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Russia

Imperial Legacy: Putin and Grand Russian Nationalism

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The invasion of Ukraine by the Russian armies marks Vladimir Putin's desire to restore “Great Russia” whose hard historical core would bring together Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians. In this regard, he is fully the heir to a long tradition that goes from the Tsarist Empire to today's Russia, passing through Stalin and the leaders of the USSR after Stalin's death: autocracy and Great Russian nationalism have always been present, albeit in different modes.

Vladimir Putin's speech on Ukraine is part of this imperial heritage: the unity of Greater Russia was broken during the 1917 revolution. In his declaration of February 22, 2022 (two days preceding the invasion) , he explains that Ukraine as a republic is a disastrous consequence of the policy followed by Lenin after the 1917 revolution:

“So let me start with the fact that modern Ukraine was created entirely by Russia, or more precisely, by Bolshevik and communist Russia. The process began almost immediately after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his comrades in arms did it in a very crude way to Russia itself – through secession, tearing away parts of its own historic territories . [...] “From the point of view of the historical destiny of Russia and its people, the Leninist principles of state building were not only a mistake: they were, as we say, even worse than an error”.

This declaration echoes a long text (50,000 characters) published on the government website in July 2021, which defines Putin's position. In this text it is said that Ukrainians and Russians are one and the same people.

And in conclusion he writes: “I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements and victories. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is in the hearts and the memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people”.

That the intervention in Ukraine was thought of in these terms is confirmed by the text published (then immediately withdrawn) on February 26 (two days after the invasion) on the site of the RIA Novosti Agency . Written in advance and anticipating a quick and total victory of the Russian forces, it clearly defines the real stakes:

“Russia is restoring its unity. Indeed, the tragedy of 1991, this terrible catastrophe of our history, this unnatural dislocation, is finally overcome [...] Russia is restored to its historical integrity, bringing together the Russian world, the Russian people: the Great Russians (Russians of the Russian Federation), Belarusians and Little Russians (Ukrainians). [...] Ukraine returned to Russia. This return does not mean that Ukraine loses its statehood. Simply, it will be transformed, reorganized and returned to its original state as an integral part of the Russian world. »

In other words, the invasion of Ukraine has the primary objective of bringing Ukraine back into the Russian fold, ending its relations with the EU and the United States, accused of using the Ukraine as a base for manoeuvres against Russia. But it is necessary to insist on the fact that this imperial/imperialist logic [\[1\]](#) of Putin's Russia is primary: the denunciation of the West and of NATO must be understood from this perspective.

The armed resistance of the Ukrainians during the first four weeks after the invasion destroyed the first illusion of a quick victory and the realization of the original plans. But that does not call into question the topicality of the initial project: to bring Ukraine back to Russia at all costs (and to date the price to be paid is already immense for the Ukrainians). Today it is difficult to predict what will happen next – a rather gloomy prospect: the heroic resistance of

the Ukrainians alone will hardly be able to put an end to the Russian occupation.

To understand and define the issues of full and complete active solidarity with the Ukrainian people, it is crucial to start from this position: the war in Ukraine is a war of aggression waged by an imperial/imperialist power against a nation state, Ukraine, which is defending its freedom and independence. This fundamental perception tends to be partially concealed in favor of a representation in terms of confrontation between two camps: on the one hand, the West (EU + EU under the NATO hat), on the other Russia which proclaims loud and clear that its integrity is being attacked and threatened. The prolongation of the war can only feed and reinforce this campist view of the situation, to the detriment of the Ukrainian resistance and its struggle for its independence and sovereignty.

The current situation and the dramatic threats hanging over the Ukrainian people today are part of a long history in which the right of peoples to self-determination was only recognized for a (too) brief period, the day after the 1917 revolution, which put an end to the Tsarist Empire, a "prison of the peoples". Very quickly, the great Russian vice would be reactivated, de facto denying the national rights recognized to the republics forming the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Lenin against Stalin

In Putin's various statements, Lenin is violently attacked for having questioned a unitary state. Stalin is presented as the one who defended a unitary position in accordance with the historical interests of Russia. Although in the end Stalin backed down and adopted the theses defended by Lenin, in fact, as Moshe Lewin wrote in *Lenin's Last Struggle* : "He (Stalin) was persuaded that the course of events, the real interests of the state would take precedence over it and that the Union would work anyway as he had planned. Under these conditions, he saw no harm in yielding completely to Lenin on paper".

The period of recognition of the rights of nationalities [\[2\]](#) was indeed short-lived in the 1920s. With the arrival of Stalin in power, autocracy and Grand Russian nationalism regained the upper hand. Below, without claiming to be exhaustive, we go over different moments.

The 1930s: return to autocracy

In his text "Ego and politics in the Stalinist autocracy" (in *Russie/URSS/Russie* , Page 2, Syllepse) Moshe Lewin writes: "Stalin always tended to make the glory of the Tsarist imperial past his own and to use tradition for the benefit of his system [...] Stalin's emphasizing of his regime's affinities with the Empire and claiming common historical roots, especially regarding the construction of the state by the cruellest of tsars, made possible a radical redefinition of his own character, but also of the ideological and political identity of the system". . Recalling that Lenin had called Stalin a *derzhimorda* ("great Russian bully"), Moshe Lewin writes that Stalin "ended up by actually wanting to be a great Russian bully" [\[3\]](#).

Great Patriotic War

During the war, different minorities were deported between 1941 and 1944: the Volga Germans, the Kalmouks, the Balkars, the Karatchais, the Ingush, the Crimean Tatars.

The Last Years of Stalin and Zhdanovism

In *The Soviet Century*, Moshe Lewin evokes Zhdanovism (1946-1950) which constitutes a particularly dark chapter in the history of Stalinism: "An expression of Russian ultranationalism, Zhdanovism attacked manifestations of nationalism in the non-Russians" (p. 130). "The ideology of Zhdanovism was Stalin's own, of course - the culmination of his ideological peregrinations. Stalin was by now fascinated by the 'glorious' Tsarist past. [...] Worse than the external paraphernalia is the extreme Russian nationalism, savouring of proto-fascism, typical of decaying Stalinism. Stalin wanted this spirit to survive him. To this end, he personally revised the Soviet anthem, imposing on a multi-national country a chauvinist paean to 'Great Russia' " p. 173. On this issue, see also *ibidem*, p. 147-149. [4]

The state and party bureaucracy was fragmented, a set of factions, cliques and networks within the various instances of power, coming together in a series of more or less lasting alliances, on the basis of common interests and more or less shared ideological positions. These different components of the bureaucracy had in common the celebration of the USSR (actually Russia) as a *derzhava* ("strong state"). Any reference to the October Revolution was erased, it was the "Great Patriotic War" (the Second World War) which was the reference. We can witness there the strengthening of the policy of assimilation of non-Russian nationalities. Brezhnev was distinguished by the intensification of Russification under the flag of the creation of a single Soviet people. From 1976 the main slogan of Russification was the celebration of the "Russian language, language of progress, socialism and internationalism" [5].

Nikolai Mitrokhin's book [6] *Russkaja partija : dvizhenie russkikh nacionalistov v SSSR 1953-1985* ("The Russian party: the movement of Russian nationalists in the USSR 1953-1985), shows that great Russian nationalism was present in all the leading instances of the CPSU: Politburo, Central Committee of the CPSU, but also of the Komsomol: virulent anti-Westernism, admiration for Stalin presented as the builder of a strong state, celebration of the Great Patriotic War, reinforcement of military education and militarization of youth, glorification of Greater Russia. All the components of Putin's discourse today were already present [7].

The end of the USSR and the 1990s: a Russia by default

December 21, 1991 marks the end of the USSR, with the creation of independent republics whose leaders came directly from the previous period, with the exception of the Baltic countries. Within this framework, the Federative Republic of Russia was created. The de facto Russia/USSR confusion throughout the Soviet period with regard to the governing bodies resulted in the absence of properly Russian institutions. In particular, there was no Communist Party of Russia, a party which would be created urgently.

The Russian Federation designated a Russia by default: a vague and suspended identity corresponding to what remained of the USSR after the independence of the republics [8].

On the economic level, we were witnessing a collapse of the system, with a policy of "reforms" carried out at full speed: massive de-industrialization, wildcat privatization of all the country's wealth ("the biggest hold-up of the century" according to Moshe Lewin), a brutal fall in the standard of living, a demographic crisis. The policy pursued by Yeltsin was that of *laissez-faire*, pursued by the reforming liberals in direct association with the IMF and the World Bank.

Faced with this, we witnessed an explosion of Russian nationalism, of which the new Communist Party of the Russian Federation was one of the main actors. Its first secretary, Gennadi Ziuganov, was the spokesperson for this virulent nationalism: one of his brochures was entitled *I am Russian by heart and by blood*, another was entitled *Derzhava* ("Great power"). And on different occasions, he criticized Lenin: "It seems to me that Lenin was subjected

to strong pressure and influence from forces that hated Russia" (we are not far from the thesis presenting the October 1917 revolution as a Judeo-Bolshevik plot) [9].

Putin's Russia: Rebuilding Greater Russia

Having come to power at the time of the Second Chechen War, Putin very quickly embarked on a series of operations aimed at reducing the gap between the Russian Federation born from the collapse of the Soviet Empire (regularly assimilated to a second major catastrophe hitting Russia – the first being the 1917 revolution) and historical Greater Russia. This was reflected both domestically: authoritarianism and a strong state, muscular patriotism, denunciation of the "degenerate" West and sworn enemy of Russia; and externally, through interventions in the "near abroad". that is to say the republics that emerged after the end of the USSR.

Russia intervened during the various "colour revolutions" assimilated to an attempt to leave its sphere of influence: the Rose revolution in Georgia in 2003, the Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, the Orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004. But also, more recently during the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia as well as in Kazakhstan. This enterprise took the form of the attachment to Russia of territories of Georgia such as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (in 2008). But it was vis-à-vis Ukraine that Putin's strategy would take the most radical and brutal form: unlike the other republics, Ukraine is for Putin an integral part of Greater Russia. – see his statements, quoted above, at the time of the armed intervention in Ukraine [10].

A first step was taken in 2014 at the time of Maidan with the annexation of Crimea and the appearance of the self-proclaimed republics of Lugansk and Donetsk. The invasion of Ukraine launched on February 24 is a new step. Everything shows that it is not a whim of an adventurist Putin, but that it is part of a project, largely theorized, of reconstituting Greater Russia.

Although the fierce resistance of the Ukrainians has slowed down the advance of the Russian troops, it is very difficult to predict the sequence of events. But there is no reason to think that Putin has given up on his plan to dismantle Ukraine.

Monday 4 April 2022

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[1] By writing "imperial/imperialist" we want to emphasize that the intervention in Ukraine is both Great Russian chauvinism and Russian imperialism as it is practiced today in different parts of the world (Syria, Africa in particular).

[2] Thus, Lenin supported the creation of an Autonomous Crimean Tatar Republic. During the war, the Crimean Tatars – together with other national minorities – were deported to Central Asia. Only after the end of the USSR were they able to return to Crimea. The Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 meant further persecution against the Tatars. Many emigrated either to Ukraine or to Turkey (where they are estimated to be 100,000).

[3] In the 1930s, large-scale repression also hit Ukrainian intellectuals and writers. See Isobel Koshib's article: "It feels like history is repeating itself, says poet from Kharkiv as Russian bombs fall" Site A l'Encontre, March 30, 2022.

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[4] We reproduce here some passages from the introduction to *Russie/URSS/Russie*, Page 2/Syllepse.

[5] On this question and more particularly the policy developed in Ukraine, see *Cahier Ukraine* published by the journal *L'Alternative*, edited by François Maspero: n°31, January 1985

[6] Mitrokhin recently published in the online journal *La Revue des Idées* (March 22, 2022) a very informed and caustic article on the self-proclaimed republics of Donbass.

[7] For a more systematic presentation of Mitrokhin 's book, see the introduction to *Russie/URSS/Russie*, p. 19-22

[8] On this question, see Moshe Lewin "Un nationalisme de notre temps: le cas de la Russie", in *Russie/URSS/Russie*, p. 205-238

[9] See Denis Paillard, 1995, "Les nationalistes, les communistes and la phenomene patriotique", in V. Garros (ed), *Russie potstsovietique" la fatigue de l'histoire* Brussels, Complex.

[10] It should be remembered that Eurasia theorist Alexander Dugin is an influential adviser to Putin. He maintains close relations with the various far-right movements in Europe. On the far-right site geopolitika.ru there are various articles by Dugin.