CONTENTS

1

Information Warrior

I WAS AN INFORMATION WARRIOR before it was cool. Every few years from 1959 until 1992, the United States and Soviet Union each swapped twenty-four "guides" to host standing exhibits about life in their respective countries.[1] Born of the Khrushchev-era thaw in US-Soviet relations, the exhibits were an early example of public diplomacy, and became a critical tool for each country to promote its vision and values. Traveling from city to city every two months, the exhibits allowed Soviet and US citizens a rare face-to-face encounter with their Cold War rivals.[2]

I was one such guide. From November 1987 to January 1989, I worked on the *Information USA* exhibit that displayed fax machines, home computers, CD players, and other information technologies used in daily life in the United States. Each day more than eight thousand Soviet citizens came to the exhibit; we were the first Americans most of them had ever met. A woman in Magnitogorsk, a steel-making town closed to almost all Westerners for the past forty years, exclaimed as she approached my stand, "An American. A real live American. I never thought I would see a real live American."[3]

I was there at a good time. Relations between Moscow and Washington had chilled in the decades after Nikita Khrushchev's fall from power, as had the reception of our predecessors on previous exhibits. But by the time I joined, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, or openness, was in full swing. Intrepid Russian journalists were reassessing many painful moments in Soviet history that had long been off-limits for discussion, from the Great Terror of the 1930s to the corruption

of the Brezhnev-era in the 1960s and 1970s. For the first time in its history, the Communist Party allowed and encouraged public meetings to debate reforms to the Soviet system, and our exhibit halls often became sites of pitched political discussions among our Russian guests.

Six days a week, for eight hours a day, we rotated between two hours standing with our props on a small stage answering questions and one hour recovering in our makeshift lounge walled off from the crowds, but not the noise, by black canvas curtains. No topic was out of bounds. Is Michael Jackson popular? Why do you have to pay for college? Why does the United States support the racist regime of South Africa? Are you married? Why not? Why do the women guides wear so little makeup? Which Georgian writers do you read in the United States? If Americans don't have internal passports, how do you catch criminals? We heard it all.

Each guide brought different perspectives to these questions. Most were under thirty (I was twenty-four) and single, but there were few other common traits; we came from all over the United States and had jobs ranging from teacher to movie director to engineer. About half were men, a handful were Soviet émigrés, and one was African American. We trained in Washington for a month learning about our "props," US policy, and the dos and don'ts of being a diplomat before heading to the Soviet Union. We were expected to explain US government policies, but were free to criticize them, and frequently did.

The exhibit filled forty-five tractor trailer–size containers. Every ten weeks we decamped to a new city, and with the help of local workers, put up walls, laid down flooring, and installed lighting in cavernous pavilions that often previously housed displays glorifying the achievements of the Soviet economy. During our stay we were local celebrities, and spent many evenings and rare days off with hosts who were eager to hear about our lives in the United States—and tell us about theirs in the USSR—until the early morning. The job was exhilarating yet exhausting.

With its glossy handouts, video touch screens, and interactive displays, our exhibit stood in sharp contrast to the drab Soviet design of the time. In this preinternet era, our props included not just home electronics but also a range of cultural ephemera, including a video loop of

the Talking Heads' "Once in a Lifetime" followed by Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun." What the Uzbek cotton farmers at our exhibit in Tashkent made of David Byrne's convulsions or Cyndi Lauper's hairdo, I can only guess.

As in just about every other exhibit since the program's inception, the most popular prop was a car. In our case, it was a Plymouth Voyager—not the sexiest on the lot, but much more interesting than the Ladas that dotted the roads in the USSR. The second most popular exhibit was a Xerox copier machine, which few had seen since copiers were kept under tight control and had to be registered with the security services. We occasionally got into trouble with the local authorities for copying calls to public demonstrations, historical documents, or forbidden literature from our visitors.

This was not my first trip to the Soviet Union. Caught up in the intrigue and excitement of the Cold War, I studied Russian first in high school in Utica, New York, and later at Middlebury College in Vermont. My first trip overseas was to Moscow in February 1985 as a college junior studying Russian language and literature. I ended up sharing a dormitory with seven hundred students from countries of the socialist camp—East Germany, Cuba, and Afghanistan—and found navigating the local mores about meeting with foreigners no less challenging than learning to conjugate Russian's notorious verbs of motion. Four weeks after our arrival, the suspicious wall-mounted radio that could not be turned off told us that the general secretary of the Communist Party, Konstantin Chernenko, had died and Gorbachev would head the funeral services—a clear indication that he would be the next leader of the USSR.

Life was difficult in Moscow in 1985. I saw ration cards for sugar, witnessed the early days of Gorbachev's attempts to curb vodka sales, and experienced the tension of a particularly difficult moment in US-Soviet relations. Just two years earlier, President Ronald Reagan had deemed the Soviet Union the "Evil Empire" for shooting down a passenger jet near South Korea, while the Soviets accused the United States of warmongering for resuming tests of nuclear weapons. Not everything American was eschewed. One bright spot for Muscovites that year was

the ridiculously popular movie "Jazz Is Only for Girls," or as we know it in English, "Some Like It Hot," which sparked a mini revival of Marilyn Monroe in the Soviet capital.

When I joined *Information USA* two years later, I saw more of the contradictions and complexities of a region that would fascinate me for years to come. Each day brought new puzzles. In Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, a serious-looking young man approached my stand and began, "I know that you have unemployment under capitalism and that it is very bad. We don't have that here. But I also understand that you have something called the 'want ads' where employers advertise to find new workers. How can both be true?" Like many Soviets then and Russians now, they knew that part of what they learned from the media was propaganda and part was true, but they struggled to identify which part was which.

In Irkutsk, a young woman peppered me with pointed questions about US policy in the Middle East. Justifiably unsatisfied with my superficial answer, she sensed weakness. As she started in again with greater ferocity, someone in the crowd announced, "They prepared you very well." Having been called out as a collaborator with the security services, she meekly withdrew amid the crowd's laughter.[4] Battles with provocateurs sent by the local authorities were part of the job.

In Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg), I went with a young Russian to see Oliver Stone's heavy-handed critique of capitalism, *Wall Street,* which received wide play in the Soviet Union with its depiction of the glamorous life of the morally bankrupt investment banker Gordon Gekko. It was obvious, I explained to my friend, why the movie was on so many screens in his country. And he said, "Tim, but you don't understand, when a Russian sees that movie he thinks, if only I could go there" (*Akh, tuda by*).

My education in the nuances of Russia continued as I entered graduate school at Columbia University. I started in January 1989; ten months later, on a tiny black-and-white television in my six-story walk-up apartment on 112th Street, I watched with astonishment as East Berliners climbed over the wall that had divided their country for decades. Communist governments fell that year not just in East Germany but also in

Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania. I watched too as the republics of the Soviet Union called for greater independence from Moscow and nationalist protests broke out across the Soviet space. A failed coup by hard-liners in the Communist Party and Red Army in August 1991 ended Moscow's dreams of keeping the multiethnic Soviet Empire together, and scrambled many dissertations underway on relations between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact as the latter no longer existed.

A New Generation

I joined a new generation of Russian and US scholars; trained after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we had unprecedented opportunities to study the collapse of Communism and rise of whatever would take its place. As part of my dissertation research, I worked for two summers in the newly created Russian Securities and Exchange Commission in Moscow. I studied why brokers relied on word of mouth to honor contracts on some capital markets, but turned to big guys with big guns on others. I interviewed bankers and bodyguards, and sometimes had trouble telling the two apart.

Following graduation, I became a professor at Ohio State University and later rejoined Columbia, where I wrote about protection rackets, privatization, corruption, property rights, and more. Russia has provided endless material to study how states and markets work, and more often, how they do not. In 2010, I had a chance to move this work closer to the source when my colleague, the Russian economist Andrei Yakovlev, and I won a large grant from the Russian government to create a research institute at the HSE in Moscow. Our team of a dozen or so Russian, US, and European scholars conducts research at the intersection of politics and economics, surveying Russian lawyers, businesspeople, and the mass public, sorting through government statistics, gathering historical data, writing articles for academic journals, and training young Russians to be hard-nosed social scientists.[5]

And we are not alone. Throughout the last thirty years, through all of Russia's up and downs, academics have produced impressive studies of

public opinion, corruption, protest, electoral fraud, propaganda, corporate raiding, and foreign policy. Contrary to the assertion of many observers that Western countries lack expertise on Russia, political science has seen a remarkable flourishing of research on the topic. The flagship journals in political science have been publishing research on Russia at far greater rates than at any time in decades.[6]

Russia has been fertile ground for studying authoritarian rule. Public opinion polls have been far more credible than in other autocracies, and Russia provides more detailed administrative data, including election results, economic information, and social indicators, than do many other authoritarian governments.[7] The country's more than eighty regions offer a tremendous opportunity to compare developments across a diverse landscape. Fearless reporters, academics, and activists in Russia have continued to publish exposés on corruption that would be unthinkable in many other dictatorships. That Russia is an unusually well-educated nondemocracy has also been a great help. Observers of other major autocracies, like China, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Venezuela, face a far more difficult task than do Russia hands.

Many of the most interesting scholars writing on Russia are now Russians. I have been a great beneficiary of this development. In the last fifteen years, I've had as many Russian as American coauthors. The addition of Russian voices to the conversation has broadened the academic debate and encouraged more reflection among non-Russian observers about the biases we bring to the subject.

This research has been part of a broader movement to reassess the workings of authoritarian governments.[8] In the last decade, scholars have made good progress in explaining why nondemocracies like Russia rise and fall, how they survive, why some are more corrupt than others, and why some grow rapidly while others stagnate. Rather than treating autocracies as the mirror image of democracies, these studies identify a host of tensions inherent to autocratic rule that force difficult trade-offs on rulers. There is still much to learn, but we know far more than we did a decade ago about autocratic rule, and many of these lessons are valuable for understanding contemporary Russia.

The Disconnect

Unfortunately, this research has had little impact on public discourse about Russia and its relationship to the rest of the world.[9] Much of this work is unknown even to Russia watchers in academic disciplines outside political science (who, if they are like me, struggle to follow the latest developments in their own discipline, let alone keep up with findings in neighboring fields). Sovietology died long ago in academia, but lives on in popular debate. While there are exceptions, much of this debate lacks balance, depth, and nuance. It is disheartening to see the quality of the discussions around Russia so shallow.

Although less so than in the Soviet period, views of Russia in the West are still highly politicized. Some on the nationalist Right depict Putin's Russia as a defender of the traditional family, white race, and Christian faith, but as Anne Applebaum notes, Russian reality is far from these American dreams.[10] Abortion rates in Russia are twice as high as in the United States, few Russians attend church regularly or read the Bible, and a third of Russian families are headed by single mothers with children.[11] And Russia regularly accepts more immigrants than just about any country but the United States. Some on the Left exaggerate Putin's influence abroad by depicting any decision by the White House that benefits Moscow as evidence that President Donald Trump is just Putin's puppet.[12]

Russia's multipronged effort to influence the US presidential election in 2016 has heightened the politicization of public discourse on Russia. Reactions to this campaign overturned one of the most durable partisan cleavages in US politics as Democrats are now more hawkish toward Russia than are Republicans. These types of rapid changes in public opinion tend to occur on issues where the public has little prior information and can be easily led by politicians. This is only the latest evidence that politics heavily colors popular views toward Russia.[13]

Commentators often fall neatly into hard-line or soft-line camps, and interpret events in Russia through these prisms. A US senator can observe that Russia is just "a gas station masquerading as a country," and a think tanker in Washington can declare that Putin has "Hitler's foreign policy and Mussolini's domestic policy."[14] These comments provoke

equally simplistic charges of "demonizing Putin" and "Russophobia," bringing debate to a screeching halt.

Political scientist Tom Pepinsky's colorful characterization of Malaysia will ring true for those of us who sometimes struggle to explain everyday life in Russia to those unfamiliar with the topic.

> The mental image that most Americans harbor of what actual authoritarianism looks like is fantastical and cartoonish. This vision of authoritarian rule has jackbooted thugs, all-powerful elites acting with impunity, poverty and desperate hardship for everyone else, strict controls on political expression and mobilization, and a dictator who spends his time ordering the murder or disappearance of his opponents using an effective and wholly compliant security apparatus. This image of authoritarianism comes from the popular media (dictators in movies are never constrained by anything but open insurrection), from American mythmaking about the Founding (and the Second World War and the Cold War), and from a kind of "imaginary othering" in which the opposite of democracy is the absence of everything that characterizes the one democracy that one knows. Still, that fantastical image of authoritarianism is entirely misleading as a description of modern authoritarian rule and life under it.[15]

To be sure, Russia is more repressive than Malaysia, and has become much more so in recent years, but Pepinsky is not far off the mark. Autocracy in Russia is a subtler beast.

It is just difficult for most people to imagine life and politics in Russia. Moscow is far, and Kremlin politics are opaque. When I started teaching Russian politics in the mid-1990s, I sometimes joked that if I told my undergraduates that in Moscow on Tuesday people walk on their hands, then the students would dutifully jot down in their notes: "Moscow. Tuesday. Hands." Not that they weren't bright. They were. Like most people, though, they needed basic information and context to begin to understand Russia's politics.

But the problem runs deeper than a lack of information and political bias. Indeed, our two dominant narratives for understanding Russian politics are helpful, but get us only so far.

Consider interpretations of a pivotal event in modern Russia: the arrest of Mikhail Khodorkovsky as he boarded a private jet in Siberia in 2003. At the time of his arrest, Khodorkovsky was the richest man in Russia thanks to the hugely unpopular privatizations of the 1990s and some savvy business decisions on his part. He was also beginning to play an increasing role in politics by funding opposition parties and think tanks much to the ire of the Kremlin. Authorities accused the forty-one-year-old Khodorkovsky of tax evasion and violating privatization laws. After two trials, he served more than ten years in jail and lost control of the oil giant Yukos to a state-owned rival. While observers agree that the arrest of Khodorkovsky epitomized the reassertion of state control over the economy and curbed the political power of big business, they disagree about the motivations behind it.

One account emphasizes Putin's personal role in the affair. As a former KGB agent, Putin had little interest in building markets and democracy, and sought to lead a revanche by his cronies in the security services that would reassert state power over society. The nationalization of Yukos and its transfer to a company controlled by President Putin's close associate was just one step in this plan.[16] This explanation is part of a broader line of argument that treats Russian politics as an extension of Putin's worldview and stresses his seeming omnipotence over society. If we want to understand Russian politics, we need to begin with Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

Another account points to Russia's exceptional history and culture. This view depicts the nationalization of Yukos as Russia reverting to its historical type. Russia's long tradition of fusing state and private property as well as the lack of public support for markets and democracy, doomed efforts to build private companies that could provide a check on state power. As one commentator noted, "What's remarkable about the uproar over President Vladimir Putin's battle with mega-oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who announced his resignation as head of Yukos Oil from his jail cell last week, is how eerily it strengthens the impression that Russian history is a continuum—no matter how dramatic the break between one era and the next."[17] The "exceptional Russia" argument underscores the gravitational pull of Russia's authoritarian past and culturally

ingrained habits that (supposedly) make Russia and Russians distinct as the key to grasping its current politics.

Yet for all the emphasis on the seemingly unique characteristics of Putin and the distinctive aspects of Russia's history and culture, similar expropriations of energy companies via forced sales or contract renegotiations took place in countries as diverse as Algeria, Bolivia, Chad, Dubai, Ecuador, Senegal, and Venezuela in the mid-2000s.[18] Looking more broadly, two researchers who examined all oil-rich countries between 1945 and 2006 found that when oil prices are high in autocracies, nationalizations are much more likely.[19] This pattern indicates that the expropriation of Yukos was driven less by Putin's personality or Russia's historical patterns than by factors common to modern autocracies. As is often the case, events treated as specific to Russia are mirrored in autocracies around the world. To understand Russian politics, we need to recognize the general forces at play in autocracies.

Academics like me are partly to blame for the poor state of our national discussion on Russia. Much of our research appears only in academic journals, and we have not done the hard work of getting these findings out to a broader audience. While there is much great reporting and commentary on Russia, unraveling Russia's increasingly insular politics also requires the kinds of careful counting, focused comparisons, and deep country knowledge that academics can provide.

Academic research brings different strengths than much popular writing on Russia. Journalists have better access to the movers and shakers, and can publish quickly. They are frequently joined by think tankers, politicians, and political activists who have a strong interest in shaping the debate on Russia in one direction or another. Academic research is less timely, but it is more reflective and less partisan than much popular writing on Russia.

There's a reason that popular writing on Russia is indeed popular, and it is easy to argue that much of the popular writing on Russia is better than on many other countries.[20] Masterful writers on Russia employ telling anecdotes, bold investigations, and compelling personal stories that provide richness and detail most social scientists can only envy.[21] These are tremendously powerful tools—sometimes too powerful, as they can

be persuasive even when they mislead. Summing up a range of research on "narrative bias," sociologist Duncan Watts writes, "So powerful is the appeal of a good story that even when we are trying to evaluate an explanation scientifically—that is, on the basis of how well it accounts for the data—we can't help judging it in terms of its narrative attributes."[22] We often deem simple explanations and arguments with informative details to be accurate even when they are not. The question is whether these anecdotes, investigations, and personal histories reflect more general developments within Russian society. This is where academic research can help.

One strength of academic research is the ability to gather large data sets that are subject to empirical testing that allow us to grasp broader trends. Arguments that come up short on evidence or logic, or are too partisan, will struggle to make it through peer review. Academic research serves as a necessary complement to, rather than as a substitute for, much of the kinds of deep reporting that dominates the best popular writing on Russia. We need both to get a full picture of what's happening in Russia.

Russia as a Personalist Autocracy

In this book, I pull together much of this exciting new research to offer a different lens for interpreting Russian politics. Rather than viewing Russian politics as driven by an exceptional ruler governing an exceptional country, I highlight common patterns that Russia shares with other autocratic regimes ruled by a single individual. Rulers in these so-called personalist autocracies face a host of common challenges and constraints that differ from their counterparts in democracies and autocracies led by a single party or the military.

In studying personalist autocracies like Russia, it is tempting to focus on the personal quirks and characteristics of the leader—but in doing so, we lose sight of the features these types of autocracies share. While all countries have their own peculiarities, we can learn a good deal about Russia by viewing it alongside other states with similar types of governance: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Turkey, Hugo Chávez's Venezuela, Viktor Orban's Hungary, Alberto Fujimori's Peru, and Nursultan Nazarbayev's Kazakhstan among others. Understanding the inherent tensions

and constraints of modern autocracies is essential for grasping Russian politics.

Comparing Russia to other countries can help us identify when Russia's politics and economics are driven by factors common to personalist autocracies, and when they are shaped primarily by factors unique to Russia. Where we see commonalities between Russia and other personalist autocracies, we can often attribute them to the political logic of this type of regime, but where we see differences that Russia has with other governments of this type, we can look for other explanations.

As we will see in more detail in chapter 3, three features common to personalist autocracies are especially helpful for understanding Putin's Russia, and each provides a useful counterpoint to conventional narratives on Russia.

First, while commentators focus on the seeming stability of Putin's rule, political life in Russia is inherently uncertain because Russia lacks strong institutions like the rule of law as well as free and fair elections to resolve political disputes that inevitability arise. Absent an electoral calendar and strong institutions to structure political competition, rulers can be removed at any time and typically without agreement on how to choose a successor. These weak institutions do not protect the autocrat after they leave office, making the stakes of losing power in politics in personalist autocracies like Russia much higher than in other types of governments.

Second, autocrats face difficult policy trade-offs. Rulers in a democracy can be removed via the ballot box; autocratic rulers can be removed via an elite coup or mass revolt. Because the dual threats of elite coup and mass revolt can rarely be reduced at the same time, personalist autocrats face inherent policy trade-offs that constrain their power. Policies that enrich cronies frequently come at the expense of the mass public and vice versa. Autocrats face hard choices about rewarding narrow interest groups or pursuing policies with broader benefits, using repression or persuasion against political opponents, and choosing how much to censor the media, cheat in elections, and violate human rights in order to stay in power. Rather than flowing directly from Putin's worldview or Russia's historical legacy, policy choices in Russia are

often the result of difficult trade-offs among and between political elites and the mass public.

Third, personalist autocracies have a range of tools—all rather blunt—for managing a modern society. Much popular commentary revolves around Putin as a master of repression to keep society in check. And it is true that crackdowns on free media, intimidation of political opponents, and arrests of human rights activists are part and parcel of political life in Russia. But repression is costly, not always effective, and rarely a first choice. Influential elites and the mass public do not automatically follow the leader but instead need to be convinced to do so, sometimes via fear, yet also via persuasion or self-interest. Autocrats like Putin prefer to rely on personal popularity, economic performance, manipulated elections, and foreign policy successes to stave off elite coups and popular revolts, but these commodities are usually fleeting and beyond the control of the ruler.

From this perspective, a view of Russia emerges that is less focused on President Putin's personality and seeming omnipotence, and less centered on Russia's unique history and culture. Rooting Russia's politics in common patterns of autocratic rule produces a picture of Russia that helps us see the constraints on Putin's power, recognize the difficult policy choices before him, and better understand Russia's politics.

That's not to say that all the research I will present introduces novel findings. Some elements of the common wisdom on Russia are upheld, and others are undermined. The point of social science is not to prove conventional wisdom wrong; it is to examine and test arguments. Because many common assertions about Russia are in tension—Russia's state is bumbling and inefficient, but conducts exquisitely sophisticated cyberattacks; Putin is popular, yet needs to cheat to win elections—these tests are badly needed to untangle these competing claims.

A comparative perspective that draws on academic research can tell us a lot about Russia—but it can't tell us everything. No single approach can. As we will see, this comparative approach sheds more light on Russia's domestic politics than on its foreign policy (although it is helpful there as well) and must be paired with deep knowledge of Russia.

And while it's much easier to do social science work in Russia than in other autocracies, this work still brings great challenges. Many top-flight Russian academics have left for greener and freer pastures. Those who remain in Russia must constantly assess what types of investigations are permissible and what types are not. Studying Russia is a contact sport, and like American football, it has a high rate of injury. Many Russians have paid dearly for their politics, and some academics too have suffered directly for their work. This is a far less dangerous task than being an investigative journalist in Russia, but still one must take care. Studying Russia has become much more difficult in recent years, and current trends—which I'll examine much more in the chapters to come—provide little optimism that the situation will improve in the short run.

In the next chapter, I present two approaches to studying Russia that generate much of the conventional wisdom. In chapter 3, I discuss recent research on authoritarian governments that provides an alternative. In successive chapters, I then explore what we know about Putin's popularity, elections, the economy, repression, media manipulation, foreign policy, and cyber campaigns abroad. The final chapter looks at what recent academic research tells us about Russia's future and offers some guidance about how we can improve our national discussion on Russia.

In the pages that follow, you will read about scholarly research that offers some of the best evidence available on many basic questions about Russia. How popular is Putin? Is corruption as high as they say? Why are relations with the United States so bad? Is Russian propaganda effective? Did Russian cyberwarriors swing the 2016 US presidential election? Do elections matter in Russia? These questions are not easily answered, but academics writing on Russia have given them careful consideration. Understanding Russia is more important than ever, and the solid evidence, clear logic, and transparency of academic research can help us cut through the disinformation, misinformation, and simple misperceptions about Russia that cloud our vision. So let's begin.

INDEX