

Geoffrey Roberts

Joseph Weisberg, *Russia Upside Down: An Exit Strategy for the Second Cold War*, Public Affairs: New York 2021 342pp \$30

Like a lot of recently published books about Russia, Joseph Weisberg's intriguing and multi-faceted memoir has been overtaken by events in Ukraine. A far more dangerous Russo-Western conflict is taking the place of a 'second cold war'. Yet Weisberg's key message is even more relevant – the necessity to engage in new thinking about Russia based on what he calls 'self-aware politics.' The more conscious we are of the psychological as well as the intellectual roots of our personal politics, the better we will be able to understand and co-exist peacefully with those who see things differently.

A former CIA officer, Weisberg is the creator of *The Americans*, a hugely successful US TV series about the escapades of a family of Soviet 'sleeper' spies. Set in 1980s Washington DC, the show was acclaimed by critics for its portrayal of rounded, sympathetic and believable Russian characters.

The show was partly based on the real-life network of Russian sleeper agents exposed by the FBI in 2010, but more important for Weisberg personally were the 2004 memoirs of a former KGB operative, Victor Cherkashin, which revealed that Soviet intelligence officers were for the most part just like him and his old CIA chums – patriotic, loyal, honest, and gregarious. Had he been a Soviet citizen, confesses Weisberg, he might well have joined the KGB.

Another important influence was the 1979 Soviet film, *Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears* (watched by Ronald Regan before his first meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev), the story of a group of young women making their way in life, which showed that Soviet citizens lived "regular lives" that were not wholly defined by the constraints and brutalities of the communist system.

For Weisberg, Putin's KGB background is a plus not a negative. "Working in the intelligence services does not disqualify someone from caring about their country and its future", he writes. "I am personally sympathetic to those looking for a democratic transformation in Russia, but I don't assume Putin and other opponents of liberalism and democracy are necessarily corrupt or simply looking to remain in power. I believe they have a different set of fears than I do."

While Weisberg casts doubt on claims that Putin routinely murders for political advantage, he accepts that he probably did order attacks on former Russian intelligence officers such as Alexander Litvinenko and Sergei Skripal.

The problem with demonizing Putin, says Weisberg, was that it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. At the beginning of his presidency, Putin was a self-proclaimed liberal and democrat and among the most pro-western of Russia's politicians. It was the west's persistently derogatory attitude to Russia as a great power and its meddling in Russia's internal affairs that turned Putin into an enemy. A more considered western approach to Russia may have had different and better results.

Weisberg does not excuse Putin. "To become a leader I could actually embrace, Putin would have to reverse course and fight against state-sponsored repression and injustice in Russia. He would have to stop persecuting his opponents – stop killing people he sees as traitors and stop either ordering or passively supporting attacks on opposition figures...He would have to stop telling bald-faced lies."

Much of the book is devoted to Weisberg's reflections on Soviet history and his own personal journey towards abandoning deeply entrenched American cultural stereotypes about Stalin and the Soviets. As a young man Weisberg was a true believer in an idealised version of American society and a fervent opponent of Soviet totalitarianism. However, his "deeply held conviction that the Soviet Union was an evil empire was a two-legged stool that eventually fell over."

The psychological leg of the stool was his personal sense of American superiority and his desperate need for enemies in the form of bitter political foes. Weisberg's empathy was wholly reserved for his Soviet enemy's victims, including fellow Jews who had been refused permission to emigrate from the USSR.

One early seed of doubt was planted by his 1988 encounter with a Jewish 'refusenik' in Leningrad who, it turned out, was quite well off materially, maintained foreign contacts and was even permitted a subscription to *Newsweek*, though he was only allowed to read it in a special room at the local post office. How was any of this possible in a repressive communist state?

That experience didn't deter Weisberg from joining the CIA, though his sojourn as a spy didn't last long. The break came when he took leave to look after his dying father, by which time the Soviet Union had collapsed.

A few years later Weisberg underwent therapy and became aware of the extent to which his anti-communist politics were emotionally-based and rooted in childhood feelings that led him to identify with victims of Soviet repression. More generally, Weisberg draws on Carl Gustav Jung's concept of the 'shadow self' – the suppressed, dark side of human behaviour. In identifying 'the other' as enemy both Americans and Soviets were projecting and denying their own dark desires, feelings and impulses.

The second leg of Weisberg's wobbly stool was political and historical – the conventional American view of Soviet socialism that everything about it was bad. As a student at Yale, Weisberg was aware of western writings that challenged simplistic mainstream narratives of Soviet history but paid them little heed: "In addition to a powerful cultural censorship, a profound self-censorship kept unorthodox views invisible to me. I chose what information I was going to take in about the Soviet Union, and weeded out what I didn't already agree with."

Among his subsequent realisations were that the KGB was not so different from the CIA and the FBI, that even in Stalin's time legality was not a complete sham, that Soviet Jews were

not treated as badly as he'd thought, and that the USSR's foreign aggressions were no worse than those of the United States. The balance of rights and wrongs in Soviet-American relations was more or less level. Certainly, Stalin was a mass murderer but he also defeated Hitler and built a relatively egalitarian social system. Stalin's power was based on popularity as well as violence. He had a good side that was admired at the time, and still is in today's Russia.

As Weisberg points out, US history and politics have their dark sides, too, above all slavery and its legacies, not to speak of the destruction of Native American populations. "Is Russia's reckoning with Stalin", he asks, "going any worse or more slowly than our reckoning with the horrors of slavery and the Americans who supported it?"

Weisberg still believes in the American system but abhors its self-righteousness. The more Americans can focus on their own flaws and imperfections the more they will perceive clearly the reality rather than the rhetoric of their own and other countries' systems.

*Russia Upside Down* is as honest a book as anyone could wish for. "A self-aware politics requires openness and honesty about mixed feelings, about doubt and uncertainty", concludes Weisberg. "In a self-aware politics, beliefs gain value when tested against our biases and predilections...What results is still belief and conviction, but of a softer variety than we usually see in politics."

Published by *The Political Quarterly*, July 2022

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-923X.13163>