AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

The Russian Public's Imperial Hangover

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Even as their government prepares them for the shock of Ukraine's counteroffensive, most Russians continue to endorse Putin's imperial dream. Why do the overwhelming majority of older Russians not only accept but support their country's war on Ukraine? The common answer is that they have no choice: the authorities, with backing from the FSB, have systematically identified and punished those who engage in public acts of disloyalty. Under such circumstances, who would dare protest?

Russians are hostage to Putin's Kremlin. Period.

Those seeking a silver lining are quick to point to the existence of underground opposition groups who have torched factories and public buildings. But which of those many conflagrations were the work of Russians themselves, as opposed to Ukrainian saboteurs? We won't know this unless and until the Ukrainian army emerges victorious. For now, however, even the existence of a small but active Russian fifth column does not refute the fact that the Russian populace remains passive, even as tens of thousands of their brothers and husbands return from Ukraine in caskets.

But are they merely passive? Even after a year of war, credible Russian opinion researchers and bloggers affirm the presence of millions of what Russians call "hurrah patriots." These zealots go far beyond the dictates of mere survival to mouth the Kremlin's slogans. Granted, such zealots tend to be older, but many younger Russians sing in the same key. This brings us back to why so many Russians not only accept but support their country's war on Ukraine?

Those who study Russia give short shrift to the psychological impact of imperialism on the Russian masses. Topics like centralized planning, the mega-industries that dominate the economy, ideology, and corruption have rightly garnered attention. But largely neglected is the state of mind fostered by imperial rule and its hold over the populace. This may be one the most enduring legacies of Lenin, Stalin, and their successors.

Forty years ago a brilliant writer from Soviet Kyrgyzstan, Chingiz Aitmatov (1928-2008), laid out the impact of authoritarianism on individual psyches in a bone-chilling novel, A Day Lasts More than A Hundred Years. The work blends such unlikely ingredients as the mythic past, Soviet rule, and intergalactic space. Yet its plot is simple. In ancient times an invading warrior tribe takes captive a Central Asian resistance fighter. As they do with all of their captives, the conquering tribesmen subject him to a harrowing process, binding his head in a cap made from the skin of a freshly slaughtered goat. The hat gradually shrinks, causing unbearable pain, which few survived. When the cap is finally removed, the victim has lost all consciousness of himself as a human being, his family, his entire people, and their past. His captors called such transformed beings "Mankurts," zombies, who have been stripped of their individual and collective memories. The Mankurt is now entirely at his captors' mercy, a slave without past or future, who meekly does whatever they demand of him.

Surprisingly, the official journal Novyi Mir published this disturbing story in 1980, as Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev's reign sank into terminal stagnation. A decade later, on the eve of the collapse of the USSR, Aitmatov teamed up with director Hojaguly Nariyew from Turkmenistan to turn the Mankurt story into an acclaimed film. Aitmatov got away with this because his international renown rendered him untouchable. It helped that he had been an officer of the Writers' Union of the USSR and a member of the Supreme Soviet.

Soon all those who had suffered under Russian rule —Ukrainians, Balts, Tatars, Chechens, and the peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus — were asking themselves whether they, too, had not been Mankurtized. The collapse of the Communist Party and the USSR itself opened the door to remedial actions. Leaders of the newly independent states understood that the best antidote to Mankurtism was to revive their national memory and identity.

Activists and scholars turned out books and films on heroic moments in their national pasts that Moscow had suppressed. Uzbeks reclaimed the memory of the Jadids, educational modernizers of the early 1900s who embraced modern knowledge, only to be exterminated by the Communists. Kyrgyz recovered memory of the 1916 Urkun, the mass revolt against the Tsar's 1916 draft that left 220,000 Kyrgyz dead. Kazakhs wrote about the horrific Moscow-induced famine of 1930-1933 that killed two out of five Kazakhs. Tajiks honored the memory of the Basmachi, anti-Communist partisans who took to the mountains after 1917. And across the Caucasus the new leaders honored the national governments that had emerged briefly after World War I, only to be cut down by the Red Army. Ukrainians also participated in this movement by documenting the "extermination famine" (Holodomor) of 1932-1933 that took some 3.9 million lives, and when they celebrated the anti-Communist partisans who fought Moscow for a decade after the end of World War II.

In all the newly independent states this passion for national recovery was genuine and deep. But did this process also take place in Russia? Conscientious Russians like Andrei Sakharov toiled to rehabilitate long-reviled figures and movements from their own past. But their effort was only one element of what took place after the collapse of 1991 and, in light of subsequent events, the less consequential part. For the past that Russian reformers sought to reclaim was not sufficiently compelling to resist a counter-movement from those who still sought to rule through Mankurtism. Leading this powerful current were the FSB (KGB) and the Russian army, both of which survived the collapse of the USSR. Beginning even before his appointment as president in 1999, KGB veteran Vladimir Putin was maneuvering to place himself at the head of these neo-imperial forces.

Putin realized that autocracy and the Soviet imperial idea had deep roots not only in governmental, legal, and educational institutions, but in the psyches of ordinary citizens. Its legacy is like a hangover, but one that can be passed down, even to those who did not drink it in at the source. Yet to acknowledge that Mankurtism maintained its grip on millions of Russians is not to explain why it persisted. Nor can its survival be attributed solely to Putin and publicists like the fanatical Alexander Dugin. Nor does it suffice to say simply that millions of Russians had internalized it. How did Germans and Japanese who had internalized their leaders' fascism emancipate themselves after 1945, when so many Russians after 1991 failed to do so?

The ominous combination of passivity and chauvinism evinced by so many Russians today has far deeper roots in Russian society and history. Down to 1861 fully 80% of all Russians were serfs, under the strict control of landlords or the state. This form of slavery meant they were tied to the land but could be sold at will. Following Russia's defeat in the first Crimean War of 1853-1856, Tsar Alexander II abolished serfdom in 1861 (two years before Lincoln's emancipation of America's slaves), thus removing what his father had called "a gunpowder magazine beneath the state." But even though serfs gained certain freedoms, they were still confined to their communal villages and obliged to make pay reparation to the state for another forty-six years. Making matters worse, in 1928 Stalin re-collectivized the entire Russian peasantry, converting them once more to the status of serfs, this time of the Communist state. In other words, most Russians knew even partial freedom for only two decades prior to recent times.

All of Russia's great writers, and many foreigners, have written about the impact of serfdom and the village commune on the Russian psyche. Some idealized the peasantry and their village communes, defending them as the keeper of the nation's values. Others attacked them both, identifying them as the source of Russia's backwardness, its alienation from Europe, and of a national psychology based on dependence, subservience to Moscow, and disengagement from civic life. Recent studies affirm this latter view.

This is not to say that all Russians suffer from this psychology. Quite the contrary. Russia's independent-minded intelligentsia has enriched the nation's culture and European civilization as a whole. Where would we all be without Pushkin, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Tsvetaeva, Mandelshtam, or Pasternak; without Mendeleev, and Kapitsa; or without Tchaikovsky, Shostakovich, and Prokofiev? However, for all its achievements, Russia's intelligentsia has always existed more as a separate stratum of Russian life than as an emanation of the society as a whole.

It is this separation that may account for the persistence of the psychology of serfdom/slavery—call it Mankurtism– among the Russian populace at large. It has survived tsarism, Communism, and even the massive urbanization that has recently taken place. This deeply rooted identity of dependency does not prevent Russians from living good lives, from being resourceful and productive, from laughing, or appreciating the beauties of nature. But it enables those at the top, if they are so inclined, to play upon and manipulate the mass of people. It may explain the passivity we see among so many Russians today, and the success with which Vladimir Putinhas been able to manipulate the public mood so as to support his backward-looking wars of conquest.

Will this ever change? Modern communications, expanded travel, and the passage of time may erode this psychology of dependence. But modern life alone will not bring about its demise. Progress will depend also on fundamental political and legal reforms, the transformation of Russia's schools and, above all, universal civic education. These are all tasks that only Russians themselves can perform. Whether and how they chose to do so will depend on how Putin's war against Ukraine ends. Meanwhile, well-wishers abroad can provide ideas but not money tied with "conditions" on its use, which fatally tainted such efforts after the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

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