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Book Review

A SHORT HISTORY OF RUSSIA: HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE WORLD'S MOST COMPLEX NATION

by Mark Galeotti, Penguin Random House, UK, 2022, pp. 224, ISBN
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A Short History of Russia: How to Understand the World's Most Complex Nation by Mark Galeotti, Penguin Random House, UK, 2022, pp. 224, ISBN 9781529199284.

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Historically, Russia, unlike other Western countries, has had to grapple with the question of its identity due to its unique geopolitical location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, which has, in turn, contributed to making Russia everyone's *other*.

Notable Russian writers from the 17th century have delved into the question of their country's identity, at times categorically mentioning that Russia is not a Western power but rather a Eurasian one on whom lies the civilizational responsibility of uniting the West and the East. Other writers have gone far enough to openly challenge the West's egocentrism, urging Russian leaders to side with Asian countries to defeat the false egocentric claims of superiority of the West. Russia's perpetual dilemma with its identity, not so much in terms of identifiable cultural traits rather in terms of its relations vis-à-vis its significant other, i.e., the West, have continued to underpin the country's internal and external political choices. Russia's identity dilemma, entrenched through its struggle to delineate its identity either in terms of a European state or a Eurasian state, has further been aggravated due to the West's treatment of Russia as an outsider and a second-rate power following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. As the norms of the contemporary global world order have come to be defined as a set of hegemonic principles derived from the liberal West, the Russian leadership has begun to challenge them. Russia has come to assert itself, and in this process, it has attempted to showcase its uniqueness by borrowing from its historical traditions and by insisting on its distinct civilizational values. This has eventually led Russia to reshape its attitude towards global governance norms that it has increasingly come to identify with Western hegemony and values. As Russia has come to position itself to lead the struggle in the international system over the organizing norms and principles of the world order, its leaders have begun to discover several themes and symbols from Russia's Tsarist history and its Soviet past to show to the world their country's greatness. The intersubjective memory of its past has, time and again, created historical aspirations for the Russian elites to bring back a great power's positive and distinctive status.

In this broader context, Professor Mark Galeotti, one of the foremost Russian watchers today, traces the historical evolution of a complex nation like Russia. Through the book, he attempts to take the readers behind the myths to the heart of the Russian story. He traces the history of Russia from the 9th century till the present day to show how the country's identity, culture and history have been shaped by the multitude of external influences and conquests from beyond its borders that have invariably led to the creation of what the author calls a 'palimpsest nation' (p. x), meaning that it is a patchwork nation comprising of citizens whose every aspect of life shows external influences. The author further highlights how the diverse external influences in the form of the Mongol invasion, the influences of Byzantium, the complex relationship with the Western countries, the efforts of some Tsars like Peter the Great who wanted Russia to emulate the West and the imported Marxist ideology have led to specific ways in which successive layers have built upon each other to create a particular identity for this country and its people. The author writes that the Russian people's fluid and cross-bred identity have evoked a peculiar response from the present Russian elites. The regime under president Vladimir Putin have created a series of national

myths to either glorify or deny aspects of its cross-bred identity depending on which aspects promotes his nationalist and great power narratives at home and abroad and which does not.

The book is divided into eight chapters, each dealing with a particular timeline of Russia's historical evolution. Chapters one to three are about the arrival of the Rurikids in the 9th century and the creation of the Kievan Rus' followed by empire-building and nation formation under several leaders of the Rurikid dynasty. One of the most notable development of this period was the Mongol invasion and its impact on Russia's political institutions and culture. Chapters four to six are about the rise and fall of the Romanov dynasty. These chapters particularly highlight the role of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great in modernizing Russia in terms of infrastructural and military development and modernizing the soul and mind of the Russian people, pushing Russia closer to the West. Chapter seven delineates the creation of the Soviet state and the role of the Soviet leaders in determining Russian's identity as a socialist state confronting a hostile capitalist adversary in the form of the West. Chapter eight, as the last chapter, is about the post-Soviet state and its place in the contemporary international system. It specifically highlights the role of President Putin in consolidating the Russian state and lifting Russia back off its knees. The author notes that President Putin's vision and his nationalist aspirations have only led the 'palimpsest to gain more and more layers of superimposed script' (p. 182).

The book with its sequential manner, lucid language and condensed account of a thousand years of Russian history put into two hundred pages, makes for an accessible read not only for the specialists of the region but for anyone with a keen interest in Russia- a country that in the author's words can at once be described as 'one that can be written off as a shambolic relic of an old empire, and at the same time be painted as an existential threat to the West' (p. xiv). A list of books given at the end of each chapter pertaining to the contents of that particular chapter is of help to the readers in case they wish to delve deeper into the subject. Nevertheless, the short length of the book, while making it an accessible read, also raises doubt about how far the history is accurately depicted without being elaborative. Furthermore, the author by highlighting how some Russians are devouring Western films and TV and how some buildings in Moscow are reflecting Western architectural style, claims at the end of the book that Russia under President Putin is becoming 'closer to Europe than at any point in history' (p. 186). Such claims appear untenable in the light of President Putin's foreign policy concepts, his federal assembly addresses and his penned articles that have increasingly come to reflect his assertion of Russia as a distinct civilizational state, laid through the ideas of the Eurasianist philosophy. Though the Eurasianist philosophy is diverse, it aims to project cultural specificity and distinctiveness of Russian values vis-à-vis Western civilizational values. Consolidation of non-Western ideas and outright criticism of Western values that became more pronounced with Putin's third term as alienation from the West became entrenched have further pushed Russia to forge deeper strategic cooperation with Asian countries like China and India. Unlike the West, these countries have never been critical of Russia's domestic political system and have, on the contrary, stood with Russia on multiple occasions, like on the issues of Syria and the Iranian nuclear crisis. Furthermore, these countries have increasingly come to share Russia's worldview, which is based on extending primacy to such foundational norms of global governance like sovereignty, multilateralism, multipolarity, plurality, and inter-civilizational dialogue in international affairs.