

Off The Cuff

EVERY MONDAY

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No. 1

Here's One to Make the Chickens Laugh

LAST FRIDAY, Russian leaders, Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, appalled by Georgian attacks upon innocent civilians in South Ossetia, rushed to their defence by invading Georgia with large Russian military formations, including tanks and artillery. In the course of knocking out a number of Georgian airfields and troop assembly points, Russian planes also bombed blocks of flats, clinics, schools and community centres in Georgia.

I have no doubt that Vladimir and Dmitry will be “greatly troubled” by this loss of innocent life, just as much as they, no doubt, regretted the total destruction of Grosny in 1999 and the regrettable, but probably necessary, *Zachistki* (or *clean-up*), in which a large number of politically unreliable Chechens unaccountably disappeared.

However, these two doughty Russian defenders of human rights also have a prior responsibility to defend their citizens wherever they are; whether they are in Moscow, in Chechnya, or in the Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russian citizens must enjoy the protection of the Russian state. Following a meeting of Russia's Security Council on Friday, President Dmitry Medvedev asserted: “My duty as Russian president is to

safeguard the lives and dignity of Russian citizens, wherever they are. . . . We will not allow the deaths of our compatriots to go unpunished. Those guilty will receive due punishment.”

So, there we have it. All the territories of the former Soviet Union with substantial numbers of Russians, which also share borders with Russia, must take special care to protect the lives and dignity of these compatriots of Dmitry and Vladimir . . . *or else*. Because, it is clear that Russia's rulers are going to follow the principles set out in the 1930s and forties by Stalin, Hitler and Mussolini, namely, that territory in which ethnic Russians (or Poles, Belarusians, Chechens, Ossetians, etc.), ethnic Germans, and ethnic Italians live must be ruled by the *Mother Country* (or the *Fatherland*).

In an attempt to mask their dictatorial atavism, Putin and Medvedev are at pains to compare their behaviour in Georgia with that of the Western defence of the Albanian secessionists in Serbian Kosovo. However, the comparisons between Russia's invasion of Georgian South Ossetia and the Western invasion of Serbian Kosovo will not wash. Serbian forces were violently expelling ethnic Albanians from Kosovo. The action of the United States and Britain in invading the Serbian territory of Kosovo and in bombing the Serbian capital, Belgrade, was in order to prevent the destruction of the ethnic Albanian population within Serbia. The United States and Britain had no desire to rule Kosovo or to make Kosovans British or American citizens. They did not invade Serbian Kosovo in order to annex or absorb Kosovo. The Kosovan Albanians were quite simply seeking independence from Serbia – a state which denied them equal rights and which finally sought violently to expel them *en masse* from their homeland. American and

British action supported this struggle for independence.

This is not the goal of Russia policy in the breakaway regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia is not seeking independence for its oppressed neighbours in Georgia. Russia is not striving to emancipate the down-trodden Ossetians and Abkhazians from Georgian tyranny. The objective of Russian policy is to rule these territories, because their rule is the key to wider Russian control of the Caucasus. Consequently, the Russians have done everything from offering citizenship and full Russian passports to people within Georgia to the lavish funding of breakaway regional governments. As a result, Ossetic and Russian speakers in South Ossetia, and the Russians, Armenians, Greeks, and Abkhazians, of Abkhazia, want to live in autonomous regions within the Russian Federation.

Russia under the leadership of Putin and Medvedev has been orchestrating ethnic and linguistic tensions and conflicts in order to destabilise the Georgian state and to assert their historic Imperial (and Soviet) Russian hegemony throughout the Caucasus. It was Stalin, after all, who gave Abkhazia to Soviet Georgia in 1931 and also incorporated South Ossetia into Soviet Georgia. Now Russia wants these regions back in order to weaken Georgian independence and as a means to improve Moscow's control over the entire region.

It is an atavistic policy, which harks back to the twenties, thirties and forties, if not even further back. The power brokers and political elites in the Russian Federation believe that direct physical control of territory and populations is essential to their well being. This direct centralised control is not simply to deny space to terrorists or other enemies in the manner, which America seeks to do in Iraq or

Afghanistan, but is in the *DNA* of the modern Russian state.

The United States and the countries of the European Union seek to achieve power and influence by securing preponderant economic, cultural, and military power in a porous and mobile fashion – their relations with other states and regions are permeated with more or less spontaneous flows of private investments, free cultural production and commercial exchanges, guaranteed, as a matter of course, by mature legal frameworks, and energetic self-interested government policies and assistance, supported *only in the last resort* by vast military machines.

The modern Russian state, on the other hand, is constructed upon the necessity of powerful central and direct political control over the economic, cultural, and civic life of Russia.

Following the inevitable disorder and confusion, which accompanied the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Putin and others have been building a new form of *corporate state*. This state's power is founded upon direct ownership and control of elements of the economy, which are considered to be of strategic importance by leading officials. The *private sector* and private capitalist concerns exist only in a closely woven matrix of state enterprises and *permissions* in a manner consonant with political arrangements supervised by state functionaries.

This is not *the rule of law*. It is, however, the direct political management of much economic and civic life in Russia. Laws are made, companies are formed and liquidated, ownership is transferred in line with political exigency, and at the whim of high officials. Consequently, political arrangements within Russia are organised around the maintenance of a strong centralised state, which closely regulates *by law and license* all aspects of economic, religious and civic life.

It is this emerging state form: *the modern corporate state*, which is dictating Russian foreign policy in the Caucasus, in Belarus, and in the Ukraine. It seeks to rule abroad as it does

at home, by presidential *fiat*, by state control, and by direct political regulation. It will not stop at the invasion of Georgia.

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