



Sir Rodric Braithwaite is giving a lecture. Photograph taken
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Scientia
et vita

DO HISTORY LESSONS EVER PAY OFF? A DIPLOMAT'S MEMOIR*

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Sir Rodric Braithwaite was educated at Christ's College, University of Cambridge, from where he went to serve in HM Diplomatic Service, having worked in Jakarta, Moscow, Washington, Warsaw, Rome, and Brussels, where he was a member of the British delegation to the European Community. From 1988 to 1992, Sir Rodric served as HM Ambassador in the Soviet Union during the decisive years of the Perestroika and the first British ambassador in Russia. Subsequently, he was appointed foreign policy adviser to the Prime Minister in the second John Major ministry and chaired the UK Joint Intelligence Committee between 1992 and 1993. He was appointed Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George (GCMG) in 1994. As a career diplomat, Sir Rodric gained decades of insight into the troubled relations between Russia and West, having taken part in numerous negotiations on arms control. His affinity with the decision-making circles in both Russia and Britain alongside with the mastery of the Russian language allow him to skillfully dissect the underlying causes of ups-and-downs in Moscow's relationship with the West, employing the works of both English- and Russian-speaking analysts. Among his recent books are *Across the Moscow River* (2002), *Moscow 1941: A City and Its People at War* (2006), *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–1989* (2012), *Armageddon and Paranoia: The Nuclear Confrontation* (2017). In this essay, Sir Rodric reminisces of the years spent as a diplomat and provides his view on the usefulness and applicability of historical lessons while devising a foreign policy course.

Keywords: Russian foreign policy; Cold War; diplomatic relations; memoir.

Представлено эссе сэра Родрика Брейтвейта, выпускника Колледжа Христа Кембриджского университета. После завершения учебы он поступил на службу в Министерство иностранных дел Великобритании и занимал дипломатические посты в таких городах, как Джакарта, Москва, Вашингтон, Варшава, Рим и Брюссель; в последнем он работал в качестве члена британской делегации в Европейском сообществе. В 1988–1992 гг. сэр Родрик был послом Великобритании в СССР в ходе решающих лет перестройки

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и впоследствии стал первым британским послом в Российской Федерации, позднее был назначен советником премьер-министра по внешней политике во втором кабинете Джона Мейджора, в 1992–1993 гг. возглавлял Объединенный разведывательный комитет Великобритании. В 1994 г. был титулован рыцарем Большого Креста ордена Святых Михаила и Георгия. Будучи ветераном дипломатической службы, сэр Родрик в течение многих десятилетий был близко знаком с основными вопросами непростых отношений между Россией и Западом, в том числе принимал участие в многочисленных переговорах по контролю над вооружениями. Его контакты в политическом истеблишменте как России, так и Великобритании, а также владение русским языком позволяют ему точно анализировать причины взлетов и падений в отношениях Москвы с западными соседями, привлекая работы англо- и русскоязычных аналитиков. В числе его недавних работ – *Across the Moscow River* (2002), *Moscow 1941: A City and Its People at War* (2006), *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979–1989* (2012), *Armageddon and Paranoia: The Nuclear Confrontation* (2017). В настоящем эссе сэр Родрик проводит обзор своей дипломатической практики и рассуждает о пользе и применимости исторических примеров во внешней политике.

Ключевые слова: внешняя политика России; холодная война; дипломатические отношения; мемуары.

Making good policy and writing good history require above all an understanding of the way human beings actually behave. The best politicians are aware of the historical context in which they operate. The best historians help them to understand it.

I spent forty years of my life in government service dealing with my country's relationships with the outside world. I learned a great deal, and I was almost never bored. And I wrote a lot, too: records of official meetings, reports on the politics of the countries where I worked, policy recommendations for Ministers. I greatly enjoyed writing: trying to say exactly what I meant, as briefly and clearly as I could, with no superfluous words, no official jargon, so that my reader would take account of what I said.

I went on writing after I retired: newspaper articles, conference papers, books on historical subjects. I had no scholarly qualifications and I began badly – I gave up history at school at the age of fourteen. I've never written an academic dissertation or a doctorate. I've never worked as a professional historian. I haven't spent my life working in the archives. But what I now write has certainly been illuminated by what I saw when I was working in the bureaucracy.

Watching It Happen

From 1950 to 1952 I was a conscript in the army. I started in the infantry, and was then sent to a very small military intelligence unit in Vienna. There were only thirteen of us, under a single officer, a captain in the regular army who drank too much. We worked and lived in civilian accommodation in the

middle of Vienna, we wore civilian clothes, and we had very little to do with conventional military life. Half my colleagues were regular soldiers. They ran agents and dealt in secrets. The rest of us were conscripts. We were not allowed near the secrets. But the things we did deal with were still very interesting.

Europe was still in ruins. Millions of refugees across the continent were still looking for a home. Vienna was deep inside the Soviet zone of occupation in Austria, rather like Berlin in Germany. We, the Soviets, the Americans, and the French each occupied a separate bit of the city. I met my first Soviet citizen there: Lieutenant Pivovarov of the GRU. But unlike Berlin, the city was never divided: we and the Austrians could go wherever we liked without having to pass through checkpoints. I spent my free time going to the opera and the theatre, and exploring the city. I soon knew it like the back of my hand.

My job was to interview people who had escaped from Eastern Europe and wanted to emigrate to Britain, Australia, South Africa, and Canada. Most had tragic histories. Many were Jewish and had lost their families in the Holocaust. Others had opposed Communism, and had escaped before they were arrested. There was already a literal Iron Curtain across Europe: a line of barbed wire and mines and watchtowers with machine guns. Many of those I interviewed had sold all they had to bribe guides who knew their way through the obstacles. Now they were desperate to get out of Vienna and start their lives anew.

The procedure will be familiar to Russian readers. My job was to discover if the applicants were spies or criminals. So I first took them through their autobiographies. If they seemed suspicious, I had to recommend that they be refused a visa. I was nineteen years old, too young to judge. But I felt the responsibility very keenly, and I turned down as few people as I could.

There were two useful by-products. I learned a very great deal about the recent history of Eastern Europe. And watching my colleagues manage their secret agents made it easy to turn down later offers of work from the British intelligence agencies.

I then studied Russian at Cambridge. Of course I couldn't get to the Soviet Union: Stalin was still in charge. But I wanted to work abroad, to understand the local politics, learn the language, and get to know as many people of all kinds as possible. I wasn't interested in business, so the Foreign Office seemed the obvious choice. None of my family had ever been in government and I worried that diplomacy would be too snobbish. I needn't have done: I never regretted my choice. I worked and lived in Indonesia, Poland, Italy, Russia, America. I dealt with the European Union and with NATO. I was ambassador in Moscow in 1988–1992. I was then briefly foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister John Major and chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, a less glamorous body than it sounds.

Policymaking and Scholarship

All that gave me a good insight into the way governments work.

Outsiders often think that government is an orderly business, that politicians devise rational policies based on privileged information, which they then have the power to implement.

The reality is much more messy. Even the most powerful politicians have to choose between incompatible objectives. They make the wrong choice, or do nothing because it seems safer. They have to frustrate the intrigues of their political rivals. Even in authoritarian systems they cannot always get their way, and have to work to retain the support from the public. They cannot make plans for the future because they are too busy coping with the crises of today. So they stumble forward as best they can. Even Bismarck, effective and calculating though he was, is supposed to have said that the best a statesman could do was to hear the distant hoof beat of history – and then, by a superhuman effort, to leap and catch the horseman by the coat-tails [Berlin].

Individual politicians do of course have a great influence on events. The world would be a very different place if Peter the Great, Mao Tse Tung, Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt had never existed. But even they were much constrained by circumstance, and we should never forget that. Absolute power does not exist.

To function effectively, governments need to have a common understanding of what they are trying to achieve. This may be an explicit ideology, as it was in the Soviet Union. It may be a set of common assumptions, as it is in America. But something is always there. In the Foreign Office, there was a consensus around a few central questions. The Soviet Union was irredeemably hostile, military and politically effective. So it needed to be opposed: that was the basis for our alliance with the United States and NATO. Britain needed to be a member of the European Union to retain its influence and prosperity. Economic liberalism was the only sensible way of organising a country's economy.

It's called "groupthink" or "confirmation bias". None of us are free from pressure, open or hidden, to think the same as those around us. Only the bravest and most independent-minded can escape from it.

Governments, like individuals, need reliable information on which to base their actions. Much is publicly available. Some can only be obtained by secret means: not surprisingly governments set up intelligence agencies for the purpose. Thanks to James Bond, John Le Carre, and Sterlitz, spies have acquired a romantic aura, and their effectiveness is popularly exaggerated.

But whether open or secret, the information needs to be accurate and timely, and properly analysed and acted on by the recipient. Stalin was caught out by the German invasion because he refused to believe his intelligence agencies. The United States and Britain attacked Iraq in 2003 on the basis of inaccurate intelligence that Saddam had weapons of mass destruction. There are innumerable other examples.

Moreover "intelligence" cannot predict the future. Western intelligence agencies were heavily criticised for failing to foretell the Chinese Communist victory in 1949 and the fall of the Shah in 1978. In April 1989 a CIA analysis said that the Soviet Union would remain the main threat to the United States for the next 20 years. Less than three years later the Soviet Union had ceased to exist.

That was groupthink at work. Western analysts could see Soviet military strengths only too easily. They failed to set that off against Soviet

weaknesses, which were also there to see if you bothered to look. But as the US Congress remarked in 1993 "Policymakers and private citizens who expect intelligence to foresee all sudden shifts are attributing to qualities not yet shared by the deity with mere mortals" [Report of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of the Committee on Armed Services, p. 2]. You must not expect more from intelligence than it can deliver.

Ray Garthoff, a wise CIA analyst who studied at Leningrad University, believed that *'the inability to empathize with the other side and visualize its interests in other than adversarial terms'* was one reason why American analysis often got the USSR wrong. He added that an American official who departed from *'the implicit stereotypical cold war consensus'* risked damaging his career. Such inhibitions reached to the highest levels. During the Cuba crisis John Kennedy tried constantly to see events through Khrushchev's eyes. But he warned a journalist that even for him it was politically unwise to show too much understanding of Khrushchev's problems [Braithwaite, 2017, p. 233].

Empathy is as important for a historian who wants to understand the past as it is for a diplomat who wants to understand the present. During the Cold War think tanks in Britain and America produced papers based on deep thought and careful research that practising officials and ministers could not afford to ignore.

The best academic historians know this perfectly well. One fine example is Richard Ullman's beautifully written and documented book about Anglo-Soviet relations after the revolution [Ullman]. When it came out, the Ministry of Defence tried to prosecute him for violating official secrets, but gave up when they discovered all the papers were available in Oxford University, where they had been illegally deposited years earlier by Prime Minister Lloyd George. In riveting detail Ullman shows Lloyd George and his colleagues in action: ignorant, prejudiced, emotional, and muddleheaded – just like the rest of us. Ministers and politicians in other countries are unlikely to be much wiser than they are in Britain.

But the usefulness of academic history is undermined if it becomes enslaved to fashionable theory: realism, neorealism, idealism, post-modernism, game theory, mathematical modelling. Human behaviour is too complex to be pinned down by abstractions. Young historians do better to spend time out in the world, working in a political party, a bureaucracy or in business, observing how human beings actually behave. They will bring back to their scholarly writing a deeper and more understanding idea of reality.

The Russia Connection

When I was born my father was working as a conductor in one of the London opera houses. His colleague Lawrence Collingwood studied music in St Petersburg before the First World War and married a Russian woman with a very powerful personality. We spent family holidays in their little cottage outside London, which they had converted into a Russian dacha: «там Русью пахло».

I studied Russian in Cambridge from 1952 to 1955. My wife Jill and I lived in Moscow from 1963 to 1966. Friendships between foreigners and

Soviet citizens were then officially discouraged. But we travelled the length and breadth of the country, from Vilnius to Nakhodka, from Yakutsk to Samarkand and Erevan. We hitchhiked in Georgia past busts of Stalin which stood in every village even though Khrushchev had just denounced him. We had brief but revealing conversations with people we met on the way: the old peasant woman who asked if we were Christians or some kind of Catholics; the gallant amateurs performing Leoncavallo's opera *Pagliacci* in the Seamen's Club in Nakhodka in the aftermath of a typhoon; the young man who defied the restaurant manager in Sochi so that Jill could teach him the twist.

We returned in 1988 to a Russia transformed, where we were at last able to have real friends and uninhibited discussions about life and politics. Jill came into her own. She spent weekends helping the nuns restore the Tolga monastery outside Yaroslavl. She stood with Russian friends outside Yeltsin's White House in August 1991 on the night when three young men were killed. It was not what an ambassador's wife should do, but I was proud of her courage and her determination to stand up for what she believed. After we left Moscow she regularly returned to Russia to support Russian friends in their projects for the care of backward children and the elderly, and for developing the skills of Russian social workers. She died in 2008, and I wrote a private tribute to her called *Coming of Age in Warsaw* (2014), because that is where we met as young diplomats.

Over all those years, like so many other foreigners, we became entranced with Russian culture, Russian architecture, the Russian countryside, and the Russian people.

My books all reflect that fascination. Most British people are intrigued and confused by Russia. I wrote to help the ordinary British reader to understand Russian history, and the way Russian people think about it. As a foreigner I am badly qualified to pontificate about what Russians feel. But I hoped that any Russians who read my books would at least think I had tried to be fair, even if they did not agree with me.

My first book *Across the Moscow River* (2002) was an attempt to convey and analyse the dramatic events which transformed the Soviet Union between 1988 and 1992 [Braithwaite, 2002]. It was heavily based on the diary I kept while I was there.

The Soviet system had been in trouble since Khrushchev's day. The politburo chose Gorbachev in 1985 because they thought he was the man to put things right: young, energetic, imaginative and, they hoped, orthodox. But he had his own ideas. He set out on a program of far-reaching political and economic reform to turn Russia into what our Moscow friends called "a normal country", open, prosperous, at peace with itself and the rest of the world. And he was determined to do it without the bloodshed which had marred so many previous Russian attempts at reform.

It did not turn out like that. Gorbachev has been much criticised for his failure to get on top of the economic problem, and for his inability to prevent the Soviet republics choosing independence as soon as they could. He is now reviled by many of his countrymen as the author of the disasters that

descended on Russia in the 1990s, the collapse of a great state in circumstances that reminded them of the terrible precedents of the Time of Troubles in the seventeenth century, and the revolutions and civil war of the twentieth.

But to lay all the blame on one man reflects a flawed understanding of what happened and what was possible. The political and economic structure of the Soviet Union was in decay. Its ideology had lost its worldwide appeal. The cost of maintaining military parity with America was becoming unsustainable. No one leader could have accomplished what was needed to put all that right. Gorbachev's critics have not convincingly proposed a better course. The "Chinese alternative" is implausible: the two cultures are too different, and Russia remains too bound up with Europe in too many ways. I hope that future Russian historians will treat Gorbachev with greater justice.

War and Peace

Three of my later books have been about war.

I was seven years old when the second world war began. I remember much of it in vivid detail. The British and the French went to war with Germany to honour the futile guarantee they had given to Poland. America was still firmly neutral and the Soviet Union was Hitler's ally. In the terrifying summer of 1940 we were saved from German invasion by the miraculous rescue of the defeated British Army from Dunkirk and the RAF's crucial victory over the Luftwaffe. In 1941–1942 Hitler made the fatal mistake of invading Russia, the BBC reported hourly on the battle of Stalingrad as the Germans crept closer to the Volga, and German submarines sank so many food ships in the Atlantic that Britain came close to starving. There followed the exhilarating years of victory, the spectacular seaborne invasion of France in 1944 and the fall of Berlin to Zhukov and Koniev in the spring of 1945. I was thirteen when I read the newspaper reports of the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima.

Since then I've had plenty of time to think about humanity's appalling willingness to wreak destruction and death on itself. War is endemic, unavoidable, central to human experience. It raises the ultimate questions of good and evil, of why men fight, why they become heroes or cowards, why even decent men commit appalling atrocities. Even victory is purchased at too high a price.

The British are proud of what they did in the war. But they have very little feeling for the scale of the fighting in the east, and of the absolutely decisive contribution which Russians made to the final victory. I hoped I could help to rectify that. My second book, *Across Moscow 1941: A city and its people at war* (2006), was intended to give British readers a sense of the scale of the Soviet victory, and of what the war was like for ordinary Russians [Braithwaite, 2006]. I read a great deal, watched the Soviet films of the day, and interviewed nearly a hundred people who shared their memories of that year: veterans, women factory workers, famous film stars, children, city officials, people who had been German camps, in the Gulag and in punishment battalions. By then the people who surrounded Stalin in 1941 were dead: but I interviewed their children.

Afgantsy (2011) was about the Soviet war in Afghanistan [Braithewaite, 2011]. I was working in London when it started. We told a visiting Soviet minister that invading Afghanistan was not a sensible thing to do: we had tried it in the 19th century and it had not worked. He said that this time it would be different. The Americans said the same when they too invaded Afghanistan in 2001.

The Western line that the Soviets had brutally invaded Afghanistan in order to impose Communism, but had been ignominiously defeated by the gallant mujaheddin with the decisive assistance of the Americans. I suspected it was not that simple, so I set out to discover what had actually happened, what the Russians had thought they were trying to do, and what impact the war had on Soviet society and on Soviet soldiers.

Once again I watched the films, read a great deal and interviewed those who had been there. Documents were beginning to emerge. Soviet soldiers and journalists had written histories, memoirs, and some excellent fiction. I interviewed generals, diplomats, scholars, civilians, women, and conscripts. It helped that I too had been a conscript, though I had never been in battle. I started from the assumption that the Soviet Army might be different from the British Army, but that soldiers are much the same everywhere. They experience the same hardships, the same fear, the same comradeship. They are not interested in the political background to their war, they do not trust their politicians, and they are convinced that the civilians back home will never understand what they went through. I was not surprised to discover that Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan were more concerned with getting through the day, and with surviving the fighting, than with grandiose ideas about saving their Afghan allies or promoting the communist way of life.

Of course there were brutalities on both sides. In war there always are:

Armies are institutions for organising and channelling violence in the pursuit of some concept of the national interest", I wrote. "They help to focus the emotions of patriotism, self-sacrifice, and solidarity which states need for their coherence and sometimes for their survival. Violence is not easy to control, and armies have to cope with violence within their own ranks as well as atrocities against the enemy and the civilian population. Otherwise they risk a breakdown of discipline and a loss of function.

It is a problem which has been faced by the commanders of all armies throughout history.

There was a myth in the West that disagreement in the authoritarian Soviet system was impossible. That was oversimple even in Stalin's day. Many people inside the Soviet government criticised the decision to invade Afghanistan. Within months the government itself was looking for a way out. But it is always easier to start a war than to finish it, and the whole business took nine years. The war brought great suffering to the Afghan people, and it helped to undermine support in the Soviet union for the regime. But the error was far from unique. There was much in common

between the reasoning of those who took the Soviet Union into Afghanistan and those who took America into Vietnam.

My last book, *Armageddon and Paranoia* (2017), was about the nuclear confrontation. I never thought there was much sense in the idea that we can defend ourselves against a nuclear enemy by threatening to wipe out tens of millions of his people, even though our own country would be entirely destroyed in retaliation. Writing a book was a way of sorting out my ideas.

The Soviet side of the story was better documented than I expected. There were hosts of memoirs and diaries, a few histories, and a mass of documents [Атомный проект СССР. Документы и материалы], including many references to intelligence about the Americans' Manhattan Project which had produced the Hiroshima bomb. In the early 1990s some former Soviet intelligence officers claimed that the Soviet weapons project could not have succeeded without their secret information about the American project. Yuli Khariton, the brilliant scientist and administrator who headed the Soviet project for nearly four decades, rightly argued that Soviet scientists were equal of any in the world, and that the intelligence was helpful but no more [Braithwaite, 2017, p. 222].

The attitudes of people on both sides of the Iron Curtain to the prospect of nuclear war turned out to be very similar, a mixture of fatalism and great fear. There were three lessons to be drawn. First, that the confrontation was very dangerous, because the systems on both sides were and remained vulnerable to accident, even if no one wanted a nuclear war. Second, that none of us who have nuclear weapons are likely to give them up. But third, that despite their immense suspicion of one another, American and Soviet leaders did manage to negotiate agreements to control nuclear weapons, agreements which have been dangerously eroded over recent decades.

Disappointed Hopes: 1989 and After

All of us, in Russia and in the West, felt a huge sense of relief when the Cold War ended and a nuclear conflagration became a distant nightmare. Nations and would-be nations in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were exhilarated to discover that they no longer had to do what Moscow told them.

In the West most of us really did hope that Russia would become open, prosperous, and democratic, a partner with whom we could cooperate to our mutual benefit. There was an overwhelming wave of goodwill towards Russia and a genuine desire to help Russia overcome the appalling difficulties which followed the Soviet collapse.

Many Russians find that impossible to believe. They are convinced that the West is conspiring to destroy Russia. Western dealings with Russia in the 1990s were too often triumphalist, insensitive and arrogant. But there is no serious evidence to justify the suspicion that West is pursuing any deliberate plan. Of course there are conspiracy theorists on both sides who are unable to shake off their Cold War attitudes. There is a great deal of disinformation flying about. None of that makes it easy to create the cooperative relationship which would benefit both Russia and the West.

We should not have been surprised by the way history reasserted itself after 1989. The terrifying black-and-white confrontation of the Cold War overshadowed everything else. Once the Cold War was over, ancient hostilities came out of the deep freeze: between Poles and Russians, between Ukrainians and Poles, between Armenians and Azeris, between Hungarians and Rumanians, within Czechoslovakia. Except in Yugoslavia most were resolved without conflict.

This was the background for one of the most contentious developments of the last three decades: the extension of western influence and the NATO alliance into areas which historically had been a matter of intense interest to Russia. The problem was simple enough. The countries of Eastern Europe had a long experience of Russian Imperial expansion. The Poles had more than once seen their country wiped off the map by Germany and Russia. It was not at all surprising that these countries sought refuge in NATO and the European Union once Russian power and influence were withdrawn.

Debate on the wisdom of the Western policy of enlarging NATO still continues in my country. But there were few realistic alternatives. There was strong domestic pressure throughout the West to bring in countries in the east to whom we had promised freedom and democracy for the previous three decades. By the middle of the 1990s the pressure was almost irresistible. But the actions of NATO and its members were muddled and insensitive. Western statesmen said ambiguous things which Russians interpreted as assurances that NATO would not enlarge. Russians resented the bombing of Serbia and the forcible liberation of Kosovo. They felt that the West was deliberately taking advantage of Russian weakness, and acting without regard for Russian feelings and interests. The outburst of nationalist feeling which accompanied Russia's return to the international stage after 2000 was understandable, even if some of its manifestations were unpleasant.

Some people now suggest that a better alternative would have been a system of European collective security in which Russia played an equal part. It seemed a good idea, but it was not practical. Russia was likely to become a major military power again, far more powerful than any other country in Europe. The other Europeans feared renewed Russian domination, and were determined to keep America in to ensure a balance. But the Americans would not contemplate any security arrangement in which they did not have the main voice. The result was and has remained a deadlock.

Europe's anxieties seemed justified when Russia annexed Crimea and stirred up trouble in East Ukraine. Almost no one in the West knew the history of the tangled thousand year relationship between Ukraine and Russia. They did not understand the ambitions, fears and emotions which lay behind the Russian action. But most felt that the Russian use of force was wholly inappropriate. Poles feared that they would once again be assaulted by Russia and betrayed by their allies, as they had been in 1939. Other Eastern Europeans felt the same. NATO had little choice but to react. The deployment of forces to the East, and the imposition of sanctions, was probably the least it could do. The Russian government called it a

provocation. But if their advisers did not warn them what was likely to happen, they were not doing their job.

The breakdown in the relationship between Russia and the West has reached absurd levels of emotion and paranoia on both sides. It also misses the point. The problem for the twenty-first century lies elsewhere: in the unstoppable rise of China, and the way America, Russia, and the rest of us adapt to that.

It does not have to be so. In 1995 the Americans held a ceremony to honour the memory of Robert Oppenheimer at Los Alamos, where he developed the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. Yuli Khariton sent a moving message. He wrote:

Mindful of my role in the remarkable scientific and engineering achievements which led to humanity tapping into practically non-depletable energy sources, today, as a more mature person, I am not so sure that people are fully prepared to master this energy. I am aware of our part in the gruesome death of thousands of people and massive damage done to the environment of our common home the Earth. Words of repentance can change nothing. God willing our descendants will find both ways and the courage within themselves to strive for good without doing evil [Человек столетия: Юлий Борисович Харитон].

We need to revive that sense of mutual respect and shared responsibility if we are to reconstruct the agreements which kept us safe (though not very safe) during the Cold War, and mitigate the damaging divisions between Russia and the West today.

Conclusion: The Uses and Abuses of History

It is of course an illusion to think that we can draw literal lessons from history. History does not repeat itself – except perhaps, as Marx said, as farce. We do have a freedom of choice: nothing is wholly inevitable. But we are all constrained by geography, by our neighbours, by the limitations on our resources – and by history itself. Even the most practical politician needs to understand the mistakes made by his predecessors. Otherwise he will merely repeat them.

People need a common idea of their national history: it shapes their sense of identity and unity, without which a country can barely function. But what people think of as their national history is often largely a romanticised construction of heroic myths, very different from what scholars regard as proper history. In England we talk of “our island story”, a story of continuous victory and imperial expansion abroad, and the steady growth of democracy at home. Our move to leave the European Union is partly driven by nostalgia for a past when Britain was Great. Our television and our politicians’ speeches are full of references to the glorious time – what Churchill called our finest hour – when we were fighting Germany on our own. Glorious it certainly was. But it is irrelevant as a guide to tackling Britain’s problems in the 21st century.

Politicians exploit such myths not only in Britain but in America, Russia, China and everywhere else. They are a way of getting your people to back

you. Such was Milosevic's notorious invocation of the Serbian defeat at the battle of Kosovo Pole in 1389 in order to arouse Serbian nationalism six hundred years later. That is why our politicians want their historians to write what they call "patriotic" history. It makes it easier for them to stoke politically convenient myths.

Those who want to write seriously about the past should take no notice. They should not deal in myths, but stick to what can be properly documented. None of us can escape the prejudices we were born with. There will always be room for different interpretations of the past. Attitudes will change from one generation to the next. It is for the reader to exercise his own judgement. That is why the writing of history will always be a perennial fascination, and why the kind of meticulously documented history at which the best Russian scholars excel is such a pleasure to read.

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