal, Jean-Claude van Damme and Vanessa Mae would do especially well to read it, as even their desire to profit by lending their names to celebrate Kadyrov’s Chechnya might, one hopes, be tempered if they knew more about the nature of the regime there.

Vicki says

I've long been a fan of Shaun Walker's coverage of Russia. He's been in the region a long time and really understands the Russian ethos, and asks the right questions, and I was not disappointed in this book, which traces the alarming rate of growth of Russian World War II patriotism and Soviet nostalgia as the present-day Russia gets worse and worse.

Going through this book and through Shaun's interviews with people throughout the former Soviet Union is like talking to a really smart friend who distills the essence of the situation down for you. Most of this history was known to me, but Shaun really adds a personal element that ties the narrative together.

The epilogue is probably the strongest part of the book and where he should have started, with a quote from Stalin's daughter that will now stick forever in my mind, " With one hand we try to catch the moon itself, but with the other we are obliged to dig potatoes, the same way it was done a hundred years ago."

D?c??r says

An excellent report of investigating journalism into Russia's past, and its journey into current state of affairs. It also excellently covers problems that are currently affecting Ukraine, and perhaps Chechnya in the future. Many of these issues that these places and its people have now to face, comes from the collapse of the Soviet Union. Moral and material corruption, issues that will face other nations in the future as well.

"You have to know the past to understand the present."
– Carl Sagan

Surajit says

Sometimes we have to look back to know where we are going.

What happens when your country disintegrates, and your national identity changes? About a decade ago, I had spoken to an old Bangladeshi in Dhaka, he had been a citizen of India, Pakistan and now Bangladesh, the conversation of broken lives, genocide and the sheer impact of politics shook me. This book has echoes of those eerie stories. Absolute power can enforce famines, kill millions, displace millions, erase collective memories, and send its citizens to prison labor until they die.

Be aware, very aware if you want to give someone that kind of power.

Chad Foster says

This amazing book should be read along with a handful of others that attempt to explain how the regime of Vladimir Putin has, to this point, managed to return Russia to its seemingly historical norm of authoritarian rule - this time with the acquiescence, and even enthusiasm, of a large swath of everyday Russians.

Putin, like others before him, has overseen a deliberate and insidious information (propaganda) campaign to craft a new Russian narrative of identity that selectively draws upon the country's history, conveniently glossing over (and outright lying about) the darker periods. Memories of the gulag, the Nazi-Soviet Pact that enabled the carving up of Poland, etc. are sanitized and justified in this new narrative. Russians feel humiliated and ignored after the immediate post-Soviet years in the 1990s. Putin has masterfully used this narrative to restore pride ... and a willingness to accept brutal repression, violations of individual and collective liberty, sham gestures that pretend to democratic legitimacy, and naked aggression against neighbors. Russians have, to an alarming extent, become willingly complicit in the lie.

Read this book along with "Putin Country" by Anne Garrels, "Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible" by Peter Pomerantsev, "The Man without a Face" by Marsha Gessen, and "The Invention of Russia" by Arkady Ostrovsky. It is well worth your time.

Robin Case says

+1 for well done audio version. Well written, solid research. Nice incite into the Putin/Russian situation.

Michael says

I think this is useful for understanding Russia today under Putin. I think the way it is framed as a book, "Putin's new Russia and the Ghosts of the Past" isn't quite right since it seemed more cumulative, starting with the efforts to institutionalize a certain celebration of Russian achievement with the victory in World War II and then moving on through the solution to Chechen separatism and recent and current events with the undeclared war in eastern Ukraine. There is a lot of well presented historical background, for example with the deportation of Chechens and also Crimean Tatars.

Still, for a general reader looking to know more about Russia, I'm not sure how useful this would be. Hmm.

The author certain knows the subject well. It is interesting to me that this correspondent for the Guardian has had such a long term focus on Russia. Many foreign correspondents don't.
