

Introduction to Tony Kevin lecture, UWA, 6 June 2017

[The below was delivered on invitation by both Tony Kevin and the Institute of Advanced Studies at UWA, who hosted his lecture. The proceedings were recorded by ABC Radio National for Paul Barclay's "Big Ideas" program. Barclay edited out nearly all my critical remarks, and performed this task so seamlessly that a listener would be none the wiser. Neither in the recording nor on the accompanying website was it acknowledged that my remarks had been edited: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bigideas/return-to-moscow/8663494>

The below is my script for the introduction. I highlighted in bold the sections that were cut, so readers can make up their own minds to what extent these were edits for time or for content. My actual remarks deviated somewhat from the below, because as I reached the Crimean referendum I was interrupted by a heckler.]

I would like to acknowledge that we meet today on Noongar land and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

My name is Mark Edele, and I am Professor of History at The University of Western Australia. My field of expertise is the history of the Soviet Union and its successor states, including but not limited to Russia. I will be your MC tonight and I am delighted that my final official duty before leaving this institution after 13 years, to take up a position at the University of Melbourne, is connected to my field of research and teaching. Such interest is not usual. Russia experts have been declared unnecessary after the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991, "because we have won the Cold War." This state of affairs has changed, thanks to President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy.

It is my pleasure tonight to introduce Tony Kevin, who will speak to us about his new book *Return to Moscow*, published by UWA Publishing. Tony is a great friend of Russia and the Russians. This friendship, yes love affair, dates back to the time he spent as an Australian diplomat in Moscow in 1969-71. Tony went back "briefly in 1985 as part of an Australian delegation" to attend the funeral of Konstantin Chernenko, "a forgettable leader," as he writes. Another short visit followed in 1990 – three days at a foreign policy conference in Vladivostok. He found a "broken-backed state." His latest visit, which prompted this book, was in 2016, when he spent a month as a tourist in the country he loves. This book is the result.

Russia today has few friends in what we still call, for lack of a better term, "the West." Russia is increasingly portrayed again as an evil empire with a nearly omniscient and clearly also omnipotent leader, meddling in elections here, being shirt-fronted by politicians there, all the while scheming to rebuild the Soviet empire. The debate about how to approach an increasingly self-assertive and muscular Russia has increasingly descended into name-calling. Anybody who suggests that it might be useful to understand the Russian point of view before reacting to any provocation from Moscow is quickly termed one of "Putin's useful idiots." Meanwhile, those who are labelled thus shoot back, calling those who advocate a hard line against Russia's breaches of international law "dishonest cop-out(s)," "cold warriors", and "liberal hawks." This polarization is lamentable, because both side of the argument have useful things to say, and any government approaching Russia should listen to both sides of the debate in order to come to a well-reasoned position.

Tony is on the side of those who advocate what is called a "realist" line towards Russia. Realists argue that there are no binding rules in international affairs. Given that there is no independent arbiter, a supra state, ultimately the international order is anarchic. The strongest states – the US, China, Russia – will be able to pursue their agenda; the smaller states – Ukraine, Mexico, or Australia – will have to fall in line. This view is countered by liberal theorists who argue that states should agree to uphold human rights and follow a rule based international order regulated by multi-lateral treaties. If a country does not behave, if it tramples human rights at home or acts aggressively abroad, others have a right to protect and a right to intervene.

Most of the "realists" argue that we should be treating Russia as a great power with legitimate interests because such a course of action is in the West's self-interest. Many citizens of the countries who find themselves in the putative Russian sphere – Ukraine, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, to name a few – are rather appalled by being told that their right to self-determination is compromised because they are not a great power. In effect, the realist position amounts to advising them to arm themselves to the teeth in order to be taken seriously – the North Korea model. To my mind such a course of action is exactly *not* in the West's interest, or indeed in the interest of Russia.

Tony, however, is not a realist who argues from the position of the self-interest of his own country – Australia. Rather, he is in love with Russia itself, with "the beauties of Russia's landscape, history and culture", with "the grace of Russia's women, who continue to inspire me, in life as in art," to quote the dedication to this book. And this is what this book is, first of all: a literate and literary declaration of love towards Russia, its people, and its culture. "Why," he writes, "does this lovely and wounded land, its culture and language, its people, its music, art and literature, continue to draw me back and enthrall me, to tug at my emotions and bring tears to my eyes?" The book – and I presume today's lecture – is an intelligent and well written answer to this question.

We cannot argue with love. And we can indeed agree to disagree on the costs and benefits of the liberal or the realist approach to foreign policy. What we must not do, however, is to re-write the past. As a historian it is my duty to correct factual error or tendentious omissions, a duty I cannot shirk even if called to simply introduce a book and its author.

When in a polemical rather than lyrical mode, Tony sometimes makes statements I found hard to stomach. To give one example: "The Crimean peninsula," we read, "with its largely Russian population and its historic Russian naval base of Sevastopol, chose by popular referendum to reunite with the Russian motherland in March 2014, in response to what Crimeans saw as a hostile anti-Russian coup d'etat in Kiev." It is true that today the majority of the population of Crimea is ethnically Russian. Crimea became part of the Russian empire in 1783 as a result of war with Turkey. It continued to be part of the Russian Republic within the Soviet Union after the revolution but was transferred by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to Ukraine in 1954. When the Soviet Union broke apart along the borders of the constituting republics in 1991, it thus had been Ukrainian for nearly four decades. Russia had a long-term lease on a naval base in Sevastopol, and because of this naval base, Russian migration to the region of long standing, and the ethnic cleansing of the Tatar population under Stalin in 1944, the peninsula has a strongly Russian population. The final Soviet census of 1989 recorded 67 percent Russians and 25 percent Ukrainians, followed by 2 percent Belarusians. After the return from their places of exile of surviving Crimean Tatars, approximately 10 percent of the population are Tatars today. Ukrainian and Russian censuses disagree over the share of the Russian population, but both agree that it's a majority of above 60

percent. It is also true that there was a referendum in 2014 and that officially 97 percent voted to join the Russian Federation.

It needs to be added, however, that at the time of the referendum Crimea was under Russian military occupation, that the referendum did not give the choice to keep the status of Crimea as part of Ukraine, that the representative body of the Crimean Tatars boycotted the referendum as illegal and disputed the alleged voter turnout of over 80 percent in a place where normal voter turnout is closer to 40 percent, that Russian media had near-complete air superiority in the information war over Crimea, and that the only foreign observers in the country came from far-right European groups, hand-picked by Moscow to attest to the fairness of the election. While it is highly likely that there was widespread support among the Russian population of Crimea to join Russia rather than stay with Ukraine, Moscow certainly did not leave anything to chance.

One other correction of the factual record: According to a much-repeated Russian line, NATO had committed itself to never expand into the formerly Soviet sphere of influence. This commitment was allegedly some kind of gentlemen's agreement, either between President George H. W. Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in December 1989, or between Gorbachev and US Secretary of State James A. Baker in February 1990. This claim has been conclusively debunked after exhaustive archival study of US, German, and Russian documents by one of the premier historians of the Cold War, Mark Kramer of Harvard University. In a study published in the April 2009 issue of *The Washington Quarterly* he concluded:

Declassified materials show unmistakably that no such pledge was made. Valid arguments can be made against NATO enlargement, but this particular argument is spurious.

It is unfortunate that the polemical sections of this book have elicited so much commentary. What usually gets lost in critical reviews is that these polemics are but a small part of the entire book. They are concentrated, by and large, in the introduction and the final chapter on the West's alleged "information war" against Russia. The bulk of the book is instead concerned with Tony's experiences in Russia, first as a diplomat in Moscow in 1969-71 and then as a tourist in 2016. A literary love letter to Russia past and present, I recommend this book.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Tony Kevin.