

## Book Review: Russia: What Everyone Needs to Know by Timothy J. Colton

*In **Russia: What Everyone Needs to Know**, Timothy J. Colton offers a concise yet comprehensive introduction to Russia's current political climate. The book is refreshingly easy to read, writes **April Curtis**, and is rich in detailed information that will make it an excellent choice for those wanting to better understand the historical roots of Russia's present.*

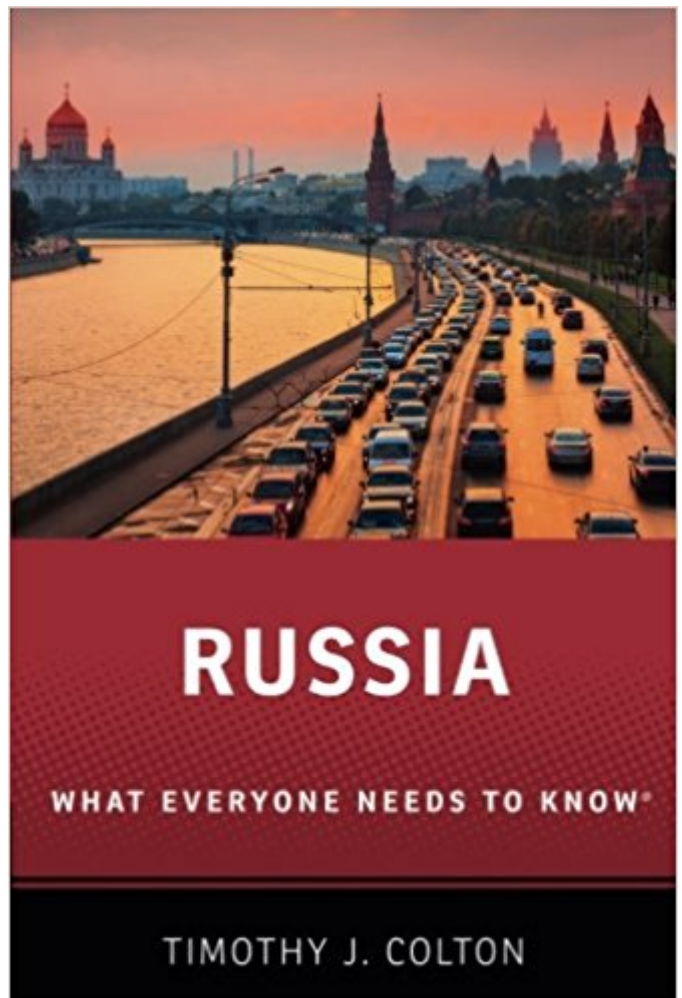
***Russia: What Everyone Needs to Know.* Timothy J. Colton. Oxford University Press. 2016.**

### Find this book:



In the contemporary political climate, Russia's intentions are increasingly opaque. Russian President Vladimir Putin looks to Russia's past for inspiration for its future, and therefore an understanding of Russia's history is essential to deciphering the Kremlin's current aims. Timothy J. Colton's new book, *Russia: What Everyone Needs to Know*, lives up to its ambitious subtitle and offers one of the most comprehensive short introductions to Russian history and today's political situation available.

While many authors have tried to summarise Russia's history, what is unique about Colton's overview is that it is anything but a basic abridgement. Instead, the book is targeted at an educated reader, enabling Colton to dive into important facts about Russia that are often deemed too technical or complex to be included. For example, Colton provides an in-depth analysis of the structure of the Russian government in the 1990s, which although complicated, illustrates how both Boris Yeltsin and Putin changed the governmental structure to achieve political gains. At times, the book can read like an scholarly text, but this is not due to it lacking an engaging writing style. Rather, the book's academic flavour is a result of the rich and detailed information Colton provides.



Colton's work is also refreshingly easy to read. The book is organised into chapters preceded by broader questions, such as 'why was the Soviet collapse relatively peaceful?' and 'what are the repercussions of the Ukraine crisis?' This structure allows the book to be read in its entirety, but also enables readers to engage with specific topics of interest. The question-and-answer format therefore gives the book a more focused approach that draws attention to the importance of a certain event or concept. This is a marked advantage over works that rather seek to provide an overarching explanation of Russia's history. In addition, this structure makes it easier to follow Colton's arguments on topics with which the reader may not be familiar.



Image Credit: Moscow (Pavel Kazachkov CC BY 2.0)

One interesting aspect of the book is the attention paid to the relationship, both political and personal, between Yeltsin and Putin. Russia was a democracy for the first time in its history under Yeltsin, thus it is important to examine this period in-depth to understand the Russian public's (often cynical) view of how democracy works. As the author of [a previous book on Yeltsin](#), Colton succinctly links the governing style and reforms of Yeltsin to Putin. He explains how Putin gained his popularity by being both Yeltsin's chosen successor and by promising to be nothing like his brash, and frequently drunken, predecessor. Colton argues that:

consolidation of power was facilitated by the constitutional setup bequeathed by Yeltsin. The superpresidency gave Putin a bully pulpit for setting the national agenda and let him take initiatives proactively (140).

Yeltsin did much of the groundwork, creating a precedent for a strong presidency and helping to condition the Russian people to a personal and individual style of governance that Putin later exploited. Putin therefore developed Yeltsin's strong presidency, which helped him create a political empire, and then protected this by appointing people loyal to him to key positions.

Colton's analysis of Russia is refreshing because he is capable of viewing the country beyond a Western lens. When measured against the same values and principles as the West, Russia seems to be a failing democracy. Human rights, especially regarding minorities, freedom of speech, rule of law, LGBT communities and media freedom, have all declined or disappeared under Putin. However, as Colton argues, 'it is not that Russian governments have missed the mark in their attempts to produce disinterested rule of law, it is that they have not in any consistent way tried to produce it' (214). As seen by Putin's consistently high approval ratings, the majority of Russians, despite the valuable work of Russian dissidents and human rights activists, do not view their ruling government as unsuccessful in achieving its aims. Rather, it is the West's bias to assume that Russia would want to become more like Western countries and embrace similar values. One reason Colton's book is able to explain Russia so clearly is that it therefore draws attention to the Russian people's own yardstick, which dispels much of the mystifying aspects of the Kremlin's outlook on the nation.

The only significant issue with Colton's argument is his treatment of NATO. When discussing Russia's place in the post-Cold War world, Colton argues that NATO's 'expansion' to the East was a breach of trust, which hindered cooperation between the West and Russia. There is no doubt that Russia's often hysterical attitude towards NATO enlargement hindered cooperation, but

Colton seems to take Russia's side unfiltered. He ignores the agency of smaller, yet equally sovereign, countries, whose memories of Soviet occupation and difficulties in removing Russian troops from their territory were very real throughout the early 1990s (it is worth noting that the final Russian withdrawal from the Baltics was not complete until 1994).

There is also no reference to why Russia's neighbours would want to ensure their territorial integrity in concert with the historic hegemon in the region – especially in light of the politically and economically unpredictable post-Soviet Russia of the 1990s (see also Russian military action in Chechnya). Colton argues that the West should have consulted Russia about NATO expansion, as though the NATO-Russian discussions on enlargement had not started in 1995 at NATO's request and as though Russia should have veto power in the security alignment of independent and sovereign states. It is important to remember that the world is no longer divided into spheres of influence, where old men decide the fates of millions of people over cocktails. Another factual issue regarding Colton's treatment of NATO is his argument that NATO 'invited' the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to become members, which ignores the Visegrad Group's incessant lobbying to join from 1991 onward. In addition, NATO does not invite membership applications; instead, it only accepts or rejects them (123).

That being said, Colton's book is an excellent choice for readers who want to know why Russia is the way it is, but are also interested in facts and details rather than generalisations. It is unique to find such a well-researched and informative work that is also accessible to non-experts. Contemporary political events have built up a myth of Russia as a mysterious entity, whereas, as Colton shows, Russia's recent actions have a historical base. Colton successfully clears the mist between Russia's past, present and future. Despite being published in the midst of the ongoing war in Ukraine, Colton's book will remain relevant far into the future.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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