

# Dead Water: How the Russian Security Services' Paranoid Mindset Justifies the War

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## Summary

A conspiratorial mindset has been an integral part of the Kremlin and Russian security services' way of thinking for many decades. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, some of the wildest conspiracy theories have been voiced and promoted by the highest officials in Moscow, including the head of the Security Council, the head of Foreign Intelligence and the most senior officials in the Foreign Ministry.

This analysis argues that this paranoid and conspiratorial talk is not just promoted for disinformation and propaganda purposes but entrenched in the mentality of the Russian security services community that dominates decision-making processes in the Kremlin. This mentality is here to stay because it is based on a widely shared feeling of insecurity, prompted by the traumas of the Russian revolution of 1917 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which remain unaddressed by the country's intelligence community.

The increasing calls in Europe and the USA to begin some form of negotiations on a ceasefire or even peace in Ukraine begs a big question – is it really possible to trust the Kremlin after 24 February? There is another question, however, no less important: would the Kremlin in turn trust the West to the extent that peace talks would make any sense. The mindset in the Kremlin, which is paranoid and conspiratorial, does not provide for much optimism, and it is this conspiratorial mindset that made the invasion possible in the first place.

When the invasion began on 24 February, many observers were struck by some odd similarities between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Just as in 1968, the invaders made it their objective to capture the capital's airport and then to land war materiel and thousands of paratroopers.

At 2am on 21 August 1968, the units of the 7th Airborne Division landed at the Ruzyně airport in Prague. They blocked the main facilities of the airfield, where Soviet An-12s with troops and military equipment landed and began unloading. This opened the road to Prague and ultimately helped the Soviets to secure a swift occupation of Czechoslovakia. On 24 February 2022, the first day of the invasion, more than 30 Russian helicopters brought 300 paratroopers to the airport in Hostomel, near Kyiv. At that moment an investigative journalist Christo Grozev tweeted: “!!! Ukrainian government sources tell me 18 Il-76 planes have left Pskov direction Kyiv, will arrive in about an hour”.

In the military, the Pskov region is famous for hosting the 76th Airborne Division, so everybody immediately grasped what kind of cargo the Il-76s were about to bring to Hostomel. Just as in 1968, Russian paratroopers had the objective of capturing the airport of the capital city to secure the landing of the upcoming Russian military transport aircraft with more troops on board.

In 2022, however, things did not go according to plan, The paratroopers failed to keep control of the airport, most of them were killed by Ukrainian defenders, and the Il-76 aircraft were forced to make a U-turn and head back to Russia. Regardless of whether the invasion of Czechoslovakia was an inspiration for the Kremlin's planners of the invasion of Ukraine, it could provide a good starting point for a review of the mindset of the Kremlin's leaders and the leaders of present-day Russia's security services.

### **Feeling of Insecurity**

In 1981 Vladimir Rezun, a Soviet military intelligence officer who had recently defected to the UK, published his first book, *The Liberators*. The book was a memoir of his time in the Soviet army, and in it he described his traumatic experience of being sent to Czechoslovakia as part of the invasion force in 1968. Rezun was not sure whether it was safe for him to use his real name, so he published his memoir under a pen name, Viktor Suvorov. In his book, he describes the debates the Soviet soldiers had with their political officers just days before the invasion:

They say they are building another socialism, with a human face. “But this is already enemy propaganda”, interrupted the political officer. Every socialism has only one face. The bourgeoisie, comrades, has come up with the theory of convergence, and this theory is contrary to Marxism and does not contain a drop of common sense. You can't sit with one ass on two chairs, it's just uncomfortable. Judge for yourselves, comrades: what kind of convergence can

there be if not even one of its advantages can be torn away from the gains of socialism?"

"Do you remember how one anti-Soviet in the era of voluntarism wrote a vile slander against our system? It was called *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* [a reference to a famous story by Alexander Solzhenitsyn]. What came of it? All unconscious elements stirred. They started spreading this slander. Distrust spread and so on. It was stopped in time, and we don't know how it would all end." It was impossible to disagree with this. I myself didn't read about that Ivan, he didn't fall into my hands, but I remember for sure that the effect of him had been deafening.

"So what did the comrade Czech communists think of?", the political officer continued. "They cancelled censorship outright! They opened the floodgates to all bourgeois propaganda! Print what you want! What can this lead to? Towards a convergence? No! To capitalism! Bourgeois influence needs only a small hole in the dam, and there the flood will break the whole dam! We had such a hole, but thanks to the Party it was patched up in time! And in Czechoslovakia it's not a hole, it's already gushing there! It must be closed urgently. What kind of convergence is this if everyone can say whatever he wants? This is not convergence; this is pure anarchy!"

This, too, was unacceptable. If the whole system almost collapsed because of one story, what would happen if censorship were abolished altogether? "Go on, comrade lieutenant colonel!" the back rows shouted. We also shouted in support. The new political officer, unlike the previous one, spoke sensibly and intelligibly. "And I will continue, comrades. Socialism is a system as slender as a diamond and just as strong, but it is enough for a cutter to make one wrong move, and the entire stability of the crystal can be broken, and it will crumble".<sup>1</sup>

What is striking about this episode is the astonishing sense of insecurity felt by Soviet military in 1968. The Soviet Union was at the height of its power, Yuri Gagarin had made a first flight to space just seven years before, and yet, the Soviet army, along with the Soviet secret services, believed that the whole edifice of Soviet Eastern Europe, "slender as a diamond, and just as strong" could easily collapse with just one wrong move.

That feeling of insecurity has deep roots in the Soviet secret services' psychology; and it survives long after the Soviet Union. This sense of insecurity is based on a traumatic memory of the Russian revolution, which is quite ironic given the fact that the Soviet secret services believed themselves to be direct descendants of the Bolsheviks.

The revolution was taught in Soviet schools and universities in a highly specific way: the First World War was never part of the picture. Unlike in the West, in Russia the war was completely overshadowed by the revolution and the civil war. As a result, what was left in Russian history lessons was that the mighty Tsarist empire, with the most formidable secret police of the time, was crushed for unknown, mysterious reasons by a small group of revolutionaries led by Vladimir Lenin, who was transported from the West to the Russian capital in "a sealed wagon" with the help of the external enemy – the Germans.

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<sup>1</sup> The Liberators: My Life in The Soviet Army, by Viktor Suvorov, 1981, p. 64.

Of course, this is a far cry from a description of the real reasons behind the revolution; that World War I crushed not one but four empires – the German, Austrian and Ottoman along with the Russian. This was not how the history of the revolution was taught to Soviet citizens, however, including those who joined the ranks of the KGB and the military. For them, the picture was very clear: one of the world's superpowers just suddenly collapsed.

Then in August 1991 a coup d'état organized by representatives of the old Soviet elite with the help of the KGB failed, but a few months later the Soviet Union collapsed. That historic event was never properly discussed within the ranks of the security services. In the beginning, the officers were not ready to talk about what had happened because the secret services – the KGB and the GRU – were too busy saving themselves from the fate of the Stasi. They succeeded only to a certain extent – the KGB was split into a collection of independent agencies, which many saw as a complete disaster.

Later, the security services first tacitly accepted the concept of being a victim of some dark forces that had plotted against the Soviet Union and finally succeeded. What was never part of the internal discussion was why the KGB, “the first regiment of the Communist Party”, with its unlimited resources, failed to maintain the party's grip on power and failed to save the Soviet Union. Instead, an old feeling of insecurity was given a new boost – for a second time in the 20th century a mighty Russian empire with a formidable secret service that enjoyed unrestricted powers had been swiftly destroyed for reasons that were not entirely clear.

Of course, this feeling of insecurity needed to be properly channelled. There has been a huge demand for a formidable enemy that has been plotting all this time against Russia. The spies did not need to look too far for that enemy.

### **Where is the Enemy?**

In the 1980s very few young KGB officers believed in communism. They saw how far the Soviet Union was from universal equality and even fewer of them seriously perceived Marxism and internationalism as a proper ideology. Xenophobic, largely antisemitic, and narrow-minded, they did not believe in the friendship of peoples either. What they really believed was that Russia was a unique country surrounded by unreliable satellites in Eastern Europe, which needed to be ruled with an iron fist, and powerful enemies in the West that dreamed of destroying Russia. For that purpose, they believed, the West could use any means possible, including pop music, sex and Hollywood – the KGB called it “ideological diversions” – and supporting dissidents.

Yuri Andropov, the longest serving head of the KGB, was obsessed with dissidents. He believed that they “violate the law, they supply the West with libellous information, they spread false rumours, and they try to organize various anti-Soviet sorties”. He also believed that they posed a serious threat to the stability of the regime. As a Soviet ambassador to Hungary, he had witnessed first hand a popular uprising against Soviet domination in 1956, and this was a highly traumatizing experience for him. Years later, he created the notorious Fifth Directorate of the KGB in charge of political investigations and repression. However, the Fifth Directorate failed to save the Soviet regime; all, the KGB believed, because of the machinations of a powerful enemy.

The fear of a Western conspiracy against Russia only grew in the 1990s, when the Soviet republics became independent from Russia. Many in the Russian security services came to

believe that their country had not only been defeated by the cunning West, but was on a path to being colonized.

Finally, it all made sense to them: no matter what political regime the country had, whether Tsarist or Communist, the West would always be against Russia. One side-effect of this widely shared belief was that officials in the FSB, the main successor to the KGB, came to regard themselves as heirs not only to the KGB, but also to the secret police that the Tsars deployed to battle against political terrorism. They saw no contradiction between these seemingly disparate missions: their main objective was to serve and protect the regime, whatever it was.

A historical narrative was developed in the early 2000s that gave a big role to the Western Crusades and the Russian Orthodox Church. As in the Middle East, the Crusades were viewed highly negatively in Russia – one of the northern Crusades had ended abruptly in April 1242 when the Teutonic Order's advance into Russian territory, sanctioned by the Pope, was repelled by Prince Alexander Nevsky, a Russian national hero, in the Battle on the ice of Lake Chud or Peipus.

In the 21st century, the Russian Orthodox Church continues to fear Catholic expansion. In 2002, five Catholic priests were expelled from Russia, some of them accused of espionage. The alliance between the Orthodox Church and the FSB seems quite logical. The FSB helps to protect the Orthodox sphere of influence against Western proselytizing. In return, the Church blesses the secret service in its struggles with the enemies of the state.

The Byzantine Empire was another target of Western crusaders, and, unlike Russia, it fell victim to the invaders. In the mid-2000s the Byzantine Empire became extremely popular in the Kremlin. A historical documentary, "The Fall of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium", was produced and aired on Russian state television in January 2008. The fall of Constantinople was explained as being due to the intrigues of local "oligarchs" and Western Crusaders. The parallels made by the authors were obvious – Russian oligarchs almost sold Russia to the West and would have done so if it were not for the FSB and Putin.<sup>2</sup> The connections between the Byzantine Empire and Russia were always special. Russia's brand of Orthodoxy was based on the concept of Moscow as "the Third Rome" after Ancient Rome and Constantinople.

The documentary was produced by Tikhon Shevkunov, a Russian priest so close to Putin that he is rumoured to be the president's confessor. (Shevkunov has always denied this.) Shevkunov's standing within the Russian Orthodox Church was officially modest, but he happened to be the abbot of the monastery—a church and collection of chaotically spread three-story buildings behind a low wall, strategically located in the corner of Bolshaya Lubyanka Street and Rozhdestvensky Boulevard, near the main headquarters of the KGB/FSB. In the mid-1990s, many FSB officers became religious and ended up going to Shevkunov's monastery. They were met by a young, easy-going, well-versed priest who talked about religion using modern language – Shevkunov was a screenwriter by training. Soon, Shevkunov was on friendly terms with many generals, including Putin, whom he had known since 1996. The relationship between the church and the security services improved significantly in the early 2000s and proved mutually beneficial.

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2 The web-site of the Vizantia documentary. English version of the transcript <http://vizantia.info/docs/27.htm>

The Russian security services command an enormous bureaucracy spread all over the country. In the regional departments, the rank and file entertained slightly more controversial ideas about Russian destiny, but all of these were based on the concept of treacherous Western plans to invade and colonize the country.

Take, for example, the conspiracy theory known as the Public Security Concept “Mertvaya voda” (or Dead Water), which argues that all Russia’s woes began with the adoption of Christianity, specifically, “Judaic Christianity”, imposed by the Jews. The Concept of Dead Water – in Russian mythology Dead Water can revive the dead and cure wounds – was created by General Konstantin Petrov.<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s, leaflets were disseminated by ultra-patriots in Moscow’s universities and by the 2000s the concept had become popular in the Russian secret services and the army.

A notable quote on the concept, which we found in a draft memo, “Global processes: trends in developments of the world and Russia until 2020”, prepared by the Systems Analysis Research Institute, a think tank under the Russian Audit Chamber, led by Sergei Stepashin, Chief of the FSB in 1994–95, reads: “Taking a realistic view of the current sweeping expansion of the Satanic Global Predictor and its secret agent network, it cannot be ruled out that a path to a future Planetary Bio-Defence Union lies through an accelerated creation of a Pan-Eurasian Defence Union as a geopolitical alternative to the ongoing expansion of the United States and NATO”.<sup>4</sup>

Nor was the Audit Chamber the only Russian government body infiltrated by the ideas of the “Dead water concept”. The official website of the Concept’s followers ([www.kpe.ru](http://www.kpe.ru)) states that the FSB has always supported the Concept. As proof, it reproduces scanned copies of three documents signed by high-ranking FSB officials. The first is a letter dated 14 October 1998, signed by the then Director of the FSB, Vladimir Putin, and addressed to Mikhail Glushenko, one of the leaders of the movement, which is supportive of the concept. In the letter the future Russian president writes:

Unfortunately, being extremely busy right now, I am unable to take a personal meeting with representatives of the group of authors of “Dead water”, Petrov K.P. and Ivanov M.N. At the same time, sharing your concern for the perfection of the process of maintaining the security of our country, I agree to consider the given problem at the conceptual level. I have given necessary assignments to the respective structures of the FSB to research the problems of security, in the light of the ideas set out in your attached note.<sup>5</sup>

In the 2000s the concept was included in the training programmes of FSB officers in several Russian regions. A number of lectures were given by Victor Efimov, a prominent adherent of the concept, and these were published on YouTube. Efimov gave lectures in 2003 to the St Petersburg department of the FSB,<sup>6</sup> possibly the most important regional FSB department, which had been busy supplying generals and colonels to important positions in the Russian

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3 Evgenii Moroz, *Istoriia "Mertvoi vody" - ot strashnoi skazki k bol'shoi politike: Politicheskoe neoiazychestvo v postsovetsskoi Rossii* [The History of “Dead Water”: From a Scary Tale to Big Politics, Political Neo-Paganism in Post-Soviet Russia]. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2005.

4 *Moskovskie Novosti*, “Rossia vo mgle”, May 2004 by Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan

5 *Moskovskie Novosti*, “Rossia vo mgle”, May 2004 by Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan

6 YouTube, Victor Efimov’s lecture in the FSB <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yxb-E86sjjo>

state since 1999.

The Dead Water concept and other mystical beliefs, although never shown to foreigners or admitted officially, put constant pressure on the secret service community from within. Today, ideas about why the West is determined to destroy Russia might differ – that Russian-style spirituality has been lost by most western peoples and is therefore the source of envy, its unique Slavic character or the legacy of Byzantine civilization destroyed by the Western Crusade but saved in Russia – but they are all perfectly suited to those in the Russian secret services who favour isolationism.

However, although the Russian security services proved to be easily seduced by all sorts of conspiracy theorists, they never forgot their own ‘heroes’, notably Yuri Andropov. In the 2000s, the FSB launched a campaign promoting Andropov’s theories that the country’s difficulties were caused by external enemies rather than internal problems. One of the key people involved in the Andropov campaign was Oleg Khlobustov, an FSB colonel, lecturer, and senior research fellow at the FSB Academy. In his lecture, “The Phenomenon of Andropov”, delivered at Lubyanka in December 2004, he quoted Andropov as saying: “Nowadays the source of threats to the security of the Soviet Union lies outside. From the outside the class enemy tries to transfer subversive activities on to our territory, to provoke ideological diversions”.

Nonetheless, Andropov was not the only inspiration the security services found in the 2000s. One thinker Putin frequently referred to was Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954). Putin cited him in his Presidential addresses in 2005 and 2006 and in his speech to the Council of State in June 2007. In June 2009 he visited the cemetery of the Sretensk Monastery in Moscow, led by Shevkunov the priest, to put flowers on his grave. Ilyin’s remains were reinterred in Moscow in 2005 from Switzerland at the Kremlin’s expense.

Ivan Ilyin, labelled Putin’s philosopher of Russian fascism,<sup>7</sup> fled Russia in 1922. In exile, he wrote articles for newspapers financed by organizations of White Guard officers. His main project was to combine Christian values, Russian patriotism and the duty of an officer. He invented an ideology of militarized Orthodox Christianity in his concept of “Resistance to Evil by Force”. Ilyin was strongly criticized by his contemporaries – one review was titled “Chekist in the name of God”.<sup>8</sup> He supported nationalism, “As opposed to any internationalism, both sentimental, and furious; in a counterbalance of any denationalization, household and political, we approve Russian nationalism, instinctive and spiritual, we profess it and we erect it to God”,<sup>9</sup> and advocated strong authoritarianism, claiming that Western democracy did not suit Russia:

...The Mechanical, quantitative and formal understanding of the state, which is applied in western democracies, is neither uniquely possible, nor true. On the contrary: it conceals in itself the greatest dangers; it does not observe the organic nature of the state; it does not unite citizens in general....Therefore such a form of “statehood” and “democracy” does not promise Russia anything kind

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7 New York Review of Books, Ivan Ilyin, Putin’s Philosopher of Russian Fascism, March 16, 2018 <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2018/03/16/ivan-ilyin-putins-philosopher-of-russian-fascism/>

8 Radio Svoboda, Checkist vo ima Boga vozvrashaetsa v Rossiyu. 24.05.2006 <https://www.svoboda.org/a/158705.html>

9 Ivan Ilyin “On Russian nationalism” Articles. Russian foundation of culture 2006 p.1

[positive] and is not a subject either to borrow [from] or reproduce. Russia needs the other one [an alternative], new, qualitative and creative.<sup>10</sup>

Such ideas were a perfect fit for the Kremlin's concept of "sovereign democracy" in Russia, which was coined by Vladimir Surkov when first deputy in the Administration of the President,<sup>11</sup> but later promoted by Vladimir Putin, and by Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov and Sergei Ivanov, by then defence minister but before that a general in the KGB's foreign intelligence. FSB officers widely shared this worldview in the 2000s and their conspiratorial beliefs only strengthened when mass protests began against Putin's rule.

### **Obsession with Ukraine Takes Root**

The FSB rank and file, like the KGB, have been trained always to suspect ulterior motives in all kinds of activities, so the FSB never trusts grassroot movements or civic action. Thus, Russian opposition movements are largely considered to be sponsored by Western donors keen to organize a Russian version of the so-called Orange Revolution – a series of protests in Ukraine from November 2004 to January 2005 in response to a rigged election. Such fears were strengthened after protests against a rigged parliamentary election took place in Moscow and in other big cities in 2011–12.

These were the biggest mass protests that Putin had seen since coming to power and he was visibly terrified. When Putin learned that demonstrations had been organized via social media and an initial call to come on to the streets had been posted on Facebook, he became convinced that the West was behind the protests. That the FSB failed to predict the protests only supported this theory.

Answering a journalist's question in December 2011, Putin said that, according to his information, the protesters were students who had been paid to attend. He then blamed the West for paying them and recalled the popular uprisings elsewhere – the dreaded colour revolutions: "We know about the events of the Orange revolution in Ukraine". He added: "By the way, some of our opposition leaders at that time were in Ukraine and officially worked as advisers to the then-President Yushchenko. They are transferring this practice to Russian soil".<sup>12</sup> (This was an allusion to Boris Nemtsov, an opposition politician, who was killed in Moscow in 2015.)

Putin's views reflected the mindset of the Russian security services. They see Ukraine as a testing ground for Western, largely US political technologies aimed at overthrowing political regimes such as Russia's. Once again, a conspiracy theory based on Russian Orthodox beliefs was used to explain that Ukraine was being used as a jumping-off point for an upcoming attack on Russia, if not some other part of the former Soviet Union.

In January 2016, Leonid Reshetnikov, Director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Research (RISI), said that he believed there was an attempt to eliminate Orthodoxy in Ukraine. Reshetnikov said in an interview with the Radonezh radio station: "Ukrainism from the very

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10 Ivan Ilyin "On coming Russia" the article first published 30.10.1950. Selected articles, Moscow Voenizdat 1993 p.368

11 United Russia website. Transcript of a speech by the Deputy Head of the Administration of the President, aide to the president of the Russian Federation, Vladislav Surkov for the centre of partisan study and preparation of the staff "United Russia", 7th of February 2006.

12 TASS, 15.12.2011 <https://tass.ru/arhiv/523742>



start was an anti-Orthodox concept. It was directed not only against Russians, against 'Moskals' (Moscovites), it was directed against Orthodoxy. This concept was formed in the West, in Austria-Hungary, in Poland, in Catholic countries and it is on the way to being implemented today".<sup>13</sup>

According to Reshetnikov, the current objective in Ukraine is the:

[E]xclusion of Orthodoxy as a foundation of our Russian Orthodox civilization; but there wouldn't be civilization without it....We often say "we are a civilization", but we forget what civilization we are. There wouldn't be civilization without Orthodoxy. There is no civilization without faith. Today the doctrine of the West is to use this moment and finally destroy Orthodoxy in Ukraine by eliminating and intimidating Orthodox believers. Unfortunately, conditions for it have appeared.<sup>14</sup>

Before RISI, Reshetnikov was head of the information analysis department of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and held the rank of Lieutenant-general. In 2009, Putin appointed him head of RISI, the main research facility of the SVR. Reshetnikov left RISI in 2017, but he is still a member of the science councils of the Foreign Ministry, the Security Council and the Ministry of Defence. He is certainly not alone in thinking of Ukraine in this way.

Since 1991, the FSB and other security services have viewed neighbouring countries, once part of the huge Soviet empire, as states that are unable to conduct their own affairs and need a supervisor. While Central Asia drew less attention, Ukraine, which had historically had close economic, cultural and political ties to Russia, was always in the spotlight. For two decades the Kremlin provided economic and political support to promote "friendly" politicians and political parties in Ukraine. The Maidan revolution smashed Moscow's plans for Ukraine, ending up with the annexation of Crimea and armed conflict in the Ukrainian regions of Donbas and Luhansk.

In June 2015, Nikolay Patrushev, Secretary of the Russian Security Council and a close ally of Putin, said in an interview with the Russian daily newspaper, *Kommersant*, that the threat that concerned Moscow the most was destabilization, which is often referred to as a colour revolution. He explained that the conflict in Ukraine was initiated by the US in order to "create a tool for radically weakening Russia". According to the logic of the former director of the FSB, the then President of Ukraine, Victor Yanukovich, did not suit the US so they decided to get rid of him: "They initiated a coup d'état. If there had been no coup, there would not have been the events in Crimea and eastern Ukraine".<sup>15</sup>

Anyone who has followed the annexation of Crimea and the Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine might be surprised by this version of events, but this reflects the security services' mindset: the Ukrainian people by themselves are not capable of starting a revolution in their own country. Only the US as a superpower could have done that.

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13 Interfax-Religion, Anti-Orthodox project is realized in Ukraine – political scientist. January 15, 2016 <https://orthochristian.com/89711.html>

14 Interfax-Religion, Anti-Orthodox project is realized in Ukraine – political scientist. January 15, 2016 <https://orthochristian.com/89711.html>

15 Kommersant, Za destabilizatsiey Ukraini skrivaetsa popytka radikalnogo oslablenia Rossii, 22.06.2015 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2752250?fbclid=IwAR0cwwd3iyVUjG7lc14hQdM0kT5egyAztFy8fD5-ORn1jMi9hKZk4OrGnP80>

## What Do All of Them Need in Russia?

Sooner or later a true believer in these conspiracy theories would ask himself a good question: why? Why have the West, the Crusaders, the US and Western Europe been plotting for century after century against Russia? What is there in Russia which justifies such a monstrous centuries-long quest? Of course, there are several answers to this question. For instance, a wildly popular writer of the 1990s, Sergei Alekseev, a former policeman and author of the multi-volume saga, *Treasures of Valkyrie*, claimed in his books that all the invaders of Russia were after the treasures of the Hyperborean, or northern civilization, buried in secret below the Ural Mountains. These treasures are of a spiritual nature and thus the main objective of the Russian civilization is to guard them from mercantile invaders from the West. Alekseev's books were widely read by the security services throughout 1990s, 2000s and 2010s.

The idea that the West essentially wants to rob Russia is widely shared by generals close to Putin. Nikolai Patrushev appears to agree with the thesis that the West is after Russian treasure. In the above cited *Kommersant* interview, he said: "They [the US] would very much like Russia not to exist at all as a country. Why? Because we have great wealth and the Americans think we own it illegally and undeservedly because, in their opinion, we do not use it the way we should".<sup>16</sup> A year before he had explained what this great wealth the US was after constituted: large amounts of territory and vast natural resources.<sup>17</sup>

Alexander Bortnikov, director of the FSB since 2007, seems to share this belief. In an interview in 2017, he said:

Our Fatherland has repeatedly become the object of hostile encroachments by foreign powers. The enemy tried to defeat us either in open battle, or relying on traitors inside the country, with their help to sow confusion, divide the people, and paralyse the state's ability to respond in a timely and effective way to emerging threats. The destruction of Russia is still an obsession for some.<sup>18</sup>

The Russian security services believe that the US will stop at nothing to achieve this goal. Since 2021, Patrushev has been claiming that the US has set up a network of biological weapon laboratories in Ukraine aimed at the Slavic nationalities, meaning Russians and Ukrainians. Igor Nikulin, a popular Russian pundit on biology, has provided an explanation for such actions: "To weaken its geopolitical opponents from within, to undermine their economies, to make them weak and sick".<sup>19</sup>

Nikulin, a proud son of a KGB officer, started his career by promoting a thesis on the artificial nature of AIDS. He was a Russian member of the UN Commission on Biological and Chemical Weapons in Iraq and Libya and was picked up by Russian Television as an expert when he

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16 *Kommersant*, Za destabilizatsiy Ukraini skrivaetsya popytka radikalnogo oslablenia Rossii, 22.06.2015 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2752250?fbclid=IwAR0cwwd3jyVUjG7lc14hQdM0kT5egyAztFy8fD5-ORn1jMi9hKZk4OrGnP80>

17 *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 'Nikolay Patrushev: Otrezvlennie ukrainsev budet zhestkim i bolezennim,' 15.10.2014 <https://rg.ru/2014/10/15/patrushev.html>

18 *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 'Alexander Bortnikov: FSB Rossii svobodna ot politicheskogo vliyania,' 19.12.2017 <https://rg.ru/2017/12/19/aleksandr-bortnikov-fsb-rossii-svobodna-ot-politicheskogo-vliianii.html>

19 *Ura.ru*, Ucheny: Biolaboratorii – odna is trekh ugroz ot Ukraini, 09.03.2022 <https://ura.news/articles/1036284124>

denied the poisoning of the former KGB spy Yuri Skripal and his daughter in the UK in 2018. Nikulin was the expert who set off a conspiracy theory that the United States had artificially created the Coronavirus. In an interview with Zvezda TV, an outlet run by the Russian Ministry of Defence, Nikulin stated that Coronavirus was potentially a US bioweapon intended to put pressure on China. Nikulin also suggested that US corporations could have created the virus in order to profit from selling pharmaceuticals to fight the disease. Nikulin mentioned that the United States operates around 400 military bio labs around the world, where it conducts “unsanctioned experiments”.<sup>20</sup>

Two years later, the narrative on US bio labs was picked up by Patrushev and Russia’s Ministry of Defence and became yet another justification for the invasion of Ukraine, along with “denazification”, “de-militarization” and “de-NATOfication”, all of which are widely used by Russian officials. Patrushev is not the only high level Russian official to promote such ideas. On 22 May 2022, Sergei Naryshkin, head of the SVR, spoke to the State Duma about US bio labs in Ukraine.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

Do Patrushev and Naryshkin really believe this theory? Does Putin believe it? It doesn’t matter – their background in the KGB/FSB and political careers in the 2000s and 2010s have prepared them always to suspect a dirty game, and the dirtier the conspiracy sounds, the sooner they accept it as a way to explain reality.

That kind of mindset does not provide much hope for a political solution to the current crisis – the Kremlin would never trust its counterparts either in Kyiv or in Washington, and not in London, Paris or Berlin either. Sharing a genuine belief that they have been living for decades under incessant attack from a treacherous West, as their predecessors did for centuries, Putin and his cronies have simply given up on the concept of peace as something that could be sustained. Instead, they see peace as a temporal truce between war; cold or hot, it does not really matter.

All of this gives little hope for a sustainable Western relationship with Moscow based to a large extent on trust, which is now non-existent — at least while Putin and his friends are still calling the shots.

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20 The Global Engagement Center (GEC), Russian Disinformation Apparatus Taking Advantage of Coronavirus Concerns, February 14, 2020 <https://irp.fas.org/eprint/gec-disinfo.pdf>

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Russian investigative journalist, co-founder and editor of Agentura.ru, a watchdog of the Russian secret services' activities. Co-author with Irina Borogan of *The Compatriots: The Russian Exiles Who Fought Against the Kremlin* (PublicAffairs, 2022).



### **Irina Borogan**

Russian investigative journalist, co-founder and deputy editor of Agentura.ru. She chronicled the Kremlin's campaign to gain control of civil society and strengthen the government's police services under the pretext of fighting extremism.

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