



The Invention of Russia: From Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War

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A highly original narrative history by *The Economist's* Moscow bureau chief that does for modern Russia what Evan Osnos did for China in *Age of Ambition*

The end of communism and breakup of the Soviet Union was a time of euphoria around the world, but Russia today is violently anti-American and dangerously nationalistic. So how did we go from the promise of those heady days to the autocratic police state of Putin's new Russia?

The Invention of Russia is a breathtakingly ambitious book that reaches back to the darkest days of the cold war to tell the story of the fight for the soul of a nation. With the deep insight only possible of a native son, Ostrovsky introduces us to the propagandists, oligarchs, and fixers who have set Russia's course since the collapse of the Soviet Union, inventing a new and more ominous identity for a country where ideas are all too often wielded like a cudgel.

The Soviet Union yoked together dreamers and strongmen—those who believed in an egalitarian ideal and those who pushed for an even more powerful state. The new Russia is a cynical operation, where perpetual fear and war are fueled by a web of lies, as television presenters peddle the invasion of Ukraine and goad Putin to go nuclear. Twenty-five years after the Soviet flag came down over the Kremlin, Russia and America are again heading toward a confrontation—but this course was far from inevitable. With this riveting account of how we got here—of the many mistakes and false promises—Ostrovsky emerges as Russia's most gifted chronicler.

The Invention of Russia: From Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War Details

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Arkady Ostrovsky

From Reader Review The Invention of Russia: From Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War for online ebook

Mary says

Ostrovsky analyzes and explains how Russia became what it is under Putin, focusing on the role of the media from Yeltsin until today. He contends the media has led the way, and been led along the way, on defining contemporary Russia. It ushered in Putin. The media went from communicating by what they omitted, standardizing the State's narrative, reporting, explaining, instructing and defining and amplifying to helping create a virtual reality today. "... politics was replaced by political technology, citizens by spectators, reality by television." During the annexation of Crimea "The image came first, the reality followed." "The Ukrainian fascists were a phantom created by Russian television. Even though nobody saw them in reality, everyone in Crimea talked about their presence." "To sustain the audience's attention, the plot had to evolve. New virtual enemies had to be produced to raise the level of aggression and hatred.... The narrative of war has now moved beyond Ukraine to Syria and the West in general."

In the back of my mind, I enjoyed toying with a generalized comparison of the Russian media to our US media and how ours also creates, defines and elevates and, often (unintentionally!) gets things so wrong. From my vantage point, the Russian media gets things wrong with purpose. The US media is not an arm of the White House. I get that the US and Russia are still more different than alike and I do not equate our freedoms with anything going on in Russia. Much of our media have shaky intellectual, analytical, history credentials and they strive for ratings over accuracy in order to stay employed and enjoy their perks. A lot of the stuff they get wrong is usually due to incompetence and the wearing of blinders rather than nefarious dealings. Trump is a creation who exploits and is exploited. We shall see how that works out.

Ostrovsky is Russian, seemingly well-educated with a Ph.D, has spent quality time in England and has worked for the better Western media from inside Russia. So, he's prepared himself and has excellent perspective and cultural fluency. He does not seem intimidated by Putin and he speaks the truth plainly. His wife has a non-Russian name. I wish him dual citizenship should he need it. But more power to him if he can remain the ground. He has that magic of consuming vast and complicated material from many disciplines and spitting it out on the page cogently. I understood the entire book and I mostly agreed with him. Yeltsin comes across a tad better than my memory of him. I need to revisit Yeltsin, the leader. Ostrovsky has cultivated himself into the exact right profession, right time, right place. Hat way off. Funny that I'm mostly dissing the media yet I conspicuously respect Ostrovsky as a journalist and writer. They can't all suck!

"Television turned Putin, an unknown KGB operative, into Russia's president within months of his eruption into the national consciousness. His first step as he settled into the Kremlin was to take control over television; only then could he seize the commanding heights of the economy. Television has been the main tool of his power, his magic wand that substituted a counterfeit image for reality." Trump has been interviewed for RT. We all know he's a fan of Putin's. I do not want to go down that road.

Ostrovsky relates that opinion polls gave Yeltsin a clear description of what was wanted for his successor. Ugh, Putin was the perfect fit. Yet another example of awesome Russian tactics with little regard for future strategy. "... Putin had to be portrayed at once as Yeltsin's opponent but also as someone who was anointed by him." Putin was an unknown, "he was "a man with no features, a perfect spy." Putin and his media have evolved into something more specific today, something they have convinced viewers that they wanted.

"No enemy of Russia could have caused as much harm to the country as has been inflicted by those who have been pumping these images [phony wars, false images, Russian victimhood...] into the bloodstream of the nation." "... that whipped up passion does not simply vanish." "Historically Russia has often used

aggression and territorial expansion as a form of defense against modernization.” “... Russia does not possess the energy or vision required for empire building—but revisionism, chaos and war. He may plunge the country into darkness, or Russia may yet rid itself of this post-imperial syndrome and emerge as a nation-state.” So where’s the strategy in that? A Ponzi scheme perpetrated upon the Russian people by the leader they deserve? Do they deserve him???

Bettie? says

Winner of the Orwell Prize 2016

Description: *By tracing the history of modern Russia from Mikhail Gorbachev to the rise of ex KGB agent Vladimir Putin, Arkady Ostrovsky reveals how the Soviet Union came to its end and how Russia has since reinvented itself.*

Russia today bears little resemblance to the country that embraced freedom in the late eighties and gave freedom to others. But how did a country that had liberated itself from seventy years of Communism end up, just twenty years later, as one of the biggest threats to the West and above all to its own people?

The Invention of Russia tells the story of this tumultuous period, including the important role played by the media, and shows how Russia turned its back on the West and found itself embracing a new era of Soviet-style rule.

Dedication: *To Becky*

Acknowledgements

Dramatis Personae

Prologue: A Silent Procession: **It was after midnight on 27 February 2015. I was making final changes to this book when I learned that Boris Nemtsov, a liberal politician once groomed to be President of Russia, had been shot four times in the back on a bridge just metres away from the Kremlin.**

Part I: FIRST WAS THE WORD

Part II: IMAGE IS EVERYTHING

Epilogue: Aerial Combat

Notes

Select Bibliography

Index

Opening: The Soviet Princes: The Last Supper: **Five minutes before 7pm on 25 December 1991 Mikhail Gorbachev walked briskly along a Kremlin corridor into a wood paneled room teeming with photographers, technicians and cameramen to record his last speech as president of USSR.**

Page 247 we finally get a glimpse of Putin and his taking over of Stierlitz, the character from Seventeen Moments of Spring:

Driving a Volga, Putin 're-enacted' the last episode of the film in which Stierlitz drives his car back to Berlin. The famous theme tune and song played in the background. Putin was a perfect fit.

Caroline says

An illuminating book about the role of the media in Russian history from Perestroika through the Ukraine intervention. Hadrian has provided a good review. I just add my sigh at the gyrations of a state with so much potential and no core of belief in the institutions necessary to make it happen.

Hadrian says

There have been a number of illuminating books published on the recent history of Russia, and this joins them in bringing some new aspect of Russian society to our access. Instead of a straightforward political history of Russia, however, this volume focuses more on the history of media outlets, and how they have presented a series of narratives which shape public opinion.

What Ostrovsky writes about, from his vantage point as a former Moscow Bureau Chief for The Economist, is the combination of anti-modern ideas - nationalism, the clash of civilizations, autocracy, economic autarky, religious orthodoxy, appeals to strength, Western 'decadence' - with decidedly modern or post-modern methods. The denial of a single truth, the monopoly power of the state over TV, the repetition of a lie pretending to be real so that it becomes truth. Take the point where Ukraine has moved from a sleepy, if corrupt neighbor, to a bastion of fascist tyranny which crucifies Russian children. A bit more pointed than the old stories of blood libel.

There are only a handful of people you grow to like in this story, and they're almost all dead. Ostrovsky does not cast moral judgment on anyone, not even Putin, but he sees the combination of systemic factors arising after the fall of the Soviet Union, where the powerful create an order for themselves and create a justification for it later.

This reminds me of a story told by Czeslaw Milosz about a Polish sci-fi story, where the citizens of a world besieged take a 'Multibing' pill to relieve themselves of all their worries. Then he was talking about Stalinist dialectical materialism, but there is a grain of truth there, in his study of the intoxicating power of ideas, for the remaining intellectuals in Russia, for those who work in their media empire, for the common citizens who see food prices rise and the roads break down and dream of greatness and glory and empire.

Geevee says

A book within a book...or it should be.

There much in this that was informative and readable but for me there were gaps and some significant absences.

The author tells the story of the USSR's evolution from Cold War power to disintegration and then with the rebirth of Russia as a nation with an infant democracy and liberal society that then reverses back to quasi Soviet Russia.

This story is told by using the media as the mouthpiece, influencer and creator of policies, moods, actions and ultimately the rule of Putin (the former KGB officer as we are told many times).

There is some useful scene setting notably from Krushchev and thru to Gorbachev. At this point we then move to the main aspect of the book with the break-up of the Soviet Union, Glasnost and Perestroika. As the walls come down - literally in Berlin - we see the media in Russia (for that is really the story) change in approach and direction, especially from the liberality given by Gorbachev.

From here Gorbachev (who it seems is dismissed unfavourably by both author and many Russians - although this point is never given to fact or wider explanation by Mr Ostovsky; and more of that later.

The real change to the media however is for the election and then presidency/prime ministership of Boris Yeltsin. It is in this period greater freedom comes and transformation (or theft) of Russian industry including the media. Oligarchs are born and take control and money. Yeltsin allows criticism of the Country, his Government and himself. TV is critical but also supportive and in its production and approach to programmes both current affairs and entertainment tries to ape the West.

Yeltsin's replacement is found and then elected; all through the strategy, influences and programmes of the media we are told. Did the Government have no media policy at all?

That replacement is Vladimir Putin.

From that moment change happens: to Russia, in Russia and to the media. Putin takes control and the media again becomes then information giver to Russian people but only in what and how Putin wants people to see.

Much of this, as I said at the start of this review, I thought good and informative. But. And it's a big but. There is little depth beneath the names of owners, reporters and oligarchs and their TV stations on how they chose to support various topics, approach campaigns and content or how they tested these to see if the messaging was effective.

The influence of Russian media (really TV in this book) is not discussed on other fledgling states freed from the USSR but remaining under its influence or indeed waiting to see how the Russian bear acts. There is no mention of the West's programming and support or otherwise (e.g. BBC foreign/world service).

Other areas are the impact and actual influence on people - there are a few mentions of opinion polls but these are not explored, nor are we told sample sizes, age groups or say social class groupings. The author at one point states that no one cared when Putin reinstated the Soviet Union's national anthem as Russia's. Yet this is patently not true as we are also told frequently of many in Russia wanting a return to some aspects of the old "Russia", and nowhere does the author prove "no one cared".

The final, and for me huge, absence in this book is the internet. There is nothing at all about the growth, access, official and social use - how did this affect or change media, people's and state behaviour. It is left inexplicably untouched. This is clearly a failing as polling, story telling, opinion and even access to other countries or individuals sources and feeds must have had influence; especially as Putin and his Government are involved in cyber operations from testing other nation states' defences to creating news and opinions facing both into and out of Russia.

Overall a useful book that presents insight and information about this fascinating country but needs more depth and wider links than just TV, oligarchs and money.

Hasso von Moltke says

Overall this was a very interesting and informative work that details the transition from the final years of the USSR to the rise of Putin. Ostrovsky takes a unique approach in examining the role of the media throughout the evolution of Russian politics.

As with most works involving Russian history/politics/literature there are a great deal of potentially confusing names, such as two prominent but unrelated figures named Yakovlev, but there is a handy Dramatis Personae outlining a who's who of Russian politicians, oligarchs, and media personnel.

As for the content, the work starts with an interesting overview of Soviet media, focusing on Khrushchev's thaw before branching out into Perestroika, it's leading figures, their goals, and the consequences of Gorbachev's government. The 1990s are where Ostrovsky's work shines, highlighting Russia's attempt to transition from an Authoritarian Socialist state to a liberal democracy. Ostrovsky helps his read sift through this tumultuous period as Oligarchs, Journalists, and Politicians battle for the soul of Russia.

The last third of the book dealing with Putin's presidency is a bit lacking. Instead of delving in depth into events it's mostly an overview of over a decade and a half of Putin's regime. For example the action film Brat 2 seemed to get about as much coverage as the Russian invasion of Georgia. However, this section was still good at piecing together the various themes across Russian political history.

Overall, I was quite pleased with the book and will look into Ostrovsky's other works.

I received this book for free through Goodreads Giveaways, which I believe covers the legal necessities.

Karel Baloun says

With Trump being partly a Russian asset, and possibly Russia having cyber penetrated some of our key civilian infrastructure, it is an important moment to be learning about the country and its popular culture. Ostrovsky's book is an excellent launch point.

So Ironic that the oligarchs and Yeltsin supporters seeking liberal continuity thought they could find it in Putin. Russia is ruled by the power of men and their cliques, not by law or any institutions.

A second odd irony, is that I found myself respecting Putin for putting Russia the state first moreso than the oligarchs (and western financiers) who basically pillaged assets and stole cash flows. He kills with impunity, but hard to tell what government would suit Russian people and history.

“Without lies, the Soviet Union had no legitimacy. The Ruling elite no longer saw any reason to defend a system the constrained their personal enrichment and comforts.” Page 15

Professionally crafted by a journalist, it's not surprising he puts media as the power fulcrum in Russian political history. The question of who succeeded the ailing Yeltsin was key to the future of democracy... and liberals failed profoundly, as the oligarchs stupidly and prematurely turned to battle each other.

Towards the last third of the book I started to feel that Ostrovsky is under representing the impact of pure power on politics, in his strong focus on the media and people he knows in media. Clearly Putin and his journalist/opponent killing lackeys have powerful agency.

The book ends in 2015, before Putin won re-election and solidified his connection to nationalism, as well as further aggressiveness of his KGB/security apparatus. It ends with optimism that Putin can be contained, and opposition could rise. In parallel with Xi consolidating his power, it now in 2018 seems at least equally likely that Putin will be Russia's strongman indefinitely, and it is not clear whether authoritarian nationalism is best for the well being of the Russian people. What is clear is that, unlike China or Iran, and more like NK, no powerful group in Russia needs to worry about the People. Especially Ostrovsky's hint towards regional separatism, seems even less likely under Russia's system of strong regional control, than in China's carefully federated local controls.

The book's last 10 pages seems oddly prophetic with respect to the 2016-18 Russian takeover of American media and political dialog. Trump is certainly trying Putin's playbook, in his own incompetent way.

"Just like any drug, television propaganda exploits people's weaknesses and cravings. The main reason Russian propaganda works is that enough people want to believe it. Many of those who crave it are not poor and ignorant but affluent and well informed. They are deceived because they want to be deceived. ... [almost half of the Russian population...] approves of these lies and sees them as a sign of strength. More than half think it is right for the media to distort information in the interest of the state." p322 In the US, people actually pay real money for their own world view propaganda.

"After Nemtsov's murder, [the liberal capitalist] Valdimir Yakovlev made a public appeal to everyone who worked in the media, [...] Stop teaching people how to hate. Because hatred is already tearing the country to pieces. People live in a crazy illusion that the country is surrounded by enemies. ... The information war is first and foremost destroying ourselves." p321

Here is one haunting passage about Russian morality, though I'm not sure whether this is deeply culturally historical, or a modern media creation. Konstantin Ernst has been a key architect of Channel One's patriotic programming, including *Nochnoi Dozor* (Night Watch), the first post Soviet blockbuster movie, which divides people in fictional Moscow into light and dark fighting factions. "The light ones in the film are closely connected to their Soviet part, whereas the dark ones clearly belong to the world of Russian capitalism. The two sides are fighting for the soul of a twelve year old boy who in the end chooses the dark. As the boy tells his estranged father, who is one of the light ones: You are no better than the dark. You are even worse. You lie and only pretend to be good. In his interviews Ernst explained that the dark ones for all of their aggression, do not equal evil and the light do not equal good. The dark are much freer, they let themselves be as they want to be. The light are more frustrated, they have too many duties, and they feel responsible for a lot of people. The dark have eschewed constraints, they live for themselves, while the light are like neurotics who are trying to be good to everyone. Ernst identified himself with the dark ones." p293.

Owen says

Ostrovsky examines the way newspapers and television have shaped modern Russian history. An interesting account of the late Soviet period and the 90s, which focuses recurrently on dramatis personae like Yakovlevs, Alexander, Yegor & Vladimir, to tease out changing moral and social attitudes.

The book is let down by its cliched canter through the Putin years, relying on unevidenced assertions and some manifest falsehoods, like the claim Russia was the aggressor during the Georgian War. The author's antipathy toward Putin also requires a kind of running apologia for the Yeltsin presidency.

Jake says

“So the media turned to history --not by way of a serious examination but as a form of entertainment.” ~ Arkady Ostrovsky

Putin can be viewed as a product of an environment, an environment where a Vladimir Putin was inevitable. This text is a recent history of the Russian media apparatuses role in feeding the Russian people a nostalgia for a Russia that never was, in hopes of bolstering their own power and insulating themselves from scrutiny by state censors. Lenin was used throughout this time period to defend Stalinism to defend marketization under Gorbachev. His writing can be degenerated, and were to argue any position the state apparatus wanted and the media was not only complicit in this but argued for it.

Donald Maclean, a British diplomat who spied for the KGB is quoted to have saying: “People who read Pravda every day are invincible. People who are well informed and get their information from different sources inevitably start thinking.”

The most striking section about the book is the resemblance between Russian intelligentsia and modern American progressives. The Russian liberal intelligentsia is the artist-scientist class in Russia who lived relatively well as opposed to the rest of the public and were often insulated to the struggles of the common person.

“Zhurnalist reflected all the strengths and weakness of the shestidesiatniki. Idle conversations around a kitchen table among the liberal intelligentsia all too often were a substitute for real action or work; it gave them relief, but yielded few results. It created a comfortable cocoon, but also increased the intelligentsia’s isolation from the rest of the country. The ‘cocoon’ itself, however, was growing larger in size. By the time Yegor was fired less than two years later, its circulation exceeded a quarter of a million copies.” ~ Arkady Ostrovsky

As you’re arguing for transgender rights and #BlackLivesMatter there are millions of working class conservatives who not only don’t understand what you’re talking about, but see it as an active threat to their lives. As a woman I heard talking during the 2016 election voted for Trump said, “Everything I knew growing up that was wrong, is now right.” As well meaning as progress is, there is an inconvenient fact that fascists have capitalized on our language and our positions to gain power through a populism fed on hate, xenophobia and solipsism.

“This is simply because we are WEIRD. That’s social science shorthand for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic – and nobody is WEIRDer than Americans. In the last several decades many Americans, and essentially all our elites, have internalized a worldview based on affluence, individualism, and secularism that makes us unique, globally speaking. So much so that we seem unable to comprehend that there actually are opposing viewpoints out there.” ~ John Schindler

Putin is everything that the American foreign policy establishment hates. He’s an old fashioned white guy with outdated views on gender relations, race, sexual identity, faith, the use of violence and worst of all is that he hates us. It was once said that Winston Churchill saw through the lies of Hitler because he saw the same sort of megalomaniac that he himself was staring at him from across that channel. In 2016 we have that similar relationship between world leaders, except our megalomaniac is too busy taking compliments and having his ego boosted to see through the lies of a fellow megalomaniac.

If you read nothing of this book but the prologue, you are set. It knocked me on my ass.

Piker7977 says

This is a good narrative that describes how Russia's shapeshifting media ushered in perestroika, democracy, and capitalism, then mutated into nationalist sensationalism that created the foundation for authoritarian rule predicated on imperial and strongman nostalgia while jettisoning communism. Very interesting and well written.

The large lesson is protect your institutions, rule of law, and truth. Fabrication in the media can create a lubricant in which democracy can be undermined.

Sud666 says

The Invention of Russia traces the development of the modern Putin- State of Russia. Written by a Russian born journalist eminently familiar with the inner working of Russian media the book looks at the way the media services were always suborned by the powers that be.

In the beginning we look at the way gradual easing of the murderous Stalin regime's supreme control of all media- from newspapers to radio, were slightly eased by his predecessors. Each succeeding leader from Krushchev to Gorbachev, slowly loosened the role of the media-though never freeing it from becoming an official organ of the Soviet State.

The nuclear disaster of Chernobyl, during Gorbachev's time, started the policies of glasnost and perestroika. In time, events (the economy mostly) caused the inevitable- inevitable because Communism and it's slightly retarded and slightly less violent brother Socialism do not work as economic systems.

After the fall of the Soviet Communists and the rise of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States)- for a period of almost a decade, 1990-1999, the media in Russia enjoyed the chance to become the Fourth Estate. But, sadly a series of missteps, greed, corruption and lack of democratic ideals and institutions led to the rise of the Oligarchs...and eventually a former-KGB Col and one time head of the FSB- Vladimir Putin to become President. Putin's intelligence officer instincts led him to suborn and eventually completely control the media, which has now become once again a mouthpiece of the government and its ideas. In order to cover up his kleptocracy and the dismal state of the Russian economy (based of gas exports) the Putin government uses the media to foment one "crisis" after another from Crimea, to Ukraine to now Syria.

This very readable and well written, considering many might find the topic to be rather dry, history of the role of the media in the Soviet Union/Russia deserves praise for not sugar coating the issue. While many Western liberals blithely insisting on a "reset" with the Russians are being played for fools-the book traces how the media went from becoming the official arm of propaganda to the "unofficial" mouthpiece for the FSB nation-state, aka Russia under Putin.

The book excellently indicts the ordinary people of Russia from the lower classes all the way to the oligarchs who fell prey to their won greedy instincts and then having been preprogrammed for 7 decades of brainwashing to follow their base instincts and blame the West, and of course the US, for everything that goes wrong. Their ability to be whipped into a nationalistic frenzy and their often ugly, anti-Semitic, neo-fascist (almost Neo-Nazi), xenophobic culture is not pretty to witness.

But the book does masterfully show us how each Russian government from the Communists to the Putin-state has manipulated or outright terrorized and controlled the media and by extension the brainwashed,

inferiority-complex driven people of Russia itself. A must read for people in power both in the US and Europe (Of course they won't....wouldn't want to ruin their "image" of Russia) or for anyone who is curious how a nation that had throw off the shackles of the murderous Communist regime and seemed on the brink of joining the rest of Europe as a modern, functional state with much to contribute- descended first into the arms of ruthless oligarchs and now has become an authoritarian FSB police-state under a new Tsar for a new era-Putin.

Andrew says

The Invention of Russia: From Gorbachev's Freedom to Putin's War by Arkady Ostrovsky is an interesting look at the development of the modern Russian state and the importance of the media in this process. The book begins by examining the declining Soviet system and the slow Liberalization of the media and entertainment sphere in the 1980's and 1990's, followed by a sudden burst of change after the Soviet Union disintegrated. Ostrovsky chronicles this pathway of change by following both events and personalities. He mostly covers the growth and decline of Russia's many Oligarchs, strongmen and politicians, as well as important figures in the media and cultural sphere of Russia.

Changes in Russia began in the Prague Spring years of 1968. Many in the USSR and satellite states saw this moment in history as a new beginning, and began to yearn for change in the rigid and authoritarian Soviet system. Instead, the Prague Spring was crushed with Russian tanks, and the Spring ended. However, the yearning did not. In Russia, change ironically came from inside the Nomenklatura system - from censors, KGB officers and important politicians and news media figures. These individuals had necessary access to Western print media and radio broadcasts - these were required in order for Soviet authorities to vet the news. However, these censors began to yearn for similar Western features in the stagnating Soviet system, and eventually, with the coming of Gorbachev, got their wish with Perestroika. This was a slow process, but was marked by the slow opening of the Russian media world, which was quickly snapped up by the powerful new Oligarchs making themselves known in Russia. After the Soviet collapse, these oligarchs would begin a wholesale promotion of Liberalism as a system, on the surface to promote freedom, but also out of self interest. They used the growing Liberal and Capitalist discourse in Russia to buy state assets at fire sale prices, and soon carved out vast business empires out of state assets - all backed by state loans, financial and regulatory protection, and their own media spheres.

Russia in the '90's was like a caricature of capitalism from Soviet times. Ruthless business men grappled for power behind the scenes, sometimes politically, and sometimes violently. Ordinary Russians were flush with the new times, but were also lacking any sort of national consciousness. Russia as a state had never really existed as it did after the Soviet collapse. A growing nationalism and a longing for importance, dignity and stability became a common theme after growing tensions between oligarchs spilled into open warfare pitting Liberal democrats and shady oligarchs against an unlikely Communist/Nationalist alliance. Although the nationalists were defeated, Russia's Liberal democrats lost ground as well. Ordinary Russians no longer believed that rampant capitalism was the answer - a point driven home by the disastrous Asian financial crisis and Russia's debt default. This changed politics as well - Boris Yeltsin, the successor of Gorbachev slowly lost popularity and support, and his failing health was no help either. Russia's elite struggled to find a stable transition, and began to look to an outsider for help. This is where Vladimir Putin came in. A former KGB officer, Putin was young, loyal, and unknown by the public. However, he came to prominence after Yeltsin's disastrous handling of the First Chechen War, and another civil war in the oligarch camp that saw many of the '90's most prominent elite cast aside.

Putin's rise corresponded with a crackdown on media freedom. Throughout the above period, Russian

Oligarchs used their media arms as political weapons, discrediting politicians, attacking rival oligarchs, publishing expose after expose, and riling up the Russian public with dark, gritty and dramatic news and programming. This constant media bombardment lent a sense of instability to Russia's public, and inadvertently led to a growing desire for national stability, a disenfranchisement from politics, and growing nostalgia for the glory days of the Soviet Empire.

This coincided with Putin's rise, and after the oligarchs fell apart, Putin seemed the only viable option. Yeltsin handed power to Putin willingly and stepped aside, and Putin tightened state control over every aspect of the public sphere. Putin used the media and entertainment business to build his brand as a tough, thoughtful and crafty politician. He was the opposite of Yeltsin, who came across as loud, good humoured, and very stereotypically "Russian." Putin on the other hand was built after (partly fictional) Soviet War hero Stierlitz - a USSR agent who infiltrated the German SS in WWII. Putin came off as very "Germanic" - stoic, macho and so on, which appealed to both the Russian masses who craved stability and calm, and the nationalists who espoused antisemitism, anti-Westernism, and Imperial nostalgia.

Putin's brand has seen Russia emerge once again as a globally ambitious player. Russia has engaged in two internal wars in Dagestan/Chechnya, has invaded both Georgia and Ukraine, and is increasingly assertive in its foreign policy. The collapse of the USSR was seen by the West as a victory, but Russia disregarded the West, both due to perceived mistreatment (the US claiming victory in the Cold War), economic instability generated by rampant Capitalism, and the failure of Liberalism and democracy as forces of stability. Instead Russia has built its own system, often characterized by Statism, Imperialist tendencies, and Soviet nostalgia. This is coupled with the rise of Putin's elites - another round of oligarchs who control most of Russia state assets, media arms and large political positions. Although in recent years Western media has increasingly covered this phenomena (Kleptocracy in Russia, Imperialism, growing Russian nationalism etc. etc.), this narrative seems naive. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's elite built these ideas slowly into the Russian system, and turned them into both a means to achieve political control, and a means to protect their own interests.

Ostrovsky's book is interesting, well sourced and brings authority to the topic at hand. This is an excellent book to read regarding Russia's internal political and cultural norms and ideologies. It is both clear eyed and soul searching, looking at both political and social ideas, as well as the details of Russia's alteration from Soviet Empire to modern state. It chronicles the collapse of Soviet ideas, the internal disputes between old system and Western system, and the emergence of the Russia we see today, warts and all. This is an excellent read, and I can easily recommend it to those interested in Russia and its history and current policies.

Alex Zakharov says

Surprisingly pretty, pretty good, especially relative to expectations. Given the reviews and the title, I was bracing for a heavy media-manipulation framing of history, but luckily the reader is spared the overt Zizekian narrative. Ostrovsky briefly covers Soviet history from Khrushchev to Andropov, spends a fair amount of time on Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and blows the last third of the book on Putin.

Very readable overall, he attempts to embed Soviet political history into Russian culture and literature, as seen through the prism of a city-dwelling, classically-liberal intellectual. Don't expect a deep history here, but he tells a good story, with a good angle, in a punchy, compelling writing style. Recommended.

A couple broad comments and then notes to self:

One of the overarching themes is a recognition that political and economic freedoms don't necessarily play

well together, and the net outcome can be particularly sensitive to the order and the rate at which these freedoms are introduced. He often contrasts Gorbachev's, Yeltsin's and Putin's policies in that context.

Ironically, when it comes to describing attempts at liberalizing Russian economy, Ostrovsky is illustrating exactly why rule of law and property rights are a precondition, rather than consequence of market economy, but a libertarian in him prevents him from reaching this conservative conclusion.

1953-64 Khrushchev Thaw, '56 "secret speech", destalinization. ("Paleo-Leninist" as per Martin Malia).

- Limited works of previously forbidden writers (Akmatova, Zochenko) softly brought back. Solzhenitsyn "One Day..." to be published in *Novi Mir* (via Tvardovsky). Rise of **Samizdat**.
- '56 revolutions in Hungary and Poland spooked Soviet orthodox communists leading to '57 attempted coup (K saved by Zhukov).
- A few failed top-down agricultural reforms, '62 **Cuban crisis** was the final straw and Khrushchev is replaced by Brezhnev in '64.

1964-82 Brezhnev and stagnation. '68 Dubcek and econ-political reforms of "Prague Spring", crushed by Soviet tanks - induced further paranoia of reforms in Russia, further deepening Brezhnev's *zastoi*.

Correctly frames **Gorbachev** as a reformer who introduced political freedoms, while still shooting for Dubcek's "**socialism with human face**".

- All previously forbidden works gradually published (Doctor Zhivago, Gulag, Life and Fate etc).
- Early oligarch privatization began under Gorbachev.
- By '88 perestroika is visibly out of steam. Culture wars over the past. Gorbachev vacillating between hard-liners and reformers.

Yeltsin. American officials to Malashenko "he is your only democratic institution"...

- Unlike Gorbachev, he fully recognized necessity of market reform, failure of perestroika and unreformability of econ socialism.
- '91 putsch against Gorby. '93 **coup** against Yeltsin, Ostankino, Yeltsin orders tanks to fire at Parliament.
- '93 **constitution**: more power to president, but parliament is lost to Zhirinovskiy nationalist and communists, over Gaidar's liberals.
- Irony of Yeltsin - media relationship. Biting the hand that feeds.

Early to mid 90s attempted transition to capitalism, Gaidar, Chubais; media;

- **Shestidesyatniki** vs value-free "**Kommersant**" 90s generation. Capitalism stripped of Weberianism, news as *steb*.
- '93 **NTV: Gusinsky and Malashenko**. 94-96 coverage of first Chechen war, NTV almost shutdown by siloviki.
- '96 **Campaign**. Y with 5 heart attacks. Campaign against nationalists/commies ran by oligarchs (e.g. Berezovsky) & media.
- 7 tycoons and "loans for shares"

Mid to late 90s. State assets, operation "successor".

- Post-election '96-'98: Oligarchs **squabble over assets**, turning against liberal gov't, Chubais sacked.
- Gov't discredited, budget deficits, '98 default. Signs of **cultural reversion** to Soviet era symbolism and nostalgia.
- '98-'99. Unknown Putin groomed as successor to Yeltsin, by **Berezovsky**. Pro Putin, anti Lyzkov/Primakov media campaign.
- **2nd Chechen war** as vehicle for Putin. Young, decisive, healthy and sober.
- Cultural swing against the West: econ in shambles "following Western advice" and **NATO bombing** of Serbia/Kosovo as real turning point against US/West.

2000 Enter **Putin**.

- Further liberalize economy, growth, oil prices. Having observed the power of the media in the 90s he learns his lessons.
- Putin's "Kukla" on NTV and arrest of Gusinsky, forced sale of Gazprom.
- **2000 Kursk** disaster. Covered by NTV and Berezovsky's Channel One. Putin "**Gusinsky is an enemy, Berezovsky - a traitor**"
- Both NTV and Channel One get shafted. Irony of Shestidesyantinki who smell what's coming and come out for support of NTV, while Kommersant generation stays home.
- **2002 Nord-Ost** Moscow terror, rescue gas poisoning fiasco. Last reasonable coverage by NTV.
- **2004 Beslan school siege** in North Ossetia. Not covered at all by Russian media with exception of re-aired CNN reports.

2000-2017 Tail end of the book is a bit Baudrillardian, too much attention to media as reality angle, but for what it's worth here we go:

- **Surkov** as a chief ideologist. Theater background. Reality is media, and media is theater; ideology is no ideology.
- First decade under Putin: oil growth, middle class 25%, consumer society. Media suppressed, Oligarchs subjugated, stay out of politics.
- **2009 Financial crisis** followed by 2011 farce of **Medvedev swap** does result in popular protests/revolt. **Navalny** and anti-corruption.
- Putin regroup, having lost some support in middle class he ratchets up appeal to **core nationalist-leaning electorate**
- **Anti-Americanism** framed as nationalism becomes a fully-fledged legitimate ideology.
- 2008 Georgia War, 2014 Crimea (approval ratings rebound to 80%).
- With Donetsk/Lugansk conflict running out of steam, and hurt by sanctions and oil bust, Putin turns to Syria in 2015.
- Ostrovsky's timeline stops here but subsequent meddling in US and European elections would be a natural extension to this arc.

Re that last point: for my money the effect on US election per se is marginal, but deliberate amplification of American culture wars has been undeniably impactful.

Putin treats media as theater but he uses it quite seriously, as a legitimate weapon under umbrella of cyberwarfare. America also treats media as a theater, but channels its anxiety over it into incessant analysis of the "Big 4" (Google, Apple, Amazon, Facebook). While American congressmen and policy analysts occasionally warn each other over dangers of cyberwarfare, Russia, unburdened by democratic guilt or institutions, is calmly and systematically developing what it needs to be effective.

PennyLady (Bev) says

"Author, Arkady Ostrovsky is a Russian-born journalist who has spent 15 years reporting from Moscow, first for the *Financial Times* and then as bureau chief for *The Economist*.....(from book cover)

Arkady Ostrovsky proposes the answer to the question
What happened to the promise of the late 80's and early 90's Russia?
Parameters like foreign affairs, politics and economy do not
give the complete narrative.

Media was seen as a "prism for Russia's post Soviet transformation." Ideologues and oligarchical activity promoted words, ideas and images that often conflicted with actual reality.

The television literally came first and reformation of country was to follow.

Reading, you'll see how oligarchs, ideologues and television rebuilt Russia. Acknowledgments, notes, "dramatis personae" and bibliography are extensive.

I found Ostrovsky's chronicle to be a clear explanation of the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of Vladimir Putin.

5 ★

(I received this book as a Goodreads giveaway)

Chris Jaffe says

This is a good book on the transformation of Russia over the last 30 years, with special attention paid to the role of the media in Russia in those changes.

One thing to realize about this book is that it's more about how we got to Putin than on Putin's Russia itself. Oh, there is more than a little bit on Putin's tenure, but you get far more detail on the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years. The last two (out of ten) chapters are on the 21st century, even though that covers about as many years as the Gorby/Yelstin eras combined. Frankly, I thought the book got bogged down in the Gorbachev regime. It matters and should be talked about, but the USSR disintegrates on page 141, and the acknowledgements begin on p.329. Personally, I was more interested in hearing about the post-communist years.

Ostrovsky notes that the NTV began as a media source aiming to be more high-brow, and focusing on the ideals of free speech and a free press. They were willing to be critical of Yeltsin, but ultimately they depended on him. Ostrovsky notes that in Russia a free press existed not because of tradition or widespread desire for it but because Yeltsin desired it. Once Yeltsin won reelection in 1996, the threat of communism receded, and with that the interest many had in rallying 'round Yeltsin. Combine that with the economic problems of his second term, and Russia was ready for something different.

One key moment Ostrovsky sees is a chapter he calls the Oligarchs' War, where they fought for control over television and the power that came with it, but ultimately it just hurt the credibility of all of them. He writes that they managed to do what communists and Yeltsin's opponent had failed to do: "destroy the government of liberal reforms and discredit the idea of a liberal media." The NTV became less effective than the more populist Channel One. People were sick of Yeltsin and wanted someone very different - someone more low-skilled, more a bureaucrat, and sober. Putin fit that bill to a T, and thus was able to be both Yeltsin's antithesis and heir (Yeltsin agreed that the next leader should be different).

By 1998 a shift in attitude to America began. It became evident with the NATO intervention in Serbia. Thus Putin's rise was arguably an outgrowth of a trend already in place.

Under Putin, shifts continued. The sinking of the sub the Kursk began a limitation of free speech and media coverage in Russia. (In this way, it's the opposite of Chernobyl). He had government forces essentially take over the NTV, ending that era in Russian journalism. He helped promote nostalgia for the Soviet past, even bringing back the old national anthem. This was not done out of a love of communist ideology, but a

reminder when the nation was more important and powerful. Nationalism was already on the rise, but Putin helped it rise more. He used it when his popularity eroded after the 2009 economic crisis hit Russia. (Putin may not like free elections, but as an old intel head he cares a great deal about public opinion). Many Russian nationalists see their nation as strong because it has Truth while the US is weak because it's all about love of money. Putin uses anti-Americanism, the main survivor of old Soviet ideology. He uses TV to achieve his ends and put out his ideas. TV was vital in the Crimea annexation in getting his approach out. Putin swept out the oligarchs and brought in an era of bureaucrat-entrepreneur who used state powers for personal enrichment. Ostovsky says they are more dangerous than the old oligarchs were.

The Ukraine in 2014 presented a threat, and opportunity. His popularity soared after Russia entered it. The new union was of nationalists and Putin's part of "crooks and thieves." (Man, I can see why Trump-ites like him). By the end, Ostovsky concludes that Putin has put Russia in a cynical cycle of aggression and militarism. After Ukraine, they got involved in Syria.
