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THE WIDER WORLD

Spotlight Turns to Global Affairs in New Series

By Diane Chido
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When Jefferson President Ferki Ferati asked if I would like to write a regular series on global affairs, I nearly jumped out of my seat. Those who know me well have endured my enthusiasm in discussing anything about foreign policy or national security. Those who I've yet to meet are about to find out in a new series I'll be authoring for the JES: "The Wider World."

All of us are overwhelmed by the amount of online content pushed at us every day. Even when we know we should be spending more time learning about the positions of our political candidates to ensure we do not just vote along party lines and increase today's polarization, where do we find the time? Benjamin Franklin said that the only safeguard for our democracy is an informed populace. Ole Ben the printer may have been a content producer in his day, but he never could have imagined the flood of information we are inundated with today.

The objective of this series is to share my experience and passion for all things global with interested readers. We may see, for instance, riots in France or Israel and shake our heads at the state of things in the world today. Until we take the time to understand that these two protest movements are completely different but have at their heart a yearning for what these groups see as fairness, we will be unable to put them in context.

As an analyst, I am generally curious about everything in the world and appreciate it when people have patience with me peppering them with questions

about their own work. International affairs is the realm where I geek out, and I look forward to those who are curious coming along this journey with me to learn about the wider world.

By the time I was 10 years old, I had read every children's book in St. Luke School's small library. One day, I brought a note from my mother asking if I could start selecting junior high books, with the librarian's discretion. They agreed, and I looked anew at this little library that suddenly seemed full of the light of possibility. I positioned myself toward the new section with excited anticipation and closed my eyes. It didn't matter which book I started with, as I meant to read them all!

The first one my little hands landed on was a biography of Stalin and Khrushchev. I read it with fascination that there could be a land so completely different from the one I knew. I was hooked. Thus began a lifelong obsession with all things Russian.

My eighth grade "thesis" was about the Russian Revolution. In the summer of my junior year of high school, I started studying Russian language at a special program at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Madly in love with that city, I enrolled at American University in 1990 and graduated with a double major in International Relations and Soviet Studies and a minor in Russian Language. Later, I pursued a master's degree in Russian language.

In fall 1989, I was able to study Russian in Moscow. The shops were utterly bare of everything, and there was an air of change but more of uncertainty. Information was unattainable. Food was as well, except that the country's recent economic woes caused a currency shift that suddenly made dollars more valuable than rubles and we could feed ourselves by shopping in special stores for foreigners and dabbled in the black market. Sinister as it may sound, this would be for things like honey since sugar was rationed, not your usual contraband.

In early November, our study group took us on a long train trip to Lithuania. When we arrived in Vilnius, the capital, we saw shops filled to the brim with things we sorely missed like clothing and candy. We eagerly bombarded the shopkeepers in our best colloquial Russian. They completely ignored us. Finally, one of us pleaded in English, "Please, we're American students, and we really need some new socks!"

Their whole demeanor changed. They broke into broad smiles and welcomed us like long lost children, "So far away from your mamas!" They filled our bags with candy and sold us socks at a discount, and one of the younger workers invited us to a party that night. There, amid the dancing and the Euro-techno music, we learned that they hated Russians and the Soviet system and begged us to go home and tell President George H. W. Bush to help them gain their freedom.

As a young person born in the United States, that was the day I became an American. I began to realize the fortunate accident of my birth, and this has never wavered. From that day, my life has been focused on understanding the rest of the world and how its unique history has shaped its people and politics, its cultures, and social orders.

This is what I hope to share with you as we journey together through time and space to see the world with some historical and geographic context and not to dismiss actions and policies we cannot understand if we view them only through our own limited lens.

Before we begin our journey, one confession. In 2000, when the Russian submarine *Kursk* sank and sent out distress signals, I was working at the International Monetary Fund as a research assistant on Belarus and Ukraine. I had been there for four years working on Russia before moving to this new division. Before that, I had spent two years in a similar capacity with the Brookings Institution's Foreign Policy Program working on books about Russia's transition to democracy and a market economy.

Newly appointed President Vladimir Putin allowed 118 young men aboard that submarine to perish to keep his precious military secrets. This single event caused me to lose faith in the Russians I had come to love. After that, I turned my back on Russia and decided that those people would never become fully human. They were cattle who would never aspire to be truly free, and I had had enough of them. I soon turned my attention to my new baby and moved to a farm in upstate New York.

Eventually, I came back to Erie and Bob Heibel gave me the opportunity to obtain a second master's degree at Mercyhurst in Applied Intelligence Analysis. This experience brought me out of several years of disinterest in the wider world. Through the courses and the projects we did, my yearning to understand returned, and with some maturity. I eventually looked anew at the Russians.

They are people, just like us. They sometimes trust their leaders and sometimes vilify them, just like us. When we marvel at how they simply accept Putin's propaganda about the war in Ukraine, it is easy to write them off as less intelligent or less evolved. What about when we comfortably silo ourselves with media that only confirm our own views?

However, Russians are the same people who halted the Mongols' progress across Eurasia and saved most of Europe from the hordes. They are the ones who suffered for centuries under absolute Tsarist rule and found a way to keep their sense of humor and love of their homeland. These are the people who turned back Napoleon by burning their own homes and fields. They lost 20 million

people stopping Hitler, yet many Americans look down upon them like the kid in the playground who never wears the cool, in vogue fashions.

As former Red Army Colonel Dmitri Trenin, once a scholar with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, wrote about the immediate post-Cold War period in his 2007 book *Getting Russia Right*:

Russia's wish was simply to belong. It applied for NATO membership, sought to become America's formal ally, and talked about joining the European Union. ... In return for its good behavior, Russia craved a seat at the top table.

It sorely wanted recognition and reward for what its leaders and elites saw as unparalleled sacrifice and generosity. ... But it wanted this quickly, it did not wish to wait indefinitely in the club's antechambers and to be treated on par with its former satellites or borderlands. ... It had done its work and waited for what it thought was its due.

While Trenin has since been rightly denounced for supporting Putin's war in Ukraine, perhaps we should sometimes listen to those with whom we disagree for a richer perspective. It is conceivable that our own hubris contributed to the Western-Russian rivalry that might have become a constructive European partnership. Even George H. W. Bush said at the time, "Gorbachev just lost the Cold War, we didn't want to embarrass the guy."

While there is much more background to Russia's war with Ukraine, we did ignore Russia's pleas for help with the growing al Qaeda threat in its southeastern regions and Afghanistan in early 2000. We invited the tiny Baltic states to join the EU and NATO before the successor to the Russian Empire. We made overtures to Georgia and Ukraine, while telling Russia to wait.

What does this all mean, and why does it matter?

I invite you to join along here to discover deeper contextual understanding than black and white, right and wrong and headline observations to effectively grasp the wider world.

End Notes

Trenin, Dmitri. *Getting Russia Right*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.



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