

Review - The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America

Written by Richard Sakwa

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Review - The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/07/23/review-the-road-to-unfreedom-russia-europe-america/>

RICHARD SAKWA, JUL 23 2019

The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America
By Timothy Snyder
Tim Duggan Books, 2018

There is a type of book that contributes to what can be called the literature of the New Cold War, and this work will undoubtedly take a top place in the bibliography of the genre. Snyder's book is characterised by all the main features of the type: broad but unsubstantiated assertions; a mix of profound erudition and overwhelming prejudice; and penetrating analysis combined with the absence of even basic standards of scholarly methodology. Snyder sets up a potentially stimulating contrast between what he calls the *politics of inevitability*, the sense that 'the future is just more of the present' (p. 7), in which the laws of progress are known and there are no alternatives. This is what in Marxist, or Hegelian, language is known as historicism, the belief that the meaning and purpose of history is knowable, and hence manageable. Reading Snyder, one would not have a clue that there is a vast and interesting literature on the subject, as well as some rather primitive analysis along Fukuyama lines. The collapse of the communist systems in Eastern Europe from the late 1980s opened the door to what appeared to be the triumph of capitalist democracy, but this project has now encountered setbacks. Snyder ascribes them not to the contradictions of liberal democracy, but to an external agency.

The 'collapse of the politics of inevitability' (p. 8) opens the door to another conception of time, what Snyder labels the *politics of eternity*. Inevitability implies a better future, but eternity 'places one nation at the centre of a cyclical story of victimhood. Time is no longer a line into the future, but a circle that endlessly returns the same threats from the past' (p. 8). One does not have to be a genius to recognise which nation Snyder has in mind for this tailor-made definition. According to Snyder, it is Russia that is locked into a permanent cycle of eternity, nursing its grievances and even manufacturing crises to be able to manipulate the resultant emotion. Russia is exporting its malign politics of eternity, but Snyder writes as if no other nation but Russia has grievances and unresolved problems with their own history.

In both models, facts are translated into narratives, and history becomes little more than incidental to the grand narratives represented by the two models of time. Instead, Snyder claims that his goal is to 'win back the present for historical time, and thus to win back historical time for politics' (p. 9). This is a laudable goal, but one in which Snyder spectacularly fails. Instead of detailed historical analysis of the recent past, we are given a medieval morality tale in which all the evil of our present times emanates from Russia, and even questioning this foundational postulate exposes the innocence of the West and further exposes us to the taint coming from the East. Russian evil to Snyder is self-evident, overwhelming and unmitigated.

This is pure and unalloyed Cold War literature of the worst extremes of the totalitarian school. This is dressed up as a warning that what has already happened in Russia could take place in Europe and America. With the rise of populist movements, Brexit and the election of Donald J. Trump as the president of the United States, defenders of the politics of inevitability take comfort in the idea that this just represents a blip before the return of inevitability. Snyder's self-appointed job, though, is to warn that there can be no easy return to the *status quo ante*. He is right in that, but

Review - The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America

Written by Richard Sakwa

for the wrong reasons. The recent upsurge in populism from above (the 'deconstruction of the administrative state', as formulated by Steve Bannon, but as practiced by neoliberals everywhere) and from below signals a deep dissatisfaction with complacent elites and failing social and economic policies.

However, Snyder will have none of this, and as far as he is concerned these ills are not rooted in the contradictions of the post-Cold War social and political order, but instead betoken the change in the vector of influence: no longer from west to east, but from Russia to the west. Trump's 'fake news' is just a reheated Russian form of disinformation. Russia's kleptocratic regime seeks to export the politics of eternity: 'to demolish factuality, to preserve inequality, and to accelerate similar tendencies in Europe and the United States' (p. 11). This is a pretty devastating indictment, but is it true? A few points can be made in this regard. First, Snyder's work is located in a peculiar East European sensibility that takes extreme form in the Galician parts of Ukraine. This is a position that it is unrelentingly and remorselessly hostile to Russia. The term Russophobia barely does justice to the depth of the contempt, usually clothed in terms of the civilizational clash between the advanced, tolerant and ultimately liberal Europe, and the backward, despotic and eternally malign Russia. Snyder has now cloaked this in the semi-philosophical term 'the politics of eternity', although his lack of intellectual curiosity about the deeper roots and manifold forms of such a politics is striking.

Such sentiments are generated by some genuine grievances and takes different forms in most of the former Soviet bloc countries. These sentiments were once encouraged by the Austro-Hungarian authorities and by the Polish overlords in what is now Western Ukraine, and today are encouraged by irresponsible elements in Washington and London. The tragedy of our days is that the enlargement of the European Union incorporated these sentiments into the mainstream of European thinking. It would have been wiser if the Copenhagen criteria for membership of the EU included a fourth point: peace and reconciliation for the post-communist countries. Instead, rather than transcending the logic of conflict, they were amplified by the EU, although in subtle forms. This is why the Ukraine crisis broke precisely over the Association Agreement with the EU in the context of the Eastern Partnership, devised by none other than the Polish foreign minister, Radosław Sikorski. Thus, the catastrophe of Ukraine in 2013-14 was a consequence of earlier failings, and not simply a function of Russian malevolence. Such a view renders Snyder and his ilk apoplectic with rage, but the important thing is that the issues are debates are not simply folded into a pre-arranged narrative of the battle of good and evil.

Second, Snyder makes much of the alleged influence on Vladimir Putin of Ivan Ilyin, one of the Russian intellectual émigrés who left the Soviet Russia in 1922. In Snyder's depiction, Ilyin was a fascist ideologue, and his thinking, he argues shapes contemporary Russia. In both aspects Snyder is quite simply wrong. Ilyin did occasionally laud the fascist regimes of the 1930s, but he was not the only one to do so. In fact, Ilyin was a trenchant critic of all forms of totalitarianism, which he considered 'godless', and, in fact, espoused the idea of a strong law-governed state in which arbitrary power is constrained and personal life can be pursued without unwarranted state interference. When Putin quotes Ilyin, it is the elements that are in the legal statist tradition of Boris Chicherin, not the authoritarian features. Above all, Ilyin was not anti-Semitic, and for this reason had to leave Nazi Germany in 1938 (a point Snyder ignores).

As for Ilyin's influence, it is true that Putin has on a few occasions referenced him and his works have become part of the rich mix that is the Russian public sphere today. However, Snyder greatly exaggerates his influence on Putin and policy in general. He does the same with Eurasianism and the influence of Alexander Dugin, who could only dream of enjoying the influence credited him by Snyder. Dugin is certainly not 'Putin's brain', as once influentially argued. Indeed, the key point here is that Snyder has precisely nothing to say about how policy is formulated in Russia today, and the often bitter debates that take both bureaucratic and technical forms. There is a Putinite consensus in foreign policy, but this does not mean that the towers of the Kremlin all speak with one voice.

Third, Snyder makes much of the problem of succession in Russia, and here he makes some telling points. The Soviet Union in the post-Stalin years tried to achieve stability at all costs, but periods of succession proved traumatic. The problem has re-emerged in post-communist Russia, but with the enormous difference that there are now constitutional mechanisms to manage a change of leadership. The problem is the uncertainty over whether constitutional or managerial procedures, or what combination of the two, will operate.

Review - The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America

Written by Richard Sakwa

In sum, this is a very strange book, reflecting the very strange times in which we live. A work that purportedly seeks to defend the liberal order is decidedly illiberal when it comes to understanding others, and, above all, Russia. The mentality comes straight out of nineteenth century Galicia, with a simple morality tale of good and evil. This has nothing to do with history, factual analysis, truth-seeking or policy analysis, but only exacerbates the problem to which it claims to be the solution. In fact, it would appear that Vladislav Surkov, the self-proclaimed post-modernist *éminence grise* of managed democracy, and Timothy Snyder are intellectual twins, the prophets of some arcane knowledge to which only they have access. Both suppress genuine politics and debate, and instead propound axiological truths that ultimately suppress truth itself. Instead of pulling us out of Cold War confrontation, it drives us back into the worst periods of twentieth century history. This is the real politics of eternity that unwittingly emerges from this work.

About the author:

Richard Sakwa is professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent, an Associate Fellow of the Russia and Eurasia programme at Chatham House, and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. His main research interests are Russian domestic and international politics, European international relations, and comparative democratization. Recent books include *Russia Against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order, The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism, and the Medvedev Succession* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), *Putin and the Oligarch: The Khodorkovsky-Yukos Affair* (I. B. Tauris, 2014), *Putin Redux: Power and Contradiction in Contemporary Russia* (Routledge, 2014), and *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (I. B. Tauris, 2015). He can be contacted at: R.Sakwa@kent.ac.uk.