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CHURCHILL'S FAUSTIAN BARGAIN COMES DUE

A coalition of enemies of the open society is taking shape.

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Tucker Carlson, a TV entertainer who has more or less managed in passing his utterances for journalism among his loyal base in the far right fringe of American politics, arguably scored the biggest success of his career by landing an interview with Russian president Vladimir Putin.



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Right off, Putin humiliated his interviewer by asking him rhetorically if it would be a serious conversation or a “talk show,” seeing that Carlson’s territory is obviously the latter. With his authority completely undermined from the outset—the Russian dictator’s sneering comment about his interviewer having an education in history being the coup de grâce that knocked him out—Carlson sat back, looking intently and sometimes bursting into inexplicably silly smiles (or were those tics?) as Putin bulldozed him with a masterclass in history à la soviétique that included two measures of falsehoods for each one of facts. The predictable result was a lesson of imperial propaganda from the nostalgic KGB spy that Putin has never ceased to be (he also mocked Carlson for failing his application to join the CIA). We have discussed before in these columns the perils of NATO’s repeated phases of eastward expansion, but at this point Putin’s actions have justified the new members rationale

To be fair, even if Carlson had done his homework, interviews are generally owned by the interviewee. A smart subject will offer interesting answers even to feeble questions, according to Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, noted for her pugnacious interviews with Henry Kissinger, Shah Reza Pahlavi, and General Giáp, among others.

Firmly in command of his two-hour lecture to the American entertainer, Putin beamed his propaganda arguments to the millions of viewers his docile interviewer brought with him. It basically came down to Ukraine being a Russian and then a Soviet invention and now the Kremlin was claiming it back.

So far, so bad. The well-read minority among the audience will laugh most of it off. Yet how many among the listeners would be able to tell right from wrong about Ukrainian history? And for that part of the public who doesn’t care what is true or false as long as the TV set makes distracting noises, an articulate dictator who speaks with self-assurance may have scored one point or two.

Herein lies the danger. Tucker Carlson provided a free platform for a man who is, by action or omission, becoming an informal spokesman or leader of sorts for a still nebulous group of autocracies and dictatorships united in their enmity to the open society. In his interview with Carlson, Putin articulated the outlines of a new doctrine that justifies a redrawing of the maps by force. Hence, the China of Xi, with an eye on Taiwan; the Turkey of Erdogan, which is sowing mischief in the region, from Libya, Syria, and Iraq



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to Armenia, which together with its ally, the Azerbaijan of dictator Ilham Aliyev, it is waiting for the right moment to dismember, will be watching closely what will become of Ukraine. Increasingly autocratic Serbia is making noises again about Kosovo. And the Hungary of Victor Orban is, as so many parts of the world these days, a democracy only in name (see The Economist's democracy index).

The deeper problem here is that most of the countries mentioned above, but first and foremost Russia, have not atoned for their past sins in the 20th century. The Soviet Union of Stalin was as monstrous as the Third Reich, yet it was "a satisfied power" in a somewhat Bismarckian sense. It did not pose an immediate threat to Great Britain, France, and generally the West (with the tragic exception of Poland and the Baltic republics). Yet the Germany of Hitler had to be stopped before it swallowed Europe whole. "If Hitler invaded hell, I would make at least a favorable reference to the devil in the House of Commons", famously said Churchill prior to joining forces with the Soviet Union against the Axis.

Victory in the Second World War assured the Soviet Union and its current successor, the Russian Federation, of a historical legitimacy that has always poisoned the postwar years and the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin, victorious in 1945, never learned the right lessons of the war, unlike its totalitarian former partner of Ribbentrop-Molotov fame turned foe. If it had, Putin would not have overplayed his hand in Ukraine. Now that Churchill's Faustian bargain has come due, we can only pray that Putin will not be emulated by fellow autocrats and dictators. But most of all, may we all avoid a Third World War. Aside from the horrific costs in lives and destruction, it is far from certain it will have the corrective effect the Second World War had, ensuring at least in Europe a historically unprecedented eight decades of peace. With the strides Russia is making in the field of weapons' technology, the defeat of Ukraine could embolden revanchists like Putin, Aliyev, and Erdogan to scan new horizons for their imperial ambitions and, in the process, rewrite history in a fascist key.