



It's Time to Drop 'Eurasia'

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A year and a half into Russia's brutal war against Ukraine, Vladimir Putin's ambitions have become clear to all. Both expert and public opinion accept that his goal, at the very least, is to reassert Moscow's control over all the former lands of the Soviet Union. What is yet to be understood is, first, the extent to which he informs and justifies his actions in terms of the much broader and more sinister theory of Eurasianism, and, second, that that theory has assumed the same place in Russia's current ideology as Marxism-Leninism once filled under communism. The unification of all Eurasia under Moscow's rule would give reality to what Putin smugly calls "the Russian World."

Prior to 1990 few in the West had even heard the word "Eurasia," but then, following the collapse of the USSR, it began appearing everywhere. Investors, eager to develop new markets in the fifteen successor states, seized on it as a convenient catch-all phrase covering the entirety of what had once been the USSR. Washington think tanks were quick to latch onto the fashionable new term, while academic programs across the United States that focused on Russian and Soviet studies quickly rebranded themselves. In 1992, Congress got in on the act by founding and endowing the Eurasia Foundation with the lofty purpose of promoting civil society across the former Soviet Union.

Many now use the term "Eurasia" as a way of speaking about the territory of the former Soviet Union without mentioning Russia, but others use it to denote anything from the former Soviet Union to all of the lands east of the Elbe. In most cases the adoption of the term "Eurasia" was seen as a timely and innocuous step carried out under the pressure of dramatic world events after 1991.

However, there are readily at hand more specific and appropriate alternatives to the term "Eurasia." Thus, we might speak of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, or the countries of the Caucasus, Baltic region, or Central Asia singly or in any combination. Why, then, the preoccupation with the word "Eurasia"?

Initially a term used by mid-19th century geologists to characterize the continent of Europe and Asia, "Eurasia" entered the realm of geopolitics after World War I. In Prague, a group of anti-Bolshevik Russian émigré nationalists picked it up as part of their effort to rescue Russian nationalism from the grip of Lenin, Stalin, and the newly formed USSR. These anti-Soviet Russian thinkers took inspiration from the writings of a then-obscure English geographer named Halford Mackinder, who had divided the continental landmass into a vast "heartland" consisting of Russia and Central Asia and surrounded by diverse "rim lands." Most geographers at the time held that political power derives from control of the world's sea lanes. But Mackinder argued that the fate of Asia and Europe was in the hands of those controlling the heartland. He predicted that the struggle to control this vast and multicultural space would define the future.

The Prague-based Eurasianists acknowledged the diversity of peoples, cultures, and religions on the vast Asian plains but claimed that through intense interactions over the millennia, these diverse peoples had developed common and distinctive linguistic and cultural traits that contrast sharply with both Asia and Europe. Beneath their superficial differences, so the Eurasianists asserted, the varied peoples and tribes of these lands had evolved into a single mega-ethnos. Russia, then, is neither European nor Asian, but "Eurasian," the main bearer not of European or Chinese values but of the ideals of primordial steppe tribes.

On the basis of these bizarre but thoroughly elaborated claims, the pioneering Eurasianists in Prague declared Russia's utter independence from Europe and its rise as a continental power fated to dominate not just the old lands of Muscovy but all of Eurasia. The subsequent evolution of this fanciful theory has been brilliantly recounted by the English journalist Charles Clover in his important 2016 study, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism*. Appearing as it did just when the West was studiously side-stepping the implications of Putin's seizure of Crimea and other Ukrainian territories, it was, shall we say, an "inconvenient truth." But Clover gave us a landmark study that warrants far more attention than it has received to date.

Clover focuses above all on the enigmatic ethnologist, historian, and fabulist Lev Gumilev (1912–92), who brought the ruminations of czarist émigrés home to Russia. The son of two of Russia's greatest poets, Gumilev (like both his parents) had suffered grievously under Moscow's rule, spending nearly two decades in Stalin's gulag. He emerged from the gulag less an enemy of communism, which he surely was, or a traditional Russian chauvinist who had made his peace with Moscow, and more the champion of the newly discovered super-nationality of Eurasia.

Yes, he acknowledged, there existed people who called themselves Turks, Mongols, Huns, and Slavs, and nomadic herdsmen and farmers, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, and animists, all of whom spoke their own languages. Yet through their intense linguistic interpenetration over many centuries, so Gumilev argued, they had acquired a common identity. No longer were they Russians, Azeris, Tatars, or Uzbeks; now they had evolved into a super-ethnos, defined in opposition to both Asia and Europe. In spite of their great diversity in religion and cultural practices, Gumilev considered his Eurasians one people. Impelled by this vague and dubious claim, Gumilev turned his back on Europe and European culture, vigorously rejected democracy, and championed what was in effect an entirely new and grander form of Russian imperialism, one freed from both czarism and communism. In so doing, he laid the groundwork for post-Soviet Russia to reclaim its place in the world.

When Gumilev died in St. Petersburg in 1992, a deputy mayor of the city and forty-year-old veteran of the KGB named Vladimir Putin was among the thousands of the curious who lined the road to the cemetery. But the process by which young Putin progressed from observing a funeral cortege to fulsomely embracing the ideology espoused by the deceased and his heirs was neither linear nor swift.

The collapse of the USSR had brought in its wake the collapse of the Communist Party and the ideology that had served as its state religion. During the 1990s, Russians and their leaders, while struggling to fend off economic collapse, groped about for values that might replace the secular religion that the Communist Party had promoted for seven decades. In spite of having attended law school, Putin was by no means an intellectual and was incapable of devising what all agreed was an urgently needed new national ideology. Fortunately for him, there were many thinkers from whose works he could draw.

One whom Putin hailed as a “staunch patriot” was Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954), a monarchist, foe of communism, nationalist, and “Christian fascist” who had had many good things to say about Hitler. But since this savant had been dead for half a century, Putin could not turn to him for a program of action. Such was not the case with the former counterculture rock guitarist and now self-promoting ideological savant Alexander Dugin, who was very much alive.

Back in the Eighties, Dugin had been a dissident opposed to the turgid communist status quo and in search of a cause. He found it in Gumilev’s dream of Eurasia, which he deftly blended with ideas gleaned from direct contact with ultra-right thinkers and activists in France, Italy, and Belgium. No slacker, for this purpose Dugin had learned to speak both French and Italian. As he told Clover, “I absorbed this New Right model that resonated with Eurasianism very clearly.” Dugin then expounded these ideas in a long and rambling volume entitled *The Foundations of Geopolitics*, four Russian editions of which sold out immediately. Here Gumilev’s ideas on the world mission of Eurasia were blended with nuggets from both Mackinder and the new European ultra-right. The resulting amalgam demanded a powerful state to rule the entirety of Eurasia, eliminating national borders and without the inconvenience of elections, which Dugin staunchly opposed.

Dugin’s synthesis not only offered to fill Russia’s post-1991 ideological vacuum but it also gave Russia’s deep state—the military and the FSB, as the KGB has been renamed—a new and centrally important mission. This was Dugin’s message when he was repeatedly invited to give unpaid lectures at the army’s General Staff Academy. He also preached his theories to several of the new ultra-right political parties that emerged in Russia in those years but were largely ignored by Western experts on Russia. Through such lectures he successfully implanted the Eurasia ideology and ultra-right nationalistic ideas into Russia’s new elite. As he did so, he and his growing circle of followers came to identify the United States as the chief enemy of Russia and the emerging new Eurasia.

During the first years of his presidency, Putin made contact with Dugin and his Eurasian ideology and also with Gumilev’s ideas. By 2002 he was declaring to an audience in Kazakhstan that Russia had always conceived itself to be a Eurasian country. As Putin embraced the primordial notion of “Eurasia,” Dugin—the former dissident—embraced Putin and his vision of a new continent-spanning Russia. Soon Putin propagandists were rebranding themselves as “Asiatics.”

The dream of Eurasia came to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the communist dream of a classless utopia. Putin promptly set about institutionalizing his new ideology. He demanded to join and then closed down the Central Asia Economic Union that the newly independent states of Central Asia had created, which he saw as a threat to his Eurasian dream. He promptly replaced it with his own Eurasian Economic Union, and set up a Eurasian Development Bank as Eurasia’s answer to the World Bank and other existing international financial institutions. Inspired by the Eurasian fantasy and invoking it to justify his actions, Putin in 2008 commanded the Russian army to hack off two province of the Republic of Georgia and, in 2014, to seize both Crimea and four provinces of eastern Ukraine, all of which the United Nations recognized as part of Ukraine.

To be sure, there were setbacks along the way. Thus, he tried to gain control of Kyrgyzstan and establish an air base to control the Fergana Valley, the very heart of Central Asia. However, adroitly coordinated moves by China’s Hu Jintao and Uzbekistan’s Islam Karimov stopped him cold. But overall, Dugin and champions of the new Eurasian ideology in Moscow’s deep state were ecstatic. They rejoiced that Russia had finally found for itself a new global mission that was more grand even than czarism or communism.

Dazzled by this bold new term but ignorant of its actual content, Turkish investors and the New York architectural firm of Swanke Hayden Connell built the Eurasia Center in Moscow, Europe’s seventh-tallest structure. At the same time a vast Eurasia Shopping Mall opened its doors in Changchun, China, and “Eurasia Universities” were founded in Armenia, Bangladesh, and China. These, along with the various American think tanks and university programs that had added the word Eurasia to their names, had yet to perceive that what they assumed was merely a fashionable new geographical term was in fact an aggressive ethnic, cultural, and geopolitical ideology that President Putin had successfully invoked to justify brutal assaults on several of Russia’s sovereign neighbors. For Putin, his Eurasia program was risk-free.

Did anyone in the West perceive that these separate actions may have been linked by an overall ideology and that Moscow’s actions on behalf of that concept were growing increasingly brazen? One of the few to do so was Zbigniew Brzezinski in his *The Grand Chessboard*, published three years before Putin assumed the presidency but while Russia’s war in Chechnya was already grinding away. Though he used the then-fashionable term Eurasia, Brzezinski was well aware of one of Dugin’s main sources, Mackinder, whose heartland theory he invoked to assert the gravity of Russia’s recent geopolitical moves:

Ever since the continents started interacting politically, some five hundred years ago, Eurasia has been the center of world power. . . . It is [therefore] imperative that no Eurasian challenger emerges capable of dominating Eurasia and thus of also challenging America. How America 'manages' Eurasia is critical. A power that dominates Eurasia would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions . . . rendering the Western Hemisphere and Oceania geopolitically peripheral to the world's central continent.

In spite of Brzezinski's grim warnings, when he actually met Alexander Dugin in 2006 he dismissed him as a bizarre eccentric. Their meeting occurred because the author of this essay, puzzled by Americans' disinterest in the provocations contained in Dugin's published works, invited him to spend a week as his guest at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in Washington. All those who met with Dugin during that visit dismissed him as a madman. Arguably the only American who took him seriously was political scientist John B. Dunlop, who had been writing on the rise of a new spirit of nationalism in Russia since before the collapse of the USSR. But when Dunlop testified before Congress on the new Russian nationalism his insights fell on deaf ears.

Back to Ukraine

Realists in the West are not deaf to the ideology of Eurasianism, but prefer to base their analyses on hard and measurable facts, not what they consider the ethereal ideas propounded by foreign globe-spinners. Concerned that a desperate Putin might be tempted to resort to nuclear weapons in Ukraine, their goal is to reach an agreement with Moscow that will end the fighting and open the way to negotiations. But they are utterly vague on whether such negotiations should require Russia to return all Ukrainian territories to Ukraine, and are silent on whether Moscow should also abandon lands it has seized from Georgia and Moldova or any of its many military bases abroad, all of which are used as instruments to control their involuntary hosts.

The obvious problem with the kind of negotiations demanded by isolationist forces in Washington is that they sideline the Ukrainians, who have paid for Putin's adventure with thousands of lives, and subordinate their legitimate territorial claims to indeterminate negotiations conducted over their heads. Worse, they could leave intact post-Soviet Russia's fictionalized national ideology of Eurasianism, which has taken deep root not only in Moscow's intelligence agencies and parts of the military, but also in significant parts of the political elite and Russian public.

Back in 1932, after millions had died in Moscow's brutal collectivization and man-made famines, Stalin called for a pause. However, in the same speech he suggested that after a brief respite, "We will hitch up our pants and continue once more." Putin today appears as serious in his mission as Stalin, whom he admires. Viewed in this light, America's goal beyond preserving Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity should be to assure the end of the ultra-nationalist imperial Eurasian ideology that gave rise to the war on Ukraine in the first place.

This brings us back to all those institutions that have rebranded themselves with the term "Eurasia." In most cases these were understandable improvisations introduced under pressure of the titanic events of 1991. But after the publication of Clover's landmark study in 2016, it should be understood that the term in its modern usage originated with the reactionary and nationalistic "Eurasianists" of the 1920s, that Lev Gumilev popularized it among dissident Russian intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s, and that Vladimir Dugin then blended it with ideas drawn from Europe's extreme right-wing ideologues and translated into a form that Vladimir Putin could embrace as Russia's national ideology. "Eurasia," Clover concludes, "is a new and fictitious continent which over time became ever more real," even as it became more fictionalized. By now it is clear that the term "Eurasia" lacks scientific legitimacy and has been permanently stained by its intimate association with Russia's repeated aggressions against its neighbors.

What must concern us today is how we use the word "Eurasia." Writing in the 5th century B.C., the historian and general Thucydides noted how words changed their meaning over the course of the Persian Wars. This also happens today. For centuries the German word "Reich" meant simply a realm or state. However, the legacy of the three German Reichs of the years 1871–1945 was to taint the word to such a degree that its connotations today are overwhelmingly negative. Similarly, the Third Reich's exploitation of the swastika as a symbol of the Aryan race and antisemitism killed its use in all contexts except within the Hindu world, where it originated as a sign of well-being. In the same way, the Japanese term "kamikaze" referred originally to the "divine wind" that sank the invading fleet of the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan and saved Japan. But after Togo's air force exploited the term to denote suicide bombers sent to destroy the American Navy, it, too, gained a new meaning from which it will never escape.

Much the same can be said today of "Eurasia" and "Eurasianism." The difference between them and "Reich," "swastika," and "kamikaze" is that even its original use by the so-called Eurasianists was the rallying cry of a perversely chauvinist ideology. By exploiting it as they did, Gumilev, Dugin, and Putin finished it off, leaving it in tatters.

Given this, those many worthy American and other institutions that have adopted the word, and the U.S. government as well, should consider a rebranding. This will be easy, since more accurate and less tendentious terms are readily at hand. Why not refer simply to Russia, Ukraine, or Belarus? In speaking of whole regions why not refer to the Baltic states, the Caucasus, or Central Asia, collective terms that—unlike "Eurasia"—accord with local usage in all the countries involved? And instead of "Inner Eurasia," why not simply "Inner Asia" or the former term, "Uralo-Altai lands"?

To be sure, this is but one of many steps that must be taken as we struggle to move beyond the present crisis. But it is an important one and should not be neglected.

S. Frederick Starr is a distinguished fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council and founding chairman of the Central Asia Caucasus Institute.