What Russian Literature Tells Us About Vladimir Putin’s World

The country's great authors put Russia's aggression in context better than any intel briefing can.

BY JAMES STAVRIDIS  JUNE 2, 2015

Want to really understand what’s going on in Russia? Get rid of that CIA report full of dusty Cold War tropes. Forget the NSA intercepts or spy satellite imagery. And drop the jargon-filled scholarly analysis from those political science journals.

Instead, get back to the richest literary gold mine in the Western world: Russian novels and poetry. Read Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, and Bulgakov. That’s where you’ll really find how Russians think. And it’s all unclassified!

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Begin with Nikolai Gogol’s 1842 masterpiece, *Dead Souls*. It is the blackest of black humor, a story in which a mysterious businessman moves through the Russian countryside “buying up souls” (i.e., taking away a tax burden from the estate owners). It is an absurdist construct, and the novel functions as a satiric portrait of the dysfunctional Russian landowner society that eventually fell in the 1917 revolution. It tells us that Russians see the world as somewhat absurd and contradictory, and hardly a place where overarching humanist value systems triumph. For a nation whose leader struts around the world stage without a shirt on, plays with a pet Siberian tiger, and flies in a motorized mini-plane chasing white storks, there is a certain appeal to the absurd. It is a novel that evokes the most skeptical and cynical in the human condition and appropriately ends abruptly in mid-sentence — a signal of the inability to predict a coherent future.

How will Russians fight and what kind of leaders do they follow? Want to understand their patriotism? Go read the master, Leo Tolstoy. His sweeping 1869 epic, *War and Peace*, shows us how the Russians think about their ability to fight, and illuminates the deep patriotism that fuels today’s nationalist tendencies. Tolstoy makes clear the largest landmass under national sovereignty in the world is literally unconquerable, even by the brilliance of Napoleon. Moscow might burn, but the Russian military will never give up. Tolstoy also debunks the 19th-century theory of world events once-called “the great man” approach, arguing instead that events are driven by the collision of thousands of small events coming together. And when it comes to leaders, Russians throw the cosmic dice: One time they get an Ivan the Terrible, the next a Peter the Great. They know that eventually the dice will roll again, and a new leader will emerge. The bad news is that what comes after Putin may be even worse, given the growing xenophobia and ultra-nationalism. As we look at Putin’s dominance, we should remember that the dice will roll again. The Russians do.
Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *Crime and Punishment* spins a tale that captures the Russian sensibility perfectly: A deeply troubled protagonist chooses to kill, but then is haunted by guilt and — encouraged by the good people around him — eventually confesses. He is then purified and ultimately achieves redemption. The central character, Raskolnikov, is a largely sympathetic figure, full of tragic contradictions, who strays into a brutal crime but is redeemed through punishment and faith. While it is hard to see Putin as a Raskolnikov, perhaps there is a touch of that pattern of redemption in the life and times of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the oligarch turned political opposition leader, who was jailed and then finally released. The next chapter of his journey will be an interesting one. Russians have a deep belief in their own goodness and justness, recognizing mistakes will be made along the road to righteousness. They believe in both crime and punishment in a very literal sense.

Think the Russians will crack under sanctions? Try reading *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the 1962 novel by dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn. His protagonist, a convict in a Siberian gulag, finds a hundred ways to scrape through the day, dealing with the petty corruption, laughing at the predicaments, occasionally reveling in the harsh conditions of his imprisonment, and powerfully exhibiting the ability to overcome adversity. Like Denisovich, Russians will find an ironic pleasure in overcoming the pain of sanctions, and we should not put too much faith in our ability to break their will through imposing economic hardships.

For something more modern, try *One Soldier’s War* by Arkady Babchenko. It’s a foot soldier’s memoir set in Chechnya during the height of the war there in the 1990s waged by the Russian conscript military against the rebellious population. This is counterinsurgency turned upside down — the Russians aren’t trying to win the hearts and minds; they are quite content with putting a bullet into each. The book is a good view into the mind of any conscripted force sent to Ukraine — which explains why it is the Spetsnaz special forces, not regular troops, who are operating across the border. There is much to learn here about the Russian military’s operational approach: The Russians have learned from their mistakes in Chechnya and in Afghanistan, and the new so-called hybrid war is full of lessons they took away. In Ukraine, the use of social media, strategic communications, humanitarian convoys, insurgent techniques, and cyber dominance all come from the Chechnya experience.
And finally, to understand the view of the Russian émigré, the brilliant Russian-American novelist Gary Shteyngart’s *Absurdistan* captures the post-Soviet space better than any book of non-fiction. Set in Moscow and a thinly disguised Azerbaijan (a former republic of the USSR, in case you forgot), it serves up a portrait of Russian “capitalism” with a huge dose of black humor. It echoes Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, a magical realist novel written in the 1930s, in its evocation of the Russians’ ability to exist quite happily in a world where everything is half a beat off the music.

As Russia becomes increasingly isolated from Europe and the West over everything from the annexation of Crimea to the jailing of Pussy Riot and the treatment of gays and lesbians, their society will increasingly reject the “norms” of the West and become more “the other” — a place they have been before. What does all this tell us about the current flow of events?

Russians correctly view themselves as inheritors of something bigger than just another huge country — they see Mother Russia as the repository of deep and powerful life philosophies through a vibrant literature. They are unbelievably tough under pressure and take a perverse pleasure in demonstrating they can outlast anyone.

The Russian military, while still largely a conscripted brute force instrument, can be crafty and wily in combat, trying and adopting new techniques like the hybrid warfare we see in Ukraine today. Russians are skeptical of alliances, remain xenophobic and nationalistic, and have enormous doubts about everyone else’s motives. They see a dark world of forces aligned against them and will continue to use their traditional tools — a bitter reservoir of dark humor, superhuman endurance in the face of adversity, and a clever tactical approach — to try and carry the day. They are masters of playing a bad hand of cards well.

And what of Russian leaders? Dostoyevsky said about one key character in his masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov*, that “Anger was buried far too early in a young heart, which perhaps contained much good.” A description of the young Putin? Perhaps. Certainly, the soaring polls that buoy the Russian president today contain a component of sympathy which stems from intense nationalism, Orthodox faith, an appreciation of the fickleness of the hand of fate, and the salving power of dark humor — all of which run consistently through Russian literature. It bodes well for Vladimir Putin.
We can, of course, learn a great deal about Russia from traditional sources of non-fiction and analysis — history, biography, memoir, political science, and international economics — but literature is the true lens. If you want to understand the Russian mind, remember that no other culture esteems its writers more than Russia. Every Russian can — and frequently does — quote Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Gogol; whereas you would be hard pressed to get a line of Whitman, Hemingway, or Toni Morrison out of a typical American. Whether or not Putin reads on a daily basis (though some reports indicate he enjoys Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy) Russian literature shapes his worldview and illuminates the decisions of the Kremlin in powerful, focused prose. Maybe don’t start with War and Peace (if you haven’t heard, it’s pretty long), but pick up a novel and start reading.

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