

Letters to the Editor

Responses George Michael's Article, "Is a Greater Russia Really so Bad?"

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William Thayer

Is a greater Russia really so bad? Well, at least part of the answer depends upon who you are. If you are living in New Jersey, there is no immediate threat. If you are living in Ukraine or the Baltics, the answer is quite different. Ukrainians remember the Stalin famine, the *Holodomor* (Ukrainian for "extermination by hunger"), in which three to eight million Ukrainians perished. The Baltics remember the Soviet occupation of their countries, and the mass executions and deportations. Consequently, there is a very real threat associated with a greater Russia. The situation today is very analogous to the Czech situation in 1938. At the time, it was decided that Czechoslovakia was a "faraway country." Instead of countering Hitler at the time, the decision was made to appease him.

Dr. Michael makes very valid points which I entirely agree with. China covets the Russian Far East for its resources, especially its geography and water. The United States and Russia should work toward being allies, not enemies. I think this is even more important from the Russian point of view since it is on a demographic decline.

The dilemma is how do we stop Russia from expanding while not threatening the Russian homeland? Currently, we are trying economic sanctions, which certainly weaken the Russian economy, but it is also helping Putin isolate Russia from the West. While I would like to hope that economic sanctions will work, I do not think they will. Russia is prepared to go into a Stalingrad/Leningrad-type mentality. What will make the Russians stop? To prevent the Russians from contemplating an attack on the Baltics, they must be stopped in Ukraine. Present casualties in Ukraine are about 5,000 total, compared to the 10,000-15,000 mentioned by Dr. Michael in the North Caucasus. It is going to take severe losses by the Russians to convince them to stop.

How can this be accomplished? There is no easy way, but I believe it can be done. In the Battle of Kursk (1943), the Russians delayed and damaged important elite German armor divisions with massive minefields. This was with 1940s pressure mines. Today, remotely fired improvised explosive devices (IEDs) exist that can be much more effective. Furthermore, all Russian armor has big, flat

bottoms, which are easy targets. We have many methods of observation and many ways to fire the IEDs. The Russian armored forces number around 10,000 (tanks plus armored vehicles). Losses in the thousands of Russian armored vehicles would get the message across to both Putin and the Russian people. This would take millions of IEDs and emplaced sensors. This is just one technique. Excalibur artillery rounds and small, fast-attack unmanned

aerial vehicles firing Hellfire missiles would be other options. None of these methods could be construed as a threat to the Russian homeland such as NATO air forces.

We have to be prepared for a long struggle. I do not think Putin is going to change his mind. We will have to wait for the next generation of Russian leaders. In the meantime, it is imperative to stop the Russian advance.

William Thayer, San Diego, California

Ray Finch

I am curious as to why *Military Review* would publish such an apologetic and biased portrayal of Russia's current foreign policy ("Is a Greater Russia Really so Bad?" by George Michael, Ph.D.). As one who spends most of his waking hours monitoring developments within Russia, particularly within the realm of security, I found the author's argument both dangerously specious and one-sided.

The author claims that Russia's aggressive acts against Ukraine (and other countries) are "actually acts of increasing desperation and are destined to be relatively short lived." He bolsters this claim by suggesting that Russia's demographics are so perilous that the country may soon get gobbled up by China or be transformed by its increasing Muslim population into an Islamic state. Many of the sources he quotes to support his arguments are outdated and tendentious. (Check out, for instance, note 43 and the not-too-objective Strategic Culture Foundation.) Dr. Michael appears to suggest that Russia's poor demographics should justify thuggish behavior.

While certainly not yet robust, Russian demographics have actually improved slightly over the past five years, and there is simply zero evidence that "Beijing [is] to become the de facto overlord of Russia's resource rich Far East in the not too distant future." The notion that Russia will someday become an Islamic state is yet another canard, perhaps designed to convince the reader that while Putin's Russia may be corrupt and aggressive, it is far preferable to what might transpire in the future.

He then goes on to assert that the United States has largely been responsible for "turning Russia from ally into enemy" by not only appointing a "strident

Kremlin critic, Michael McFaul, to serve as the U.S. ambassador to Russia," but also by allegedly supporting separatist elements within Russia. This represents the typical argument found within much of the Kremlin-supported media today. In this "Russia-as-innocent-victim" rendition, the evil leaders in Washington have been secretly plotting to weaken Russia by enlarging NATO and sponsoring color revolutions in countries around Russia's periphery. President Putin subscribes to, and frequently advertises, this anti-American trope, claiming that the United States wants to neuter Russia so it can steal its abundant natural resources. In this Kremlin-sponsored narrative, Russia is always the innocent, peace-loving nation which would never undertake surreptitious or aggressive actions to disturb or steal from its neighbors. Of course, the author fails to make any mention of Russia's determined efforts over the past six years to modernize its military and other security structures. Similarly, he completely avoids examining the Kremlin's role in the August 2008 conflict with Georgia or the protests and cyber-attack against Estonia in 2007.

The author reviews some of the aggressive ideology which serves as window dressing for Putin's actions, then attempts to dismiss or justify the Kremlin's expansionist tendencies by claiming that "such expansion may likely be seen as a matter of national survival." According to Dr. Michael, such Kremlin hostility should not be regarded "as indicators of emerging Russian strength but rather acts that mask festering Russian decrepitude." Following this absurd logic, Western leaders should ignore further Russian aggression in Ukraine or perhaps into the Baltics because such belligerence indicates that the Kremlin is acting

out of weakness. The author chides Secretary of State John Kerry for remarking that confronting “Russia over Ukraine could lead to a nuclear war.” Dr. Michael is apparently unaware of the Kremlin’s repeated aggressive and casual mention of using nuclear weapons over the past year. Indeed, in early March 2015, President Putin remarked that he was ready to place the country’s strategic nuclear forces on high alert after Russia’s “polite green men” seized key locations in Crimea.

The author concludes that despite the current chilly relations, Russia and the United States ought to be working together in the face of common threats (e.g., Islamic extremism, Middle East instability, a resurgent China, nuclear proliferation, etc.). That this cooperation has been stymied, Dr. Michael again points his finger at officials in Washington, claiming that the United States is responsible for “treating Russia as an international pariah.” He appears oblivious to the harsh rhetoric preached by some Kremlin officials and their general unwillingness to honestly and openly cooperate on mutual security issues.

The author is quick to point out Western mistakes vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine. The United States and other Western countries may have been at fault for promising to help Ukraine in their desire to create an economically prosperous and law-based state. Instead of working with Russia

to improve the Ukrainian economy and political system, an “either-or” approach was adopted which indeed hampered mutual cooperation. However, it takes two to tango, and the author has simply ignored Russia’s negative role in escalating tensions with the West.

Over the past year, the Kremlin has invaded and annexed a portion of their neighbor’s territory. It continues to support separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine with both military and humanitarian aid. It has so poisoned and distorted the Russian information space that a large majority of Russians now view the United States as their primary military threat and sincerely believe that they can fight and defend against this “enemy” by defending and seizing more territory in Ukraine. The Kremlin continues to flex its military and informational muscle, in an often irresponsible and provocative manner. To suggest that to find common ground upon which to work with the Kremlin leadership the United States should somehow overlook this persistent and harmful Russian aggression borders on the delusional. To answer Dr. George’s question, “Is a greater Russia really so bad?” Yes, if it is based upon an ideology which thumbs its nose at treaties and international law and which advocates the creation of a greater Russia irrespective of national borders.

Ray Finch, Lawrence, Kansas

EDITOR’S RESPONSE: *To answer the reader’s question specifically, **Military Review** has a long history of publishing articles that may not get a forum elsewhere because they may provide an unpopular alternative view with which many may disagree. The article in question went through a board process in which several members personally disagreed with the author’s conclusions, but were impressed by the author’s research effort and agreed that the article merited publication in order to provide an alternative view on a matter of vital interest to our military readership to stimulate debate and research.*

“Is a Greater Russia Really So Bad?” George Michael, Ph.D.

The author contends that the United States and Russia share similar threats to their long-term security and their national identities. Therefore, it would be in the best interests of both countries to resist a resumption of the Cold War, to reconcile differences, and to make a greater effort to understand their respective points of view and interests.

The original article can be found in our January-February 2015 issue on page 99 by clicking on the link for the electronic version or by clicking on the article cover for the Joomag version. http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20150228_art018.pdf

