

**BOOK REVIEW**  
**FLOGGING THE GEOPOLITICAL HORSE**

**Alexander Dugin. 2015. *Last War of the World-Island: The Geopolitics of Contemporary Russia*, Arktos Media Ltd., 166p, ISBN: 978-1-910524-40-4.**

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There is probably only a handful of writers that have, in recent years, received more attention than Mr. Dugin, heralded not only as an insightful geopolitical thinker, but also as one of the major intellectual forces behind Russia's resurgence in international relations at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Dugin, a founder of Russia's Eurasian movement, has been seen as one of the most influential voices among the Kremlin's elites (Newman 2014). Given Russia's recent actions, his 2015 book, which is a translation of the 2012 Russian edition dedicated to Russian geopolitics, deserves proper attention, insofar as explaining Russia's foreign policy and its recent moves in Crimea and Ukraine are concerned.

*Last War of the World-Island* is divided in five chapters. The first one is dedicated to establishing a geopolitics of Russia's future, after carefully studying Russian society's present and past. Dugin wholeheartedly adopts Mackinder's view of history and politics, arguing that Russia, the country occupying the pivot-space of history (Mackinder 1904, pp. 423-436) and also in reference to Mackinder adopts "the landman's point of view" (Mackinder 1942, pp. 53-82). In fact, if Mackinder's *Democratic Ideals and Reality* is supposed to be a work of policy recommendation to Western leaders based on the geopolitical imperatives of maritime dominance, Dugin explicitly formulates his prescriptions on the supposedly unassailable geopolitical reality of Russia as a land-power. This status is also responsible for defining the outlines of

Russian society and culture: an inheritor of both the Byzantine Empire<sup>1</sup> and of the Mongol Empire, a “planetary pole of the «civilization of Land»” locked in a battle of the continents since the XVIIIth century with Great Britain (Dugin 2015, pp. 5-7). In a very essentialist vein, Russia’s geographical position determines the characteristics of its society: conservative, holistic<sup>2</sup>, anthropologically collectivist, emphasizing sacrifice and the vales of faithfulness, honour, asceticism and loyalty (Dugin 2015, pp. 7-8). In Sorokin’s and Sombart’s terms, an ideal heroic civilization (Dugin 2015, p. 8), which is doomed by geography to fight “the civilization of the sea” (Dugin 2015, p. 10). As for Mackinder, the logic of history is for Dugin one of the conflict between the sea-power (in his terms, the “thalassocracy”) and the land power (“the tellurocracy”).

The second chapter is dedicated to the geopolitics of the USSR. The Russian Revolution receives an explanation in terms of the sea versus land power historical conflict described in the previous section. In Dugin’s view, both the Czar and the February revolutionists were defeated by the Bolsheviks not necessarily because of the appeal of the Marxist ideology, but because the monarchy and the Provisional Government had espoused the ideology of the “thalassocracy” (the sea power – in this case, the Franco-British-American alliance), whereas the Bolsheviks stood for the traditional tellurocratic role of Russia. While a clear explanation for the monarchy abandoning the classic Russian geopolitical outlook is not given, the Provisional Government is attracted to the sea-power’s siren call by the Masonic affiliations of a large number of its members (Dugin 2015, pp. 13-17). The Civil War is but another stage of this conflict, between the sea and the land powers (Dugin 2015, pp. 21-23). The curious case is that of the Second World War, when the natural alliance between land-powers (Nazi Germany and the USSR) was derailed by both the imperial and ideological ambitions of Germany and by the Soviet’s lack of *objective* geopolitical specialists, capable of pointing the leadership towards the right path (Dugin 2015, p. 44). The Cold War reverts to the historical logic of confrontation between the sea and the land power. It is nevertheless important to observe that Dugin gives little or no attention to

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<sup>1</sup> It is nevertheless amusing that Dugin makes no reference to the land or sea power characteristics of the Byzantine Empire.

<sup>2</sup> Dugin goes into no details about what the “holism” of the Russian civilization entails.

other conflicts in which Russia allied itself with sea-powers in order to counter a possible land-based hegemon (the First World War or the Napoleonic Wars) – the reader can only assume that the same explanation is warranted: Masons or other nefarious groups succeeded in derailing Russia from its natural destiny or the lack of sufficiently influential geopolitical specialists prevented its leadership from taking the right choice.

While the rest of the chapter seems to follow the same logic of history – the conflict between the global land and the global sea power, this time enacted under the guise of the Cold War, there are several other elements of the second chapter that raise the reader’s eyebrows. On the one hand, apparently, the geopolitical position of Russia elicits a strong-man rule: Khrushchev’s thaw apparently led the way to a “weakening of the populace” (Dugin 2015, p. 50). On the other hand, the identity of the nefarious opponent of Russia’s natural ambitions is revealed: the CFR (The Council on Foreign Relations), “the most important authority in the formation of American foreign policy on a global scale in the thalassocratic spirit” (Dugin 2015, p. 29) and the Trilateral Commission, “whose activity [...] consisted in coordinating the efforts of the leading capitalist countries for victory in the «Cold War» and isolating the USSR and its allies from all sides” (Dugin 2015, p. 54).

The last section of the second chapter lambasts Gorbachev for his enacting of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, seen in epically tragic terms: “a complete contradiction of Russia’s entire historical path as a Eurasian, great-continental formation, as the Heartland, and as the civilization of Land” (Dugin 2015, p. 59) or as “the undermining of Eurasia from within; the voluntary self-destruction of one of the poles of the world system” (Dugin 2015, p. 59). The USSR’s collapse echoes in Dugin’s account Putin’s assertion that the event represents “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20th century (BBC 2005). The author goes on to criticize democratization, essentially considering it an instrument of the “total attack by the civilization of the Sea” (Dugin 2015, p. 59), complaining about the proportion of the catastrophe, which reminds him of the Times of Troubles or of the Mongol Invasions.

The third chapter starts philosophically, by quoting extensively from G.K. Chesterton’s *The Everlasting Man*. Russia becomes a modern representation of Rome gripped into a fight to death against Carthage, Dugin taking up Chesterton’s argument that the moral strength of the Roman

religious system is responsible for Rome's ultimate victory in the Punic Wars. Unlike the Romans, however, in the Cold War, a "Mercantile civilization prevailed over a heroic, ascetic, and Spartan civilization" (Dugin 2015, p. 68). The Times of Troubles are compounded by the enacting of Western policies, contrary to Russian interests, Dugin argues, the symbol of Russia's defeat and downfall being the loss of the First Chechen War.

The penultimate chapter deals with Russia's resurgence under the terms of Vladimir Putin. It is fitting that the return to a "clearly Eurasian, land-based geopolitical character" (Dugin 2015, p. 68) should start in Chechnya – Russia's victory emphasizes the benefits brought about by resuming the land-based strategy. Russia's renewed assertiveness in international relations under Putin is applauded by Dugin. However, it is important to note that Putin is also a target of criticism: his cooperation with the US in the combat against terrorism, his tacit support for US actions in Afghanistan are criticized by Dugin, who also takes on the incumbent president for his inability to construct alongside France and Germany a "European-Eurasian multipolar bloc" (Dugin 2015, p. 109). In addition to that, Dugin launches a scathing criticism against the Kremlin's experts, who have maintained their position after Yeltsin's replacement and are seen as a hindrance towards the adoption of a truly scientifically geopolitical course – it is amusing to see that among the "pro-Western, pro-American analysts, [who] were often also the West's direct agents of influence" are former Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov and incumbent Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (Dugin 2015, pp. 112-113). Putin's 2006 speech in Munich, criticizing American unipolarism is, alongside the Russian-Georgian War the crowning achievement of a reversal of fortunes.

However, as the last chapter of the book argues, this course of Russian politics is not irreversible, for several reasons. Putin's own ambiguity towards embracing what amounts to Russia's geopolitical destiny, highlighted by his nomination of Medvedev as a successor and by his references to democracy in his public interventions, is a factor of concern for Dugin, who indirectly portrays himself as an ultimate authority in geopolitics, hence his frequent criticism of Putin's direct entourage. Dugin is unsure whether Putin's inability to follow up on his Munich 2006 speech is just a ruse to circumvent American attention or an expression of his inability to step up to the challenges of Russia's geographical position and mission. Consequently, Dugin believes that Russia's future "demands a strong-willed and energetic personality at the

head of government, a new type of ruling elite and a new form of ideology” (Dugin 2015, 114). The verdict is out as to whether Putin fits this description and Russia’s historic mission – “Russia will either be great or will not be at all”, concludes Dugin (Dugin 2015, p. 144).

Essentially, *Last War of the World-Island* is a reply to Mackinder’s classic geopolitical view. Whereas Mackinder’s argument is in favour of preventing the rise of a continental hegemon, Dugin predicates his proposals based a reverse logic – if the global sew power is to ensure no great power controls Eastern Europe, Dugin calls for Russia’s fulfilment of Mackinder’s well-known dictum: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World” (Mackinder 1942, p. 106). It is ironic, therefore, that while Dugin discusses at length about the Russian national character and the need for a truly Russian geopolitics, his theory (if we can call it that) is simply a reverse case of Mackinder’s century long predicament.

However, this simple (and simplistic) reasoning is beset by internal contradictions and numerous errors. Dugin carefully omits several moments of Russian history that run against his arguments: in addition to the moments when the Czarist Empire found itself allied with sea-powers, there is no mention of Peter the Great’s Western inspired politics or of the Russian geopolitical ambition regarding the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Straits (See Taylor 1957, p. 50 or Schroeder 1994, p. 590). Moreover, for a distinctly Turanic Empire Russia is purported to be, as far as Dugin is concerned, its ambitions are largely European – there are no mentions, for example, of Russia’s ambitions in Asia. In addition, it is also problematic that while there is a “neoconservative” geopolitics, an Islamic one, there is no mention of the role China is to play. By Dugin’s classification, China is also a viable candidate for a “telluric” hegemon. Instead, Beijing is dismissed as only an instrument Russia might use in order to bring about global multipolarity. It is also important to note that, unlike other Russian geopolitical representations, Dugin’s is hegemonic – if other perspectives call for Russia to find partners in order to build a truly multipolar international system (Malek 2009, pp. 200-202), multipolarity is, as for Dugin only a step towards Heartland domination.

In addition to that, it is ironic to notice that Japan belongs to the interwar land-power coalition of the interwar period (Dugin 2015, p. 30). Factual errors are also present: decrying NATO’s enlargement, Dugin notes that

former Eastern European communist states became members of the Alliance *before* the Baltic Countries: Croatia's 2009 accession or Romania's 2004 accession precede, according to the author, the Baltic countries' 2004 accession (Dugin 2015, pp. 61, 75).

The biggest problem of Dugin's argument remains however in his use of a classical geopolitical model. Dugin makes no clear difference the explanatory, predictive or normative aspects of his theoretical model. And it is a theoretical perspective which claims to perform all these functions. His model is a reductionist one, for geography (specifically a single Eurasian region) is the single variable that underlines Dugin's account. Moreover, in spite of all his claims to the contrary, *Last War of the World-Island* is also a determinist perspective: as far as Dugin might be concerned, the politician can ignore the law-like advice of the geopolitical specialist at his own costs, because history inevitably follows the logic of the confrontation between the land and the sea power.

In addition to that, it is important to note that *Last War of the World-Island* is mired in classic geopolitical references. While this might serve as an advantage inasmuch as the clarity of the original argument is concerned, it is distressing to see that Dugin whole-heartedly ignores not only mainstream international relations theories (Brzezinski and Kissinger are mentioned in their capacity as statesmen and not academics), but also more recent takes on geopolitics (see Flint 2006, Dodds 2007, O Tuathail 2005).

Moreover, one cannot observe that the argument becomes ideological or at least indefinably vague: *Last War of the World-Island* contains direct references to geopolitical apperceptions, vectors, identity, history, architecture, logic, meaning, aspects, situation, independence, orientation, construct, choice, discipline, arsenal, method, character.

All in all, *Last War of the World-Island* is a curious, yet entertaining book. It offers little to the scholar of International Relations and rather more to the casual reader, given that the author is acutely interested in stretching every argument in order to fit the theory. The book is neither a new or original contribution to geopolitics, as the author appeals only to classical authors and is apparently unaware of critical geopolitics. Eclectic in bibliography, containing factual errors and a fair dose of reasoning very close to conspiratorial accounts, under researched in some aspects, Dugin's "Russian" answer to Mackinder exhibits his own idiosyncrasies, his own quarrels with

the Russian academic and political elites, transforming history and society in order to underline his argument of a titanic Wagnerian-like struggle between the *thalassocracies* and the *tellurocracies*. In spite of all critical arguments, Dugin remains a mystical believer in the virtues and merits of his theory, flogging to death the horse of geopolitics and warranting Morgenthau's accurate description of this line of reasoning: "[...]a kind of political metaphysics to be used as an ideological weapon in the service of the international aspirations [...]" (Morgenthau 1948, p. 118). An ideological account, utterly unfalsifiable, presumably capable of explaining nothing and everything at the same time.

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