

NONFICTION

Are We Traveling the 'Road to Unfreedom'?

By Margaret MacMillan

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THE ROAD TO UNFREEDOM**Russia, Europe, America**

By Timothy Snyder

359 pp. Tim Duggan Books. \$27.

Historians of the first half of the 20th century take little pleasure in today's renewed interest in their subject. We don't like the parallels between the West then and now: the rise of intolerant nationalist right-wing parties; the loss of faith in democratic institutions and the longing for a strong leader; the demonization of minorities like Jews or Muslims; or the unwillingness or inability of democracies to work together.

We are living in dangerous times, Timothy Snyder argues forcefully and eloquently in his new book, "The Road to Unfreedom." Too many of us, leaders and followers, are irresponsible, rejecting ideas that don't fit our preconceptions, refusing discussion and rejecting compromise. Worse, we are prepared to deny the humanity and rights of others. In his chilling "Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin," Snyder explored the ghastly consequences of tyranny and the breakdown of human values and norms in the center of Europe.

The road to unfreedom, as Snyder sees it, is one that runs right over the Enlightenment faith in reason and the reasonableness of others — the very underpinning, that is, of our institutions and values. Recent examples, found around the world, demonstrate both how important conventions and mutual respect are as a way of maintaining order and civility — and how easily and carelessly they can be smashed. Just think of President Trump's regular impugning of the loyalty of those who work for the American government, in the F.B.I., for example.



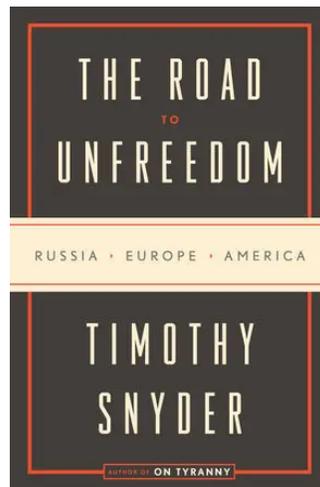
Vladimir Putin delivers a speech during a campaign rally in Moscow this past March. Maxim Shemetov/Reuters

So many of us no longer care, as we should, about understanding ourselves and our pasts as complex and ambiguous. Rather we look for comforting stories that claim to explain where we came from and where we are going. Such stories relieve us of the need to think and serve to create powerful identities. They also serve the authoritarian leader who rides them to power.

Snyder makes a valuable distinction between the narratives of inevitability and those of eternity. The former are like Marxism or faith in the triumph of the free market: They say that history is moving inexorably toward a clear end. The latter do not see progress but an endless cycle of humiliation, death and rebirth that repeats itself. Not surprisingly these often draw on powerful religious iconography. Both, as Snyder points out, produce intolerance of those who disagree. By questioning the narrative's supposed truth, you are removing yourself from the community of true believers.

Liberal democracy is being undermined from within, but not only from within. In addition to the general malaise Snyder identifies, “The Road to Unfreedom” also points to human agency — in particular that of Vladimir Putin. At home and abroad Putin has willing collaborators and “useful idiots,” as Lenin supposedly called them, who think Putin means well or can be won over. Yet the evidence is that Putin is ruthless in his determination to hang on to power and destroy those he perceives as enemies of Russia, a large group. He has used covert and not so covert means (think of the “volunteers” in eastern Ukraine who drove Russian Army trucks) to destabilize neighboring governments and to stir up dissent in countries from France to the United States. Within Russia, as recent elections illustrate, he bends the Russian people to his will through a mixture of coercion and persuasion. As Snyder says in one of his incisive comments, Putin’s dominance is based on “lies so enormous that they could not be doubted, because doubting them would mean doubting everything.”

To understand Putin, Snyder argues persuasively, you must understand his ideas. On examination these are a strange and toxic mixture of fascism, religion and 19th-century notions about race and the struggle for survival. His pronounced use of sexual imagery would also interest Freud. There is a stress on power and virility and corresponding fears of sexual nonconformity. Putin and his obedient press regularly attack gays and gay rights as part of a Western conspiracy to destroy Russia. When Ukrainians turned out in massive protests in 2014 against their corrupt pro-Russian dictator Viktor Yanukovich, the Russian press claimed that behind the organization there was an L.G.B.T. lobby and warned of a “homodictatorship.”



One of the key thinkers venerated by Putin and his circle is a hitherto obscure Russian fascist, Ivan Ilyin, whose views are absurd but terrifying in their implications. God, Ilyin says, made a mess of the world but fortunately there was one pure and innocent being — the Russian nation. Whatever Russia did, and does, to defend itself is legitimate. One day it will find its redeemer — inevitably a strong and virile man — and triumph. (As Snyder points out, there is an insuperable dilemma: What happens when the redeemer dies?) Wearing the mantle of the redeemer, Putin will wage war on Russia’s enemies: namely, his own citizens who want democratic rights; Ukrainians and other neighbors who want independent states; or the European Union and the United States because they offer the temptations of another way of life. Fortunately (this theory goes) both the great rivals are decadent and worn out and doomed to vanish, with some help from Russia, into the dustbin of history.

In 2013 Russia’s foreign minister unveiled an official “foreign policy concept,” which foretold a bitter competition for resources and space across the world. Eurasia would emerge as a “unified humanitarian space” from the Atlantic to the Pacific and at its core would be the great power of Russia. In the words of another of Putin’s favorite thinkers, Lev Gumilev, Russia possesses a vital energy, “passionarity.” Here we get into L. Ron Hubbard territory. Each nation in the world, as defined in the discredited 19th-century racial sense, is the product of cosmic rays. Since the Russian ray came late in time, Russians are young and brimming with energy.

Knowing relatively little about Putin’s private views or about who really has influence over him, it is hard to tell if he actually believes such stuff or whether he uses it as compensation for Russia’s many and manifest weaknesses. What is clear is that he is prepared to inflict as much damage as he can get away with on Russia’s enemies and he has had considerable success.

Snyder set out to write a book about Russia and its relations with Ukraine and Europe, but he found the trail led to Western Europe and the United States as well. Russia spreads false information, like the story — that never took place — of a German schoolgirl’s gang-rape by Muslims, or Obama’s supposed birth in Africa. It gives financial and other support to right-wing parties or, in the case of Britain, to those supporting the Brexit campaign. Putin no doubt sees it as payback, since the West promoted dangerous ideas about democracy and human rights in his own country. Russia has honed its cyberwar skills, shutting down communications and financial networks in Ukraine and Estonia and, now, as recent reports say, penetrating the systems that control American power stations. Surely, though, the reader wants to

say, Snyder must be exaggerating and jumping to conclusions when he calls Trump “Russia’s candidate”? Yet it is unsettling that so many people near the president or his campaign have links to Russia and that the president himself has been so reluctant to comment publicly on Russia’s more egregious moves.

So what can the concerned citizen do about the decay in our public life? We must, Snyder says, keep digging for the facts and exposing falsehoods. As Thucydides, the father of history, said, “Most people, in fact, will not take trouble in finding out the truth, but are much more inclined to accept the first story they hear.” We should mistrust one-sided accounts of the past or the present. “The Road to Unfreedom” is a good wake-up call. You don’t have to agree with all of Snyder’s conclusions, but he is right that understanding is empowerment.