

# THE UNITED STATES AND RUSSIA

After World War II, the United States thought that the spread of communism was a threat to freedom. Once allies in World War II, the U.S. and Soviet Union engaged in a Cold War from 1947 to 1991. This means, although they did not deploy their militaries directly against one another, the two competed on every front for the greatest global influence.

The two countries sought to influence or control other countries and establish democratic or communist states. They raced to stockpile deadlier weapons. They even competed to be the first to put people in space. Tensions ran high, and the countries seemed on the brink of an apocalyptic war.

After the Cold War, however, the Russian economy opened to the world for the first time. The U.S. wanted to profit from this and had to figure out how to strategically build economic bridges with its old enemy.

In the play, Mikhail Khodorkovsky meets with a White House official. This character and these fictional scenes symbolize the changing relationship between Russia and the United States. The United States would benefit from the Russian economy being open. Behind closed doors, an unnamed official is working out a deal with Khodorkovsky to sell Yukos Oil to Chevron, an American oil company. This sale would be a huge step in opening Russia's market to the world. However, the U.S. government does not like Khodorkovsky antagonizing Putin. The official makes a strong "suggestion" that Khodorkovsky back off, demonstrating that the U.S. also has massive political interests in Russia.



## ACTIVITY

The relationship between the United States and Russia is in the news every day. Each member of your class should find a different news article of significant length about the U.S. and Russia. Find articles from the early 1990s to today. As a class, construct and discuss the history and hypothesize about the future.

## RESOURCES

### ON THE WEB

"Playwright Kenneth Lin is realizing his dreams"  
*Everett Evans* | <https://tinyurl.com/lininterview>

"End of Scene"  
*Kenneth Lin* | <https://tinyurl.com/kennethlin>

"Timeline: USSR and Russian Federation"  
*David Johnson* | <https://www.infoplease.com/timeline-ussr>

"The Fall of the Soviet Union"  
*NowThis World* | <https://tinyurl.com/ussrfall>

"Russia's oligarchs are different from other billionaires"  
*CNN* | <https://tinyurl.com/cnnoligarch>

"Life After Communism: the facts"  
*New Internationalist* | <https://tinyurl.com/aftercrashfacts>

### Definitions

Encyclopedia Britannica | [britannica.com](http://britannica.com)

"Khodorkovsky"  
*MBK* | <https://www.khodorkovsky.com/>

"Profile: Khodorkovsky"  
*BBC* | <https://tinyurl.com/khodork>

"Vladimir Putin"  
*Britannica* | <https://tinyurl.com/putinprofile>

## HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!



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Visit [www.arenastage.org](http://www.arenastage.org) for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.

## THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

Why is the play titled *Kleptocracy*?

2

What makes a great leader?

3

How can you reverse damage that has already been done?

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## THE PLAY

It is one of the most pivotal moments in history — the Soviet Union has collapsed. It is also a defining moment in the life of **Mikhail Khodorkovsky**. He is about to become an important man in this new world and very, very rich. First, though, he needs to gather his resources, including a beautiful and shrewd wife, **Inna**.

Khodorkovsky becomes part of a ruthless, rising class of corrupt businessmen, who are determined to make their fortune from the ruins of communism. Then, these oligarchs (see article) will open Russia's economy to the world. Who cares if it's at the expense of the working people? That's capitalism.

At the same time, a calculating young man named **Vladimir Putin** is rising to political power. When Putin starts going after the oligarchs one by one, Khodorkovsky finds himself up against a dangerous man. In this fictional play, inspired by true events, who will hold the power and how will they use it? Who will determine the future of Russia?

# KLEPTOCRACY



BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT WITH **ROBERT AHRENS**,  
**MICKEY LIDDELL**, **MICHAEL MILLS** AND **ANDREW TOBIAS**  
BY **KENNETH LIN**  
DIRECTED BY **JACKSON GAY**

**KREEGER THEATER | JANUARY 18 – FEBRUARY 24, 2019**

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# MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



KENNETH LIN

Kenneth Lin (born in 1978) was raised in New York by his Chinese-American parents. Not everyone in his home spoke English. His grandmother loved the theater and films, making them a part of his daily life. Growing up within this household exposed Lin to the power of storytelling, which drew him to the performing arts. He joined the speech and debate team at his high school, and he fell in love with theater and reading plays.

In an interview with Everett Evans, Lin stated “I had never thought of just reading plays and suddenly here was this roomful of them to read. I remember reading Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. I couldn’t stop reading it. I found myself crying because it reminded me so much of my parents’ struggles.”

Even though his family loved the arts, they did not approve of his choice of pursuing a playwriting career. They wanted him to become a doctor or a lawyer. Yet, Lin followed his passion and went on to study at Cornell University and the Yale School of Drama.

Lin was the recipient of a Fulbright Scholarship, and was selected as one of the “50 to Watch” by the Dramatists Guild. He was a writer for *House of Cards*. Other well-known works by Lin include *Intelligence-Slave*, *Po-Boy Tango* and *Life on Paper*.

# PROFILE: MIKHAIL KHODORKOVSKY

Mikhail Khodorkovsky was born in 1963 to a moderately well-off family. His parents were engineers and secretly opposed to communism, but kept this from their son, raising him as a patriot and fervent communist. Despite this, Khodorkovsky became an avid capitalist. He was well-positioned to financially flourish as the Soviet Union, and later Russia, began experimenting with privatization. Khodorkovsky seized the opportunity. He started a bank and eventually owned Yukos Oil, a conglomerate of more than 20 oil companies. By 2003, Khodorkovsky was the richest man in Russia, and one of the richest men in the world, with a fortune of approximately \$15 billion.



Mikhail Khodorkovsky

After amassing his fortune, sometimes at the expense of his workers, Khodorkovsky began to give large amounts of money to charities and reform his company. He was instrumental in connecting the Russian and U.S. economies.

As a vocal critic of President Vladimir Putin, Khodorkovsky has faced serious consequences. Khodorkovsky has funded opposition parties and discussed running for president. His foundation, Open Russia, works to expose and eliminate government corruption. It has been declared an “undesirable organization” by the Russian state.

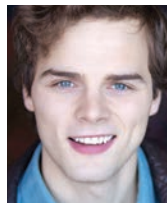
# FROM ARENA STAGE’S ARTISTIC DIRECTOR MOLLY SMITH

“*Kleptocracy* is about the rise of the oligarchs. It focuses on businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky and rising star Vladimir Putin. It is a fascinating prism through which to look at our own relationship with Russia in the United States now. *Kleptocracy* is the most dangerous play at Arena Stage this season. Dangerous because playwright Kenneth Lin has taken us right into the heart of greed, manipulation and the rise of the wealthy and Putin in Russia in the 1990s and 2000s, reminding us of where we are now.”



Molly Smith

## THE CAST



JOHN AUSTIN



ELLIOTT BALES



CANDY BUCKLEY



JOSEPH CARLSON

# PROFILE: VLADIMIR PUTIN

Vladimir Putin is the president of Russia. He was born in 1952 in the Soviet Union. In speaking about his youth, Putin emphasizes that he was an average child raised on tough streets.

Putin studied law and had a 15-year career in the KGB, the Soviet Union's intelligence agency, which was known for its ruthlessness. In 1994 Putin became the deputy mayor of Saint Petersburg. He continued to rise through political positions and, in 1999, Putin was appointed the prime minister of Russia by President Boris Yeltsin.

When Yeltsin resigned from office, Putin became the interim president. He ran for president in the following election in 2000 and won. Oligarchs were surprised when Putin, whom they had hoped would be easily influenced, asserted his authority over them. He began to shape Russia into his vision, eliminating the oligarchs who did not agree with him. Putin promised to rebuild Russia into a powerful country.

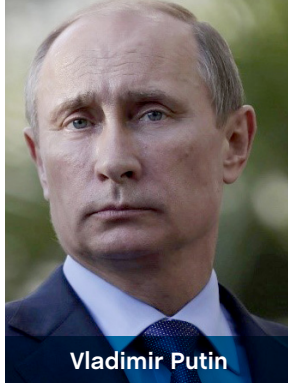
In 2007, Putin reached the consecutive term limit for a Russian president. His prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev, succeeded him, and appointed Putin his prime minister. In 2012, Putin was elected president again and made Medvedev his prime minister. Putin was elected to a fourth term in 2018.

Opinions of Putin vary across the world. During his presidency, Russia has become more economically and politically stable, reemerging as a world power. Under Putin, Russia hosted the Sochi Olympics and the World Cup. According to Yuri Levada Analytical, Putin's public approval rating has not dropped below 60 percent since 2000.

While some countries view him as an uncompromising political leader, others view his leadership as authoritarian. Critics of Putin and the Russian government have been jailed or, like Alexander Litvinenko and Boris Nemstov, have been assassinated or died under suspicious circumstances. During his leadership, Russia annexed Crimea, which members of the international community saw as an invasion. Putin is also criticized for passing strict "gay propaganda" laws, which are meant to keep LGBT information away from children. These laws, which Putin passed in the name of "traditional family values," have been used to stop gay pride parades, charge activists and have diminished support groups and other resources for LGBT youth.

Transparency International, an organization that monitors and fights government corruption, rates countries on a scale of 0 to 100 with 0 being highly corrupt. It rates Russia as a 29. For comparison, the U.S. is a 75.

In the play, Putin is the only character that speaks directly to the audience.



# KEY TERMS

*Kleptocracy* is set after the fall of **communism** in the Soviet Union. During the play, **capitalism** is taking root and the economy is undergoing **privatization**. A group of **oligarchs** emerged in this new society.

**Communism** is a political and economic system. Its goal is to create a country with no social classes, because all the major industry and resources are owned and run by the government. Thus, ideally, wealth can be distributed equally, and everyone gets what they need. Communist countries are often run by a single political party or leader, and opposition is not tolerated. During the 20th century, about 1/3 of the world's population lived under communism. Today, China, Laos, Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam are the only five communist countries remaining.

**Capitalism** is an economic system. Unlike communism, major industries and resources are privately owned. Individuals and businesses compete for profits in what is called a free market, with less government intervention. While capitalism creates opportunities for financial success, it also results in economic inequality. The United States, Germany, Japan and Chile are among the capitalist countries today.

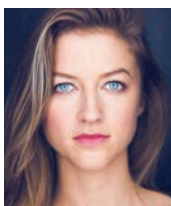
**Privatization** is the process of transferring an industry from the public sector (run by the government) to the private sector (owned by individuals). Privatization is part of the process of shifting from a communist economy to a more capitalist one.

Russia's **oligarchs** were a new, wealthy class of people with great political influence. They made their money by taking over Russia's major industries like timber, oil and other natural resources. Oligarchs used their close government connections, corruption and exploitation of workers to do so. If an oligarch fell out of favor with the government, they and their fortune were in danger.

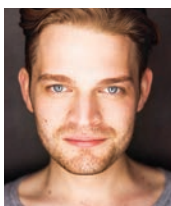


## WATCH

"The Power of Putin" — BBC Documentary  
<https://tinyurl.com/powerofputin>



BRONTË ENGLAND-NELSON



CHRISTOPHER GEARY



TONY MANNA



ALEX PIPER



MAX WOERTENDYKE





A key moment in the collapse of communism was the opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. The wall had divided the city of Berlin and Germany in two. West Germany was allied with the U.S., Great Britain, and France and East Germany was allied with the Soviet Union. Germany was officially unified in 1990.

## VOUCHERS & PRIVATIZATION

**“No one in Russia, besides the princes or The Party, has ever been able to own property. That means no one has ever been able to own himself. History is opening the door for us a crack, to let us make our own economy, to let us own labor and you’re afraid to squeeze through.”**

—Mikhail, *Kleptocracy*

When Mikhail Khodorkovsky tries to seduce Inna, he brings her a paper bag of food and necessities. It wasn’t a bad strategy. In the chaos after communism, items like clothes and food were scarce and inflation was high.

To set up the new economy, the government gave people vouchers. These pieces of paper were—at best—an attempt to start all Russians off on the same foot. All businesses had been state-owned. These vouchers represented each citizen’s equal share of those businesses. If a person accumulated enough vouchers they could buy a business, like a bakery or a factory.

Most people didn’t need vouchers, though; they needed groceries and everyday goods. The vouchers were also worth very little. So, people sold their vouchers to men like Khodorkovsky, who were buying them up and paying cash (about \$7 each). In turn, these men took advantage of the situation and purchased the largest industries in Russia. They were also helped by being friends with powerful people in government, including Boris Yeltsin, who was Russia’s president at the time. These men emerged as a new social class called “oligarchs.”

Once he was elected president, Vladimir Putin made it his mission to curb the power of the oligarchs, especially his political rivals, and assert his authority over them. They could keep their money, if they recognized this authority. Some oligarchs had to surrender millions of dollars in assets. Others fled the country—some to the U.S. Others were jailed on charges like tax evasion. This does not mean corruption disappeared from the Russian government, but that it benefited other people.

## KLEPTOCRACY

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a kleptocracy is “a society whose leaders make themselves rich and powerful by stealing from the rest of the people.”

## OLIGARCHS VS. BILLIONAIRES

Thomas Graham is the co-director of the Russian Studies program at Yale. In an interview with CNN, he explained the difference between American billionaires, who also exert enormous political influence, and oligarchs.

“The difference in our country [the U.S.] is we have institutions. We have independent court systems. You can try to influence policy, but you don’t have to have access to the political power to protect your property. You can be a rich businessman in the U.S. and not worry about your contacts in government. It’s a little bit different in Russia; each business decision you make, you have to be checking with your contacts in the Kremlin. The government can strip you of your oligarch status.”

The Kremlin is the executive branch of the Russian government. The Duma is the elected legislative body. While they are in office, members of the Duma cannot be prosecuted for crimes.



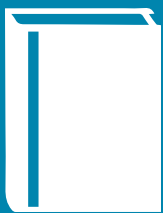
People began to pull down and destroy statues and other images of the Soviet Union after its collapse. The hammer and sickle appeared on the Soviet flag.



The countries in green were part of the Soviet Union. Although they were not part of the Soviet Union, the areas in yellow were communist and heavily influenced by the Soviet Union.

## THE SETTING: RUSSIA AFTER THE FALL OF THE USSR

The Soviet Union (USSR) was the world's largest communist country and a global superpower. It grew to 15 republics (see map) and was two and a half times the size of the United States. It collapsed in 1991. *Kleptocracy* begins after the fall of the Soviet Union and continues through the 1990s and early 2000s.



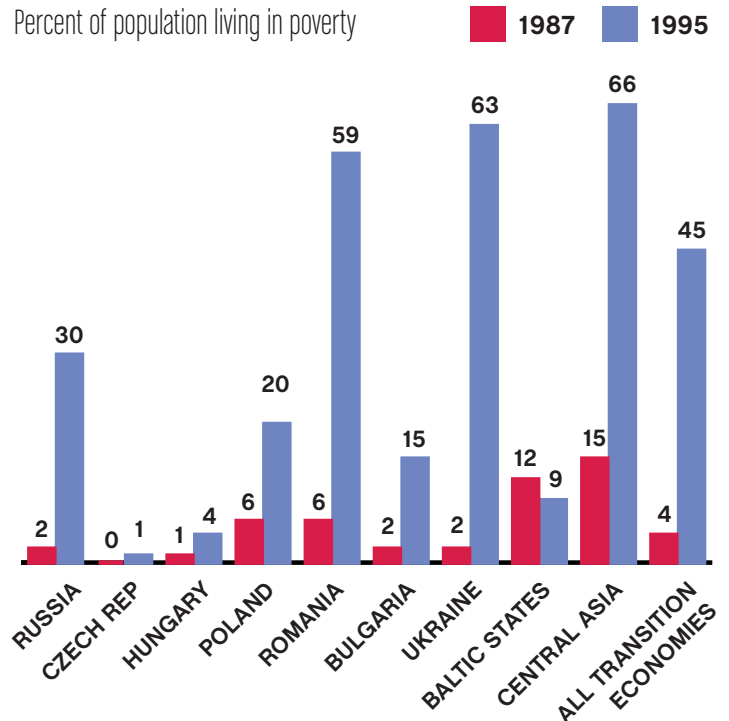
### READ

A detailed history of the Soviet Union

[www.history.com/topics/russia/history-of-the-soviet-union](http://www.history.com/topics/russia/history-of-the-soviet-union)

## THE POVERTY TRAP

Percent of population living in poverty



After the fall of communism in 1991, formerly communist countries needed to make major economic changes. In all the transition economies combined, 168 million people were living in poverty by 1995.