

Russia: A Recent History Lesson

Ross: Welcome to Renegade Inc. If you listen to Western leaders or the corporate media, you'd believe that Russia is by far the most evil and regressive country on the planet and therefore needs to be sanctioned back to the Stone Age as its punishment. But how much of this rhetoric is based on fact, rather than the fear of the Russian bear coming out of hibernation into our interdependent multipolar world?

Ross: Professor Vladimir Golstein, really good to have you on, Renegade Inc. Thanks for joining us.

Vladimir Golstein: Thank you.

Ross: Professor. Tell me, whenever we hear about people talking about the East and the West as it were, Russia, China, you know, the so-called developed West, we always hear a comparison between Western economies and the Russian economy. Let's just take that as an example. And the comparison is always, Oh, well, I mean, the economy of Texas is bigger than Russia and that the economy is not as big as Italy, and it's not even in the top 10. Why are people so quick to jump on this statistic to talk about Russia in this way? And is it old world thinking or is it true that the Russian economy really isn't that strong?

Vladimir Golstein: Well, is definitely old world thinking, and we should remember, you know, Russia has a tremendous potential. It's a tremendous landmass. It has more resources than practically any other country in the world. And Russia also has a tendency to mobilise. We know from history, you know, when there is a need, Peter the Great turned the country around, you know, Stalin turned the country around. You know, the Soviet Union turned the country into a superpower. In other words, the potential is there, you know. Do the Russians always live to their potential? Probably not. But, you know, we know that they can get things turned around. So the Soviet Union under Stalin, turned into basically a superpower. They managed to prepare to the war, producing many tanks and many other sorts of things, gadgets which required battle thinking, whatever, very rapidly. What I'm stressing is precisely that in terms of human talent, in terms of resources, it's all there. So to dismiss Russia by some certain kind of statistics it's very, very naive. We have to remember that the Russia emerged from the Soviet Union. The situation there was like a pretty unclear way of planning, documenting and measuring things. So what the United States can measure in terms of production, we know that in Russia, for example, half of that is done what they call through the black market. When I go to Russia, I hear the people who sort of on paper, they would sort of charge for building a house, ten thousand rubles. In reality, it's 10 million. So if somebody looks at the paperwork and says, they produced merchandise worth ten thousand while in fact, there is much more. So this very important data. So I know a lot of economists actually suggest a different way of measuring things. And, you know, they'll be much more productive and on that level Russia will be, like, very advanced.

Ross: But it is that the case is that that old world thinking that people are using a snapshot sort of balance sheet approach, if you like, into whatever it might be, whatever the metrics, whatever the stats. And actually, it is undervaluing a country that has come an enormously long way over the last two and a half decades. And the hubris used to value in this way

actually creates a complacency in the West, whereas the Russian bear is actually moving quicker and more efficiently than we give it credit for.

Vladimir Golstein: That's absolutely true. And you know, I go to Russia and I observe many things. And you can imagine, for example, the famous situation with sort of forced Ukraine sanctions they introduced and Russia said, we're not going to buy products from the EU. And literally within two years, they began to produce very good stuff, domestically. You go to restaurants now they have all this fancy food produced domestically. They create things. They build things. So the Russians are quick sided you. There's almost like a tradition that, you know, like when, again going back to Peter the Great that brings people to the West, say, OK, I want to build a ship. I want to do this, you know, build this and they build them very quickly. So I think now with the possibility of going back and forth, when the Soviet Union collapsed, there was like a few years and unfortunately, that was a time when a lot of Western observers would go to Russia. And they would see a collapse, they would see inefficiency. They would see corruption. They would see crime and they projected, OK, that's the way it is. It's not the way it is now, you know.

Ross: Have sanctions created, and the made in Russia a tagline on a lot of the products now coming from that area of the world, has the sanctions built an internal capacity, which has actually been an own goal for the EU and the Americans?

Vladimir Golstein: Definitely the sanctions didn't achieve what they wanted to achieve. And in fact, I think sanctions are very good for Russia. There is always talk about that until there is a trouble, the Russian president wouldn't move until there is external pressure. So now I think, first of all, the country appears much more cohesive. There is much more friendliness now. Before that, there was like still sort of after collapse, there was this and this. Now they feel an external pressure and people are more friendly and more open to each other, more willing to cooperate, more interested and you know and they are inventing things, doing things. You can go to a lot of cities, not necessarily Moscow and St Petersburg, there will be young people opening bars, opening cafes, opening little businesses. So I think the more sanctions there are the better. But maybe for some poor countries, say if you take Cuba or whatever which cannot produce something and they put sanctions in terms of their oil, then it might be an issue. But Russia doesn't need anything. They actually have everything they want and then some. So the only thing I suspect they need, is probably some Western know-how and definitely some capitals for investment. And there is one additional problem that a lot of wealthy Russians probably invest money somewhere else. But eventually they will find a way around that to.

Ross: Coming to the idea of collapse, when the Soviet Union did fall over, capitalism reigned supreme - well, so we were told - a lot of the excesses were justified, a lot of markets went bananas and we also know that one of the side effects of that is massive inequality and also environmental degradation. This apparent reigning supreme of capitalism, do you see the neoliberal West now crumbling in a way that hasn't delivered on a lot of the promises that were given at that juncture when the Soviet Union fell and apparently capitalism was the poster boy for liberation?

Vladimir Golstein: Well, the Russians have to learn and they sort of are capable of learning. And what they have to learn is that the West is not panacea. And they also have to look East and learn certain things from China because for a while, you know, during the Soviet time, there was like still as tradition in Russia that, you know, Russia is an older brother and China is a younger brother and with it, we don't have much to learn from them. We are, in fact, in advance. Now, a lot of Russian's finally began to trade with China. They go to China. They learn from China. And they learn that there are certain things that just rampant neoliberal capitalism is not the solution precisely because they see on the world stage how China is actually gaining against the West. So they will learn and they already have a potential for like sort of a social structure, social message, social thinking. So it just, you know, they need an extra push and they'll would be able to combine, I would say, the best of the East and the best of the West. But, further, in the West, which just shows its bankruptcy on practically every turn, it's really kind of naive approach and luckily Russians, have seen that it doesn't work. So I think this kind of infatuation with the West is definitely gone. I mean, sanctions function, if you wish on a literal physical level, but also on a metaphorical one. That is, you know, Russians are trying to trade with everyone, you know. I remember in St Petersburg, they would sell some kind of, you know, peaches, and I looked where are they coming from. And some of them are coming from the Middle East. Some of them are coming from Latin America. Some of them are coming from South Africa. So they're trading, they are open, they're interested in trade and they have plenty to offer, of course, gas and whatever. But also on a more kind of intellectual level, they realise that the West is not necessarily a friend that the West treats us condescendingly and thinks they can just squeeze us and whatever and the Russians have their own kind of pride or whatever. So they will learn and they understand that many things can be done differently. What is a little bit troublesome, and I think one hopes that Russia will get out of it, is that a lot of the Russian elite, they still got their dream to send their child to Oxford, Cambridge or Harvard, and then they get a little bit brainwashed. So Western ways are good ways and the only ways. So there is a certain tension. But I think eventually they would learn and know that China has a lot to offer, Iran has plenty of things to offer. So I think the West used to be the only play in town and that's why sanctions could have worked. But not anymore. Not anymore. And that's just one thing which the West can't still come to terms with.

Ross: A bigger play in town is climate breakdown. Now this idea, which goes back to the collapse of the Soviet Union, which is, you know, one side's good, the other side's bad, black, red, however you want to divide it, haven't the West, the Russians and the Chinese, is there a moment where they have to come and sit at the table and understand that the only way to beat this is collaboration?

Vladimir Golstein: That's about time. And I remember a long time ago Russians like Gorbachev or whatever they were talking about Spaceship Earth that we're all in it together, we'd have to think about it. But, you know, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, somehow there was the idea that the West could continue to think that they can go it alone. Every time you get a reminder, now is flooding in Germany. Now is this, now that. You can't go it alone. There is a giant amount of population living outside the West. There is giant masses of land, which, you know, with a climate and everything and half of the world pollutes. And you know, as much as you can do things in Belgium, you still get flooded. So I think it's time to sit at the table. It's time to kind of forget it. But you know, what is important is we need new types of leaders, maybe the younger generation or something. But you know, if you look at it

in United States continue well early way into the 21st century, they continue to be run by these baby boomers, people who formed around the Second World War with this kind of particular mentality. And I think the system is very well entrenched and they try to preserve it. So I think, you know, changes, you know, we know that that's how the nature and the world teaches us, you know, by sending all this kind of cataclysm. So eventually, we'll learn. But I think it will take a different type of leader. So the world waits.

Ross: Andrei Nekrasov, really wonderful to have you on Renegade Inc. Thanks for joining us.

Andrei Nekrasov: Thank you.

Ross: History, as we know, is written by the victors. After 1991, when the Soviet Union fell and the wall came down, really in the West, we've only had one version of events. You're a film maker, somebody who looks at narrative a lot, looks at people, thinks about story. What's the other narrative from Russia from '91 to the present day?

Andrei Nekrasov: Well, for the majority of Russians, the 90s was at best complicated and challenging, but tragic also for a lot of people, and the word democracy was just a slogan in name. You know, it had nothing to do with power of the people. It was an ideological beacon for some. But in fact, President Yeltsin at the time was not even elected as a president of this new capitalist Russia. He was elected as president of the Soviet Union Republic and then in '96, had a popularity rating of six percent, according to some sources, 2 percent, then miraculously won an election so that couldn't be democratic. Even liberals admit there was manipulation and it wasn't a free and fair election. So democracy was some kind of capitalist ideology, not even capitalist but a sort of rubber baron capitalism, the completely unfair and sometimes financially criminal privatisation. That is the real narrative. The 91 revolution, as far as I'm concerned, was a failure. It was technically a failure. So then one shouldn't be surprised that there would be a reaction, a counter revolution in respect of that 91 Russian anti-communist revolution.

Ross: It's not the first time that democracy, the word democracy, has been used to so-called liberate new markets, lets put it that way. Shock therapy is what happened in the 90s, and a lot Western so-called investors got very, very rich in exploiting natural resources and labour and other things in Russia. Yeltsin really let that happen, didn't he?

Andrei Nekrasov: Well, some people say that he personally wasn't even very corrupt. He liked a drink or two. But his entourage certainly was. And he was a failure. You know, people now say whatever they want, that he saved Russia, even the West, from communism because he came to Washington to declare, mea culpa - we, the Russians are to blame for all the wars, all the bad things that happened in the 20th century to the American congress with the Vietnam War, etc. fresh in their memories. But, certainly, he was a failure as far as I'm concerned. And so the reaction followed.

Ross: His entourage, did they have a neoliberal mindset? Did they embrace shock therapy and think that actually what you could do almost overnight is jam-in all this so-called progress and things would be, you know, the land of milk and honey?

Andrei Nekrasov: Well, absolutely. You know, when Margaret Thatcher said there's no alternative, in Russia, it was no alternative multiplied by a hundred. The people were told by the government, by Yeltsin's entourage, and by the West, by the way - by the neoliberal gurus - there is no alternative. This is what you get is a slogan which was of course, a lie, because there were all kinds of ways to restructure and reform the Soviet economy.

Ross: Enter Mr. Vladimir Putin, seen as a successor to Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin famously said to him, Save Russia, look after Russia, Vladimir. And he spotted the oligarch class who also spotted the Western rent seekers. And he also thought about Mother Russia. Put all that together and tell us then what happened.

Andrei Nekrasov: Putin had a host of problems to deal with. He had a defeat in Chechnya, had just a few oligarchs controlling the whole country, not just the economy, but the whole country, culture, politics. And he started to try to solve these problems one by one. And by the way, I was an early critical of Vladimir Putin when whilst the Western leaders like Tony Blair and George W. Bush were at first supporting him. I can now see that Putin was an absolutely logical historical reaction of the Russian people, not just Putin personally. But what happened in the 90s was not going to be left without a kind of historical response. As a Russian, I can tell you the Russian people were going to react, were going to try and take control of their country. Putin's main problem was, of course, that Russia by then was ultra-capitalist, He had seven or so oligarchs who not only had all the power in Russia, but which were gradually, you know, selling those assets or merging in all kinds of operations to the West. So Putin had to deal with this, and the ways he dealt with it may have shocked some. But he did change the tide. Putin is called in the West as an enemy of the Russian people by some which is the narrative which is completely false. Putin himself and the support he had from the Russian people were a reaction to the neoliberal '90s. So both economically he was he was trying to change inside Russia. He was trying to change whatever he could change, whatever he could save, from the Soviet Union. But also, maybe most importantly, geopolitically, he would have none of Yeltsin's sort of compliance with the Western domination.

Ross: Professor Vladimir Golstein, welcome back to Renegade Inc. In that first half, you talked about, thematically, leadership and you specifically said the baby boomers are still an entrenched mentality. It harks, in a sense, back to the Nixon era, and they're still throwing out the stuff that they have ever - socialism bad, Russia bad, capitalism is the only way forward, leaders of the free world. The list goes on. Why do you think the West got stuck in such a leadership rut, a leadership rut so deep that it delivered, let's face it now, a very forgetful President Joe Biden, and hasn't been able to move away from that old world mentality, that old thinking? Why did it get stuck in such a rut if, economically and politically, it's supposed to be so dynamic?

Vladimir Golstein: Well, you know, there is a good American saying, unfortunately, which sounds like if it ain't broke, don't fix it. So from the perspective of, you know, wealthy establishment classes, it's not broken. They can pat themselves on the back saying, we won the Cold War. Our main enemy - again, thinking about the Cold War - the Soviet Union collapsed. Socialism not going to do anything. We're doing so well. The whole world kind of listens to us. And I think people persist that that's what they're thinking. And again, if you

live sort of comfortably in a particular way of life, it's very hard to change. You know, you don't want to change. You know, so again going back even to the philosophy, there is a very famous Hegel discussion of master-slave dialectics where he says that a slave who has to fight and liberate itself longs to think quickly and acquire skills and eventually might become a master. Well, a master is just too lazy to change his way. So this is like they are stuck in the old ways.

Ross: Let's come to solutions. Vladimir, insofar as if we agree and people watching this agree that we don't have the luxury anymore of this massive standoff and you know, the to and fro of it all, the empty words from presidents. If we agree that we need collaboration, where do we start with solutions? Because it seems to me, and I do say it's a luxury, this luxury of this standoff, only a few people, a handful, the elites that you've talked about benefit from it, as well as, of course, the military-industrial complex.

Vladimir Golstein: Yeah, that's absolutely true. But you know there should be a very strong pressure on politicians willing to sort of get engaged. And I think dogmatism should be thrown away. Honestly, I lived in the Soviet Union and, you know, socialism and I have my serious doubts about, you know, at least Soviet times. I've seen the United States capitalism. I have my doubts about that. So, you know, it was important to approach this with an open mind, and I know certain things work. You know, like when China build a new city and try to build eight lines of roads around it and think even, you know, in terms of 50 years, that's important. We have to learn from that. But we also have to learn, indeed, how to take care of a forgotten individual, forgotten person, and not to think just the number. So I think, you know, each society has plenty to offer as long as we don't try to shove it down others throats. And also have like sane people to cooperate and say we have limited resources. We probably should do something with overpopulation. We should think about something neither at the expense of one country or another. But I think there's enough of goodwill, precisely that humanity is not stupid. We might be on the on the brink of extinction. So I think there will be a desire to do certain things as long as there is again trust established. And we know that we're dealing with a seriously responsible person, not liars, not crooks. You know, if there is no trust on that level, then there is no trust. But I think eventually there will be trust and there will be trust in people who will say, we want to learn from each other and want to work together.

Ross: You're a pragmatist and also steeped in cultural studies. You've read the great authors. From an IT point of view, you have understood, you know, where we're headed with tech. How does the next five/ten years look from where your stood? Give us the historical context and where we may get to or where we could get to over that period.

Vladimir Golstein: I think tech made a lot of, you know, good, good things. We do live in the global world now. The idea of global village is absolutely obvious. Like you can say, ten years ago I wouldn't be able to sit in my home and talk to you. You know, I had to drive for some studio and there will be some kind of use of sort of fancy satellite. Now it's all possible. So actually we are connected. We know what's happening in Yemen. We know what's happening in, you know, in Germany. So that's a big help. And I think it would enable people and that type of tech actually to keep fingers on the pulse. And, you know, now we have this sort of communication, it's much more difficult for politicians to lie about what's happening

in Cuba when we have, say, pictures of a different demonstration or something. So tech can help. And because of that, of course, the governments try to control it, try to limit access, try to use again old-fashioned censorship, which is kind of, you know, a wrongheaded approach. Furthermore, some tech companies actually engage in that. This is really pathetic. When Twitter tries to ban certain politicians from tweeting, this is just worse than Soviet Union excesses. You know, we need information. We need to know. And people are smart enough to figure things out. And you know, there is, as I said, the good will. So I think tech will help us. And I honestly believe that there is something in nature which sort of simultaneously creates problems and creates solutions. It cannot only be like just only a problem. It cannot be just we only pollute, we only destroy without us, they're coming up with another way of say, dealing with pollution or dealing with this sort of thing. So I think as long as we unleash these kind of positive forces, not just on the negative forces in terms of pollution, lying, destruction, but positive forces, we can put them to good use.

Ross: Professor Vladimir Golstein, thank you very much for your time.

Vladimir Golstein: Thank you.