

Russia's Own Imperial Road *

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Each great empire has its own unique and inimitable emergence, zenith, decline, and collapse, but they all have one thing in common. Back in the 5th-6th century, Roman historian and philosopher Anicius Boethius noted that all those who witnessed an empire's fall considered it a natural development, but always made an exception for their own country. As they saw it, their own country's collapse, unlike that of all others, was not simply history taking its logical course, but arose because of particular combinations of circumstances, incompetent rulers, or malicious intent fermented at home and/or abroad. The collapse of one's own empire was always seen as an unprecedented disaster, while the end of any other empire was simply one link in a long chain of similar, explainable, and logical historic events.

These same views prevail in today's Russia. Speaking several years ago, former President Vladimir Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century, and most of the public and the political elite backed him up on this opinion. But paradoxical though it may seem, this attitude is yet further proof that for all its specific features, the Soviet empire found itself subject to the same universal laws of socio-economic, military-political, and moral-psychological cycles that took the Soviet empire, like all of its numerous predecessors, through the stages of rise, zenith, decline, and collapse.

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The Soviet Empire: Similarities to and Differences from Other Empires

It seems unquestionable that in several important respects tsarist Russia and its successor, the Soviet Union, stood out among the great empires of the 19th and 20th centuries. Britain and France, Spain and Portugal, Italy, Holland, Belgium and Germany all built their prosperity on colonial exploitation and drew a strict dividing line between Europeans and indigenous peoples. Russia, however, had always been an empire not in the economic sense, but in the political and military sense, acquiring colonies in order to expand its security perimeter and multiply its might, prestige, and role in the surrounding world.

The Russian (Soviet) ruling elite was open to nobles from the colonial provinces, thus giving rise to a genuinely multiethnic *nomenklatura*, working together to exploit and oppress all of their subjects and use them as cheap labor (albeit with a low level of productivity) and cannon fodder with the goal of maintaining their own power, wealth, and grandeur. The empire's core people – the ethnic Russians – were not infrequently given even harsher treatment than the other peoples. However, Russia and later the Soviet Union were nonetheless empires in the full sense of the term. They had much in common with continental military and political empires of the past – the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, and especially the Byzantine empire, from which Moscow borrowed, most of all in terms of imperial ideology (Moscow as the “third Rome”), state-building, rules and traditions governing relations within the hierarchy and the political process in general.

Soviet-style communist ideology was built not so much on Marxism-Leninism as such, as on a super-statist, anti-democratic (totalitarian) and messianic vision of state and public organization. Russian autocracy, before the Revolution of 1917, had possessed a similar ideological base, though in a milder version. This was the only kind of ideology able to cement into a unified monolith a whole host of peoples scattered across a vast territory and living at different stages of social development – from

an industrial economy to nomadic cattle herding. This was yet another difference between Russia and the main European empires, where (except in authoritarian Portugal) varying levels of democracy in the mother country existed in parallel to authoritarian colonial oppression in the dependent territories. For this reason these empires' political regimes survived the loss of their colonies.

The Russian Empire, and even more so the Soviet empire, was built on four pillars holding up the system.

The first was an iron-disciplined authoritarian or totalitarian corporate political regime based on all-pervasive political surveillance and suppression of dissident thinking.

The second was colossal military power far in excess of the country's economic resources, built up at the expense of the state's other functions and the people's prosperity.

The third was a centralized economy under state control (directly in the Soviet Union and indirectly in tsarist Russia), designed above all to consolidate the bureaucratic establishment's power and build up military might.

The fourth was a messianic ideology that served to legitimize the three pillars of imperial power mentioned above, use grand ideas to justify the subjects' poverty and lack of rights, and provide the grounds for constant outward expansion.

The obsession with security, secrecy, and the never-ending fight against plots and threats from both within and without was an integral part of this ideology. It was partly rooted in the harsh lessons of history, but over time became a self-perpetuating condition of the regime's existence. The need to maintain and legitimize the status quo, coupled with the messianic vision, required the constant expansion of the borders. This exhausted economic and human resources, sparked discontent at home, and aroused neighboring peoples' fear and hostility.

The result was that the obsession with external and internal threats turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The vision of potential enemy plots

at home and abroad produced a saber-rattling foreign and domestic policy that did indeed create resistance inside the empire and confrontation beyond its borders.

Soviet foreign policy had its own particular approach to the rule of law and the need to observe moral norms of some sort or other on the international stage. The Soviet Union made a show of observing these rules only insofar as they corresponded to its geopolitical, military or ideological aims or could be used to justify its actions. The disregard for the law and reliance on force that it practiced at home defined its behavior in the world at large, too.

Of course, Western leaders were far from being the angels that many ideologues abroad tend to sing the praises of now. Mass use of military force, secret sabotage operations, and violations of international laws and moral standards were frequent in Western politics during the Cold War. But for the West, this was the cost of global rivalry rather than a natural extrapolation of its domestic situation to events abroad.

The Western democracies, therefore, had a relatively painless time digesting the end of global confrontation. However, these changes on the international stage represented a glaring contradiction challenging the Soviet empire's existence. This is the main reason why the West's economic and political systems and military and political alliances were able to survive the end of this confrontation, while the Soviet Union's system, empire and ideology could not. This interdependence between the regime's nature at home and its projection abroad explains why those trying now to rehabilitate Stalinism and appeal for a return to this or that form of authoritarian regime always link it to a revival of some form of the Russian (or Soviet) empire and permanent confrontation with the West.

The irony is that once it lost such a strong and cunning adversary, the United States made a bid for the status of sole superpower and leader of a single polar world. Acting in this spirit, in its foreign policy Washington started making increasing use of the worst Cold War-era practices and borrowed many of the Soviet Union's shameful principles and methods, such

as exporting its political and ideological system by force, changing inconvenient regimes, using force arbitrarily abroad, committing mass human rights violations, conducting disinformation campaigns, and so on. This eventually led the U.S. into the biggest domestic and foreign policy crisis in its recent history. "History teaches us nothing but only punishes us for not learning our lessons," Russian historian Vasily Klyuchevsky wrote.

Under the Banner of a Grand Mission

Messianic vision is an important element of all empires. The British, French, and other empires all suffered from megalomania and used the idea of a civilizing mission to justify their expansionist ventures. Hitler's Germany proclaimed the "thousand-year Reich" of the superior Nordic race. Under Benito Mussolini, Italy set out to restore the great Roman empire, and under the emperor, Japan used its military might to spread its beneficial rule and create "the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." The Soviet Union supported the "triumphant march" of socialism and national liberation movements around the world.

The idea of a special "Russian mission" has long been an inherent part of the Russian imperial design. Some of its features are more or less typical of any colonial ideology, especially the conviction that the center spreads its civilization to peoples at a lower stage of socio-economic and technological development. But the Russian idea/mission has its historical roots in internal Russian issues: it was in many respects necessary as a psychological defense and support for the nation over centuries of bitter struggle for survival.

This ideology served as a source of comfort and a sort of compensation for the relatively low living standards and absence of many of the basic practical conveniences available to people in the West. It was essential to provide a psychological justification for the difficulties created by a centralized and militarized economy and an ineffective bureaucracy.

Above all, an inspiring idea was needed to reconcile in Russians' minds the contradiction between their lives filled with hardship and humiliation and their country's vast territory, its boundless natural resources and the talents of its great people. Finally, spiritual quests and metaphysical values provided an outlet for the nation's intellectual potential in an environment where a reactionary ruling regime strictly limited freedom to engage in political or economic activity.

Be that as it may, authoritarian traditions, militarism, a centralized command economy, messianic ideology, expansionism, and constant confrontation with the West are not an inherent part of the Russian mentality or national character. These are all the results of particular circumstances of historical development and, therefore, can and should change as Russia's domestic situation and external environment change.

At the same time, these traditions could gain new life and receive public support in response to failed transformation policies, lost opportunities to make progress along the mainstream road of European civilization, and an increasingly painful process of adapting Russia's everyday life to the changes taking place. These moods could flare up in reaction to unfair and disrespectful treatment of Russia by other countries and attempts to exploit its weakness and force it to accept a dependent and humiliated position. Such moods are explainable and understandable, but they should not be allowed to become a self-perpetuating force that defines policy and would lead the country once more along the long dead-end road of self-isolation, messianic ideology, militarized authoritarianism, internal stagnation, and external hostility.

Who Defeated the USSR?

Like all other empires, the Soviet Union had its advantages and its moments of glory. Aside from the grim years of Stalin's secret police terror and mass repressions, the Soviet state, like other empires at their high

points, guaranteed its subjects a high degree of stability, security, and predictability within the strict rules established by the government. Along with colossal military and industrial might, it also developed a modest but universal level of healthcare, education, social protection, and housing that its many different peoples all benefited from on an equal basis (along with a system of strictly regulated privileges for the bosses). Moreover, no one can deny the Soviet Union's truly world-class cultural, scientific, and technological achievements.

Unlike most other empires, including tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union was not defeated or fatally wounded in a major war and did not disintegrate as a result of exhausting small colonial conflicts, despite the quagmire of the war in Afghanistan (1979-1989) and the troubles in the USSR's constituent republics (1989-1991). It is particularly significant that despite the common view, the Soviet Union was not defeated in the Cold War. Many people share this misconception because the Soviet collapse coincided in time with the end of global military and ideological confrontation, but in history "happened after" is not always the same thing as "happened as a result of."

The Soviet empire was created and built for the arms race, confrontation, and, if necessary, waging war against external enemies. The arms race was not in itself a factor that undermined the economy or caused the empire's collapse. It was the engine driving the entire planned economy and the nucleus of the overall economic and technological system. However, as a result of its own internal dynamic, this system completely lost its effectiveness and attractiveness for the mass consumer by the end of the 1980s, as did the whole edifice of political and ideological dogmas, myths, and claims on which the state regime and the *nomenklatura's* monopoly on power were built.

Subsequent experience showed that a tenfold decrease in defense spending in the 1990s did not lead to economic growth but only made matters worse, sending all of the economic sectors directly connected to the defense industry into collapse. The militarized Soviet economy's systemic

nature prevented any real free movement of capital, labor, and goods into civilian sectors. The system started to fall apart but was not subjected to any deep-reaching reform after 1992.

The Reagan-era acceleration of the arms race, including the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) program, did not deal the final blow to the Soviet economy. Taking into account the time needed to go through all of the usual cycles involved in big military programs – research, development, production, and deployment – the Soviet “appropriate and asymmetrical response” to Reagan’s military and technological challenge at the start of the 1980s would have gotten into high gear (and demanded greatest funding) only by the late 1990s at the earliest. Gorbachev’s *détente* began fifteen years earlier, and the defense programs underway during the Soviet Union’s final years were based on decisions made back in the 1970s or early 1980s.

Technologically and economically speaking, the Soviet Union could have continued under the growing burden of its military expenses, but the state had been weakened to its very core by internal corrosion. The gap between real life and all of the official ideological dogmas, without exception, had become too glaring. Most of the population fell into apathy and lost all faith in the regime, thus depriving it of social backing and support. As for the ruling *nomenklatura*, with few exceptions, the system of “natural” selection that had taken shape had filled its ranks with careerist, money-grubbing cynics.

The defeat was hastened by the scientific, technological, and information revolution that brought about unprecedented expansion in the Soviet Union’s contacts with the outside world in the 1980s. By the end of the 1980s, the Soviet Union had more than 30,000 nuclear warheads, 5,000 ballistic missiles, 60,000 tanks, and 300 submarines, but as Grigory Yavlinsky noted, it could not produce a single laptop computer. Speaking figuratively, the new era of the universal computerization of human existence determined the outcome of the historical struggle between “real socialism” and capitalism. The Soviet empire was designed as a monolithic

bastion built to withstand constant siege, but it had no immunity against broad-ranging contact with the outside environment and thus collapsed as soon as the siege (or perceived siege) was lifted.

It was not the United States, NATO, or Reagan that brought down the Soviet Union as a political regime and an empire. The Soviet Union did not collapse under pressure from outside, but was toppled by a relaxation of internal tension and inconsistent attempts at internal reform. Mikhail Gorbachev freed Eastern Europe in order to maintain political cooperation with the West, and Boris Yeltsin and the Russian democrats freed the other Soviet republics in order to end the rule of Gorbachev and the Soviet Communist Party. Democratic Russia was the main victor in the Cold War – not the U.S. and its allies, which provided only episodic and half-hearted moral support in achieving this victory.

The collapse of the Soviet economic and political system and its associated ideology preceded the empire's downfall rather than the other way around. This makes the Soviet case different from that of the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Portuguese empires or the Kaiser's Germany. The Soviet case also differs from the disintegration of the British, French, Dutch, and Belgian empires, in which collapse of the empire did not lead to serious change in the mother country's economic and political system.

The communist system in its economic, political, and ideological dimensions was the cement holding the empire together. This is why Russian communists' calls to restore the Soviet Union and all types of nationalist yearnings for a return to the tsarist empire inevitably involve a return to an authoritarian or totalitarian regime and are incompatible with democracy and the market economy.

The Price of Collapse

Russians have yet to fully wake up to the fact that they live in a country radically different from the Soviet Union, owing its existence not to

historical coincidence, domestic or foreign plots, or miscalculations by its rulers, but to the objective course of events. Gorbachev's ascent to power, Yeltsin's emergence on center stage, and the failed coup of August 1991 were just subjective catalysts for deep-seated changes long since waiting to happen. They shaped the form but not the substance of events.

No matter how inevitable it was, the Soviet Union's fall was a disaster for millions of people, for whom it meant the collapse of the state, the loss of national identity, and separation from friends and family in neighboring countries. In some of the former Soviet republics millions of people suddenly became second-class residents with no rights or protection. The militant, and at times unashamed, nationalism that replaced the internationalist ideology, which, as a rule, had been the natural foundation for everyday relations between the ordinary people of the USSR's many ethnic groups, came as a shock.

This was all aggravated by the fact that during the Soviet period many of the borders between the different republics had been drawn and redrawn in an absolutely arbitrary fashion, ignoring historic events and ethnic or economic ties. Stalin often deliberately redrew borders in such a way as to sow the seeds of interethnic conflict in order to "divide and conquer." These lines suddenly became state borders and turned into the focus for tension, territorial claims, nationalist speculation, and trans-border crime.

Negative attitudes towards this turn of events were heightened by the fact that many people had no clear understanding of what had caused the Soviet Union's demise, as it was a different case from that of past empires. Furthermore, the various Soviet republics differed too in their views of the USSR's collapse.

The events that followed: economic decline (in Russia above all as a result of failed economic reforms), social contradictions, the breakdown of traditional ties and communication, instability and bloody conflicts in the former Soviet republics and in Russia itself, all added to people's disappointment and confusion. Added to this were the loss of modest but re-

liable benefits, the rather unworthy behavior of leaders suddenly catapulted into power, the sense of national humiliation due to loss of influence in the world, and a whole chain of foreign policy retreats and defeats.

This created fertile soil for restoring Russian nationalism, artificially constructing national identities or unifying ideas, and attempting to revive traditional and archaic concepts and values in new conditions. Alongside everything else, the recent retreat that has occurred in Russia from many democratic norms and institutions is entirely in line with the emergence of a monolithic state with a development model based on the export of raw materials. In keeping with the historical tradition that dominates the political elite's mood today, neo-imperial motives are sounding ever clearer.

Meanwhile, the country needs to carry out vast and complex social and political modernization tasks, make the transition to an innovative economic model, and spread European-style living standards beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg to the country's regions. By some socio-economic and scientific-technical criteria Russia is an advanced country, while by other elementary criteria, even aside from *per capita* GDP, average wages, pensions, and the subsistence minimum, it is still incredibly backward. The housing situation is still a serious problem (and is still, as Mikhail Bulgakov said, "ruining people"). The country has the world's biggest gas reserves, but more than half of its territory is still not connected to centralized gas supply networks. Russia has the world's largest fresh water reserves, but many of its small towns, not to mention villages, do not have modern sewage systems. Russia has always been proud of its huge territory (a seventh of the world's land surface), but its network of quality roads is shorter than that of tiny Belgium or Switzerland. In terms of life expectancy, child mortality, and level of corruption, Russia ranks among the developing countries and even then is a long way from the top of the list.

Those in Russia sounding the call for a new imperial campaign (including many former liberals – Russia's neocons),¹ as a rule already have gas, sewage systems, country houses, flashy foreign cars for trips to their dachas along excellent highways, and also property and big bank accounts

abroad. It seems this has all become too mundane and boring for them, and so they want something more thrilling: the restoration of an empire, a big geopolitical game on the international stage, building anti-Western coalitions spanning continents and oceans, and a return to global super-power status...

Sewage systems, gas and decent roads for ordinary people are too mundane, troublesome and time-consuming. They seem to realize sub-consciously that they would not succeed in delivering these things anyway, at least not as long as they work within the framework of the current political and economic system that gives them their prosperity and share of power. There is more appeal in rousing the people to new feats for the sake of Russia's "greatness," all the more so because this would distract people for a long time to come from questioning the inconveniences and difficulties of life in this same Russia. Why waste time and energy on cancer treatment centers for children? Give us aircraft carriers and military bases abroad!

The real matter of historical and modern political importance is whether a militaristic authoritarian empire is Russia's natural and only possible form of existence, as many supporters of conservative and nationalist views assert today, or whether this model has outlived itself and should be replaced by a new paradigm.

It seems that one of the "enigmatic Russian soul's" biggest secrets is the tendency to step on the same rake over and over, never learning from its own mistakes, and thinking up various metaphysical notions to explain this going round in circles. Unable to offer the conditions for sustained growth of national prosperity (and fearing for their privileges and power), the ruling elite mobilized the people for geopolitical expansion and drew them into exhausting military campaigns that sapped the country's resources and finally toppled the political regime and the state itself. In Europe (and probably in the entire world) you would be hard pressed to find another country that three times repeated the same cycle again and again. Unable to provide a decent life for its own people, it turned to the

search for unifying national ideas and grand imperial projects, unwilling to understand the mechanisms of past disasters and heaping the blame for them on individual “villains” (whether Boris Godunov and Shuisky, Rasputin, Lenin and Trotsky, or Gorbachev with Alexander Yakovlev and Eduard Shevardnadze).

The state collapse and the Time of Troubles in the late 16th and early 17th centuries were not only or even particularly due to the end of the Rurik dynasty following Ivan the Terrible’s murder of his son and the mysterious death of Prince Dmitry. A century of imperial expansion followed Russia’s liberation from the Golden Horde yoke and the passing of the Orthodox baton from Byzantium to Russia in the 15th century. The military campaigns against Kazan and Astrakhan and the endless Livonian War bled the country dry. The flourishing centers of Novgorod and Pskov (we would call them “economic growth zones” today), which had avoided destruction by the Mongols, were destroyed in the interests of mobilization and consolidation. The boyars – the nobles who formed the political elite – and their economic base were destroyed by the *oprichniki* – Ivan the Terrible’s personal henchmen – whom the tsar then exterminated, too, leaving nothing in their place. The result, as could be expected, was that the nation, economy, and state simply fell apart. The disputes between surviving princes and squabbles over the throne, the peasant uprisings, the emergence of several false Dmitrys, and the Poles establishing themselves in the Kremlin were not the causes of the Time of Troubles but were the consequences of the unjustified imperial ambitions and senseless internal massacres unleashed during the reign of Ivan IV (who, incidentally, during his lifetime was nicknamed the “Torturer”).

With various alterations and adjustments as the times changed, this cycle repeated itself and again led to the empire’s downfall in 1917, and then a third time in 1991.

The author has no doubt that the military-imperial road is a dead-end option that would only lead to yet another disastrous collapse of the Russian state.

Historical experience shows that all empires are built (or rebuilt) on the basis of the center's decisive military supremacy, its attractiveness as a more advanced economic and socio-political development model, ideological appeal, or a combination of these three factors. All of them played some part in "gathering" the Russian lands and backward frontier regions following the troubles of the early 17th century, and in establishing the USSR after the tsarist empire's collapse in 1917.

However, none of these factors would be of use in rebuilding an empire based on today's Russia. Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova depend on Russian oil and gas and supply Russia with cheap labor, but they do not see Russia as an attractive political and economic model. The irredentist mood is strong only in Crimea in Ukraine and in Moldova's Transnistria region, above all as a result of short-sighted policies of cultural and political oppression on the part of Kiev under President Yushenko, and on the part of Chisinau in the 1990s. Most Ukrainians seek close relations with Russia and do not want to join NATO, but at the same time they do not want to return to the Kremlin's embrace. Alexander Lukashenko's current personal power regime in Belarus rejects the idea of reunification with Russia as a "poor relative," but great power Moscow rejects the idea of an equal union. In the future, a more democratic leadership in Belarus would probably set its course on rapprochement with the European Union, like Ukraine and Moldova, which see in the EU, rather than in Russia, a social and economic model to follow.

Not one of the three South Caucasus countries sees Russia's ideology and social and political system as more progressive and an attractive model to follow. Georgia is hostile toward Russia following the 2008 conflict and is openly and unanimously trying to throw itself into NATO's embrace. Armenia is quietly moving in the same direction, and Azerbaijan is busy reproducing the authoritarian oil-state model of the Middle Eastern countries (including hereditary supreme power for life).

To various degrees the authoritarian or dictatorial regimes of Central Asia are not looking northwards for models to follow, but to the south and

east. Any attempt to export the current Russian ideology and political system to these countries using force would provoke an explosion of Islamic radicalism and bitter resistance (as in Iraq and Afghanistan).

From a purely military point of view Russia could hypothetically restore its control over Belarus, Crimea, and Ukraine's eastern regions, absorb Abkhazia and South Ossetia, annex northwestern Kazakhstan, and, under certain conditions, seize Transnistria and northern Azerbaijan (populated by Lezgins).

However, without an economic and political system attractive for the neighboring peoples, or the kind of ideological "superiority" previously offered first by Christianity and then by communism, military annexation alone would not in any way equate to actual restoration of the tsarist empire or the USSR in a broader sense. To gain control over these hypothetically named and insignificant geopolitical acquisitions (compared to the rest of its territory), Russia would have to pay a tremendous price in its soldiers' lives, economic resources, political isolation, and the creation of a hostile surrounding environment. Neighboring countries would join forces with more distant foes in an attempt to exploit any of Russia's weak points and work from all directions to undermine its territorial integrity.

The only way forward with a future for Russia is the road of developing a civilized market economy and European-style democracy. At the same time, Russia should not and cannot just trail along behind the European countries, simply copying their historical evolution. Russia has to take its own historical road to the universal values of European civilization, if only because, unlike the rest of Europe, it is not progressing towards these high standards of public organization from an agrarian-feudal society to the emergence of manufacturing and trading capital and then on to the industrial revolution. Russia's road takes it from a centralized state economy built on heavy industry and the defense sector and onward via today's economy, based on the export of raw materials and corrupt state-monopolistic capitalism.

Russia's huge territory and its raw material resources in the Arctic and Siberia cannot serve forever as the economy's foundation, as the current economic crisis has convincingly demonstrated, leaving Russia particularly hard-hit by the fall in global energy prices. Abundant natural wealth is simply a resource for diversifying and modernizing the economy and raising the long-term Russian and foreign investment needed for high-technology development. Gradual rapprochement and eventual integration with Greater Europe is the highway of Russia's post-industrial development and the road able to lead it out of the unenviable role of a backward and dependent raw-materials exporter of the 21st century's economic giants, despite all its nuclear weapons.

Russia, which has the means to reliably defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity, should spread its contacts and influence across the countries of the former Soviet Union and further into Europe and Asia not by force, but through economic and financial growth, an attractive social and political development model, and its scientific, technical, and cultural achievements.

This is not about carving out "spheres of influence" and "regions of privileged interests" or about seizing geopolitical bases or natural resources – these are all relics of past centuries. Global influence in the 21st century is defined by a country's economic potential measured by the size of its real economy and its participation in global trade, especially in innovative sectors, the amount of foreign investment it receives, and its role in international economic and financial institutions. Only under these conditions can military power make a contribution to the country's place in the world (and then only if it is also based on advanced technology and a high level of professionalism). With time, countries' achievements in Internet technology, energy conservation, developing alternative energy sources, environmentally friendly technology, medicine, global telecommunications networks offering personal access, monitoring and command, and the convergence of nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, and cognitive science will play the biggest role.²

Foreign Policy As a Mirror of Domestic Policy

There is no doubt in the author's mind that the policies of the U.S. and its allies over the last almost twenty years were the main factor that ultimately brought Russia and the West into conflict (the blame lies in varying degrees with both U.S. administrations from 1993 to 2008.) But Russia also bears a significant share of responsibility for the worsening relations with the West and for the failure of many of the hopes and projects of the early 1990s.

For a start, there is the historic phenomenon. In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet system, state, and empire took place, fortunately without a destructive civil war or revolution. However, this very fact was also what made the subsequent long and contradictory road towards forming a new state and society inevitable. The ideological confrontation of the Cold War era moved inside Russia itself. Western policies of the last twenty years have had a big impact on internal political struggles within Russia over choosing the country's own economic, social, and political development path, and defining its allies and adversaries abroad.

One position is based on the idea that Russia, for all the specific aspects of its history, belongs to European civilization and its cultural heritage, which are seen as an enduring value, unlike changing economic and political systems. In order to break out of the vicious circle of successive cycles of oppression and chaos, Russia needs to adopt the main European value, namely that the state is not sacred, but is a more or less functioning organization of civil servants and elected officials hired to serve society and each individual citizen. This forms the foundation for giving priority to domestic development, the transition from a raw-materials export model to a high-technology innovative economic model resting on the democratization of the political system, guaranteed inviolability of private property, both material and intellectual, and attracting domestic and foreign innovation and investment. This road sets a strategic orientation towards developing multifaceted cooperation above all with the European Union, the U.S., and Japan.

This course does not exclude but, on the contrary, implies that efforts will also be made to build equal and respectful ties with Russia's post-Soviet neighbors and develop mutually advantageous relations with China, India, and other non-European countries (incidentally, the West, which is unambiguous about defining its place in the world, is much more successful at this than Russia.) This strategy's cornerstone is cooperation with the West, China and other countries, and international organizations on strengthening global and regional security, preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and carrying out gradual nuclear disarmament, resolving climate change and environmental issues, and fighting international terrorism and other 21st century threats. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in this respect: "...The end of the Cold War destroyed the justification for bloc politics. The principle of 'either with us or against us' no longer works... In today's globalizing world when we face transnational threats and challenges there is no objective justification for this approach. We have overcome the ideological division. If we face a choice today, it is between cooperation in the common interest, or its absence."³

A completely different approach is that based on Russia's potential rejection of European values. Instead of European values, the cornerstone here is a philosophy that makes a fetish of the state, giving it total control over society, and that implies maximum state control over the economy and public life and a priority role for security and law enforcement agencies (hence the need for constant external and internal security threats). The main guarantee of the state's prosperity is a wise ("truly national") leader who stops bureaucrats from stealing and forces them to work for the good of the people.

This vision of Russia's path is based on the existence of irreconcilable ideological and political differences between Russia and the West and sees confrontation with the U.S. and its allies and isolation of Russia's people from their influence (associated with globalization) as the only means of preserving Russia's "identity as a civilization." Essentially, if we strip this "special road" notion of all the philosophical wrapping it has accumulated

over time thanks to the smart aleck philosophers (“the particularists”), it boils down to no more than continuing to keep the people as a cheap (even if unproductive) labor force and cannon fodder for ensuring the wealth, power, and expansionist ambitions of the ruling elite.

Adherents of this path see their priority task as the restoration of Russia’s exclusive economic and military-political supremacy over the countries of the former Soviet Union in one neo-imperial form or another. They view this region as a “buffer zone” protecting them from Western influence, a guarantee against looking towards the West as a partner for cooperation, and an attribute of Russia’s status as a global player, despite Russia’s minor role in the global economy, trade, finances, and innovation.

Having lost their supporting pillar in the form of seventy years of Marxist-Leninist scholasticism, supporters of this line fill the resulting intellectual vacuum with newly discovered century-old “truths” in the spirit of geopolitics, the balance of power, spheres of influence, and the struggle between the maritime and continental powers (sometimes with a thin coating of religious and ethnic myths on the differing political traditions of the Anglo-Saxon, Byzantine, and Slavic worlds). In the era of globalization, the information revolution, and the “common trans-border threats and challenges” that Lavrov spoke of, these archaisms are ridiculous as theories. As a blueprint for practical politics, they are fatal for Russia’s interests and in some cases could threaten international security in general.

Even more shameful and regretful is that having failed to obtain a suitable status in the outside world and order at home, a large part of the new elite has turned to rehabilitating Stalinism as the incarnation of Russia’s grandeur and great power status. Mass propaganda along these lines over recent years has influenced public thinking, and this in turn has encouraged politicians to make use of these moods (post-Weimar and post-Versailles syndrome) to bolster their own positions. Led astray by cunning historical falsifications and frustrated by external and internal problems, Russians have been taken in by this great-power chauvinistic campaign. In particular, in surveys for the Name of Russia project in 2008,

people, to their disgrace, chose Stalin (and also Ivan the Terrible) as Russia's most outstanding historic figure (although formally the priority was given to Alexander Nevsky, who had defeated the Swedes but genuflected before the Mongols).

As for international politics, a very telling example in this area is the rhetorical storm whipped up in Russia's parliament (with lukewarm support from the executive branch) over the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly declaration adopted in Vilnius in the summer of 2009. Its preamble states that "in the 20th century European countries experienced two major totalitarian regimes, Nazi and Stalinist, which brought about genocide, violations of human rights and freedoms, war crimes, and crimes against humanity."⁴ Russia was mainly outraged because the Soviet Union was tarred with the same brush as Hitler's Germany, despite its decisive contribution to the victory over the Nazis in World War II.

It is entirely possible that the declaration did set out to cast a shadow over today's Russia and its foreign policy, playing on the associations between the Russian Federation and the Soviet Union, although it says nothing of this sort directly, nor does it say anything about the Soviet Union's role in the war. But the stormy reaction by politicians in Moscow, who all but branded their own foreheads with the mark of Stalinism, played right into the hands of those behind such an approach. Both in the West and in Russia, however, this is really all clever juggling of the political and historical notions of "Stalinism" and "the USSR's victory in the war" – things that in reality are not on one and the same plane.

Stalinism is a complete dictatorship built around a single leader and based on mass repression, a mobilization- distributive economy, ideological fanaticism, absence of rights, and ruthless exploitation of the workers, including slave labor by prisoners. From an academic point of view, one can identify quite a few economic, ideological, and other differences between German Nazism and Soviet Stalinism. But in their methods and in the disastrous results they brought for their countries, these regimes were very similar. This is above all true of the mass repressions that in Germany

and the countries it occupied were carried out on an ethnic basis, while in the Soviet Union repression was carried out at first on the basis of social and political criteria (Trotskyites, left and right deviationists, and so on) and then without any criteria at all, but simply under the gathering inertia of the mass purges needed to bolster Stalin's personal grip on power through the use of universal fear, suspicion, and terror.

In the resulting number of victims, Nazi repression and Stalinist repression are entirely comparable, though the numbers have been calculated fairly accurately in the former case, while even today we have only approximate figures for the victims of Stalinist repression. It is known that 12-14 million people went through the Gulag in the Soviet Union during 1934-1944, and an additional 10-13 million did so in 1945-1954. Around one million people were shot (700,000 in 1937-1938 alone).⁵ But even today no one knows for sure how many millions died in the camps from overwork and illness or were killed by guards or common criminals. The famine unleashed by campaigns against the "rich peasant" *kulaks* and forced collectivization, along with the exile of peasants to Kazakhstan and Siberia, took several million more lives. Stalinism destroyed the cream of the Soviet, above all Russian, intelligentsia, scientists and artists, clergy, peasantry, and officer corps.

The similarities between Stalinism and Nazism are demonstrated in a curious fashion today by the various publications of the most reactionary end of the spectrum of what passes for political science in Russia. Freed from the tight reins of Soviet censorship, various newly-hatched pseudo-experts have enthusiastically set about whitewashing Stalin and his executioners and doing the same for Hitler, his ideology, and political regime. By way of illustration, here is a quote from one of the most odious authors in this vein, who considers Stalin a genius and Beria, his secret police chief, a great state organizer: "...The intelligent Russian has a duty to read 'Mein Kampf,' but should do so intelligently," he exhorts. "After all, Hitler examined many social issues in 'Mein Kampf,' sometimes in memorable and original fashion."⁶ That is as far as the ideology is concerned,

and as for the practice: “Even the Nazis’ rise to power did not exclude the possibility of strong and comprehensive joint Russian-German influence on the fate of world civilization, which would have led in the short term to lasting peace in Europe and in the long term perhaps to world peace.”⁷

Nothing could be clearer: Stalinism and Nazism could have ruled the world as brothers given that they shared such similar values and interests. The author noted in passing that Hitler was wrong to attack the USSR, but was otherwise an entirely acceptable long-term ally for Stalin. The author and others like him are not in the least bit bothered by the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Buchenwald and the mattresses filled with human hair (nor by the labor camps of Kolyma and Vorkuta, or the mass graves in which those shot by the NKVD were buried). Here we have a crystal clear illustration of Stalinism’s package of moral and ideological values: the leader, state, and people are a single whole, and the greatness of the state is everything, while human life and dignity are nothing. The ends justify any means and sacrifices. The Stalinists themselves put Stalin and Hitler on the same plane (and more clearly than the authors of the Vilnius Declaration), only they do so not with condemnation but with approval. Today, these views are shared by some in political circles and the media, and by a portion of those working in the security and law enforcement sectors and for the military-industrial complex (with which the author of the cited pearls of wisdom has direct relationship).

One senior Russian parliamentarian known for his blunt and spontaneous statements (to put it mildly) recently said that “the sins of Stalinism were redeemed by victory in the Great Patriotic War.” In other words, Stalin can be forgiven for everything because he led the people to victory in 1945.

There is indeed a link between Stalinism and the war. If the Comintern had not been so obsessed with carrying out Stalin’s orders to concentrate on fighting the social democrats (whom he called “social fascists”), the real Nazis with Hitler at their head would have probably not come to power in Germany in 1933. If not for Stalin’s mass purges of the army in 1937-38 (which

killed 50,000 officers) and the incompetent military development program he and his favorite cavalry commanders implemented, the country would have been better prepared for war. If not for Stalin's blind trust in Hitler and the 1939 Soviet-German Non-Aggression Pact, the Wehrmacht's sudden invasion would not have caught the Soviet Union unaware. If not for Stalin's arbitrary decisions and fatal strategic mistakes in commanding the military operations, victory would not have cost the Soviet people the tremendous price in human lives, which to this day is estimated anywhere between 27 and 37 million dead on the front lines and in the rear.⁹ Stalinism brought the country to the brink of disaster in 1941 and 1942 and then forced the people at the cost of unthinkable sacrifice to redeem the guilt of Stalin and his flunkies on the long road to victory. Yes, people often fought and died with Stalin's name on their lips, but in their minds this name stood for their homeland and not for the Stalinist regime with its tortures in secret police prisons, flood of executions, and sea of camps.

We could ask the above-mentioned parliamentarian what then redeemed the new waves of purges after the war, the millions of former prisoners of war and interned people sent to the Gulag, the campaigns against the "cosmopolitans" and the "doctors' plot," and the repressions carried out against entire peoples on the basis of their ethnicity? We are suffering the consequences of these actions to this day in the North Caucasus. If these aspects of Stalinism are not "genocide, violations of human rights and freedoms, war crimes and crimes against humanity," as cited in the Vilnius Declaration, then what is?

Unlike those trying to whitewash Stalinism today, most of whom have seen war only in the movies, Academician Georgy Arbatov, who was only just out of school, departed immediately for the front in June 1941. At the age of 19, he commanded an artillery battery on the front line, fought on the Kalinin front and in the battle of Kursk, took part in liberating the left bank of Ukraine and twice forced his way across the Dnieper, was wounded and decorated, was discharged after he contracted tuberculosis, and miraculously survived in army medical units and hospitals. This is

what he wrote about his experience: "...In addition to the officer corps' destruction in the repressions just before the war, troop deployment along the new unprepared western borders, and Stalin's demobilizing orders in May-June 1941 to 'not fall for provocation,' despite all the reports that the Germans were preparing to attack, there was much more besides after the war began."

For example, during the first disastrous days of the war when the western front collapsed and the Germans advanced 40-50 km a day, the "great leader," in a state of shock, retreated to his dacha, did not answer the telephone and did not receive any visitors, fearing that his acolytes would arrest him and hold him responsible for the defeat. Then there is the example of how millions of our people, who had been prisoners of war, were deliberately declared "traitors of the Motherland," which incited many to join the ranks of the Vlasov army (which was fighting alongside the Germans). Tribunals and punishment detachments executed hundreds of thousands of soldiers and officers abandoned to their fate on the front lines by their commanders and forced to retreat.

Stalin in his despotic willfulness refused to allow the troops to retreat in time and entire armies thus found themselves encircled at Kiev, Vyazma, and Kharkov... Stalin's excessive self-confidence led to a strategic miscalculation of the enemy's plans in 1942, and the Germans seized Odessa, Sevastopol, and the North Caucasus and reached the Volga near Stalingrad. Stalin's obsession with political effect forced the troops to simply keep plowing ahead despite huge unnecessary casualties, carrying out missions by particular dates, starting with the taking of Kiev in 1943 and ending with the head-on storming of Berlin in 1945.

Stalinism's crimes included the repression of entire peoples: the Crimean Tatars, Chechens, and Karachais, punished because some traitors in their midst cooperated with the enemy. I personally knew several good officers arrested right on the front line and sent off to the camps. The same goes for the repression against freed prisoners of war and the people interned through no fault of their own in the occupied territories.

Tens of millions of people lost their rights after the war, and for decades to follow these shameful black marks stayed in their official records, making them second class citizens.”⁸

Coming back to our own time, the Russian parliament and executive authorities should have responded to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's declaration not by taking offense for Stalin's sake and confusing Stalinism and the Soviet people's heroic fight in the war, but by firmly and unambiguously distancing themselves from Stalinism and decisively rejecting any attempts to cast the shadow of his terrible crimes on modern Russia and its policies.

The two above-mentioned policy outlooks characterizing Russia's political elite have constantly, with varying success, exerted their influence on Russia's foreign policy. The need for social and economic modernization and the real emergence of new threats and challenges in the 21st century are pushing Russia towards the first road. Historic traditions, the interests of a large part of the new ruling elite, internal and external failures, and the disappointments of the last twenty years are pulling it towards the second road. This leaves its mark on the so-called “multi-vector” nature of Russia's foreign policy, which often exhibits a lack of clear priorities and of a logical fit between strategy and tactics, objectives, and resources.

The struggle flared up anew following Dmitry Medvedev's election as president. Of course, supporters of the imperial road realize that the new president won the 2008 election with the backing of Vladimir Putin, with whom he has close political and personal relations. However, they know (or feel) Russian history quite well and remember the numerous examples of leaders coming into their own and gaining their independence from former colleagues (Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Putin himself are all examples of this type.) The traditionalists, seeing in Medvedev a new type of leader with modern and quite democratic views, therefore took preventive action and launched their own offensive, influencing a number of domestic and foreign policy decisions including, it seems, events surrounding the Caucasus conflict in August 2008.

Second, the lack of an effective and clear decision-making mechanism also contributes to the fragmentary nature of Russia's foreign policy. The parliament's inability to act as a counterweight to the executive branch and the lack of any real control over the executive authorities turn foreign policy into a forum for representing and lobbying ministerial and private corporate interests. Predominance of informal relations over official powers in the upper echelons of the state hierarchy break down order in the process of coordinating various approaches and setting a unified policy course even within the executive power framework.

Only the Foreign Ministry seems to try to pursue constructive and balanced diplomacy, and the Russian Security Council attempts to give foreign policy a strategic perspective. However, the practice that took shape under Yeltsin and was consolidated under Putin informally gives numerous other influential collective and individual actors access to this sphere, and President Medvedev has not yet succeeded in improving this system (or rather the lack of it).

Various pressure groups often succeed in getting official approval for their own projects, which they then carry out themselves. Gazprom, the oil monopolies, Rostechnologii, Rosoboronexport and other arms exporters, Rosatom and those selling rocket and missile technology, armed forces agencies and defense industry companies, not to mention numerous politicians, all act of their own accord on behalf of the state. To blame them for their active participation would be foolish, given that this very active quality is their reason for existence and means of getting money. The blame lies with the chaotic decision-making system that enables the lobbyists to "short circuit" state policy. The new "bicentric" executive power system further expands group interests' room to maneuver.

Third, the increased military activity and surrounding fuss, especially after the Caucasus conflict in August 2008, are also largely explained by internal causes.

The military balance is indeed changing noticeably to Russia's disadvantage. But the paradox is that this is happening in the absence of

deliberate attempts by the U.S. and NATO, which Moscow now officially perceives as its main security threats, to build up their military capability. Along with its politically deeply mistaken policy of eastward expansion, NATO is making significant cutbacks to its overall armed forces. In Europe the current 28 NATO members now have 40 percent fewer servicemen overall, 35 percent fewer ground forces, 30 percent fewer naval forces, and 40 percent less military aviation than the sixteen member countries had at the start of the 1990s. The number of American troops in Europe has decreased three-fold over this same period.¹⁰ NATO would hardly undertake these cutbacks if it were preparing to attack Russia.

The U.S. has made a close to three-fold reduction in its strategic nuclear forces over the last twenty years. It has carried out practically no modernization of these forces, which are 20-30 percent lower than the ceilings set by the START-I Treaty (depending on the counting method used), and it has made a six to seven-fold cutback of tactical nuclear forces. It is not making cutbacks to its conventional forces, but it is reorganizing them and arming them to conduct anti-guerilla operations.

Objectively, making use of its huge economic and military-technical superiority compared to Russia, the U.S. is increasing its lead by developing new precision-guided conventional weapons systems, missile defense systems, and information and command systems. But there are no grounds for accusing the U.S. of being on a deliberate track to build up military capability, and its military developments are in any case aimed more at other likely adversaries, though their technical characteristics often raise doubts and fears in Moscow.

The perception of a growing military threat in Russia is due more to the failure of attempts to reform the military in the midst of a huge drop in defense spending in the 1990s, as well as serious mistakes in military policy in the following decade (with a five-fold increase in defense spending). This situation is the primary explanation for the continuing disintegration of the country's conventional forces, the slow pace of modernizing the strategic nuclear forces, the collapse of the defense industry, the wid-

ening lag in modern military technology, and the increasingly frequent complaints from foreign buyers of Russian arms.

It is easy to get the impression that Russia's military commanders often lead the political leadership and public astray by spreading two myths: the "growing military threat" from abroad and the "steady build-up of the country's defense capability." This includes the numerous recent military PR stunts at home and abroad, such as bomber flights and visits by naval ships to Venezuela, test launches of missiles, grandiose parades and equally grandiose statements, etc. These stunts aim perhaps at diverting attention from the stagnation of Russia's military reform and the state program to upgrade weapons, along with the corruption, crime, and hazing practices in the armed forces, especially in light of the huge amounts of money spent on defense during the fat years before the crisis began.

Despite cheerful defense reports on successful reform and pronouncements of victory, an analysis of the Caucasus conflict of August 2008 reveals the various problems that still exist. The persistent shortcomings in troops' combat training and technical equipment and in the command and coordination of the different forces, as well as problems in information support, communications, and radio and electronic warfare, have still not been resolved since the two Chechen campaigns in the 1990s. The losses to Russia's ground forces and aviation in a five-day conflict in a tiny territory were greater than NATO's losses in active military operations against Yugoslavia (1999), and also in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) before it installed occupation regimes in those countries.

For twenty years Russia has not been able to resolve the chronic problems of providing housing for officers, organizing contract service in the armed forces, re-equipping troops, improving the command and information support systems, raising the level of combat preparedness, organizing military needs according to a justified and clear set of criteria, optimizing the level, structure and composition of the armed forces, and drafting a suitable military doctrine and strategy.

A young and liberal Russian president (and the same goes for his American counterpart) could be more easily influenced by the generals and defense corporations, especially at first. Big stars on epaulettes and modern military technology make a big emotional impression on civilians, and generals and admirals are consummate masters at putting on impressive displays of firepower. Many decisions are made under the influence of emotions and under pressure from agencies and lobbyists, rather than based on objective analysis of the military issues. This was noticeable in a number of the decisions on military action and programs after August 2008.

The problematic state of affairs and future uncertainty dictate the military and defense industry's negative attitude towards disarmament talks and the deliberately unrealistic conditions proposed by them, despite Russia's worsening position in the global balance of military power. The economic crisis has seriously exacerbated all these problems.

The liberal young U.S. President Obama is under pressure from supporters of a hard-line foreign policy and real arms race. If the situation were to arise putting Russian and American strength to the test against each other, Obama would be forced to show a much greater degree of "firmness and patriotism" than his predecessor (as Kennedy found himself having to do during the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962). In this situation, relations between the two countries could run into much bigger difficulties and even dangers than during the years of stagnation between the peak in relations following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and the low point following the Caucasus conflict of August 2008.

Notes

- 1 Analogous to the American "neocons," who formed a large part of the George W. Bush administration and led the U.S. into unprecedented crisis. Their current Russian counterparts include former liberals from the Gorbachev and Yeltsin periods from political, journalistic, and scientific circles, who are now

seeking to “rehabilitate” themselves for their democratic past or follow the “general line” set by the bosses, or who are genuinely disillusioned with their former ideals and thus have become zealous conservatives and neo-imperialists instead.

- 2 S. Leskov, “Akademik Alexander Dynkin: Neft, brilliandy i mozgy — glavnaya tsennost po vsemu miru,” *Finansovye Izvestia*, March 13, 2004.
- 3 S. Lavrov, “Krizis v otnosheniyakh s Zapadom: kakoy krizis?,” *Itogi*, № 21 (675) (2009): PP. 16-18.
- 4 OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, *Resolution on Divided Europe Reunited: Promoting Human Rights and Civil Liberties in the OSCE Region in the 21st Century*. Vilnius Declaration of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and Resolution Adopted at the Eighteenth Annual Session: Vilnius, June 29-July 3, 2009 (Vilnius, 2009), P. 48.
- 5 *Preodolenie stalinizma* (Moscow: RODP YABLOKO, 2009), P. 104.
- 6 See: S. Kremlev, “Beria — upushchenny shans strany,” *Nats. oborona*, № 4 (April 2009): PP. 100-103.
- 7 S. T. Brezkun, “Rossia i Germaniya: stravit!” in *Ot Versalya Vilgelma k Versalyu Vilsona: Novy vzglyad na staruyu voynu* (Moscow: AST, 2003), PP. 10, 15.
- 8 No one other than Marshal Yazov announced the figures for losses: 9 million on the frontlines and 27-28 million among the civilians. See: V. Tatyanchiev, “Poteri podsčitany,” *Ofitersky splav*, № 4 (33) (May 15, 2009).
- 9 G. A. Arbatov, *Zhizn, sobytia, lyudi: avtobiografia na fone istoricheskikh peregovorov* (Moscow: Lyubimaya Rossia, 2008), PP. 34-35.
- 10 Overall, NATO forces are 42 percent lower in numbers of servicemen than the ceilings set by the original Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, 25 percent lower in armored vehicles and artillery, and 45 percent lower in aircraft.