

THE SEARCH FOR EUROPE

Contrasting Approaches



BBVA



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The Russians have always been uncertain about their place in Europe. That ambivalence is an important aspect of their cultural history and identity. Living on the margins of the continent, they have never been quite sure if their destiny is there. Are they of the West or of the East? Feelings of ambivalence and insecurity, of envy and resentment towards Europe, have long defined the Russian national consciousness—and they still do today.

RUSSIA AND EUROPE

1

From the reign of Peter the Great and the founding of St. Petersburg (his “window on the West”) in 1703, educated Russians looked to Europe as their ideal of progress and enlightenment. St. Petersburg was more than a city. It was a vast, almost utopian, project of cultural engineering to reconstruct the Russian as a European man. Everything in the new capital was intended to compel the Russians to adopt a more European way of life. Peter forced his noblemen to shave their “Russian” beards (a mark of devoutness in Orthodox belief), adopt Western dress, build palaces with classical facades, and adopt European customs and habits, including bringing women into society. By the early nineteenth century, much of the nobility spoke French better than they spoke Russian. French was the language of the salon, and French loan-words made their way into the Gallicized literary language of Russian writers such as Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) and Nikolai Karamzin (1766-1826) at this time.

RUSSIA'S WESTERNISTS SOUGHT EUROPE'S APPROVAL, AND WANTED TO BE RECOGNIZED AS EQUALS

For the Russian intelligentsia, Europe was not just a place: it was an ideal—a region of the mind that they inhabited through their education, their language and their general attitudes. “In Russia we existed only in a factual sense,” recalled the writer Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin (1826-89). “We went to the office, we wrote letters to our relatives, we dined in restaurants, we conversed with each other and so on. But spiritually we were all inhabitants of France.” Russia’s Westernists identified themselves as “European Russians”. They sought Europe’s approval, and wanted to be recognized as equals by it. For this reason, they took a certain pride in the achievements of the imperial state, greater and more mighty than any other European empire, and in Petrine civilization with its mission to lead Russia to modernity. Yet at the same time

they were painfully aware that Russia was not “Europe”—it constantly fell short of that ideal—and perhaps could never become part of it.

When Russians travelled to Western Europe, they were aware of being treated as inferiors. In his *Letters of a Russian Traveller* Karamzin managed to express the insecurity that many Russians felt about their European identity. Everywhere he went he was reminded of Russia’s backward image in the European mind. On the road to Königsberg, two Germans were amazed to learn that a Russian could speak foreign languages. In Leipzig, professors talked about the Russians as “barbarians” and could not believe that they had writers of their own. The French were even worse: They combined condescension towards the Russians as students

THE SLAVOPHILES HAD THEIR ROOTS IN THE NATIONALIST REACTION TO THE SLAVISH IMITATION OF EUROPEAN CULTURE

of their culture with contempt for them as “monkeys who know only how to imitate.” As Karamzin travelled around Europe, it seemed to him that the Europeans had a different way of thinking, that perhaps the Russians had been Europeanized in only a superficial way: European values and sensibilities had yet to penetrate the Russian’s mental world. Karamzin’s doubts were shared by many educated Russians as they struggled to define their “Europeanness.” In 1836, the philosopher Petr Chaadaev (1794-1856) despaired that the Russians were able only to imitate the West—they were unable to internalize its essential moral principles.

In the 1850s the Russian writer, socialist philosopher and émigré in Paris Alexander Herzen (1812-70) wrote: “Our attitude to Europe and the Europeans is still that of provincials towards the dwellers in a capital: we are servile and apologetic, take every difference for a defect, blush for our peculiarities and try to hide them.” This inferiority complex engendered complicated feelings of envy and resentment of the West. The two were never far apart. In every educated Russian there was both a Westernizer and a Slavophile. If Russia could not become an equal part of Europe there were always those who were prepared to argue that it ought to take more pride in being different.

The Slavophiles emerged as a distinct grouping in the 1830s, when they launched their famous public disputes with the Westernists. They had their roots in the nationalist reaction to the slavish imitation of European culture, as well as to the French invasion of Russia in 1812.

The horrors of the French Revolution led the Slavophiles to reject the universal culture of the Enlightenment and to emphasize instead those indigenous traditions that distinguished Russia from the West. They looked to the virtues they discerned in the patriarchal customs of the countryside. They idealized the common folk (*narod*) as the true bearer of the national character (*narodnost*). As devout upholders of the Orthodox ideal, they maintained that the Russian was defined by Christian sacrifice and humility. This was the foundation of the spiritual community (*sobornost*) by which Russia—in contrast to the secular law-based states of Western Europe—was defined. The Slavophiles were never organized, except by the intellectual leanings of various journals and discussion groups, mostly in Moscow, which was seen as a more Russian capital, closer to the customs of the provinces, compared to St. Petersburg. Slavophilism was a cultural orientation, a mode of speech and dress (in the Russian manner), and a way of thinking about Russia in relation to the world. One notion shared by all those who were Slavophiles in this loose sense—and here we might count both the writers Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-81) and Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008)—was a special “Russian soul”, a uniquely Russian principle of Christian love, selfless virtue and self-sacrifice, which made Russia different from the West and spiritually superior to it. The West might have its Crystal Palaces, it might be technologically more advanced than Russia, but material progress was the seed of its own destruction because it fostered selfish individualism, from which Russia was protected by its collective spirit of *sobornost*. Here was the root of the messianic concept of Russia’s providential mission in the world to redeem humanity. And here too was the origin of the idea that Russia was no ordinary territorial state; it could not be confined by geographical boundaries, but was an empire of this mystical idea. In the famous words of the poet Fyodor Tiutchev (1803-73), a Slavophile and militant supporter of the Pan-Slav cause:

Russia cannot be understood with the mind alone,
 No ordinary yardstick can span her greatness:
 Her soul is of a special kind -
 In Russia, one can only believe.

2

Such ideas were never far away from the foreign policies of Nicholas I (1825-55). Nicholas was a firm upholder of autocratic principles. He

established the political police, tightened censorship, tried to seal off Russia from European notions of democracy, and sent his armies to crush revolutionary movements in Europe. Influenced by Slavophile ideas, he equated the defence of the Orthodox religion outside Russia's borders with the pursuit of Russia's national interests. He took up the Greek cause in the Holy Lands against the rival claims of the Catholics for control of the Holy Places, which led him into a protracted conflict with the French. He mobilized his armies to defend the Orthodox Slavs under Ottoman rule in the Balkans. His aim was to keep the Turkish Empire weak and divided and, with Russia's mighty navy in the Crimea, to dominate the Black Sea and its access through the Straits, which was of great importance to the Great Powers in order to connect the Mediterranean with the Middle East. There were dangerous policies of armed diplomacy that would lead to the Crimean War in 1854-56.

**NICHOLAS I ESTABLISHED THE POLITICAL POLICE,
TIGHTENED CENSORSHIP AND TRIED TO SEAL OFF RUS-
SIA FROM EUROPEAN NOTIONS OF DEMOCRACY**

The first phase of the Crimean War was the Russian invasion of the Turkish principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia (more or less today's Romania) where the Russians counted on the support of the Orthodox Serbs and the Bulgarians. As Nicolas I contemplated his decision to launch the invasion, knowing it might bring the Western powers to intervene in the defence of Turkey, he received a memorandum on Russia's relations with the European powers written by the Pan-Slav ideologist, Mikhail Pogodin, a professor of Moscow University and founding editor of the influential journal *Moskvitianin* (Muscovite). Filled with grievances against the West, the memorandum clearly struck a chord with Nicholas, who shared Pogodin's sense that Russia's role as the protector of the Orthodox had not been recognized or understood and the Great Powers treated Russia unfairly. Nicholas especially approved of the following passage, in which Pogodin railed against the double standards of the Western powers, which allowed them to conquer foreign lands but forbade Russia from defending its co-religionists abroad:

France takes Algeria from Turkey,¹ and almost every year England annexes another Indian principality: none of this disturbs the balance of power; but

¹ In 1830.



Cossacks watching a screen featuring Vladimir Putin in Simferopol, the capital of the Republic of Crimea, on April 2015.

when Russia occupies Moldavia and Wallachia, albeit only temporarily, that disturbs the balance of power. France occupies Rome and stays there several years in peacetime:² that is nothing; but Russia only thinks of occupying Constantinople, and the peace of Europe is threatened. The English declare war on the Chinese,³ who have, it seems, offended them: no one has a right to intervene; but Russia is obliged to ask Europe for permission if it quarrels with its neighbour. England threatens Greece to support the false claims of a miserable Jew and burns its fleet:⁴ that is a lawful action; but Russia demands a treaty to protect millions of Christians, and that is deemed to strengthen its position in the East at the expense of the balance of powers. We can expect nothing from the West but blind hatred and malice, which does not understand and does not want to understand (*comment in the margin by Nicholas I*: “This is the whole point”).

Having stirred the Tsar’s own grievances against Europe, Pogodin encouraged him to act alone, according to his conscience before God, to defend the Orthodox and promote Russia’s interests in the Balkans. Nicholas expressed his approval:

Who are our allies in Europe (comment by Nicholas: “No one, and we don’t need them, if we put our trust in God, unconditionally and willingly.”) Our

2 A reference to the expeditionary force of General Oudinot in 1849-50 which attacked the anti-papal Roman Republic and brought back Pius IX to Rome. The French troops remained in Rome to protect the Pope until 1870.

3 In the Opium Wars of 1839-42.

4 A reference to the Don Pacifico affair.

only true allies in Europe are the Slavs, our brothers in blood, language, history, and faith, and there are ten million of them in Turkey and millions in Austria... The Turkish Slavs could provide us with over 200,000 troops—and what troops!—All this without counting the Croatians, Dalmatians, Slovenians, etc. (comment by Nicholas: “An exaggeration: reduce to one-tenth and it is true.”) [...] By declaring war on us, the Turks have destroyed all the old treaties defining our relations, so we can now demand the liberation of the Slavs, and bring this about by war, as they themselves have chosen war (*comment in the margin by Nicholas*: “That is right.”)

If we do not liberate the Slavs and bring them under our protection, then our enemies, the English and the French [...] will do so instead. In Serbia, Bulgaria and Bosnia, they are already everywhere among the Slavs, featuring their Western parties. If they succeed, where will we be then? (*comment in the margin by Nicholas*: “Absolutely right.”)

Yes! If we fail to use this favorable opportunity, if we sacrifice the Slavs and betray their hopes, or leave their fate to be decided by other powers, then we will have ranged against us not only one lunatic Poland but ten of them (which our enemies desire and are working to arrange) [...] (*comment in the margin by Nicholas*: “That is right.”)

At the heart of this deliberation was the conviction that if Russia did not step in to defend its interests in the Balkans, the European powers would do so instead; hence, a clash of interests, influence and values between the West and Russia was unavoidable.

For the European powers the spread of Western power was synonymous with liberty and liberal values, free trade, good administrative practice, religious toleration, and so on. Western Russophobia was central to this push-back against Russian expansionist ambitions. The rapid territorial expansion of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century and the demonstration of its military might against Napoleon had left a deep impression on the European mind. There was a frenzy of alarmist publications—pamphlets, travelogues and political treatises—about “the Russian menace” to the continent. These fears had as much to do with the imagination of an Asiatic “other” threatening the liberties and civilization of Europe as they had to do with any real and present threat. The boundaries of Europe were being drawn to exclude the “other” that was Russia, which emerged from these writings as a savage power, aggressive and expansionist by nature, hostile to the principles of liberty which culturally defined the Europeans. The Tsar’s suppression of the Polish and Hungarian revolutions, in 1830-31 and 1848-49 respectively, reinforced this position of drawing divisions between European freedom and Russian tyranny, eventually cementing

the anti-Russian European alliance (Britain, France, Piedmont-Sardinia) during the Crimean War.

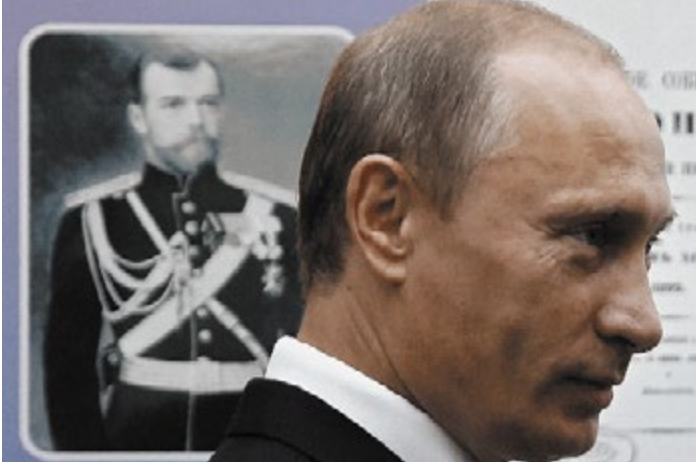
But from the Tsar's point of view the European powers were behaving hypocritically: their promotion of liberty was based on spreading free trade, which was in their economic interests. Their defence of Turkey was a strategy to restrain Russia, whose growth was a threat to their own imperial ambitions in the area, not least the route to India.

Defeat in the Crimean War left the Russians with a profound resentment towards the West. The peace treaty imposed by the victorious European powers was a humiliation for Russia, which was forced to destroy its Black Sea Fleet. No compulsory disarmament had ever been imposed on a Great Power previously. Not even France had been disarmed after the Napoleonic Wars. The way Russia had been treated was unprecedented for the Concert of Europe, which was supposed to be based on the principle that no Great Power should be humbled by others. However, the allies did not really believe that they were dealing with a European power, but regarded Russia as a semi-Asiatic state. During the negotiations at the Paris Conference, Count Walewski, the French Foreign Minister, had asked the British delegates whether it would not be overly humiliating for the Russians that the Western powers installed consuls in their Black Sea ports to police the demobilization. Lord Cowley, the British Ambassador in Paris, insisted that it would not be the case, pointing out that a similar condition had been imposed on China by the Treaty of Nanking after the First Opium War.

3

Defeated by the West, Russia turned towards Asia following her imperial plans after the Crimean War. Tsar Alexander II (1855-81) was increasingly persuaded that Russia's destiny lay as the major European power in Asia and that only Britain stood in its way. The climate of mutual suspicion between Russia and Britain after the Crimean War deeply influenced Russia to the extent of defining its policies in the Great Game and its imperial rivalry with Britain for supremacy in Central Asia in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

As a Christian civilization on the Eurasian steppe, Russia could face west or east. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, it had looked at Europe from the vantage point of its most eastern state. Along with



Vladimir Putin in front of an image of Tzar Nicolas II.

southern Spain, it could be said to form part of Europe's private East World—that “other” by which Europe was defined. However, if it faced the East, Russia would become the most western state in Asia, the carrier of a Christian-European civilization across eleven time zones of the globe.

The Russian conquest of Central Asia from the 1860s encouraged the idea that Russia's destiny was not in Europe, as had so long been supposed, but rather in the East. In 1881, Dostoevsky wrote:

Russia is not only in Europe but in Asia as well. We must cast aside our servile fear that Europe will call us Asiatic barbarians and say that we are more Asian than European. This mistaken view of ourselves as exclusively Europeans and not Asians (and we have never ceased to be the latter) has cost us very dearly over these two centuries, and we have paid for it by the loss of our spiritual independence. It is hard for us to turn away from our window on Europe; but it is a matter of our destiny... When we turn to Asia, with our new view of her, something of the same sort may happen to us as happened to Europe when America was discovered. For, in truth, Asia for us is that same America which we still have not discovered. With our push towards Asia we will have a renewed upsurge of spirit and strength... In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, while in Asia we shall be the masters. In Europe we were Tatars, while in Asia we can be Europeans.

This quotation is a good illustration of the Russians' tendency to define their relations with the East in reaction to their self-esteem and

status in the West. Dostoevsky was not arguing that Russia is an Asiatic culture; only that the Europeans thought of it as so. And likewise, his argument that Russia should embrace the East did not mean that it should seek to be an Asiatic force: on the contrary, that only in Asia could it find new energy to reassert its Europeanness. The root of Dostoevsky's turning to the East was the bitter resentment which he, like many Russians, felt at the West's betrayal of Russia's Christian cause in the Crimean War.

RESTORING SOVIET HISTORY IN RUSSIA WAS AN IMPORTANT PART OF PUTIN'S NATIONALIST AGENDA

A resentful contempt for Western values was a common Russian response to the feeling of rejection by the West. During the nineteenth century, the “Scythian temperament”—barbarian and rude, iconoclastic and extreme, lacking the restraint and moderation of the “cultivated European citizen”—entered the cultural lexicon as a type of “Asiatic” Russianness that insisted on its right to be “uncivilized”. This was the sense of Pushkin's lines:

Now temperance is not appropriate
I want to drink like a savage Scythian.

And it was the sense in which Herzen wrote to French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in 1849:

But do you know, Monsieur, that you have signed a contract [with Herzen to co-finance a newspaper] with a barbarian, and a barbarian who is all the more incorrigible for being one not only by birth but by conviction? [...] A true Scythian, I watch with pleasure as this old world destroys itself and I don't have the slightest pity for it.

The “Scythian poets”—as that loose group of writers that included Alexander Blok (1880-1921) and Andrei Bely (1880-1934) called themselves—embraced this savage spirit in defiance of the West. Yet at the same time their poetry was immersed in the European avant-garde. They took their name from the ancient Scyths, the nomadic Iranian-speaking tribes that had left Central Asia in the eighth century BC and had ruled the steppes around the Black and Caspian seas for the following 500 years. Nineteenth-century Russian intellectuals came to

see the Scyths as a sort of mythical ancestor race of the eastern Slavs. In the final decades of the century, archaeologists led excavations of the Scythian *kurgans*, the burial mounds which are scattered throughout southern Russia, the south-eastern steppe, Central Asia and Siberia, in an effort to establish a cultural link between the Scyths and the ancient Slavs.

This prehistoric realm fascinated the Scythian poets. In their imaginations the Scyths were a symbol of the wild rebellious nature of primeval Russian man. They rejoiced in the elemental spirit (*stikhiia*) of savage peasant Russia, and convinced themselves that the coming revolution, which everybody sensed in the wake of that of 1905 would sweep away the dead weight of European civilization and establish a new culture where man and nature, art and life, were one. Blok's famous poem *The Scythians* (1918) was a programmatic statement of this Asiatic posturing towards the West:

You are millions, we are multitudes
 And multitudes and multitudes.
 Come fight! Yes, we are Scythians,
 Yes, Asiatics, a slant-eyed greedy tribe.

It was not so much an ideological rejection of the West as a threatening embrace, an appeal to Europe to join the revolution of the "savage hordes" and renew itself through a cultural synthesis of East and West: otherwise it ran the risk of being swamped by the "multitudes". For centuries, argued Blok, Russia had protected a thankless Europe from the Asiatic tribes:

Like slaves, obeying and abhorred,
 We were the shield between the breeds
 Of Europe and the raging Mongol horde.

But now the time had come for the "old world" of Europe to "halt before the Sphinx":

Yes, Russia is a Sphinx. Exulting, grieving,
 And sweating blood, she cannot sate
 Her eyes that gaze and gaze and gaze
 At you with stone-lipped love and hate.

Russia still had what Europe had long lost—"a love that burns like fire"—a violence that renews by laying waste. By joining the Russian

Revolution, the West would experience a spiritual renaissance through peaceful reconciliation with the East.

Come to us from the horrors of war,
 Come to our peaceful arms and rest.
 Comrades, before it is too late,
 Sheathe the old sword, may brotherhood be blest.

But if the West refused to embrace this “Russian spirit”, Russia would unleash the Asiatic hordes against it:

Know that we will no longer be your shield
 But, careless of the battle cries,
 We shall look on as the battle rages
 Aloof, with indurate and narrow eyes
 We shall not move when the savage Hun
 Despoils the corpse and leaves it bare,
 Burns towns, herds the cattle in the church,
 And the smell of white flesh roasting fills the air.

4

In March 1918, with German planes bombing Petrograd, as St. Petersburg had been renamed, the Bolsheviks removed the Soviet capital to Moscow. The move symbolized the growing separation of the Soviet Republic from Europe. By the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed that month to end the war with the Central Powers, Russia lost most of its territories in Europe—Poland, Finland, the Baltic states, and Ukraine. As a European power, Russia was reduced to a status on a par with seventeenth-century Muscovy.

In the early years of Soviet power the Bolsheviks had hopes of their revolution spreading to the rest of the European continent. As Lenin saw it, socialism was unsustainable in a backward peasant country such as Russia without the revolution spreading to the more advanced industrial states. Germany was the focus of their highest hopes. It was the home of the Marxist movement and had the most advanced labour movement in Europe. The November 1918 Revolution was greeted with joy by the Bolsheviks. Its workers’ and soldiers’ councils seemed to suggest that Germany was moving on the Soviet path. But there was no German “October”. The German socialists put their weight behind a democratic republic by entering government and crushing Communist uprising in January 1919. No other European state came even close to a Moscow-aligned revolution: the post-war social and economic crises

that radicalized workers began to ease, and by 1921 it had become clear that for the immediate future, until Europe was shaken by another war or crisis, Soviet Russia would have to survive on its own (“socialism in one country”).

For the next seventy years Soviet Russia was isolated from the West, politically and culturally. There were brief spells when cultural channels opened up—during the Second World War, for example, when Western books and films were sent by the Allies and made available to the Soviet people; or during the Khrushchev Thaw of the late 1950s and early 1960s when cultural exchanges between the Soviet Union and the West took place. With the Soviet take-over of Eastern Europe after 1945, Soviet citizens could also travel to the Eastern Bloc countries, from which they received some elements of European culture in a form acceptable to the Communist authorities. But otherwise, in general terms, they were cut off from the universalism of the European tradition to which Petrine Russia (1703-1917) was attached.

**THE RUSSIANS HAD FREELY INTERMINGLED
WITH THE FINNO-UGRIC TRIBES, THE MONGOLIANS
AND OTHER NOMAD PEOPLES FROM THE STEPPE**

Among the scattered émigrés who fled Soviet Russia after 1917 was a group of intellectuals known as the Eurasianists. Eurasianism was a dominant intellectual trend in all the émigré communities. Many of the best-known Russian exiles, including the philologist Prince N. S. Trubetskoi (1890-1938), the religious thinker Father George Florovsky (1893-1979), the historian George Vernadsky (1887-1973) and the linguistic theorist Roman Jakobson (1896-1982), were members of the group. Eurasianism was essentially a phenomenon of the emigration insofar as it was rooted in the sense of Russia’s betrayal by the West in 1917-21. Its largely aristocratic followers reproached the Western powers for their failure to defeat the Bolsheviks in the Revolution and civil war, which had ended with the collapse of Russia as a European power and their own expulsion from their native land. Disappointed by the West, but not yet hopeless about a possible future for themselves in Russia, they recast their homeland as a unique, “Turanian” culture on the Asiatic steppe.

The founding manifesto of the movement was *Exodus to the East*, a collection of ten essays published in Sofia in 1921, in which the Eurasianists foresaw the West’s destruction and the rise of a new civilization led

by Russia or Eurasia. As argued Trubetskoi, the author of the most important essays in the collection, Russia was at root a steppeland, Asian culture. Byzantine and European influences, which had shaped the Russian state and its high culture, barely penetrated the lower strata of Russia's folk culture, which had developed more through contact with the East. For centuries, the Russians had freely intermingled with the Finno-Ugric tribes, the Mongolians and other nomad peoples from the steppe. They had assimilated elements of their languages, their music, customs and religion, so that these Asiatic cultures had become absorbed in Russia's own historical evolution.

Such folklore had little in the way of ethnographic evidence to be supported. They were but polemic and resentful posturing against the West. In this respect, they came from the same stable as that notion first advanced by Dostoevsky that the empire's destiny was in Asia (where the Russians could be Europeans) rather than in Europe (where they were "hangers-on"). Yet because of their emotive power, Eurasianist ideas had a strong cultural impact on the Russian emigration of the 1920s and 1930s, when those who mourned the disappearance of their country from the European map could find new hope for it on a Eurasian one, and these same ideas have been revived in recent years, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, when Russia's place in Europe has been far from clear.

5

With the collapse of the Soviet regime, there were hopes that Russia would rejoin the family of European states, where it had belonged before 1917. Western governments and their advisers believed that Russia—perhaps more so than the Eastern European states that had emerged from the Soviet bloc—would become "like us": a capitalist democracy with liberal European values and attitudes. That belief was mistaken, for historical and cultural reasons which should by now be clear; any hopes were dashed by what took place in Russia after 1991.

For millions of Russians, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a catastrophe. In a few months they lost everything: an economic system that had given them security and social guarantees; an empire with a superpower status; an ideology; and a national identity shaped by the version of Soviet history they had learned in school. The "capitalist system" that was introduced—with hurried privatizations at a time of hyperinflation—resulted in the theft of state assets by corrupt oli-

garchs. The boom in criminality did not help the capitalist cause. All this fuelled a profound resentment of the West, which was blamed for this new system. Beyond the small intelligentsia, confined to Moscow and St. Petersburg, the majority of Russians, in provincial Russia did not share the liberal values of democracy (freedom of expression, religious toleration, equality for women, LGBT rights, etc.), all of which seemed foreign to the Soviet and older Russian ways by which they had been brought up. Russians felt these values were imposed on them by the “victorious” West in the Cold War.

Putin expressed their hurt pride and resentment of the West. In the first term of his Presidency, from 2000 to 2004, he had seemed to signal an interest in closer ties to Europe, if only to create a counterweight to American influence. He continued Boris Yeltsin’s rhetoric of a “Greater Europe”, a community of European states, including Russia in some form, which could act as a “strong and truly independent centre of world politics” (i.e. independent of the U.S.), albeit without Yeltsin’s stress on liberal democratic principles. But two things altered Putin’s stance on Europe during 2004. First, NATO expansion into Eastern Europe and the Baltic states aggrieved the Kremlin, which saw this as a betrayal of NATO promises on the dissolution of the Warsaw pact not to move into the former Soviet sphere of influence. Secondly, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine fuelled the insecurities of the Putin government, which saw the democratic movement as a Western (U.S.-led) offensive against Russia’s influence in its near abroad (the Commonwealth of Independent States). Ukraine was, and still remains, a crucial border country in Russia’s national identity and relations with Europe. Kiev was the birthplace of Russia’s Christian civilization. As Putin often says, many Russians regard the Ukrainians as the same people, or family of peoples, as themselves.

Fearful of a similar democratic movement spreading from Ukraine into Russia, Putin buttressed his authoritarian power with a nationalist base of popular support built on anti-Western rhetoric. The U.S. and the E.U. were fostering democratic revolutions in countries of the former Soviet Union to destroy Russia—which, in brief was, and still is, his view. The regime strengthened its relations with the Church. It promoted the ideas of Eurasianist philosophers such as Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954), a White émigré, whose remains, on Putin's orders, were returned from Switzerland to Russia in 2009. Eurasianist ideas began to be voiced by Kremlin ideologists. Putin backed the idea (originally proposed by the

President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev) of creating a Eurasian Economic Union, and in 2011 the presidents of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia agreed to set a target of establishing one by 2015. Putin was determined to include Ukraine in this Eurasian Union, but the Ukrainians in Maidan were equally determined to join Europe.

Restoring Soviet history in Russia was an important part of Putin's nationalist agenda.

Whilst acknowledging the “mistakes” of the Stalin era, his euphemism for the terror in which countless millions of people died or languished in the Gulag, Putin insisted that there was no need for the Russians to dwell on this aspect of their recent past, let alone to listen to the moralizing lectures of foreigners about how bad their history was. They could take pride in the achievements of the Soviet period—the industrialization of the country, the defeat of Nazi Germany and Soviet science and technology—which had given meaning to their lives and to the sacrifices they had made. For millions of Russians, Putin was restoring national pride.

The constant refrain in his speeches is the need for Russia to be given more respect, to be treated as an equal by the West. He has frequently complained about the hypocrisy and double standards of the West, which invades Iraq in the name of freedom but imposes sanctions on Russia when it defends what it describes as its legitimate interests in the Crimea. The parallels with the resentment of Nicholas I about double standards on the eve of the “first” Crimean War are striking here. Just as Nicholas I regarded the defence of Russia's co-religionists in the Balkans as his Christian duty, as the Tsar of All the Russias, so Putin has equated the defence of Russian speakers in Crimea (and thus in east Ukraine) with the defence of Russia's national interests. Both men share a mystical conception of Russia as an empire that is not defined by territorial boundaries.

Putin admires Nicholas I for standing up against all of Europe in the defence of Russia's interests. Today, on his orders, a portrait of the Tsar hangs in the antechamber of the presidential office in the Kremlin.

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