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From Halle (Saale) to Brisbane: hijacking Europe and denying Eurasia

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Author: Chris Hann

Shostakovich in Händel's home town

Halle has been my home town for the last 15 years. It is a small city close to Leipzig in the former German Democratic Republic. You are more likely to overhear conversations in Russian and Ukrainian in the trams hereabouts than in other parts of Germany. Musical life is excellent, as you would expect in cities closely tied to Bach and Händel. For their programme of symphony concerts for 2014-5, the cultural planners in Halle opted for the theme of “War and Peace”. Of course, what they had in mind was the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War. They could not have anticipated recent violence in Ukraine when they drew up this programme.

On 16-17 November 2014, punctually following the ostracism of Russian President Vladimir Putin by other world leaders at the G20 summit in Brisbane, the Staatskapelle Halle (under an Estonian Guest Conductor) gave a performance of the 7th symphony of Dmitri Shostakovich. It was a memorable concert. This is the longest and most complex of the composer's 15 symphonies. It is known as the Leningrad Symphony because it was written during the Wehrmacht's siege of the composer's home city, one of the most brutal and dehumanizing campaigns of human military history. This music is Shostakovich's contribution to the victory over Fascism. Later in life he made it plain that his empathy with the victims of Hitler extended in equal measure to the victims of Stalin. This symphony is widely considered to be one of the outstanding compositions of the twentieth century – an inspired pinnacle of the European classical tradition. However, this year German elites are invoking the moral authority of Europe to condemn a Russian President born in a city called Leningrad.





Putin in Germany

No one has attracted more media attention in the year 2014 than Vladimir Putin. His annexation of Crimea in the spring has been condemned not only by NATO but the world at large. Allegations of Russian support for “separatists” in Eastern Ukraine have led to the imposition of economic sanctions by the EU and the USA. The stalemate was not broken in Brisbane. In the following weeks even Angela Merkel was reported to be losing her patience.

The importance of the connection to Germany has been widely acknowledged. It is not just a question of economic ties, though both states are suffering as a result of the present sanctions. Thanks to the entanglements of twentieth century history, Merkel and Putin understand each other’s countries and even languages rather well. Although most reporting in Germany in 2014 has been as critical of Russia as that in other western countries, I have noticed that many Germans still hesitate to endorse the unambiguous judgments of their elites, which they have been fed in both popular and highbrow media for the last eight months. It is not only on the left and not only in the former Eastern Germany that one frequently comes across a more sympathetic understanding of the Russian President’s point of view.[1]

It is widely realized here (as it is not in Britain) that US military spending is in another league from that of Russia. It is NATO which has expanded dynamically since the end of the Cold War. Many Germans are inclined to take seriously Putin’s position that the government which came to power in February 2014 in Kiev did so illegally, with support from Washington, in clear breach of international agreements. Some agree with him that the case of Crimea is no different in essence from what happened in Kosovo in the 1990s, when NATO infringed the sovereignty of the Serbian state. Yet these views can hardly be aired in polite society. Mikhail Gorbachev, whose credentials are impeccable, caused grave embarrassment when, invited to Germany to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall, he basically endorsed the position of his successor in the Kremlin. When, later in the same month, Matthias Platzeck, a well-known East German Social Democrat who now chairs a pro-business association called the *Deutsch-Russisches Forum*, suggested that sooner or later the west will have to come to terms with the situation in Crimea, he was greeted with an outpouring of scandalized derision.

The fact is that, behind the scenes, the German Foreign Minister is working to achieve precisely what Platzeck is calling for. Yet in the media Putin must remain a pariah, the fiction must be maintained that he alone has infringed European norms and international law. Platzeck went on to compound his sin by daring to criticize the recent decision of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko to cease the payment of state entitlements to Ukrainian citizens

who live in the regions controlled by the “separatists”, suggesting – reasonably enough – that this was unlikely to contribute to national reconciliation.

Given the disconnect between newspaper coverage and the persisting heresies of the man on the street, it was a brave decision on the part of the Intendant of ARD, the premier public television channel, to broadcast a long television interview with Putin in the immediate wake of the G20 summit in Brisbane. Of course, political correctness required that Putin’s perspective be promptly countermanded. The interview was embedded in the Sunday night talk show of Günther Jauch (best known as the presenter of the German version of the quiz “Who wants to be a millionaire?”). Germany’s Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen (widely tipped as a possible Merkel successor) and a conservative historian reiterated the familiar accusations. Professor Winkler suggested that Putin was evidently attempting to drive a wedge between Germany and its western partners. The journalist who had conducted the interview (recorded just before the Brisbane summit) struggled to plead some mitigating circumstances, and to remind the audience that Germany and Russia should never forget their *Täter-Opfer* (culprit-victim) relationship. Günther Jauch looked aghast when another journalist expressed something approaching sympathy for Russian sentiments of marginalization and *ressentiments* vis-à-vis the west. However, even this expert declared herself to be a longstanding critic of Putin and his system.

The debate attracted over six million viewers and therefore had to be resumed in the programme’s next edition. This opened with a sample of mostly critical newspaper headlines following the interview a week before. To counter the allegation that the public broadcaster was implicitly legitimating the dictator, viewers were informed at the beginning of the programme that several key assertions made by Putin were categorically false. This rebuttal smacked strongly of western “disinformation” but the ensuing discussion was nonetheless more substantial than the previous round. The journalist Gabriele Krone-Schmalz contested the accusation of annexation by suggesting that the people of Crimea had exercised their right to secede. She insisted that the EU, rather than Russia, had frozen relations in recent years, parallel with its overtures to Kiev. Brussels therefore bore a large share of the responsibility (*Mitverantwortung*) for the crisis. Matthias Platzeck, having eaten humble pie for his gaffe concerning Crimea, was warmly applauded by the studio audience for stressing the need to involve Russia constructively in bringing it to an end. The programme itself was brought to an end by an extraordinary tirade by Wolf Biermann, who accused Putin of aggressive warmongering and wound up by comparing him to Adolf Hitler.[2]

Putin simply cannot be defended in Germany, at least not on prime time public television. Elsewhere, things are even worse, especially in some parts of eastern Europe (by no means everywhere, and not in all social groups). At an anthropological conference in Tallinn, Estonia, this summer, I was asked by a student of journalism if I thought that Russia could ever be a

part of Europe.

Hijacking Europe

It has not been a good year for Europe. José Manuel Barroso, widely held in Germany to be the man primarily responsible for the EU's failure to engage with Russia, has been succeeded as President of the European Commission by Jean-Claude Juncker. It is hoped that the Luxemburger will prove more astute in this regard. But these leaders have little legitimacy compared with the leaders of the member states. David Cameron's dogged opposition to Juncker was just one element in a series of flashpoints which have made the possibility of a British withdrawal from the European Union a real one. Anti-Brussels sentiment is rising in many other states, above all in France. How much longer can power holders in EU states condemn the populist in the Kremlin when they themselves are obliged to indulge in the same sort of rhetoric to counter the populists in their own countries?

Indeed not much good news has come out of Brussels since the large expansion of 2004-2007, which brought most of the former Soviet bloc states of Eastern Europe into full membership of the Union. Economically this expansion was always fragile and it was quickly sabotaged by the global financial crisis. Although the most conspicuous victims have been the southern members of the Eurozone, austerity measures in the north-west have also compounded the problems of the new states in the east. Most of them have been able to respond only through exporting reserves of labour, both unskilled and highly qualified, because work is difficult to find at home. It is difficult not to share Wolfgang Streeck's verdict that "the unity of Europe has failed dramatically".[3]

Like other left-leaning critics of capitalist financialization, especially the monetary policies of the European Central Bank, what Streeck objects to is not Europe per se but the highjacking of ideals of European integration and even a European cultural identity to serve the interests of bankers and technocratic elites. The career of Jean-Claude Juncker is exemplary in this respect. The east-west polarity of the Cold War era has been replaced by a new gulf between north and south, which the latter are powerless to close because of the single currency. Social inequalities within countries have also increased dramatically, irrespective of location. Streeck concludes with a pessimistic assessment of the future of democratic politics in Europe and a devastating critique of capitalism as a global system. Given the anti-democratic characteristics of actually existing European institutions in Brussels, Strasbourg and Frankfurt, a retrenchment back to the nation-state, while hardly a long-term solution, is according to Streeck in the interests of European citizens today. He has been roundly criticized for these views by Jürgen Habermas (see Hann 2014b).

Dealing with the Eastern Slavs

From the perspective of, say, Brisbane or Beijing, Europe is indeed a very messy place. Within the EU, the cleavages between old and new members do not coincide with the boundaries of the currency union or of the Schengen area. But 2014 has also reminded the world that the EU is not congruent with Europe. Leaving aside Switzerland, Norway and several pieces of the western Balkan jigsaw, the major anomaly lies in the east. No significant population of Eastern Slavs has been admitted to the European Union, nor (unlike Turkey) even been invited to enter a negotiating process. However, when Wolfgang Streeck and Jürgen Habermas debate the present and future condition of Europe, these non-EU components are unaccountably missing. So, who are these Eastern Slavs? By far the largest nation in question is Russia, of course, followed by Ukraine and Belarus. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, these three states have their separate capitals and all the trappings of sovereign states. But anthropologists, historians and linguists complicate the maps of political scientists and international lawyers by pointing to the substantive unity of these populations. The first capital of the medieval Rus' state was Kiev. Moscow and St Petersburg did not emerge as major political centres until much later.

The eastern expansion of the EU proceeded more slowly than the expansion of NATO, which admitted several former Soviet bloc states to full membership as early as 1999. The main wave of EU accession was in 2004. This was completed with the admission of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007. How to maintain the momentum after that? The Eastern Slavs were a problem because, after all, Moscow was the capital of the erstwhile Cold War enemy. Memories of Soviet domination were so strong among some of the EU's new members that, like the student I met this summer in Tallinn, many of their citizens thought of Russia as extrinsic to Europe. No one had good reason for putting the Russian Federation, with its vast territories in Siberia, on the list for a closer Association with the European Union. Belarus continued to exclude itself for political reasons: its population repeatedly endorsed the regime of a Soviet-style strongman, Alexander Lukashenko. That left Ukraine.^[4] The sorry history of elite political machinations and corruption at every level of Ukrainian society in the first decades of postsocialism is undisputed. The holy grail of admission to the EU was deployed as a weapon by some of the factions but, when elected to govern, they performed no better than their Moscow-oriented opponents. This sterile game, which brought nothing but suffering to the majority of the population, moved to a new level with the events of February 2014.

Ukraine and Europe in 2014

Various arguments are put forward to embellish the case for a strong western commitment to Ukraine. After all, for a century and a half before the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire in 1918 much of the west of the country was governed from Vienna. This was the era in which modern Ukrainian nationalism was born and Austrian Galicia was its Piedmont. In this sense,

at least some Ukrainians were following the trends of the age in central Europe. Moreover, many of these Austrian subjects had a much older allegiance to the west. These Eastern Slavs had become Catholics as a result of the power relations of the era of the Counter Reformation. While the Greek Catholics (as they were christened by Empress Maria Theresa on the basis of their Byzantine liturgy) preserved the practical religion of the east, they were constantly exposed to Latinizing influences from the west. By acknowledging the Pope as their religious leader on this earth, they learned to appreciate the separation of powers. Sadly, this fundamental step was never taken by the Orthodox Churches. As a result, political scientist Samuel Huntington (1996) classified Greek Catholics with the liberal west and postulated a civilizational fault line dividing this region of western Ukraine from the rest of the country.

Has the violence of 2014 confirmed Huntington's propositions? Like other anthropologists I deplore the way in which he theorizes civilizations as closed units based on culture. It is important to recognize the solid successes of Ukrainian nation-building. While classifications and territorial boundaries were undoubtedly determined by the minorities policy of the Soviet Union, Kiev and Minsk cannot be treated as pawns of the erstwhile superpower in Moscow. Ukraine is above all a multicultural land (see Magocsi 2010 for a history of the territory which explicitly counters the dominant national narrative). But Huntington is nonetheless right to insist that account should be taken of historical divisions within the dominant nationality.

Unfortunately for those who would present the European character of its western regions in a more positive light, the history of the Ukrainian nationalist movement is not an edifying tale. From its roots in Habsburg Galicia, resistance intensified when this region was subject to repressive Polish rule in the interwar decades (while the Soviet regions experienced their catastrophic hunger, the Holodomor). From complicity in Nazi atrocities in the Holocaust to atrocities of their own instigation against Poles and others, the Täter-Opfer classifications of the 1940s in western Ukraine are endlessly contested. All I wish to point out is that, in spite of Soviet censorship, this history of frustrated nationalist aspirations has left deep marks on the society and on social memory. The pro-democracy activists who protested so courageously in Kiev throughout the winter of 2013-4 were hardly representative. Illiberal groupings prone to violence were also prominent on the Maidan and these were over-represented in the government from February onwards. Yet one suspects that policymakers in Brussels have not the faintest idea of these complexities. How could they simply dangle the carrots of EU and even NATO membership to their selected allies in Kiev, given the country's internal diversity and also, more fundamentally, the fact that it is a full member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), with tight political and economic links to Moscow?

Western leaders proclaim: "we are not pushing anything, we only wish to respect the wishes of the Ukrainian people". This is disingenuous. Without impugning the motivations of the liberal

activists who helped to topple Viktor Yanukovich, the fact is that most ordinary Ukrainians (like citizens of Moldova, Belarus and many other countries) are primarily interested in obtaining identity documents that would enable them to enter the labour markets of the west, just as Poles and others did a decade ago. They are tired of existential insecurity in their country and the humiliating tricks and ruses necessary to enter the Polish labour market (often filling gaps left by Poles working in Britain and elsewhere in the West – see Follis 2012). On the face of it, it makes excellent moral as well as political sense to integrate Ukraine into the EU as soon as possible. But for clueless western leaders such as Barroso (as for numerous western academics), the only way to do this is to reaffirm the essentially non-European character of Russia. Ukrainians are thus invited to choose between Europe, idealized as a realm of enlightened, liberal, free association, and Eurasia, a realm of darkness, totalitarian Caesaropapism, dominated by Vladimir Putin and the ideologists of the Eurasianist movement to whom he is allegedly in thrall. Must the second largest population of Eastern Slavs really be presented with such absurd alternatives?

Conclusion: denying Eurasia

The crisis in Ukraine should be connected to the crisis of capitalism, as analysed by Wolfgang Streeck and others. The bloodshed was entirely predictable once the boundary of the Eastern Slavs was breached in such an irresponsible manner. It is a consequence of the renewal of the eastwards expansion of NATO and the EU, but it also needs to be placed in the context of opening more new markets in the east for western capitalism. The integration of the Visegrád countries and other eastern European states into the EU has contributed significantly to the process which Streeck identifies as “buying time” (and perhaps these countries should receive more attention in his work). Ukraine is already a very interesting place for German companies, and it is likely to become even more so; perhaps the cars currently produced in Hungary and the Czech Republic will soon be assembled in L’viv and Odessa. And perhaps one day in the distant future we could imagine a Russian President being deemed *salonfähig* to negotiate political and economic accords, and even a merger of the CIS with the EU, to open up a much larger free trade zone across the Eurasian landmass.

This is one scenario. Others are imaginable. Brussels could have averted tragedy in Ukraine with a clear declaration that it was only prepared to negotiate with Kiev and Moscow simultaneously; such a declaration would still be helpful today. It would be wise to find a seat at the table for President Lukashenko too, thus respecting the *longue durée* integrity of the Eastern Slavs. But the negotiations should not stop there – they should be extended to include Ankara, Beijing, Chişinău and all the other capital cities of Eurasia, understood as the super-continent where ever more intensive forms of connectivity have evolved since the Bronze Age (Hann 2014a). The stakes could not be higher. It cannot just be a matter of extending free

trade zones, but of working out policies to conserve fragile human environments and promote society and its collective goods. And not least to promote the very rights and freedoms which western Europeans have come to take for granted, which they invoke, e.g. in the guise of human rights, to reproach most of the rest of the world.

I measure the ravages of neoliberalism in my home city of Halle by the contraction of the local orchestras since my arrival here, by the insidious expansion of Sunday shopping, the rationalization of hospital services and the constant cuts which affect teaching and research at the Martin Luther University. But I am aware that even this economically weak region of Germany is extraordinarily privileged in comparison with most of the world. In this respect, the messages which came out of the G20 summit in distant Brisbane, a hotspot in Australia's lurch to a more aggressive neoliberalism, were not reassuring. The emphasis upon growth and free trade, the continued, British-led reluctance to regulate financial markets effectively, all served to confirm Streeck's diagnosis that the old European ideals of the Sozialmarkt have been sidelined if not entirely abandoned by European and world leaders.

These ideals build on much older civilizational histories across Eurasia, which have always embedded economy in the social order and prevented the market principle from dominating. These legacies remain significant and anthropological research indicates that they are highly valued. Even neoliberal Britain still has more in common with post-Soviet Russia and with China, cautiously beginning to extend the entitlements of a welfare state to all its citizens, than with the anti-government dogmas of the Tea Party faction in Washington. The current suffering of the Eastern Slavs should be addressed in this spirit of Eurasian commonalities, not through the absurdity of opposing Europe to Eurasia.

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[1] Struve 2014 analyses both academic and non-academic public interventions in the German press down to mid-April 2014, emphasizing how interpretations are shaped by the legacy of guilt following the Second World War. While this ought to apply to both Russia and Ukraine in equal measure, according to Struve it led in these months to a pro-Russian bias. My impression is that in recent months the tone has hardened substantially against Russia and those referred to contemptuously as "Putin-Versteher". German elites argue that Germany has a special obligation to uphold the rule of law; they take the "liberal values" invoked by the "pro-Europe" forces in Ukraine at face value because of their own illiberal past. According to this interpretation, ironically, it is precisely because of horrors such as the Wehrmacht siege of Leningrad that Germans now have a duty to show Russians the Western liberal way. However, reader comments in internet forums throughout 2014 suggest that these insinuations (that apologetics for Putin's Russia are tantamount to a continuation of the worst abuses of the German past) are hotly contested.

[2] Wolf Biermann is an acclaimed musician and writer whose expulsion from East Germany was a cause célèbre in 1976. Decorated in the west for his Zivilcourage, he is known nowadays as a CDU voter who condemns President Putin as the "bloody afterbirth" of Stalinism. Invited in November 2014 to address the German parliament to mark the 25th anniversary of the falling of the wall, he used this occasion to refer to Die Linke, the third largest parliamentary party, as the "wretched remains" of communism.

[3] Streeck believes that capitalism may well have entered a terminal collapse (fully aware of having distinguished company in this regard). See his article "Die Einigung Europas ist dramatisch gescheitert" in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 11 August 2013 (No. 32). See also Streeck 2014a, 2014b and, for a complementary perspective from France, Salais 2013.

[4] To complete the picture the case of Moldova should also be noted. In July 2014 this weak state, characterized by deep political divisions and extremely low income levels, ratified a closer Association with the EU similar to that proffered to Kiev, which led to regime change there. Moscow was not pleased by Moldova's integration into the EU's DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area), a rival to the embryonic Eurasian Economic Union. However, the growing westwards orientation of a small country which, although historically a part of the

Russian Empire, is culturally and linguistically close to Romania, is insignificant in comparison with the provocation perceived in the Ukrainian case.

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