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Transcript

POST-IMPERIUM: A EURASIAN STORY

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WELCOME:
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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

MODERATOR:
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SPEAKER:
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Director,
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JAMES COLLINS: I think if we have people out in the hall, if they can come in and take seats, we should get started.

Let me welcome everyone to our noon time event today, which I'm very, very pleased to introduce.

Dmitri Trenin has written another book. And this book, not unlike his last, I think, is a very thought-provoking and challenging book intellectually. And it's one that asks us to rethink many assumptions.

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Dmitri is very good at that. Most of you know him. I don't think he needs a big introduction for this audience. But he is the director of our Moscow Center for the Carnegie Endowment. He has been with Carnegie, what, 15 years?

DMITRI TRENIN: More than that.

MR. COLLINS: More than that.

MR. TRENIN: Eighteen, maybe?

MR. COLLINS: OK. And he is the author of sort of regular series of articles, books and so forth that look at Russia's contemporary development and its relations with the outside world and internally.

We've asked another longtime friend of mine, and well-known to many people who served in Moscow in the '90s, David Hoffman, to provide some provocative questions to Dmitri or to get him talking about his book. David has most recently written a book called "Dead Hand" and tells me he was just in Moscow to introduce its Russian translation around town to a rather interesting and, I think, diverse set of audiences.

But David was correspondent for The Washington Post in Moscow when a number of us were there. He has written a book on the oligarchs. And the most recent is on arms control.

And so I'm simply here to introduce these people, welcome you. And we'll have some back and forth between David and Dmitri to begin, and then we'll engage the audience in the discussion. So welcome all of you and thank you very much for coming.

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And I will turn (now ?) it over to you, David.

DAVID HOFFMAN: Great. Thank you. It's great to see you, all of you, here.

I know that the weather outside is lousy and people are very, very busy. But I have to tell you, I think this book will be worth your time. It is absolutely brimming with great analysis and wisdom. And I was forced, as I read, to

catalog some of my own mistaken assumptions in the '90s and the last decade, so I feel humbled before Dmitri for this piece of work.

I hate to give you a spoiler, but there's a very important sentence in the conclusion of the book which I must read to you, and it's very simple: The Russian Empire is over, never to return. This is Dmitri's conclusion, but on the way to getting there, he takes us through 20 years of very, very important history.

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And I think that what he has done is to actually stand on the cliff where Russia was 20 years ago, look into the abyss, and then tell us a little bit about why and how Russia and all the successor states of the former Soviet Union did not fall into that abyss. And it's quite a story, it's quite an interesting one, and it's a challenging one. And (up here?) I'd like to explain why briefly.

All of you, I'm sure, remember that in December 1991, that was a pretty scary abyss that Russia faced. And I think we can all make long lists of the possible outcomes that would be very, very unpleasant for the rest of the world, not the least of which was nuclear weapons being hauled in cattle cars back from the frontier or the bizarre command-and-control system over the weapons that did exist, four republics with them, not to mention the ethnic and other distributions that seemed to be a road map for disaster.

And in the book, Dmitri tells us that actually, Russia has gone through four crises in this period since the mid-1980s: It let go of communism; it abandoned central planning; it walked away from the Cold War confrontation; and gave up the imperial state.

And the consequences of that, I think, are laid out in this book in such a clear and analytical fashion that we can begin to get a much better grip, 20 years later, on what really happened.

And as I read it, I began to think about what hadn't happened that I certainly feared might have when I was a correspondent there and frequently at Dmitri's edge of his desk, asking him for his advice about what was going on. And a quick list: There was not a nuclear conflagration and all the nuclear weapons were safely returned to Russia. Russia did not attempt to restore the empire. There is not a failed state among the former Soviet republics. In Dmitri's analysis, Russia itself is a unitary state and a country, if not yet a nation, as Dmitri puts it, and we'll talk more about that. Most of the former republics are comfortable in their own skin. There are a few conflicts, but there is not, really, a large-scale dispute about the borders.

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But for all that didn't happen, the tension in this book is the – and what Dmitri challenges us to think about – is how does Russia go forward? How does a shrinking empire, a shrunken state cope with its own rather big ambitions? How does a weakened state go about realizing those ambitions or accepting, then, the fact that it cannot realize them?

And here, I think we get to the exact inflection point where we stand today – and was the news of the weekend – that Vladimir Putin will resume the mantle of the presidency. What kind of shrunken empire will he be leaving and what kind of pressures will be bearing down upon him as he does that are the kind of things we want to talk about today.

So I'd like to put a few questions to Dmitri, and then, of course, we're going to open it up for everybody to go after him.

But at first, I'd like to put this question to you because it's a big part of your book. And that is this: Why did this empire collapse without all those terrible things happening that we predicted? In other words, in post-imperium, why not more chaos?

MR. TRENIN: Well, let me first of all thank you for agreeing to do this. It's a – it's a great honor for me that you're sitting here and you've read the book and you are putting those questions.

I think it's very important that we – that we stop taking the collapse of the Russian imperial state for granted. I think that's what many of us did back in the early 1990s. The Soviet flag was hauled down from the Kremlin and that was supposedly it.

It was not.

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And I think we're living today with the consequences of a process which has almost run its course, but it's still – it's still impacting on the lives and policies of not just Russia but other countries as well.

I think, to address your question squarely, you will have to recognize the importance of the Gorbachevian moment in Russian history. I think that, if anything, glasnost revealed to the Russian people the horrors of their history, which many of them had not been fully aware of.

And I think what glasnost also – glasnost and other things that were part of the process that Gorbachev launched – glasnost somehow convinced the people in Russia to put themselves above other things, such as ideology, religion, and even their own state.

I think what's important to realize is that the state, all of a sudden, ceased to be what it had always been in Soviet history and what it had largely been in Russian imperial history, something which is more important than the people who live in that state.

I think with – Gorbachev empowered – and Gorbachev, I use for a shorthand – Gorbachev empowered people, and they put themselves first.

And that, I think, led to many interesting things. The people who were in charge of the ideology in the Soviet Union, they traded the ideology, which was worn and basically useless – no one believed in that – they exchanged it for other things more important to them, more lucrative things.

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The people who was supposed to guard the Soviet Union from external threats had become tired of being used by Gorbachev and others in the various domestic conflicts. This is not – if you want to keep an army in good shape, you never tell the army – you never ask the army to do the domestic stuff for you. And Gorbachev clearly abused the army in that sense. So when the Soviet Union was teetering toward that abyss, that edge of the cliff, the army – and that, I think, was the most – I may be biased, frankly, because I served in the military in those days, but I think that the Soviet army were, in some ways, the unsung heroes of the transformation because, you know, normal

people do not give – in Russia – do not give an oath of allegiance; the military people had to give an oath of allegiance to the state, and that – it meant something. You sometimes have to give your lives for that. And they never cared about saving the Soviet Union by the time the Soviet Union was nearing collapse. They withdrew their support from the Soviet Union, and that was very important.

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Now, there were many other things. All of a sudden, it dawned on the people that they needed to walk away from the shell which had become basically nonperforming and empty for them. And that's when the Soviet Union collapsed – and many other things. It's one of those rare moments in history when an empire is – a communist empire and a nuclear empire – decides to dissolve itself peacefully.

If you compare that record with the record of other empires in the 20th century, you probably come to the conclusion that the exit from the Russian empire was by far the – well, the least bloody exit. There was blood, no question; there was pain. But if you compare that to what might have been – and what happened, actually, in other cases – you would see that that was surprisingly, surprisingly easy exit.

But, of course, the underside of it is that 20 years after the end of the empire, we're still living with a – with a lot of old baggage, mental baggage, a lot of old stuff. And if you listen to – this is the last thing I will say, (and after ?) – I know I've been talking for quite a while – but in answer to your first question, I would say that if you were listening to the people in Moscow and the people in some places around Russia – and maybe far away from Russia – you wouldn't know that the Russian empire is over. If you listen, you think it's still there. If you – if you go in, if you look around, if you – if you look at what people do rather than what people say, then you will know the answer, I think.

MR. HOFFMAN: Let me follow up with that a little bit because while we're still on this question of why did it happen before we look ahead, one of the things you point out in your book is that the great fears that many of us had about sort of a rolling ethnic collapse, a nationalistic breakup, it sort of stopped.

In other words, we had certainly the centrifugal forces that Gorbachev unleashed – the union falling apart. We did have sort of the attempted secession of Chechnya. But in many, many other ways, all these fault lines of nationalism and ethnicity didn't crack. The millions of Russians marooned in Kazakhstan didn't – you know, over and over again, it seems to have settled where it was.

To what do you attribute that?

MR. TRENIN: Well, there's an interesting thing about this imperial collapse. Unlike in many other cases, unlike the decline and fall of the British Empire, let's say, the initiative, in this case, in the Russian case, came from the metropolitan part of the empire. It was the Russians, crucially, who had grown tired of shouldering the imperial burden. And with Russia leading the way rather than Russia standing in the way, you had the dynamic that you described, David.

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And also, there's another thing about the Russian people. Because the Russian empire is as old as – it's now deceased, but was as old as St. Basil's in Moscow, which was the first monument to the Russian Empire – that's where Russia forfeited its historical option of becoming a nation-state and instead started amassing other people's

lands and other peoples within its imperial boundaries. The 400-plus year history essentially – imperial history essentially de-ethnicized the Russians.

So who is a Russian? Anyone could be accepted into the Russian community if you – if you add a patronymic to your name, and it's an easy thing to do. We all have fathers. And that's it. Georgy Georgievich Bush sounds very Russian. (Laughter.) And I'm sure that there may be a couple of people bearing that name in the Russian Federation. That's – that's not a problem.

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So when people think about ethnicity – maybe not last, but it's certainly not first – you walk into another cathedral in Moscow, our Saviour's cathedral, the one restored next to the Kremlin on the – on the – place of the former swimming pool, and you look at the plaques devoted to the officers in the Russian imperial army in 1812-1815, who fought against Napoleon, of course, around a third of the names would be Slavic, about a third of the names would be Muslim and the remnant third of the names would be Western European. So that's the imperial army. The most patriotic – it was said in the 19th century, the most patriotic servants of the tsar bore German names. And, of course, the dynasty was more German – much more German than it was Slavic or Russian.

So you have this imperial thing which essentially may put the state, the culture and the language above ethnicity and even above religion because many of those German patriots of the Russians tsars were protestants or some of them were Catholics.

So that's – I think that's part of it: de-ethnicization of the Russian people and their attachment to the – to the empire, and, for some of them, to the idea of the empire.

MR. HOFFMAN: In the – in the outlying areas too? I mean, there must have some factor there that prevented them also from bloodshed and further violence like we saw elsewhere in the world.

MR. TRENIN: Well, I'm – I would really want to commend, first of all, the Ukrainian people. It's a small miracle that Ukraine has been able to keep itself within – within its borders given the large Russian population, given the complex nature of the Ukrainian territory. The fact the Ukraine was the only country has – well, not the only – but one of the very few countries in the former Soviet Union that has not experienced any serious ethnic clashes is certainly a great contribution of the Ukrainian people of whatever ethnicity to European security and worldwide well-being.

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In many other countries, the process of Soviet modernization led to the emergence of urban centers, which were polyethnic, multiethnic and where ethnicity, again, mattered somewhat less than it did elsewhere.

It was also important, in a certain way, that in the Soviet Union, religion was not – after what Stalin had done to religion across the country – religion did not become a focus of attention. And people did not grant – did not reach out for their religious identity, in many cases – in some, they did, but not in many cases – as something that would distinguish them from the others.

And I think that what applies to Russia applies to most other former Soviet states. They managed to get through with relatively little bloodshed, with relatively little conflict, although Russia, of course – we're talking about Russia as if there has not – has not been a Chechnya. There was Chechnya. There is instability in the North Caucasus

even today. And Russia is not wearing white clothes, God forbid. But again, judged against the list of what might have happened, the Russians and the rest of the former Soviet Union have not done badly at all.

You look also at the Baltic states. There were very, very few – there was some tension – there is some tension – but there were no clashes between the Russians and the – and the – and the local ethnic groups. This is – this is another contribution to Europe's security.

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MR. HOFFMAN: You know, Dmitri, I also – now that we've looked back a little bit, I'd like to look forward. And there's a page in this book that had, I thought, an exceptionally prescient and penetrating comment. And I'd just like to read it and then ask you a question because I see a little bit of a contradiction in your views about the future.

You write that, in present-day Russia, atomized society is not really bound by any barriers, official or conventional. The elite rise, but they do not lead and do not care to. The private definitely trumps the public. Seen from virtually any level of society, the state is too corrupt to inspire national consciousness. You say there is no imagined community of faith in today's Russia. So you've portrayed this atomized, privatized state.

And in the next page, you go on to say that the people who lead Russia today clearly do not see democracy as a value. But, you say, they have uses for democracy's attributes as a legitimizing instrument. And you suggest that an atomized society beholden to personalized power works for the time being. And you say this is a recipe for stability in post-Soviet Russia.

But elsewhere in the book, you also say that you don't think that Russia can modernize economically without also modernizing politically. And I think you've been quite outspoken about discussing how political modernization has to be part of the equation.

So I want to ask sort of, which is it? Is this atomized, privatized society led now by Putin in the near future stable? Or is it something that essentially is stable only for stagnation? Can the Putin formula work beyond stagnation? Can it – can it work towards some kind of different future than the one we take as the conventional wisdom, that – will be next?

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MR. TRENIN: Well, I would say that the Putin formula is fine for preserving the status quo as long as the challenges to the status quo are not overwhelming. And this may last – who knows? I don't think it will last very long, but it will last a couple of years. It may last more than a couple of years. But it's clear that this formula does nothing to take Russia away from this stagnation path.

And I think that before there is a political modernization, there must be – and there is, already – social modernization. So I used the notion of an atomized society to describe what Russia is today. It's 140 million people – (1)42 million people – but they don't constitute a nation.

The recipe for success and even for survival in post-Soviet Russia has been individual – I mean, individual effort. You had to – you had to lean together on the walls of the Soviet Union so that they gave way and let you walk out of that walled-in community, walled-in space. But then what? It dawned on people that you would only be successful to the extent that you focused on yourself, not on the others.

You talked, David, about the 25 – whatever – 30 million Russians marooned outside of the new borders of the Russian Federation. Did any Russians within the Russian Federation care about that? They did not; most of them did not. It's just bad luck for you guys; you happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and we can't do anything about it because, you know, we're in the business of surviving or in the business of making money or some other business, but it's our personal business.

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So what you have in Russia today is – and this is the private trumping the public – my favorite analogy, of course, is a normal Russian apartment block. You walk into that apartment block and you see that the door is not nice, not paint – not freshly painted, not painted at all. The elevator is creaky, the cleaning lady has not been there for two weeks or three weeks or two months, I don't know.

But then you walk into the apartment that you're visiting, the apartment is nice. It's actually newly refurbished and it has all the amenities and – well, actually, you can – you can sell it for fairly high price. A square meter in Moscow, in central Moscow would fetch – I don't know – depending on the quality of the apartment block, $7,000, $8,000. So you can buy fairly – a fairly good apartment in the United States, for example. That's real money.

When you look down from the window of your apartment, you will see new cars and there will be ever newer cars. I don't think that there are many Soviet-made or Russian-made models anymore or – in most – in most courtyards in central Moscow.

But then you come to the pretty unsettling conclusion that individualism has almost run its course. You live in this nice apartment but the staircase is dirty. The elevator needs replacing. And no one will do it for you. You can – you can have a nice car but the roads are bumpy and the poorly – traffic is poorly regulated and you can – you cannot do anything about that.

So what I'm trying to say is that individualism is close to having performed its mission in securing this passage. Any progress beyond where you are would require some common action. You would – it would – that would require that the neighbors form – for example, that they form a condominium and start managing their affairs jointly. And this is just a model for things on a far larger scale.

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And this is where Russia is today. If Russian people start collaborating horizontally, if they start reaching out to their neighbors, the country will change, it will start changing. And then the country, which is – does not have a nation today, might have something like a nation in the future.

Russia, today, is not an empire, but it's not a republic, either. It's a not a republic in the most basic sense of the word. There's no res publica. Everyone has his own res. That's the problem.

But Russians being just, you know, a bunch of humans, I don't think that they are so different from other people. They'll take their time. And I – you would – you would see that at the social level, the way people go about their daily lives, the way people think about their kids, they think about their future, there is modernization going on.

And people are placing – people talking about the values – many of the values that the urban people in Russian – in Russian urban centers, the city dwellers have, they would be very close to the values of the urban people across the

world. And you do have the social modernization. Whether it will lead to political modernization, I think, yes. And we can talk about some of the ways –

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MR. HOFFMAN: But – I mean, if you let me just push you on that for a minute, because you're getting close to the real unknown about Russia's future. And that is, many people have said Putin essentially has created what one of your associates called a "non-participation pact" with people: that essentially he stays out of the kitchen – he stays out of their personal lives, the era of intrusion is over – and they stay out of politics. And they stay out of civil society. They don't look out the window and think about contacting their neighbors. That everybody is happy in this atomized society.

What's to prevent Prime – President Putin from essentially taking this forward in a Chinese model – give no ground at all on politics, control it, and try and satisfy people's individual desires and preserve that status quo – what threatens that?

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MR. TRENIN: Well, I would say this: People do not normally engage in politics unless their real interests are affected. And you are absolutely right to point out that for a lot of people, the current status quo today is just fine, especially compared – they do not compare their situation to the situation in the United States or France or China for that matter; they compare it to their own situation 20 years ago, 10 years ago, 30 years ago – so whether you compare that to Yeltsin, Gorbachev or Brezhnev.

And you can make an argument that today's Russia is far more affluent than any other Russia that we've seen, and it's much freer than any other Russia except for a brief period at the beginning of the '90s which, though Russia experienced – during that period Russia experienced much more freedom than it experiences now, that freedom came in combination with a fairly low level of living and fairly dire situation for most people.

And actually, freedom for a lot of people begins with their pocketbook. You can be free but if you – if you don't have enough money to buy yourself a good lunch, then you're not as free as you might think. You may elect your president but you cannot, for example, send your kid to the seaside during his vacation. And this is a different kind of freedom. Now, the freedom that people today have is fairly more substantially – it stops at the edge of the realm of the political, that's correct.

And now, I think, the government and the people who for a long time have been living in two different universes – the government did – doesn't really – in Russia the government doesn't really need the people for the money. The money comes from gas, from Rosneft. Something like 5 percent of the Russian income – federal income comes from the people – from taxing the individuals.

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And of course the people – well, they may – they may – they may be paying attention to the bureaucrats – the corrupt bureaucrats becoming so rich on the job; they will still console themselves by saying it's not my money, it's their money. They're just dividing their money, and I keep my money. So, you know, they're two parallel universes.

This has been going on for some time. Will it go forever? No. One of the things that Mr. Putin is fighting so hard for right now is a popular mandate. And this may one – be one of the reasons why he decided to step back into the

presidency. He sees the situation – the economic situation becoming more difficult for Russia. And it's actually widely accepted in the country that once the elections are over the Russian government will start – will begin with a set of austerity measures.

The Russian government has only been able to keep – let me put it differently. The break-even price for the Russian budget – the price of oil – has risen to 109 (dollars per barrel). When Kudrin took over as finance minister, that was – that was in the low 30s (dollars per barrel); now it's 109 (dollars per barrel). Will it stay at that level? Probably not, if you're looking at the situation of Western economies and the global economy which may mean that – which will mean that the Russian government will impose itself more seriously on the Russian people.

Now, you – if you start doing that, people will start paying attention to how you're using their money. And we can – this can draw more people into the realm of the political without the people – it's won't be – right now it's – for a lot of people who oppose the government, it's more done out of – I wouldn't call it abstract conclusions, but it comes from your heart, you know, or it comes from your – from your head, this opposition to Putin – Putinism, however you want to call it.

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But that only draws a small portion of the population into the realm of even political debate when this will be about people's core interests. If it's about the pocketbook, then a lot, lot more people will be politically conscious. And I'm not saying that this will turn Russia into a liberal democracy. It may turn Russia into a – it may help steer the course into a different direction. But what I'm saying is that this pact that you referred to, although it's still holding, will not hold forever. And it may not hold for long in my view.

MR. HOFFMAN: Well, that's interesting and somewhat disturbing conclusion that it's not really so stable and you're predicting change. So now's a good time for me to throw it open. Please raise your hand to be recognized, and please stand up and tell us who you are so everybody knows who's asking. And we've got a good amount of time now. And I'm just going to sort of go around the room randomly, so I'll start over here and we'll get everybody.

Q: My name is Hank Gaffney for CNA. And just a question for you personally – you going to turn it on?

MS. : Yes.

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Q: No, I know you started out in – the GRU debriefing people over in East Europe.

MR. TRENIN: No, I think you confuse me with somebody else. I was not debriefing people from –

Q: Were you in GRU?

MR. TRENIN: No, I was not.

Q: You were in straight army?

MR. TRENIN: I was in straight army. People around me – some of the people around me were people from the GRU. I was not.

Q: OK. So the question then is – whatever – as an army person, how was your consciousness shaped toward this big change that took place? I understand you got your Ph.D. at – around 1984 from ISKRAN, ISKON (ph) at that time. How did your consciousness evolve across this time given those connections?

MR. TRENIN: Right. Mr. Gaffney, let me – I think I would start – when I was 19 I was sent to Iraq, of all places, by the Soviet military to be an interpreter for the Soviet military assistance group in Iraq. And what Iraq taught me was that – well, A, it taught me that there could be a government in the world that was stricter on its people than the Soviet government.

And that was a bit before Saddam Hussein – Saddam Hussein was still number two that – we're talking that in '75 and '76. So we still had that army general Bakr as president. But what Iraq also gave me access to was not so much the Arab world – I do not speak the language and I was dissuaded from attempting to learn Arabic – but Newsweek was available – Mysteries of Baghdad – so I would buy a copy of Newsweek every week and read about the world through Newsweek. So that was one window.

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When I was – when I was commissioned into the military, my first job was as a – call it a liaison officer to the Western allies in the Berlin area, and I was in Potsdam. So there were many things that I took away from that. Every day I would have eight dailies in three or four languages land on my desk. And I'd be often the sole reader of that stuff because no one – no one else was terribly interested.

But you could read the Herald Tribune, the Daily Telegraph, The Times, or Le Monde, the Frankfurter Allgemeine, on a daily basis. You were also – you also had access to West German television, and I speak German. So you learn about the world. Mr. Putin, unfortunately, was yet to debrief people because in Dresden, where he was stationed with the KGB, you know, there is a topographical depression and they could not pick up West German television from Dresden – (laughter) – so you had to talk to people to know the truth.

Potsdam was – of course, West Berlin was around the corner. And more importantly, I think, you had access to people and you engaged in private conversations with people ranging from corporals to four-star generals – but the four-star general would normally be in an interpreter's capacity. And with your peers you would be just colonels – well, I was a senior lieutenant captain, so very lowly placed military officer.

But you would talk to the – and you would – one thing I realized from Germany is that – or rather from my experience, that you can have more and better communication with your peers across the borders horizontally than with your own people vertically. And that came as a – as one big insight. Another big insight – you had to sit in at the meetings which were often contentious, that's why they were called, between the Soviet military people and the Western military people about incidents – people were spying on each other, which helped to keep the Cold War cold.

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So there were military intelligence people, Soviet, in the free zones of West Germany. There were three Western military missions in the GDR. And everyone was riding around the place. So Germany was always being controlled from the inside as well as from the outside. And you – what you would always – and since you were there, you were interpreting or taking notes in those meetings. You always – you realize that there's no such – well, there is such a thing as the truth. But it lies between the sides. It doesn't belong to either side.

The Soviets would be saying, you know, I think – you would know from the inside that the Soviets were saying the things that were convenient for them, and you would know it from them they would be. And you would also realize that the people in the West were – would be telling their own stories because of the position that they had. It was all about catching people in unauthorized areas and doing other things. But it was fun. And for a young kid of 22, 23, 25, that was great learning. It was much worth – it was worth a university education – a second one. I'm so glad that I was part of that.

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But I can continue – I think I'd rather stop there. There was – there were other things – Geneva, nuclear talks and many other things. And – well. I'd rather stop here.

MR. HOFFMAN: Mr. Ambassador?

Q: Thank you. Temuri Yakobashvili, Ambassador of Georgia. It's always good to see Dmitri and always inspiring to read his books because it's always very interesting. So I have a temptation to read this as soon as possible. I have to admit, I hadn't read it yet.

So first of all, I want to agree with Dmitri that the Russian Empire is dead. But I disagree that it died in '90s. It died in – during the revolution – the socialist revolution. Since that we had no Russian Empire; we had the Soviet Empire which was by all, you know, assessment very much different from what the classical empires – (inaudible) – German, Austrian, whatever – the British – would be.

So that's why putting sort of together these allusions to other empires and the Russian Empire, which I would be calling the Soviet Empire, is not exactly the correct thing to do because the system of loyalty was different. System of loyalty in British Empire or Hapsburg Empire was the – there was a royal family and a court. And the Soviet Union had something else. So you know it very well what we had.

The problem – the second problem is that I'm not sure if the Russian current leadership is aware of – the Russian Empire is dead. And the behavior patterns, especially in our parts of the world, tells a completely opposite. And all these ideas of, you know, spheres of influence, liberal empire, you know, recognition of occupied territories independence and et cetera, and et cetera – it leads me to think that people in the top leadership of Russia still are not sure about if that empire is dead or not.

[00:45:44]

But the biggest problem, I think, is that – what Dmitri correctly mentioned – that Russians are not sure what kind of country they have. I know only two countries in the world with fluid borders: that's Russia and Israel. So in Russia if you ask where Russia starts and ends, most of the people are not able to tell you where are the borders of Russia.

And my question will be what will trigger Russian, either leadership or people, to come to some kind of conclusion to build either nation-state or to build kind of federation – federal state – not on the paper but on realistic terms. And when you refer to Russian houses and entries, it was Soviet. I mean, we had exactly the same grayness, it had exactly the same – it takes this other kind of transformation to have a normal entrance in your house – but it has nothing to do with the state building in the classical sense. It's just different kind of social changes that are happening when your government starts to deliver to public instead of stealing.

And one last question: When we will switch from notion of making money to earning money? Because in Soviet Union we had this very interesting notion that money had to be made, not to be earned. Thank you.

MR. TRENIN: Mr. Ambassador, first of all, I much appreciate what you said. And it's always interesting to hear from you and you're very outspoken and your views are widely known and I think widely discussed. I think you raised very important points. To me – and that – I think that's where you stand, where you sit, in a way, applies. To me, since I was born and raised in Moscow and in – the end of the Soviet Union was the end of the flag, more or less. To me, nothing more – well, there were other things, but Moscow remained what Moscow was, and did not move anywhere.

I think that, to me, Soviet was – Soviet stands for Russian communist. That's how I interpret it. It's – Soviet is a period in Russian history. And I say Russian because to me, again, this is not ethnically Russian. So my Russian in, let's say, 1914 would include Georgia. Today it doesn't include Georgia.

Q: (Off mic.)

Pardon?

[00:48:48]

Q: (Inaudible.)

MR. TRENIN: No, it doesn't. Well, we'll – we can talk about that. You talked about the borders of Russia. When I – when – and I think you're absolutely right. But the question that I'm most troubled with, and most people in Russia are troubled with, are not the borders on the outside but the borders on the inside. So when I look at the piece of the Russian Federation called Chechnya I see it as a separate state – de facto. When I look at Chechnya's neighbors, Ingushetia, Dagestan, and others, I would say that they're becoming de-Russified and they're becoming something very different. Some people call it "internal abroad," which I think is very – is a very applicable term. So the borders of Russia have started moving, but they're moving in the opposite direction.

Now, Abkhazia and South Ossetia – well, you talked about the spheres of influence. I think that those are the only spheres of influence that Russia currently has. I don't think there's anything else. But that's what they are at this point. I think it would be foolish of Russia to start thinking about reintegrating or integrating South Ossetia with – which to me is non-viable as a state – into Russia. But something has to be done about that.

My own – my own idea about South Ossetia would be to make it into an Andorra in the Caucasus, so everyone would claim that it's somehow – the Andorrans would claim it – would be able to mint coins and print stamps and welcome people to their casinos. From the standpoint of the Georgian state it would be part of Georgia, because Georgia will have some – and from the standpoint of Russia they will have some droit de regard. And it's not a very popular idea anywhere. (Laughter.) But at least that's how I would look at South Ossetia.

[00:51:14]

Abkhazia I think is a different case but, again, I don't think that I need to go very much into that either. But you are – you're absolutely right. The borders of Russia are somewhat being challenged. But the challenge – again, I would say the challenge is coming from within. I wouldn't – I will not willingly go to Chechnya, frankly, although

it's part of the Russian Federation. The number of Russians in Chechnya is close to zero. Before the war there were 400,000 Russians.

My own driver who drives me and my colleagues at Carnegie is born in Grozny. Will he ever want to go there? Do we ever think about reintegrating those 400,000 people? The number of Russians in Dagestan has gone down, as you know, to 2 percent, 3 percent? Ingushetia is Russian-free. That's what we're talking about.

[00:52:18]

The rhetoric – I said at the beginning I'm absolutely in agreement with you that if you listen to what people are talking – in Moscow and in some other places – you will not know that the Russian Empire is dead – that people in Russia are often using the rhetoric as some kind of a self-therapy. It's a difficult thing to exit from an empire. And you will talk about it as if it were there, but in reality it is no longer there. And I think one of the strongest proofs that I have in my mind – you know, there's official talk and there's subconscious something, and that sometimes it goes into the open – this subconscious thing.

You would recall that Putin – or you may not recall that – but Putin was speaking about a year ago during a call-in interview with the Russian people – four hour – a four-hour marathon – had to take a question about Ukraine. And he said a remarkable thing, a totally outrageous thing, which is very interesting. He said, we would have won the Second World War even without Ukraine, which means that not only today or in the past 20 years does he not see Ukraine as part of us – as part of Russia – but even he projects that back into the – into history. So even in the mid-20th century Ukraine was somehow not Russia – a very interesting thing.

Q: (Inaudible) – state at all.

MR. TRENIN: Pardon?

Q: If it isn't, it's not a state at all.

MR. TRENIN: No, he – basically, no. His message was that it's a very fragile state and handle it with care. I think that's what he meant.

Q: (Inaudible) – because he said that the artificial – (inaudible)?

[00:54:03]

MR. TRENIN: I will not be commenting on Putin's statements here. I don't think it's, you know, artificial. You can – you can all say that the borders of the Soviet Union were artificial – internal borders of the Soviet Union were artificial. There are many Russian nationalists who would just say that. The interesting thing that I found out when I was researching for this book was that the borders of the Russian Federation very closely conform to the borders of the Tsardom of Muscovy circa 1650 before Russia embarked on its imperial quest.

So Kiev was not there, the Caucasus were not there, Kazakhstan was not there, Belarus was not there, the Baltic states. So it was basically the borders of – and the interesting thing also is that in – you evoked the Russian Empire. In 1917, the territories of the Russian Empire that defected from the core were exactly the territories that were not part of the Tsardom of Muscovy in 1650. It's interesting. It's – so this is my argument to my own people when they say it's all artificial and the Russian Federation never lived in those borders – that's wrong.

And – but self-therapy is a good thing. I mean, it's – if you gradually come to realize the reality is they have to stay, that's fine. And what kind of a country – it was said of a different country 60 years ago that it had lost an empire and not found its new role. I think it applies to Russia. And it's – I wouldn't call it a tragedy. The country has to conceptualize itself in a totally new way. And it will require time.

And unlike the country I have alluded to, it is not an ally of a mighty world power. It's not part of a – the continent-wide integration process. It's basically on its own, which is fine but which is more difficult.

[00:56:17]

Q: Thank you. Wayne Merry, the American Foreign Policy Council. I might note that some of former Captain Trenin's American counterparts in Potsdam remember him very fondly. (Laughter.) And I think that was –

MR. TRENIN: It is reciprocated.

Q: I think that was an educational process in both directions. And where we are today may demonstrate the benefits of military-to-military contacts, often very unpredictable. (Laughter.)

Dmitri, I've – I have read the book. I have not the slightest hesitation both praising it and recommending it. But I'd like to ask you a question about something you don't go into very much in the book. And that's elite group attitudes. In the book is a very excellent description of the reality of post-imperial Russia and of what's happened in the last 20 years. You discussed to some extent public attitudes in Russia but not elite group attitudes. And it seems to me that that's rather important because elites in great powers are often, perhaps shall we say, a little abstracted from reality.

I won't go in any sort of local examples. (Laughter.) But just in another post-imperial instance, in 1956 the elites in Britain and France not only thought that they could conduct a successful military operation in Suez, they genuinely believed it would be a policy success and would lead to a restoration of a good deal of their greatness and grandeur.

So I'd like you to discuss a bit not reality but what people in the upper, say, 5 (thousand) or 6,000 people of Russia – what do they think of this reality? To what extent is that rather amorphous concept – derzhavnost' – does it affect their sense of Russia internally, Russia externally, and to what extent is this sense of their role of legitimacy from derzhavnost' tied in with their response to both external stimuli and to their own political needs?

[00:58:28]

MR. TRENIN: Well, Wayne, thank you so much for this. I think it's a key question. David quoted from the book saying that the elites rise but they do not lead. That's, to me, a key point or maybe the key point. The elites in Russia do not perform the core function of the elite as leaders of society. The elite in Russia are focused primarily, and I would say exclusively, on themselves. They would employ often derzhvne discourse maybe in order to get themselves some kind of a – of a justification for doing what they're doing because they kind of know what they're doing is a bit unholy. So to make it holy they injected a dose of anti-Americanism into their discussions. Then they would look more patriotic.

And patriotism is – depending how you view it – could be an extremely cheap and useful good. You can – on the Duma floor – you can engage in vitriols against outside threats against Russia, but you will spend most of your time, actually 99 percent of your time, making yourself rich on the Duma floor because there are countries where you

become rich before you join the government; there are – and after you quit the government, and there are countries like Russia where you grow rich while you are in government. That's while you go through –

MR. HOFFMAN: As I think you had said earlier, Russia is ruled by those who own it.

MR. TRENIN: Exactly, and that's the key point. So those elites are not so much abstracted from reality. I think that they are more, well, realist, in many ways, than I am. Because they know how money is to be made, and you know, I probably don't. But they are divorced from the country. The interesting, and maybe one of the things I will need to emphasize here, again, is that the end of the Soviet Union was in many ways a unique experience.

[1:00:55]

It's not that – let's say, you live in Georgia and you see the end of the Soviet Union as national liberation. You may see it differently, but some people see – maybe the majority of people will see it as national liberation.

When you sit in Moscow, what happens is that your state, which you thought was eternal, which had its hand everywhere – all of a sudden, it collapses. And you are present at the funeral of your country, in a way. The country dies and you walk on. And you move on, and you also discover that it's actually better to live without that state above you, or maybe around you. It's a very unusual feeling that a lot of people, I think, imbued during the 1990s. And then the state came back, but that was after a decade, essentially, of the state lying in a coma in Russia.

So derzhavnost', I think, is just a way to compensate themselves and to win some kind of – I wouldn't call it support, but maybe – well, you may call it justification for whatever you're doing to enrich yourself. That's how I see it.

Q: Takao from NHK Japan Broadcasting Corporation. I'm glad to see you again. I've worked in the Moscow office for five years, so I had the chance to interview you a couple times. Thank you.

And I have a question: What is your first impression of Putin's announcement to, you know, go back to the presidency in fact? So, is Medvedev just simply the puppet of Putin, or how seriously was he thought to be an independent authority to reset relations with the United States or the European countries? And how do you think the future relations with the West – you know, from Russia. For example, the missile defense issue – what will happen next? Thank you.

MR. TRENIN: Well, thank you very much. That brings us back to the front pages of today's news. It was surprising and unsurprising, what was announced at this United Russia congress last Saturday. I think most people believed that Putin was likely to stop being an informal leader – paramount leader for Russia, and that he was getting ready to step back into the shoes of formal power, while keeping his informal power, again, with him.

[1:04:40]

I was surprised, however, by the announcement that Medvedev would be Russia's prime minister, and also formal head of the party – under Putin, the paramount leader, of course. In my view, Medvedev does not exactly fit for that role, but the role may be redefined to accommodate Medvedev.

Normally, you view – since the late Soviet period, a prime minister in Russia is someone who is a technocrat, an economist, a financier – someone who looks after socioeconomic things. He is not leader of the party, and he is not an ideologue. And Mr. Medvedev, well, he served as first vice premier, but he is better known for other things.

I don't think he was a puppet. I think he's always been a junior partner to Mr. Putin, a willing junior partner, fully loyal to him. Putin grades loyalty above all other qualities, or maybe most other qualities in humans. And Medvedev passed the test. He never challenged Putin seriously. And when Putin decided he wants to go back, Medvedev obliged.

MR. HOFFMAN: Dmitri, doesn't it bother you that this decision was made so arbitrarily? I hate to raise the question, but you know, Gorbachev said not long ago when these two were discussing their decision – he said, weren't there supposed to be some voters involved? And you know, you describe so eloquently in your book this atomization and all-for-himself kind of idea. And you seem to think there's some stability, but there will be change.

It seems to me that if I were sitting at my kitchen table, I would just say, see, it doesn't depend on me. They made the decision themselves. Aren't they really perpetuating this stagnation in a big way in telling people that it doesn't matter what you think?

[1:06:43]

MR. TRENIN: Well, absolutely. I think that's exactly right. And it's an insult to the Russian people. I think it was a very – it was a very true, genuine, totally correct – very cynical statement that we will sit down and discuss it, because that's what they did. And they said that they were going to do just that. So they were fully – they didn't engage in hypocritical rhetoric about that, but no, this does not bring Russia closer to democracy. Clearly not.

But on the other hand, Medvedev is like the moon to Putin, the sun, if I may say so. He shines with something that's reflected from the bigger body.

And if Medvedev decided to run against Putin, we know who would have won, in general. I mean, Medvedev's support is not that big. That could have opened some floodgates for public discussion. It would have – the Kremlin, perhaps, argued it would have destabilized the system. It would certainly have destabilized the bureaucracy, and probably immobilized the bureaucracy and many other things.

But there are two things that Putin brings to the Russian political system that assure its relative stability. A, he has the support – I wouldn't call it the support. I would call it the acquiescence of the populace. He reaches out to the people down there, way below where he sits. And he kind of appeals to a lot of people around him, so he procures the – again, I would hesitate to call it support – but he procures the acquiescence of the majority of the Russian people in the system that Putin has built.

So this is one thing that he is doing. The other thing that he is doing – he arbitrates among the sharks who populate the upper echelon. It's not a picnic to sit down with some of the oligarchs that you wrote about, David, and especially to invite one of them – you know, to order one of them to come here and sign on the dotted line – and by the way, don't bring the pen back. (Laughter.) And all that in front of TV cameras.

[1:09:24]

You know, it's not a picnic, the life at the top of the Russian system. So those are the two things that Putin does. Medvedev doesn't bring in those things. He goes where Putin can't, or Putin wouldn't. He goes to the young. He goes to the Internet-savvy people. He reaches out to the West, to the United States. The reset would not have been possible if the name of the Russian president had been Vladimir Putin. I don't think it would have been possible.

MR. HOFFMAN: Does that mean the reset won't be possible going forward?

MR. TRENIN: No, now the reset is there. So you need to continue to start – well, the reset today means that United States forces can travel across Russian airspace in the thousands. The Russian public don't know about that – well, almost don't know about that. This is not something that you publicize if you want to build what you call sovereign democracy, with very much the emphasis on the first word. And that military equipment is traversing Russia on rail tracks.

[1:10:35]

So that is reset. It also means that there is, I think, a serious chance of changing the very nature of the relationship, which I think we need to be doing 20 years after the end of the Cold War – transforming the strategic relationship between the two countries, which is still adversarial at core, which is still defined by the missiles at that level.

And the missiles may have played a role when I was wearing my uniform, but they have no role today. And missile defense could be a game-changer in the relationship, changing it from a largely adversarial to a more cooperative relationship. And if you have Putin as your partner, at least you are talking to the decision-maker. And you're not talking to somebody who looks – he's nice, but he will have to clear all his steps with the guy who sits in the back room, in the back office.

Putin has been, and still is today, essentially a back-office manager. His salesman is operating in the front office.

MR. HOFFMAN: Go ahead. No, right here in front, yeah.

Q: Hi, thank you for your presentation today. My name is Ben Liga (sp) with the Internews Network. And I was just wondering if you could comment: In the coming years, in the face of this atomized society, what role do you think the media, and in particular social media, will play in reversing that, in starting to rebuild community connections?

MR. TRENIN: Well, I think that even today the social media are playing a huge role. It's not just the social media, but the Internet more broadly. Some people say there are two parties in Russia: One is called the TV party, and the other one is called the Internet party. The TV party is the Putin party. The Internet party, Medvedev wants to capture that, and he's doing it, of course, on behalf of Vladimir Putin.

But the Internet cannot be captured just like this. The social media cannot be mobilized in support of state power. So I think that Russia is changing fastest at the social level. Most people who read newspapers look at what's happening at the political level, and the more they look there, the more it looks the same, the more depressed they are.

[1:13:35]

If you go down one notch, at the economic level, there's something going on, but not as much as you would wish, because the economic and the political are so closely tied in the Russian system, and in a way, very unfortunately tied. This kind of bind is very unfortunate for the country's development. But if you go one level deeper, if you go to the social level, then you will see tremendous change. Then you will see people – especially the younger people, for whom the world is totally different from the world that I grew up in.

For example, one of the jokes that set – and some of you may remember that – set thousands of people, hundreds of people in a room laughing when performed on stage: There was a famous comedian who said, I need to go to Paris tomorrow on my private business. And people would be laughing in the Soviet Union. Because it was totally insane to talk about going to Paris tomorrow on your private business. You belong in a madhouse.

When I relate that to my 30-year-old son today, he doesn't get it. (Laughter.) He says, so what? I mean, don't you have a – what's your problem? You don't have a visa? You don't have a ticket? There is overbooking? What's the problem? But for those people, the world is essentially borderless. And they reach out to a lot of opportunities around the world, and many of those Russians are voting against Russia.

Hundreds of thousands of people, younger people, are leaving on an annual basis on pursuit of happiness – which is fine, which is great, which is what people wished for. Only they're leaving Russia. I mean, they may return. No one is an émigré. The state does not withdraw your passport. It doesn't care, really. But the country gets fewer bright minds, and it's a bit depressing to think about.

[1:16:01]

But in a world of open borders, that's the reality. You cannot keep people in one place if they want to go elsewhere. And the opportunities in Russia for a lot of people will be so much worse for a very long time, so you have to somehow factor that in.

Q: Gary Ghazarian, Capital Trade, Inc., international trade consultancy. You mentioned that the Russian people eventually should – or was it a question – that they will become a nation, or should become a nation. What would be the national idea behind it? What would be the national idea it would be based in? Ethnic? Doesn't look like it. You know, there are Tatars; there are many other nations. Some kind of ideological? What would be the basis for creating a nation?

MR. TRENIN: I think it will be more like a neighborhood, only a very big neighborhood. You live in one place, more or less. You may call that place Moscow, or a bar in Moscow, or you may call Russia your place. But somehow, you're not bound together. You're not like in the Soviet Union; you can, you know, get up and go.

[1:17:31]

But if you decided to stay, it's best that you collaborate with other people and do something which is for the common benefit. The basis for that, I think, you may call it civic nationalism or something. There's a competitive spirit. The Cold War is over, clearly, but competition is not. And for some people, there is something in this notion of a team Russia – not only in sports, but elsewhere. Let's do it. Are we incapable of competing with anyone?

Then there are some pressures from the outside. Russia is a fairly small place located on the periphery of great China. And the change in fortunes and in position between Russia and China has been far more dramatic, over the last 20 years, than the change between Russia and the United States. Because the United States has always been up there and out there: You'd try to catch up with it, but you knew it was – but with China, you looked down on it for 300 years, or almost for 300 years.

There were lots of them, but they were backward and disunited for a long period of time, lorded over by others – including us. And then all of a sudden, it changed tremendously. In 1977, when Deng Xiaoping started his

reforms, the GDP of China was 40 percent of the GDP of the Russian Soviet republic. Nowadays, it's four times bigger. And the big change happened within just 10 years. So that may be another thing.

Then you will need to define yourself somehow, because if you live in the city of Moscow – again, it's very recent. I have always – not always – last nine years, I lived close to Moscow's central mosque, which is in central – just north of the Garden Ring. And for many years, it was – you know, at the Muslim festival there would be perhaps 100, 200 cars parked there. So not a big deal.

More recently, I would say, the last two or three years, if you walked out into the small lanes that lead from the mosque to the Garden Ring where I live, you see dozens of thousands of young people – very unfamiliar in their attire, even their facial expressions to you. They would be speaking their own language. They would be totally – at this point, still unintegrated into Muscovite society.

[1:20:52]

They would be behaving fine, not doing anything that would, you know, be objectionable. But the sheer size of those people and the suddenness of it all brings you to the realization that you need to do something about that. You cannot expel those people because you can't live – A, because many of them are your own citizens; B, there may be Russians in Dagestan and Chechnya, but there are more and more Chechens and more and more Dagestanis in Moscow, right? So you need to relate to those people somehow, and you need to redefine your Russianness.

The good thing about this nation-building project is that it has the imperial past behind it. So Russians – and I started with that – Russians were not ethnically conscious to the extent that other people were. So you could –

Q: (Off mic, inaudible.)

MR. TRENIN: Ethnically.

Q: (Inaudible.)

MR. TRENIN: Well, Stalin was – no one in his right mind would say that Stalin was a foreigner.

[1:22:05]

Q: We're not talking about Stalin.

MR. TRENIN: No. Dzerzhinsky, I can give you – Catherine the Great – I can give you all the names you want. And they were all Russian sovereigns, or Russian tsars, or Russian dictators, as the case may be.

MR. HOFFMAN: Well, I think we're at the end of our time, so I thank everybody for coming. We have a lot to think about. I have to say, listening to you today, having read the book, I'm more worried than ever. I don't see stability, but I hope you're right about the upside. Thank you, everybody, for coming.

MR. TRENIN: David, thank you so much.

MR. COLLINS: And for those who may want it, the book is available in the back, so I hope you'll take advantage of it.

(END)

[01:22:47]