

Why study Russia? Isn't the Cold War over? Didn't we win?

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You might be sitting there thinking: Why do we have to learn about Russia? The Cold War was over for years before I was born. When I was in Mr. Davey's class I know I had thoughts like this. So why then?

Well, the Russian Federation (as it calls itself) is the largest country in the world clocking in at 6,592,800 sq miles. Thus it comprises 1/8 of the Earth's land area. Its population is around 142 Million people, making it the ninth largest in population, with a little over 2% of the world's population in its borders. It comprises 40% of Europe, and extends over the entire northern part of Asia. It has the largest mineral and energy reserves, and the world's largest forest reserves second only to the Amazon Rainforest. It has been called the "Lungs of Europe", and its lakes contain approximately 1/4 of the world's fresh water. With one lake, Lake Baikal alone containing 1/5 of the world's fresh water.

Russia has 83 federal states with different levels of autonomy. And though Russian is the main language, there are 27 other official languages throughout the region. Including Tartar, German, Ukrainian, Bashkir, Chuvash, and English. Though Russians make up around 80% of the ethnic composition of their country there are large groups of other ethnicities including, but not restricted to Tartars, Ukrainians, Chechen (we will return to these), Armenians, Jewish, and Kazakh.

Furthermore, Russia is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and was a leading member of the G8 (until 2014 when it was thrown out). Russian is one of the official languages of both groups. It is a recognized nuclear weapons state and has within its borders the world's largest stockpile of weapons of mass destruction.

Russian is also one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. Over a quarter of the world's scientific literature is published in Russian, and Russian is one of the two main languages used to code computers and store universal knowledge. Combined around 70% of all the world's information is published in either English or Russian.

If that were it, there would be more than enough reason to study Russia today, but Russia also has some serious problems.

In 2007, the population of the country shrank by 237,800 people alone. In 2006 it was 532,600. That's approximate to the entire city of Detroit disappearing in two years. Or the city of Oakland disappearing off the map in the 2007. This is the largest population drop of any country not at war or experiencing famine, ever. Most deaths come from heart disease, yet many more are claimed by "accidents". This might actually be alcohol poisoning, freezing, falls. All of which occur due to the high amount of alcohol consumed.

Since 1998, Russia has also risen to the top of a sad list. It is the country with the highest percentage of suicides per capita. Formerly belonging to Czechoslovakia, or Norway, today it's Russia's mantle to carry. As well as the country with the highest amount of TB deaths, with stories of virulent strains that are immune to antibiotics coming from its prison system. Russia's AIDS epidemic is also something to keep an eye on, spread mainly through intravenous drug usage is not talked about and actual information on it is unknown. Its youth is dying faster or leaving the country than the older people.

It could be the most polluted country in the world, if the Russian government cared/reported on this kind of thing. Oil pipelines run across the entire country, built during the time when the Russian

Federation was The Russian Soviet Republic (top Republic in the Soviet Union), and it is estimated that every day this old infrastructure spills the equivalent of one Exxon Valdez. Lake Baikal (mentioned earlier holding 1/5 of the world's fresh water) has large amounts of pollution runoff from paper mills and other factories working on its shores.

The Soviet Union's once top secret biochemical research facility that was on an island in the middle of a lake in Uzbekistan, has now been left alone. Today that lake (really the Aral Sea) has all but disappeared and rats now run back and forth from this facility, which still has biochemical diseases in it..

At the same time, Russia has a past of acting out if they feel they are being encircled. Dating back to Ghengis Khan ransacking Kiev in the 900's Russian's have not like feeling trapped. With NATO putting up its missile defense shield, and looking to invite Ukraine into its ranks, Russia sees the United States and the EU trying to encircle it. This, accompanied by Russia's historic rule by strong leaders to mount a quick defense can be seen in some of the conflicts in its surrounding countries in the last 8 years (Georgia, Ukraine, possibly Kazakhstan*).

Russia is currently an oil and resource based economy, one of the largest oil producers in the world, as well as having the largest natural gas reserves, the second largest coal reserves. With the decline in oil prices, combined with the sanctions leveled against it by the EU and US due to actions in Ukraine, the economy is now extremely small. Back when oil prices were high though they were spending their money on their military, creating missiles that fly under radar to make the missile defense shield null and void. They created new aircrafts, they were taking their ships out of the mothballs, and equipping their army, soon some thought it would be like the good old days. With a ready real life training field in Chechnya.

Chechnya, termed as an internal problem by President, then Prime Minister, and President again Putin, in its second war. The state in the North Caucasus (southern part of Russia) has a long history with the heads in Russia. Yet the two wars drained men and supplies into a small part of Russia. Some in Chechnya trying to seek independence have become violent to any Russian, holding people captive in a Moscow theater, and blowing up a school in Beslan (a state in Russia) on the first day of school. Russia has now equated its role in Chechnya as part of the Global War on terrorism, and Washington for the most part has ignored it since 9-11. Some think the tactics Russia is used in invading Crimea and it is currently using in eastern Ukraine were learned in Chechnya.

Russia also participates in war games with China and some of the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz Republic through the new military and security alliance the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization). Adding to its ability to work in this region militarily and to spread its influence.

This isn't the only place Russian and China cooperate though. The Chinese wish Russia to build a pipeline directly to them from the oil fields that are just north of their border, instead of going towards Moscow and then coming back towards them, raising the price of transportation taxes to the Chinese.

Russia also has its hands in its former republics in regards to oil and natural gas. Before Russia's actions in 2014 Ukraine and Russia constantly spat over payment for oil and gas, causing the former to constantly get its gas turned off in the middle of winter. Yet the gas pipelines to Western Europe go through Ukraine, so when Ukraine gets cold, so does the rest of the Europe.

Yet possibly a bigger problem is Central Asia, the Caspian Sea hasn't been drilled for oil yet and is one of the largest untapped oil reserves in the world. (for the most part, Azerbaijan got the short end of the stick on this one by running out of oil in the late 70's). Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Georgia and Armenia all have rights to different parts of the sea, but Russia is big brother in the region and it has influence which it is not afraid to use. Most of the oil pipelines coming out of the area go through Russia.

The United States tried to build a new one which was going to go from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, through

Afghanistan and then to Pakistan, before the war in Afghanistan. US was working with the Taliban to try and get it through but as we can see it didn't work. China is moving in on Kazakhstan to build oil pipelines through there.

Civil wars simmer in the region, as does Islamic fundamentalism. This part of the world, formerly Soviet Union countries, are now under the protective arms of Russia (though US and China are trying to get in there as well), is the most explosive parts of the world. Russian troops keep the peace in Tajikistan where there was a long civil war after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The US military has bases in some of these countries already with the biggest in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. We train their troops who then go kill hundreds of their civilians (Andijon, Uzbekistan), the United States is in deeper in Russia's back yard than we would like to admit, and because of that we may break the most important rule of Mr. Davey's classes, never start a land war in Asia.

In closing, studying Russia is important because it cannot be ignored. It is the world's white elephant, and we choose to ignore it at our peril. Not studying Russia is like ignoring America and China. We will either be working with them, or against them as a country and with the resources they have. All you have to do is turn on the news or read a newspaper and see Russia talked about. So why study Russia? It's better to know those around you, whether they are your friends or enemies, because their actions will influence you, just as your actions will influence them.