

have been reemerging—Germany is by far Moscow's largest creditor, not America, and the European Union already accounts for about 40 percent of Russia's foreign trade—along with growing mutual resentment over what both perceive to be U.S. political and military "hegemonism."¹¹⁴ Both are opposed, for instance, to Washington's plan for a missile defense system.

An exception illustrates this trend. Much more than did the U.S. government, European capitals reacted strongly against the Kremlin's brutality in Chechnya. In April 2000, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, which Moscow joined in 1996, even suspended Russia's voting rights. And yet, that same month Russia's new president, announcing that "we will try to integrate with Europe," made London the site of his first state visit, which the British prime minister eagerly trumpeted as a "new strategic relationship."¹¹⁵ It was only the beginning of Putin's activist diplomacy toward Western Europe. Even before Clinton left Moscow after their meeting in June 2000, the Russian president had departed for Rome. Putin then made a still more important diplomatic visit to Germany.

We should see political virtue in the necessity of a historic European-Russian rapprochement. Unlike America, Europe and Russia shared the twentieth-century traumas of war on their own territory, occupation, police terror, and dictatorship. (And whereas almost no Americans have ever actually known a Communist, virtually every European has, sometimes intimately.) Kinship, understanding, and tolerance often grow out of common historical experiences. If nothing else, having suffered their own calamities, Europeans are less likely

to see Russia as some kind of "calamitous nation" or perverse "enigma."

Even if it turns out that Europe cannot fully understand or integrate post-Communist Russia, it can hardly do worse than America has done since the end of the Soviet Union. After all, Europeans stopped believing in missionary crusades a long time ago.

The Owl of Minerva

We must end where this book began, with America's Russia-watchers. Do most of them now understand that they misconceived their subject for nearly a decade? In the new millennium, are U.S. policymakers, journalists, and academics finally focused on post-Communist Russian realities, particularly the dangers, instead of American fictions?

Russia's purported transition to prosperity, stability, and democracy under Yeltsin ended in an unprecedented economic depression, human catastrophe, civil war, nuclear instability, and with a career KGB officer in the Kremlin—hardly the way Russia-watchers had predicted. And yet, as we saw earlier, the outcome has not opened their eyes or changed their minds in any fundamental ways. Their standard narrative of "Russia's historic transition" remains largely the same, only somewhat revised and updated to incorporate the rise of Putin.

Indeed, Yeltsin's resignation and Putin's ascent were made an occasion, in the first months of 2000, for reaf-

firming the story's "standard templates." Top editors of both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* wrote what could be read only as apologies for the entire Yeltsin era and by implication their papers' coverage of the Russian 1990s. One of America's most eminent Russia specialists, a former ambassador to Moscow, extended those rationalizations even to Putin's savage war in Chechnya. A senior historian lent his authority to the same apology. A leading missionary economist continued to denounce his critics for "shameless naivete or cynicism." Younger transitionologists also clung to their templates, one urging the U.S. government to acknowledge the "moral basis" of the post-Communist Kremlin's war.¹¹⁶

Nor are there any second thoughts about the American crusade, even though it is amply clear from the 1990s that, as a native observer remarked, "Russia swallows such 'missionary' efforts whole." The point of any setbacks, we are still assured, "is not that we've misengaged Russia." Thus *Business Week's* specialist continues to applaud a Harvard shock therapist's role in privatization, "one of the most successful reforms of the Yeltsin era," though most Russians today equate it with plundering and impoverishment. And American correspondents and investors in Moscow still yearn for Kremlin appointees, now under Putin, who are impeccably "liberal"—a "market-friendly, English-speaking guy who listens a lot to financial markets."

Lest doubts arise about the American crusade, a senior political scientist warns once more against "illusions about there being some kind of 'third Russian way' " between the Soviet past and U.S. prescriptions. Indeed,

a new generation of academic transitionologists appears on the scene worried, in light of IMF failures of the 1990s, "there will be no instrument left with which to guide Russia toward market reform." A billionaire American missionary is deeply disillusioned, but because the crusade did not take an even "more direct, intrusive approach." A Washington academic advises the U.S. Senate to rectify that shortcoming by funding American tutelage over Russian society itself. And a *Washington Post* editorial defiantly proclaims, "Yes, meddle in Russia's affairs."¹¹⁷

Worst of all, America's Russia-watchers are still sleepwalking through the new nuclear age, evidently unaware that lethal dangers in the country they study now exceed any in history. Testifying to a U.S. Senate committee on the situation in post-Yeltsin Russia, two leading think-tank experts do not even mention those growing threats. The head of Russian studies at a major university denounces economic proposals to stabilize the country as "neo-Sovietism." A journalist reports that NATO expansion has been a U.S. "triumph," even though it has clearly made the nuclear threats worse. A foreign affairs columnist recommends "containment vis-à-vis Russia," as though quarantine can prevent nuclear explosions and launches.¹¹⁸

Readers might say it does not matter what the "chattering class," as the English sometimes call us, thinks because it has no real power. In an important respect, they would be right. Only presidential power and leadership can enact a new Russia policy to cope with the growing dangers. Here too most of the news is bad.

The Clinton administration's reaction to Yeltsin's

ignominious departure was to reaffirm the necessity of its tutelage policy. "The very absence of clarity about Russia's future . . . in the minds of its own people and its own leaders," a top American official explained, "requires all the more clarity in U.S. policy." Having lost its designated "personification of Russian reform," the administration quickly nominated Putin for the role, angrily dismissing "psychobabble about the KGB thing."

President Clinton himself remained as missionary as ever. Visiting Moscow in June 2000, he was, as a wire service report put it, "in an instructional mode." Speaking to the Russian Parliament, he admitted that "Americans have to overcome the temptation to think we have all the answers," but, according to another report, immediately "proceeded with a catalogue of recommendations that sounded like a transplanted State of the Union address."¹¹⁹

Contrary to all appearances, the administration's crusade was said to be on track, Russia being "a work in progress" merely in need of more "reform." It meant what it had before—the U.S.-sponsored economic measures that have destabilized the world's largest nuclear country. Seeing in Putin a chance for a "second beginning" of those policies, the administration and IMF immediately tried to influence his choice of economic ministers, as they had Yeltsin's. They urged Putin, in return for loans, to appoint "genuine reformers"—the same kind who had led Russia into depression and mass poverty in the 1990s.¹²⁰ It was, again in Yogi Berra's useful malapropism, *déjà vu* all over again.

In democratic theory, the choosing of a new Ameri-

can president should include a discussion of failed policies. As the 2000 presidential election approached, only an elliptical debate about Russia had taken place. Ritualistic statements about arms control aside—the Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee opposed any new such agreements—neither major candidate expressed an awareness of the full dimensions and gravity of the nuclear threats inside Russia, or their underlying causes, even while scientists continued to issue urgent warnings.

The Democratic candidate, Vice President Gore, pledged to continue NATO's eastward expansion and, insofar as his positions were discernible, every other element of the Clinton administration's disastrous Russia policy. The Republican candidate, Governor George W. Bush, on the other hand, proposed a new approach to nuclear security. He promised to explore the possibility of unilaterally reducing deployed U.S. warheads to levels perhaps substantially below the 3,000 to 3,500 permitted by START II and taking some of the remaining ones off high alert status, on the assumption that Moscow would reciprocate.

Such unilateral steps, as readers know, are urgently needed. But Bush also favored further NATO expansion and an even more expansive missile defense system than the limited one advocated by Gore, regardless of Russian objections. If carried out, both proposals would almost certainly compel Moscow, as readers also understand, to rely even more heavily on its fragile nuclear infrastructures and to keep its missiles on hair-trigger alert. Indeed, Bush endorsed the Republican Senate's reckless rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban treaty,

which had prompted delegates to a UN conference in 2000 and others to view the United States itself as "something of a nonproliferation rogue state."¹²¹

Above all, neither presidential candidate showed any awareness of the folly of the American crusade to reinvent Russia. As its cosponsor in the 1990s, Vice President Gore seemed eager to pursue the same intrusive policy already under way in Ukraine. Governor Bush did not object, his chief foreign policy adviser echoing the crusade's missionary premise: "The twenty-first century will be based on American principles."¹²²

We are left with a woeful paradox. An unprecedented danger and a fateful failure of U.S. policy-making have brought forth little if any of the new American thinking or leadership that is needed. In this context, Hegel's bleak axiom "The Owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk" seems naively optimistic. The great German philosopher believed that although we are unable to comprehend epochal events until they unfold, we do then understand them. For the first time in history, a fully nuclearized country has already been perilously destabilized, but still there is no sufficient American understanding.

Russians who once believed in a wise and compassionate America are despairing.¹²³ Recalling how the U.S. government pressured its collapsing Russian ally to remain in the carnage of World War I and thus on the road to catastrophe in 1917, a Moscow historian fears it is happening again:

The West is rigidly demanding that Russia march forward. This time not towards the Galician foothills of the

Carpathians but scarcely in a less dangerous direction. As in long ago 1917, the West, not wanting to open its eyes to Russia's real problems, is promising loyalty only in exchange for continuing in a direction, begun in 1992, that is objectively leading to . . . chaos.¹²⁴

There is, however, also an optimistic historical precedent. In the mid-1980s, the world faced a lesser but grave nuclear danger. Cold War threats and military buildups had led the two superpowers to the brink of actual war. It was avoided and the Cold War ended largely because of the radical "new thinking" and leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev that emerged in the authoritarian Soviet system.¹²⁵

Today, democratic America must provide the new thinking and leadership, but has yet to do so. Instead, the Owl of Minerva still sleeps, wings firmly tucked, while the clock of disaster inside Russia ticks toward midnight.