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**Commentary Series on Putin's War: "Russia in American Eyes: Some Telling Letters Offer a Lesson for Today."**

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It has been easy, particularly for foreign observers, to depict the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine as a major turning point.<sup>1</sup> That was also true to a lesser degree during the Russian seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008. But these events may be less significant as episodes of historical change than as evidence of continuity in the failure of Russia to become a fully participating member of the European (and later Euro-Atlantic) system of peace and security. For Russia may well be European but, as Stephen Kotkin has recently remarked, it is not Western; and that system, for better or worse, is a system made by and for the West.<sup>2</sup>

Could Russia have become part of a lasting post-Cold War peace? A great deal of commentary on that question in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine today reveals a persistent division of opinion over the nature of Russian power.

There are, broadly speaking, two answers to that question:

1. No. Russians are exceptional: "Historically," Thomas G. Otte writes, "Russia has only found a place in Europe through empire." Kotkin adds: "Russia is a remarkable civilization: in the arts, music, literature, dance, film. In every sphere, it's a profound, remarkable place – a whole civilization, more than just a country. At the same time, Russia feels that it has a 'special place' in the world, a special mission. It's Eastern Orthodox, not Western. And it wants to stand out as a great power. Its problem has always been not this sense of self or identity but the fact that its capabilities have never matched its aspirations. It's always in a struggle to live up to these aspirations, but it can't, because the West has always been more powerful."<sup>3</sup>

2. Yes. NATO and other Euro-Atlantic institutions didn't do enough to integrate Russia after the Cold War, thereby making it easier for Russia, whatever its inclination may have been, to reject the peace on offer. For its part, NATO betrayed its own values with military interventions and a deliberate policy of enlargement into former Soviet territory, which Russia strongly opposed. There was also the abandonment of a number of Cold War-era agreements, such as the Anti-Ballistic

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<sup>1</sup> T. G. Otte, "Zeitenwende: Russia's War against Ukraine and the End of the Thirty Years' Holiday," *H-Diplo Commentary Series on Putin's War*, Diane Labrosse, ed., *H-Diplo Essay 416*, March 11, 2022; <https://issforum.org/essays/PDF/E416.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Kotkin, interviewed by David Remnick, "The Weakness of the Despot," *New Yorker*, March 11, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Kotkin, "The Weakness of the Despot."

Missile (1972) and Open Skies (1992) Treaties. The Western response to Russian opposition was usually along the lines of “don’t worry; the Russians will get over it.”<sup>4</sup>

Russia, or at least the Russian state ruled by Vladimir Putin, has not done so. It has instead reaffirmed and reenacted both answers in aid of a new question. “Who cast the first stone?” will be asked for a long-time and may never be decisively answered.

The interesting thing about all these questions is their durability. The same answers have been offered at one point or another during the twentieth century after the Bolshevik revolution when it was said that the Soviet Union, perhaps even more so than its Russian imperial predecessor, could never be trusted to play the proper role of a great power, at least in Europe. It was at once too imperial, too revolutionary, too menacing, and, eventually, just too powerful. The only reasonable policy for the West was to check that power for as long as it took for the Soviet Union to succumb to its own contradictions.

Such was the logic of the Cold War policy of containment. Most historians consider it a success. But it also spoke to another particular continuity. The relationship between domestic insecurity and the drive to extend the borders of empire is as old as empires themselves. Russia is typical, not unique, in this respect. That was the central insight of the containment policy famously formulated by George Kennan.<sup>5</sup> Another person who had similar thoughts was Kennan’s boss in Moscow, the first U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union, William C. Bullitt, who, in spite of a reputation for flightiness, was heeded at the highest levels of the U.S. government.

Bullitt began his professional life as a journalist and possessed a gift for lucid expression and a passion for, among other things, political gossip.<sup>6</sup> Both that gift and that passion endeared him to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who nominated him to open the new embassy in Moscow and then, after Bullitt grew fed up with life there in the 1930s, as ambassador to France, where he thrived until the German conquest of that country.

Bullitt’s shrewd opportunism was counteracted by a self-destructive tendency, perhaps honed self-consciously through his professional association with Sigmund Freud.<sup>7</sup> His public service with the Woodrow Wilson administration crashed after he met Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin in Russia, and then resigned from the administration in order to denounce Wilson for failing to take the Soviet Union seriously. Rehabilitated by Roosevelt, his career crashed again when he infuriated the president by pursuing a vendetta against a presidential favorite, Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles.

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<sup>4</sup> The words of a senior official of the U.S. government in a conversation with the author in 1999 regarding NATO’s intervention against Serbia.

<sup>5</sup> “George Kennan’s ‘Long Telegram,’” February 22, 1946, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, National Archives and Records Administration, Department of State Records (Record Group 59), Central Decimal File, 1945–1949, 861.00/2-2246; reprinted in U.S. Department of State, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1946, Volume VI, Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1969), 696–709.

<sup>6</sup> Biographical studies include: Will Brownell and Richard N. Billings, *So Close to Greatness: a Biography of William C. Bullitt* (New York: Macmillan, 1987); Beatrice Farnsworth, *William C. Bullitt and the Soviet Union* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967); Michael Cassella-Blackburn, *The Donkey, the Carrot, and the Club: William C. Bullitt and Soviet-American Relations, 1917–1948* (Westport: Praeger, 2004); Alexander Etkind, *Roads Not Taken: An Intellectual Biography of William C. Bullitt* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See Sigmund Freud and William C. Bullitt, *Thomas Woodrow Wilson, Twenty-Eight President of the United States: A Psychological Study* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).

In the meantime, Bullitt offered Roosevelt advice on the war and on the peace that might follow it. Some of these letters are striking for their clarity and prescience. One in particular, dated January 29, 1943, merits quotation at length.<sup>8</sup> Bullitt asks: “In what countries in Europe may we reasonably hope to set up de facto administrations, followed by de jure governments, that will work for a world of liberty, democracy and peace?”

The answer to this question lies largely in Stalin’s hands. He may set up Soviet governments in many of the countries in which we now expect to set up democratic governments.

We have little firsthand, detailed information about Stalin’s views and aims.... He is said to share your views expressed in the Atlantic Charter, and to favor the Four Freedoms. It is stated that he has abandoned all idea of world communism and is ready to dissolve the Comintern. He is said to want no annexations but to be interested only in security. He is reported to be determined to have the Soviet Union evolve in the direction of liberty and democracy, freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

We ought to pray God that this is so; for if it is so, the road to a world of liberty, democracy and peace will be relatively easy – and if it is not so, the road will be uphill all the way.

It soon becomes clear, however, that Bullitt has framed his answer ironically:

If Stalin is for our war aims, no power on earth will be able to prevent the establishment of a good peace.

It is therefore, in our national interest, to attempt to draw Stalin into cooperation with the United States and Great Britain, for the establishment of an Atlantic Charter peace. We ought to try to accomplish this feat, however improbable success may seem....

The persons who hold this to be true say that we can obtain Stalin’s full and frank cooperation, if only we will overcome his distrust of the United States and Great Britain by increasing our war aid to the Soviet Union, establishing a second front in western Europe, and promising help to rebuild the devastated areas of the Soviet Union after the war. They say that Stalin will trust us and work with us hand-in-hand, if we trust him and give him these things....

In other words, the foregoing hope is little more than “wishful thinking”:

The reality is that the Soviet Union, up to the present time, has been a totalitarian dictatorship in which there has been no freedom of speech, no freedom of the press, and a travesty of freedom of religion; in which there has been universal fear of the O.G.P.U. and Freedom from Want has been subordinated always to the policy of guns instead of butter....

[Stalin] moves where opposition is weak. He stops where opposition is strong. He puts out pseudopodia like an amoeba rather than leaping like a tiger. If the pseudopodia meet no obstacle, the Soviet Union flows on.

Even if Stalin has not changed, as we pray he has – if we can play on this characteristic behavior pattern of his with sufficient skill and force, we may be able to set up throughout Europe the sort of democratic administrations we want. We have to demonstrate to Stalin – and mean it – that while we genuinely want to cooperate with the Soviet Union, we will not permit our war to prevent Nazi domination of Europe to be turned into a war to establish Soviet domination of Europe. We have to

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<sup>8</sup> Reprinted in *For the President, Personal and Secret; Correspondence between Franklin D. Roosevelt and William C. Bullitt*, edited by Orville H. Bullitt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).

back democracy in Europe to the limit, and prove to Stalin that, while we have intense admiration for the Russian people and will collaborate fully with a pacific Soviet State, we will resist a predatory Soviet State just as fiercely as we are now resisting a predatory Nazi State.

That challenge was not so new:

The wishful thinkers just now are fond of arguing that “Stalin has become a Russian nationalist, interested only in security for his country, therefore, the Soviet Union will become pacific.” They forget conveniently that the Russian nationalist State was never pacific. Tsarist Russia was, and the Soviet Union today is, an agglomeration of conquered peoples. Since the time of Peter the Great, the Russians have extended their rule ruthlessly over one people after another....

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Even if Stalin had become a mere Russian nationalist – which he has not – that would be no guarantee of pacific behavior; indeed, it would be a guarantee of aggressive imperialism....

No single state in Eastern Europe can be made strong enough to resist the flow of the Soviet Union without the support of other states. A combination of feeble states will be inadequate. An agglomeration of weaknesses is not strength.

We are obliged, therefore, in setting up administrations in occupied and liberated countries, not only to set up democratic administrations but also to lay the ground work for a combination of democratic governments in Europe strong enough to preserve democracy in Europe and keep the Bolsheviks from replacing the Nazis as masters of Europe....

A guarantee of Europe by the Soviet Government would have practical value only if adequate force should stand behind the eastern frontier of Europe ready to resist the Red Army. The onward flow of the Soviet Union has never been impeded by any written agreement... Soviet invasion finds barriers in armed strength, not in Soviet promises....

If the Soviet Union as well as Europe could be disarmed, an argument might be made (an unwise argument at best), for establishing an Anglo-Saxon armed dictatorship all over the earth. But the Soviet Union can not be disarmed. Since this is so, Europe cannot be made a military vacuum for the Soviet Union to flow into. Europe must be made not a military cipher but a large digit capable of defending itself against the Soviet Union....

An integrated democratic Europe, pacific but armed, is a vital element for the creation of world peace.

A few months later, on August 10<sup>th</sup>, he sent another letter that urged more specific action. This was just three months before Roosevelt met Joseph Stalin for the first time at Tehran.

It should be clear even to the most wishful thinker that, if Moscow-controlled governments should be installed in Germany and in central and eastern Europe, any serious attempt by Great Britain to keep the Soviet Union from controlling the remainder of Europe would lead either to collapse into communism of the remaining capitalist countries of Europe or to war between the Soviet Union and Great Britain.

A Europe divided into a Soviet sphere of influence, which would be communist, and a British sphere of influence, which would be capitalist, would produce at best an uneasy armistice but no peace. Europe would be another “house divided against itself”...

If, therefore, the British and American armies get into eastern and central Europe and establish themselves there before the Red Army gets in, and handle the situation firmly and intelligently, there is small chance that the Red Army will attempt to get in....

We must also make clear our position toward the whole problem of Europe. No one in Europe today has the slightest idea what our program is. This is natural since we have no program. Stalin has a clear program and a vast organization working day and night to carry it out.

That position was not made clear, either at Tehran or later at Yalta. Clarity wouldn't really come until the end of 1946 after the Big Three took steps to divide Europe through occupied Germany. It remained divided there until 1989.

After that point the policy of the West remained, perhaps surprisingly, ambivalent about the "whole problem of Europe." Once the Soviet Union dismantled itself, wasn't it finally time for a Europe, whole and free, to become a reality? Few people at the time said otherwise. But Western opinion was divided on whether and how post-Soviet Russia could be part of this new Europe. As Otte has written, debate over these divisions and responsibility for them in the West has already "given rise to a veritable cottage industry."<sup>9</sup> The point here, instead, is simply to acknowledge that unresolved ambivalence about Russian power and culture was, is, and will probably remain, at the heart of the debate.

Another person who grappled with it was the former Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, General Andrew Goodpaster. Before serving as SACEUR, he served in a number of other positions, including as a wartime aide to George Marshall and as White House Staff Secretary to Dwight Eisenhower. In the early 1990s he played an important backstage role in devising what became the Partnership for Peace program which he describes in the following letter,<sup>10</sup> dated July 13, 1995, and addressed to President Bill Clinton:

My concern has been building for a year or more... The prospect of early NATO expansion is having a deeply damaging impact on Russian thinking about its future security posture and about its relations with the West. They see it as extending our nuclear umbrella to the borders of Russia, and doing so before Russia is brought constructively into Europe, through the Partnership for Peace, association with the European Union, or other means. Talk about "cold peace" or "losing the peace" is taking root, and the prospective opening of NATO-Russian discussions, although a move in the right direction, fails to allay the concern. They do not see this move as measuring up to the attention being given to expansion of NATO membership.

The kinds of goals set by you and President Yeltsin in May, it seems increasingly clear, can best be achieved – perhaps can only be achieved – by strong action to articulate in explicit and emphatic terms, and then sustain, an "overarching framework" of friendship and cooperation between our two countries.... We are now falling short of this goal; early course correction is needed....

A problem... is the proposed expansion of NATO membership, embracing the commitments under Article V of the Treaty. This as you know is causing contention and confusion here and abroad. It is seen in Moscow as directed against Russia, amounting to a new form of containment that blocks the inclusive participation of Russia in the new Euro-Atlantic relationship. It is alienating Russian political leadership, feeding suspicions and an undercurrent of disillusionment, and can prevent achievement of the overarching relationship of friendship and cooperation that I believe represents our true security interest. It is a burden we do not need to bear....

The Partnership for Peace, which Russia has now joined, will – if made the future centerpiece of NATO – provide a much superior alternative. It responds to today's real security needs for Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, rather than bowing to vague fears and historical

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<sup>9</sup> See the useful summary by Marc Trachtenberg, "The United States and the NATO Non-extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?" [www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/1990.pdf](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/cv/1990.pdf); and Kristina Spohr and Kaarel Piirimäe, "With or without Russia? The Boris, Bill and Helmut Bromance and the Harsh Realities of Securing Europe in the Post-Wall World, 1990–1994," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 33:1: 158-193.

<sup>10</sup> Copy in the author's possession. Goodpaster's original copy is held in the archives of the George C. Marshall Foundation.

enmities that would perpetuate past divisions. Just as those were overcome in the case of Germany by the Western allies after World War II, the West should take advantage of the same opportunities now with Russia. The Partnership needs to be developed much more energetically and with greater dialogue than has been the case to date. All members should participate in a common forum on the basis of full unity and equality rather than the hub-and-spoke concept which puts each nation at a disadvantage in relation to the NATO Sixteen. The Partnership can allow Russia to be a full participant with a role appropriate to its situation and size. Formed on the basis of commitments to democracy, respect for existing borders and for minorities, peaceful resolution of disputes and free market economies, it can constitute the basic security structure for the era we are entering. Should the Partnership as it actually develops fail to meet the needs of the Visegrad countries, greater emphasis can be given to OSCE as the vehicle for European security unity, and full NATO membership for these countries can be reconsidered, but only after Russia firmly anchors itself to the West, or definitely fails to do so. The Partnership will give Russia the opportunity, and the responsibility, to show itself different from the Soviet Union – or the old Russia – to the Central and Eastern Europeans and the Baltics.

The Partnership can thus be the “how” of NATO enlargement, as well as the appropriate adaptation of NATO’s role to this new era....

Goodpaster’s reasoning here adheres to the second of the two abovementioned answers to the Russian question. Russia is unique but not ‘exceptional’ in a permanent, negative sense; and there’s no inherent reason why Russia cannot play as constructive a role in supporting Euro-Atlantic peace and security as any other European or extra-European state like the United States, can play. If he were still alive at the time, would Bullitt have dismissed the prospect of a different, post-Soviet Russia playing that role as just another case of wishful thinking?

Perhaps not. Just as Bullitt prided himself on his realism – but not necessarily on cynicism – Goodpaster was no idealist. Both men regarded themselves instead as old-fashioned American pragmatists whose geopolitics moved in the realm of the possible. Which meant in this instance that there was an important additional distinction to make between insisting that the West could do little to dictate Soviet or Russian behavior, and that the West should go out of its way not to facilitate bad behavior brought on less by avarice than by insecurity, even vulnerability, vis-à-vis the West. That is, the Soviet Union of 1943 and Russia of 1995 were different countries, but they both possessed strong resentments, particularly toward the United States – resentments that would continue, in both instances, to grow worse. The aim of the Partnership for Peace was to offset those resentments with a gradual transposition of temporal and territorial lines on the map, so that the former’s possibilities would someday overcome the latter’s limitations. Goodpaster ended his letter to Clinton as follows:

I have taken the liberty of writing directly to you because of the urgency and importance of this issue, and because I believe that only the U.S. President can give the leadership our people now need, both within our government and internationally. This fact was demonstrated by Presidents Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower at a similar turn of history during and after World War II, when the security structure was put in place that has served us so well for the last 50 years, in the process bringing in rather than excluding Germany and Japan as participating members.

Diplomatic exclusion is almost always easier and more immediately satisfying to enact than inclusion. It is also almost always the wrong policy from the point of view of one’s own objective interests. Weakness and indecision, as Bullitt noted, can harm those interests in the face of a determined, “predatory” power. But so too, as Goodpaster stated, can strength and intimidation in the face of a vulnerable, resentful one. The policy choice for the United States ought not to have been about calibrating elements of deterrence with those of appeasement. Instead, the lesson from both men worth remembering today is that it is usually a mistake to base a policy mainly on presumptions about the mind and motivations of a current or potential adversary, however long-standing and recurring the attitude of an adversary may be. It would be better to establish a clear, positive, and common program at the outset and then to explore the ways in which the interests of others, including adversaries, can be accommodated to, or within, that program.

We'll probably never know if the Partnership for Peace could have succeeded in such a way. On the other hand, even at this dark moment, it is probably still not too late to imagine a similar policy once again for a Europe, whole and free.

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