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Angela Stent. *Putin's World: Russia against the West and with the Rest*. New York: Twelve Books, 2019. ISBN: 9781455533015 (paperback, \$15.99).

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Deeply immersed in both the scholarly and policy worlds, Angela Stent is one of those itinerant experts who crosses the chasm between government and the academy. Such passages have both advantages and disadvantages, and in her account she cautiously and persuasively navigates between dispassionate analysis and dedication to what is best for her own country, the United States. Throughout *Putin's World* she displays what might be called a liberal common sense about which values and behaviors would best preserve the international order, promote peace and prosperity in the world, and keep the indispensable nation on top. Russia is a challenger, though not the major challenger (that honor now falls to China), to American global hegemony, and therefore warrants a careful analysis of its interests, motives, and capabilities. Russian President Vladimir Putin's Russia poses as a unique power astride Eurasia, ready to work with any state regardless of its political persuasion and anxious to promote a multipolar world to replace the unipolar world dominated by the United States. If the United States is indispensable, for the Putinites, Russia is irreplaceable. Both powers cling to their own notions of exceptionalism.

Stent sees Russia as a normal state whose actions are understandable if not acceptable and, whose leaders are “determined to restore Russia to what they believe is its rightful place in the world” (6). Like leaders in most countries, “For the current occupants of the Kremlin and their close associates, foreign policy serves their overriding goal to remain in power” (5). The double humiliation they feel at losing their inner and outer empires is key to how they evaluate the threats to Russia. But how they wield what limited power they have in the world is also influenced by persistent geographic and historical factors: Russia's large size and harsh climate; its economic backwardness; the imperative of centralized rule and Russification; lack of natural borders; and isolation from the mainstream of European civilization, all of which add up to endemic vulnerability.

Yet domestic and foreign policies are not determined fatalistically by deep structures and geography but also by how leaders perceive and give meaning to their environment and experiences. History not only plays a role, but the ideas derived from particular readings of the past are formative in foreign policy thinking. Although Russians have had difficulties stabilizing a national idea—and therefore, a sense of their own ‘national’ interests—Stent and other Western travelers and commentators are ready to provide their own reading of what identities, interests, and ideas have influenced Russian behavior. From the poet Fedor Tiutchev to the Slavophiles and tsarist officials through Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin to the present, Russians have seen the West as hostile and anxious to divide and weaken their country. More positively, Russian intellectuals proposed that Russia was a unique civilization, different from and (usually) superior to the West. Such celebrations of difference and superiority can be found in nineteenth-century Slavophilism, Soviet Marxism-Leninism, twentieth-century Eurasianism, or what Stent calls “the new Russian idea” (34-37). Despite the occasional Westernizing fling (think of President Boris Yeltsin's first foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev), Russia has repeatedly reverted to a set of ideas now represented by Putin's consolidated ideology. Stent puts this succinctly early in her book: “Putin's Russia has defined its role in the world as the leader of ‘conservative international’ supporting states that espouse ‘traditional values’ and as a protector of leaders who face challenges from ‘color’ revolutions—popular uprisings against authoritarian governments, which Putin believes are orchestrated by the West.” The new Russian Idea claims that Russia is “the defender

of the status quo...against what is depicted as a revisionist, decadent West trying to promote regime change against established leaders” (36). This conservative reaction is deeply anti-liberal (though not anti-capitalist) and is seen by its proponents as a defense of what they consider Christian values, traditional cultural identities, and heteronormativity.

When Putin came to power, he ended the internal democratic experiment of the Yeltsin years but attempted to maintain the interconnections with the global neoliberal economic system. But in time he sensed that the West’s democratization efforts threatened his hold on power. Even before his second presidential term, he began to turn toward great security, ‘sovereign democracy’ (which was more about sovereignty than democracy), and greater hostility toward the West. The appointment of democracy promoter Michael McFaul as U.S. ambassador to Russia only confirmed his suspicions about American ambitions.

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“Russians,” says Stent, “have at best been reluctant Europeans” (45). They need and admire Western technology but managed to miss the Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment, and never developed a middle class and a democracy. Putin himself is a “wary European,” who fails “to understand that Europe’s successful modernization was a product of both a free market economy and a democratic political system based on the rule of law.” More appealing to him is China’s model of “authoritarian modernization” (52). Moreover, he is suspicious of the expansion of the European Union, its Eastern Partnership Initiative (EPI, 2009), and its overtures for former Soviet states to join the EPI or EU. Disputes over the signing of such an Association Agreement with Ukraine in 2013 exploded into the Maidan movement, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the war in eastern Ukraine, and economic sanctions against Russia. China soon replaced Europe as Russia’s largest trading partner. Instead of President Mikhail Gorbachev’s dream of a ‘common European home,’ Russia has become the major opponent of European unity, a promoter of Brexit, and an ally of the anti-liberal axis of ‘take-our-country-back’ right-wing populist and neo-authoritarian European parties and governments. Putin is indiscriminate about cultivating allies and has established friendly relations with a rogues’ gallery of strongmen and authoritarian politicians that includes among others Marine Le Pen, Victor Orban, Silvio Berlusconi, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Bashar al-Assad, Benjamin Netanyahu, Mohammad bin Salman, Narendra Modi, and Donald J. Trump. But at the same time he has worked to establish ties with moderate and centrist leaders like Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel.

As scholar and practitioner, Angela Stent is at her best when elaborating the specificities of Russian dealings with friends and foes. Her chapter on NATO expansion—“The ‘Main Opponent’” (Putin’s words)—is a judicious and critical review of policies that redivided Europe and propelled Russia through the logic of a security dilemma to re-engage in offensive strategies from rearmament to hybrid warfare. Yet while acknowledging that Russia has genuine security concerns about NATO’s moves eastward, she reverts to the notion that Russian ideological constants are key to the conflict between East and West.

Russia has not, over the past quarter century, been willing to accept the rules of the international order that the West hoped it would. Those included acknowledging the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the post-Soviet states and supporting a liberal world order that respects the right to self-determination. Russia continues to view the drivers of international politics largely through a nineteenth-century prism. Spheres of influence are more important than the individual rights and sovereignty of smaller countries. It is virtually impossible to reconcile the Western and Russian understanding of sovereignty. For Putin, what counts is power and scale, not rules (137-138).

Stent does not share the default view of some of her fellow Putinologists, among them Masha Gessen and Michael McFaul, who see almost every malevolent deed of Russian policy as stemming from one grim personality. She argues instead that Putin and more generally Kremlin policies are the effusion of something deeply Russian. Like the work of many other analysts of Soviet and Russian foreign policy behavior, however, the book often neglects or underplays the intersubjective effects on Kremlin actions, the ways in which initiatives by the more powerful West precipitate reactions by the East—NATO expansion and European and American recognition of Kosovo independence being among the clearest examples.

Losing the West, much of East Central Europe, the Baltic countries, Georgia, and Ukraine, Russia turned eastward toward Eurasia, to the former South of the USSR, a region that Stent argues “has been an essential component of [Putin’s] main goal restoring Russia as a great power” (142). He wants, as did Yeltsin, the West to recognize Russia’s “sphere of privileged

interests” in the so-called “Near Abroad,” where it has “civilizational commonalities” with former Soviet states (144-145). To the Kremlin the Near Abroad is contested with the West, and losing it would severely jeopardize Russia’s security. Military arrangements, like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and economic collaboration in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) have bound several republics, notably Belarus, Armenia, and Kazakhstan, to Russia. In recent years several states, notably Moldova, have gravitated closer to Moscow, while others, like Turkestan, maintain a guarded distance.

Substantive chapters review Russian relations with Ukraine, China, Japan, the Middle East, and the United States. Putin’s greatest success came in Syria, where he took advantage of the Obama and Trump administrations’ ambivalence about their role in the civil war. Putin sided with Assad and, along with Iran and its proxies, propelled the brutal dictator to victory over myriad rebels. For a time he solidified relations with Erdoğan’s Turkey, but by 2019 the two potential allies were at loggerheads both in Syria and Libya. Playing a relatively weak hand vis-à-vis Europe, China, and the United States, Putin managed to deploy limited resources to become the principal extra-regional player in the conflict-riven Near East. Given Trump’s reluctance to go to war or remain on the front line, Putin deftly filled the vacuum left by American confusion and incompetence.

Reading *Putin’s World*, one can see how Putin, successful in some places, bogged down in others, and threatened in still others, has both increased Russian prestige and extended his influence while deepening Russia’s economic and diplomatic isolation and elevating global suspicions as to its nefarious actions, from poisonings to election interference. Benefiting from the gullibility and ignorance of the occupant of the White House, he can sit back and observe the chaos launched by the Trump administration. But unpredictability should not calm a realist’s mind, and Putin is forced to deal with the contradictory cascade of attitudes and activities emanating from Washington: friendly personal relations between the two leaders, the series of sanctions placed on the Russians, the bizarre actions of Trump and his cronies in Ukraine, unilateral abrogation of arms controls, withdrawal from the Paris Accords on climate control and the Iranian nuclear agreement, the precipitate withdrawal from Syria, and the impulsive assassination of high Iranian and Iraqi officials.

Stent ends the book with an assessment of how Russia’s strongman has reasserted his country’s role on the world stage while at the same time worsening relations with the West and facing a renewed arms race and the resurrection of harsh Cold War-like representations of his country. “Putin has achieved his major objectives.... The world can no longer ignore [Russia]. It is respected—and feared” (346). In much of the world he is a more attractive figure than his “partner” Trump. Stent is confident that the West can work with Putin, but “the West has to recognize what Russia is—and not what it would like Russia to be” (356). Russia’s views of the world and of its interests have to be taken seriously, even when the West is unwilling to accede to or compromise with them; “Engagement must be realistic and flexible” (361). Expect the unexpected. After all, you are dealing with a wiry, wily judo master.

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Verso Books. He is currently working on a book on the recent upsurge of exclusivist nationalisms and authoritarian populisms: *Forging the Nation: The Making and Faking of Nationalisms*.