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Russia Could Have Been China

By Alexei Bayer

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A recent radio feature by Anne Garrells, a U.S. correspondent with National Public Radio in Moscow, quoted a Russian engineer who described the Moscow-Volga canal: "The Moscow River, which often dried up, could not supply the capital's growing needs. Now, 90 percent of water for this city of 10 million comes from the Volga. Many died building this canal. I have no love for Stalin. But there was no other way to do it, given the conditions of the time."

This view of Stalin is typical in Russia, both at the official level and among ordinary people. Stalin was brutal, they say, but he had to be to achieve economic development, industrialization and progress. He mobilized Russia, transforming it into an industrial power in a couple of decades. He fashioned its military into an efficient machine that defeated Hitler. Brutality was necessary, and those who deny the achievements of the people under his rule are often accused of Russophobia.

Such accusations are an insult to intelligence. Before World War I broke out in 1914, which marked the beginning of 40 years of historically unprecedented bloodletting in Russia, it was well on its way to becoming one of the world's most prosperous industrial economies. The

foundations for Russia's development had been laid in the 19th century by Nicholas I's educational reforms and the freeing of serfs by his son Alexander II. True, Russia began industrializing four decades later than the United States and three decades later than Germany, but after the shock of naval defeat at the hands of the Japanese and insurrection in 1905, it grew at rates that matched or exceeded anything seen in Germany or the United States.

With its continent-size territory, wealth of natural resources and a reservoir of rapidly urbanizing, international labor, Russia could have easily been the China of the 20th century. It had great merchants and a nascent class of industrialists. Its scientists and engineers were top-notch. Trained before the Revolution, those of them who emigrated prospered in the West, and those who stayed formed the backbone of Soviet industry, despite the country's brutal repression, show trials and purges.

The Russian Empire was criticized as retrograde by Russia's educated classes, but that in itself showed the emergence of liberal opinion in the country.

It was a promising and pleasant country, full of energy, enterprise and artistic ferment. I have known "white emigres" in Rome and New York who remain nostalgic for the glory of pre-

Bolshevik Russia, which Lenin and Stalin turned into a concentration camp. The Soviet Union did industrialize, but the quality of its industrialization was woefully low, while the price extracted from the nation was exorbitant. Today's Russia is a poor, underpopulated vendor of natural resources. A country that could have rivaled the United States in many ways — and not only in the number of nuclear missiles — lies moribund. To celebrate Stalin's achievements is either a sign of idiocy or extreme hatred of Russia.

Today's Russian bureaucratic elites are marauders. Russia is dying — both physically and economically, falling behind the world's new economies, most notably its neighbor China. But marauders are never interested in treating the wounded on the battlefield. Thus, the ruling elite is cynically celebrating the achievements of the past 100 years instead of reversing its disastrous course.

Who are the real Russophobes now?

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