



The "Ideology of the Future" movement asserts that Russia is a separate civilization in its own right—neither Western nor Eastern. Moreover, advocates of the ideology in the government assert that Russian civilization as it has evolved provides a superior guide for the future political and economic formation of global society when compared to the failing liberal democratic systems that predominate in the current international system. The foundations of the new ideology will be taught to students of all majors in the first semester of their first year at university. This means that regardless of the students' course selection, all begin their higher education with ideological indoctrination using such means as textbooks on the history of Russia. (Photo courtesy of Oleg Elkov)

# Russians Are Busy Hammering Out Their "Ideology of the Future"

Dr. Robert F. Baumann

The official position of state-sponsored public intellectuals since the beginning of the war in Ukraine has been that President Vladimir Putin's "special military operation" marked a global historical turning point. For instance, Dmitri Trenin, a scholar at the Center for National Security of the Russian Academy of Sciences, called it a "watershed moment" in the November 2022 periodical *Russia in Global Affairs*.<sup>1</sup> To make himself perfectly clear, Trenin noted that he is not talking about a simple "turning point," which might be subject to reversal, but a definitive, irreversible break with the past. This surprising proposition has become a core tenet of Russia's emerging "ideology of the future."

Vladimir Medinsky—Putin's handpicked presidential assistant, head of the influential Russian Military Historical Society (RMHS), and shaper of ideological and cultural dialogue—said essentially the same thing in equally cataclysmic terms, characterizing the present moment as "the greatest challenge" in Russian history and warning that the survival of Russian civilization was at risk.<sup>2</sup> As bizarre as this might sound to outsiders, such remarks capture the current hysteria in Russia resulting from the (so far) thwarted attempt to seize Ukraine.

Just months prior to the start of the euphemistically titled special military operation on 24 February 2022, the RMHS founded a new journal under the pretentious title *Ideology of the Future*. With

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extensive backing from the state and state-approved public intellectuals, this publication aimed to provide a forum for thought about Russia's future. The main categories included Russia's future in focused scientific discussion; Russia, the Russian world, and Russian civilization in current conditions of global threat; and military-historical heritage in the struggle against "myths" and falsifications.<sup>3</sup> However, its orientation changed significantly once the special military operation began to sputter in March 2022. On 21 March, the state officially registered it as a source of mass information and thus subject to new controls. Suddenly, *Ideology of the Future* pushed the staggering assertion that over one thousand years of Russian history are divisible into two parts: before and after 24 February 2022, the date Putin's special military operation officially launched. The fifth issue, published in June 2022, reflected a dramatic change of focus. Since then, almost every article has drawn alleged scientific connections to the *spetsial'naia voennaia operatsiia* (SVO) as it is abbreviated in Russian.

Also in this issue, a new lead section, consisting of eight articles, carried the title "Special Operation: Ideological and Informational Support." In effect, the journal's mission statement changed. The first article, "The Ideology of Russian Victory: Out Sacred Codes," outlined the traits and circumstances that shaped Russia and contributed to victories through the centuries. It established a storyline of defeat and redemption. Its author, Aleksandr Prokhanov, noted the vital role of miracles in Russian history, exemplified in the twentieth century by victory in the Great Patriotic War. Demonstrating the same spirit today, the people have dug their country out from the ashes and miraculously returned Crimea to Russia. "Today's Russian state arose after a huge historic defeat, resurrected itself after a stunning crash. We have again started the Russian reactor."<sup>4</sup> Subsequent articles highlighted the Russian information campaign supporting SVO with particular focus on denazification and allegations of genocide in Donbas.

The journal's editorial board as well as its list of principal contributors draws from select sources beholden to the regime. There is, of course, the RMHS and its network of branches around the country. In addition, there are strong links to academic centers, defense colleges, and think tanks that also function as government propaganda arms. Finally, there are

well-publicized discussion clubs consisting of politically loyal public intellectuals.

This article aims to examine the intellectual evolution of the new worldview and especially Russia's Orwellian quest to produce a rational framework for a policy that can galvanize support from a weary population for whatever the Putin regime may choose to do. Although it has received intensive attention since the start of the war in Ukraine, the so-called "ideology of the future" has been in the making for a long time and yet still eludes precise formulation.<sup>5</sup> We can, however, identify salient tenets in this line of thought and reach some tentative conclusions about what the ideology is and is not at this stage of its development.

## Contextual Review

First, a contextual review is in order. The "deep history" of the new ideology reflects concepts such as Eurasianism, whose roots reach back at least as far as the Russian Revolution of 1917. Briefly stated, Eurasianism, as framed by Russian intellectuals, regards Russia as a distinctive civilization apart from the adversarial West and profoundly influenced by connections to Asia.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, Eurasianist philosophizing is often convoluted and full of arcane references. In fact, it occasionally delves so far down the proverbial "rabbit hole" that it brings to mind George Kennan's reference to the "Russian capacity for self-delusion."<sup>7</sup>

Ideology has multiple uses for Putin. As noted by journalist Frank Foer, "*Kulturkampf* is not merely a diagnosis of the world; it is a political strategy."<sup>8</sup> In Putin's case, ideology helped him brush off election protests in 2011 and push back at the West over values-based debates concerning gender, colonialism, economic bullying, and so forth. Putin learned the utility of ideology from serving the Soviet Union, which governed the former Russian Empire for seven decades. It was not so much the Marxist-Leninist content of the ideology, for which Putin held little admiration, that left a permanent imprint as it was the logical template of official ideology as a rubric for officially sanctioned thought. Marxism-Leninism, though often manipulated by the leadership to justify all manner political machinations, provided the Soviet populace with a philosophical north star that provided a seemingly principled rationale for the regime and pointed toward a hazily defined better future. Furthermore, it provided a relatively

durable framework for intellectual and political life, and for those inclined to accept it a fully developed belief system as well. Soviet citizens had an idea of their place in political and world history. Even in the worst of times, most Soviet citizens assumed that their country was advanced and respected worldwide.

All this came crashing down with the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Amidst the brief period of euphoric flirtation with democracy as the union dissolved into fifteen separate republics, the Russian Federation headed by President Boris Yeltsin quickly found itself groping in the darkness for a new sense of direction and purpose. For example, how was the Russian Federation to define itself? Russians made up the preponderant demographic and cultural component of the country, but even stripped of the minority republics of the former USSR, Russia remained a diverse country. Thus, one attempt to clarify matters was a project proclaimed in 1996 to establish a "Concept of the State Nationalities Policy."<sup>9</sup> The purpose of the document was to lay the groundwork for a new federal structure that would simultaneously allow for the development of Russian identity as foundational to the new state while making space for non-Russians who were part of the "Russian world" to continue their own cultures in a Russian context. Unlike the former Soviet Union, whose ideology demanded subordination of Russian identity to the concept of a multinational federation of "independent" republics, the Russian Federation did not conceal its fundamentally national character.

Accentuating the Russianness of the federation marked a subtle departure from the policies of the USSR and even the Russian Empire, which had always highlighted its Russian distinctiveness while framing its decisions in the context of imperial interests rather than narrowly Russian national prerogatives.<sup>10</sup> The doctrine of "Official Nationality" put forth under Tsar Nicholas I in the 1830s gave official sanction to the place of the Orthodox faith, identification with the Russian nation in a civic sense, and autocracy as the system of rule.<sup>11</sup> In practical terms, this meant that overt Russian nationalism as expressed by Pan-Slavists lacked the Tsar's endorsement. Thus, Nikolai Danilevsky's hugely influential book, *Russia and Europe* (1869 in serialized form), emphasizing competing civilizations, carried no official imprimatur. To be sure, the work resonated with Russian nationalists in political



and military circles, but the regime regarded expressions of popular opinion as undermining the exclusive tsarist prerogative to determine policy without interference.<sup>12</sup> In any case, a decentralized federal nationalities policy under Yeltsin emerged but did not survive the subsequent Putin presidency that incrementally centralized and subordinated the non-Russian regional republics to Moscow. This was especially so once Putin began his second tour in the presidency in 2012 at which point Russian identity openly became the organizing principle of the federation.<sup>13</sup>

United States during the Gulf War of 1991. One Russian theorist at the time, Gen.-Maj. Vladimir Slipchenko, characterized it as sixth-generation warfare employing means that posed a clear danger to the overmatched military of Russia.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the war immediately preceded the collapse of the USSR left Russian military analysts rattled. One prominent interpretation of events that gained currency was that the Central Intelligence Agency had played a role in bringing down the Soviet regime. (This is the sort of thinking that helped condition Putin to accept the

“ Putin proceeded to do away with the inconvenience of democracy through a series of new election laws that impeded formation of an actual opposition. ”

Putin’s return to the presidency shaped the current environment in important ways. One immediate consequence of Putin’s election fixing in 2000 was that, in the words of now-detained dissident critic Vladimir Kara-Murza, “Putin proceeded to do away with the inconvenience of democracy through a series of new election laws that impeded formation of an actual opposition.”<sup>14</sup> After serving the constitutional maximum of eight years, Putin temporarily ceded the presidency to his ally Dmitry Medvedev. The prospect of Putin’s return to the presidency prompted widespread protests in 2011 in Saint Petersburg and Moscow by Russians who understood that a rigged transition posed an existential threat to what remained of Russian democracy. Putin’s “takeaway” from this experience was that the protests of democracy activists could only have been orchestrated from abroad. To be sure, the United States, for example, openly voiced its sympathy for the democracy activists.<sup>15</sup> To Putin, this amounted to election interference, whether the elections themselves were legitimate or not. For him and his inner circle, it was part of the accumulation of evidence that the West was orchestrating a so-called color revolution (like those on Ukraine or Georgia) in Russia.

Another bastion of growing alarm about Western intentions was Russia’s Ministry of Defense. Concerns traced to the display of advanced technology by the

idea that foreign intelligence services were working assiduously in 2011 to do the same to him.) Renewed protests in 2019 about pension reform and other issues reminded Putin about the perils of tolerating democratic expression.

Meanwhile, the steady expansion of NATO dovetailed nicely with this conspiratorial view of events. So potent was this worry that figures such as Mikhail Gorbachev who had opened Russia to the West in the first place in the late 1980s concurred with much of it. As political scientist William Taubman noted in his biography of the last Soviet leader, “Gorbachev, too, condemned Western attempts to ‘turn us into some kind of backwater’ after the cold war.” Like Putin, Gorbachev protested NATO expansion and the bombing of Yugoslavia during the conflict over Kosovo.<sup>17</sup>

For Russia, the decade after the end of the Cold War brought vast disappointment following a brief period of soaring hopes. Democracy was not working

**Next page:** (From left) Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, President of the Alexander Solzhenitsyn Russian Charity Foundation Natalia Solzhenitsyna, President of Russia Vladimir Putin, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, and Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky take part in unveiling a monument to the Holy Prince Vladimir, Equal of the Apostles, in Moscow’s Borovitskaya Square on 4 November 2016, the National Unity Day. (Photo by Dmitry Astakhov, Sputnik via the Associated Press)





well, the economy floundered during the transition to market capitalism, angry pensioners aligned with the recently deposed communist party, crime rates exploded to shocking levels, and Russia's global influence evaporated. The ensuing crisis, brought on by rampant corruption and administrative incompetence under President Boris Yeltsin, left most Russians willing to accept a partial return to authoritarianism in return for a bit of stability.

One sign of Putin's plans to rejuvenate the country psychologically was the christening in formal legislation of the RMHS in 2012.<sup>18</sup> Putin put his personal imprimatur on the new organization, which received lavish funding. That an ostensibly educational organization focusing on military heritage would become part of the new ideological vanguard revealed a simultaneously old and new strategy. It was old in the sense that the tsarist empire and even more so the Soviet government understood that control of historical narratives was a key to defining national identity and justifying current and future policy. It was new in that it resurrected Russia's imperial history as the prime narrative of national greatness supplemented by a deep excursion into the Great Patriotic War.

## Russia Today

Today, the form of Soviet ideology, though little of the content, offers a blank template for thinking about Russia. Putin has always tried to shape the dialogue from a distance, leaving the particulars to others to work out. This way there is a semblance of uncontrolled public discussion that he can elect to embrace or dismiss. He also gains the opportunity to sense incipient trends among his core supporters. In addition to the RMHS, Putin has encouraged the activities of so-called discussion clubs, whose membership extensively overlaps with RMHS as well as government institutes, defense think tanks, and patriotic organizations. Collectively, these function both as cheerleaders for the regime and forums for controlled political analysis.

The best known of these is the Valdai Club, but others such as the Izborsk Discussion Club and the Zinoviev Discussion Club also have significant public profiles. Established in 2009, the Valdai Club, named after Lake Valdai near Novgorod where the founding meeting was held, is the most closely linked to Putin himself. In fact, Putin's annual address to the Valdai Club has become

a policy event. Putin shares his latest thoughts in a forum that offers a veneer of intellectual gravitas. After all, most members hold advanced degrees as well as high-level appointments to research or political centers. Many members are content contributors to *Ideology of the Future*. Prior to the crisis in Ukraine, some Western policymakers were invited to participate. In recent years, conference themes have hewed closer to the governmental party line and especially related to how Russia can reshape the world order. While the club may play a modest role in influencing policy, it plays a prominent role in amplifying policy.

One notable aspect of the Valdai meetings is that a share of them take place outside of the Russian Federation itself. For example, in the fall of 2021, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, hosted a meeting emphasizing relations between Russia and the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. At a recent meeting on Central Asia staged in May 2023, one of the Russian organizers, Timofei Bordachev, exclaimed, "Russia is the closest neighbor and ancient partner of the peoples of Central Asia."<sup>19</sup> This comment signaled Russia's not-so-subtle view that it retains a strong interest in what it considers its realm of privileged influence.

In turn, the Izborsk Club, which was established in 2012 in association with the 1,150th anniversary of the founding of its namesake city, has an explicitly patriotic mission. The chairman is Aleksandr Prokhanov, editor of the daily *Zavtra* (tomorrow) newspaper. A longtime conservative going back to his opposition to Yeltsin (Russia's first post-Soviet president who enjoyed Western backing), Prokhanov became a proponent of the idea of "Fifth Empire," which postulates that Russia's current regime is the fifth in a series of historic Russian empires. This notion, which holds Putin as the founder, has enjoyed considerable play in *Ideology of the Future*, where Prokhanov is an editorial board member.<sup>20</sup>

Another interesting example of the discussion group phenomenon is the Zinoviev Club, which proclaims commitment to the outlook and writings of philosopher Alexander Zinoviev who died in 2006. Zinoviev earned fame as a Soviet-era satirist and as author of the acclaimed novel *Yawning Heights* as well as works such as *Homo-Soveticus*. Exiled by the Soviet government in 1978, Zinoviev returned to the motherland in 1999. Loosely in the tradition of Nikolai Danilevsky, he embraced an allegedly scientific analysis of society and history.<sup>21</sup>

Overall, it is worth taking note of what has been adopted and what has been rejected from the Soviet style of ideological logic. For the Soviets, the cult of Vladimir Lenin (and for a while Joseph Stalin), the mythology of the October Revolution marked by associated parades and holidays, and the official obsession with the Great Patriotic War (World War II to the rest of the planet) provided the means to glorify the communist regime and establish historical mythology around its achievements.<sup>22</sup> Of course, the regime's egregious failures remained unacknowledged and consigned to the forbidden realm banned ideas. In any case, Putin has marginalized memory of Lenin and October, while elevating memory of the Great Patriotic War and Stalin ("mistakes" and all) to the pantheon of ideological monuments reserved for Alexander Nevsky, Peter the Great, and lately Putin himself.

Under Putin, the constant memorialization of World War II along with numerous other milestones in Russian military history has been fundamental in forming a new ideology. Victory Day, the 9 May holiday commemorating victory in the Great Patriotic War, is perhaps now the most important holiday on the calendar. Until 2015, it was also Russia's international calling card, a moment to invite representatives of formerly allied countries in the war against the Nazis to attend the grandiose parade in Moscow and bask in the glory of Russia's most conspicuous achievement of the twentieth century. However, following Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014, some invited countries such as the United States and Britain declined to send representatives.

Still, Victory Day retained its place even as the global COVID pandemic disrupted normalcy around the world. As observed by Saint Petersburg professor Ivan Kurilla in 2020, celebration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of the war was linked to constitutional reform, the return of Russia to great power status, and the transformation of the official narrative about the Great Patriotic War into a fiercely defended pillar of the emerging ideology. Political scientist Paul Goble likens World War II to the "founding myth" of the Putin government.<sup>23</sup> As scholar Gregory Carleton noted about the spirit of triumphalism, "More than any other subject, it [the war] makes Russia the decisive protagonist in the greatest conflict the world has ever known."<sup>24</sup> This is a primary reason why the

government is so anxious to draw comparisons at every opportunity with the special military operation. One popular claim is that the special military operation with its purported purpose to denazify Ukraine is the perfectly logical step to complete the unfinished work of the Great Patriotic War.<sup>25</sup>

This new narrative has become official dogma. In fact, recent legislation as well as a constitutional amendment (Article 67/1) threatened sanctions against historians inclined to challenge the correct point of view.<sup>26</sup> In addition, laws against the rehabilitation of Nazism and support for extremism used language vague enough to put historians on guard. The constitutional provision prohibited "diminution of the significance of the achievements of the people in defense of the Fatherland."<sup>27</sup> At the same time, guardians of the official view such as Vladimir Medinsky championed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact—often denounced by historians, especially in the West—as a triumph of Soviet diplomacy.<sup>28</sup>

Some republics of the former Soviet Union, such as in Central Asia, served as venues for commemorative events through 2021. Victory Day celebrations became a transparent instrument of Russian influence. Many schools incorporated Victory Day events into their schedules to complement official diplomatic ceremonies staged at various regional war memorials. Russian television crews filmed examples of school activities for news consumption back in Russia. Historical conferences offered forums for speeches about the war by international representatives, above all those from Russia. One common theme of interest voiced by Russian speakers was the struggle to rescue the history of the war from distortions by Western scholars seeking to diminish the enormous Soviet contribution to victory. Speakers framed this assault on their favored interpretation of the history of the war as part of a broader cultural offensive against Russians and by extension the other peoples of the former Soviet Union who sacrificed in the war.<sup>29</sup> Irina Kaznacheeva, writing in *Ideology of the Future*, attributed this and other historical heresies to what she terms the Western industry of historical fakes.<sup>30</sup> The point was to spread the sense of grievance and insult professed by Russian nationalist historians to other formerly Soviet nationalities. Whereas in fact most Western scholarly challenges to Putin's favored narrative focus on Stalin's decisions such

as the deal with Germany in 1939, war crimes in occupied territories, widespread purges, and the imposition of communist regimes in eastern Europe, nationalist historians cast these criticisms as an attack on the heroes who saved the world from Nazism.

Victory Day events revealed several layers of the new historically based ideology in both theory and practice. On one hand, they accentuated Russia's leadership role in the war and the solidarity among the peoples of the former Soviet Union. They especially reinforced Russia's implicit claim to leadership among the former republics. On the other hand, they reflected Russia's determination to control the historical narrative of the war and issue an ideological rebuff to the West.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 resulted in a change of atmospherics surrounding Victory Day celebrations. Central Asian republics such as Uzbekistan muted commemorative events and steered clear of any actions that might imply an endorsement of Russian foreign policy. In 2023, schools in Uzbekistan acknowledged Victory Day but commemorative events remained subdued.

In any case, the relevant question here concerns what Russia's current historical obsessions tell us about an emergent ideology. An examination of the journal *Ideology of the Future* gives a few indications. One derives from the consensus among regime supporters that an officially sanctioned national idea is necessary. R. I. Medinsky, not to be confused with Vladimir Medinsky, claims Russia needs such an idea like never before. He alludes to his experience in the 1980s when he participated in the massive and dangerous cleanup after Chernobyl. He asserts that a sense of patriotism and values instilled by his Soviet education kept him and others going under extremely adverse circumstances. Drawing an unflattering comparison with the present, he asks, "Where have the true patriots gone?"<sup>31</sup> Echoing Putin, Medinsky condemns the privileged "rats" of the modern "elite" who jump ship when the country faces adversity.<sup>32</sup>

In short, Medinsky and others regard a national ideology as the answer to an immediate problem—how to sustain support for the special military operation. Building on this theme, Kaznacheeva proclaims that great leaders have always appeared in Russia's national history to provide guiding ideas ranging from the "Third Rome" of the Monk Filofei to the drive for

empire advanced by Peter the Great. She concludes that Putin is the man to meet the moment today: "The course of Putin and his team absolutely does not align with the plans of the collective West. Russia has entered a phase of global opposition to the American hegemon and its allies."<sup>33</sup>

To date, themes propagated in *Ideology of the Future* focus overwhelmingly on history, particularly on military history, or what in the Soviet Union was known as military-patriotic education. In that context, Russian military achievements constituted the highest manifestation of patriotism. The goal of military-patriotic education was to produce new generations ready to sacrifice for the motherland. Today, as in the Soviet era, Russia is engaged in an information war with the West over historical truth.<sup>34</sup> Thus, while its content is heavily weighted toward historical narrative, the journal is also highly presentist in its outlook. It asserts that history is directly relevant to the special military operation and its success. The new generation must pick up the torch and carry Russia to new victories.

Accordingly, the current moment is a decisive one in the stream Russian history. Young patriots are living out the latest manifestations of Russia's historical development. To drive home the point, the journal repeatedly identifies Putin as a leader of his age on par with the greatest figures in Russian history. His special military operation is an act of resolve and genius dictated by the circumstances of the times. Putin's response to foreign threat is worthy of comparison to the deeds of his predecessors from Nevsky to Peter to Stalin.<sup>35</sup> To drive home the point, the Ministries of Defense and Culture, bastions of the current ideological trend, announced plans to establish a national network of museums dedicated to the special military operation, thereby further elevating its importance.<sup>36</sup> Apparently, the "future" in *Ideology of the Future* is a reference to what is at stake and how Russia must shape the future.

## Nine Pillars of Russia's Worldview

Although the new ideology is still a work in progress, this article tentatively posits nine pillars of the emerging worldview.

**One.** Though seldom expressed in such blunt terms, *there is a personality cult at the top in Russia* that provides the underlying rationale behind much of the rest. The top priority of the Putin regime is its continuation in





Vladimir Medinsky, head of the influential Russian Military Historical Society and de facto minister of culture, gives a lecture 22 February 2022 on the three hundredth anniversary of the Russian Empire. (Photo by the Russian Military Historical Society)

power and every subsequent ideological claim serves that end. It starts with the assertion that a “vertical state” with some trappings of democracy is perfectly natural for Russia and so the modern presidency is consonant with the traditions of princes and tsars.<sup>37</sup> After all, what did Alexander Nevsky, Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, or Joseph Stalin need with democracy? Putin is simply the latest in this proud lineage. Prokhanov writes in *Ideology of the Future*, “No, it is not Putin who has written his name in Russian history. Russian history has been written in him.”<sup>38</sup> Insulting the president, entailing almost any form of explicit or implicit criticism, is illegal. Consequently, the government’s unyielding refusal to face the dismal outcome to date of the special military operation stems from fear that any lack of firmness would suggest that the current regime is incompetent.

**Two.** *The role of historically based military-patriotic education in Russia today is to justify the current regime and its policies by invoking the mythical greatness of an eternal Russian civilization defined as Eurasian and shaped by the Orthodox Church, transcendent leaders, and a distinct set of values. That civilization is entitled to a seat at the table of great powers but is currently under threat from the perpetually hostile West. Programs underway in schools and civic organizations across Russia tell young people that the essence of being Russian is to embrace the received traditions of their ancestors as interpreted for them by the current*

regime. Unwavering support of the state is fundamental to their identity.

**Three.** An essential aspect of this historical tradition is the view that Russia has earned its status as a world civilization and all the perquisites that this implies. Some authors refer to a “code” like the primordial DNA of Russian civilization that is permanently reflected in its national character and drive to secure its sphere of influence.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, *Russia has legitimate interests, is entitled to its historic space, and can only be judged by its own standards.* Russia does not need Western-style democracy because it enjoys a unique consensual relationship between the ruler and the governed.

**Four.** The history of the Russian Orthodox Church exemplifies what is distinctive about the Russian world. Its oppositional relationship to Catholicism (and subsequently Protestantism as well) has lasted for a millennium. *Orthodoxy has been crucial to the idea of Russia as a separate civilizational center.* In fact, references to “third Rome” imply world leadership. Although for most Russians Orthodoxy is more a matter of cultural heritage than religious conviction, the country retains a profound emotional connection to its enduring symbolism whether in its distinctive church architecture or veneration of icons.

**Five.** *Russia is a Eurasian power.* Affinity with China, as expressed in the “unlimited partnership” declared by Putin and Xi Jinping, is a naturally occurring strategic alignment against the West to thwart American

hegemony. This relationship resides in the tradition of Alexander Nevsky who stood firmly against the West while making accommodation with the Mongol Empire in the East. As long ago as 2015, Russian financial commentator Aleksandr Razuvayev compared Putin's choice to Nevsky's, noting, "He preferred the Horde to the Catholic West and an Asian market from the Volga to China to trade with Europe."<sup>40</sup> Not to resist Western influence would result in gradual assimilation by Europe and cost Russia its identity. Today, Russia seeks to organize states worldwide that do not wish to submit to colonization by Western values.

**Six.** Hence, Western hybrid war aimed at undermining Russia and imposing Western values is the central problem of the present age. The Great Patriotic War provides a victory narrative to inspire emulation. One practical objective of the reverence for history is to build support for a *renewed militarization of Russia*. This is evident not only through the fixation with the development of a multilayered system of military-patriotic education but also the gradual introduction of wartime norms in Russian society. These range from clamping down on what little remains of press freedom and jailing political opponents to expanding laws pertaining to treason and espionage. To oppose Russia's special military operation against Ukraine in print or speech is construed to discredit the army and provide moral support to the enemy. To describe it as war or invasion is illegal. Even as the special military operation stalled at the start of spring 2022, various Russian websites began compiling lists of traitors.<sup>41</sup> Broadly speaking, establishing a wartime regime grants Putin maximum latitude to classify any critic as an enemy of the state or a foreign agent.

**Seven.** *Russia is a victim.* Creating their own peculiar brand of identity politics, advocates of the new order constantly perceive evidence of Western disrespect, anti-Russian racism, foreign subversion, and so on. Speaking of the West at the Valdai Discussion Club Meeting in October 2022, Putin argued, "It [the West] denies the sovereignty of countries and peoples, their originality and uniqueness, does not put the interests of other states in anything."<sup>42</sup> Ironically, Putin invoked writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn's famous speech at Harvard in 1978 when, while exiled by the Soviet regime as punishment for exposing the evils of Stalinism, he nevertheless criticized the Western sense of superiority and its insistence that other countries follow its norms. (Of course, these dreaded "norms"

include respect for the human rights of individuals as well as for democracy, and above all the right to criticize one's government, for which Solzhenitsyn was arrested and eventually exiled.) Furthermore, Putin added, "Over the past nearly half a century, this blindness that Solzhenitsyn spoke of—openly racist and neo-colonial in nature [Putin's words, not Solzhenitsyn's]—has taken on simply ugly forms, especially after the emergence of the so-called unipolar world."<sup>43</sup>

**Eight.** As framed by Putin, *Russian sovereignty is at stake*. Moreover, he is not so subtly trying to align Russia with states (especially dictatorships) in Africa and Asia that were once part of European colonial empires yet today must tolerate European critiques of their politics and human rights records. Putin would have us believe that Russia feels their pain. (Actually, Putin is calling on authoritarian rulers to close ranks against pressure to democratize.) Somehow, to suggest that authoritarianism is wrong is "to deny the very existence of culture, art, science of other peoples."<sup>44</sup> Putin falsely extends this to "prohibitions of Dostoevsky and Tchaikovsky" (which have not occurred), all a part of "the modern Western culture of cancellation."<sup>45</sup> With the breathtaking audacity of one who allows no serious domestic dissent, *Putin claims that he is the one standing up for "open society" and the right of every country to choose its own form of government.* (As though Russia's elections were not fixed, and the people actively and consciously chose dictatorship as their preferred system of governance.) In effect, Russia's president holds that choosing to have no political rights is a fundamental individual right reflecting the natural distinctiveness of different cultures.<sup>46</sup>

In turn, all Western criticism is inherently malicious and aimed at absorbing Russia into the decadent, anti-traditional European cultural orbit. Traditional values, Putin posits, flow from unique national experiences and are entitled to respect. After all, Russia does not tell Europe how to live. Again and again, Putin returns to the question posed by Russian Pan-Slav philosopher Nikolai Danilevsky, "Why does Europe hate us?"<sup>47</sup> There is ample precedent for such thinking. During the Soviet era, the Communist Party constantly cited the destruction resulting from the Nazi invasion to explain away systemic inefficiencies and shortcomings in economic development. At the same time, internal propaganda about the war covered up errors and atrocities



Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a laying ceremony 9 May 2020 at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Kremlin Wall in Moscow, marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Nazi defeat in World War II. Putin postponed the massive Victory Day parade due to the coronavirus pandemic but ordered a flyover of warplanes over Red Square. (Photo by Alexei Druzhinin, Associated Press)

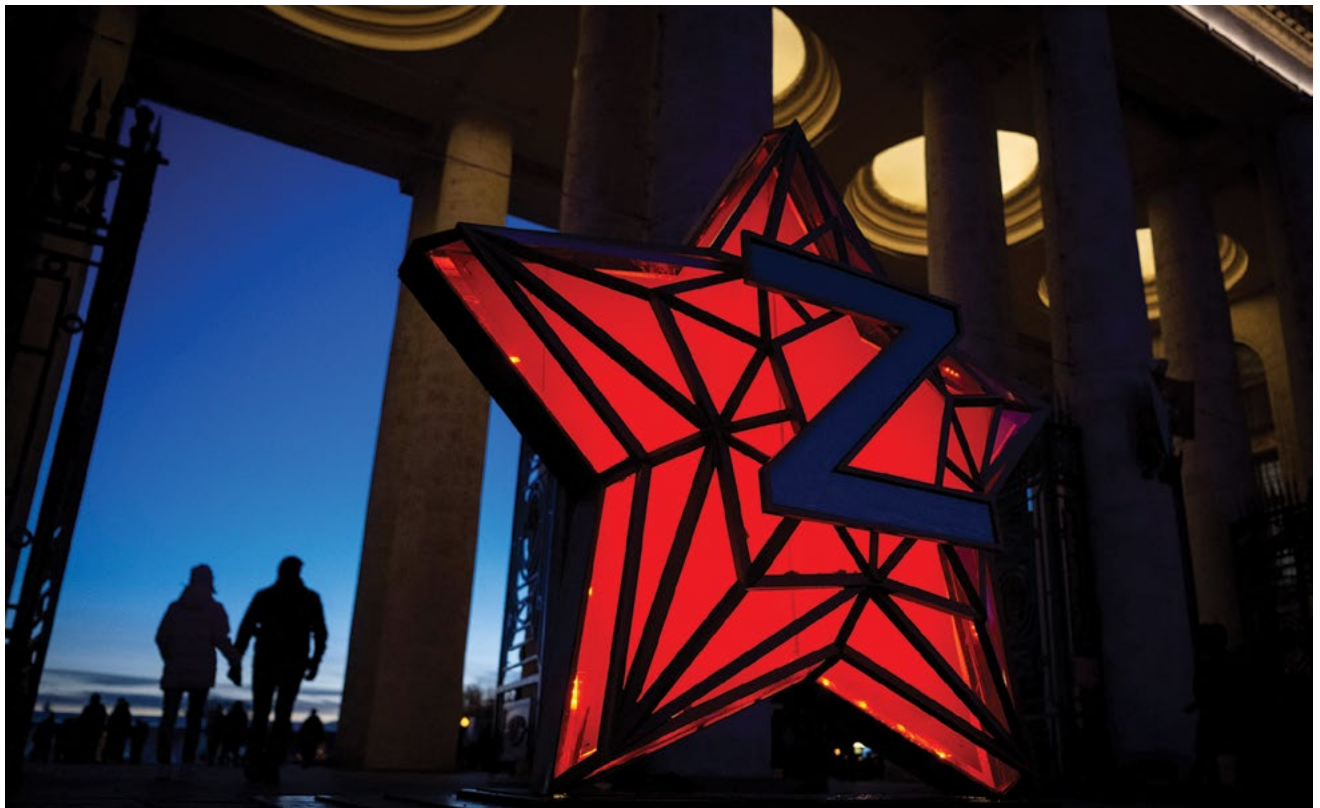
by Stalin and the Communist Party. That Putin, as an ex-KGB operative, would fall back on this style of reasoning is not shocking. Thus, his view is that today the United States and the West are attacking Russia without any provocation whatsoever.

**Nine.** Many Russian nationalist commentators invoke *the importance of justice*. However, what this usually implies is *not justice for individuals in a Western sense but rather justice for Russia itself*. In short, the war in Ukraine seeks a kind of restorative justice, returning to Russia what rightfully belongs to it. As for Russia's position in the international system, Putin claims that Russia is fighting for democracy in international relations: "But today the absolute majority of the world community demands democracy in international affairs and does not accept any form of authoritarian dictate by individual countries or groups of states. What is this if not the direct application of the principles of democracy at the level of international relations?"<sup>48</sup>

Overall, a striking feature of commentary about ideology in Russia is its particularity. Other than pious

assertions of the right of states to manage their internal affairs without interference, it makes few universal claims to relevance characteristic of Marxism-Leninism or Western liberalism. *The ideology of the future* applies to Russia and a specific understanding of Russia's place and prerogatives in the world. From this vantage point, Russia is a benign power, a threat to no one. It is simply claiming its rightful place among world civilizations. Accordingly, neighboring peoples that were once under Russian sway within the empire or the USSR should gravitate naturally to their proper place in subordination to a greater power. Russian nationalists regard the contiguous former republics as beholden to Russia for the gift of Russian civilization and membership in the Russian world. In this scenario, Russia was never an imperialist colonizing nation like the European powers. The accumulation of territory across Eurasia was natural and, for the most part, benevolent. Equally important, as Putin himself has indicated, Russian territorial gains under Peter, for example, did not require the approval of Europe.<sup>49</sup>





Pedestrians walk past a New Year decoration stylized as the “Kremlin Star” 2 January 2023 in Moscow. The decoration includes the letter “Z,” a tactical insignia used by Russian troops in Ukraine. (Photo by Natalia Kolesnikova, Agence France-Presse)

## Conclusion

Ultimately, Putin’s regime and its formative ideology may have staked too much on the special military operation in Ukraine. Failure in this overhyped endeavor could grievously undermine claims about historical inevitability, Russia’s unique “victory code,” Putin’s infallibility, and Russia’s civilizational mission. Yevgeny Prigozhin’s June declaration (not to mention his brief mutiny) about the falsehood of Russia’s pretext for launching the war against Ukraine offers evidence to that effect. Still, the principal streams of reasoning that collectively constitute

the still unresolved “ideology of the future” will in all probability far outlive the Putin administration. They withstood past societal changes and political earthquakes in Russia and will retain their grip on the imagination of nationalists for decades to come. Even so, it is not certain that a new ideology really offers a solution to Russia’s underlying problems. Support for the war seems widespread but tepid. This is consistent with the impact of ideology during the Soviet era. Still, the ideology does provide a useful lens through which to understand the ambitions of the Putin government. ■

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## Notes

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[chajshim-vyzovom-v-svoej-istorii](#). The English language tends to conflate the Russian adjectives *russkoe*, which is an ethnic term of reference, and *rossiiskoe*, which implies belonging to the Russian state or civilization. The point is that the Russian Military Historical Society focuses not on a narrow ethnic history but on the history of the state and the many peoples that populate it and belong to the lands that constituted the empire.

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