ESSAY

"What is Wrong with Russians? Why are They Doing This?"

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Having decades of experience working in what I call "the former Soviet sphere" means that people often ask me to explain what is happening "over there." Starting in the 1980s, I joined a team providing pastoral education for church workers throughout the countries behind the Iron Curtain. Cultural misunderstandings which were encountered in this work pushed me to do doctoral research in anthropology to better understand how to teach effectively in the Slavic cultural context, leading to a further 30 years working on a variety of educational projects in Russia and Ukraine. Recently, an old friend asked for help to better understand what was going on, and why the current conflict had begun. He wanted historical perspective and literally wondered if there was something wrong with the Russian people that they could be led into, and apparently even support, such a war as the one presently being waged in Ukraine.

I gently reminded him of his German roots, and he laughed somewhat uncomfortably, but with understanding. Circumstances can be such that any people may end up following a demented leader who, despite their faults, obviously has some abilities that contribute to their success. As my friend knew clearly, Hitler was a prime example, and the German people his victims, in his short and bloody period as the German Fuehrer.

The question about the Russian people stuck with me. My initial answer was no, they did not have some fatal flaw that made them vulnerable to a dictator like Vladimir Putin. While I maintain that opinion, I began to wonder if there were faults or cracks in the culture of the Russians which could be exploited by someone wanting to dictate to them and lead them astray. During my three decades of working closely with Russians and in their country, I have consciously tried to emphasize the positive aspects of their culture and history, partly as an antidote to the "Russia as evil empire" legacy of the Cold War and Ronald Regan (McNeill 2002). Now I was being asked to turn a critical eye on the country and people whom I had learned to appreciate.

Democracy and Russia

I remembered a series of lectures which I gave to a class of Russian law students at one of the campuses of the Volgograd State University in the 1990s. The invitation grew out of a reconciliation impulse from German Christians who, in 1995, the 50-year anniversary of the end of WW 2, wanted to express their sorrow over the war's impact, and specifically their solidarity with the people of Volgograd, the site of a decisive battle that changed the trajectory of the war. Friends of mine were part of the delegation to visit Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad), and when asked to recommend someone to visit local universities and bring a similar reconciliatory message to Russian youth, my name was mentioned. I was already working in the region, and various universities were happy to have an "expert" from the West bring new perspectives to their students while also testing their comprehension of English.[1] Being an anthropologist and not a lawyer, I knew that the invitation hid a serious challenge. What could I say to a group of Russian law students?

Because Russia was, at the time, experimenting with democratic reform, I thought that a survey of the development of democracy in the English world might be of interest. But as I began to study the subject, it was clear that I had too vague a notion of the parallel developments in Russia. I was going to need to study the two histories alongside one another, if for no other reason than to satisfy my own curiosity. Part of what I will recount in this essay is taken from information I discovered on the Russian side of the story.

Just over a millennium ago, as Russia was welcoming the arrival of the Christian faith in 988 CE,[2] there was a traditional social convention in Kiev and Novgorod, the two capitals of the Russian people, to limit the power of the prince. Limiting the power of the prince or king was, by the way, a major part of the battle for "democratic reform" in England for centuries to follow, during which time the English did not reach Russia's level of 988 until about 700 years later. In the Russian capitals around the year 1000, if a citizen was unhappy with a decision of the prince, they could call together the town assembly, the "veche," by ringing the bell designated for that purpose. Various people could call the assembly, but especially relevant was the right of private citizens to do so by ringing the "veche" bell so that the assembled citizens[3] could listen to a complaint and decide either for or against the prince (Riasanovsky 1984:50, 84-87). This was an amazing limitation of the absolute power of the prince. "The veche proceeded to impose severe and minute restrictions on his power and activity" as Riasanovsky notes in

[1] Given the accelerating developments of the past 20 years in Russian politics, it is clear that such an open invitation to bring new ideas to young minds would no longer be welcome.
[2] Or having the Christian faith imposed upon them by the ruling prince of Kiev.
[3] To avoid a too romanticized notion of this Russian "democracy," it should be noted that the citizens were only male and a restricted group. All the same, it was unusual for its time.

describing the prince in 13th century Novgorod (1984:82). The likes of this was only dreamt of in England for centuries to come.

Subsequently, the Russians were overrun in 1237-1240 by the Mongols, who ruled for a couple of centuries (Riasanovsky 1984:67). Their domination was felt strongly in Kiev,[4] less so further north, and not at all in the far northern city of Novgorod where Russian traditions were maintained. During the period of the "Mongol yoke," a migration of Russians fleeing northward resulted (Reimer 1994). Moscow, which had been a rather insignificant village or town, gained in influence as it grew in population, partly by presenting itself as a faithful representative of the Mongols, who preferred to rule by proxy at a distance from their capital in the south. The Muscovites were crafty, one could say even duplicitous, presenting themselves as faithful servants of the Mongol rulers while simultaneously, but slowly and carefully, developing a power base that eventually was strong enough to oppose the Mongols and drive them out. Could this be a root for the widespread corruption, disregard for law, and duplicity that appears to have been a problem in the region both pre-and post-Soviet Union?[5] Corruption is a problem in every culture that I am aware of, but, while in some it seems to be held within bounds, in others, like the Russian, it seem to run so rampant as to cripple the culture it has infected. Could this be the fruit in Russia today of Moscow's rise to power?

The first clearly strong leader of the rising Moscow after the departure of the Mongols was none other than Ivan the Terrible. Suffice it to say that he earned his bad reputation. As he spread his influence outward from Moscow, his violent overthrow of the local power of Kazan was legendary (Riazanovsky 1984) and is still recalled by locals.[6] When he moved north to successfully conquer Novgorod, one of his first acts was to publicly smash the "veche" bell. The message was clear: we will have no more nonsense about limiting the powers of the absolute leader and giving mere citizens a voice! It is of note that in the new museum in Volgograd called "Your History," which was built as part of the preparations for the recent FIFA World Cup that took place in Russia in 2018, a display about Ivan the Terrible amounts to a rehabilitation of his reputation. There is a saying in Russian that the people are a hard group to rule, and it takes a leader with a strong hand to be successful. Ivan was not so terrible, the museum suggests; he was simply being as strong as he needed to be for the good of the Russian people. In the same museum, Stalin is also given a similar rehabilitation treatment. This kind of re-writing of history

[4] Mongol influence, followed by Lithuanian, Polish, and German, are part of the explanation for the development since the year 1000 of what we now call Ukrainian, a language and associated culture the existence of which present Russian leadership under Vladimir Putin tries to deny.

[5] Oden (1992) identifies the absolutism of collectivism in the Soviet times with the absolutism of individualism in USA as equally corrosive and destructive in their respective societies. I agree, with Moscow having combined the use of absolute power with duplicity to both rise to power and remain there: a corrosive foundational influence.

[6] As one of them told me during a personal visit there in the early 2000's.

serves a useful purpose in the present, contributing to the movement in Russia to roll back democratic reforms and centralize power in a tiny and powerful elite.

To summarize, what I see in Russian cultural history is a general trajectory away from the democratic tendency which was represented by the "veche" tradition, and toward centralization of power, autocracy, and dictatorship. This despite efforts made by many brave people in the opposite direction over numerous generations and today. Wilson (2002) points out how, while Russians were moving over centuries in the direction of a conservative autocracy, Ukraine was developing a taste for more autonomy and freedom of expression. Ukraine, with its modern attempts to break from the past and develop its democracy, is perceived to be a too close-to-the-border threat to the Russian centralization of power.

Russian Pan-Slavism

Another source of cultural background noise for the present conflict is Russian pan-Slavism. There are people speaking distinct and unique languages belonging to the Slavic family throughout the Balkans, the Czech and Slovak republics, Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. At various points, pan-Slavic sentiment in Russia has extended, but only temporarily, as far as the Balkan states as they faced threats from Turkey (Riazanovsky 1984). In preparation for the conflict in Ukraine, Putin seems to have drawn from the well of Russian pan-Slavic emotion. Riazanovsky (1984) comments that the pan-German and pan-Slavic movements are cousins; clearly there are similarities, but also differences. While Hitler attempted to re-integrate only German speakers from other countries into his mighty "Reich," any attempt to assimilate Ukrainians and other Slavic language speakers into Russia encounters linguistic hurdles that Hitler's colonialism did not attempt to bridge. There are many languages in the Germanic family, but Hitler, in his pan-German initiative, only envisaged those foreign groups that actually spoke German. In trying to "re-integrate" Ukrainians into Russia, Putin, apparently influenced by pan-Slavic thinking, is forced to deny, or at least minimize, the existence of the Ukrainian language and culture. This is historical and cultural nonsense! Ukrainians have a distinct language and culture, and their identity as a nation has recently been given a powerful and possibly permanent boost by the very pressure put on the country by Russia to try to assimilate them.

Possessors versus Non-Possessors

In considering the cultural roots of Russia, it is important to note a dispute that arose in the 16th century over the riches of the church monasteries, which owned about one third of the land in Russia at the time. Non-possessors thought that this land should be owned by people in the general society, while the possessors advocated a continuation of monastic ownership. Ultimately, the dispute was settled in favor of the latter by an intervention of the Tsar and the use of power (Ware 1993). It is interesting that the possessors were also in favor of the use of

state power to enforce church discipline and punish heretics. Theirs was a positive answer to Broadbent's question: "Could the church, by union with the world, save it?" (1974:23). In Russia, the union of church and state grew steadily, and the increasing subservience of the church to the state as well. Here we see in Orthodox circles a theological justification for the church to use force against "unbelievers" in order to supposedly protect the integrity of the Christian faith. Charles and Rah (2019) identify this, in Catholic and parallel Protestant theology, as the "Doctrine of Discovery," and show clearly its destructive and murderous influence in colonialism. As we will discuss shortly, modern Russia is still a colonial power, the heir of the last of the great empires that has not been broken up or subjected to the processes of de-colonization.

Separating Church and State Roles

In the Constantinian worldview, the secular ruler—Constantine in the first instance—is seen as God's representative on earth to care for the temporal needs of the people, with the church (now identified as the Eastern Orthodox family of churches) being God's agent for the spiritual needs of the people. The spheres are distinct and not to be mixed or to interact at all. Temporal power rests entirely in the hands of the state. The effect of this division is, dare I say, to castrate the church of its prophetic function. Peter the Great made this control of the church by the state even stronger in the case of Russian society that followed his rule (Men 1996). Movements within the Orthodox Church itself also struggled over questions about the role of the church. In Russia, the dominant Josephite faction in the church favored the state, and "worked to reinforce the autocracy and voluntarily placed their monasteries and the whole Russian church under its protection" (Fedetov 1966:377).

In contrast, the Old Testament portrays prophets who often spoke to power, criticized power, and even called down judgment on power. They were not welcomed by power in most cases, but they spoke. The Nathan and David story is one of the rare exceptions where a prophetic "calling out" led to a profound change on the part of leadership (2 Samuel 12:1-13). But, despite the mistreatment and rejection that prophets often experience, a church without a prophetic voice is less than what the church should be. Around the world, the modern church has largely lost its prophetic edge, often because of moral compromise or an uncritical acceptance, and even veneration, of false or trivial prophets (Charles and Rah 2019). But prophecy, a clear speaking of God's view of the events of the day into contemporary society, while essential, is constitutionally impossible in Russia because the Constantinian worldview and enslavement of the Russian Orthodox hierarchy to the state make no room for it.

There are in Russia two distinct groups of men who serve in the church, interestingly clad in white and black. The white clad ones are pastors of local congregations, and by definition must be married. The ultimate ceiling for their service is the local congregation. The

black clad are celibate monks by obligation, who work in monasteries and elsewhere, but can also participate in, and rise to the top of, the church hierarchy. On occasion, some of the white clad church servants have spoken out on social issues, including the war in Ukraine. But the black clad are much too closely tied to the power structure to speak out against the state and its policies. Do not expect to hear members of the hierarchy or the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church comment critically on the war in Ukraine. It will not happen!

Sacralizing Secular Leadership

One other element that floats quietly in the background of Orthodox theology, present but not officially endorsed, is the "messianic" idea of Moscow as the third Rome, first proposed by the monastic teacher Pilotheus of Pskov (Schmemann 1963). My Orthodox friends cringe when I mention the concept, and insist that it is not really the official teaching of the church. But it persists nonetheless, in the background. A couple of years ago, when visiting Volgograd, I was surprised to find it documented and endorsed in the same museum that I have already mentioned. The idea is rather simple and superficially attractive. First there was Rome as the head of the church. Then, in the providence of God, and shortly before the pagans overran Rome, Constantine established a second Rome in Constantinople, so that, when the pagans invaded, the Spirit of God moved on, making Constantinople the second Rome. Among other things, this idea provides validation for the Eastern Orthodox churches in their conflict with Rome. During the Constantinople-as-second-Rome period, missionaries sent out under its leadership evangelized the Slavs, eventually reaching the Russians in 988. A new missionary church was born that, over time, grew to be the single biggest Orthodox Church in the world, and in the 16th century the Russian Orthodox Church declared itself an autonomous national church within the Eastern family of churches. Short decades after this decision, Constantinople was conquered by Muslim forces and became a Muslim city. Where had the Spirit of God moved? Well, to Moscow of course!

Given the clear separation of church and state, the secular leader of this "third Rome" can be assumed, by unwary citizens, to be chosen and blessed by God for his role and work in the public and political sphere of influence that the Constantinian model assigns to him. He and his sphere of work may also be assumed to be immune to criticism.

As previously mentioned, in the Russian Orthodox Church there are two classes of leadership: local parish priests clad in white robes who are married and whose roles are generally limited to parish work, and celibate monks in black robes who have the possibility to participate in and rise to the top of the church hierarchy. The latter tend more to church bureaucratic thinking and action, and the former are the group where more personal piety can be experienced and flourish. One such parish priest has publicly spoken out against the war in Ukraine, naming it as such (instead of the publicly permitted "special operation") and

identifying it as the murder of fellow believers. His action has resulted in censure and a fine equivalent to one year of salary (Arnold 2022). But, as encouraging as his brave stance is, it is also rare, and not matched, as far as I have been able to determine, by any leaders from the bureaucratic ranks of the monks.

The Russian Empire, Past and Present

Of the great European empires from past centuries, the Russian is the only one still surviving in a form close to its full extent. While it is true that the collapse of the Soviet Union reduced Russia's sphere of influence, most of the client countries, at least in Eastern Europe, were never part of the Russian empire of pre-Soviet times. Ukraine, on the other hand, is different. A millennium in the past, Kiev was one of the two centers of Russian culture. Subsequent invasions, first by the Mongols, followed by Lithuania, Poland, and the Hapsburg empire, produced a people with an evolving new language, a different history and cultural memory, and a growing sense of identity that was not purely Russian. The violence exercised on them by their Russian neighbor in recent centuries has only increased the widespread desire in Ukraine to be separate from Russia. Describing 19th century Russia, Clayton (2014) notes that most Ukrainians were content to be under the relatively benign control of the Hapsburg empire and to not be Russian. A bureaucratically provoked famine in 1930s Ukraine, caused by the forced collectivization of small farms and elimination of their "kulak" owners, and known locally as the Holodomor ("hunger death"), resulted in millions of deaths, and is the source of further bad feeling in Ukraine toward Russia and the control of Moscow. To the present day, Moscow refuses to acknowledge the Holodomor.

In expanding from a tribe in the forests of north-central Europe to a world empire, the Russians expanded mostly south and east, conquering more than 100 peoples with a variety of cultures and languages. As Clayton points out at several points in *Ukraine: A Short History*, while being somewhat tolerant of linguistic and cultural diversity, the builders of this empire made it clear that "local cultures could sing and dance, even speak in local languages, but must not entertain dreams of independence" (2014:18). This attitude was clear during the rule of the Tsars, and continued in the Soviet period. So Ukrainian pretentions to independence fly in the face of this still active colonial policy. Furthermore, as a previous homeland of the Russian people, their effrontery in pretending that they have now developed a unique language and culture is simply too much for Russian nationalist-colonialists to accept.

Sacralizing the Military

Many times, I have seen ceremonies in which the church or local religious authorities have been called upon to bless the military as it marches off to war. In the USA this is accomplished in a slightly more secularized or "state religious" way by the proclamation "God

bless America" at military functions. Russia has its own version, as recently illustrated. The first example is a cathedral built very quickly near Moscow and completed in 2020. It combines religious and military imagery glorifying the past victories of the Russian military. As originally planned, it was to include both a text mention and a visual panel celebrating Putin's victory in 2014 in taking Crimea from Ukraine. Public outcry resulted in the visual panel being put into storage, a partial retreat which I imagine its sponsor hopes will be temporary (Walker 2020).

The second illustration took place recently with a mass audience event at a large stadium in Moscow, staged to demonstrate public support for the "special operation" in Ukraine. At the event, Putin, speaking to the assembled crowd, quoted the words of Jesus that no man has a love greater than to lay down his life for his brothers (Sauer 2022). He then tied the quotation directly to the sacrifices being made by Russian soldiers in Ukraine, who are presumably supposed to be seen as sacrificing themselves to save the Ukrainians from Nazism, or perhaps from their very own deceived selves. In any case, this is another clear example of "sprinkling of holy water" on the war in Ukraine.

Russki Mir and Mr. Putin

An update for Moscow as the third Rome has recently appeared, endorsed by both the Russian Orthodox hierarchy and the Russian president. "Russki Mir" is the label chosen, and though it is partly obvious, it is also somewhat mysterious, vague, or indefinite. The "Russki" part is, simply translated, Russian. "Mir" in the language has two distinct meanings: world and peace. Together the expression "Russki Mir" suggests a sphere of influence of indeterminate size (up to the whole world perhaps) in which the Russian influence (benevolence, peace, sovereignty) is to be felt, or even imposed (Kozdra 2018). It should be stated clearly that Orthodox believers and theologians from around the world have condemned this teaching, saying that it confuses Russian imperial power with the kingdom of Jesus (Volos Academy 2022). Russian language surrounding the Ukrainian war ("special operation" in Russian publicity) suggests that Ukrainians have become apostate, and Russia needs a corrective action ("special operation") to save them and bring them back into the fold. The Russian version of the Doctrine of Discovery allows them to use lethal force in this "act of mercy." But "Russki Mir" does not need to apply simply to Ukraine. Russian propaganda statements paint the West as corrupt and apostate: perhaps we too need "Russki Mir." Who knows how far this sphere of supposed Russian blessing is supposed to reach?

Vladimir Putin has a black belt in judo. In that sport, it is important to wait for and then exploit mistakes and weaknesses of the opponent. During Obama's presidency, "red lines" were drawn in Syria, but when they were crossed, the USA did not retaliate as threatened. Putin interpreted this as weakness. Then, in the immediate afterglow of the Sochi Olympics, Putin

snatched Crimea without being seriously challenged. Western reaction was muted at best, another sign of weakness. During the Trump presidency, the US leader was perceived in Russia as fawning before and looking up admiringly to Putin, the established strong leader that Trump could only dream of becoming. Again, this was interpreted as weakness and vulnerability.

Vladimir Putin recently published an explanation of his rationale for the war in Ukraine. In the article, "On Russian and Ukrainian Unity," Putin (2021) is guilty of what Andrew Wilson, writing earlier in the year 2000, exposes as culture-centric thinking.

> Russia still thinks in solipsistic terms of the centuries of common existence before 1991, conveniently sublimating the real complexities of that experience and preferring not to notice the real differences that have been made by the nine years for which Ukraine has already been independent. (2000:316)

In his excellent book, Wilson makes clear how many struggles and reverses of fortune underlie the present situation of Ukraine. The sub-title of his book, "Unexpected Nation," expresses how surprising it is that Ukraine, after this difficult history, including periodic past efforts by Russia to suppress or eradicate expressions of Ukrainian language and culture, has finally achieved the status of an independent nation. But, despite the struggle and difficulties Ukraine has experienced in finding a national expression for its identity, no amount of Russia-centric rewriting of history can deny the differences and uniqueness that are embodied in the Ukrainian nation. Ukrainian independence is indeed a massive blow to the Russian colonial project, the kind of blow that other colonial powers have had to accept and deal with in the past 100 years or so. Now it is Russia's turn to give up its project to dominate and absorb other peoples and nations.

Vladimir Putin, at 70 years of age, must be aware, despite all his efforts to promote a macho image, that he is mortal, and that his time to establish a legacy by solidifying the Russian empire is limited. His opponents, the Western nations, were seen individually, and in their military alliance (NATO), as weak, indecisive, and vulnerable to being exploited. It was time to strike, and the judoka struck, confident that his opponents were going to be thrown to the ground. He was wrong!

Conclusion

What does this mean? How do these cultural tendencies affect life today? Why would a doctrine that lurks in the dark corners of the Russian Church be endorsed at a modern museum in Volgograd and translated into a 21st century version? Putin's public quotation of the words of Jesus suggests the Savior's blessing on the war in Ukraine. The military cathedral visualizes the Russian military and its victories in a context that implies the church's blessing of the military in general. The "Moscow third Rome" and "Russki mir" doctrine sprinkles holy water on the

ambitious schemes of whatever regime rules in Moscow. It validates actions taken by Russia's leaders because they are "God's representative" for secular matters affecting the country. It means that Russians affected by this teaching—and most Russians identify as Orthodox—may support whatever their leader decides, and they may even see it as the direct will of God being enacted by their leader. "Moscow, the third Rome, and there will be no other," can even be interpreted to mean that Russia must be the nation designated by God to enact His will in the end days, since "there will be no other." This is certainly different from what we might have thought about Russia in whatever apocalyptic scenario we entertain or dread. Add to this a twisted view of history that refuses to see, despite their common historical roots, that Russia and Ukraine have developed differently, and you have a recipe for the Russian people to support the war against Ukraine.

Therefore, we should not be surprised, seeing these "flaws" (or rather vulnerabilities) in the Russian culture, that Russian leadership, in full control of the flow of information and propaganda,[7] has as much popular support as it does in the present circumstances. Some of these cultural vulnerabilities can make corruption and falsity tolerable or seen as a "necessary evil" in governing the "unruly Russian people." They can also provide a foundation in Russia for strong, even dictatorial leadership, and they can make it easier to pacify the Russian people and encourage them to be compliant under such authoritarian leadership.

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[7] I have seen this information control grow over the Putin years, having been in the country during three election campaigns during which the West saw propaganda about democracy but, for local Russians, neither street posters nor television publicity announced anything other than Putin and his party.

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