

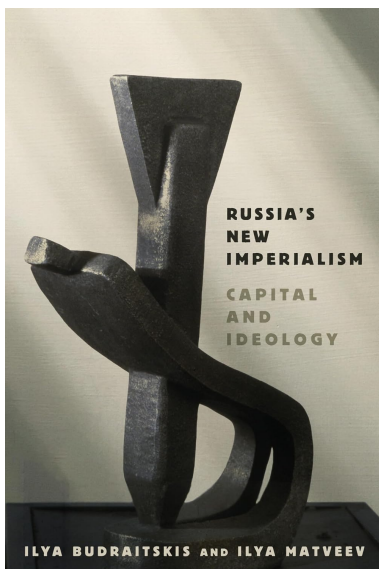
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Russia

Russia's New Imperialism

- Reviews section -



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Review of Ilya Budraitskis and Ilya Matveev, *Russia's New Imperialism: Capital and Ideology*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, September 2026.

Russian imperialism is a subject that has received little attention from contemporary Marxists, some of whom even question its very existence. This is why the book by Ilya Budraitskis—a historian and political scientist at the University of California, Berkeley—and Ilya Matveev—an economist and political scientist at the Research Centre for Eastern Europe (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) in Bremen—fills an important gap. Both are Russian and left their country after the beginning of the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. How can one explain an enterprise that appears so irrational and counterproductive to the Russian ruling classes? This is the starting point of their analysis.

The two authors first examine the material foundations of post-Soviet imperialism. Between 1999 and 2013, Russia's stock of foreign direct investment (FDI) rose from \$2.2 billion to \$501 billion, placing it just behind China at the time. This reflected a very rapid expansion of its integration into the global economy, particularly with those of Western Europe and the United States. They nevertheless stress that the articulation between the economic and political spheres remained marked by the legacy of a state-directed economy (in 2007, seven of Russia's twenty largest companies were state-owned) and by asymmetrical relations with the territories of the former USSR. Thus, the manipulation of prices for political purposes, and even the interruption of hydrocarbon exports, were widely used as means of international coercion. Since coming to power, Putin has also tightened his grip on the economic sphere by surrounding himself with a circle of businessmen with whom the other oligarchs have increasingly been compelled to cooperate.

In 1930, Trotsky wrote that, "The twofold imperialism of the Russian bourgeoisie had basically the character of an agency for other mightier world powers." [\[1\]](#) Yet Budraitskis and Matveev argue that during the 2000s Russia could also be regarded as a "subimperialism," in the sense given to the term by Ruy Mauro Marini, pursuing a policy of antagonistic cooperation with the dominant imperialisms. Its logistical support for the Western military intervention in Afghanistan is a case in point. In this context, the "offensive realism" conceptualized by John Mearsheimer undoubtedly played an important role in its international relations. This integration into capitalist globalization nevertheless began to decline after the 2008 financial crisis, because of falling oil prices and the withdrawal of foreign capital.

From 2014 onwards, the annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Donbas severely undermined the economic position of the most internationally integrated fractions of Russian capital, particularly because of Western sanctions. These developments strengthened the position of agricultural holdings, resulting from import substitution, as well as that of the energy sector, supported by substantial public investment, and the military-industrial complex, at the expense of civilian industries. In the following years, the deployment abroad of troops belonging to the Russian Federation or to the Wagner Group testified to the growing aggressiveness of Russian imperialism, which thus sought, in vain, to compensate for its economic losses by plundering resources in Donbas, Syria and Africa.

The Weight of Ideology

Drawing on Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1929), Budraitskis and Matveev distinguish an initial phase of partial ideological commitment among the ruling circles, lasting until the beginning of the 2010s. They then show how the policies of the elites became increasingly guided by a process of "total ideologization." This process has

continued to advance since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012. The campaign then unleashed by the media against the feminist punk group Pussy Riot was emblematic of this turning point. This shift could not be explained by a growing NATO threat: by the mid-2010s, US forces in Europe amounted to only one tenth of their Cold War strength, while European military spending was at its lowest level.

By contrast, the increasingly ideologized ruling circles gathered around an increasingly influential Security Council, multiplied laws targeting LGBT people and promoting "family values," while constantly glorifying the empire's historical frontiers across the centuries, which only military forces had made it possible to defend. "The life experience of the political elite—from criminal street culture and the Soviet security services to the 'wild capitalism' of the 1990s—fostered the belief that the true law of both society and international relations is the might of the strong" (p. 79). At the same time, power was, above all, perceived as a means of manipulating the masses.

It was within this mental universe that the "color revolutions" (2003–2005), NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe, the rise of domestic opposition in 2011–2012, the Arab Spring and the Maidan protests (2014) gave substance to the obsessive idea that the West was waging war against Russia's eternal values. A growing section of the elite was thus led to take various conspiracy theories more seriously. The value system of an autocratic (neo-monarchical) "Russian world," endowed with a strong state with an imperial vocation and inspired by Orthodox eschatology, now found itself in direct opposition to a decadent West.

For its ruling circles, "Fortress Russia" was henceforth threatened by its internal divisions, by domestic opposition and, more fundamentally, by Ukrainian dissent, all perceived as so many perfidious maneuvers orchestrated by the enemy. The growing grip of ultra-conservative ideas, propagated by intellectuals such as Anatoly Sobchak, Alexander Prokhanov and Alexander Dugin, simultaneously fueled the glorification of a mythologized history: that of a state and empire in constant expansion and of the exceptional achievements of its most ruthless rulers—Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and Stalin; that of a Eurasian civilizational unity embodied by Russia; and that of the Orthodox Church's struggle against the Antichrist (the katechon).

As Alexander Prokhanov aptly put it, "It is not Putin who builds the empire; it is the empire that builds Putin." In other words, Putin began to perceive his role as that of a monarch, tending to conflate his own political conceptions with the aspirations of his subjects. Indeed, expansionist nationalism has never enjoyed a broad popular base in Russia: in the past as today, it has always been imposed from above. The resonance of the ethnic nationalism of the far right in other countries around the world is, moreover, at odds with this imperial nationalism, which is necessarily multinational. For this reason, the xenophobic and racist far right, which has gathered since 2005 around an annual demonstration—the Russian March—has been subjected to increasingly close control by the authorities, combined with its partial integration into the official discourse and the relentless repression of its uncontrollable tendencies.

At the beginning of [*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*](#) (1858), Marx wrote that "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." In the same vein, Budraitskis and Matveev observe that Russian imperial ideology now exerts a decisive influence on the policies of its ruling circles, to the point of leading them to adopt counterproductive courses of action. This enables them to explain Putin's successive decisions to annex Crimea and intervene militarily in the Donbas in 2014, and even more so his decision to launch the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, although these choices have driven Russian imperialism into a dangerous dead end.

To support their argument, they invoke Mannheim and his distinction between "peculiar" [2] and "total" ideology. In the former sense, the ideology of a social group or class is influenced by its interests, but only to a limited extent. In the latter, its entire worldview and conceptual apparatus are determined by a more or less coherent ideology. For Budraitskis and Matveev, Russia has gradually moved from the first to the second of these scenarios. They add that Mannheim distinguishes ideology, "oriented toward the maintenance of the present," from utopia (reactionary [fascism] or revolutionary [communism]), "focused on rejecting the present in the name of a better future or a return

to the past” (p. 43). Yet they point out that Putin's Russia “do[es] not offer an alternative to the existing social order, [does not] seek to create ‘a new man,’ but rather radicalize[s] the trends of neoliberal capitalism” (p. 43).

Despite these considerations, and despite profoundly different historical circumstances, they nevertheless propose that contemporary Russia should be regarded as “a new form of fascism [...] as a transhistorical phenomenon” (p. 44), or as a regime whose “fascistization is underway” (p. 170). [3] This conclusion is surprising given that Putin does not enjoy the support of a militant mass movement, that Russian civil society is deeply depoliticized, and that he does not propose to create “a new man” at all. Yet these characteristics were at the heart of the Italian and German fascist experiences. In fact, within the broad panorama of autocratic, reactionary, expansionist nationalist, militarist and police regimes, Putin's Russia would probably bear greater similarities to the Russia of Tsar Nicholas I, to the Bonapartism of Napoleon III, or to the regimes of the late Ottoman or Austro-Hungarian empires, insofar as comparison with examples so distant in time is meaningful.

Regarding the material force of ideology, Budraitskis and Matveev briefly cite Gramsci and Althusser (pp. 40–43). These developments would have deserved more space. From a Gramscian perspective, it would have been interesting to revisit the strong influence exerted on him by Alexander Bogdanov and Anatoly Lunacharsky, [4] and to discuss the philosophical approaches of Lukács and the historical work of Edward P. Thompson. As for Althusser, the references to his thought are somewhat cursory and occasionally confusing, particularly concerning the role of the ideological state apparatuses—which are not “the form in which ideology is internalized” (p. 41), but rather the institutions and practices through which ideology is reproduced. Following on from Althusser, Budraitskis and Matveev could have discussed Poulantzas and his conception of the state as the material condensation of class relations, which extends his reflection on the materiality of ideology. More generally, it would have been useful to stress that a growing number of Marxist historians and anthropologists have for many years contributed to moving beyond the fossilized “base/superstructure” schema, which is largely foreign to the thought of Marx and Engels.

The Weight of History

The two authors are right to seek to understand “Russia's new imperialism” by considering the burden of history and the ideological weight that permeates it. To this end, they seek to deepen the concept of imperialism, rejecting a reductive economic interpretation and emphasizing the weight of political and ideological factors, and therefore of history. The ruling core of the Russian regime around Vladimir Putin, they explain, seeks to reproduce a total state, perceived as the sine qua none of Russia's existence as a world power, in keeping with its centuries-long trajectory.

In this regard, it is worth revisiting the reflections of the Marxists of the early twentieth century, which are very often caricatured, even though Russian imperialism was a central subject of their controversies. Luxemburg, for example, explained that “its strongest strain is not, however, as in Germany or England, the economic expansion of capital, hungry for territorial accumulation, but the political interests of the state.” [5] Lenin endeavored to identify its main characteristics: a “weaker” monopoly capital, “enmeshed in a particularly close network of pre-capitalist relations,” which relied on a “military-autocratic and feudal” state where “the political concentration was high,” in order to defend “vast territories” and thereby enjoy “special facilities for robbing national minority nationalities.” [6] This overall conception emerges from numerous passages in his work and has not entirely lost its relevance today.

To better grasp Lenin's perspective, it is therefore necessary to set aside a tenacious Marxist tradition that reduces imperialism to an economic transformation of capitalism, which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century—the transition from free competition to the rule of monopolies. This view claims the analytical framework of his April 1917 pamphlet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* as its authority, while neglecting the warning contained in its first Russian preface:

This pamphlet was written with an eye to the tsarist censorship. Hence, I was not only forced to confine myself strictly to an exclusively theoretical, specifically economic analysis of facts, but to formulate the few necessary observations on politics with extreme caution, by hints [...] It is painful, in these days of liberty, to re-read the passages of the pamphlet, which have been distorted, cramped, compressed into an iron vice. [7]

This decisive observation concerned Russian imperialism in particular, leading him to specify:

I had to speak in a "slavish" tongue, and I must refer the reader who is interested in the subject to the articles I wrote abroad in 1914-17 [...]. On the question of annexations [...] I was forced to quote as an example—Japan! The careful reader will easily substitute Russia for Japan, and Finland, Poland, Courland, Ukraine, Khiva (emphasis in the original). [8]

Unfortunately, this warning has been largely forgotten. Yet Lenin's text, "distorted, cramped, compressed," nevertheless stressed that, despite its economic backwardness, Russian imperialism ruled over the world's second-largest colonial empire in terms of area and the third largest in terms of population.

In Russia, capitalist imperialism of the latest type has fully revealed itself in the policy of tsarism towards Persia, Manchuria and Mongolia; but, in general, military and feudal imperialism predominates in Russia. [9]

Joseph Schumpeter was therefore partly right when he viewed imperialism as a survival from the past. Russia is by no means alone in having conquered a large part of its colonial empire before the advent of modern imperialism. England, France and the Netherlands are in the same position. The characteristics of the main imperialist powers therefore cannot be understood without considering their centuries-long development and the conditions under which they became integrated into the contemporary world's political and economic system. Yet the history of the uneven and combined development of the main imperialist states remains a largely unexplored field. In this respect, the work of Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski on the long history of Russian imperialism points the way. [10]

The Headlong Rush

From 2017 to 2020, Budraitskis and Matveev point out, various popular protests were repressed. In 2020, Putin amended the constitution to allow himself two additional terms in office. In the summer of 2021, he published an article entitled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," whose reading was made compulsory in the army and even became part of its training. The ideological and operational preparation for the aggression of 24 February 2022 was now complete. At the same time, the 2014–2015 Minsk agreements had given rise to contradictory interpretations; the United States and NATO had adopted a tougher tone and provided Ukraine with its first, still modest, military assistance. Finally, the invasion of February 2022, launched despite dissenting voices within the Security Council, brought about Russia's "self-encirclement," as described by Jack Snyder in *Myths of Empire* (1991).

Its military failure and the immediate successes of Ukrainian resistance prevented the Kremlin from seeking a negotiated settlement with Washington. Although Russia had not prepared for a long war, the partial restructuring of its economy since 2014 enabled it to withstand the new Western sanctions more effectively, in a context where the relative weight of the G7 countries had declined considerably (from 65% of global GDP in 2000 to 45% in 2021). From 2021 to 2024, Russian military spending more than doubled, and the defense sector created an additional half a million jobs, thereby altering the composition and circuits of accumulation of the economic elite. However, this crisis regime will be difficult to sustain over the long term (a drying up of the labor market, supply difficulties in certain key sectors, inflation, etc.).

Faced with this new reality, the circle of leaders most closely connected to Putin responded by ideologizing the war.

How else could Ukrainian resistance be explained than by the grip of “nazis leaders” who had managed to gain a hold over the population? Hence the pressing need for the denazification of Ukraine and the thorough re-education of its misguided people. Moreover, at the beginning of 2024, the main political channel of the Orthodox Church proclaimed a “holy war.” Alexander Dugin asserted the need to work to “decolonize the consciousness” of Russians themselves. From nursery schools to universities, indoctrination programs were put in place. The last centers of domestic opposition were neutralized. Media and social networks were brought under tighter control. From the repression of opponents as foreign agents, the law has been tightened and now targets all persons “under foreign influence.” The relative independence of permitted parties, such as the Communist Party, has been reduced to zero: the few opponents of the war within its ranks were pre-emptively expelled. In March 2024, the only candidates allowed to stand “against” Putin eventually called on voters to vote for him.

Today, Russian society is depoliticized, which, in plain terms, means that it does not involve itself in politics, but also that politics does not interfere too much in its everyday life—which is increasingly no longer the case. The challenge for Russia’s ruling circles is to move from popular non-opposition tinged with cynicism, skepticism and resignation—“everyone lies”—to active support, which would require prolonged mass indoctrination, an approach that is of little effectiveness in the face of the immediate needs of the war. Moreover, like efforts to mobilize additional manpower, such an undertaking carries risks.

In what forms does opposition to the war manifest itself in Russia? On 24 February 2022, thousands of people took to the streets of Moscow and St Petersburg, and these severely repressed demonstrations continued for two weeks. They lacked organizational channels and a common strategy that would have enabled them to endure. For the past decade, the various oppositions to the system—liberal, left-wing, and even nationalist—have been silenced and marginalized through repression and extrajudicial killings. The only partially tolerated opposition voices have been those of the small liberal Yabloko party, which has no parliamentary representation, and Boris Nadezhdin, a candidate in the 2024 presidential election, who managed to collect more than 200,000 signatures in his support before being denied permission to stand.

More or less spontaneous protests took place in several regions, particularly in the Muslim republics of the Russian Federation, against mobilization, often led by women. Anonymous citizens also expressed their disapproval by laying flowers at makeshift memorials to the civilian victims of the war. Seven hundred thousand people—mostly men—left the country in the autumn of 2022 to evade conscription, while desertions continued to increase among mobilized troops. A series of acts of sabotage were also carried out by small clandestine groups.

Under these circumstances, the authors’ conclusion seems difficult to dispute: “A new cold war of the Kremlin’s own making is in full swing. Europe is firmly on a path of remilitarization. Prior to 2014, European NATO states were reluctant to adopt the 2 percent GDP target for military spending long demanded by the US. However, by 2025, they had agreed to increase military expenditure to an astonishing 5 percent of GDP within ten years (NATO 2025). NATO is busy rebuilding the infrastructure necessary to quickly move hundreds of thousands of soldiers to its eastern flank. Sweden and Finland have joined the alliance, making the Baltic Sea a much more difficult security frontier to navigate for Russia. Moreover [...] multiple European states are seeking to acquire the capability to strike deep into Russian territory” (p. 168). A fascinating and highly topical book, which deserves to be read without fail.

11 September 2026

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- [1] Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Vol. 1 (1930), chap. 2 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/ch02.htm>.
- [2] Budraitskis and Matveev translate the German term “partikulare,” used by Mannheim, as “partial,” whereas it is generally translated into English as “peculiar.”
- [3] These two observations are not entirely compatible. The “transhistoricity” of fascism, as conceived by Enzo Traverso (*The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right*, London & New York, Verso, 2019), refers to the concept of fascism rather than to its empirical manifestations, whereas “fascistization,” as described by Dimitrov in his report to the Seventh Congress of the Communist International (1935), implies the actual evolution of bourgeois class rule towards fascism.
- [4] Angelo D'Orsi, *Gramsci. La biografia*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2024, pp. 195–197, 280–281 and 305; Romain Descendre and Jean-Claude Zancarini, *L'œuvre-vie d'Antonio Gramsci*, Paris, La Découverte, 2023, pp. 69–71, 179, 186, 436, 439.
- [5] Rosa Luxemburg, *The Junius Pamphlet*, 1915 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1915/junius/ch04.htm>
- [6] These passages are drawn from Lenin's works in the following order: “The Collapse of the Second International” (May-June 1915) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/csi/v.htm#v21pp74h-227> ; *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/ch06.htm> and <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/ch07.htm> (April 1917) ; “Social-Chauvinist Policy Behind a Cover of Internationalist Phrases”
- [7] Lenin, Russian Preface of 26 April 1917 to *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/pref01.htm>.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Lenin, “Socialism and War,” July-August 1915 <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/s-w/ch01.htm>.
- [10] Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski, “The Conquest of Ukraine and the History of Russian Imperialism,” *New Politics*, June 12, 2022, <https://newpol.org/the-conquest-of-ukraine-and-the-history-of-russian-imperialism/>.