"The New Cold War" by Edward Lucas (2008: Bloomsbury, London) - Reviewed by Alan Lloyd

For anyone who has an elderly maiden aunt, or a Colonel Blimp type uncle, who spent decades having sleepless nights in the belief that the Soviet Union was poised on the borders of East Germany, ready to sweep across the plains of Europe at any time, and then to end all life as we knew it, this is an ideal gift for them - guaranteed to continue their trauma.

Lucas catalogues almost every negative story that has ever been written about Russia since the revolution, even to the point of suggesting that World War Two "was largely Stalin's fault", in order to try and suggest that, although the names and weapons have changed, Russian attitudes remain the same.

The book is largely a 300 page right wing rant that the likes of the Daily Mail and Fox News would be proud of, and the lack of any attempt at balance means that it becomes increasing boring as each chapter appears as hysterical as the last.

Inevitably the poisoning of the ex FSB Officer Litvinenko features early on, as a perfect example of the dirty deeds the Kremlin is still capable carrying out. This conveniently ignores the fact that he was not exactly engaged on social work in London, and it is quite possible that one of his dodgy associates was responsible, not least to try and discredit Russia. Lucas also happily charges the Kremlin with being associated with the death of the journalist Politkovskaya, darkly suggesting that Putin's view that her death had just "marginal significance" added weight to the charge. However, this is one of the best examples, of so many in the book, where a particular slant has been taken in order to support a flimsy case. For anyone who troubles to read Putin's full quote, in the notes at the back of the book, they will see he is taken hopelessly out of context.

Another of Putin's quotes, which so clearly alarms the author that he repeats it later in the book, is his observation that the fall of the Soviet Union was the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th Century". For most Russians, of course, it was, but our inability to place ourselves in the position of ordinary working people in other countries often leads so many writers to judge those countries against our own norms – as if many of those are all something to be proud of. This is clearly shown by the claim that Russia has "abandoned the aim of being normal", which largely refers to the situation whereby the Russian Government is refusing to "liberalise" its energy market, and thereby allow multi national companies to come in and plunder their natural resources for the benefit of their shareholders, as they are allowed to do in most other parts of the world.

"Once it was communist Trade Unions that undermined the West at the Kremlin's behest", writes Lucas with another ludicrous claim. Now, he argues, it is all about the money generated by the massive oil and gas revenues which threatens his New Cold War, as it is going to undermine his idea of the free world "slice by slice, adding to their sphere of influence." This is

to be assisted by the "Kremlin's close friends...a rogues gallery." In this he includes Venezuela, a country whose people have made a clear democratic choice - despite all the money and inference by the USA to undermine the process. It also has a government which has done so much to improve the health and education of its poorer people. Compare this to the US supported regimes in Colombia and Guatemala where Trade Unionists are murdered on a weekly basis- who are the real rogues??

Whilst it is true that Putin has certainly abused the electoral process in Russia, bullied the media, and ensured that so much of the wealth of the country is channelled into the hands of a few insiders, Lucas refuses to acknowledge that the groundwork for all this was done by the drink-sodden Yeltsin. Indeed he actually tries to make excuses for the way in which Yeltsin changed the constitution to put virtually all the power into the hands of the President, blatantly stole at least one election, and allowed the oligarchs to plunder the wealth of the country, many of whom are now to be seen to be flaunting their wealth in London, prevented from extradition back to Russia to face trial by the disgraceful protection of the British Government. All this was done with the tacit approval of the West, no doubt believing that their rich friends would soon be allowed in to help themselves to their share of the booty. It is also claimed that, "most Russians were ill placed to judge Yeltsin's policies", but surely if a government's policies have changed your world from one where basic food prices were held to a subsidised level, a job was guaranteed, you lived in a flat with an affordable rent, and pensions were adequate and paid on time, to a life of chaos, unemployment, rampant poverty and inflation, you are actually far better placed to make a judgement than some well paid, patronising, journalist from the West.

Lucas argues that the fact that the oil and gas supply is controlled by the Russian government means that it would be fairly simple for them to use it as a geopolitical weapon. Indeed, he claims this is already happening with their treatment of the former Republics and Countries who formed part of the Warsaw Pact, such as the Baltic States, who are now trying to ingratiate themselves with the US. He fails to suggest why they should continue to get the special treatment they once enjoyed. After all, surely, if you wish to embrace capitalism then you must expect to pay the going rate for a product, in the same way that the UK had to tolerate its economy being wrecked by the OPEC inspired oil prices rises in the 1970's. Indeed, a considerable chunk of the book is a p.r. puff for the Baltic States, especially Estonia, whose treatment of their large Russian minority is not only dismissed, but it is actually suggested the prejudice that has been enshrined in law is actually good for them in the long run. The rise of fascism once again, particularly in Latvia, is also conveniently overlooked.

Indeed one is left to wonder if much of the Baltic States attitude to Russia is because they would have preferred to have lived under a fascist dictatorship rather than to be liberated by the Red Army. This point allows me to return to Lucas's absurd claim that WW2 was "largely Stalin's fault" due to his "conniving with Hitler in the 1930's". Whilst Stalin was responsible for many horrific crimes, not least the corrupting of the Socialist ideal which gave such hope to so much of the world, this is a total rewriting of history. He conveniently forgets, or omits, that from 1936-1939, only the Soviet Union, along with Mexico, was prepared to go to the aid of the democratically elected Republican Government of Spain in its, ultimately failed, battle to prevent a fascist coup d'etat led by Franco, whose allies Hitler and Mussolini poured in massive amounts of men, aircraft and equipment. Not only were they happy to support a fellow fascist it

also allowed them to experiment with new military techniques, particularly bombing, which they would later use to great effect on so many English cities. Little wonder that Spain has been described as the first battle of the Second World War, but all this time the so-called great democracies of UK, USA, and France stood back with their cowardly policy of non-intervention, which even meant that the Spanish government was unable to buy desperately needed arms and equipment on the open market, as International Law decreed that they should have been allowed to do. In the circumstances Stalin could hardly be blamed for cutting a deal with Hitler, after the Spanish Civil War was over, as he could not have had any confidence that the Western Powers would come to Russia's aid in the event of a German invasion.

It is seems as though Lucas is occasionally aware of the totally unbalanced argument that he propounds, with comments such as; "analogies with it (the Old Cold War) are outdated and anachronistic", and "it is important to show them that our dislike of the Kremlin is not motivated by Russophobia", but he quickly slips back and darkly warns us again that "we are facing people who want to harm us, frustrate us, and weaken us".

Until such time as it is recognised that Putin was the antidote for the Russian people, for the humiliations heaped upon them during the Yeltsin era, and certain countries stop trying to wreak revenge for past mistreatments (real or imagined), and recognise the continued expansion NATO for the policy of American imperialism that it is, then we will continue to have the sort of strained relationships that will only please the shareholders of arms manufacturers - and writers peddling fear and mistrust.