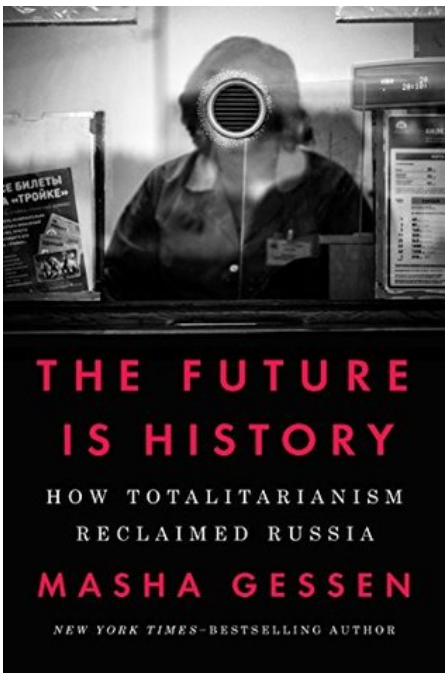

The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia

Masha Gessen

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WINNER OF THE 2017 NATIONAL BOOK AWARD IN NONFICTION

FINALIST FOR THE NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARDS

WINNER OF THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY'S HELEN BERNSTEIN BOOK AWARD

NAMED A BEST BOOK OF 2017 BY *THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW, LOS ANGELES TIMES, WASHINGTON POST, BOSTON GLOBE, SEATTLE TIMES, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, NEWSWEEK, PASTE,* and *POP SUGAR*

The essential journalist and bestselling biographer of Vladimir Putin reveals how, in the space of a generation, Russia surrendered to a more virulent and invincible new strain of autocracy.

Award-winning journalist Masha Gessen's understanding of the events and forces that have wracked Russia in recent times is unparalleled. In The Future Is History, Gessen follows the lives of four people born at what promised to be the dawn of democracy. Each of them came of age with unprecedented expectations, some as the children and grandchildren of the very architects of the new Russia, each with newfound aspirations of their own--as entrepreneurs, activists, thinkers, and writers, sexual and social beings.

Gessen charts their paths against the machinations of the regime that would crush them all, and against the war it waged on understanding itself, which ensured the unobstructed reemergence of the old Soviet order in the form of today's terrifying and seemingly unstoppable mafia state. Powerful and urgent, The Future Is History is a cautionary tale for our time and for all time.

The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia Details

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From Reader Review The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia for online ebook

Hadrian says

Superb illustration of Russia's slide into totalitarianism over the past three decades, through the lives of four ordinary Russians and three members of the intelligentsia. I'm impressed how Gessen finds these people - a young gay man in a rural town, the daughter of a businesswoman, a grandson of a Soviet politician, the daughter of a Boris Nemtsov, an assassinated dissident.

Yet Gessen is *intelligentsia*, and so she best converses with others, as they grapple with the seismic changes of the past quarter century. These include a psychiatrist, bringing the desperately needed treatments of mental health to a country that once abused it as a tool for political control and a pollster who sees the attitudes of his compatriots regress back to the time of *Homo Sovieticus*. Looming in the distance is Aleksandr Dugin, fellow traveler of Vladimir Putin, occasional conspiracy theorist, a fanatical priest against *??????????????????? ????? ????????*, or idolizing the West.

The data scientist, to his great horror, finds a nostalgia for the Soviet regime, and Masha Gessen prescribes it as a "recurrent illness", like syphilis. Of course, "totalitarianism" is a loaded term, and many within the social sciences, myself included, would bristle at the use of such a term. But Gessen at least makes a case for it - "not as deadly", yet, but with recognizable symptoms.

Gessen's hypothesis for how this happened is fuzzy - some Freudian speculation about a "death drive" - but her reportage and narration are superb. She best notes the "March of the Millions" protests in 2012, and the invasion of Crimea in 2014, and Putin's presentation of events. The totalitarian government is obsessed with the past, forever remaking the past in its own image. As for everything else, *???????? ???* - there is no future.

Phillip says

4.5 / 5.0

Don't know if she explicitly proved her title thesis, but the book progressed tragically through the lives of her protagonists. Extremely insightful unpassionate analysis of Russian character and psychology regarding authority. Told from activist viewpoint but emotionally fair and balanced. Minimal villainy attributed to Putin. Her points are subtle but strong and the accumulated total is devastatingly enlightening. Particularly in this time of simple convenient truths her nuanced detailed factual explanation and illumination of the current State of Internal Russian Affairs is a story well worth studying. Besides she writes very clearly and precisely chooses her words.

Jimmy says

My very first memory of a newsreel was the Hungarian revolution against the Soviet Union. It was crushed. The Hungarians had control for a week or two hoping that the US or UN would help out. Good luck with that. The world ignored them, and they were crushed. As a young boy, I watched them being shot down in

the streets by Russian soldiers.

The next memory about the Soviet Union that stuck with me was the Czechoslovakian revolution. Led by Alexander Dubcek, the government there tried to create "communism with a human face." Once again: Good luck with that. Soviet tanks rolled in. There was no real pushback. One young Czech man burned himself in front of a tank. Dubcek was assigned to run a parking garage. Then there was this beautiful moment. Dubcek and his wife walked into a movie theater. The audience noticed him and stood spontaneously to sing the Czech national anthem. I was inspired. But they were still under the boot of Russia.

The Russian dissidents became my heroes. In 1969, Andrei Amalrik wrote the book-length essay *Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?* I always thought they would. They didn't survive much longer. But that government has come back. Amalrik, by the way, died in a car accident in Spain going to a civil rights conference. Broke my heart.

So many other examples caused me to grow up with a decidedly negative view of communism. I have not changed.

This book is solid history and a must read for anyone who cares about Russia. Masha Gessen is the best!

I can't help but wonder if we missed a great opportunity to change Russia and the world. I don't think they ever had a golden age. It always seems so cold and miserable. And the people so depressed. Even in their great literature.

In December 1989, the great dissident physicist Andre Sakharov died leaving Boris Yeltsin to lead the "democrats." Yeltsin was "locked in mortal combat" with Mikhail Gorbachev, who refused to cede the Communist Party. Gorbachev banned street protests in March 1991. There were tanks in the streets in an effort to stymy democracy protests. Crowds chanted "Yel-tisn!" In June, Yeltsin was elected president. Civil War was narrowly averted.

One after another Eastern European states allowed protests. The Communists and the Russian Army were forced to leave. That makes the current dismantling of Eastern European democracy even more discouraging. Mr. Trump has been a model for fascists everywhere.

A young KGB agent there described the experience as "frightful and humiliating." His name was Vladimir Putin. He would not forget. And the chain reaction did not stop at the Soviet border. Even the great Soviet Union splintered. Slowly the Soviet Republics declared their own independence. Gorbachev resigned his post as President of the USSR.

In August the giant statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police, was removed from its pedestal near the Kremlin. It symbolized the dismantling the two pillars of totalitarianism: ideology and terror.

The Soviet state was based on punishment. Children were taught to criticize one another in groups. The same with workers.

Russians were outraged at the American bombings in Serbia.

Vladimir Putin's popularity shot up in 1999. First, a series of apartment building explosions in Russia. Putin used the bombings as a pretext to launch a new offensive in Chechnya. It seemed as if no Russian felt any sympathy for what Chechen civilians were going through. Instead, they admired one utterance by Putin: "We will pursue terrorists wherever they are. At the airport, if they are at the airport. And that means, I apologize, that if we catch them going to the bathroom, then we will rub them out in the outhouse, if it comes to that.

That's it, the issue is closed." The Russian people had a new strongman who knew how to talk tough again.

And he had the Russian Orthodox Church on his side.

In 2000, a Russian sub sunk off the coast of Norway. The Norwegians offered to help. Putin would not interrupt his vacation.

Chechens seized a movie theater in Moscow taking more than 900 hostages. The military stormed the theater and 129 hostages died. Sleeping gas pumped into the theater ended up killing many of the hostages. No pictures of dead hostages were shown. Just terrorists.

Russians at first reacted with sympathy to 9/11 attacks on America. Soon it gave way to blaming America itself for the attacks.

Estonia removed the statue of the bronze soldier meant to commemorate Russian WWII victories there. What Russians thought of as "liberation," Estonians thought of as "occupation." Russia attacked Estonia as punishment with cyberwarfare. Sound familiar?

Georgia and Ukraine were prevented from entering NATO by Russian military attacks. I guess you could say it's hard to blame either side of the issue. But those are separate countries and should be respected as such.

If you read the book, take a careful look at the definitions of totalitarianism. They look eerily familiar to our current situation. As Erich Fromm said, ". . . a feeling of superiority over the rest of mankind . . . will compensate them--for at least a time--for the fact that their lives had been impoverished, economically and culturally."

One of the things I most learned was how much Putin used attacks on LGBTQ rights to maintain power and solidify his base. They were constantly referred to as "pedophiles." Again the book goes into great detail.

Putin and Medvedev have a back and forth handover of power. Total corruption. The Russian Orthodox Church helped to promote this power.

And of course there was the usual hatred of Jews.

And of course the need for strong men. You know, like the shirtless Putin.

And of course they now could say that Crimea was "theirs."

And, like climate change and the other problems we face, the worst is yet to come.

A great book. Well worthy of the National Book Award.

Peter Mcloughlin says

Taking the past forty or so years of Russian history from its emergence from to its retreat back into Totalitarianism this book focuses of individuals who experienced firsthand this false dawn and the broken promise of democracy since the fall of the Soviet Union. The stories of individuals and activists getting a breath of freedom only to see it submerged under Putin. Gives some interest incites to the way ordinary and some not so ordinary Russians think.

Erik van Mechelen says

Gessen's careful telling of the lives of four Russians who saw the Soviet Union collapse and who also saw Putin take power is a thrill to read. Their are three additional characters whose position in Russian society and political influence garners attention.

Despite following the lives of 7 characters across landscapes of city to country life and occupations from psychology to politics, Gessen manages to keep the reader on a path toward making sense of what it was like for these people to live (and in some ways) contribute to the political results.

Gessen emerges less surprised than she was at the project's outset (as a journalist she herself covered this period in Russia). With attention, the reader will too.

Rory Harden says

This is an important book.

Its purpose is to explain how, and why, Russia returned to a state of totalitarianism despite the initial hope and democratisation of the Yeltsin period. Why did the Russian people not fasten on to their new freedoms in the way that the citizens of the Baltic republics and, to a lesser extent, those of Ukraine did?

Masha Gessen’s explanation explores, via the lives of seven individuals and through three disciplines which did not exist in the Soviet period – sociology, psychoanalysis and opinion polling – the persistence of what she calls Homo Sovieticus.

This character, the opinion polling and (a bit less plausibly) the psychoanalysis suggest, did not fade away after the collapse of the Soviet Union, nor even with the passing of generations. Putin era youth groups like Nashi differ little from their Soviets equivalents. Most citizens fear the open expanse of liberal freedom, preferring the ‘narrow corridor’ of the authoritarian State.

Most Russians, the book says, yearn not for change and opportunity (and the responsibility and anxiety that may go with them), but for order, imposed from above, and ‘strength and stability’. ‘Strong and stable’ – where have we heard that lately?

The book contains a discussion of the precise meaning of ‘totalitarianism’. Hannah Arendt is quoted, along with other writers. But the precise meaning is largely beside the point. In 2017, opposition politics in Russia is all but impossible. If you oppose Putin, you may be murdered, like Boris Nemtsov. Elections are rigged, even if Putin opponents are excluded and rigging is therefore unnecessary. Academics are monitored for ideological conformity. Demonstrations are all but impossible to stage. Protesters may be arrested by the hundred. Justice is arbitrary and controlled by the executive. Corruption abounds.

Gessen discusses whether a totalitarian state needs an ideology. The answer appears to be: not necessarily, but it helps – especially when you are getting started, and you can change it as circumstances demand. And the ideology should be a single, simple idea. (Like ‘MAGA’ or ‘Brexit’, perhaps.)

The current ideology is ‘Eurasia’ or ‘Greater Russia’ – as people in Ukraine are well aware – and its high

priest is Alexander Dugin. Dugin is the Steve Bannon or Nigel Farage of Russia – only worse. According to this book, Dugin has a personal connection to the American neo-Nazi Richard Spencer (the 'Hail Trump' guy.)

Dugin's ideology is all about 'traditional family values', which are threatened by Western liberalism. There are no such things, he says, as 'universal human values'. Liberal (social, but not economic) ideas are to be abhorred; they are 'Western' and an affront to white Christian civilisation, as epitomised by the 'Russian World'. Putin is thus the leader of a movement to restore 'European Civilisation'.

This is where it gets really scary. LGBT people are 'deviants' who deserve to be 'liquidated'; the Russian opinion polling on this is devastating. (And a warning: this book contains descriptions of homophobic 'vigilante' violence, tacitly state-sanctioned, that may cost you sleep.)

To what extent do people like Bannon, Spencer, Farage, Le Pen and Trump buy into Dugin's despicable ideology? How intent are they on spreading it outside of Russia? They may seem like comic villains, but we should ask ourselves this question before we laugh too much.

Apart from Nemtsov, the characters in Gessen's book survive, though most of them leave Russia. The book leaves you feeling, firstly, that Russians do not deserve their fate, Homo Sovieticus notwithstanding; and, secondly, that neither do we, in Europe or America – and we'd better think about that.

Towards the end of the book, Gessen notes that, in June 2017, a Russian opinion poll reported that Russians' choice for 'most outstanding person of all time in the entire world' was Joseph Stalin.

AC says

One of the most stunningly brilliant books I have read this year. If you are interested in Russia, Putinism, and the depth psychology of totalitarianism, you will find this book fascinating. Gessen is utterly brilliant.

Massimo says

Imagine the United States collapses in the near future. And imagine someone decides to write about the collapse of contemporary America 20-25 years from now, focusing only on Trump, racism, poverty, health care, etc... In order to do so, this person follows the rise of Richard Spencer and the lives of a bunch of liberal, middle-class individuals from NYC, LA and, let's say, Houston. Would this be a fair depiction of life in the U.S.? Yet this is what Masha Gessen does with the Soviet Union and Russia in her book.
Gessen is a Jewish woman who was told by her parents that, in order to beat the "Soviet antisemitic machine," they "could no longer live in our country," something that she herself would tell her children years later before leaving Moscow for New York. This is what the reader is warned about in the prologue, some sort of guidelines to frame the events narrated in the book.
Gessen traces the life trajectories of six different people who grew up in the post-Soviet space, plus Aleksandr Dugin, who makes sporadic and, at times, incomprehensible appearances here and there. The idea of using other people lives seems to give a lot of credibility to the point Gessen tries to make which, to put it bluntly, can be summed up as "the Soviet Union was a terrible place to be and Russia is not any better." The problem, though, is that if you choose to portray the life of the son of a party official, of the daughter of a famous politician, of the grandson of Alexander Yakovlev etc. the picture that you get will get cannot

possibly be complete. And that's understandable. Masha Gessen, together with some of her protagonists, is an intelligent, and she tells the stories of the people she knows and relates to. Keep that in mind: she tells the story. What we hear in the book are not the voices of the six protagonists, but their stories filtered by the author's voice, which makes all the difference in the world. Gessen is a journalist with a specific agenda, she is not Svetlana Alexievich. The result is a book that tries to explain the slow descent of Russia into totalitarianism without really portraying the people who have been supporting Putin for more than twenty years, because she dismisses them as the embodiment of Homo Sovieticus, who was (and is) only able of "doublethink." And the reason is that Gessen doesn't know these people, she doesn't want to acknowledge them, like Clinton saying that Trump's supporters were "deplorables." When Gessen talks about "Occupy Pedophilia", a short-lived movement active in 2013-14, she uses the word "thug" to describe the guys involved in it, but the underlying reasoning is the same.
Gessen is angry at Russia, therefore she props up her biased account with negative comments about every possible aspect of life there: from the Cathedral of Christ the Savior that looks like a "gaudy giant wedding cake" to the geometric tiles of the sidewalks in Moscow resembling tombstones, from "the small number of movies that had been produced in the Soviet Union" (which is false) to grand statements about the Soviet Union such as "knowing which way the wind was blowing could mean the difference between life and death."
Gessen's account on contemporary Russia is more about how Russia is not America than how Russia really is. At one point she writes: "Intellectuals were always falling into the trap of mistaking the written word for a true mirror of life." I hope the readers of this book won't fall into the same trap.

Tatiana says

Bias on top of bias on top of bias.

I feel about this book the way I felt about The Bronze Horseman. It is clearly written by an emigrant from Russia who hates EVERYTHING about Russia. There is no attempt to be objective here, vitriol in every sentence, where even the most innocuous things are described as depressing and dire and BAD - free, government sponsored, mind you, preschools portrayed as a "cross between baby prisons and warehouses" - really? how did we all make it then after attending them? this is just one of the most ridiculous exaggerations. My memories of my standard preschool include playing a lot outside, eating and taking naps and doing arts and learning songs and dancing and going to the beach!

Well, I guess this is how Masha Gessen is making her name in the West. She can come up with ridiculously convoluted theories of why Russians welcome and love Putin (homo soveticus my ass), but the reality is simple - not many Russians could make it in a cut-throat, unregulated post-perestroika capitalist Russia, including my parents who could barely keep it together in the new "free market." Is this so hard to comprehend that majority wanted to go back to the time of paltry, but guaranteed income, free medical services and quality education? They thought Putin would bring back the, often imagined, rosy past, and they still think the same way now!

Read Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets for something more balanced, a criticism with a perspective and understanding.

Brian says

Quite an amazing book, part history, part novel, with good doses of sociology and philosophy thrown in. I

think this is an important book that Americans should read to better understand post-Cold War Russia as well as the present political moment we're living through in our own country.

Masha Gessen tells the story of the late Soviet Union through the eyes of several Russians living in Moscow beginning in the late 80's. Like a Tolstoy novel, the cast is large and includes public figures such as Boris Nemtsov and Aleksandr Dugin as well as less well-known Russians like Lyosha, a young gay man, sociologist Lev Gudkov, a psychoanalyst named Marina Arutyunyan, and a young activist named Masha. The combination of many perspectives within a single narrative against the backdrop of history paints a nuanced picture of present day Russian society, allowing foreigners to perceive a level of complexity and subtlety not easily accessed by merely reading the news.

In one example, Gudkov's years of research conducting opinion surveys provide the reader with insight into Russian attitudes toward many social issues, such as how society should treat LGBT individuals, the handicapped, and other marginalized groups, as well as how these attitudes changed over time. Lyosha's firsthand experience of violence directed toward gay men combined with his difficulty pursuing his academic career serve to kindle empathy for the struggles that hundreds of thousands of Russians face daily.

The most frightening (though enlightening) point of view, however, is Dugin's. The book follows Dugin from his early days as an anti-communist dissident through his present station as a key ideologue within the "Eurasian" movement and nationalist conservatism more generally. Some have drawn comparisons between Steve Bannon and Dugin, as well as to their roles with their respective rulers. At the core of Dugin's philosophy lies the idea of "Fourth Political Theory," meaning that the backward-looking authoritarian traditionalism he espouses represents the fourth great wave in political ideology, with the prior three being liberalism, communism, and fascism. Rather than viewing events in Russian history such as the Mongol occupation like the West typically does (as a period that hindered the development of inclusive political institutions in favor of colonial extraction), Dugin claims that these events have formed a uniquely Eurasian culture with values fundamentally different than those of the democratic West.

Specifically, Dugin views notions such as representative democracy, pluralism, and tolerance as Western cultural exports at odds with the fundamental character of Russian society. His philosophy at its heart rejects modernity and longs for a return to a glorious Russia of the past, loosely defined around a set of rural conservative religious and cultural values that stand in opposition to the liberal beliefs of the West and the urban elite. To Dugin, Francis Fukayama's famous "end of history" embodied in the end of the Cold War meant the triumph of liberalism over communism, following liberalism's earlier defeat of fascism. Rather than accepting the "maternal" view of history represented by the global victory of liberalism and moving steadily toward the implementation of Western-style institutions within modern Russia, Dugin's Fourth Political Theory unapologetically advocates a patriarchal worldview, with liberalism at home and abroad as the chief enemy.

It isn't difficult to see the appeal of Dugin's position to Trumpists and the American alt-right, whose chief adversary also seems to be liberalism. (Racist community organizer Richard Spencer's wife once worked as Dugin's translator.) Gessen's book, however, makes clear that Dugin's ideas are at their core adversarial to the United States, which serves as an object of resentment for the chaos that befell Russian society in the early 90's. Interventions like the US bombing of Serbia that few Americans keenly remember loom large in Russian nationalism and act as a reminder of how the US humiliated Russia at a time of weakness. While most Americans spent the 00's preoccupied with the aftermath of 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia seethed with sense of grievance over what it perceived to be US arrogance and unchecked aggression, including NATO expansion into Russia's East European security buffer.

Masha Gessen's book is eye-opening in more ways than I can easily recount. (I haven't even mentioned her application of Hannah Arendt's ideas on totalitarianism to Russia's current situation.) The similarities between Russia and the United States under Donald Trump are troubling, but I'm optimistic that our

institutional fabric will prove unconducive to "Duginism with American characteristics" (to borrow the phrasing the Chinese use to describe their variant of socialism). Yet if large swathes of American society continue to frame their agenda in terms of opposition to "liberalism," we remain vulnerable to Dugin's ideology poisoning our discourse. Eurasianism opposes not liberalism as the word is used in contemporary American parlance, but rather in the sense of the word that places both American liberals and conservatives within the liberal tradition as our founders would have defined it, combined with Adam Smith and David Ricardo's concepts of economic liberalism (in the form of free market capitalism) balanced by democratically enacted social measures to ensure fairness. I hope more people read Gessen's book to better understand contemporary Russia, the nature of modern totalitarianism, and the dangers that Dugin’s ideas (with Putin as their advocate) pose to the democratic West.

Esil says

4 stars for the content and 3 stars for the audio.

In The Future Is History, Masha Gessen looks at Russia since the mid 1980s to today. It's not a pretty picture. She focuses on three young people born in the mid-1980s, from different backgrounds. She weaves in a lot of history and political theory. She essentially argues that contemporary Russia is under a totalitarian regime, zeroing on themes like the lack of true elections and state sanctioned homophobia.

For anyone interested in recent Russian history and contemporary politics, Gessen's book is very rich. It has a real human dimension, while providing a lot of deeper political and historical context. Gessen herself is originally from Russia, so it also feels like her book comes from a place of deep understanding. This is a sympathetic portrait of people living in difficult circumstances.

But because there is so much to this book, I really don't recommend the audio. It was sometimes hard to keep track of people and events. Also Gessen narrates this one herself, and she reads very fast in a bit of an odd staccato voice.

Great book for those interested in the topic. But read it, don't listen to it.

Jeanette says

This explains much about the dichotomies of the Russian citizens' mental, logical, spiritual, economic worldviews. Most of which ride on feelings as much as they do on physical or realistic to quantity facts. It's not just about the period since the 1980's, but that in particular is far more discerned and described through varying well characterized by witness and opinion citizen "eyes"- their life experiences throughout vast (once again) changes.

It's more difficult than just that though. It's also at times erudite and deep in direction. As is the Russian "awareness" and "ideal" dichotomy. And it truly is hard to parse where any individuality or any approach to "equality" is ever a discerning regard or particularly defined within Russia. It's ALWAYS a top down worldview with something like a "father" who "knows better" making nearly every possible bureaucratic, economic, political, work related life decisions. FOR YOU and not with you too. And certain groups are nearly always excluded for advancements. Not only within schooling either. I though the identity bases in their politics and the "coffin" questions to admittance more than enlightening. Because I've heard them from the horse's mouth from Russian immigrants to the Chicago area. Some just in this decade too. Hard to get in,

hard to get out. And you better not talk any other language but Russian in the schools, either.

But this book is far more. It's about the patterns of the past and the reality of the now. The USSR days and that break up period is most highlighted here.

In my own life I have been told all through every aspect of my earliest educational paths that Russia was the "enemy". From hiding under desks during the Cuban Missile Crisis to the dire warnings we got when the first Cosmonaut was shot into space. The people who read this have no real concept, I don't believe, of how we were taught that Russia wanted to bury us.

So it really did make me LOL when Obama made that remark about Russia's "power" or status effects being so minimal during those last years of his Presidency. Russia has immense geographical and cognition challenges. It does. It always has and it always will. No one in any country's hierarchy of observing their roles in the world (anywhere on Earth and not in the past, present or future) should ever forget it. When you don't have much at all, you often have "little to lose" and will toss in the lot. Putin's role and progression is typical of Russian past. The system of belief beyond just the Communism ideology has always been to sacrifice large proportions of the population to "same, same" group think. Huge proportions of the population have in every decade been sacrificed, censored/imprisoned, exiled to sure deaths, or full out just killed off in pograms or political "thought" correctness issues re secret police wars. Individuality think is "wrong" by its own prime concept from the get go. Regardless of what the decision or outcome of it will or might be.

These stories from witness in this book are mild compared to the stories I've heard from Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Russians, and Polish or Belgium 2nd generation which originated and in steps came out of Russia proper. The class system is stronger than ever now too. A couple of these people visit about once a decade. So it amazes me that some of the reviewers believe this is only "positing" the hardest facts and reality of politico Russia and mundane issues of Russian living. Commodities, shopping especially. It's far worse in tracts of Russia away from the cities than this book surmises, IMHO. And all the changes that these individuals had to bridge or try to bridge AS INDIVIDUALS through the "changes" (IMHO they always return to a authoritative/ totalitarian form) in this book? They were educated and "lucky" in class or placement- you should hear the stories of those that were not. I've heard dozens. Mostly from home health workers here in the USA and people who had nursing skills and even degrees within Russia. Work does NOT insure a consequence of advancement or profit. Much works exactly the opposite. Slower you go the more you get.

It loses a star for the depth and tangent prose method. But I truly appreciated the chart with name and relationship definition to age and method for naming /title used for this book in the previewed section before the copy began.

Lauren says

The slow transition from one form to another: We see this process, this morphing, through the lives of several individuals - professionals in the 1970/80s USSR, and children born under Soviet control - who witness the shifts through each decade of their lives, and the paths they each take into adulthood.

Gessen is an artful researcher and interviewer. She shares the lives of her subjects without judgement. She reserves her criticisms for the government (there is a lengthy discussion on how to define the modern Russian state - authoritarian, totalitarian, illiberal democracy, etc), but bears these out with the systematic abuses of power and human rights violations, and how they affect the lives of all of her subjects.

We trace the days of Gorbachev and perestroika, through the "fall", and rise of Yeltsin, and finally the long tenure of Putin, as it plays out to 2016, and there's been more since. She spends chapters on Ukraine and the Orange Revolution, the protests in 2010 (and on), the dissidence of Pussy Riot and other activists, and the encroachment in Crimea (including a short history of the region and the various ethnic cleansings that took place there in the over the last century.) Perhaps the most interesting thing that Gessen shows is the mental state and health of a country (or several countries, as former Soviet states now stand independent) and how hopelessness, depression, and anxiety are used as control measures.

I will be chewing on this one for a long while. It is a dense read ~500 pages, interspersing history and politics with personal stories, and one of the most important and prescient books that I have read in years. Gessen is a top-tier writer, and I want to return to her work very soon.

Jerrie (redwritinghood) says

A great look at the last ~35 years in Russia, how it went from a Communist regime to faltering democracy to totalitarian state. Gessen uses the lives of ordinary Russians to help the reader experience what it was like to live there during this time. We follow a few people while also learning about government changes and how those changes affected them. A great book to understand Russia and what might be influencing politics in the US today. Thoroughly researched and well- written book.

Jillian Doherty says

Admittedly this book took me longer to read than most I've read in the last year – it's because there's at least five books with in this one!
The quality of journalism, paired with the incredible insight to the timelines of the USSR are unprecedented. Masha's reporting illustrates far more than the growth of a totalitarian culture – it gives you the personal, socioeconomic, mental 1984-like capacity, and so much more that all comes along with it!
I just hope she keeps writing~
