

The Banality of Putin and Xi

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No death toll can truly capture the devastation that Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot and their ilk inflicted upon the world. Think of the engineered Great Famine in Ukraine (Holodomor), the Holocaust, the Cultural Revolution, the Killing Fields of Cambodia. Though today we recognize these leaders as monsters, we mustn't forget that in their time Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and others had Western apologists and admirers. By now we should have learned to evaluate dictators properly.

But, depressingly, many politicians and intellectuals persist in misreading dictators. For example, when Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran was rising to power, he found admirers among Western intellectuals. In 1979 Richard Falk, a professor of international law at Princeton, dismissed concerns about Khomeini's political vision of Islamic totalitarianism. Falk [suggested](#) that "Iran may yet provide us with a desperately needed model of humane governance for a third-world country." That's not been the experience of Iranian women who are brutalized and jailed for failing to wear hijab; nor of gays executed by public hanging; nor of any Iranians who value their freedom; nor of any of the victims of Iranian-backed Islamist terrorism.

Remember when Bashar al-Assad of Syria was seen as a savvy "reformer," invested in the welfare of his people? Except that he became notorious for inflicting chemical weapons on his subjects. Mohammad bin Salman of Saudi Arabia was breathlessly hailed as a forward thinking, capable leader: yes, the self-same MBS who ordered the hit on and literal butchering of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist affiliated with the *Washington Post*.

But surely the most consequential examples today are Xi Jinping and especially Vladimir Putin.

In the [words](#) of one American commentator, Vladimir Putin is like a "grandmaster of chess" when it comes to strategy, whereas Barack Obama "stumbles with checkers." On the eve of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [described](#) the Russian dictator as "very shrewd, very capable," adding "I have enormous respect for him. . . . [Putin] is

an elegantly sophisticated counterpart and one who is not reckless but has always done the math.”

While Donald Trump was in office, he was one of Putin’s superfans and [apologists](#). Trump has described the Ukraine invasion as “genius,” later [praising](#) Putin for having “taken over a country for \$2 worth of sanctions.”

This is a severe misreading, and the most obvious evidence can be seen in the battlefields of Ukraine. The reputedly formidable Russian military has struggled against courageous Ukrainians fighting in self-defense. It can also be seen in the extraordinary scale and extent of international sanctions imposed on Russia. But this misreading goes deeper than a strategy that backfired.

The notion of dictators as charismatic, capable strategists is an illusion. The illusion endures partly because they can appear successful, at least for a while. But the truth is that Putin and Xi, like their twentieth-century predecessors, are fundamentally impotent.

What Putin and Xi have “achieved”

For individuals to live, think, produce, and thrive, the role of a proper government is to protect their freedom. It is freedom that fuels human progress and prosperity. No one who values human flourishing can look at Putin, Xi or any other dictator as anything but a lethal aberration.

Putin and Xi are not simply politicians who get a few details wrong. They’re wrong all the way down. They dominate, brutalize, and exploit those who think, teach, invent, produce, run businesses, create value at whatever scale. By violating the rights of their citizens, Putin, Xi, and other dictatorial leaders defy the objective conditions necessary for individuals to live and prosper. They are destroyers. “To deal with men by force,” [observed](#) philosopher Ayn Rand, “is as impractical as to deal with nature by persuasion.”

What Putin, Xi, and their cronies have “achieved” are regimes geared toward exploitation. Putin-aligned oligarchs have ransacked the country. China’s caste of party-aligned operatives have raked in billions, amid the country’s impressive economic rise. That rise, now seemingly slowing, occurred despite not because of China’s dictatorial leadership. It was a consequence of the slight degree of economic freedom the Party condescended to permit — and which it is now undoing.

There’s nothing “shrewd” nor “sophisticated” here. Such dictators and their hangers-on are thugs, gangsters, and murderers who operate under the state’s

(ostensible) moral authority. Human parasitism is an expression not of efficacy, but of impotence.

What empowers Putin and Xi

Why do some view Putin and Xi as impressively capable, strategic leaders? Here are two factors.

First, to put it bluntly, many Western intellectuals and policy makers have an irrational prejudice against freedom, especially as manifested in markets. You can see it in the bias against markets, deemed messily inefficient, and in favor of central planning. While we both reject this common perspective, our point here is not to persuade you that we're right about markets. Rather, it's that many in the West are afflicted by what you might call Central Planner Envy, and this leads them into warped thinking. It picks out supposed accomplishments — “Behold the high-speed trains in Xi's China!” — while evading the full reality of the uncountable individuals whose rights are trashed in the course of maintaining the regime's system of pervasive repression.

A second, more significant explanatory factor is Western appeasement of Russia and China. Instead of frankly recognizing the evil character of these regimes, the West affords Russia and China the undeserved moral status of civilized countries. By agreeing to sit down with them at summits and multilateral meetings, our heads of state perpetuate the fiction of Putin and Xi as efficacious and benevolent leaders that belong in the company of rights-respecting nations.

The United Nations is a major culprit in whitewashing these regimes. Both have permanent seats on the UN's powerful Security Council (!), despite violating the organization's stated principles — flagrantly, repeatedly, and on a vast scale. What about the massacring of pro-democracy student protesters at Tiananmen Square in 1989? Dousing the last embers of intellectual freedom? Interning thousands of Uighurs in concentration camps? Wiping out the last vestiges of freedom in Hong Kong? Ongoing piracy of foreign-owned intellectual property? The dishonest handling of the COVID pandemic? No, China has learned that it is effectively untouchable.

This official whitewashing encourages, and is reinforced by, the willingness of American and European companies to invest in China and Russia as if they were basically free, civilized, moral regimes. The consequences are pernicious. Putin's regime, for example, has benefited handsomely from the inflow of foreign capital and joint ventures with BP, Shell, and Exxon. But since the war in Ukraine, all three of these companies are frantically departing the Russian market, suffering [losses](#) in the tens of billions of dollars.

When you reflect on how the U.S. and European nations dealt with Putin's past aggression, his initiation of war against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, is exposed as foreseeable, rather than strategically shrewd let alone "genius." Passive appeasement by the U.S. and Europe emboldened Putin. Consider the [incisive observation](#) of Evgeny Kissin, an expatriate Russian pianist and composer, who on this issue exhibits greater clarity of vision than political leaders in Washington, London, and the capitals of Europe:

If the West had applied the same sanctions against Putin's regime as it is applying now 8 years ago, after the annexation of the Crimea, there would have been no war in the Ukraine now. I'll tell you even more: had the West applied such sanctions in 2008, in response to Putin's invasion of Georgia and the de facto annexation of South Ossetia, Putin would not have annexed the Crimea five and a half years later — and maybe, by that time he would even no longer be in power. And more: if the West had applied such sanctions back in 1999–2000, in response to the genocide in Chechnya, there would definitely have been no invasions of Georgia and the Ukraine.

Charismatic tyrants?

There's still the notion that Putin, Xi, and their ilk are charismatic, inspiring loyalty. The reality is that they are at war against their own subjugated people. Putin and Xi are usurpers, and on some level they know it, but shut their eyes to that truth. The epic scale of censorship and repression under their reign is telling. Why intimidate, muzzle, and seek to control the thoughts of the population, if it truly found you inspiring, magnetic?

Orwell's fearsome "Big Brother" pales in comparison to China's vast surveillance of its population, social credit scores, and legions of censors. The regime [crushes](#) dissent, and it imposes thought control. When Dr. Li Wenliang spoke out about the novel Corona virus at the pandemic's outbreak, he was silenced, punished, humiliated. After his death from Covid 19, tragically vindicating his warning, censors scrubbed Chinese social media to erase public demands for freedom of speech. Or recall what happened to Peng Shuai, the Chinese tennis champion who accused a Party official of sexual assault: she was "disappeared." (Only after an international furor about her vanishing, did she reappear for a stage-managed interview.)

Putin's railroading and "disappearing" of critics, the poisoning of opponents, the eradication of every last vestige of an independent media, the marinating of the population in endless propaganda: these are a confession of weakness, a fear of facing the facts. Thought control puts the regime's wishes above facts,

on the premise that wishing makes it so. There's no "war" in Ukraine, only a "special military operation" — and any Russian who denies this or objects to it can face up to 15 years in prison.

Dictators are at war not only with their own people, but, ultimately, with reality.

A profound impotence

The notion that Putin and Xi (and their ilk) are charismatic, efficacious leaders is false. They have pitted themselves against the facts and against human life. To the extent such dictators advance toward their stated goals, they wreak havoc. Zoom out from Ukraine, where Putin's forces are floundering, and recall that Stalin's reign brought nothing but death to his own people. Hitler lost a world war, laid waste a continent, and put to death tens of millions.

Reflecting on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a key figure in the "final solution," Hannah Arendt coined the phrase the "banality of evil." It's an idea that remains controversial. If you take it to mean that evil is in fact small, unglamorous, commonplace, there's some truth in the observation. And it certainly applies to Putin, Xi, and other dictators; [picture](#) Saddam Hussein upon being dragged out of hiding from an underground rathole.

But this idea is at best incomplete. There's a deeper truth about the character of evil, which Ayn Rand discussed in her writings. Rand [observed](#) that "evil was impotent — that evil was the irrational, the blind, the anti-real — and that the only weapon of its triumph was the willingness of the good to serve it."

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