

Isaiah Berlin, The Soviet Union and the Captive Nations

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Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become.)
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home so lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some who have just returned from the border say
there are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Constantin Cavafy, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

THE BARBARIANS are gone. The Soviet occupation of the captive nations is a distant memory and for twenty years now, the Baltic peoples have been resuming their Hanseatic history as free cities and their interwar history as free states. As Alexander Herzen said and Isaiah Berlin liked to repeat, history has no libretto, but you have reason to hope that there will be no turning back.

Now, twenty years later, you can begin to understand why the barbarians were a kind of solution. Their occupation of your soil forced you to remember what freedom was and to imagine what it could be once again. In exile your people refused to forget. When Western Europeans told you to be resigned to the facts of life, you understood you had no choice but to resist those facts. Because you held true, there were some glorious days twenty years ago. Getting rid of the barbarians was sweet.

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Now you face a new challenge, not just your own but the challenge of every liberal society: how to conserve liberal freedoms once your citizens feel safe enough to take them for granted. The barbarians are no longer there to remind you how precious freedom is. People's memories of the barbarians will grow dim and your people, like people everywhere, may find the liberal state tedious.

This is a challenge not just for newly free states, but for old established ones. The liberal task – deliberation, compromise, respecting rights and due process – often seems uninspiring. Marx was not wrong when he scorned the 'parliamentary cretinism' of liberal democracies. For five years, in my political career, I was one of the cretins, after all. There is no glorious finality, no communal effervescence, to ennoble life in a liberal state. Bismarck said that politics was like sausage making: everyone needs sausage but no one wants to see sausage being made. The work feeds our bodies but does not nourish our souls and liberal citizens tire of it. They no longer show up to the meetings or to the voting booths. What people find boring, they are not likely to defend with any passion and they might throw away from carelessness.

So while the barbarians were at the gates, they reminded us who we were. Now that they are gone, it is up to us all to remember who we are, why liberty matters, why it is a discipline worth keeping to, even when our own sinews tell us to relax.

So far, you've not had much time to relax in freedom. You've been too busy. You've even passed a very difficult test for a free people, surviving your first exposure to a global economic crisis. After joining Europe, you set out to catch up, only to learn that if you 'put the pedal to the metal', as you did until 2009, the vehicle overheats. You imposed upon yourself an austerity regime that tested the will power of your elites and the solidarity of your people. You needed outside help, but you learned how to maintain democratic sovereignty in the midst of a global economic crisis. That is impressive. Now you come out of the crisis, older and wiser about living within your means in a small country with open borders and a pegged exchange rate.

International bankers and European bureaucrats are now showing you around as a good example for your southern brothers and sisters. You feel like one of those patients that doctors present

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at a press conference to announce some radical but successful new surgical procedure. They want to prove the procedure worked and you want to oblige. So you smile and wave for the camera and you are delighted that the doctors are so happy, but you yourself don't feel so terrific. You know you still have a long way to go. But you know that you have bought yourself time to recuperate and that you will resume your journey westwards, safe in the knowledge of your eventual destination.

When you look beyond your borders, you can rejoice that you are in a good neighborhood for the first time in your lives. The Poles and the Czechs are free and you live across the Baltic from some of the most successful liberal societies the world has ever seen. The world is open to you now. The Baltic is still your royal road to every destination. So there is much to give you the feeling at last that you are free to create your own future.

But there is a new arrival in the neighborhood, and no one can be sure that this neighbor will respect your fences and your freedoms.

The Putin regime is something new in the annals of political science: a tyranny that ratifies itself with rigged elections; a market society in which everything is for sale, but no one's property is safe; a petro-state that leaves millions so poor they remember Soviet times with nostalgia; a state ruled by a former secret police agent whose only contact with a liberal Western state was as a spy and whose understanding of power was learned in an interrogation room of a police state.

This makes for a less than promising neighbor. Putin is not a barbarian of old, since he does not express explicit designs on your territory or your freedom; he offers no ideology for export, no radiant tomorrow, no goal other than power for himself; but all the same, he is not happy and because he is not happy, you are not secure. He knows that millions of his citizens no longer thank him for the security his regime has provided. They have tasted some freedom and they both resent his authoritarianism and worry that their own economic freedoms are insecure under his rule. He himself is resentful of Western scorn and indifference, nostalgic for the good old days when Russian might was at least respected. So he is a ruthless leader determined to earn respect, if necessary, by force.

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As states on its southern frontier, like Georgia, have learned, this new Russia is easily provoked. The states on its northern frontier will have to avoid giving or giving in to provocation. You will have to be prudent, keep your alliances in good order, never let your guard down, make sure no internal quarrels – especially over language and minority rights – ever provide a rationale for outside interference, and make sure all your citizens, whatever their language or origins, never forget how much their own personal freedom depends on the preservation of your national independence.

As a liberal state on the frontier of this new form in political science, you are in the front line of liberal democracy's decisive new encounter – no longer with totalitarianism of the left or the right, which defined liberalism throughout the 20th century, but now with new regimes that have no historical precedent: post-Communist oligarchies – Russia and China – that have no ideology other than enrichment; regimes that are recalcitrant to the global order; predatory on their own society and dependent for their stability, not on institutions, since there are none that are independent of the ruling elite, but on growth itself, on the capacity of the economic machine to distribute enough riches to enough people; regimes whose legitimacy is akin to that of a bicyclist on a bicycle. As long as they keep pedaling, they keep moving; if they stop, they fall off.

In the case of Russia, the wealth is precarious: natural resource income that leaves the regime dependent upon the ups and downs of the commodity price cycle; a petro-state vulnerable to Dutch disease, corruption and increasing inequality; a political order without checks and balances, without the rule of law, and without even an orderly democratic mechanism for leadership transition.

In the case of China, the wealth is based on control of cheap labour supply chains in global manufacturing and the steady growth of a domestic consumer market measured in the hundreds of millions. In both Russia and China, rising real incomes have replaced ideology as the key to post-Communist legitimacy. Yet wealth is an unstable source of legitimacy. Since both regimes are predatory, wealth is highly concentrated in those with access to power. The strategic question is whether Russia and China are stable. Ostentatious wealth, built on corruption, power

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concentrated in few hands and unconstrained by institutions, is not a recipe for stability at home or peaceful relations abroad.

Both China and Russia are societies in which power is stacked: political power confers economic, social and cultural power. They remain single party states, emptied of the ideology of communism, yet imbued with the same Leninist attitude to power. Leninism dies hard, but sheer ruthlessness is a brittle basis for legitimacy.

Both Russia and China are attempting to demonstrate a novel proposition: that economic freedoms can be severed from political and civil freedom, and that freedom is divisible.

The liberal democratic creed is that freedom is indivisible. What this means is the interdependence of political and economic liberty, the interdependence of majority rule and minority rights, the interconnection between rule of law and democratic sovereignty.

China and Russia both pose a strategic challenge to this belief, and the shape of the twenty first century will be determined by which side is right.

If liberal democracy is premised on the idea that freedom to own and acquire pre-supposes and requires the freedom to act, to believe and to know, the liberal ideal also pre-supposes a further proposition: that the truth is one, can be known and can be shared. People will disagree about what facts mean, and this is the life-blood of democratic argument, but equally democracy presumes that they can agree on what the facts are. Indeed democratic politics is impossible without shared agreement on the facts.

The political legitimacy of liberal societies, therefore, is not just procedural: the observance of electoral rules and legal due process. Legitimacy is substantive: it flows from collective democratic acknowledgment of facts and a refusal to disavow difficult truths. Legitimate regimes are regimes that face facts. Regimes become illegitimate when they deny important facts staring them in the face.

Regime legitimacy – and the social solidarity that flows from it – depends on a certain shared public truthfulness about the past. Neither China nor Russia has made peace with their Communist past. Societies that suppress secrets are not stable. In both Russia and China, the regimes have quietly put Communism aside as a public belief system, but they have never faced up to Communist legacies of terror, starvation and persecution. Regimes that have

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not allowed truth about their past to surface will continue to be dependent for their stability on repression. In both societies, there remains a lurking nostalgia for terror. Mao continues to glower down over Tiananmen Square. Uncle Joe's picture is still carried in parades in Moscow.

Pasts just as difficult as this can be overcome. There is no fatality that condemns human beings to repeat. The Germans acknowledged what they did to their neighbors, what they did here in Riga in 1941 to Jewish citizens. Because acknowledgement was made, reconciliation became possible and finally Germany regained the trust of its neighbors. It takes a liberal regime to acknowledge wrong and Russia is not a liberal regime. The Baltic peoples cannot forget, but the Russians have not begun to remember. Until this changes, frontiers are not truly secure.

So a critical question for liberal society becomes how do we define ourselves in relation to these new forms of domination – Russian and Chinese – how do we understand them and live in peace beside them?

We should be asking this question, but instead we leave the answer instead to commerce and capitalism, trusting that as we create contracts and economic relationships, the fundamental question of how liberal societies should relate to non-liberal ones will resolve itself. *Le doux commerce*, the invisible hand, will do its work and Russia and China will be happily integrated into a globalised division of labour and if power passes to East Asia, so be it.

The generation that came to maturity in 1945 – Berlin's generation – thought differently. They thought that the question of how liberal societies should relate to non-liberal powers could not be left to fate and the global division of labour, but was a political, strategic, and moral issue to be decided by democratic peoples.

Isaiah Berlin did not live to see these new tyrannies arise in Russia and China and he would have trouble recognising the world we now inhabit – post 9/11, post-meltdown, post liberal in so many ways – but he did know a lot about living beside barbarians. His Cold War liberalism has much to teach us still.

The first lesson is that history has no libretto. As late as Benedetto Croce, liberals still thought of their creed as being the wave of the future and thought of history as the story of liberty.

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Berlin dispensed with all that, and we should remember this now, since it is a cliché of optimistic Western discourse on Russia and China that they must evolve towards democratic liberty. Once market freedoms are introduced, once a middle class is created, an unstoppable demand arises for press freedom, for political pluralism, for rule of law and for an independent judiciary, that is, for all the institutional accouterments of liberal society. It is not unreasonable to think this, and there are millions of Russians and Chinese who passionately believe it and seek it, and if they have need of our help, we should give it. But we should not assume there is any historical inevitability to liberal society, any more than it made sense to predict in 1950, say, that both Chinese and Russian totalitarianism were doomed to crumble. Berlin refused to make any such predictions, telling the editor of *Foreign Affairs*, in 1951 that there was no occasion for surprise that the Soviet regime had lasted so long, ‘nor yet for supposing that its intrinsic wickedness must bring it down’ (256).¹ It is always comforting to believe that evil is doomed – George Kennan perhaps believed this, but Isaiah Berlin did not. History is not a romance or a novel. Neither is it the apocalypse: evil does not always triumph, the worst does not always happen.

Berlin counsels us to be humble about history. No one could have predicted that China would take the path it has taken since the end of the Cultural Revolution, and no one could have imagined in 1989 that Russia would set out on its unpredictable trajectory. Since no one predicted the direction these societies have taken, no one can be sure that either will evolve towards anything remotely like a liberal democratic order.

To say that history has no libretto is not a counsel of pessimism. Berlin’s historical humility was always paired with a strong belief in the efficacy of freedom. He objected to the Marxist theory of history precisely because of its disdain for the power of human agency. Leadership, he knew, could bend the arc of history, if not always towards justice, at least away from tyranny. While he admired leadership in the *exercise* of power – Churchill and Roosevelt – his deepest sympathies were reserved for those who used leadership to *undermine* power. He revered Anna Akhmatova because she refused to bow to Stalin. The poet’s heroic silence was

¹ Such references are to the pages of Isaiah Berlin, *Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960*, ed. Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes (London, 2009).

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not in vain: she and Pasternak, Brodsky and Sinyavsky, created an unbroken chain of refusal that, in its capacity to inspire, leached moral legitimacy away from a regime that held all the power, but possessed nothing of truth or justice.

If this is true, then in our dealings with the Chinese and Russians, it matters to give help, both private and public, to those who campaign in both countries for the rule of law, not the rule of men, who want poor villagers to be fairly compensated for expropriations of their land, who want ordinary people to have the right to read anything they want on the Internet, who want free and fair elections and an end to the rule of billionaire oligarchs. History is not necessarily on the side of these liberal values, but fighting for them remains a moral duty. If a blind lawyer in China is fighting against forced sterilisation of women, if others are fighting against evictions of peasants, then we can give them the encouragement of knowing that they are not alone and that we will not remain silent if they are persecuted. If Berlin did whatever he could to secure honor for Pasternak, Akhmatova and Brodsky, then in our generation, we should do the same to their successors. We do this because history is on nobody's side, and freedom needs all the help it can.

To do this is liberal solidarity in a global age, and when the Chinese and Russians tell us it is an internal matter, we should tell them that this too was Stalin and Mao's excuse. And were they to threaten the sovereignty of free peoples, they will have to be told: here is the line, do not cross it, we do not abandon our friends.

If this seems a defiant stance towards the new tyrannies in China and Russia, and it is, then we need to learn from Berlin how to balance resolution toward tyranny with openness towards what these societies can teach us. This balance between firmness and openness is the equilibrium the liberal temperament is always seeking and a liberal foreign policy should always aim for. Berlin is as good a guide as any as to how this equilibrium is achieved and maintained.

Liberalism's enemies always portray a liberal temperament as quivering equivocation, flowing from an emollient desire to be all things to all people. While liberal tolerance can look a lot like appeasement, Berlin shows us how it is possible to combine tolerance with firmness. The true pairing of tolerance should be

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with curiosity, with an appetite to learn from beliefs we cannot share. Berlin's liberal temperament sought that balance but it did not come easily to him. He used to castigate his own desire to please, to see the other side's point of view. But he did know where to draw the line.

He supported NATO, American missile deployments in Europe and in 1958 told a young campaigner for nuclear disarmament that 'I am not at all a pacifist, and believe that some wars are fully justified, not merely wars of defence [...] but even preventive wars [...] where the probability of aggression from the other side is very high or where the political system inflicts a very great deal of suffering upon a very great many persons' (607). He went on: 'Unless there is some point at which you are prepared to fight against whatever odds, and whatever the threat may be, not merely to yourself but to anybody, all principles become flexible, all codes melt [...]' (608).

Drawing the line here – against the barbarians – set him against many friends on the Left, – Oxford Communists, socialists and social democrats – who believed that the barbarians had outgrown their expansionist ideology. Berlin would have none of it. The barbarians remained barbarians, and dangerous ones at that.

He also stood against those on the British Left who thought that Communist societies that sacrificed liberty might nonetheless be considered to be progressive to the degree that they delivered to their people the goods of social equality. He would have none of that either. 'Two Concepts of Liberty', his inaugural lecture as Chichele Professor at Oxford in 1958, has to be read, in the context of his arguments with Western friends on the Left, as the claim that those who are prepared to sacrifice liberty for the sake of equality will end up with neither. As he told his friend, Stephen Spender, in 1958, right after the lecture, 'the proposition that I cannot be happy unless everyone else is happy too, or cannot tolerate being free unless everyone else is free too, is to reject freedom ultimately in the face of equality, or else to assume that these things can be married to each other, when no one has any reasons for supposing this to be true' (656).

If liberty came first, and if it meant freedom from interference – it also had to mean freedom to, self-determination for captive nations. Here his Zionism rescued his liberalism from individualism, giving him special sympathy for the idea that

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individuals cannot be free – to speak their own language, to worship their own faith, to conserve what is uniquely valuable to them about their heritage and culture – unless they possess self-determination as a people.

This was the spine of liberal belief that gave firmness to his conviction in respect of the barbarians and the nations they held captive.

But he did not believe that the West needed an ideology or creed to oppose the Soviets and refused to enlist in any attempt to create one. This is because he believed, as individuals, that we identified a number of ultimate, and sometimes competing, ends worth pursuing and even fighting for. As he wrote in 1952, 'I do not see why it is not possible to believe in the various ends in which we do believe with as much fervor and self-dedication as Communists believe theirs,' but he added a significant caveat. Senator McCarthy's reign of terror over American opinion proved that if one allowed oneself to be 'hypnotised by the blood-curdling threats of the enemy into a frame of mind similar to his own', then a liberal sacrificed the freedom and pluralism a liberal society was supposed to be defending in the first place (351). The ability to hold onto principles without believing that they were eternally sanctioned by history or by religion, the ability to defend them rationally without succumbing to ideological inflation was for Berlin the mark of a liberal mind.

It is noteworthy that he opposed the Soviet regime without ever losing his admiration for the Russian people and for their art and literature. Cold War liberalism made him more, not less curious about the Russian people, more not less admiring of the heroic resistance of the magnificent few who stood up to Stalin and his heirs.

The larger point is that he did not believe the barbarians were a kind of solution. He thought it was dangerous to organise one's mind into fixed and immovable categories of 'us' and 'them', still worse to believe that without a 'them' there can be no 'us'. He said once, 'nothing is gained by pretending that because the other side all want one and the same thing, tidily summed up in Communist slogans, therefore we must, although in fact we don't' (350).

Communists divide world into friends and enemies. Lenin famously said that the key distinction in politics is who/whom,

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hammer or anvil. Totalitarians of all kinds divide the world in this way. Carl Schmidt, the Weimar era philosopher of law who became an apologist for Nazi totalitarianism, famously said that the only distinction that matters in politics is between friend and foe.

Liberals refuse to treat opponents as enemies. They see their antagonists differently, as persons who must sometimes be opposed, and with force if necessary, but also as persons who might be persuaded to change their minds, and who, in any case, must be lived with, if they cannot be changed.

In the domestic politics of liberal societies, we need to maintain this distinction between opponent and enemy. In the Latvian house, in the Canadian house, there are opponents, but no enemies. Democracy cannot function without opposition, and the opposition must be given the presumption of loyalty. Once democratic opponents treat each other as enemies, politics quickly becomes war by other means, and the possibility – essential to democratic compromise – that yesterday's opponents could become tomorrow's allies – is thrown away with a partisanship that, in taking no prisoners today, makes government tomorrow impossible.

Likewise, on the international stage, observing the distinction between enemies and opponents is vital in any situation short of actual war. In war, we have enemies. Short of war, they are opponents, and we are in the domain of politics, that is to say, in the domain of negotiation, bargaining, compromise and where compromise is impossible 'agreeing to disagree'.

What Berlin's Cold War liberalism has to teach us is that in international relations with opponents we should practice politics, not war, politics, not religion.

Nothing is gained by pretending that Russia and China are not the chief strategic threat to the moral and political commitments of liberal democracies. We should understand this threat for what it is. Equally nothing is gained by treating this as an encounter between religions, resolvable only by conversion or war. We are faced with political opponents, and if our belief in freedom is grounded in the facts, we will win. We must avoid the temptation of believing that we cannot know who we are unless we have barbarians to define ourselves against. We have no need of barbarians. We have no need of enemies. We know who we are

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and we know what we should defend by force of argument, and only at the last resort, with force of arms.

Cold War liberalism remains a useable past, even though the Cold War is over and no one would ever want to resurrect it or return global society to the hair-trigger tensions of the era or its bloody proxy wars. It remains a useable past because there is a temperament we have need of: humility about history, firmness to stand against wrong and the openness to engage and learn from those we oppose. Berlin incarnated this temperament, and living within its disciplines, would stand us in good stead as we face challenges from new forms of oppression that he never lived to see.

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