

Review - Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism

Written by Valerie Pacer

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VALERIE PACER, AUG 5 2014

Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism

By: Marcel H. Van Herpen

Lanham, USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014

Although it may seem backwards to point to the conclusion before talking about the hundreds of pages preceding it, in the case of Marcel H. Van Herpen's recent work, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism*, starting at the end explains why the rest of the book is so important to understanding the on-going events in Ukraine.

The book, which Van Herpen finished writing late last year, ends with a quotation from former Czech President Vaclav Havel, who stated, "I have said it so often: if the West does not stabilize the East, the East will destabilize the West", and is followed by Van Herpen's commentary that "this is a warning that should be taken seriously" (p. 248). This comes during a section discussing Ukraine in 2013 and a prediction from Van Herpen that "if Ukraine were to opt for deeper integration into the European Union, a Georgia scenario could not be excluded, in which the Kremlin could provoke riots in Eastern Ukraine or the Crimea, where many Russian passport holders live", and could provide the Kremlin with the excuse it needs to intervene and "dismember the country" since they would be acting in defence of the "Russians" living there (p. 247). What has been seen in the months since the writing of the book is as both Havel and Van Herpen predicted. A new conflict has emerged in the European neighbourhood, and the Russian support for separatist movements in Ukraine has resulted in the annexation of Crimea by Russia and fighting between Ukrainian governmental forces and Kremlin-supported militants in Eastern Ukraine.

In the case of this book, it is perhaps the subtitle and not the main title that is of greater significance. The consideration of Russia's imperialism that the book sets forth provides the background to understanding what has happened in recent months and establishes the basis for the book itself. The focus of the second section of the book, "The 'Internal War'", provides those unfamiliar with the domestic forces that influence Russian foreign policy-making with a consideration of the country's political party system and nationalist forces within Russia. The book's third section, entitled "The Wheels of War", is dedicated to the two twenty-first century wars that Russia has fought, one in Chechnya and the other in Georgia. This affords the reader an opportunity to understand the lessons that the Russian leadership has acquired during the fighting and the ability to connect them with what has occurred in recent months in Ukraine.

The first section of the book, "Russia and the Curse of Empire", will be the focus of this review, but that does not detract from the importance of the second and third sections of the book. What the first section does so successfully is explain the complicated legacy that empire has on the modern Russian state and how Russia has sought to maintain (as well as increase) its influence over its neighbours. As these themes can be seen as key to understanding current events, this section should be highlighted.

Van Herpen is clear in the introduction to his book that he will argue that Russia "is both a post-imperial state and a pre-imperial state" (p. 5) and states that his position stands in contrast to that of Russian scholar and Director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre, Dmitri Trenin, who wrote *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story* (2011). In his book, Trenin

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argues that the post-Soviet leaders of Russia have not sought, and do not seek, to reinstate the Russian Empire and, therefore, to read these two books together provides a good debate on the nature of Russia's geopolitical aspirations and allows the reader to acquaint themselves with two very different arguments. In support of his own argument, Van Herpen points to decisions made by Russian leaders regarding the so-called "near abroad" as examples of Russia's attempts at building influence, including: Putin's 2003 suggestion for Belarus to join Russia as six new provinces; the claims from Russia (dating to 1993) on the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol; the choice to give Russian passports to Ukrainians living in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in violation of the Ukrainian Constitution; and suggestions from Russian leaders after the Orange Revolution to turn Ukraine into a federal state in a proposal, like the one made regarding Moldova in 2003 (p. 4). When looking at what has happened in Ukraine since the book's publication this past spring – the annexation of Crimea by Russia, discussions of federalizing the Ukrainian state, and the fighting between Ukrainian government forces and pro-Russian forces (aided by Russia and consisting of some Russians) – events that Van Herpen points to from years earlier appear all the more significant.

While the first section of the book, "Russia and the Curse of Empire", provides valuable background on Russian expansionism and imperialism since the tsarist period, thus establishing precedent, it is the later chapters in this section that focus on Putin and begin to establish the perspectives and goals of the Russian leadership regarding the country's neighbours. For Van Herpen, the efforts by Russia to exert influence over its neighbours, through projects such as Putin's Eurasian Union, can be seen as an example of the new imperialism to which the title of the book alludes and as a way "to reintegrate the post-Soviet space" (p. 243). It is the fact that the Russian leadership "is very secretive about its long-term foreign policy goals and keeps its cards close to its chest" while "playing a dangerous 'Great Game' in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, destabilizing its neighbourhood and trying to re-establish itself as the dominant power" (p. 55) that can be seen in evidence in Ukraine as fighting continues in the eastern portion of the country.

Russian attempts to maintain influence in this region and to prevent expanding Western influence can be seen in the establishment of organizations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), considered by Van Herpen to be a "mini-Warsaw Pact" (p. 68), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Putin's Eurasian Union, therefore, represents another stage in Russia's on-going efforts to institutionalise its influence over its neighbours and allows Russia to establish "a new instrument to bring Ukraine back into its orbit" (p. 84). Van Herpen sees Ukraine as the key to building the Eurasian Union and the membership of Ukraine as one of Russia's two goals in establishing the Union, the other being the creation of a military side that allows only member-states of the Eurasian Union to intervene in post-Soviet countries with Russia leading the way (p. 83-4). For Putin, pressuring Yanukovich and offering reduced gas prices and billions of dollars in loans in exchange for not signing the Association Agreement with the European Union was a way of drawing the Ukrainian leadership closer to Moscow while hoping to gain Yanukovich's support for the Eurasian Union. The Maidan protests, the fleeing of Yanukovich to Moscow, the annexation of Crimea, and the support for fighters in Ukraine's east have ended the prospects of Ukrainian membership in the Eurasian Union, but the importance of the project to Putin can still be considered a motivating factor for the Russian president.

What *Putin's Wars* does so successfully is establish that Russian imperialism is not something left in the past, but a prospect for the future, an argument that is strengthened by the events of the last half year. The post-imperial state that Russia entered after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the loss of influence in the former Republics, has given way to a pre-imperial state that is building its influence over its neighbours. While in the past Russia has built its empire through territorial expansion, the new imperialism is seeking to institutionalise Russian influence over the neighbourhood.

About the author:

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in the Euro-Atlantic security policies of Russian presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. Outside of her thesis research, she has previously written on Russian foreign policy and arms control issues.