

New Cold War: How America Lost Post-Soviet Russia | Stephen Cohen

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The reason that the people who control the financial oligarchy of Russia don't want free elections is because they know that if they had them, the people would vote for candidates pledging to confiscate their property. This is the main obstacle to democracy in Russia. — Stephen Cohen, 12/30/11

INTRODUCTION

Stephen F. Cohen (born November 25, 1938) is Professor Emeritus of Politics at Princeton University, where for many years he was also director of the Russian Studies Program, and Professor Emeritus of Russian Studies and History at New York University. He grew up in Owensboro, Kentucky, received his undergraduate and master's degrees at Indiana University, and his Ph.D. at Columbia University. For his scholarly work, Cohen has received several honors, including two Guggenheim fellowships and a National Book Award nomination. Over the years, he has also been a frequent contributor to newspapers, magazines, television, and radio. His "Sovieticus" column for The Nation won a 1985 Newspaper Guild Page One Award and for another Nation article a 1989 Olive Branch Award. For many years, Cohen was a consultant and on-air commentator on Russian affairs for CBS News. With the producer Rosemary Reed, he was also project adviser and correspondent for three PBS documentary films about Russia: Conversations With Gorbachev; Russia Betrayed?; and Widow of the Revolution. Cohen has visited and lived in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia regularly for more than forty years.

WHY DO I CARE?

I'm extremely excited about today's conversation. In fact, I feel awkward admitting it, but it can't help but get a little emotional. I was just 19 years old when I sat in professor Cohen's class: "Russia Since 1917." I'm embarrassed to admit that I was too busy flirting with girls and indulging in the pleasures of liberated adolescence to attend all of his lectures. Had I been taking this class as a Junior, I wouldn't have missed a single lecture. The course was about Russian history, politics, and society from the 1917 Revolution to the present. The lectures and readings focused primarily on



the main periods, turning points, and outcomes during the past 80 plus years since the Bolshevik Revolution, and the large explanatory questions raised by them. The text below is lifted directly from the syllabus of the class. It is a 2010 version that Dr. Cohen sent me, though I've been told that it would not have changed very much in those intervening years (barring the first point about the Cold War not being over):

Even apart from the long Cold War, which may or may not actually be over, there are good reasons why American students might want to study Russia's experience during and after the twentieth century. Four are worth identifying at the outset:

First, since 1917, Russia has experienced almost every kind of political and social trauma known in modern history – international war, revolution, civil war, famine, dictatorship, mass terror, military invasion and occupation, demographic catastrophes, loss of empire, and collapse of statehood – but also many achievements, including modernization of everyday life, scientific and technological feats, military victory, world-class culture, and partial democratization. Given this extraordinary range of experiences, Russia provides an opportunity to identify and evaluate various factors commonly used to explain major events in history more generally – factors such as historical tradition, ideology, political leadership, economics, and others.

Second, because Russia's history has been so unlike our own American one, studying that country tests our ability to understand a very different national experience, or what is sometimes called "foreign culture." To take an example that is both historical and contemporary: Are we able to understand why, despite all the traumatic events of the Soviet era, many Russians even today nonetheless express strong pride in and nostalgia for that era?

Third, considering Russia's special history and vast geography – even after the Soviet Union it remains the largest territorial country in the world – where does it belong as a civilization: with us in the West; in the East; in a realm of its own called Eurasia? And does it matter? (Russians have themselves fiercely debated this question for centuries and still not resolved it.)

Finally, Russia, in the form of the Soviet Union, may have shaped our own twentieth-century history



more than did any other country, and thus the lives of your parents (and grandparents). If so, studying Russia is a way of also learning something important about your own past and the America and world in which you now live.

You should understand, however, that although I have strong opinions, there is no scholarly or political consensus about these issues among Western specialists or Russians themselves, only conflicting positions and controversy. Therefore, there is no reason for you to feel any obligation to agree with answers that may be given by the course lectures, readings, or preceptors, who have their own points of view. We ask you instead to read carefully and think critically about everything presented in the course and then reach your own conclusions.

BACKGROUND

Origins — **Q:** How did a kid from Kentucky that grew up in the Jim Crow South get interested in Soviet History?

First Impressions — **Q:** What was your initial experience traveling to and living in the former Soviet Union like? **Q:** When did you know that you wanted to become a Russian historian? **Q:** How did that come about?

Mother Russia — I distinctly remember feeling that you conveyed a deep sense of love and connection to the Soviet Union and to your friends in that country. **Q:** What is it about the Russian people that you so love and admire? **Q:** How much of that is Soviet, and how much of that is Russian?

Communism — I've always come away with the impression that you have very strong sympathies with the loftier aims and ambitions of communism. **Q:** How would you describe yourself politically? **Q:** What about your philosophy on diplomacy and international relations?

Career — You have had an admirable career. You were a consultant and on-air commentator on Russian affairs for CBS News. You've advised presidents. **Q:** What can you share about your career and past experiences that can help our audience appreciate you better?



BACKGROUND

How Did We Get Here? — I remember when Russia was our friend. The 1990's were filled with images of Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin laughing and holding hands. We were inundated with movies that showed Americans and Russians working together towards some larger objective or in overcoming some larger challenge. **Q:** How did we get here? **Q:** When did things take a turn for the worst and why?

What Don't We Get? — **Q:** What don't Americans "get" about Russia?



East or West — Where does Russia belong as a civilization: with us in the West; in the East; in a realm of its own called Eurasia? **Q:** Does it even matter?

Soviet Aftermath — I distinctly remember you saying, as late as 2012 that the fundamental grievance of the Russian people remains the manner in which the country's wealth was reallocated after the fall of the Soviet Union. That if we really get to the basis of what's wrong with Russia and leave aside its history, it's the fact that the nation doesn't accept the privatization of property that occurred in the 1990's. **Q:** How important are the 1990's and the manner in which Soviet assets were privatized in helping us to understand Russian politics today and the support of Putin?

Single Biggest Policy Error — I've heard you say this over and over again that "the single biggest policy mistake that the United States has made in its relationship with former Soviet Russia is the expansion of NATO towards the East." In the intervening years, documents have been made public that support the assertion that the Soviets had been given assurances that NATO would not expand eastward. "Not one inch eastward," is what I believe James Baker is reported to have said to

Privatization and NATO Expansion



Gorbachev. **Q:** Can you help us understand why you believe that the expansion of NATO was as significant as you say? **Q:** Why do others in the American foreign policy community dispute this interpretation? **Q:** What about those who say that a country like the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, etc., have every right to join NATO if they want to and that they have good reason to fear Russian influence? **Q:** Is this ultimately about what's best for the US or what's best but not these Eastern European countries?

From Thomas Friedman's 1998 New York Times interview with George Kennan ("[Foreign Affairs; Now a Word From X](#)") on the decision to expand NATO:

This has been my life, and it pains me to see it so screwed up in the end. — George Kennan

"I think it is the beginning of a new cold war," said Mr. Kennan from his Princeton home. "I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. This expansion would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves. We have signed up to protect a whole series of countries, even though we have neither the resources nor the intention to do so in any serious way. [NATO expansion] was simply a light-hearted action by a Senate that has no real interest in foreign affairs."

"What bothers me is how superficial and ill-informed the whole Senate debate was," added Mr. Kennan, who was present at the creation of NATO and whose anonymous 1947 article in the journal *Foreign Affairs*, signed "X," defined America's cold-war containment policy for 40 years. "I was particularly bothered by the references to Russia as a country dying to attack Western Europe. Don't people understand? Our differences in the cold war were with the Soviet Communist regime. And now we are turning our backs on the very people who mounted the greatest bloodless revolution in history to remove that Soviet regime."

"And Russia's democracy is as far advanced, if not farther, as any of these countries we've just signed up to defend from Russia," said Mr. Kennan, who joined the State Department in 1926 and was U.S. Ambassador to Moscow in 1952. "It shows so little understanding of Russian history and



Soviet history. Of course, there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [the NATO expanders] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are -- but this is just wrong."

Democratizing Reforms — You have said that the historical narrative about democratization in Russia is wrong, that the narrative is that democratization began in Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990's and that Putin has been steadily crushing it ever since. According to you, the height of democracy was in 1989-91 under Gorbachev's Soviet Union. **Q:** What don't Americans understand about Russia political history?

Putin — **Q:** Where does Vladimir Putin fall on the continuum of authoritarianism and democracy? **Q:** Why is there this obsession with Vladimir Putin in the American press and zeitgeist? **Q:** Where did that come from?

Frustrations — **Q:** How much of America's frustration with Putin is a result of their inherent need for a boogey man? **Q:** How much of it is because Putin is a "thug" as McCain called him (or as Hillary implied, that he was soulless)? **Q:** How much of it is because he got in the way of the plundering of the Soviet economy by a network of foreign and Russian investors during who had their way with Russia under Yeltsin?

Real Reason — American foreign policy has supported some of the most reprehensible dictators the world has ever seen. We know this can't be the reason for our vitriol towards Russia. **Q:** What's the *real reason* for America's hostile foreign policy towards Russia?

Attitude in Russia — **Q:** What is the popular atmosphere and attitude in Russia towards Americans and the United States?

Pivot from West — When did Russia's pivot from the West begin?

Communism in Russia — **Q:** What is the appeal for communism today in Russia? (I remember you saying how popular it was ten years ago on account of the lingering resentment for how the wealth was divvied up after the dismantlement of the Soviet Union).

We have demonized Putin and we have "Putinized" Russia. — Stephen Cohen



Journalists — According to you, the murder of journalists began with the privatization of state assets, the implication being that journalists investigating the corruption have often been killed by the oligarchs. **Q:** What is the status of free speech and journalism in Russia today?

THE PRESENT DANGER

Cuban Missile Crisis — **Q:** Why do you think we are closer to a nuclear war now with Russia than at any point since the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Putin is not a virtuous leader. He's not a democratic leader. But nor is he as he is often presented in this country as some kind of Saddam, or Stalin, or even Hitler. – [Stephen F. Cohen](#)

Détente with Russia — **Q:** Why do you believe that we need détente with Russia and what does that mean?

Advocacy for Russia — **Q:** What motivates your strong advocacy for cooperation between the US and Russia? **Q:** What would that look like? **Q:** How would we get there?

Putin Apologist — **Q:** How does it feel being called a “Putin apologist” and how does that make you feel?

Russophobia — I feel like you are a contrarian, and in the age of Russophobia, you end up sounding unconditionally supportive of Russia and Vladimir Putin. **Q:** Is that assessment accurate?

Trump — **Q:** What do you think of trump?

Hypocrisy — **Q:** How big a deal is American hypocrisy in explaining not only Russian frustrations but yours as well?

Litmus Test — During the Bush era, the litmus test for being quoted or getting on television was your support for the troops and your willingness to state over and over again that Saddam was the second coming of Adolph Hitler. **Q:** What is the litmus test that people need to pass today?

Russia-Gate or Intelgate? — **Q:** What role do you believe the intelligence agencies had in what has come to be known as “Russiagate” and do you believe that they investigation of Trump?

*** [Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances](#)

