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Russians in Wartime and Defensive Consolidation

JEREMY MORRIS

The Russian invasion of Ukraine seemingly shocked Russia experts as much as anyone else. At home, it brought disbelief, fear, and apprehension to the majority of Russians. As an ethnographer of Russia with over 30 years of close interaction with people from all walks of life there, I was party to a snapshot of reactions, first on a minute-by-minute basis as the first bombs and rockets fell on Kyiv, and then in even more difficult exchanges with friends and colleagues in response to atrocities like the murder of civilians in Bucha and the destruction of the city of Mariupol, as well as the effect of sanctions and the withdrawal of Western companies from Russia itself. In this overview, though, I will try to connect the reactions of most Russians—which fit a pattern of what I call “defensive consolidation”—to a broader arc of current history.

To understand the seemingly muted, accepting, and sometimes approving responses by Russians toward the war, we have to do two things. First, dig deep into the structure of Russian society, characterized by economic adversity and political disconnection. Second, zoom out—and look at how disappointment, resentment, and the fruitless searches for a connective idea to make sense of the new Russia find partial, but incomplete, fulfillment in expressing approval of the leader’s decisions. Now is the beginning of the end of Putinism, but it was never a coherent ideology, and in many senses is just part of a continuity of change that goes back to 1986 and Mikhail Gorbachev’s late Soviet reforms. The descent into militarism, chauvinism, and isolationism is a last desperate attempt to give society a reason to believe in the state’s

capacity to lead, and an answer to the question posed by big politics: “Who are the Russians?”

Even for many ordinary people—while they grudgingly express loyalty—aggression against a neighbor and autarky are the wrong answers. In my many talks with Russians over the years, they have had an entirely different question in mind, one that the regime itself doesn’t even appear to understand: How to address the loss of social coherence and purpose that the Soviet period—however flawed and coercive in practice—provided for the majority of citizens of that supranational state?

RUSSIA’S LONG COVID

Before focusing on Russians’ reaction to the war, let me step back and take stock of “late Putinism” as seen by the average Russian person. We need to remember that COVID-19 hit Russia particularly hard in 2020–22. The federal government cynically delegated the response to subnational authorities, and the burden fell on what was already a chronically underfunded health service and an aging, sick population. By some counts, Russia has had the highest rates of death of any developed nation. Moscow, both the city and the region, where over 10 percent of the Russian population lives, instituted relatively harsh lockdowns and used advanced technology to monitor citizens’ quarantine, arbitrarily punishing thousands of ill people due to the rushed and buggy programming of a self-isolation app.

When vaccination began, people simply did not trust the authorities and medical personnel. Mass avoidance of the Sputnik V vaccine was not so much about anti-science views, but reflected a realistic and rational calculation—Russia’s state is ineffective at protecting people at the best of times, as I wrote previously for *Current History*.

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Resentment also played a part. A frequent rejoinder was, “Why should I risk my health in getting a job of unknown provenance when the state does nothing for me?” Essentially, people refused a call to reciprocal social solidarity—not because they are strongly individualistic, but because of the overall absence of meaningful social protection. The idea that the weakest need to look after themselves is coded into the callous “common sense” of Russian politics itself.

The Russian economy had its boom time in the 2000s, but after the global financial crisis of 2008, it saw some of the worst stagnation of incomes in Europe. Corruption grew, and the net wealth of a new breed of the super-rich expanded—those with political connections, often via the security services, to Putin and his circle. The increasingly online population was no longer blissfully ignorant—the tenacious efforts of oppositionist Alexei Navalny to publicize corruption at the highest level meant that no one could ignore the rapacious appetites of the new elite, set against deteriorating standards in schooling, health, and social infrastructure more generally.

While oil revenues continued to make Russia, and particularly Moscow City, rich in terms of GDP, average incomes fell behind.

Politicians responded with often harsh rhetoric of social Darwinism, lamenting the lack of “entrepreneurialism” or bootstrapping among poor Russians. More than once, a minor scandal ensued after unguarded statements by out-of-touch politicians, such as, “No one asked you to have children,” or, “If you’re not already successful, why should I talk to you?” Even before the present crisis, Russia had drifted into a long period of growing social discontent with government, a weak economy benefiting only a tiny minority who could extract “rents,” often via corruption, and a largely cynical and distant political class whose main rhetorical strategies revolved around mounting a “culture war” against symbols of so-called Western permissiveness and proposing backward-looking evocations of Russia’s imperial greatness, often centered on the Soviet victory in World War II.

BEYOND THE RHETORIC OF REVANCHISM

Therefore, when war surprised everyone, including even intimates of Putin himself, it was

not surprising that in looking for proximal causes, observers focused on these rhetorics of revanchism, chauvinism, and “victim” narratives. The latter relate to frequent complaints about Russia’s alleged sidelining in international affairs since 1991, a lack of support for the transformation of its economy and society (such as the aid given to Germany after 1945), and the expansion of NATO to its doorstep. For our media, an important part of explaining the war to a European and North American public is to highlight the effective leveraging of this victim narrative coupled with nostalgia for the USSR’s great power status. The allegation is that Russians have been willing consumers of this Putin-branded Kool-Aid.

It is true that a good share of Russians, particularly older people, feel that Russia is “disrespected,” and a few relish the idea that Russia should be feared. There are even some who celebrate Ukraine being “put in its place.” But my argument is that for the majority, resurgent aggressive nationalism, directed from above, is not relevant to their lives. So how did we get to such a state of affairs? It surely

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can’t be enough to focus only on the rhetoric of Putinism, especially when it is relatively empty of positive content and delivered without the dark charisma of a Trump figure.

Despite our Western obsession with Putin’s flirtation with macho images, his aging and his eccentric reclusion during the pandemic (holding meetings at very long tables) have left him a much more marginal figure than he once was.

In the United States, the genre of “hillbilly research” is now well known. The respectable version is work by scholars like sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, who lived in Louisiana communities to get at the sense of loss and disappointment that led people to emotionally connect with populist messages such as “Make America Great Again.” In the media, this research is often simplified to such an extent that it panders to liberal prejudices by producing a one-dimensional, wholly malevolent and resentful political subject who wants to “burn it all down.” Since the Russo-Ukraine war started, this pattern now repeats itself: Russians are portrayed as bloodthirsty, vengeful barbarians bereft of reason and compassion.

Like Hochschild’s, my research focuses on the ways the “left behind” see and experience the

world, and that includes politically. It was therefore with a great sense of trepidation that I opened my phone messenger on the morning of Russia's invasion. I had been in conversation with my usual research participants more frequently in February 2022 as it became clear that the geopolitical situation was getting worse. What was I going to find—a baying mob? Instead, their initial reaction was disbelief, shock, and that roller-coaster vertigo feeling—a giddy anxiety. “It can't really have happened? How can he [Putin, who is rarely named] have made this decision?”

But even in the first 24 hours shock started to morph, or at least gut responses mixed with cognitive processes and coping mechanisms kicked in. Most Russians, whether they admit it or not, daily consume state-controlled media, and they are influenced, sometimes strongly, by the state's messaging. But we should be cautious about propaganda's supposed “hypodermic” effects: people's views aren't directly injected by propaganda, but shaped by their own coping mechanisms and life experience.

The Russian state has shut down most easily accessible sources of trustworthy alternative information. After the war started, a virtual private network was needed to access YouTube (where many oppositionists are active), Facebook, and Twitter, along with Russian-language news sites critical of the regime. Many people were rightly afraid to even talk about the war, given the immediate move by the government to criminalize the publication of information that discredits the Russian armed forces—a frighteningly wide definition that could be applied to people “liking” a post on social media. Nonetheless, there were some significant antiwar street protests early on, despite the risk of arrest and prison. Even now, antiwar graffiti and surreptitious messages appear in public spaces, as well as some evidence of sabotage of military draft offices.

The invasion was officially called a “special antiterrorist operation” against “neo-Nazis,” but it quickly became clear to many that things were not going according to plan. This fed into cognitive and emotional coping mechanisms, forms of defensive consolidation: a retreat into comforting truths which help individuals deal with cognitive dissonance. For example, rather than accept that “our” Russian troops were indiscriminately using rockets against civilian targets in Ukraine, a person wrote to me via Facebook (while it was still accessible): “It's better that it's over quickly; Ukrainians

brought this upon themselves; it's better that it happens there than here; it was inevitable that the West would provoke a large conflict.”

DENIAL AND LAY NARRATIVES

Sociologist Stanley Cohen wrote a book called *States of Denial* more than 20 years ago about how people react to unpleasant events not with critical thinking, but with avoidance. This insight is relevant to all types of societies and historical periods. Most Russian people quickly came to “know” on some level that Putin had invaded Ukraine, that Russian forces are responsible for the deaths of thousands of Ukrainians, and that the massive destruction of Ukrainian cities (where, incidentally, a lot of Russian-speaking Ukrainians live) was the result. And yet they will actively “not know.” They will on some level continue to make use of narratives claiming that the Ukrainian leadership is guilty, that the West provoked the conflict, that Ukrainian resistance only makes the conflict worse, or that Ukrainian troops “choose” to contest or target urban territory, making civilian casualties worse.

Cohen concludes that denial has no easy solution. Historians of postwar Germany have long known of this problem: collective punishment did not lead to an enduring or deeply held sense of guilt, only a vague sense of responsibility. More powerful than guilt or shame are competing claims of victimhood.

Even among those with more awareness or a more instinctive grasp of the murderous capacities of their own state, the Russian response has been chiefly defensive consolidation. I don't use the familiar term “rally round the flag,” because what is happening in Russia is not directly connected to expressions of patriotism, or nationalism, or enthusiasm for either the “special military operation” or the Russian government. The state has failed to create a coherent conservative ideology, or meaningful reasons for loyalty to the regime, beyond self-interest and advancement. In my research, I often find examples of the Russian state's opaqueness or incoherence in the eyes of its citizens. Russian people fall back on a variety of instinctive and “lay” narratives—some of which coincide with elite talking points, but also have a life of their own.

Against the impossible truth of the war, the phrase “Truth [*pravda*] is on our side” is used by more than a few in a kind of magical defensive incantation—but it is not said with any sense that

the speaker celebrates this “truth.” An alternative translation of this emotionally evocative phrase could be, “Our cause is just.” A retired provincial engineer in his 60s says:

There’s disinformation on both sides, but we have the greater truth. Yes, it’s war: we’ll find out later who burned whom; there’ll be losses, probably big losses for us, and for you, but you cannot stop inevitable historical processes. This is not about fascism, I will admit, it’s about overcoming a greater injustice—the division of fraternal peoples.

SENSES OF LOSS

Two words stand out here: “injustice” and “fraternal.” Zooming out to look at the long post-communist period since 1991, it’s easy to see why these Soviet-style keywords still have purchase on the thinking even of younger people. The relative recovery of living standards from 1999 to 2008, which could have been Putin’s legacy, only papers over the bigger picture. By many measures of human flourishing, subjective well-being, and social mobility, Russia has barely progressed since the Soviet period. Indeed, it’s not hard to argue that for the majority, despite the façade of a roaring consumer sector and the shiny trappings of a market economy, life is more of a financial and future-fearful struggle than the so-called era of stagnation in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Once more, Russia is a struggling middle-income country with a GDP per capita similar to that of Argentina, Malaysia, or Bulgaria. Its oil and gas income flatters this statistic; in reality, incomes are so skewed toward the rich that the average wealth of a Russian family is negligible, the poor are reliant on microcredit to get by, and many people struggle to pay utility bills—even for smartphone data. Average incomes in Russia were recently surpassed by China for the first time—a remarkably bad milestone for Russia, given its mineral wealth and its highly educated and urban population, and China’s still urbanizing millions of poor citizens. Russia has also taken a tumble down the global ranking for wages, with real incomes similar to those in Mexico, Thailand, Turkey, and Brazil.

These social problems make it obvious why even now, a significant majority of over-40s

responding to polls express nostalgia for the USSR, as do nearly half of younger people over 25. Typically, this is interpreted as more evidence of chauvinism (a post-empire people harking back to a period of greatness), or an expression of the inability of some generations to adapt to change and their stubborn attachment to the state’s management of individual risk. Recently, a few scholars have rejected this negative assessment of “Soviet nostalgia.” (I prefer not to use this term at all.) Nonetheless, a shared sense of having “lost” something worthwhile, whether a political project of relative equality, a vast federal state of some modernizing power, or simply a coherent sense of social purpose, can act as a glue that binds all kinds of people to an elite in a time of trouble.

Defensive consolidation would therefore be part of a relative closing of the gap between an elite that has lost its way and a tired and disoriented people. What makes it different from the usual way of looking at reactions to war, such as “rally round the flag,” is that it is based on a deeper set of ideas that are dislocated in time and space (loss of the

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“good” USSR project, resentment against a collective West, social dislocation from the 1990s, and loss of social bonds in general). It is striking that despite some visible flag waving, the majority have not responded with

overt nationalistic or even patriotic fervor or enthusiasm. Even pro-war demonstrations must be carefully curated, so afraid is the regime of independent mobilizations.

Nonetheless, almost all Russians are patriots (why wouldn’t they be?) and seek ways of expressing their belief in their country. The only way of doing this right now is to defensively consolidate behind the “idea” of a political struggle for the nation (which is hardly even a sense of “Russianness”) against the hegemonic part of the world. Some Russian leftists have made a similar prognosis: that varieties of Soviet patriotism were discredited and discarded by Putinism, leaving the path open only to expressions of chauvinistic, even fascistic militarism.

Western scholarly, media, and other responses to the war on Ukraine have shown a large degree of incuriousness and moralizing, even demonizing of “the Russians.” We’re closer to the spirit of 1914 and open propaganda that paints the enemy as barbarians than to World War II, or even the Cold

War. Lacking here is what American sociologist C. Wright Mills famously called the “sociological imagination”: an awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society’s context and history. It is ironic that the harshest voices criticize Russians for lacking the will or courage to respond morally to the actions of their leaders, but then themselves fall into emotional and untenable explanations of events.

My own view might seem controversial, but it involves taking a long view of the last thirty years or more as a still-unfinished process of coming to terms with the traumatic end of the Soviet period. We have to look to particular senses of loss if we are to explain a search for meaning and identity in the present that for now results in consolidation in Russia behind an idea that “everyone is against us, and yet we are the victim.”

RETURN OF THE TRAUMATIC POST-SOVIET SUBJECT

Anthropologist Serguei Oushakine coined the term “the patriotism of despair” in a book of that title published in 2009. He paired this with the idea of a “community of loss” to describe left-behind towns whose sons had been killed in the Chechen wars. Oushakine looked at how veterans’ mothers responded to the state’s abandonment of its own citizens. But what if we extend that insight to talk about a broader sense of absence in the present and its impetus to find a replacement set of values, objects of attachment, and ideas? Oushakine points to this possibility: he says his book is concerned with a “collapse of the general social context (symbolic order) within which actions and identities used to make sense.”

For me, this insight is intensified by the reactions of Russians to the war today. An incomplete process of integrating different experiences and ways of talking about loss and disappointment is visible in the shared reactive and defensive responses by Russians to their state’s aggression. We could go further and say that the current war is at least partly connected to the inherently traumatic nature of the experience of the USSR’s collapse, now out in the open. Do I mean that revanchist desires for punishment and aggression are unveiled? Well, once more, that could be part of it, but the nature of the trauma is more psychosocial than ethnonationalist. It gains visibility in the actions of Putin’s clique toward Ukraine, using ideas about the core nation and errant Ukrainian subjects, but its roots are surely in the loss of the

overall ends-driven logic of the Soviet project and the resulting social, economic, and political disorientation.

Some formidable scholars have started to substantiate the argument. Georgian-Russian philosopher Keti Chukhrov, in a recent book called *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism*, offers a unique political-economic history of communism. Her thinking is too complex to do justice to here, but her basic point is that we should take seriously the effect of the eradication of private property on the identities of Soviet people. The Soviet system was more than just communist ideology; it was a specific form of modernity where the utopian future orientation of the whole society could not be avoided, regardless of an individual’s ideas and views. However flawed the “deprivatization” of the economy and society, it had real leveling effects beyond income and access to goods and status.

Chukhrov’s argument is that the system presented an imaginary space of possibility that was continually held up as an ideal, regardless of reality. Indeed, its emphasis on continually building toward a shining future made references to current shortcomings, or complaints about privations, irrelevant. In place of desire for consumption or acquisitiveness, this form of modernity allowed people to invest themselves in production that had future meaning: the material of socialism, the smokestacks and factories of Stalinism, rather than the materialism of capitalism. But more than that, Chukhrov points to the remodeling of desire: it is based not on responding to a “lack,” but on the merits of involvement as a group member. Instead of atomized competition, there would be the satisfaction of inclusion in a project where one had no need to think of oneself as an individual “homo economicus” competing against the rest. Chukhrov’s argument, then, is about directing the “libido,” in a nonsexual sense, which drives all humans in their projects and life-aims.

THE SOCIAL EMOTIONS OF SOVIETNESS

We don’t need to completely accept Chukhrov’s radical psychoanalytical perspective to agree with the general idea of her argument; we can turn to a historical frame of reference, as researcher Galina Orlova recently has done. As a “social archaeologist” of the USSR, she emphasizes the overwhelming power of the Soviet project’s rhetorical language, with its focus on mobilization and acute sense of temporality. Soviet citizens were

always being made conscious of the historicity of their society, regardless of the reality of their own lives. They lived in a present that was simultaneously breaking from the capitalist and feudal past in the most radical ways and hurtling toward a future of plenitude.

People might not have felt up to this challenge of making history, but they were told most insistently that they were a part of it. The cognitive and ontological “relief” of knowing this not only helped individuals deal with the real privations, violence, and disappointments of Soviet reality; it gave ordinary, flawed people, who may have had little understanding of the political project, permission to ignore the bigger picture and attend to their mundane daily troubles. But it did not allow them to develop a sense of existing outside this totalizing social system. They could not abdicate membership and identity.

Some scholars have argued that retreat into private life and cares was a statement of detachment from the system, but Orlova would argue that the very allowance of heroic ordinariness contributed to a sense of alignment with society, and of being-in-common. After all, if I live in a society that is building communism, whatever meager contribution I make, whether serving as a nightwatchman in a polar north construction site or cooking meals for kindergarten children, gains a sense of working with society toward a single shared aim.

For scholars such as myself and Orlova, what we observe today is a keen sense of the loss of an ineffable “commonality” (*obshchnost'*). Collective memory can activate and even transmit to younger people a sense of this loss. In interview after interview, when interlocutors assess the current state of affairs in comparison with the Soviet order, they begin by talking about social security and perhaps even ideological foundations, but what dominates is the sense of the possibility of social communication, reciprocity, understanding, the human texture of material life. This comes through when they talk about workplaces, schools, their relations with their grade school teacher, neighbors, grandparents. About the reality of the low standard of living, the Cold War, state coercion, lack of personal freedom, and the technological ineffectiveness or inefficiency of the Soviet system they

are largely indifferent. “Yes, we may have lived badly, but. . . .”

People in the present are jarred into enthusiasm when the prospect of some reanimation of lost formats of communication presents itself—through work relations, volunteering, and other kinds of quasi-civicness. And these can be vicarious—witness the “nostalgic” popularity of Soviet comedies and dramas, even among younger people. What these modes have in common is that they can offer a substitute tinsel of emotional connectedness. But people want more. The thesis is simple: people suffer from the collapse of those forms of sociality that were part of the experience of the Soviet project. They are ready to support anything that somehow promises to return those forms of communication and unalienated existence in the world. This is not about the “political” as in ideological stances, not about national identity or empire, but about communicative bonds of collective experience. This is perhaps the one truth Putin really understands (without fully understanding) and can connect with.

The study of the social emotions of groups whose actions seem alien or even morally culpable to us has an inevitable political effect. We ascribe “resentment,” or victim-complexes, to those we disapprove of. Essentially, we avoid having to think about the deeper causes of these emotions. It is still surprising to me that the social and historical roots of the observed revanchism and bitterness of those who support Putin’s war, and those who only conditionally or reluctantly acquiesce to it, have been given so little attention.

Hopelessness and marginalization lead to the danger of radicalization of social groups that, given the recognition of their right to emotions of grief and loss, would not have been so hardened. People fall prey to those who give them hope for recognition of their emotional status. And it is no longer so important for them that in the process of recognition, the lost quality of social relations in an earlier era is replaced by loyalty to a despicable political regime. More positively, there are still plenty of their countrymen who, even now, while sharing a sense of loss, do not give in to the temptation to join in the celebration of the death and destruction that Russia has brought to their closest cultural neighbor, Ukraine. ■