The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's 21st Century Began in 1991

By Richard Lourie

May 18, 2014



As the year 2000 approached, two of the main topics of conversation were: Could the world's computers handle the switchover, the so-called Y2K problem, and when did the 21st century actually begin, in 2000 or 2001?

Numerical nitpicking aside, it is clear the 21st century began in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The political, ideological and military confrontation that had defined the second half of the 20th century was done.

What's taking its place is only gradually becoming evident. At first there was a sort end-of-history euphoria in the West, the belief that people would devote themselves to computers and consuming. That giddiness lasted a decade until Sept. 11, 2001, when a new element of the 21st century made itself dramatically known.

History had returned — this time taking the form of anti-modernist Islamic terrorism, the Koran and Kalashnikov versus the laptop and the mall. The resulting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq changed warfare. Massed standing armies and nuclear stockpiles were revealed as antiquated overkill. Drones, intel and special forces were the new hot thing.

The financial debacle of late 2007 was the next stroke in the 21st century's emerging portrait. The crisis highlighted the vast disparity between the superrich and everyone else.

A bank may be too big to fail, but no homeowner is. All countries now have their own version of the 1 percent — whether it is corrupt Chinese officials who have to rent apartments to hold the cash bribes they have received, Russian oligarchs buying Western sports teams like Chelsea or the Nets, or top U.S. hedge fund managers who make a million dollars an hour when the minimum wage cannot make it to $10.

The Russian annexation of Crimea and the subsequent turmoil in Ukraine is another key feature in the portrait. The process that had begun with the real beginning of the 21st century in December 1991 had now come full circle. A Russia humiliated by the Soviet failure and by the triumphalism of the West was now back with a vengeance. With the $50 billion Olympics behind it, the Russia of 2014 was not about to allow a failing Ukraine slip into the Western camp. That would mean Russia would be outflanked by NATO from the Baltic to the Black Sea which itself would become a sort of Lake NATO.

Russia was immediately criticized for not acting in a 21st-century fashion — that is, modern, rational and civilized. But it was the West that was deluded with fantasies of order and decorum when perceived vital interests were being threatened. As Robert D. Kaplan, chief geopolitical analyst for Stratfor, put it with blunt concision: "In geopolitics, the past never dies, and there is no modern world."

The countries of Eastern Europe were less surprised, remembering all too well that it was in Yalta, Crimea that they were sold out by the "Big Three" in 1945.

The most important immediate effect of the Ukrainian crisis is that Russia and the West have called it quits. The West has rejected Russia for rejecting Western ways. Russia is now pivoting east toward Central Asia and China — and north to the riches of the Arctic. Russia has sheared off from the West like one of those glacial ice masses whose melting will no doubt flood coastal cities worldwide as the 21st century ends, completing its portrait.

Before that happens, though, there will be other defining strokes. Some may come soon near specks of islands for which the Japanese have one name and the Chinese quite another.

Richard Lourie is the author of "The Autobiography of Joseph Stalin" and "Sakharov: A Biography."

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/05/18/russias-21st-century-began-in-1991-a35530