

Russia Macro-Politics: Best Russia Books 2013 & Russia Library Update*

"Keep scribbling! Something will happen"

Frank McCourt

2013 has been a particularly busy year for authors writing about Russia, or about subjects which help those working or investing in Russia to better understand the economic, social or political backdrop. Of the total volume published I have read sixteen which I use as the basis of my survey.

I have picked out the best five, solely based on my personal opinion, and highlight these separately below. The criterion is very straightforward "does the book help the reader to better understand Russia today and the issues which may determine where the business and investment climate is heading?"

There have been several excellent books published this year which are more historical in nature. Anders Aslund's "How Capitalism was Built" and the very recently published "The Capitalist Transformation of State Socialism" by David Lane are both excellent on the subject of transition from communism to capitalism. But they don't add a great deal to the understanding of where we are today and what to expect next.

Alena Ledeneva's book, like many of the others published this year, and since 2000, concentrates on political structures and the personalities at the top of government. There has not been a good book looking at the economy or analysing economic trends in Russia for a very long time.

Note: Following the listing of 2013 books I update the Russia Library List. This is a list of the top 10 books published since 2000 which, again in my personal opinion, offer the best overview of Russia's history, the transition from the Soviet Union to Russia and which also best explain many of the issues which are relevant for investors and businesses coming to the country today.

Top 5: Best Russia books published in 2013*

➤ **Can Russia Modernise? – Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance**

Author: **Alena Ledeneva**.

This book examines how the government power structures work. Rather than the published formal power structures, Ledeneva looks at the much more important informal relationships and the informal systems which actually run the country. There is the list of who's who in power and into which groups, or clans, they belong. Putin's role as manager or arbitrator amongst the groups is also well explained. One interesting quote sums up a lot of what the book is about. It is from a post-Soviet official who reproached his subordinate for implementing his written instruction: "If I had wanted you to do something, I would have called you"

➤ **Freedom, Repression and Private Property in Russia**

Authors: ***Vladimir Shlapentokh, Anna Arutunyan***

This book looks at how the move to private property ownership and a market economy has resulted in both freedoms and something of a feudal system which actually blocks the creation of a real democracy in Russia. The authors also demonstrate that the new system supports authoritarianism but prevents a move back to totalitarianism. They conclude that Russia now has three distinct structures; authoritarian, feudal and liberal. They analyse each and their position in shaping the economy and control systems

➤ **Man without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin**

Author: ***Masha Gessen***

I don't agree with a lot of what Masha Geesen writes or her view of the Kremlin and Russia today. But this is a good book in that it provides a very useful overview of Putin's early career in St Petersburg before he came to Moscow. A lot of the work relationships he formed in the 1990's continue today and Masha's book helps explain much about how many of the those individuals whom investors and business leaders are now familiar with came into the positions they currently hold.

➤ **What Every Knows about Russia (and you don't)**

Author: ***Olga Fedina***

This is a fun book and easy to read. It is made up of a collection of 12 essays which reviews movies, books, myths and other stories which are ingrained in Russian culture. But these are not Pushkin, Dostoevsky, or Bulgakov. The author looks at pop-culture including the most popular Soviet-era movies, e.g. The Irony of Fate, Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears, White Sun of the Desert, etc. The author say she choose these 12 subjects because of their influence on Russian language and thinking, and also because they reflect Russian attitudes and perceptions. And also because Russians refer to them very frequently in daily life.

➤ **Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin**

Authors: ***Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy***

The authors propose that the best way to understand Vladimir Putin and to understand his priorities and ambitions is to actually look at him as if he is an aggregate of several different people rather than just one. They argue that his personality and outlook have been shaped by many influences; the influence of Russian history and literature; his own early life; his KGB training; his time in East Germany; his experiences in St. Petersburg in the 1990s; his early days behind the scenes in Moscow; and his time at the helm of the Russian state. The one aspect of this book I don't like is that the authors drift off into the stereotype of Russia as a mafia state and that we are now approaching the period where the "people" will hold the "Don"

accountable for the actions of the state over the past 13 years. In fact there is zero evidence of that. Despite the conclusions this is an interesting review of all of the aspects of Putin's character.

Other interesting Russia books published in 2013*

In alphabetical order

➤ **Bear Traps on Russia's Road to Modernization**

Authors: **Clifford Gaddy and Barry Ickes**

The argument presented in the book is that Russia's growth challenges are conventionally misdiagnosed by analysts and economists. The authors state that the "most popular proposals for economic reform – diversification, innovation, modernization – are misguided" and are "based on a faulty diagnosis of the country's ills". They argue that Russia's geography and the location of industry and people – i.e. the legacy of the Soviet era - are the major and insurmountable handicaps

➤ **Black Garden: Armenia & Azerbaijan in peace and war**

Author: **Thomas de Waal**

This is an updated version of a book first published in 2003. It looks at the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the war they fought over Nagorny Karabakh just as the Soviet Union broke up. Many people see this as unfinished business, especially from the Azeri side. Expect to see the issue in the news in the coming years. This book is a good primer.

➤ **Capitalist Transformation of State Socialism: Making and Breaking of State Socialist Society, & What Followed**

Author: **David Lane**

This book focuses mostly on the transformation in Russia and some East European countries but also briefly looks at the way China dealt with the transformation issues. It is partly a history of what happened at the end of the Soviet Union; partly his opinion of why events unfolded as they did and also his view of what has worked and what has not. He concludes that a lot of what has happened over the past twenty years is still "work in progress"

➤ **Environmental Crime and Corruption in Russia**

Authors: **Sally Stoecker and Ramziya Shakirova**

The book looks at the legacy of pollution from Soviet-era industrialization and concludes that very little is being done to deal with the problem. The book should be of interest to anybody looking at Russia's forestry industry. It focuses on the widespread corruption in this industry.

➤ **Fragile Empire: How Russia fell in and Out of Love with Vladimir Putin**

Author: ***Ben Judah***

The first part of the book is a useful primer for people not too familiar with the Russia story since Putin's debut. The second part of the book is somewhat predictable in that it starts with the premise that "Putin is bad so he must fail" and then labours too much on the street protests, on people like Navalny and with a few clichés about why China may invade the empty Far East/Siberia for good measure.

➤ **How Capitalism Was Built: The Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia**

Author: ***Anders Aslund***

This is the second edition of the book first published in 2007. The book deals with questions such as "Why did communism collapse? • Why did Russia not choose gradual reforms like China did? • How did the oligarchs arise and decline vis-à-vis authoritarian leaders?"

➤ **Implosion – The end of Russia and what it means for America**

Author: ***Ilan Berman***

Implosion is a sensationalist book and the only reason I mention it in this list is because it has actually received a lot of coverage in the US. The theme is that the indigenous Russian population is rapidly dying due to ill health, alcoholism, etc. and is being replaced by radical Muslims. The country breaks up, the Chinese move into the Far East and radical Islamists get their hands on nukes.

➤ **One Night in Winter**

Author: ***Simon Montefiore***

This book is based on a true story from 1945 Moscow. It concerns the case of the killing of two teenage children of a politburo member. It is not the usual genre covered here, i.e. current politics or economics, but a well told story which also will enhance your understanding of how Russians see their world.

➤ **Restless Valley**

Author: ***Philip Shishkin***

The "valley" in the title is the Fergana Valley which straddles Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia. When one extends the view to include the outer neighbours, the region's importance becomes much clearer. To the north is Kazakhstan and Russia; to the east is China; to the south is Pakistan and Afghanistan. But despite the title and the larger region, the book is almost exclusively about the recent political history in Kyrgyzstan, post the Tulip revolution. Not much about the Fergana Valley as such and nothing about the huge issues facing that region, especially when the US pulls out of Afghanistan.

- **Russia after 2012: from Putin to Medvedev to Putin – continuity, change or revolution?**

Edited by **J. Black and M. Johns**.

This is the forty-fifth book to be published by Rutledge as part of its Contemporary Russia and Eastern Europe Series. This book is comprised of thirteen essays from different authors covering subjects grouped in three categories; Domestic Affairs, Economic & International Related Issues and Foreign Affairs.

- **Smashed in the USSR; Fear Loathing and Vodka on the Steppes**

Authors: **Caroline Walton and Ivan Petrov**

The advertising blurb describes the book as “hilariously sending up the tragic absurdities of Soviet life” and while there are parts that are funny in an ironic way, the book is anything but humorous. The book is about Petrov’s life travelling throughout the Soviet Union from the 1940’s until 1990. About unemployment, life in jail camps and alcoholism. It is truly amazing he lived so long. But nevertheless an excellent memoir of living in the Soviet Union (outside the big cities) during the Soviet era.

Russia Library Update*

This is my personal list of the ten books which I recommend to anybody looking to better understand Russia’s history, its transformation from the Soviet Union, the formation of capitalism and today’s political structures.

The books are in no particular order other than by theme. In some instances there are other books covering each theme which have been popular and I mention these as alternatives to my choice. Some of these have simply been supplanted by a more up to date analysis or by books which, in my opinion, dwell more on relevant specifics rather than general topics.

Historical context

- **A History of Modern Russia (1997 & 2003)...from Nicholas II to Putin**

Author: *Robert Service*

- **Stalin: The Court of the red Tsar (2003)** - there are many similarities in the way the government structures operated, i.e. in terms of reporting and alliances, in the 1930-1955 period with today.

Author: *Simon Montefiore*

Alternatives: Russia: A 1,000-Year Chronicle (2011) by Martin Sixsmith... **The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Empire: from Lenin to Gorbachev** (1998) by Dmitri Volkogonov ... **Hammer & Tickle** (2008) by Ben Lewis (an excellent history of humour in the Soviet Union).

Transition from Soviet Union to Russia

- **Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire (1994)**...the definitive record of the transition.

Author: David Remnick

Alternatives: **Black Earth. Russia after the Fall** (2004) by Andrew Meier ...**Midnight Diaries** (2000) by Boris Yeltsin... **Rebirth of a Nation: An anatomy of Russia** (1998) by John Lloyd

Understanding Vladimir Putin

- **First Person (2000)**...this is Putin's autobiography. Yeltsin advised him to write it/have it written so that people could better understand their new leader. No longer available in Russian.

Author: *Vladimir Putin*

- **Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia (2012)**...the most recent record of Putin's rule and, therefore, the most useful. The author worked on Kremlin PR from 2006-09 and later worked on the BBC series Putin, Russia and the West.

Author: *Angus Roxburgh*

Alternative: **Putin's Russia** (2004) by Anna Politkovskaya

Workings of Current Government

- **Can Russia Modernise? – Sistema, Power Networks and Informal Governance**...see top pick books for 2013 above.

Author: *Alena Ledeneva*.

- **The New Nobility: The Restoration of Russia's Security State and the Enduring Legacy of the KGB (2010)**...the restoration of the role of the state security organisations since 2000.

Authors: *Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan*

Alternatives: **Inside Putin's Russia: Can there be reforms without democracy** (2005) by Andrew Jack.... **The Return: Russia's journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev** (2011) by Daniel Treisman.... **A Russian Diary** (2007) by Anna Politkovskaya

The Energy Sector

- **Wheel of Fortune (2012)**... the definitive detailed history of the oil industry's evolution since the breakup of the Soviet Union, its current structure, as at early 2012, and the issues it faces.

Author: *Thane Gustafson*

- **Putin's Oil: The Yukos Affair (2010)**...the best record of the Yukos case

Author: *Martin Sixsmith*

The Economy

- **In From The Cold: The Rise of Russian Capitalism (2012)** ... The book is divided into two parts, one giving a more general overview of the economic/stock market development and the other focusing on the personal experiences of people who have been part of the process.

Edited by Peter Westin

Alternatives: **Sale of the Century** (2000) by Chrystia Freeland..... **The Oligarchs** (2002) by **David Hoffman**...this is the definitive guide to the powerful Oligarchs and their role in shaping the economy from the early 1990's until the Putin era. But it is almost 12 years old now and a lot has changed.

“ The opinions expressed in this note are those of the author personally. They are not intended as a solicitation to purchase. Neither the author nor macro-Advisory has any association with any of the authors, their agents or the publication companies.*