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Russians in the Soviet Union: rulers and victims

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When Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, declared [1] in his "state of the nation" speech in April 2005 that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical disaster of the (20th) century", his remarks were met in the west with horror. It was assumed that he was declaring openly his intention to recreate an authoritarian and overbearing imperial state. Actually, the background to his statement is more complicated than appears at first sight. Russians have good reason both to love and to hate the Soviet Union.

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To start with, the Soviet Union was a huge multi-ethnic state in most parts of which Russians had made their homes. For Russians the end of the Soviet Union was not emancipation (unlike the other nationalities) but deprivation. In some ways this was a purely practical matter. Which English [3] person would welcome a development that required him or her to show a passport and make a customs declaration before visiting a relative in Glasgow or Cardiff?

But it goes further than that. Russians are accustomed to being the leading people in a multi-national state that has universal aims. They are used both to dominating it and to sacrificing their immediate national interests to the state and its mission of resisting imperialism and creating an international socialist society. They are a messianic people (like the English at a recent period of history, and like the Americans [3] today). The Soviet Union gave Russians greatness, but at terrible cost. They do not like to think their sacrifices were in vain.

A messianic people

One characteristic of national messianism is that it subordinates the interests of the nation to those of the supranational mission. Or perhaps it would be truer to say that national identity is stretched or broadened to contain within itself a great purpose [4] or project, within which it enfolds other peoples. But that project may well require serious sacrifices of the nation which is its principal protagonist.

This is certainly true of the Russians in the Soviet Union: they bore the burdens [5] of a great multinational state, tolerating a very modest standard of living in order to build modern industry and powerful armed forces, with the ultimate purpose of creating international socialism.

In the first decade or so of the "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" the Soviet leaders actually pursued an anti-Russian policy, deliberately discriminating *against* Russians in order to build a multinational community without leading or subordinate peoples. Lenin proclaimed "I declare war to the death on Great Russian chauvinism". He instituted the "affirmative action [6]" programme known as *korenizatsiia*.

Non-Russians were awarded their own administrative territories and accorded preference in educational and promotion policies to ensure that they could run their new mandates. Russian settlers were evicted from the north Caucasus and central Asia. Russians living in the Ukrainian SSR were required to send their children to Ukrainian-language schools – something many Russian parents bitterly objected to, since they looked down on Ukrainian as a farmyard dialect.

During the 1930s, it is true, the emphasis of policy changed, and became less overtly anti-Russian. Stalin began to adopt the symbols of Russian culture and statehood as an adhesive to hold together the myriad peoples who might otherwise develop each in their own way. All the same, for the Russian *people* the 1930s were even more disastrous than the 1920s. Stalin endeavoured to destroy the two institutions that were at the heart of Russian national identity: the village commune and the Orthodox church. The destruction of the village commune was combined with the closure of most parish churches and the arrest of the priest. It was sometimes accompanied by symbolic desecration: in one case icons were lined up against a wall, sentenced to death and shot "for resisting *kolkhoz* construction".

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Among his books are:

Russia: People and Empire **(Penguin, 2002 [7])**

Russia and the Russians **(Harvard University Press, 2001 [8])**

Rulers and Victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union **(Harvard University Press, 2006 [9])**

Why this deliberate vindictiveness towards harmless objects? Here we come to the heart of the problem of Russian messianism. The fact is that by the early 20th century there was not just one but two kinds of Russian messianism: one associated with the Orthodox church, the other with Russian socialism. Both intersected partially and imperfectly with the outlook and practices of the Russian peasant community. Peasants had supported the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 [10] because it offered them the chance to seize the land and drive out the landowners. Besides, it legitimated their view that they should run their own communities, that land was a common resource and that property was justified by labour. But among peasants that outlook was based partly on Christianity, partly on tradition, not on a socialist worldview.

In the long run the communists could not tolerate rival visions of community, whether generated by the church or by the traditional peasant outlook. That is why in 1929-32 they closed churches, expropriated the peasants, deported the *kulaks [11]* and set up collective farms making compulsory deliveries to the state. In doing this, the Communists were convinced they were fighting a great and glorious war.

Lev Kopelev [12] recalled from his days as a young party activist: "I was convinced that we were soldiers on an invisible front, waging war on kulak sabotage for the sake of bread the country needed for the five-year plan. For bread above all, but also for the souls of peasants whose attitudes had hardened through ignorance and low political consciousness ... not grasping the great truth of communism."

Collectivisation squeezed the life out of the Russian village, which Tolstoy and Dostoevsky had regarded as the heart of the Russian nation. Peasants were subjected to a second serfdom: they were deprived of the passbooks necessary to resettle in the towns, required to work for low or non-existent pay and to deliver produce at artificially low prices to the state. Young men –

who had a right to their passbooks when they did military service – would mostly leave the village, which as a result became home to women and old men.

The number of children born there declined drastically. As old people died no one took over their homes, which remained derelict. When it came to the annual harvest, villagers could not cope. When I was a student at Moscow University in the mid-1960s, my colleagues had to begin their academic year in September with two or three weeks' hard labour gathering in the crops.

The price of victory

The Soviet Union has one uncontestable and undying claim to Russian patriotism: victory in the "Great Patriotic War" of 1941-45. Under Stalin's leadership – however defective in the early stages – the Russian people led the other peoples of the Soviet Union, and indeed of Europe, to triumph over Nazism, to the liberation of its surviving victims and to the creation of a peaceful if divided Europe. This was the high point of Russian – not just Soviet – history: never had the czars dominated central and eastern Europe to the same extent, nor made Russia one of the world's two superpowers.

Nearly all Russians were justifiably proud of this achievement [13]. Yet maintaining it over the following decades was to cost them dearly. During the later decades of the Soviet Union the Russians (and to some extent also the Ukrainians and Belarusians) bore the main burden of great-power status. The military-industrial complex required to sustain it was largely a Russian, or at least Slavic, monopoly. The language of command in the armed forces was Russian, and the traditions and symbolism of the fighting men also derived from Russian history and culture.

The lion's share – about 75% - of military-industrial research and production was located in the RSFSR (Russian Republic), with a further 15% in Ukraine. Several major Russian cities – Gor'kii, Sverdlovsk, Perm', Kuibyshev – were closed to foreign visitors because they contained so many military factories and facilities. These and other cities suffered from severe pollution: smoke from fuel, effluent from industrial chemicals. Lake Baikal [14], the largest source of fresh water in the world, was poisoned by discharges from a cellulose factory designed to strengthen the tyres of bombers.

A massive housing programme was launched to provide for the soldiers and industrial workers required to sustain great-power status. Tall apartment blocks began to dominate the urban scene almost everywhere. They were impressive, and the new flats were hygienic and well-heated, but they were cramped, mostly far from the earth and fresh air, and in general not a good place to bring up children, especially if both parents were working.

As Russia became - for the first time - a mainly urban country, its population ceased to grow and even began to decline. By the early 1970s the demographer Viktor Perevedentsev [15] was warning that the Russian population was not reproducing itself. To do so, he calculated, each Russian couple needed to have an average of 2.65 children; the actual figure was 2.4 and in Moscow as low as 1.6. In the Caucasus and central Asia, however, the reproduction rate was much higher: more people there preserved their way of life better, lived in small towns and villages, in one or two-storey homes where children could easily play and relatives were nearby and able to look after them when needed. So Russians were gradually losing their demographic dominance, especially in the armed forces.

In other ways too the Russians paid heavily for sustaining huge armed forces and the industry to provide for them. Their living standards remained very modest, and their needs for food, consumer goods, services and transport were met only skimpily – as they became increasingly aware when more contact with foreigners became possible. The quintessential Russian

institution of these decades was the queue – for fresh fruit, television sets, furniture, shoe repairs, railway tickets, entitlements to something or other. Most items were cheap but scarce, so the queue became the normal method to ration them.

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When Russians try to understand what happened [16] to them in the Soviet Union, they come up against an ineluctable paradox. The Soviet Union was both Russian and anti-Russian. Superpower status and the mission to save the world were purchased at the cost of national degradation. The Soviet model succeeded in certain ways: it educated the masses, it created modern industry, science and technology; it defeated the Germans at war. Yet it also precipitated a Russian demographic disaster, devastated Russian agriculture, demoralised the Russian peasantry, undermined the Russian church and paralysed Russian culture.

Russians' feelings about the Soviet Union are both strong and ambivalent. And they are still unresolved. There has been no great turning-point at which Russia decisively dissociated itself from the Soviet Union and started a new path. There was no trial of the Soviet Communist Party for its crimes. Lenin was never moved from the mausoleum [17]. Soviet symbols are still everywhere to be seen: the Russian army continues to march under a red banner with a star, though without a hammer and sickle.

The incident which best illustrates this ambivalence came at the 2000 Olympic Games. The old Soviet national anthem [18] had been dropped, and a new melody adopted – but without words, because no one could agree what they should be. As a result, victorious Russian athletes had nothing to sing when they stood on the podium, in contrast to their rivals from every other nation, and felt very embarrassed at their conspicuous silence. Putin therefore decided to bring back the old Soviet melody, but to new words – which by an exquisite irony were composed by the aged Sergei Mikhalkov, who fifty years earlier had written the abandoned words of the Soviet anthem.

Russia, then, is both Soviet and anti-Soviet, at one and the same time. Stalin is still admired because he won the Great Patriotic War and (it is thought) cracked down on bureaucratic corruption – even though most people know perfectly well that he was a ruthless mass murderer. Memory [19] always tends to embellish what we have lost, filtering out the repugnant and leaving undisturbed the agreeable. Russians' ambivalent attitude to their own history is likely to prove long-lasting.

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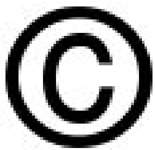

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