

Russia's exceptionalism and the root causes of the war

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When in southern Sweden one hears the expression “the eternal neighbour”, it is perhaps Denmark that first comes to mind – at least considering the events of the past few centuries. In south-western Sweden, where this essay was written, the concrete traces of Russia are few. One might even say that here, Denmark has played the role that Russia has played for our eastern coasts – our traditional competitor for power and influence and our historic arch-enemy.

If you consult Wikipedia about the wars Sweden has fought throughout history, you will learn that we fought 14 wars against Russia and 15 against Denmark over a period of 600 years, from the 13th century until the Napoleonic wars. The fact that the numbers are nearly equal is probably because the two countries often took the opportunity to wage war against us as allies whenever the chance arose.

With Denmark, we are now fortunately the best of neighbours, but Russia remains the great problem. It still differs so dramatically from the rest of Europe that we must devote energy to understanding how and why. People often speak of “eternal Russia”, referring to certain traits that have persisted throughout history and proved difficult to change. These traits reinforce one another and help to ensure that the same Russian patterns tend to repeat themselves. What are these eternal traits? These are hardly new insights and some may find them stereotypical – but they are crucial for understanding why Russia continues to be such a fundamentally deviant country. They can be summarised in four points.

First, the Asiatic origins of the Muscovite state. The Viking roots of the Kyivan Rus are well known, as is the Mongol invasion of the 13th century. The so-called Tatar Yoke lasted until the late 15th century. The Mongols, who had conquered nearly the entire steppe of the Asian landmass, did not wish to settle in the Russian forests. Instead, they made the Russian princes their vassals, who had to visit the Mongol Khan by the Volga and pay tribute. This interaction led to a degree of symbiosis and cultural influence on the conquered peoples. The principality of Moscow became the Khan's agent, collecting tribute from the other Russian principalities, and over time became the Mongols' principal partner in the West.

The Muscovite principality was so strongly shaped by its Mongol overlords that it adopted their political culture, which was characterised by the indivisibility of absolute power, the absence of private property and the serfdom or total subjugation of all under the Mongol Khan. Many Russian historians have noted that when Moscow rose to prominence and began to expand in the 15th century, as the Mongol empire fragmented, it was not a matter of liberation from the Tatar Yoke because Moscow itself had become part of that Yoke. In other words, when Moscow emerged as a state in the 14th and 15th centuries, it did so not as a liberator from but as an heir to Genghis Khan.

The cradle of Russian culture and language did not lie in Moscow, however, but further south in Kyiv. The Mongols reached Kyiv too, but only briefly. Kyiv and the southern regions were instead incorporated from the 14th century into the Lithuanian and later the Polish-Lithuanian realm. There, Catholicism gained a foothold, and societal development involved a differentiation of society and a measure of pluralism that resembled that of Western Europe, where the church, feudal lords and towns were partly autonomous actors.

It is essentially this civilizational divide – this abyss, in fact – that today's war is about. In Ukraine, there has always been a seed of a different Russia to that of Moscow, and this is what Putin is seeking to eliminate once and for all. The ongoing war is not about territories or provinces, but about the survival of the Russian – that is, the Muscovite – order. A large East Slavic country such as Ukraine, with a democratic and open society, a thriving economy and successful integration into Europe, would pose a mortal threat not just to Putin's grip on power, but to the very possibility of preserving traditional Russia as an authoritarian empire. Putin's falsified historiography, which derives Moscow's roots directly from Kyivan Rus, is an ideological attempt to erase Ukraine and thereby eliminate this alternative.

A political order drawn from Genghis Khan was the first of the four fundamental factors. The second concerns the geographical expansion of the Muscovite empire, the speed of which was breathtaking. When the Mongol empire collapsed in the late 15th century, the Muscovite principality was smaller than Sweden. A century later, it had reached the Ural Mountains and was larger than all European states combined. Another 50 years later – around the time of the Peace of Westphalia – it had reached the Pacific Ocean. This was the Muscovite empire: Siberia was conquered at record speed as it was sparsely populated and defenceless. Russian fur traders led the advance, and the vulnerable nomadic peoples were as susceptible as the indigenous peoples of the Americas had been to the European triad of gunpowder, alcohol and disease.

Moscow may have reached the Pacific by the mid-17th century, but it had still not conquered the old Russian heartland in the south along the Dnieper River with Kyiv at its centre – the cradle of Russian culture. It had tried, of course, and for over a century Moscow fought unsuccessfully against its more advanced neighbours to the west. Only with Peter the Great's modernisation of the army and navy and the decisive victory over Sweden in the early 18th century could Russia advance westward. At the same time, something profound happened: the vast Muscovite empire was transformed and Moscow ceased to be the centre. The new capital was St Petersburg – the centre of the new Russian Empire, which penetrated Europe.

During the 18th century, Russia seized the Baltic states and large portions of the extensive Polish realm, including Ukrainian territory. In the south, it conquered the last Tatar strongholds, including Crimea. Somewhat bluntly, one might say that it was through the conquest of Ukraine that Moscow made itself into Russia, even as traditional Muscovy disappeared and became part of the St Petersburg-centric, multinational Russian empire.

Peter the Great did not merely change the capital – he replaced the old Muscovite boyars and their Orthodox traditions with a new, foreign-influenced ruling elite, which was forced to adopt European habits and to speak foreign languages. Expansion continued throughout the 19th century. Russia emerged victorious from the Napoleonic Wars to become a leading European power. Over the rest of the century, it conquered all of Central Asia and territories in the Pacific from China. This expansion even reached the North American continent in the form of Alaska, which the United States later purchased. Less well known is that the Russians went as far south as California, founding Fort Ross just north of San Francisco. They withdrew voluntarily in the 1840s as it was too unprofitable.

Moscow itself had by then lost its role as the imperial heartland, since St Petersburg had been founded as the new imperial centre. The empire became its own *raison d'être*. Russia has never been a nation state – and it was precisely the empire that prevented a nation state from forming. The European colonial powers were able to gradually dismantle their empires, often after long wars, but Madrid, London or Paris never felt existentially threatened. France could even give up Algeria after a bloody war without France as a state being seen as endangered. The new Russia, however, felt that it could not relinquish Chechnya without endangering the entire imperial construct.

The empire is thus of fundamental importance to Moscow. All four great land empires perished in World War I – Russia's too. When the Bolsheviks consolidated power, however, they reconquered their colonial possessions, even if they called it a civil war in their own historiography. The empire is therefore seen by the Kremlin both as Russia's unique contribution to world history and as the primary reason why Russia remains a dictatorship. At the same time, the empire is a source of pride for many Russians. As many of them say: "I may be powerless and oppressed, but at least I am part of something uniquely grand that commands respect and fear".

Such an extraordinary expansion as that of the Muscovite and later Russian empire naturally had many causes. The absence of natural borders and the vulnerability to attack over the Asian steppes drove expansion southwards and south-east. The conquest of Siberia was driven by economic interests. In Europe, the old rivalry with Poland and Ukraine was a heavy factor, as were traditional great power interests. The latter also dominated the 19th century expansion in Asia.

The empire has also carried with it the idea of a fundamental opposition to the West – of Russia as a great power distinct from Europe. Attempts to define the idea of Russia have taken many forms – from the effort to unite all Slavic peoples to a mission to dominate the vast steppe between the Carpathians and Xinjiang; from land power versus sea power; as well as irreconcilable value systems, Sparta against Athens, Germany against England – and today Russia against NATO. The Orthodox Church's conflict with Rome and Moscow's historical claim to be a "third Rome" also belong here. What all these interpretations share is the belief that the West has never given Russia the recognition, respect and influence it deserves by virtue of its size. President Yeltsin in the 1990s even appointed a committee to formulate what the Russian idea really was, but it was dissolved for lack of results.

To summarise the first two of the four eternal traits: autocracy is a lasting consequence of Moscow's "Asiatic" birth, and empire became the very idea and meaning of the emerging state. What made it possible to preserve the empire was the third constant factor – the ability of the enormous bureaucracy to concentrate military resources. State bureaucracy was introduced by Peter the Great as a substitute for the civil society that in Europe grew out of increasing economic and political diversification. The Russian bureaucracy, organised in a military-inspired system with 14 ranks, was, like everything else, subordinate to the tsar. That the empire was governed by a military administration – an empire that was its own *raison d'être* – meant that military interests were prioritised over developing the country's economic potential or meeting the needs of its people. These three factors – autocracy, empire and the vast, partly corrupt bureaucracy – together form a kind of iron triangle that keeps the system in place through all strains and challenges.

The fourth and final point concerns the political culture – or perhaps one might call it the mentality – that has come to characterise the Russian social order, and that too is a product of history. Beneath absolute power there was from the start an atomised population. Even though attempts were made during the 19th century, no spontaneous differentiation of society and power from below ever took place, as it did in Europe – through feudalism, the growth of the influence of the church and the emergence of corporations, towns and companies, and so on – everything that contributed to a complex society where power is distributed and shared in many ways.

The Orthodox Church remained introverted and subordinate to the tsar. The Renaissance, the Reformation, liberalism – all the great cultural and intellectual transformations that propelled western development – to a large extent passed Russia by. The distance between power and the atomised masses remained enormous and still marks Russia to this day.

Autocracy in this vast empire, as mentioned above, required a huge bureaucracy subordinate to the all-powerful tsar. However, no tsar, no matter how powerful, could exercise absolute power over such a vast realm. The result was that the bureaucracy and army, which from the start had to be granted great autonomy, became highly corrupt – from the lowest rank to the highest. As the inspector in Gogol's classic 1837 play says: "It is strictly forbidden not to accept bribes according to rank". In this system, dissimulation, imitation, pretence and lies became essential for survival and protection from authority – for high and low alike.

Since supreme power is like a foreign occupying force for which the people feel no responsibility, the ordinary person feels no responsibility for the actions of the state. The Russian social contract can be formulated quite simply: the authorities say, "We pretend to care about you" and the people say, "We pretend to respect you". They try to live separate lives – and this helps explain the indifference, acceptance or even passive support that a significant part of the Russian population displays for the war against Ukraine. Of course, this attitude is shaped by intensive state propaganda – but there is also a traditional, fatalistic acceptance of evil when it is committed in the name of the state. It is no coincidence that Ivan the Terrible and Stalin often rank high when Russians are asked to name their greatest leaders. There is a kind of sacral understanding of the actions of power when it is seen as defending the empire.

Someone has said that Russians have a comfortable relationship with evil, but the powerless acceptance by many of a brutal state's actions is mirrored by another trait: a tradition of enduring hardship and suffering to an extent unthinkable in modern societies, often with fatalism and patience – as well as an inherited tradition of low or negative expectations. These are generalisations but without them it is difficult to understand Russian society. They do not give the full picture, of course. There are many courageous people who fight for democracy in Russia, at great risk to their own lives. They are heroic and deserve our support, and many of their names are known worldwide. They are in a minority, however, and have not yet succeeded in influencing the course of events. Repression has both tightened and become more refined, proving surprisingly effective. Today, nearly all opposition figures have been forced into exile, imprisoned or killed. The Kremlin's drive to silence all dissent seems to know no bounds.

Throughout history, attempts have been made to break this vicious circle of autocracy, empire and bureaucracy. These attempts have usually occurred after the regime in Russia was weakened by military defeat. Thus far, however, reform efforts have not led to any lasting democratic breakthrough. Such attempts were made in the mid-19th century, following defeat in the Crimean War; then in the early 20th century, first after defeat in the war against Japan in 1905 and then, famously, during World War I through the February Revolution of 1917; and again in the 1980s after the loss of the Cold War. In other words, it is defeat in war that has weakened the regime and opened windows for attempts at reform. Each time, the attempts have failed. However, it cannot be impossible to break this vicious circle – perhaps one day it might happen. Perhaps it is better, then, to say that Russia as we know it is persistent rather than eternal.

Nearly 40 years ago, as everyone knows, came the beginning of a democratic breakthrough known as perestroika. It was a result of the Soviet Union's loss of the Cold War, and it led to the collapse of the empire – at least temporarily. It came not from a great popular uprising from below, but as a result of the Communist Party abdicating power. People protested and demanded freedom – but only after the authorities had invited them to do so. Perestroika merely scratched the surface when it came to the eternal traits. There was never a forced break with the old structures, which were dominated by the security organs and the military. Above all, there was never any reckoning with Russia's terrible past. The empire itself was never questioned and the imperial mentality remained. The survival of the empire required that power be reconcentrated and autocracy restored. One could say of perestroika what the British historian A. J. P. Taylor said of Europe's revolutionary year of 1848: "history reached a turning point but failed to turn".

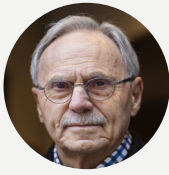
When Willy Brandt knelt in Warsaw in 1970, he did so not only for the sake of the Poles but also for the German people – as a way of helping them overcome their past. Can one imagine Putin, or a successor, kneeling as a sign of guilt for the past in Kyiv, Warsaw, Prague, Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, Budapest, Sofia or anywhere else?

That is why the roots of today's conflict run so much deeper than a dispute over some territories in eastern Ukraine or NATO expansion. The goal is to erase Ukraine as a nation and as a Russian alternative to the Kremlin's authoritarian Russian order. Beyond that, the war aims to undermine the liberal world order we have had, to make more room for the authoritarian Russian empire.

If history is any guide, a new democratic attempt in Russia will not be possible without a military defeat of the current order. Putin's dictatorship has a firm grip on power. The result of the ongoing transformation of an authoritarian Russia into a totalitarian one can be called "war-Putinism". The war against Ukraine is for Putin an existential war to re-establish the empire. It was existential for Ukraine from the very beginning – for survival. Now it has increasingly become existential for Putin as well, for his own hold on power.

Without a Russian defeat in the current war, we must be prepared for a continuing, protracted conflict with an unreformed, and therefore still imperialist, Russia. Putin has managed the remarkable feat of combining empire and Russian nationalism, despite their traditional opposition to one another. He and his successors will need their external enemy; the conflict with Europe will be kept alive, and after Ukraine the attack may well be directed at another neighbour – on this point there seems to be consensus among western intelligence services.

Russia demands that the "root causes" of the conflict with Ukraine be removed, but these causes do not lie in Ukraine – they lie in the conditions described above, in Russia's eternal – or rather stubborn – traits. We cannot know what comes after Putin. The eternal traits do not mean determinism, but they do mean that authoritarian rule and confrontation with the West are what we must expect for some time to come. Helping to bring about a Russian defeat in the war is what we can contribute, so that Russia itself, one day and probably by a winding path, might once again find its way to a new attempt at reform.



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