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On June 17, 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin staged a special ceremony on the St. Petersburg waterfront to mark the anniversary of three flags: the flag of the Russian Federation, otherwise known as Peter the Great's tricolor, formally unfurled in 1693; the imperial Russian flag, introduced by Tsar Alexander II in 1858; and the Red Banner, the Soviet Union's hammer and sickle, adopted by the Soviet state 100 years ago and later used by Joseph Stalin. Putin watched the event from a boat as the National Philharmonic and the St. Petersburg State Choir performed the national anthem, which, thanks to a law Putin enacted in 2000, has the same melody as its Stalin-era counterpart. The portentous rite unfolded in front of the Lakhta Center tower, the country's tallest building, as well as the $1.7 billion headquarters of Gazprom, the state-run gas company that has become another crucial symbol of Putin's Russia.

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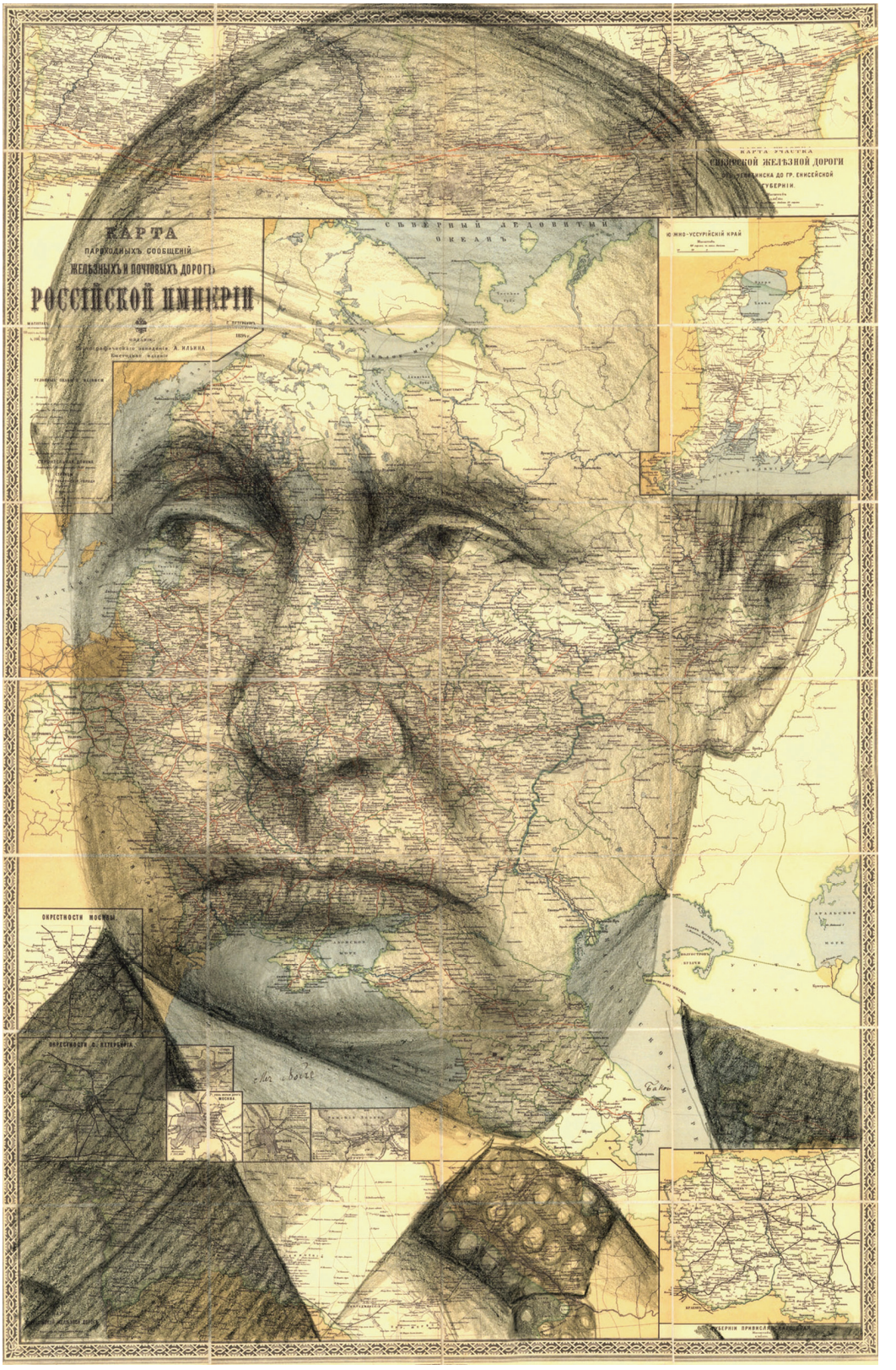

DAVID RUMSEY MAP COLLECTION

Illustration by Daniel Baxter

In some respects, the choice of flags was not surprising. Since the launch of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine in February 2022, Stalinist nationalist imperialism has become the de facto ideology of the Putin regime. Tsar Peter I, who styled himself the first emperor of all Russia after his victory in the Great Northern War in 1721, and Alexander II, who was emperor of Russia, king of Poland, and grand duke of Finland, are closely associated with Russia's imperial aspirations. And Putin has emphasized that the Soviet Union—especially in its triumph over Nazi Germany in World War II, when Stalin appealed to nationalism rather than Marxism to consolidate support and rally the population—carried out Russia's imperial destiny under a different name. Of course, Putin has not openly referred to Stalin or declared himself Stalin's heir. But for more than a decade, the Kremlin has presented the Stalinist period as an era of greatness in which imperial traditions were respected and national values cherished. And more recently, in his language of power and his intolerance of dissent, Putin has come to resemble Stalin in his final phase in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Yet the two tsars and Stalin also viewed empire as a means to what they understood to be a modern state. In the early eighteenth century, Peter borrowed Western innovations, including advances in shipbuilding and other technologies, and Western ideas about government management and even styles of dress. A century later, Alexander abolished serfdom and carried out progressive judicial reforms influenced by European examples. As for Stalin, in the 1930s he pushed for Western-style industrialization and catch-up development even as he transformed Marxism, a modern European ideology, into Soviet Marxism-Leninism at the cost of countless human lives. By contrast, Putin's opening to the West was short-lived, more or less ending in 2003, less than four years after he came to office, when he took full control of parliament and the authorities arrested Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the billionaire investor and one of the symbols of a free market and independent thinking in Russia, on trumped-up charges.

Now, Putin seeks something different from any of these predecessors: an empire without modernization. To fully apprehend Russia's continuing intervention in Ukraine and how it has been presented to the Russian people, it is necessary to recognize this impulse. Putin resurrected the Russian imperial idea with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and expanded it with the launch of the "special operation"

eight years later. Buttressed by the abstract and archaic teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church, he has also embraced an older strain of nationalist ideology in which the decadent West is the enemy and Russia has a messianic destiny to oppose its harmful influence. If Peter I, as Pushkin once said, cut a window to Europe, 300 years later, the man who sits in the Kremlin is boarding up that window.

Putin's dramatic reorientation of the Russian state is not unprecedented. At least since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Russia has repeatedly swung toward and away from the West, as well as between modern Western-style conceptions of state power and Russia's place in the world, and nationalist, reactionary ones. Much the same has happened with the state's attitudes toward Stalinism. Three times in the last 70 years—under Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s and 1960s, under Premier Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s, and under Russian President Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s—Soviet and Russian leaders have sought to rid the country of Stalinist ideas and Stalinist discourse, only to have those precepts return, even if just tacitly. For much of the past century, Russia's political ideas have been shaped by the struggle between liberal and totalitarian tendencies, or what could be called de-Stalinization and re-Stalinization.

What is particularly striking about Putin's Russia, however, is the extent to which it has combined re-Stalinization with antimodern imperialism. In reviving some of the most extreme versions of what in the nineteenth century was called "the Russian Idea"—a concept originally meant to convey the country's separateness and exalted moral stature but that in practice came to stand for raw militarized expansionism—Putin has drawn on a pernicious ideological tradition to shape both the campaign in Ukraine and his long-term vision of power. Although Putinism may be finite, its advanced state of development and its deep roots in anti-Western thought suggest that it may take more than the outcome of war for Putin's hold over Russian society to break.

HOLY RUSSIAN EMPIRE

For much of Russian history, the twin pillars of the Russian state were the Russian Orthodox Church and the military. In ancient times, the daily life of Russians was organized and regimented by church bells. Their sounds were later complemented by those of Russia's cannons on the battlefields of early modern Europe. If the bell embodied the controlling order of the state, the cannon backed that order by

physical force—and sometimes superseded it. In his 1966 study of Russian culture, *The Icon and the Axe*, the American historian James H. Billington points out that in the late seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries, church bells in provincial Russian towns and monasteries were melted down to make cannons for the Russian army. In reviving and glorifying the archconservative values of the Russian Orthodox Church and steadily remilitarizing the country, Putin has forged his own bell and cannon doctrine.

As Russia emerged as a major empire in the eighteenth century, these symbols of power were complemented by broader visions of the Russian state. At first, the contradictions of Russia's swing toward Europe and the Enlightenment were ignored: Russian Empress Catherine II could correspond with Voltaire even as she continued to enslave the peasants. After its victory over Napoleon in 1812, Russia gained a new sense of patriotism and unity, as well as a place in the European order, despite its retrograde autocracy. The failed Decembrist revolt of 1825—led by aristocratic Russian officers who refused allegiance to the new tsar, Nicholas I, and sought to abolish autocratic rule—exposed the need for European-style modernization. But during his reign, the conservative Nicholas (1825–55) opted for reaction rather than reform. It was in this era that Russian thinkers began to formulate a comprehensive state ideology.

In 1832, the education minister, Count Sergey Uvarov, introduced a doctrine he called "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality." In some respects, it bore the imprint of Europe. Like other Russian aristocrats, Uvarov thought and wrote in French; he also spoke German and kept up a correspondence with Goethe. But Uvarov believed that Western ideas posed a threat to Russia, and he sought to keep in check any modernizing impulses that could undermine the foundations of tsarist power, or what he called autocracy. In his model, orthodoxy, or the Russian Orthodox Church, served as a means of safeguarding Russia's separate identity, whereas nationality provided the link between the tsar and the people. Even before he had given the doctrine its final formulation, he had made clear his expansionist aims. In a letter to Nicholas in 1832, Uvarov wrote that "the energy of autocratic power is a necessary condition for the existence of the Empire."

In this same period, meanwhile, a second tendency in Russian thinking about the state emerged with the birth of the Slavophile movement. Beginning in the 1840s, the debate between "Westernizers" and

"Slavophiles" became a central theme in the political conceptualization of Russia. The Westernizers viewed the tsarist state as backward and argued that Russia could only compete with the great powers of the West through European-style modernization and constitutionalism. The Slavophiles were also dissatisfied with the tsar's absolute power but believed that Russia, founded on its own unique values, stood apart from the West and was morally superior to it. But that romantic vision gradually evolved into something else. Unlike the early Slavophiles, who opposed despotism, their successors in the second half of the nineteenth century defended it, arguing that any attempts to limit autocracy would weaken or undermine Russia's place in the world.

Russian imperialists saw Moscow as the successor to Rome.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, these ideas were pushed in a new direction with the work of the Russian philosopher and ideologue Nikolai Danilevsky. In his influential *Russia and Europe* (1869), Danilevsky argued that Russia and the Slavic countries belonged to a special cultural-historical category or type, a widely debated theory that marked the beginning of the pan-Slavic movement. Among other things, he envisioned a union of all Slavic nations that would be ruled from Constantinople, or what the Russians called Tsargrad—emperor city. Danilevsky was also deeply suspicious of the West and its modernizing ideas. "Europe is not only something alien to us, but even hostile," he wrote. These theories have long found echoes in Putin's own rhetoric about Russia as a "state-civilization" defined in opposition to its European counterparts. In the October 2022 meeting of the Valdai Club, the annual forum that Russia has hosted since 2004 that has in the past included prominent foreign analysts and scholars, Putin invoked Danilevsky directly to explain why the West must be resisted.

In 1856, the novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky added his own vision of Russia's special destiny with his concept of the Russian Idea. Although a great connoisseur of European culture, Dostoyevsky, like other Slavophiles, believed that the West was declining and that an ascendant Russia would take its place. He described this conceit in a letter to the poet Apollon Maykov in which he admired the poet's allusion to Russia's ability "to complete what the West began." As Dostoyevsky saw it, the state should serve as the guardian of the country's special path and revive the system of universal Christian morality that had

preceded the Enlightenment—values that reigned before Europeans became obsessed with ideas of progress, freedom, and individual rights. But this vision gradually took on more radical forms. During the World War I era, a wave of patriotic philosophers, liberal and conservative, embraced the idea of a purifying war through which the nation could rejuvenate itself, unify its people, and push back against the decadent modernity that had overrun Europe. Intertwined with pan-Slavism and the dream of a Slavic empire, these notions fed a new nationalist imperialism.

Yet another strand of nineteenth-century state ideology that would come to cast a long shadow on the Russian state is the "Third Rome" thesis. In the 1860s, Russian imperial thinkers began to promote the old sixteenth-century idea that Moscow was the successor of Rome and Constantinople as the center of world Christianity, the legitimate heir to the Byzantine Empire, and the last Christian kingdom, and thus bore a messianic destiny. Indeed, to many on Russia's far right, the state has always had a mission to defend and spread its traditional values and spirituality in the world. In a speech in April, Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church and a crucial mouthpiece for the Kremlin, traced this messianic vocation back to Russia's defeat of the Teutonic knights in 1242 and its victory over the Mongols in 1380: "Wasn't this what the holy prince Alexander Nevsky fought for? Wasn't this why our great predecessors fought on the Kulikovo Field?"

PUTIN VS. SATAN

Paradoxically, little of this reactionary tradition held much sway when Putin first came to power 23 years ago. At the time, post-Soviet Moscow was awash in Western ideas. Under Gorbachev in the 1980s, the Soviet government had progressively abandoned social controls and opened up to liberal thinking. Then, after the Soviet Union's dissolution, the economist and acting Russian prime minister Yegor Gaidar, with the backing of Russian President Boris Yeltsin, undertook dramatic reforms that transformed the shell of a 70-year-old Marxist empire into a market economy with modern Western-style political institutions. Although this wholesale restructuring was controversial, it helped usher in a new concept of Russia: one of Gaidar's principles was that it was impossible to build a liberal economy on the scale of an empire and that for the reforms to succeed, the country would have to redefine itself as a nation-state.

In his early years, Putin did not oppose continued modernization based on market principles. But from the outset, he has publicly regretted the collapse of the Soviet empire and sought new ways to regain control of Russian society. He took advantage of the country's economic liberalization and its lucrative natural resources, which allowed him to lavishly reward loyalists and strengthen the state's grip on the political and economic system. When he returned to the presidency in 2012 after Dmitry Medvedev's one-term administration, he began to dismantle the liberal reforms that he and Medvedev had earlier supported. By that point, he was already openly embracing authoritarianism and repression and had begun using conservative ideology to justify the shift. He was also increasingly irritated by the West—he claimed the United States and its allies did not treat Russia as an equal partner or consider its interests and were fomenting internal opposition and turning civil society organizations against the government—and he felt less need to maintain the appearance of political pluralism and free speech. As the Kremlin now saw it, Russia's liberal economists served solely to maintain macroeconomic stability and could be reduced to mere technocrats.

Rather than driving Putin's changing conception of power or the evolution of the Russian political system, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 was the result of those developments. Even as Russia continued to supply much of Europe's gas and oil and to draw on Western investments and technologies, Putin gave voice to an older, more spiritual idea of the state as empire. Already, in 2013 he had begun to portray the Russian Orthodox Church as the bedrock of a Russia that included the historic lands lost in 1991. "At the heart of the Russian nation and the Russian centralized state," he said, "are the common spiritual values that unite the entire large European territory, on which today Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus are located. This is our common spiritual and moral space."

By 2022, Putin and many around him were actively adopting the most extreme forms of Russian nationalist-imperialist thought. A common refrain in Putin's circle is that the West is in moral and spiritual decline and will be replaced by a rising Russia. Since the "special operation" in Ukraine began, the Kremlin has used these claims to justify the disruption of ties with Europe and the United States and an ever more sweeping repression of Russian civil society, including attacks on Western-oriented human rights organizations,

the promulgation of laws targeting gay and transgender people, and broad new restrictions on organizations and individuals identified as "foreign agents." Putin's ideologues now suggest that Russia can only uphold its status as the defender of civilization by combining a reinvigorated empire with the conservative precepts of the church. "We are fighting a war to have peace," Alexander Dugin, the ultra-nationalist thinker and self-styled Kremlin philosopher, said in June.

Today, Kyiv has taken the place of Constantinople/Tsargrad in right-wing discourse, with Putin effectively assigning the role of lost Byzantium to Ukraine. According to Kremlin propaganda, Ukraine is slipping into the grip of a dangerous and "satanic" West that has been encroaching on the historical lands of Russia and the canonical territory of the church. In a post on Telegram, a messaging service popular among Russians, in November 2022, Medvedev cast Russia's fighting in Ukraine as a holy war against Satan, warning that Moscow would "send all our enemies to fiery Gehenna."

THE EMPEROR UNCLOTHED

Part of what makes the Putin regime so threatening is the way it has simplified traditional ideas to the extreme. As the historian Andrei Zorin has observed, in Count Uvarov's era in the early nineteenth century, "the past was called upon to replace a dangerous and uncertain future for the empire," In Uvarov's view, Russian autocracy and the Orthodox Church were "the last alternative to Europeanization." By the early twentieth century, however, nationalist ideologues were already using the concept of Russian exceptionalism to defend an unvarnished militarism. "Russia's national idea . . . has become incredibly crude," the Russian philosopher Georgy Fedotov, who had left Soviet Russia for France, wrote in 1929. "Epigones of Slavophilia . . . have been hypnotized by naked force, which made them miss the moral idea."

At the time Fedotov wrote these words, the Soviet state was already putting them into practice. Stalin called 1929 "the year of the great turning point"—that is, the beginning of forced industrialization, which required forced labor and forced collectivization and drained the peasantry of all its resources. A year later, the Soviet authorities established the gulag, and a period of mass repression soon followed. But Fedotov's insight may have even greater relevance today.

As the struggle in Ukraine continues, the Kremlin's obsession with naked force has become more and more apparent. In Putin's version,

the Russian Idea amounts to little more than territorial expansion and the repression of domestic dissent in defense of a sacralized state. The regime's embrace of this concept in its most primitive form has coincided with a shift from soft authoritarianism into what is now closer to a hybrid totalitarianism modeled on Stalinist precepts. In addition to the complete suppression of civil society and independent media and the brutal repression of any form of dissent, the state now makes new political demands of Russians themselves. In many situations, it is no longer acceptable for people to just passively acquiesce to the regime, as they could in past years; they must express their support loudly. Russian schools now include mandatory "patriotism" lessons, textbooks dictate the correct interpretation of Putin's actions, and citizens are sometimes required to participate in pro-Putin rallies. By such means, Putin is imposing a totalitarian regime that seeks to possess sole control of how events are explained to the country—and what Russians are supposed to think about them.

The Kremlin is waging a war against memory.

Perhaps most revealing is the effort to suppress knowledge of the political persecutions of the Soviet era. In late 2021, just before the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government shut down Memorial, an organization devoted to preserving the memory of Stalin-era crimes; after all, the Putin regime no longer regards Stalin's purges as a negative event. But the closure of Memorial is only one example of a much broader erasure. Already in 2020, authorities in the city of Tver removed a memorial plaque from the site of a mass shooting of Polish prisoners of war in World War II, part of the notorious mass killings by agents of the NKVD, Stalin's secret police and the predecessor to the KGB, in the spring of 1940 known as the Katyn massacre. Since then, the Russian media and parliament have sought to rewrite the history of Katyn, rehashing false Soviet narratives that blame the Nazis.

This campaign has accelerated over the past year. In April, residents in Russia's Perm region discovered that a monument commemorating Poles and Lithuanians who had been deported there from Lithuania in 1945 had been demolished. A few weeks later, a monument and a cross marking the mass graves of Lithuanians shot by the NKVD near the eastern city of Irkutsk in the 1930s were destroyed. And in July,

a Polish memorial at Levashovo Memorial Cemetery in St. Petersburg—a cemetery that was established in 1990 to commemorate the victims of Stalin's political repressions—was removed. Local authorities are likely the instigators of these actions: amid the conflict in Ukraine, they have sensed the change in Russia's ideological climate. Putin is waging a war against memory. As his Kremlin sees it, victims of past political persecution were opponents of the Russian state, just as their present-day counterparts—opponents of Putin—are now. To affirm a just cause for Putin's reprisals, the regime needs to repress the record of Stalin's.

Stalin's dictatorship, based on nationalism, imperialism, naked force, and what became a growing anti-Westernism, led to millions of deaths in the gulag and set back the country's development by decades while causing multitudes to live in constant fear of arrest. Putin's autocracy, by adding a messianic, anti-Western worldview to these currents, has now plunged into a senseless quagmire in Ukraine, resulting in vast destruction, the reversal of Russia's economic development, and the imposition of an antimodern consciousness on the elite and the general population. The return of the Russian Idea in today's Kremlin is thus the product of two centuries of ideological corruption—a process that has been spurred by recurring fears of the West.

As George Kennan observed in his "Long Telegram" from Moscow to the U.S. secretary of state in 1946, Russian rulers "have always feared foreign penetration, feared direct contact between Western world and their own, feared what would happen if Russians learned truth about world without or if foreigners learned truth about world within." As a consequence, he wrote, "they have learned to seek security only in patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power, never in compacts and compromises with it." In Putin's Russia, this kind of thinking has led to the "special operation" in Ukraine—a cynical perversion of the idea of "defending the fatherland" from the West at a time when no one has attacked the fatherland. Citizens are being asked to risk their lives for this idea, and Russian boys have been turned into cannon fodder.

THE PLOT AGAINST RUSSIA

In entering a world of ideological necessity, the Kremlin has unleashed forces it cannot always contain. One surprising example is Yevgeny Prigozhin, a convicted thief and fraudster who reinvented himself as

a serial entrepreneur, eventually running a Kremlin-favored catering business and, later, the Kremlin-backed Wagner mercenary outfit. His rebellion in June 2023 should not be misunderstood as a direct challenge to Putin's system. Prigozhin, as much as any of the other characters around the president, is a product of that system and an embodiment of the concept of naked force. If he had any disagreements with Putin, they were—as the dissident and writer Andrei Sinyavsky, parodying his own differences with the Soviet regime, once put it—"stylistic."

At the same time, however, Prigozhin is a product of Putin-style state capitalism, in which the Kremlin distributes tax revenues to various outsourcers. This is what Putin's Russia has been reduced to: a feudal system in which the supreme leader hands out pieces of property to his vassals to manage or delegates functions to them at his subjects' expense. As one of these outsourcers, Prigozhin was paid more than $1 billion in state—that is, taxpayer—money to create a private army that was not fully controlled by the state. He was allowed to briefly cause chaos and in the end was not punished for his antics. Such an anomalous situation can be explained only by the extreme personalist nature of Putin's autocracy and the need to defend the homeland from Western attacks and promote Russia's military influence abroad, as for example in Africa. Prigozhin was valuable because he was a supplier of expendable human material. In this case, he felt he might be losing his government contract and decided to show his capabilities. His goal was not to displace Putin but to be recognized as an equal partner of the president. But he made a false start and overplayed his hand. In his eruption, Prigozhin malfunctioned, frightening Putin but not significantly shaking his hold on power.

Paradoxically, the Kremlin has seemed less concerned about the real possibility of more rebellions from within than about imagined dangers from without. In fact, the regime's main ideological precept is simple, revolving around a single imaginary threat: the West is out to destroy the Russian state. In the words of Sergey Kiriyenko, the first deputy chief of the presidential administration and a chief Kremlin spin doctor, "The goal of those who are trying to fight against Russia today is very clear. . . . They want Russia to cease its existence." Russian officials bombastically refer to this as a "civilizational challenge" or "existential threat." The simplicity of this premise has made it a key

rationale for continuing the "special military operation" in Ukraine, which officials, including Putin, are finally calling a war, even as they punish ordinary Russians for doing so.

Russians were certainly not seeking to sacrifice themselves for the state before February 2022. The government's promotion of the idea of a heroic death "for the fatherland" emerged only after the "special military operation" began. Now, Putin argues that death on the battlefield means a life not lived in vain. As he told a group of mothers whose sons had been killed in the fighting in November 2022, "With some people . . . it is unclear why they die—because of vodka or something else. . . . Their lives passed without notice. But your son did live—do you understand? He achieved his goal." Already, this idea has permeated Russian culture. Consider the Russian pop star Shaman, who has been transformed by the Kremlin's propaganda machine into a mouthpiece of military expansionism. In his recent hit "Let's Rise," he not only claims that "God and truth are on our side" but calls on Russians to praise the fallen—"those who found themselves in heaven and are no longer with us."

Helping advance a warrior cult, the Russian Orthodox Church has become a crucial ideological and propaganda instrument of the regime. But it has also lost its Christian message. Consider the case of Father Ioann Burdin, a pacifist village priest in the Kostroma region northeast of Moscow: after his parishioners informed on him, he was fined for discrediting the army in his sermons and in March 2023, was banned from leading services. Russia's diocesan court ruled that his pacifism was inconsistent with the teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church. (Burdin has correctly pointed out that the church is serving the state, rather than Christ.)

An even more powerful tool than church decrees, however, may be the Kremlin's rewriting of history. As the sociologist Lev Gudkov has observed, long before the invasion of Ukraine, the government began nurturing the idea in Russian textbooks that the country is "a national unit that emerges as the empire expands." In this framing, the colonization of neighboring territories serves as a projection of Russian national superiority while "conflating regime interests with the interests of the people." (As a joke making the rounds in Moscow has it, "Russia borders on whatever country it wants.") Just like Stalin-era textbooks, many of which were compiled with Stalin's personal involvement, today's textbooks betray the extraordinary

lengths that officials and educators loyal to the regime have gone to adapt history to Putin's nationalist-imperialist ideas.

The government's new "Concept of Teaching Russian History to Non-History Higher Education Institutions," introduced in the winter of 2022–23, makes two key points. First, it stresses the importance of a strong centralized authority, which it says is "essential for maintaining national statehood." Second, in interpreting the events that brought about Russia's actions in Ukraine—including, according to the document, the "attempt to create a 'belt of instability' around Russia" and the "refusal" of the United States and NATO to "discuss threats to Russia's security"—it asserts that they were all instigated by the West. According to the document, Ukraine's leadership "had turned [Ukraine] into 'anti-Russia' and, with the help of NATO, was preparing for the 'return of Crimea and Donbas'" to Kyiv. It was this existential threat, the government says, that "led to the inevitability of a special military operation by Russia in 2022."

AFTER THE AUTOCRAT

Putin's attempt to resurrect an empire by naked force is failing. The imperial model is on its last legs and can no longer be revived. The question is: For how much longer will ordinary Russians be receptive to Putinism, Russian messianism, and the state's increasingly flimsy justifications for using military power? The evidence is contradictory: according to the Levada Center, an independent research organization, Prigozhin's mutiny has had little effect on Putin's approval ratings. In the eyes of ordinary Russians, Putin won that battle, and the country has remained relatively calm. Russian society may be mobilized, but not all citizens are involved in the fighting, and Putin has been able to show that for those who are not on the battlefield, the state can continue to provide relatively tolerable living conditions. People may not trust the authorities, but that does not prevent them from supporting the regime and its uncontested leader and even showing their loyalty when necessary.

Ordinary Russians, long conditioned to ignore their own opinions, tend to follow the arguments that the state gives them. Consider the law used to designate certain Russian individuals, including this author, as "foreign agents." According to the Levada Center, in an October 2021 poll, shortly after the law was expanded, just 36 percent of respondents supported the government's claim that it seeks to limit

the "negative influence of the West on our country." But by September 2022—eight months into the "special operation"—57 percent of those polled agreed that the government had good reasons for designating prominent Russians as foreign agents. In short, ideology does work, but only when reduced to simple points hammered into people's heads.

Yet the mutiny, during which no one seemed to rally around Putin, also exposed the extent of public ambivalence toward the regime. Putin can count on the indifference of the population, which has allowed him to take the country into, and sustain, a disastrous military adventure, and, in this case, to quickly end a failed rebellion. But that same indifference could be fatal if the regime truly comes under threat. Having been conditioned for so long to be passive observers of events, Russians are unprepared to defend their president. Similarly, many condemn those who have fled the country to avoid mobilization yet fear being conscripted themselves. They also find the archaic conceits that the state feeds them about the satanic West and the special destiny of Russia at odds with their modern, urban Western lifestyles.

> Putin will find words to present defeat as victory.

Despite the Putin regime's glorification of arms and empire, financial well-being remains far more important to most Russians. Before 2022, sociologists found that a substantial majority felt that the country's greatness lay in its economic rather than its military might. To some extent, the government has been able to bridge this ideological gap between the state and the people by offering better pay to those who serve in the military. Moscow is now plastered with posters conveying the message that fighting in Ukraine is a "real job" for "real men," unlike, say, driving a taxi or working as a security guard. Another financial incentive is the benefits that families of soldiers receive if they are killed or permanently disabled. In June, Putin boasted about the growth of real incomes in Russia, but the private sector is withering. Rising incomes are being driven instead by ever-greater transfers from state coffers, whether through social payments or higher salaries, especially for security forces, service members, and mercenaries. This is growth due to destruction and death, not innovation or productivity.

One sign of how far Russia has traveled down the road to totalitarianism is the imposed dominance of official thought. Earlier in

the Putin era, Russian society enjoyed a great diversity of political currents and debates. Liberal thought in various forms, embraced by a number of Russian politicians, was very influential; policy debates and alternative points of view could be heard. But liberalism has become Putin's main enemy. Its public supporters are now in prison or have been thrown out of the country, and its channels of information have been destroyed. Now, questioning government policy is not just forbidden; it is viewed as an anti-state act.

At the end of earlier totalitarian phases, Russia has traditionally reversed course: Alexander II's Great Reforms of 1861, Khrushchev's de-Stalinization of 1956, Gorbachev's perestroika of 1985, Yeltsin's reforms of 1992. But an end to Russian actions in Ukraine is unlikely to mean the end of Putinism as a political and ideological phenomenon. Putin will find words to present defeat as victory. For citizens, in any case, the Russian Idea will remain a sledgehammer that the state can continue to wield against them. In a personalized dictatorship, the pendulum will swing the other way only when the dictator himself steps aside or leaves the scene. Putinism has a chance to outlive Putin, but Russian history, including the history of Stalinism, shows that as soon as an autocrat disappears, a new era of liberalization can begin. After Stalin, people had the opportunity to think and breathe, although the regime remained communist. Similarly, the end of Putin would inevitably start a cycle of de-Putinization, though the underlying structure of the state would likely survive for some time.

Of course, change could come from within the system itself: at least historically, all political transformation in Russia has come from the top. It is possible that a new group of reformers could emerge from among the moderate members of the existing elite—liberals who are still serving in government or the civil service. This new group would have to decide just how radically they want to change the country. If they embarked on a new course of modernization and opening to the West, it could provoke conflicts between former Putinist circles and the counter-elite returning from abroad or being released from prisons.

Still, a pragmatic or conciliatory path, resulting from compromise between elite and counter-elite, could also be followed. If such an outcome is hard to imagine now, it cannot be ruled out. But before a more constructive, less messianic vocation for the Russian state can be born, the Russian Idea must die.