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Getting Russia Wrong

By Peter Rutland

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A lead article in the March 7 New York Times argued that the U.S. failure to predict Putin's actions in Crimea is due in part to a dearth of experts in Russian politics. Since the end of the Cold War, political scientists have deserted Russian studies, and a new generation of specialists has not emerged to replace their Cold War predecessors.

There is some truth to that argument. Only three out of the eight Ivy League universities have appointed a tenured professor in Russian politics since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and none of them has appointed a Russia expert in economics or sociology. There is a similar situation in Germany. While there are 43 professors of Russian or East European history, there are only three professors of Russian politics, and one each in economics and sociology.

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featuring Russian specialists
who portray Russia
in primitive, good-vs.-evil
terms.

But that is only part of the story. In fact, there are plenty of Russia specialists out there in U.S. academia. There are even some former Sovietologists still at their desks, including yours truly. At the same time, however, there is also a new generation of young experts who are extremely well informed about contemporary Russian politics — better informed than their Cold War predecessors because they have more opportunity to travel there and conduct research and because they can draw on the findings of new Russian scholarship.

The problem is that this academic expertise is not being tapped by the mass media, nor by government agencies for that matter. The few exceptions would include Michael McFaul, who before serving as the U.S. ambassador to Russia was President Barack Obama's top adviser on Russia, or Celeste Wallander, now serving on the National Security Council.

Academics who try to portray Russia in a more nuanced way — that is, beyond the primitive, good-versus-evil binary — have a hard time getting their point across. Take my own case, for example. In my 30-year career as a Russia specialist in the U.S., I have managed to publish an opinion piece in The New York Times or International Herald Tribune three times. One was on the Islamic insurgency in Mali, a second was on the chances for an Arab Spring in China, and the third was on the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. I am not an academic expert on Mali, China, Armenia or Azerbaijan, and I do not speak the languages of those countries. But on the topic in which I am actually proficient, Russia, I have never once been published in The New York Times — and it is not for lack of trying, I assure you.

The media have their own stable of authoritative commentators on Russia to whom they repeatedly turn when a quote or op-ed is needed. And this group of experts, mostly located within the Washington Beltway, tend conveniently to fall into two camps. The majority are contemptuous of Russia, seeing it as an irrelevant, declining power at best. At worst, they see Russia as a dangerous, authoritarian regime that poses a threat to its neighbors and plays a destabilizing role on the international stage. At the same time, there is a minority of observers who insist that Russia is a normal country, on the way to integrating with the West. Debate consists of an exchange of comments between the camps of pessimists and optimists.

The two low points where misunderstanding of the situation in Russia has been most damaging are 1993 and 2009. In 1993, the U.S. government supported President Boris Yeltsin's decision to illegally dismiss the parliament and then shell it into submission when protesting deputies refused to disband. The U.S. media rallied behind the pro-Yeltsin position, and very few critical voices got a hearing.

In April 2009, on the eve of his first visit to Moscow, Obama undiplomatically declared in an interview that Putin had "one foot in the past [Soviet Union]" and that Obama would concentrate his efforts on then-President Dmitry Medvedev. That diplomatic faux pas was based on a misunderstanding of the "tandem leadership" in which then-Prime Minister Putin was still, in fact, calling all the shots. Obama's gross misread of the country's power structure set his Russian policy on a flawed track from which it never recovered.

Crimea now provides us with a third example of how a shallow and schematic understanding of Russian politics can lead us to be taken by surprise by the turn of events. This is somewhat ironic since Russian policy is itself overwhelmingly shaped by their analysis of what the U.S. is

doing to Russia. The U.S. has consistently ignored Russia's legitimate interests in the post-Soviet space. For example, no complaints were raised when Estonia and Latvia denied citizenship to their Russian minorities after these two countries gained their independence in the 1990s. At the same time, Slovakia and Romania were obliged to protect the language rights of their Hungarian minorities as a condition for European Union entry.

Senior U.S. diplomats such as Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland seemed to be more interested in playing the role of freedom fighter than trying to work toward a peaceful solution to the crisis. With Russian propaganda stressing that the protests in Kiev were orchestrated by the West, it was unwise to be photographed on Maidan Square handing out food to riot police or to boast that the U.S. has spent $5 billion on promoting democracy in Ukraine. Such steps were a red rag to the Russian bull — and Moscow responded in kind.

Peter Rutland is a professor of government at Wesleyan University in Connecticut and is currently a visiting scholar at the University of York, in England.

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