

What philosophical doctrines is Russian imperial nationalism based on?

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Introduction

“But when it is necessary for him [ruler] to proceed against the life of someone, he must do it on proper justification <...>” (Machiavelli, 2021, para. 152)

Non-profit organizations focused on human rights report on countless abuses of human rights with people being deprived of fair trial and being persecuted for any dissent in the Russian Federation (Amnesty International, 2021). Nonetheless, many Russian citizens still claim to be content with their president (Statista Research Department, 2021). As Machiavelli had expressed in the quote chosen as an epigraph to this work, actions such as human rights violations need to have a proper justification in order to not de-legitimize a current rule. It can be claimed that the way in which preservation of Putin's government's legitimacy is ensured despite the deteriorating amount of freedoms is through nationalism, which, according to a philosopher Gershon Weiler, “is a justificatory doctrine of rulership” (Weiler, 1994, 120). More particularly, Russian imperial nationalism is deployed by the current Russian government to justify its actions: there is an “almost total unity between the authorities and Russian [imperial] nationalists” (Pain, 2016, 69).

The phenomenon of Russian imperial nationalism is unusual for the Western academic tradition, in which nationalism and imperialism are thought of as polar and incompatible phenomena (Pain, 2016, 46). It emerged recently, although imperial nationalism in Scotland and British Canada can be traced back as late as the 19th century (Colclough, 2007). While the concept has not yet been researched other than from the sociological perspective, understanding its roots and its underlying ideas is crucial for understanding Russian political discourse. Particularly, this understanding may give an insight into the current Russian government's stances on domestic (such as respect of human rights) and international (such as geographical borders) affairs. The importance of closing this research gap, then, leads to my research question, stated as follows: “What philosophical doctrines is Russian imperial nationalism based on?”

Therefore, in the following essay, the philosophical doctrines that influenced and defined Russian imperial nationalism will be analyzed.

Methodology

The majority of philosophers chosen for the research are Russian as they are the most relevant to the Russian political discourse, since “there is a Russian approach to world philosophical problems, a Russian way of experiencing and discussing them” (Nizhnikov, 2021, 16). Of all Russian philosophers, the most influential ones were chosen: Konstantin Leontiev, for example, is sometimes referred to as “Russian Nietzsche”, illustrating the fact that he played an important role in the history of Russian philosophy (Üre, 2008, 5). In addition, the Russian philosophers were chosen because of the author's access to the original texts as a native Russian speaker: it ensures the absence of misinterpretation and misrepresentation in the study. Machiavelli's work, meanwhile, was used in the research because it is one of the works most representative of the doctrine of using fear as a way of establishing and ensuring political power.

To begin with, the core concepts needed for understanding Russian imperial nationalism should be defined. While definitions of the term “nationalism” vary, there is a somewhat agreement on the classical form of nationalism's characteristics: “it typically features the supremacy of the nation's claims over other claims to individual allegiance and full sovereignty as the persistent aim of its political program” (Miscevic, 2001). In imperialism, as Pain puts it, on the other hand, not the sovereignty of the nation but the sovereignty of the ruler is praised (Pain, 2016, 47).

The cultural dimensions of these two phenomena are especially relevant for the work. Cultural imperialism is, according to Shiller, “the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world-system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even promote, the values and structures of the dominating center of the system” (Smandych, 2019, 3). Cultural nationalism, in the meantime, is “focused on the defense and the regeneration of the national community” (Hutchinson, 2015).

Major characteristics of Russian imperial nationalism

As concepts of Russian cultural imperialism and cultural nationalism come together, Russian imperial nationalism encompasses features of both: it aims at regenerating the national community, where the national community is represented by its dominating stratum:

people ethnically Russian and predominantly Cristian. It is manifested in the essential characteristics of the phenomena.

One of the characteristics is, as Pain puts it, the belief that there is a unique set of values and “cultural qualities” uniting all Russian people and distinguishing them from the West (Pain, 2016, 51). The author refers to it as “essentialism” (Pain, 2016, 51), meaning that it is perceived in a way that one must have these values in order to be Russian (Teresa & Atkins, 2008). The promoted set of values, as shown later in the essay, is closely linked to Orthodox Christianity, whereas only 63% of Russians identify as Christian (“Более 60% россиян назвали себя православными”, 2019). The “essentialism” therefore does not take into account the cultures of many peoples living in Russia. This property of Russian imperial nationalism can be then linked to both cultural nationalism and cultural imperialism since the cultural qualities are transferred from the dominant culture to the whole country, which is used to justify expansion and imperialism.

Another idea comprising Russian imperial nationalism is that supremacy of the ethnic Russians over all others within the so-called empire should be maintained in return for the protection of the empire (Pain, 2016, 51). This is referred to as “the principle of the political domination of ethnic Russians” and is clearly nationalistic (Pain, 2016, 51).

The third major characteristic of Russian imperial nationalism, according to Pain, is the idea of protection of territories from being disowned, preservation of the so-called empire by the means of autocracy (Pain, 2016, 51). This is referred to by the author as a “defensive imperial character” (Pain, 2016, 51) and can be linked to the concept of imperialism.

Now, as the essential characteristics of the phenomena were defined, each of them can be looked at and linked to philosophical doctrines that contributed to its development in the Russian context.

“Essentialism”

The idea of Russians having a peculiar mentality and distinctive cultural qualities can be found in the works of many Russian philosophers. They expressed it differently, however, the two essential features have been repeated by various thinkers, as it will be shown later.

The first attribute is that the Russian people's mentality was hugely influenced by Christianity, giving tribute to religious cosmology. The second attribute is that the Russian mentality is completely different from, in most cases even said to be morally superior to the one in the West: Email Pain even considers the West as “the constituting ‘Other’ in relation to Russian nationalism” (Pain, 2016, 51).

It must be noted that the so-called ‘West’ in the works of philosophers chosen for the essay was different from what it means in Russian political discourse now. As the texts were created far before the Cold War dynamics emerged, the ‘West’ was referring to Western European states, while now it normally refers to the United States which, as a superpower, dictates the ideology to the Western European states. Another clarification to be made is that in the second half of the 19th century when the following works were written, the Russian Empire consisted of more than 200 ethnic groups (Фоксфорд, n.d.). Even though many of the peoples have had traditions, religions, and philosophies different from Christianity, in the following works they all are included in the terms “Russia”, “Russians” due to persistent imperial nationalism.

Russian mentality as opposed to European rationalism

In the letter “On the nature of European culture and on its relationship to Russian culture”, philosopher and writer Ivan Kireyevsky claimed that European mentality, completely different from the Russian one, results in “feeling of dissatisfaction and disconsolate emptiness” (Kireyevsky, 1979) that Europeans experience. He developed the inductive argumentation behind this statement.

According to Kireyevsky, there are three historical reasons that resulted in such a difference between Russian and Western European life. First of them is that, while Christianity was “was the soul of the intellectual life of the Western peoples, just as it was in Russia”, Europe adopted the religion from Rome, and Russia from Greece (Kireyevsky, 1979). The Roman church in his opinion is linked to an approach of applying logic, as Roman theologians were especially interested in the “practical activity and the logical concatenation of concepts” (Kireyevsky, 1979), meaning that even religion in the West is based on reason.

The second reason is the “pre-Christian knowledge” (Kireyevsky, 1979). European people got all the heritage of the human mind, all the knowledge obtained in 6000 years “solely in the form given to it by the civilization of Old Rome [which is pagan] and received it “in an utterly one-sided form” (Kireyevsky, 1979). Under one-sided form the rationalism and materialism are meant, which are based on a “logical activity that is detached from all of humanity's other cognitive faculties” using the “most primitive sensual data on which it erects its ethereal dialectical edifices” (Kireyevsky, 1979). Christianity, according to the philosopher, came to Europe afterward, when the European mentality was already formed as materialistic and logic-oriented. All the knowledge Russia got, on the other hand, was gotten through the lens of Christianity, which had already created firm grounds before the Old Rome pagan knowledge came. This fact ensured that the mentality is not one-sided as it happened in Europe and has developed in a way closer to Christian tradition. This duality leads to the emphasized complexity and superiority of the Russian mentality.

The third reason for the existing difference is that European states “arising out of the violence of conquest” are alien to Old Russia formed without such violence (Kireyevsky, 1979). It resulted in Europeans having not a social spirit as Russians do, but “a spirit of individual separation” where they are bound together solely by private interests (Kireyevsky, 1979). This controversial statement can be explained by Kireyevsky's views on Ancient Rus history: he believes that the clan system as well as the Russian mentality, the base of the Slavs' social order, were untouched and uninfluenced by Varangians (Kireyevsky, 1979). It makes the development of Russian imperial nationalism easier, as the so-called social spirit emphasizes affiliation of ethnic minorities with the Russian people and therefore diminishes nationalist sentiments among peoples.

Thus, Kireyevsky speaks of the negative traits that Europe has and Russia does not rather than defines both mentalities equally. The Russian mentality is linked to a holistic way of understanding life, where one thinks of himself as a part of a community rather than as an individual, focuses on mental life rather than on material goods, and measures life using their whole self instead of just following the laws of reason and logic. The Western European mentality, in the meanwhile, is presented as individualistic, materialistic, and one-sided. A big role in creating these differences was played by Christianity.

Russian mentality as Byzantine heritage

In the work “Byzantism and Slavdom” Konstantin Leontiev developed an idea that “the foundations of both our [Russian] state and domestic life remain closely tied to Byzantism” (Леонтьев, 2007, para. 25) which is substantiated by inductive argumentation based on the philosopher's understanding of history and history of culture of Eastern and Western Europe.

The philosopher uses the word “Slavdom” juxtaposing it to “Slavism”: Slavs, according to him, did not develop a cultural formation that can be called “Slavism”, they only are united by common ethnicity and similar languages, which is meant by “Slavdom” (Леонтьев, 2007). The premise is that slavs are culturally different: Poles are, for example, Catholics, following traditions of their own fallen Polish civilization, while Russians are following traditions of Byzantine (Леонтьев, 2007).

“Byzantism” is a term that Leontiev uses for a set of mainly cultural, but also political traits inherited by Russians from Byzantine (Леонтьев, 2007). The cultural traits associated with this concept are as follows: in questions of religion it is Christianity with ‘traits differentiating it from the Western church, heresy and splits’; in questions of morals it means not much attention to “exaggerated” earthly concept of an individual which comes from “German feudalism”, as well as no belief in all-happiness, all-equality and all-perfection on Earth (Леонтьев, 2007, para. 6).¹ In politics, the concept is linked to an authoritarian conservative rule which originally was Romanian Caesarism (Леонтьев, 2007). The political component of this idea will be closely looked at in the next chapter, while this one is concentrating on the idea of cultural differences.

According to Leontiev, Byzantine influence came both to Eastern and Western Europe (Леонтьев, 2007). In the West it faced Romano-Germanic culture in a state of blooming; two cultures then merged and caused the start of the European Renaissance (Леонтьев, 2007). In Russia, Byzantine culture found only “colorlessness and simplicity, poverty, unpreparedness” and thus was adopted there in its pure form (Леонтьев, 2007, para. 19).

¹ It is meant here that ideals such as all-happiness and all-equality can only be reached in the afterlife, in accordance with religious views of the author.

Western European states, as the result of the fact that it adopted “Byzantism” not in its pure form, at the times of the author's life were exposed to egalitarian and liberal processes, which are linked to the process of decomposition and that of rotting, according to the philosopher (Леонтьев, 2007). Meanwhile, the Russian mentality, since it is not focused on material happiness, was not occupied with decomposing dreams of earthly freedom and happiness (Леонтьев, 2007). Thus, apart from acknowledging the difference between mentalities, Leontiev also promoted an inferiority-superiority dynamic, where the Russian one was conceptualized as better and the right one, with its ideas in a position to help the inferior Western whose progressiveness is only an illusion.

The way both philosophical works apply to the modern Russian political discourse can be illustrated by the following Putin's statement: “And now family, friendship, mutual assistance, mercy, solidarity have come to the fore for us. Spiritual and moral values, which are already forgotten in a number of countries, have, on the contrary, made us stronger. And we will always defend and protect these values” (Акопов, 2021). This essentialist speech alludes to the Cristian values and addresses the West implied by the countries that have forgotten the Cristian values; both of these ideas were emphasized in the theories described above.

“Defensive imperial character”

Autocracy is a system of government characterized by the “concentration of power in a single centre, be it an individual dictator or a group of power holders”, which mainly relies on force and is not “subject to effective controls or limited by genuine sanctions: it is absolute power” (Heslop, 2020). The preservation of the so-called empire is considered to be possible only by the means of autocracy in the doctrine of Russian imperial nationalism. The roots of these beliefs can be found in both Russian philosophy and Western political thought.

Justification of autocracy

Konstantin Leontiev's ideas about the political order, including his cyclical view of history, were also expressed in the work “Byzantium and Slavdom”.

Using the analogy of growth of grass, the author comes up with a premise that the word “development” in organic life means gradual ascent from simplicity to complexity, as

well as separation from the outside world and all similar phenomena (Леонтьев, 2007). The pick of the process of development, then, is the pick of complexity united with internal unity (Леонтьев, 2007). Before the collapse of an organic matter or phenomena, the philosopher writes, the matter of the phenomena becomes monotonous; it also comes closer to the outside world (Леонтьев, 2007). The second premise he comes up with is that the three-stage process of life and development, which is primary simplicity, flourishing complexity, and secondary simplicity, is a feature of not only organic life; it applies to anything existing in the universe (Леонтьев, 2007). He justifies it using the examples of the life cycles of a celestial body, history of art, and history of philosophy.

Thus, he concludes, the state goes through the same processes as organic matter (Леонтьев, 2007). Autocracy, then, is the basis of the development, while democratic, egalitarian and liberal processes are similar to that of combustion, decay, and melting, and lead a state to the collapse (Леонтьев, 2007). Once the conflation of classes, fluidity of authorities, the similarity of upbringing, and belittling of religion start emerging and happening within a state, progressives seem to prevail in practice, since they are simply going with the flow, down an inclined plane, but in theory, they are wrong and instead of rectifying and developing a country they destroy (Леонтьев, 2007). Guardians of the old order are, on the opposite, theoretically right, as they want to heal and strengthen the country, but in practice, the majority does not listen to them as the majority loves freedom and can no longer endure the strictness, discipline of the state (Леонтьев, 2007). Being a minority, guardians still are trying to fulfill their duty to decelerate the decomposition of the state, which sometimes requires violence (Леонтьев, 2007).

Thus, Leonyiev justifies not only autocracy but also violence against the majority if it does not resist democratic and egalitarian agenda while praising “guardians” and condemning “progressives”, who are leading to the decomposition of a state. The legacy of this doctrine is seen in the belief that Russia has to have autocratic leadership in order to keep the country and territories safe, comprising Russian imperial nationalism.

Suffering as a necessity

Fyodor Dostoevsky is a Russian writer, who, despite “all the distance from academic philosophy, was one of the most philosophical of writers” (Scanlan, 2002, 1). In his works,

Dostoevsky developed a moral philosophy in which suffering is seen as necessary in order to reach salvation, redemption, and, eventually, happiness: “Dostoevsky believed in the value and necessity of suffering” (Simons, 1967, 163). This idea is manifested in the novel “Crime and Punishment”: its main character Raskolnikov commits a murder, and, being able to escape arrest and imprisonment, the protagonist is tortured by conscience (Dostoevsky, 2001). Falling in love with a religious woman Sonya who became a prostitute to help her family, he is being influenced by their conversations about God (Dostoevsky, 2001). Eventually, he gives himself up to the police, and, taking Sonya with him, he looks “forward to the hardships of Siberia and the adversity” because it is “their great chance for redemption” (Simons, 1967, 163). Hard work and the Gospel eventually help “rebirth” and find “redemption” together with his lover (Myers, 2014, 2). The path without suffering is exemplified by another character of the book, Svidrigaylov, who avoids suffering and dedicates himself to “the pursuit of pleasure” by any means (Kramer, 2015, 2). Being “inaccessible to any hope of spiritual redemption” (Fanger, 1967, 233), he escapes the meaninglessness of his life and avoids suffering by committing suicide (Kramer, 2015, 3).

Thus, according to Dostoevsky, a person can “become purified and redeemed” by “submitting” to their suffering (Kramer, 2015, 1). This is relevant for the research because it is one of the ways in which the means of autocracy are justified.

Fear and cruelty in politics

Despite the fact that Machiavelli has been rejecting “the philosophical inquiry as beside the [his] point” (Nederman, 2005), he contributed to political philosophy a lot, for example, with his work called “The Prince”.

In this work, fear is considered necessary. It is considered not as the only, but as the most trustworthy way of holding power: in the passage about whether it is better to be loved or feared, Machiavelli advocates for fear: “it is much safer to be feared than loved” (Machiavelli, 2021, para. 152). This advocacy is built upon the premise that all men are essentially bad: they are ungrateful, cowardly, and greedy; they are loyal only when a ruler is successful, and they turn against the ruler when the ruler needs them most (Machiavelli, 2021). Those rulers who build their rulership on trust, then, are not secured (Machiavelli, 2021). This argument is illustrated by a few historical cases, such as, for example, Hannibal,

whose army was loyal, no matter if they were losing or winning a fight, by virtue of his cruelty (Machiavelli, 2021). Loyalty is particularly important for Machiavelli, as, according to the philosopher, a wise prince should have no other thought or aim other than war and discipline (Machiavelli, 2021). Loyalty, however, is not the only way used by Machiavelli to justify cruelty. The philosopher also justified it by the utilitarian idea of putting the society's good above the individual rights: “a prince, so long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal, ought not to mind the reproach of cruelty; (...) he will be more merciful than those who, through too much mercy, allow disorders to arise, from which follow murders or robberies; for these are wont to injure the whole people, whilst those executions which originate with a prince offend the individual only” (Machiavelli, 2021, para. 145).

Thus, in Machiavelli's work, the authorities' cruelty is justified by putting the society's good above the individual's, while fear is considered to be the best way of establishing power when needed — in a situation with an external threat. The philosophers' ideas can be claimed to be relevant for Russian imperial nationalism, since the preservation of the so-called ‘empire’ as opposed to ‘Western’ enemies is considered a common good, which, together with the belief that suffering is necessary, justifies the means of autocracy.

“The principle of the political domination of ethnic Russians”

As mentioned before, there are many ethnicities in Russia. Although officially some of them are given regional autonomy, the autonomy is rather illusionary: “[Putin's] legislative reforms, together with the dominance of his United Russia Party [the party which is represented by the current Russian president] in regional parliaments and executives, severely constrain their capacity to pursue independent policies”, which result in “the threat of separatism” (Russell, 2015). Thus, if the differences between ethnicities would not be recognized, it would be safer for the existence of the so-called ‘empire’. Yet the government makes the choice to acknowledge these differences while still making sure it is ethnic Russians who hold the political power. This decision seems illogical at first but can be explained through the ideas of Leninism.

Nationalism in Leninism

In the work “Corrupting workers with refined nationalism”, Vladimir Lenin used the term “refined nationalism” as the opposite to violent forms of nationalism (Lenin, 1972). According to him, it is a type of nationalism that promotes ideas such as “protecting the interests of 'national culture', ‘national autonomy or independence’” (Lenin, 1972, para. 3). The true essence of the refined nationalism is, however, not the ideas of equality of the peoples, but rather a desire of bourgeois to create the division within the working class to deter their struggle: its goal is splitting up the working class, workers' organizations, the labor movement by nationality (Lenin, 1972, para. 4). Refined nationalism thus is imposed on the proletariat by the bourgeois authorities (Lenin, 1972). This type of nationalism, then, comprises both nationalism and imperialism: it addresses and supports nationalist sensitives in order to preserve the imperialist state.

Aware workers, according to Lenin, should be resisting both violent and refined nationalism, as both imply division (Lenin, 1972). Marxists advocate for “consistent”, “complete” equality of nations and languages but with no division; rather, with the fusion of workers of different nationalities in “united proletarian organizations of every kind” (Lenin, 1972, para. 4). This is the most important difference between the nationalism proposed by the bourgeoisie and by Marxists.

This doctrine can explain the coexistence in the concept of Russian imperial nationalism of two controversial characteristics: of the right of peoples to be a part of the so-called empire and of the nationalistic dominance of one ethnic group over all others. The essentialism described in the first chapter then serves as a justification for the borders and enlargements of the political body while ensuring the inviolability of the territories. The nationalism described in this chapter ensures that there is no strong union of the ethnic minorities turned against the ethnic Russians and thus no political competition from their side in domestic politics.

Conclusion

Thus, all the philosophical doctrines presented to some extent influenced the framing of Russian Imperial nationalism and made it strong enough to justify and legitimize the current rule in Russia. Slavophiles, along with some other Russian philosophers, created and

promoted the idea of the Russian special mentality that is different from, as well as morally and politically better than, the 'Western' one. This is used to justify the borders of the country. The principle of political domination of ethnic Russians perpetuated by the illusion of political autonomy of the peoples living in Russia divides and weakens anti-imperial sensitives, as analyzed through the Marxist lens. The idea of autocracy saving a state from moral and political decomposition assigned to the 'West' by Russian philosophers, together with Dostoevsky's moral justification of suffering, serve as a way of ensuring the legitimacy of government no matter how undemocratic it is.

The topic chosen for this research can be further explored to ensure a better understanding of Russian political discourse. However, the main philosophical doctrines and ideas serving as the basis for the phenomena will stay the same: uniqueness of the mental qualities of Russian people, the conceptualization of autocracy as protection of these qualities from the West, as well as political domination of ethnic Russians.

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