

SWINE IN STALIN'S GARDEN?

By Si Frumkin

In January 1849, Alphonse Karr said –in French: “*The more things change, the more they remain the same*”. I quoted Alphonse quite a few times in the past without ever really knowing who he was or why he said what he did. As it turns out, he was the editor a major French newspaper, “Le Figaro”. He had a number of other, less well known aphorisms to his credit: when writing about the proposed abolishment of the death penalty he said, “*je veux bien que messieurs les assassins commencent*” — “*let the gentlemen who do the murders take the first step*”.

But I digress. What brought me to the Karr quote was something that President Putin said in a Moscow press conference on November 26. In it he attacked U.S. meddling in Russia’s internal affairs in connection with the upcoming presidential elections there. A week ago he had labeled his opposition as “jackals who hang around foreign embassies”, his police broke up opposition rallies, opposition leaders – including world chess champion Gary Kasparov – were arrested, and there is an ongoing nationwide campaign to “convince” Putin to serve another term as President in spite of a constitutional prohibition.

Politicians and other famous people say things that often outlive them. Winston Churchill’s “Iron Curtain that (has) descended across the Continent”; Neville Chamberlain’s “Peace in our time”; Franklin Roosevelt’s “The fear we have to fear is fear itself”; Golda Meir’s, “There will be peace when the Arabs love their children more than they hate us”; Joseph Stalin’s “A single

death is a tragedy, a million is a statistic” and “How many divisions does the Pope have?”; and Khrushchev’s “We will bury you!” are just a few of the better known.

There also are quotes that the politicians would like to be forgotten, like the one by the older Bush: “Read my lips: no new taxes”; by George W.: “Mission accomplished!” and Bill Clinton’s: “I didn’t have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky!”

Sometimes a quote assumes a life of its own, especially in totalitarian societies. I am sure that Mao is still being quoted hundreds of times each day in China as is Stalin in Russia. I too am guilty of this: I had Stalin’s wise sayings drummed into me when Lithuania was occupied by the Soviet Union and I became a Young Pioneer, the communist version of the Boy Scouts. Now, decades later, in America, when confronted by something difficult I smile and say, sarcastically, “There is no fortress that a Bolshevik cannot conquer!” – a piece of Stalin’s wisdom.

Another Stalin quote also survived in my memory as it apparently did in president Putin’s who used it – somewhat adjusted for the present – on November 26. The quote appeared first in 1934, in Stalin’s interview with New York Times’ Walter Duranty. Responding to Duranty’s question whether the Soviet Union still needed a strong army if it were to join the League of Nations, Stalin made himself clear: *“Those who try to attack our country will receive a stunning rebuff to teach them not to poke their pig’s snout into our Soviet garden again.”*

I no longer think that the pig snout metaphor is profound or witty. Apparently Stalin did because it kept showing up again and again. It was repeated in commentary on the military

clashes with Japan in 1938, later that year in “Pionerskaya Pravda”, a newspaper for the Young Pioneers, and famously, in Stalin’s speech at the 18th Communist Party Congress in March 1939, 6 months before W.W.II began, when he was warning his future allies not to poke their snouts in the Soviet garden. The minutes of the session indicate that the speech drew thunderous applause.

The “pig snout” image persisted. The song “March of Moscow’s defenders” used it to confirm that the soldiers stand as a wall of steel on orders of comrade Stalin, published letters from soldiers told their loved ones that they were teaching the Germans not to stick their pig’s snouts into Soviet gardens and post-war articles spoke of punishment for traitors, spies and the pig snout in-the-garden pokers. Even in far away New Zealand, a communist party publication celebrated Red Army Day by saying, “When, in 1937, Stalin, comrade and friend of all progressive mankind, issued a warning to the Fascist pigs to keep their Fascist snouts out of the Soviet garden, it was no idle warning...”

And so, here is Putin, as reported by the New York Times:

“According to information we have, it (foreign meddling) was again done at the recommendation of the U.S. State department...Their goal is the delegitimization of our elections. But they will not achieve even this goal.”

And then, “If Russia maintains a robust military, we will not allow anyone to poke their snotty nose into our affairs.”

Monsieur Karr was right: “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”