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Putin's Press Propagandists

The point of Russian TV coverage of the Ukraine war, Arkady Ostrovsky points out, is not to report fighting but to ignite it.

By **KAREN DAWISHA**

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Russia today is ruled by the worst and least talented group of villains Russia has seen since before World War II. How did these men come to power? And how did the phenomenon of Putinisma come to pervade the psyche of the nation? In his bold new book, “The Invention of Russia,” Arkady Ostrovsky blames not just systemic pressures from above, but also the cumulative effects of generations of genetic depletion—the survival of the least fit.

Homo soveticus, Mr. Ostrovsky observes, was “a negative selection process that first physically eliminated the best and the brightest and then nurtured doublethink, suspicion, isolationism, and dependence and discouraged independence of thought and action.” These days anyone who indulges in independent thinking leaves the country (like economist Sergei Guriev and hundreds of thousands of other professionals), ends up in prison (like Mikhail Khodorkovsky and countless other business owners whose firms are raided) or winds up dead (like opposition leader Boris Nemtsov or journalist Anna Politkovskaya). Those who remain in Russia are increasingly obliged to support the regime publicly, particularly in the film and TV industries where they now shoot (footage) to order.

The perspective of Mr. Ostrovsky is unique. A former Moscow correspondent for the Financial Times and currently of the Economist, he is no foreign correspondent but Russian by birth, the son of Soviet intelligentsia. His sparkling prose and deep analysis provide not only a sweeping tour d’horizon of Russia’s malaise, but also a description of the process by which anti-modern ideas combine with postmodern actions to buttress the country’s authoritarian and kleptocratic system.

Mr. Ostrovsky’s main culprit in “The Invention of Russia” is the country’s obedient media. Greatness, which the average Russian yearns for and is willing to sacrifice for, is fashioned out of whole cloth by television executives. The Sochi Opening Ceremony, for example, was not about the Olympics, but an

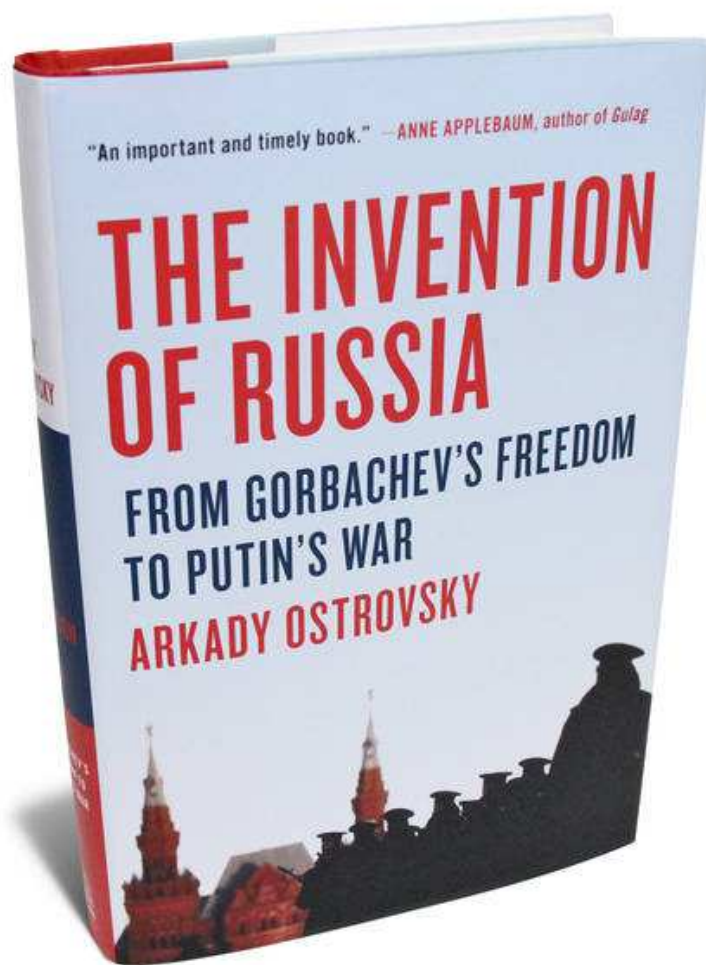


PHOTO: WSJ

THE INVENTION OF RUSSIA

By Arkady Ostrovsky

Viking, 374 pages, \$30

opportunity for creator Konstantin Ernst to construct fairy-tale appeals to tradition, orthodoxy and strength.

Perhaps the most egregious example of TV's hallucinogenic effect on the Russian population was the entirely fabricated 2014 story of a 3-year old boy being crucified by Ukrainian forces in Slavyansk—an event Mr. Ostrovsky likens to “the same time-tested mechanism of arousing hatred . . . used in Jewish pogroms in prerevolutionary Russia.” The point of Russian TV coverage of the Ukraine war, Mr. Ostrovsky rightly

points out, is not to report fighting but to ignite it.

For Kremlin PR managers who control the media, writes Mr. Ostrovsky, “words and images no longer signaled reality; rather, reality was constructed to validate what had been seen” on television. In the process, in order to create the trope of the mighty Russian fortress, Russia's enemies needed to be endowed with unimaginable capability and perfidy. So after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine ceased being the broken country it was and became a neo-fascist bastion of NATO aspirations. The Euromaidan toppling of the Yanukovich regime could not be portrayed as actions by the Ukrainian population itself, but had to be constructed as an evil plot conducted by that angel of darkness, State Department Assistant Secretary of State Victoria

Nuland. Above all, it was necessary to deny that the Ukrainian uprising had arisen organically, given that the same process was being so rigorously suppressed in Russia.

The smallest missteps reveal the fragility of the house of cards the Putin machine has constructed. In late May of this year, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev apologized on live TV to a pensioner badgering him about reduced pensions, explaining that “the government has no money.” This created a media sensation, not least because this pathetic display took place at the same time that the Panama Papers revealed that a Vladimir Putin crony, cellist Sergei Roldugin, had set up offshore accounts that received \$2 billion in unsecured loans from a state bank. When the financial newspaper RBC devoted coverage to these revelations, the editors were forced to resign, even as Mr. Putin covered for Roldugin by claiming his friend was “interested only in musical instruments.” No one believed it, but everyone united in their cynicism to await, in a derivation of the Soviet practice, what the official li(n)e would be.

It is clear that Mr. Ostrovsky’s blistering indictment of this phony reality can have several outcomes. Putinisma can morph into one long parody, in which jokes about Kremlin bureaucrats and corrupt boyars ultimately affect Mr. Putin’s standing. In early June, Twitter shamefully took down all the Kremlin parody accounts, some say after pressure from Kremlin trolls, including one directed at Mr. Putin himself: @DarthPutinKGB. Social media exploded, protesting Twitter censorship. By the time the accounts were reinstated, thousands more had started following them, showing that on the battlefield of falsehood, the Kremlin might lose against the mighty foe of memes.

But the simulacrum that Mr. Ostrovsky so brilliantly punctures can also morph into its own hyperreality. The more the West treats Russia as threatening, the more the Kremlin can use the West’s own actions to bolster its fraudulent version of reality. When TV show host Dmitry Kisilev devotes week after week to programs full of bluster about how many hours and days it would take for Russian forces to reach the Baltic states, Kiev, Warsaw and Berlin, his rants would be regarded as ridiculous, were it not for the small problems of nuclear weapons and Russian actions in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria.

Had Russia not launched a war in Ukraine, all this might be dismissed as mere magical realism. But Mr. Ostrovsky was in Crimea when Russia took over the peninsula and recounts how many locals attested that they had seen the Ukrainian neo-fascists on TV and so they must exist. The West would do well to remember Churchill’s warning that tomorrow’s empires are today’s ideas—or at least their TV programs.

Ms. Dawisha, the director of the Havighurst Center at Miami University in Ohio, is the author of “Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?”

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