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Will Putin become Russia's Hitler?

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Abstract

This paper explores the similarities of Adolf Hitler's and Vladimir Putin's ascensions to power. It explores how Hitler capitalized on the conditions that existed during the period and draws parallels to Vladimir Putin's capitalization on the conditions that existed in Russia at the end of Boris Yeltsin's reign as the president of Russia. This paper demonstrates that there are remarkable similarities between the two leaders and offers that the leaders of the world should pay particular attention to Russia's leader in the coming years.



Will Putin Become Russia's Hitler?



Research Paper

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Will Putin Become Russia's Hitler?

Adolf Hitler's rise to power is much studied. Historians and political scientists, seeking to help the world prevent a repeat of the atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust, have attempted to identify those conditions that led individuals in Germany not only to accept Hitler's fanatical leadership, but also to support it vehemently. The study of Weimar Germany has resulted in the identification of a number of elements that are generally considered to have been the catalysts that enabled Hitler's rise to power. While history never repeats itself exactly, it is useful to employ these elements as a model against which to compare other countries that may be experiencing similar conditions to those faced by Weimar Germany after World War I. This comparison can help to determine if a country is following in Nazi Germany's early footsteps, and if it is, this comparison can be used as evidence to convince the countries of the world to take action in order to prevent it.

The conditions in Russia since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union lend themselves to a comparison to the Weimar Germany model. While this comparison, often coined "Weimar Russia", has been explored before, not since the relative demise of the power of the Communist party in Russia, however, has it been updated to include the most recent decade in which Vladimir Putin has come to power. While earlier comparisons focused on Russia's potential to slip back into communism, few if any, have sought to compare and draw parallels between Hitler's and Putin's rises to power. Putin's recent return to the presidency, and the overwhelming popular support afforded him as demonstrated in the election, provides adequate proof that his position as Russia's leader is secured for the foreseeable future. The question that must be answered though is "Why does Putin have so much support?". A comparison of Weimar Germany to post-Cold War Russia will address this question and attempt

to draw parallels between the mindset of the German citizen in the 1920's and 1930's to that of the Russian citizen from 1990 to today. Additionally, it is important to examine how both Hitler and Putin were able to capitalize on these elements not only to validate the wisdom of their leadership but also to increase and solidify support from the citizens of their countries. The examination below will include six elements generally accepted as critical to the Weimar analogy. The elements that will be used to compare Hitler's Germany to Putin's Russia are: the sense of defeat without the loss of a battle; territory and resource losses; economic turmoil; political upheaval; the desire for revanchism and irredentism; and the appeal of fascism.

The sense of defeat without the loss of a battle is sometimes referred to as the "stab in the back" legend. In Germany, support for this idea of being undermined stemmed from the general belief of the German people that it was the actions of weak internal political forces, not the defeat of their military, which led to Germany's surrender at the end of World War I. What else could explain how a country who "still held most of Belgium, much of France, and large expanses of territory in the East" at the time of the armistice, could end up losing territory and resources and being forced to pay reparations to these other countries whose land they had conquered through battle?¹ Reinforcing this myth were celebrated German military leaders like Hindenburg and Ludendorff who reminded the German people that not one German military leader was present at the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in June of 1919. In fact, as "early as 1919, he, Ludendorff, and others were asserting that the [German] army had never been defeated in the field but rather had been betrayed by the subversive elements at home, including pacifists, socialists, Communists, liberals, and Jews."² The Allies also bear some of the responsibility for the creation of this betrayal myth. In a speech to Congress in January of 1918, United States President Woodrow Wilson outlined his "Fourteen Points" upon which he believed that peace

and an end to World War I could be based.³ Wilson's speech clearly indicated that if Germany were to seek a peaceful solution to end the war, that the Allies would be willing to grant Germany very lenient terms. When the Treaty of Versailles was signed, however, it bore very little resemblance to Wilson's offer. While the Allies believed that they were justified in changing their approach to an armistice with Germany, many Germans saw this broken promise as the Allies' betrayal of Germany. A second broken promise, and third factor supporting the stab in the back legend, was the Allies' failure to help feed the German people during the winter of 1919-1920. Although the Allies did provide some provisions, tens of thousands of Germans died that winter from starvation. Many Germans believed that the first winter of peace was far worse than any of the winters during the war and they attributed the horrendous conditions to the Allies' failure to live up to their promise.⁴ Both Hindenburg and Hitler were aware of the power of a legend. Hindenburg continued to refer to the failures of his former political superiors as late as 1925 during his successful run for the presidency. He sought not only to discredit his predecessors but also to convince Germans to rally behind one of their great wartime generals. Hitler's use of the legend became more subtle in that he would not reference the "stab in the back" directly, but instead would draw parallels between the actions of his competitors and those who were in power at the end of WWI. The successful manipulation of a "stab in the back" sentiment to garner the support of the German people, by both Hindenburg and Hitler, is testament to the power of this legend. The question to answer now is whether this "stab in the back" concept is applicable to Russia since the end of the Cold War.

As part of the Soviet Union, Russia was engaged in a war that lasted some 45 years. While this "Cold War" saw no direct action of East against West, it was still used to gauge one's military capabilities. Throughout much of the Cold War it was perceived that the Soviet Union's

military was larger in size to the combined forces of the West and their technological capabilities were at least on par. While the Soviet Army did experience some difficulties in Afghanistan, the sheer size of the force and its ability to maintain control of the sometimes rebellious Soviet States, instilled in the average Russian a sense of pride for their military might. However, Gorbachev's *Perestroika* and Yeltsin's *Westernization* resulted in the significant loss of territory and resources for Russia and a severe reduction in funding for the Russian military. By the end of the 1990's it was obvious that the Cold War was over. What was also obvious to many Russians, especially to those who were struggling to survive in the new Russia, was that Russia had lost the war to the West without ever having lost a battle. The Russian people, like the German people at the end of WWI, felt that they had been "stabbed in the back" by politicians. Like Hitler, Vladimir Putin understands the power of nostalgia. While Putin does not directly refer to the government's betrayal of the common man, he does appeal to the common man to remember the time when Russia was the leader of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Union was one of two world super powers. In a speech in September 2004, after authorities mishandled a hostage taking in Chechnya that resulted in the deaths of 334 hostages, including 184 children, Putin sought to direct the blame away from the current organization by appealing to this sense of nationalism. He opened his speech with:

Today we live in a time that follows the collapse of a vast and great state, a state that, unfortunately, proved unable to survive in a rapidly changing world. But despite all the difficulties, we were able to preserve the core of what was once the vast Soviet Union, and we named this new country the Russian Federation.⁵

Although Putin doesn't attribute the Soviet Union's collapse to anyone in the opening of this speech, it is evident that he wants the Russian people to believe, like he does, that the Russian Federation can achieve the greatness that was once afforded to the Soviet Union.

The second element thought to have contributed to the collapse of Weimar Germany, the

loss of territory and resources, is very closely linked to the “stab in the back” legend. The Treaty of Versailles not only undermined the German Army, it also significantly reduced the territorial size of Germany and thus reduced German access to resources. While some of the territory that Germany was forced to give up was of significant industrial and strategic importance, it was arguably the loss of access to resources that had the most impact on the German economy.⁶ Germany’s lack of natural resources within its sovereign boundaries made it almost impossible for her to realize its industrial potential without outside help. During the 1920s and 1930s, in the period known as the Great Depression, outside support for Germany was severely diminished. This in turn limited Germany’s ability to exercise its industrial capability and resulted in ever increasing unemployment. These newly unemployed people, who had enjoyed employment during the wartime period, were easily convinced by political leaders like Hitler, that Germany was not to blame for the conditions within her borders but that blame lay with those who had imposed the conditions within the Treaty of Versailles.

While still the world’s largest country in terms of land mass, Russia today controls a mere fraction of the territory compared to what it controlled during the time of the Soviet Union. While the countries that were formerly known as Soviet Republics may have never considered themselves to be Russian, many Russians believed that they were. When these countries were able to achieve independence, Russia lost not only a vast amount of territory, but also access to significant resources. Russia no longer enjoyed access to energy resources in the Trans-Caucasus, the Caspian basin or in the Central Asian Republic. Additionally, the Ukraine, which had been the focus of Russian agricultural and industrial development, was no longer under any obligation to support Russia.⁷ Although Russia still had access to many resources, it was now dependent on outside support for some essential resources, such as grain. These resource

providing countries now had a say in whether or not they were going trade with Russia. Mother Russia no longer had the power to coerce these countries to do as she desired. The economic turmoil experienced by Russia during the 1990s, while not necessarily directly linked to its loss of territory, did instill in some the belief that the loss of the Soviet Republics, Yeltsin's doing, was to blame for the hard times.

The German government's decision in 1921 to adopt the "Policy of Fulfillment", to pay reparations to the Allies, led to ever increasing economic turmoil within Germany. This policy was highly criticized by Hitler and "it weakened both the German and international faith in the mark, led to horrible inflation, and further demonstrated the inability of the pro-democracy parties to provide effective leadership in a crisis."⁸ The German government was unprepared for the inflation that followed. German companies could not afford to purchase the resources they needed to sustain the work in their factories. This led to layoffs and a further devaluation of the German mark. An example best illustrates the severity of inflation in Germany in the early 1920s: "An egg that cost 25 pfennigs (1/4 of a mark) in 1918 cost 80,000,000,000 (80 billion) marks in 1923."⁹ This unprecedented inflation served to normalize Hitler's propaganda. "After all, was what Hitler was saying any more fantastic than what was happening on the German streets, where people were picking up their half-day pay in wheelbarrows, and rushing to the store to buy a loaf of bread?"¹⁰ While the economic downturn in the Weimar Republic served to convince the German people to offer their support to Hitler, it also played an important role in maintaining their support. When Hitler finally came to power as the Chancellor of Germany in 1933, the worst of the Great Depression was over. Although "it cannot be denied that Hitler's policies were largely responsible for the elimination of unemployment within just a few years", Hitler did indeed benefit from the economic efforts of the previous government.¹¹ Germany's

post-war economic turmoil coupled with its successful economic recovery under Hitler's rule convinced many Germans of the need for a strong leader like Hitler.

Economic conditions in Russia following the end of the Cold War were not unlike those in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s. Yeltsin's attempts to *Westernize* Russia resulted in high inflation rates and high unemployment rates. Yeltsin's "shock therapy" method of introducing Western capitalistic policies led to the privatization of many of the formerly state-controlled businesses. This privatization, handled by a select few, resulted in a limited number of people benefitting from these transactions. Not only was the general public excluded from these transactions, the way in which the sell-offs took place served to rob the Russian government coffers of cash, thus further diminishing Russian government reserves. This depletion of the financial reserves further increased the already high inflation rate. As in Weimar Germany, the purchasing power of the Russian ruble became non-existent. Any Russian business that relied on imported goods or materials was unable to afford to purchase them, having instead to shut down production or to leave their shelves empty. "Inflation at the end of 1991 was estimated at 250 percent- per month" and "Shops were emptier than at any time since the famine years immediately after the Second World War."^{12,13} The situation had become so severe in Russia that it was forced, in 1998, to devalue the ruble and default on its debt. While these actions could have proven to mark the end of Russia, they did exactly the opposite. The devaluation of the ruble and debt default marked the bottom of the decline for the Russian economy. Although fiscal restraint can be partly credited with helping to initiate Russia's economic recovery, "Russia's epic turnaround also resulted from a relentless, China-driven surge in overall global demand that, with the cheaper ruble, helped call back from the dead Russia's vast unused capacity inherited from the Soviet era."¹⁴ Like Hitler, Putin was the benefactor of

someone else's economic programs and an overall upward trend in the world economy. Putin, similar to Hitler, does deserve some credit for Russia's economic return as it was Putin's energy and policies that served to increase the pace of his country's economic recovery. The significance of Putin's efforts were acknowledged by his former chief economic advisor (2000 – Dec 2005) and current Kremlin critic, Andrei Illarionov. In responding to a question concerning how difficult it was for Russia to recover from the economic collapse of 1998, he replied; ““It is necessary to give Putin his due,” ...“because no one else, but precisely he, was the motor – I saw this frequently.””¹⁵ From the very beginnings of his first presidency Putin has understood that “in today's world, geoeconomics gains the upper hand over geopolitics, and thus Russia has to learn to defend its national interests by economic means.”¹⁶ Putin's economic successes have afforded him the support of the Russian people. While some of his methods may seem unscrupulous to Western observers, to many Russians they are forgivable and merely indicate that Russia needs a strong ruler for it to continue down its current successful economic road.

When the Weimar Republic was established at the end of WWI democracy was a new and untried concept to the people of Germany. Germany's first democratic election was held on the 19th of January, 1919. In this first election more than 85 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots. While no single party was rewarded with a majority, the three pro-democracy parties together received over 76 percent of the vote and formed what came to be known as the Weimar Coalition.¹⁷ To the Allies, this first election appeared to indicate that the Weimar Republic was proceeding down a path that would lead to a stable, democratic Germany. They were wrong. Germany lacked a democratic constitution and so one of the first orders of business of the new legislators was to create this constitution. However, “because they had little experience in democracy, the German legislators produced a dangerously flawed document”.¹⁸

Under the new system's proportional representation, it was possible for many small parties to be represented in the Reichstag (the German parliament). In fact, in the years prior to Hitler assuming power, more than forty different parties were at one time represented in the Reichstag. The constitution also granted limited autonomy to the provincial state governments. This facilitated the strengthening of regionally based parties who acted in their own best interests and served to undermine the parliament's ability to govern. The combination of proportional representation and limited autonomy to the provinces, created a situation in which it was virtually impossible for a single party to win a majority of the seats in the Reichstag. Over the next 13 years, with no party able to win a majority, Weimar Germany endured a series of short-lived, unsuccessful coalition governments.

As noted above, Germany's new democratic constitution virtually guaranteed ineffective governance. While the Nazi party did indeed try to capitalize on the ineffectiveness of the government, it was two other aspects of the new constitution, Articles 54 and 48, which enabled Hitler to legally assume the role of German Chancellor and, eventually, to become Germany's uncontested leader.

Thirteen different politicians had assumed the role of chancellor between February 1919 and January 1933, when Hitler was finally appointed to the post.¹⁹ Although Hitler did benefit from the rapid succession of chancellors and the turmoil that it created within the government, he cannot be attributed any credit for it. That credit, or blame some might argue, can be attributed to Kurt von Schleicher. Schleicher was a retired military officer who, up until he himself assumed the role of chancellor immediately preceding Hitler, operated in the background of the government. He was successful in forcing the resignation of no fewer than three chancellors by cultivating a loss of confidence in them and then demanding that President Hindenburg invoke

Article 54, which states, in part:

The Reich chancellor and the Reich ministers require for the exercise of their office the confidence of the Reichstag. Any one of them must resign if the Reichstag by formal resolution withdraws its confidence.²⁰

When, after 57 days as chancellor, von Schleicher was unable to form a coalition government in the Reichstag, Hindenburg, who had previously been unwilling to grant Hitler the post of chancellor, finally relented. By this time, Hindenburg was in his mid-eighties and in decline. One will never know whether he finally relented to Hitler and the Nazi party because he believed that they were the best choice for Germany, or because he was tired of presiding over a system that was obviously not working.

As is the case in most democratic constitutions, the Weimar constitution contained an article (48) granting special powers to the president in the event an emergency. The second paragraph of article 48 of the Weimar constitution states:

In the event that the public order and security are seriously disturbed or endangered, the Reich president may take the measures necessary for their restoration, intervening, if necessary, with the aid of the armed forces.²¹

While Chancellor Stresemann did correctly invoke article 48 in 1923 to help to resolve Germany's financial crisis, it was its misuse by Hitler that helped consolidate his power and authority. On the 28th of February, 1933, invoking article 48, Hitler's government was empowered "not only [to] arrest individuals at will, censor the post and search private houses, but also to take over the state governments should they refuse to enact 'measures for the restoration of public security'."²² This decree virtually assured Hitler's government the ability to maintain their hold on government power. On 23 March, 1933, to 'legally' transfer more power from the government to himself and the Nazi party, Hitler threatened to invoke article 48 in order to convince other parties in the Reichstag to support his "Enabling Bill". The Center Party

acquiesced, supported Hitler's Nazis and, in so doing, voted to transfer the full legislative and executive powers of the Reichstag to Hitler's cabinet for a period of four years.²³ Hitler had preyed upon the weaknesses of a fledgling democracy in order to provide himself with ultimate authority over Germany.

Many Westerners in the late 1980's perceived Mikhail Gorbachev to be the father of Russian democracy. While Gorbachev's policies and reforms did indeed lay the foundation for eventual democracy in Russia, that was arguably not his intent. Gorbachev, like the Communist leaders who preceded him, had no experience with democracy. Gorbachev had not intended that his reforms would create a democracy within the Soviet Union, he merely desired that they would improve Soviet life by rejuvenating the Communist Party, by reinvigorating the economy and by refurbishing the socialist system.²⁴ With Gorbachev's resignation at the end of 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union was final. It was now up to Boris Yeltsin, the first democratically elected leader of the Russian Republic (June 1991), to lead the Russian government along the path to democracy. Like those who formed the Weimar Republic government in 1919, those who formed the first Russian government after the collapse of the Soviet Union had no experience governing democratically. This lack of experience combined with a flawed approach to democracy, set the conditions that enabled an authoritarian leader, Vladimir Putin, to come to power supported by much of the population, just as Hitler did in 1933 Germany.

The first order of business of the Yeltsin government included implementing policies designed to transform the whole of government from a state which was communist-based and centrally controlled to one which was more open and more closely aligned with government systems found in the West. Yeltsin's four main focuses included: replacing the state controlled economy with a free market system; replacing the Soviet polity with representative elections,

freedom of speech, press, and assembly, and steps towards an impartial judiciary; replacing the socialist ideology with one based on individualism, free choice, consumerism and self-reliance; and replacing a Cold War centered foreign policy with one that advocated international cooperation.²⁵ These four focuses, while admirable, would prove to be beyond the reach of a country that, as a consequence of its former policies and practices, was already on the brink of economic collapse.

Yeltsin's failure to use his initial popularity as a catalyst to push through legislative and constitutional reforms that would have democratically restricted the power of Communist holdovers, served to plague his government. Instead of creating a government united in a quest to make democracy work in Russia, Yeltsin allowed the government to remain one that was focused on individual party power. The result was a dysfunctional government during Yeltsin's presidency. While Yeltsin's intentions may have been honorable, as indicated above, Russia's first 10 years under democratic rule resulted in an economy plagued by high unemployment and high inflation and in a population ready for a change, just like Germany in 1933.

Another parallel of 1990s Russia to 1930s Germany can be seen in comparing the two countries constitutions. In 1993 the Russian constitution was approved in a popular referendum and it, like articles 48 and 54 of the Weimar constitution, gave the Russian president "the power to appoint the prime minister and cabinet and largely to determine domestic and foreign policy" and "under special and not very demanding conditions ... the right to dissolve the Duma (Russian Parliament), to order popular referenda, and to rule by decree."²⁶ While Yeltsin may have argued that the government needed this constitution to govern effectively, it is obvious that, from his often authoritarian-like actions after the constitution's ratification, Yeltsin's true intention was to provide a legal manner in which to almost guarantee his power as Russia's

leader. Not only did this constitution serve Yeltsin, it has since served Vladimir Putin as well.

While the constitution did provide Yeltsin with more authority, it was the inability of the weak and self-centered opposition parties to oppose collectively the Russian leader that permitted the Yeltsin government to govern relatively uncontested during the remainder of the 1990s. It was only in 1998, when Yeltsin wished to re-install Victor Chernomydin as the prime minister that the Duma succeeded in uniting and were then able to prevent Chernomydin's re-installment. It is true that in the 1990s many Russians enjoyed the new freedoms that they had acquired and Yeltsin was quick to take credit for these freedoms. However, when he did face criticism, for such things as the devastated economy, the constitution provided Yeltsin with a way to transfer the blame— by firing his prime minister. Yeltsin appointed seven prime ministers in eight years, three of them in the twelve-month period before he appointed Vladimir Putin.^{27,28} With an ever-revolving prime minister and a government comprised of dysfunctional parties, Russia's post-Cold War democracy closely resembled that of Weimar Germany.

In the final years of Yeltsin's presidency his government was ineffective and his personal health was declining severely. Like Hindenburg in 1933, he was tired of the constant fighting that this new thing called democracy seemed to entail. Some argue that Yeltsin appointed Vladimir Putin to the position of prime minister in August of 1999 because Putin had agreed to grant Yeltsin and his family immunity upon Yeltsin's retirement. Others argue that Yeltsin's appointment of Putin to prime minister, like Hindenburg's acceptance of Hitler for Chancellor in 1933, was his way of indicating that the current system was clearly ineffective and that it was time for a different approach.

In September, one month following Putin's appointment as prime minister, there was a series of bombings of apartment buildings in the Russian cities of Buynaksk, Moscow, and

Volgodonsk that killed 293 people and injured an estimated 650 others. Although it has yet to be proven who was actually responsible for these bombings, Putin claimed that Chechen rebels were to blame. This “time of emergency” allowed Putin to invoke the rights afforded to the president in the constitution. Governing in Yeltsin’s absence, Putin immediately “ordered government troops to return to Chechnia [sic] to reassert Russia’s authority there.”²⁹ The apartment bombings and an earlier invasion of Dagestan by Chechen extremists that required a large scale military intervention, gave rise to a renewed desire, by Russian society, for a strong leader. Putin’s actions proved to the Russian people that he was the leader that they were searching for.³⁰

By the fall of 1999, thanks in part to previous Prime Ministers (primarily Primakov), an expanding Chinese economy, and recovering commodity prices, the Russian economy was in the initial stages of recovery. Putin’s public focus on economic concerns further endeared him to his fellow Russians and by the fall of 1999 he enjoyed the support of the majority. Acutely aware of his popularity, following Yeltsin’s retirement announcement, Putin seized the opportunity to run as a candidate for Russian president. Putin, like Hitler in the 1930s, believed that if his path to power was through legal, democratic means, then the public would support his full application of those powers. Elected president by an overwhelming majority of Russian voters, Putin was now in a position to secure his ultimate authority. Putin’s first order of business as the newly elected president of Russia, by capitalizing on both his new authority and continuing popularity, was to consolidate his power and “by the end of 2000, there remained no rivals or serious competitors for Putin on the political scene.”³¹ Although he had established almost “Tsar-like” power for himself, Putin was still careful to legitimize his authority in the eyes of the average Russian. It is for this reason that Putin chose, in adherence with the Russian constitution which forbids a

president to seek a third consecutive term, to step down from the role of president in 2008. Putin cleverly and legitimately accepted the post of prime minister from which he knew he would be able to maintain his power and influence. It is also of note that while prime minister, Putin was instrumental in legally amending the presidential term length in the constitution to six years. This extension, coupled with the fact that he was now eligible to run for president at the end of Dimitry Medvedev's term, served to benefit Putin above all others. Like Hitler before him, Putin owes a great deal to the dysfunctional Russian government and its flawed constitution for his rise to and sustainment of his position of power.

The final two elements, the desire for revanchism and irredentism and the appeal of fascism, are very much interconnected and therefore will be examined together. When applying the terms revanchism and irredentism in the context of Weimar Germany and post-Cold War Russia it is imperative that one expands on their dictionary definitions. Instead of strictly relating to a policy of seeking to regain or recover lost territory, these two terms must be understood to include the concept of a people's desire to restore their nation, politically, socially, economically, and militarily, to a former glorified state.^{32,33} All too often people misinterpret the term fascism to mean anti-Semitism and while Hitler's form of fascism did incorporate anti-Semitism, the correct definition for fascism is a "nationalist and authoritarian movement."³⁴ Combining these definitions leads to the concept that a nation's people wish to restore the glory of their nation and are willing to do so under the guidance of an authoritarian leader.

The Treaty of Versailles provided Hitler all of the evidence that he would need to convince many of the German public that they had been betrayed both by the West and by the German politicians who had agreed to the treaty. The treaty took away territory from Germany, left Western forces occupying parts of what remained of their country, reduced the German

military to a state of impotence, left German industry disadvantaged in trade negotiations, and required Germany not only to pay reparations to the Allies but also to assume sole responsibility for starting the war (WWI).³⁵ Hitler also cited the state of the German economy during the late 1920s and early 1930s, although partly a result of the global “Great Depression”, as further proof of the rest of the world’s desire to limit German progression. This evidence, in part, served as the basis for Hitler’s appeal to the German people to elect him to lead Germany to greatness.

Once in power Hitler was able to further nurture German nationalism and revanchism. By withdrawing from both the European Disarmament conference and the League of Nations in 1933, Hitler demonstrated to the German people that he was focused on “exerting strong leadership in their national interest”.³⁶ Taking credit for the plebiscite that resulted in the Saar region’s re-unification with Germany, Hitler gave the Germans hope that their nation could eventually be restored to its former glory. By beginning to rebuild the German military in violation of the treaty of Versailles and by subsequently occupying the Rhineland, Hitler demonstrated the strength of an authoritarian leader and instilled in the German public the belief that Germany should be granted the *lebensraum*, living space, and the glory that it was due.³⁷

Hitler was also aware that without the support of the next generation of Germans his fascist regime would be in jeopardy. To ensure the support of this group Hitler formerly changed the educational system and developed a youth organization, the *Hitler-jugend*. The traditional educational system was replaced with one that focused on biology, history and the German language. “While history courses were designed to provide a proper National Socialist consciousness of the past and of politics in general, biology was a means of teaching racial doctrine.”³⁸ Accompanying the change in focus of academic training was an increased emphasis on competitive sports and physical education. “Hitler considered the development of the body

and strength more essential to the future of the race than academic studies.”³⁹ This fascism focused schoolhouse education was complimented with the Nazi youth movement. This organization, in which in 1939 membership became compulsory for German children between the ages of ten and eighteen (10-14 yrs in the *Jungvolk* or *Jungmaden* and 15-18 yrs in the *Hitler-jugend*), was responsible for indoctrinating the German youth in the Nazi ideals and for inspiring them to follow and obey Hitler’s leadership.⁴⁰ Although many of the vehement anti-Hitler groups were composed of members who had once been *Hitler-jugend*, the organization is still considered to have been Hitler’s most effective tool for developing and maintaining support for his Nazi regime.

It is significant that at the time that Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January of 1933, his campaign speeches espousing fascism and the promise of Germany’s return to glory were able to convince only a little over thirty-three percent of Germans to vote for the Nazi party. However, following his assumption of power, Hitler’s actions, educational changes and youth movement, inspired the majority of Germans to support his policies of fascism and revanchism. Hitler had inspired in the people of Germany a sense of hope. This lesson was not lost on Vladimir Putin.

Russia’s early experiences with democracy had proven to be disastrous. In the summer of 1998 the Russian government was forced to devalue the ruble and default on its debt. A small percentage of Russians had benefitted from democracy but too many others found their lives under democracy more difficult than their lives under communist rule. Their President, Yeltsin, was increasingly viewed as a corrupt physically weak alcoholic. By the spring of 1999 to the average Russian “as in Weimar Germany in the 1920s, the notion of democratic government itself became tarnished by its association with an era many would like to forget.”⁴¹ The average

Russian wanted someone to give him hope. In September of 1999, with his armed response to the alleged Chechen rebels' apartment bombings, Putin demonstrated the qualities of a strong leader; he gave the average Russian that hope.

Whether Putin's intervention in Chechnya was the calculated action of a savvy politician or the reactionary action of long-time KGB agent one will never know. What is known, however, is that Putin was astute enough to capitalize on the Russian people's reactions to his response to the bombings. When Yeltsin resigned at the end of the year, Putin was eager to use his popularity to legitimize his right to the role of leader of the Russian Federation.

After winning the 2000 presidential election by an overwhelming majority, Putin, like Hitler in the mid-1930s, took actions that were intended not only to consolidate his power, but also to nurture a sense of nationalism, revanchism, and irredentism within the Russian population. For this, Putin needed a Russian Treaty of Versailles. Yeltsin's capitalistic society, a society whose rich and corrupt elite had facilitated the dissolution of the Soviet Union, provided Putin an enemy against which to pit Mother Russia. From the very beginning of his first presidency, when addressing the Russian people, Putin has tried to remind them of the past glory of the Soviet Union and to instill in them the belief that Russia, under his leadership, would be able to regain this glory. At the same time, however, in the early 2000s, when Russia was still economically weak, Putin was very careful to maintain positive relations with the West. "Putin made a strategic calculation that international cooperation – along with restoring the domestic bases of Russian strength – was the most effective means of recapturing Russia's lost global influence."⁴² With rising oil and gas prices and the subsequent strengthening of the Russian economy, Putin's Russian nationalism messaging changed. He then began to portray the West as untrustworthy and anti-Russian. He continues to accuse the West of abandoning Russia in the

1990s and to argue that NATO's eastward expansion is proof of the West's distaste for Russia. This change in approach has encouraged not only Russian nationalism; it has also created "a bogeyman that allows Russia's rulers to sidestep any criticism of their own authoritarianism."⁴³ It is by no means a coincidence that sketches in the Russian media often portray Putin nursing the Russian bear back to health.

Even before Putin was appointed prime minister he was a staunch advocate of *Russian fascism*. In 1997 he submitted a dissertation to the St Petersburg Mining Institute that argued that the Russian government should "reassert its control over the country's abundant natural resources and raw materials."⁴⁴ Putin's thesis outlined his belief that Russia's economic and political future was dependent on effective government control. Furthermore, "by declaring control if not ownership, particularly of these resource-based companies, Russia, he argued, has the potential to emerge "from its deep crisis" and restore "its former might."⁴⁵ Four months after being elected president Putin took the first step to consolidate his power and, in so doing, laid the foundation for the realization of his thesis. In July of 2000, he summoned twenty-one of Russia's oligarchs informing them that he would leave them alone, but only if they didn't interfere with his policies in the Duma.⁴⁶ With the help of a somewhat subjective judicial system, in the following few years, Putin set about gaining state control of companies of importance to Russia. Throughout this period Putin emphasized the concept of turning these important companies into "*national champions*", companies that "would put promotion of the state's interest over profit maximization."⁴⁷ The implementation of this concept of "*national champions*" sought to foster not only a fascist nationalistic sentiment but also a revanchist's return to glory one. Coinciding with a seller's market for both oil and natural gas, a return to state control resulted in a drastic turn around for the Russian economy. In the eyes of the

Russian people, Putin's strong, authoritarian leadership and his drive for Russian glory, further justified his position as leader.

Putin also understands that controlling the education of its people benefits an authoritarian government. To mold the Russian youth to support its philosophies "the Kremlin is spearheading a new approach to the past that glorifies the Soviet Union, denigrates the West, portrays the Yeltsin years as a period of disgraceful weakness and chaos from which Russia has now been rescued" by Putin.⁴⁸ Furthermore, to legitimize his government's actions and perhaps to downgrade his own authoritarian approach, Putin endorsed a textbook that "tries to shoehorn [Stalin] the greatest mass murderer of Europe's past century into a familiar yet ill-fitting role: the great leader forced by circumstances to take harsh decisions."⁴⁹ By legitimizing Stalin, Putin is seeking to encourage Russia's historical aspiration to be ruled by a "firm hand".⁵⁰ As in Nazi Germany, the Russian education system is complimented with government-run youth organizations. The largest of these groups, the *Nashi*, numbers at least 120,000 members and "their unthinking nationalism and glorification of Putin lead some to call it [the *Nashi*] the *Putinjungend*."⁵¹ While some claim that extremist youth groups tend to appeal to less educated, lower class individuals, the evidence in Russia demonstrates otherwise. Russian youth groups, particularly those promoting anti-Westernism, have a loyal following of educated, upwardly mobile Russian youths. In fact, a 2007 survey indicated that "the most anti-American group of young people in Russia were university-educated male Muscovites."⁵² Russia's future leaders not only believe in a strong Mother Russia, but also they aspire for a strong Mother Russia coupled with a weak, failing West.

It is evident that Putin's approach to maintaining power bears significant resemblance to Hitler's approach in the 1930s. Putin's power consolidation actions, both as president and prime

minister, his approach to education, support for youth groups, and promotion of both “Russia for Russians” and anti-Westernism have succeeded in inspiring the majority of Russians to endorse his fascist and revanchist policies.⁵³

It is undeniable that Vladimir Putin’s rise to power bears significant resemblance to that of Adolf Hitler. This paper has demonstrated that, like Hitler in Weimar Germany, an authoritarian leader can come to power by capitalizing on the defeated mindset of a people who have undergone significant hardships. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Yeltsin government’s approach to democracy significantly affected the average Russian. The people of Russia, like the Weimar Germans, felt betrayed. Russians share a belief that their great power status was taken from them without ever having lost a battle, that they have had to relinquish unfairly both territory and resources, and that they have had to endure both economic and political turmoil as a result. These feelings of betrayal, in conjunction with both Putin’s exploitation of the chaotic conditions of 1990s Russia and his authoritarian leadership style that promotes revanchism, irredentism and Russian fascism, have resulted in Putin’s assumption of ultimate power in Russia. The answer to the title question, as demonstrated by the comparison of the rise to power of Hitler and Putin, is that Putin, in many ways, is already Russia’s Hitler.

Hitler’s legacy as Germany’s Fuhrer is one that the people of the world must never forget. It is for this reason, now that it is evident that Putin has become Russia’s Hitler, that the question the World must now ask is whether Putin will continue with a Hitlerite exercise of power to consolidate and expand Mother Russia’s influence in the world. More simply, with Vladimir Putin’s Hitler-like ascension to a position of ultimate power in Russia, is the world destined to bear witness to a repeat of Hitler’s atrocities?

Epilogue

While it is true that history never repeats itself exactly, it is also true that lessons from history must never be ignored. The similarities between Hitler and Putin are undeniable. Both leaders came to power by taking advantage of both a flawed fledgling democracy and of a population that lacked hope. There is, however, one significant difference in the environment into which these two leaders came to power; Hitler's Germany was geographically constrained in both terms of expanse of territory and access to resources while today, Putin enjoys a vast sparsely populated territory that is rich with economically important resources. If Russia's unfettered access to *lebensraum* is the significant difference between the two leaders' approaches since their ascension to power, is it this, Russia's vast geography that has allowed the world to avoid a more aggressive approach by Putin? If so, what will happen when Russia's non-renewable resources run out?

Russia's economic success today is the direct result of Putin's efforts to nationalize the Russian oil and gas industry. This industry has empowered Russia to exercise internationally both economic and political influences. Without Russian oil and gas many of the countries of Europe would not be able to meet their ever increasing energy needs. This dependence has played a significant role in shaping the approaches that many of these European countries are taking towards foreign relations with Russia. As an example, when Russia restricted the flow of oil and gas to the Ukraine, it was the countries *downstream* on the pipeline who heavily encouraged the Ukraine, not Russia, to settle the dispute so that oil and gas would again begin to flow to Europe. While this energy related support for Russia may seem reasonable, it can be argued that it was this same type of "relationship maintenance" that facilitated Russia's military actions in Georgia in August of 2008.

When the president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, began courting Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia, who viewed these two states as her own, did not approve. Although Russia deployed a significant number of military forces to the region, it did not immediately take action against Georgia. As late as early 2008 it appeared that NATO was considering Georgia for membership, however, at the NATO summit in Bucharest in June of 2008, both France and Germany flatly refused to offer Georgia (and the Ukraine) a Membership Action Plan, the next stage for admission to the alliance. This, to Putin, clearly indicated that the countries of "Old Europe" were bluntly saying "that their relations with Russia mattered more than the interests of their nominal eastern allies."⁵⁴ Capitalizing on this perceived support, in August, claiming the Georgian military had assaulted Tskhinkali, the main city of South Ossetia, the Russian government ordered its forces to attack Georgia. After advancing virtually uncontested into Georgia, Russia signed an arguably pro-Russia peace treaty and quickly gave "formal diplomatic recognition to South Ossetia and Abkhazia – ending once and for all its always flimsy recognition of Georgia's territorial integrity."⁵⁵ While the world watched idly, Russia militarily annexed more territory for itself. Is this any different than Hitler's occupation of Czechoslovakia?

Russia's oil and gas resources not only have facilitated its return to a position of international political and economic influence, but also have enabled it to begin to focus on rebuilding its military might. But what will happen if peace emerges in the Middle East dropping the price of oil, or if new technology eliminates the world's dependency on oil, or if Russia is not prepared when its oil and gas resources run dry? Russia owes its good fortunes to a resource-based export economy. Reliance on these resources and a failure to develop alternate industrial strengths could mean that Russia eventually will face another economic collapse. It is

unlikely that Putin, whose actions in Chechnya and Georgia clearly indicate his willingness to use force, will decide to let the Russian bear be subdued again. The world cannot afford to have Putin face that decision. We must act now if we are going to be able to prevent Putin's Russia from becoming Hitler's Germany.



Endnotes

- ¹ Samuel W. Jr. Mitcham, *Why Hitler? The Genesis of the Nazi Reich*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996) p14.
- ² Ibid., p14.
- ³ Ibid., p7.
- ⁴ Ibid., p14.
- ⁵ Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War, Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) p53.
- ⁶ Gary P. Russell, *Exploring the "Weimar Russia" Analogy*, (Monterey, CA: Naval Post Graduate School, 1999) p18.
- ⁷ Ibid., p19.
- ⁸ Mitcham, p71.
- ⁹ Ibid., p77.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p77.
- ¹¹ Joseph W. Bendersky, *A History of Nazi Germany*, (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall Inc., Publishers, 1985) p137,138.
- ¹² Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted; The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2001) p137.
- ¹³ Ibid., p137.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p199.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p201.
- ¹⁶ Andrei P. Tsyankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy; Change and Continuity In National Identity*, (Lanham, Maryland: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2006), p 131.
- ¹⁷ Mitcham, p27.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p27
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p28.
- ²⁰ Russell, p23.
- ²¹ Ibid., p22.
- ²² D.G. Williamson, *The Third Reich*, Harlow, (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2002), p22.
- ²³ Ibid., p24.
- ²⁴ John M. Thompson, *Russia and the Soviet Union: An Historical Introduction from the Kievan State to the Present*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2009), p330.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p337.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p350.
- ²⁷ Archie Brown and Lilia Shevtsova, *Gorbachev, Yeltsin & Putin: Political Leadership in Russian's Transition*, (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2001), p83.
- ²⁸ Marshall I. Goldman, *Petrostate: Putin, Power, and the New Russia*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2008), p95.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p94.
- ³⁰ Brown & Shevtsova, p91.
- ³¹ Ibid., p96.
- ³² Katherine Barbe, *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2004), p797, p1321.
- ³³ Russell, p32.

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- ³⁴ Barbe, 539.
- ³⁵ Mitcham, p39-40.
- ³⁶ Bendersky, p200.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p200-202.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p156.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p156.
- ⁴⁰ Williamson, p55.
- ⁴¹ Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), p130.
- ⁴² Ibid., p24.
- ⁴³ Lucas, p117.
- ⁴⁴ Goldman, p97.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p98.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p102-103.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p99.
- ⁴⁸ Lucas, p107.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., p107.
- ⁵⁰ Brown, p89.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., p79.
- ⁵² Ibid., p81.
- ⁵³ Lucas, p80.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p145.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., p148.



While not all of the books below are cited in the paper above, all, in some way, have contributed to my knowledge on the subject. Therefore, to pay the authors their just due, I felt that it was necessary to include all of these works in the bibliography for this paper.

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