On the Russia–Ukraine War and Russian Supremacy

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that Russian public's support for the war results from a successful alignment of the Kremlin's pro-war narratives with people's existing, genuinely held beliefs about social and political order. I identify Russian supremacy as the key such belief. I provide a description of what this belief entails, trace its historical origins and sources of its contemporary dominance. Russian supremacy was elevated to the position of hegemonic image of social and political order in the mid 1930s to serve the Soviet regime as both a practical and rhetorical tool designed to legitimise its oppressive and colonial politics. Russian supremacy has shown remarkable durability as it survived major reforms of the Soviet regime, its collapse, and turbulent post-Soviet transition. The hegemony of Russian supremacy today reflects both the existing social and political order – one in which ethnic Russians enjoy the highest standing, prestige, and benefits – and Putin's regime's extensive promotion and use of Russian supremacy for self-legitimisation and mobilisation. Most tellingly, Putin manages to sustain a high level of support among the Russian population for his war in Ukraine by linking justifications for war to the constitutive narratives of Russian supremacy.

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Introduction

Since the start of Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, millions of Russians have been, tacitly or enthusiastically, supporting the war. We cannot know with certainty the exact proportion of the population who supports the war, but all available evidence indicates that the proportion is substantial[1].

Why do people support the war? This question is not trivial since the war i) lacks clearly identifiable objectives in the eyes of the people and ii) is immensely costly. The war further iii) brought a long series of military defeats and iv) large numbers of civilian- and soldier causalities. Lastly, it iv) imposed a forced mobilisation of men to the front and a severe disruption of people's everyday lives.

In this essay, I argue that the public support for the war results from a successful alignment of the Kremlin's pro-war narratives with people's existing, genuinely held beliefs about social and political order. The key belief in this regard is that of Russian supremacy – an image that depicts Russians as benevolent harbingers of civilisation who, due to their greatness, are entitled to influence life and politics of other peoples. In focusing on people's genuine beliefs, this argument diverges from other explanations that attribute the support of the war to either propaganda and censorship (that is, to regime's capacity to create opinions).

[1]For survey evidence (accounting for prefrence falsification under authoritarian setting) see Chapkovski and Schaub (e.g., 2022) and reports by independent polling agencies and researchers like the "Chronicles" and "ExtremeScan". For qualitative evidence, see `https://publicsociology.tilda.ws/eprojects` (accessed 26 Oct. 2022).

What Explains Public Support for the War?

Many observers have attributed the persisting support of the war to propaganda[2]. By extensively promoting pro-war narratives and completely silencing dissenting voices, the argument goes, Putin manages to persuade thousands of Russians that his war is legitimate, right and necessary. Surely, a controlled media environment is instrumental to secure public support to some extent. But this explanation provides us with, at best, an incomplete picture of public support for war: it only focuses on the group of people who take the Kremlin's narratives at face value.

Let us start with the observation that many supporters of war (and Putin's regime) do not trust Russian official media (Alyukov, 2022)[3]. Russians overwhelmingly see media, official and alternative, as vehicles for shaping public opinion, not outlets designed to provide accurate information about events. Thus, we cannot assume that media control by itself suffices for successful persuasion. Second, we have seen several cases in which propaganda's efforts to create public support for Kremlin's priority policies failed despite its overwhelming advantage over competing actors and narratives (and, likely, because of the aforementioned distrust). The Kremlin's media failed to persuade Russians of the safety and necessity to get Russian-made vaccines against Covid-19; they failed to cushion the blow of the Pension reform (Lipman, 2019); they failed to make Russians wholeheartedly embrace "traditional values" that Putin's government sees as essential and promotes with lavish resources and ferocious enthusiasm (Blackburn, 2021).

Regime communications tend to be successful when they speak to people's genuinely held beliefs. If there is a substantial misalignment between people's beliefs and regime communication narratives, the latter are likely to fail. Consider the examples I mentioned above. The pension reform was presented as a painful but necessary measure, executed at the most appropriate time by competent officials to the benefit of Russian citizens. In a similar fashion, the Covid-19 vaccination campaign was advertised as an efficient collaboration between the state and scientists to produce a safe and and effective vaccine to protect Russians from the virus. Both stories rested on the premise that the Russian government is competent and effective and that its main concern is the well-being of citizens. Russians overwhelmingly reject the premises of government officials' competence and benevolence: people's trust in government is very low, and common-sense understanding is that government officials seek, first and foremost, opportunities for personal enrichment rather than quality service to the country and its citizens[4]. That people also have a sense of distaste for the Kremlin's official media is certainly of no help for the Kremlin to convince people otherwise.

These examples of the Kremlin's communication contrast sharply with ones used to mobilise support for its other priority policies like Putin's re-election campaigns of 2012 and 2018, constitutional amendments of 2020, and the annexation of Crimea. There, the strategy was to portray Putin as an embodiment of Russian national identity (Sharafutdinova, 2022; Sharafutdinova, 2020) and explain his actions as necessary steps to strengthen Russia internally and restore its prestige internationally. In these cases, the Kremlin's communications were successful because they aligned with people's beliefs and aspirations about the Russian political community, its appropriate political order and international standing. It is because Russians overwhelmingly see themselves as part of a great nation (Blackburn, 2021) and feel a sense of humiliation associated with the collapse of the Soviet Union and post-Soviet transition the annexation of Crimea could produce a gigantic boost in Putin's (genuine) popularity (Sharafutdinova, 2020). Similarly, it is because Putin ran on an image of

[2]For an example, see the publication by Irina Plaks for the Atlantic Council available at `shorturl.at/wDY27` (accessed 27 Oct. 2022) or the article by Nell Clark for the NPR available at `https://www.npr.org/2022/03/15/1086705796/russian-propaganda-war-in-ukraine` (accessed 27 Oct. 2022).

[3]There are supporters of war who believe in the narratives put forward by the Kremlin. However, they do not support the war *because* the TV has told them that war is good. Instead, the relationship is the exact opposite: people trust the Kremlin's communication because its narratives directly align with people's already existing beliefs. See Shirikov (2022) for the elaboration of the argument and evidence.

[4]For an overview, see the polling results by Levada `https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/02/18/approval-of-institutions-the-state-of-affairs-in-the-country-trust-in-politicians-2/` (accessed 27 Oct. 2022) and a summary report by the Moscow Times on institutional trust in Russia `https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/01/22/russia-detains-11-protesters-ahead-of-putin-talks-with-japans-abe-monitor-a64234` (accessed 27 Oct. 2022).

Russia as a unique multi-ethnic community united by the Great Russian culture (but hostile to migration and multiculturalism) – an image shared by the vast majority of Russian people – he was successful in defying the Russian constitutional limits on the number of presidential terms and getting himself re-elected smoothly (Sharafutdinova, 2022). Of course, tight media and political control was instrumental, in fact necessary, in securing public support for Putin's objectives and rule. But tight control alone does not suffice for shaping public opinion in the desired direction.

The main insight from the comparison between regime's communications on the pension reform and Covid-19 vaccination campaigns on the one side and Putin's re-elections and the annexation of Crimea on the other is that propaganda cannot manufacture opinions out of thin air. Consequently, the key to people's support for the war and Putin's legitimacy lies in people's existing, genuinely held beliefs, not tight media control and excessive pedalling of pro-war narratives. The central belief in this regard is that of Russian supremacy. Russian supremacy constitutes the core of Russian national identity and as such is Putin's indispensable legitimating device.

Russian Supremacy, Putin's Legitimacy, and War

Broadly speaking, Russian supremacy is the image that depicts Russians as benevolent harbingers of civilisation who, due to their greatness, are entitled to influence other peoples (read: have an elevated status in the world). According to this image, Russians derive their greatness from their intrinsic features: high cultural advancement, a gift of an immense scientific potential, and an unmatched capacity to self-sacrifice for the benefit of a larger community. These features allowed Russians to build over centuries a unique country-civilisation, a harmonious multi-ethnic society in which Russians lead without oppressing the others, selflessly providing them with cultural, industrial, and scientific advancements.

Russian supremacy is both an ontology and morality: it provides people with an image of Russia *as it is* and an image of what it *should be*. The former largely relates to Russian domestic politics, namely the configuration of Russia as a multi-ethnic society in which all peoples are equal yet all are inferior to the state-bearing people – ethnic Russians – whose culture and language act as the binding glue holding the country together. The latter mainly refers to Russia's relations with other countries. Russian supremacy ascribes to Russia the status of a Great Power but diagnoses the mismatch between the desired status and the inferior standing of Russia vis-a-vis other great powers like the EU, US, India, Brazil, and China, only to derive from this mismatch a sense of embarrassment and resentment. Domestically, things are the way they are meant to be; internationally – they are not.

Russians overwhelmingly believe in Russian supremacy and the outlook it provides, their vast differences in political beliefs, income, residence, education, or socioeconomic status notwithstanding. We find a large body of evidence, quantitative, qualitative, as well as anecdotal, that documents the prevalence of this belief, as well as its constitutive narratives[5]. As the hegemonic understanding of self and other, of social and political order, Russian supremacy lies at the heart of Russian national identity (one might even go as far as to claim that it *is* Russian national identity).

Putin's efforts to legitimise the war are successful because they are designed to be congruent with Russians' common-sense image of national identity. It is of no coincidence that the Kremlin's pro-war narratives portray the war as a conflict between Russia and the West, not Russia and Ukraine; speak of the existence and importance of Russian interests in Eastern Europe and how the West does not respect them (without explaining why Russia should be entitled to have interests there to begin with); justify the invasion as a preventative strike against a possible NATO threat; juxtapose Ukrainian nationalism with Russian patriotism; and heavily draw upon images of the World War II. All of these narratives stand on foundations that are commonsensical for the vast majority of Russians. These narratives provide people with a framework for interpreting the war that is favourable to Putin. Crucially, this strategy proves successful far beyond the segment of Putin's hard-line supporters.

[5]See the works by Blackburn (2021), Kassymbekova and Marat (2022), and Chaisty and Whitefield (2017) for examples of qualitative, anecdotal, and quantitative evidence respectively.

A sizable group of the population supports the war despite seeing the Kremlin-controlled media as mere propaganda devices (Alyukov, 2022)[6].

Thus, any effort to undermine Putin's war or indeed topple his regime for the sake of transforming Russia into a peaceful, democratic society would be incomplete if it fails to address the issue of Russian supremacy. To address it, we need to arrive at an accurate description of Russian supremacy, its constitutive components, and cognitive links that bind these components together into a distinct system of beliefs about Russian social and political order. We need to diagnose the oppressive functions of Russian Supremacy and outline the role of agential powers in establishing and maintaining the dominance of Russian supremacy over alternative outlooks of the Russian political community. Doing so would help us understand how to best tackle Russian supremacy and bring Russia closer to the path of reform and change.

This essay opens a series of works that aim to achieve these objectives. In this piece, I put forward a succinct summary of research on the historical origins of Russian supremacy and sources of its contemporary dominance. Building upon the works of scholars of Russian and Soviet colonial history, I trace the origins of Russian supremacy to the mid-1930s, when it was elevated to the position of hegemonic image of social and political order. As such, Russian supremacy served as both a practical and rhetorical tool designed to strengthen the Soviet regime and legitimise its oppressive and colonial practices. Russian supremacy has shown remarkable durability surviving major reforms of the Soviet regime, its collapse, and turbulent post-Soviet transition. The hegemony of Russian supremacy today reflects both the existing social and political order – one in which ethnic Russians enjoy the highest standing, prestige, and benefits – and Putin's regime's extensive promotion and use of Russian supremacy for self-legitimisation and mobilisation. Most tellingly, Putin manages to sustain a high level of support among the Russian population for his war in Ukraine by linking justifications for war to the constitutive narratives of Russian supremacy.

The Friendship of the Peoples or the Great Enslaver Empire?

In 1940, Hassan Israilov – an ethnic Chechen and a former communist party member – decided to formally break with the Communist party and called for a violent uprising against the Soviet regime. In his letter to the to the Chechen Communist party leadership, he wrote:

"*I have decided to become the leader of a war of liberation of my own people. I understand all too well that not only in Checheno-Ingushetia, but in all nations of the Caucasus it will be difficult to win freedom from the heavy yoke of Red imperialism. But our fervent belief in justice and our faith in the support of the freedom-loving peoples of the Caucasus and of the entire world inspire me towards this deed, in your eyes impertinent and pointless, but in my conviction, the sole correct historical step. The valiant Finns are now proving that the Great Enslaver Empire is powerless against a small but freedom-loving people. In the Caucasus you will find your second Finland, and after us will follow other oppressed peoples.*[7]"

Among many notable things in Hassan Israilov's letter stands out his depiction of the Soviet Union as the Great Enslaver Empire. This depiction contrasts sharply with the official Soviet understanding of the time, known as the "Friendship of the Peoples". Towards the 1940s, Stalin and his regime were actively promoting the image of the Soviet Union as an empowering, liberating, anti-imperial force that is taking the Soviet peoples towards the bright communist future, guided by the tacit leadership of the Russian people – people with most advanced culture, the most valorous and loyal people among the Soviet family of nations (Tuminez, 2003, p. 95).

The official representation of the Soviet Union as the anti-imperial power and the idea of Russian benevolent leadership gained traction and became the dominating narrative both in the Soviet Union

[6] For a description of different groups among the war supporters, see the report by Svetlana Erpyleva available at `https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-ukraine-war-support-interviews-opinion/` (Accessed 27 Oct. 2022).

[7] Quoted in Burds (2007, p. 294).

and globally. This outcome is hardly surprising given the repressive nature of the Stalin's regime and extensive propaganda efforts. That the official representation dominated over that of Hassan Israilov is not surprising either: the Red Army and the NKVD eliminated (literally) Hassan Israilov and his liberation movement and crushed any remaining sources of resistance in the Caucasus.

What is remarkable about Stalin's representation is that it outlived not only its chief architect but the Soviet Union itself and remained *the* hegemonic understanding of Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia to this day[8]. Contemporary Russians see their country as a harmonious multi-ethnic space in which Russians (russkie) lead without repressing the others; they see Russia as the successor of the Soviet Union and the Tsarist Empire, from which they inherited the tradition of peaceful interaction with Russia's indigenous peoples to whom they gifted cultural and economic advancement; finally, they see Russian culture and language as the glue that holds everything together (Blackburn, 2021). These propositions repeat, word-to-word, the constitutive premises of Stalin's "Friendship of the Peoples" idea. Remarkably, it is the Stalin's creation that gives people in today's Russia the hegemonic representation of the *current* social and political order and determines Russians' understanding of national self.

How could the narrative of Russian benevolent supremacy outlive its creator and the very political order it was meant to represent?

Stalin's Worldmaking

One possible explanation is that the idea of benevolent Russian supremacy is simply better grounded in hard evidence (policy decrees, historical archives, museums) than the alternative depiction that highlights "the heavy yoke of Red imperialism".

Unfortunately, this explanation does not hold against any meaningful inquiry. Neither the "assimilation" nor subsequent co-existence of non-Russian peoples of the Tsarist and later Soviet regimes were peaceful or voluntary. Non-Russian peoples and their land were conquered violently by a foreign power, governed from the center with its interest in mind rather than that of the local people or their culture; indigenous peoples had little to none influence on the center's priorities. The center's rule was enforced with a nexus of population control policies characteristic of colonial rule: exploitation of people and land to the benefit of the Metropole, halting of local cultural and economic development, brutal repression of national cultural and political elites, mass settlement of "loyal" populations on indigenous land and displacement of local populations[9]. The "Evil Enslaver Empire" representation is certainly much closer to actual lived experiences of non-Russian indigenous peoples in the Soviet Union than the "Friendship of the Peoples" representation.

Consequently, the secret of longevity and success of the latter has nothing to do with its ontological standing. The narrative of benevolence belies the gruesome, violent, and involuntary character of non-Russian experiences in the Soviet Union and therefore is inaccurate. To explain the extraordinary success of the Russian benevolent supremacy representation, we need to embrace a different epistemological approach and explore what its constitutive narratives *do* instead of examining their aptness to historical reality. We need to explore what kind of practices, people, and values do these representations help create and sustain.

The Great Retreat

The Friendship of the Peoples and its constetutive narrative of Russian supremacy entered Soviet mainstream during the period coined by Nicholas Timasheff (1946) as the "Great Retreat": a decisive

[8]It further became the dominant representation among Russian and Western academics who, until the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, were reluctant to discuss Russian rule in imperial terms, that is highlighting violent and forced nature of coexistence between Russians and non-Russians within the bounds of Russian- or Soviet empires. For elaboration of this point see Kassymbekova and Marat (2022), Marat (2021), and Spivak et al. (2006).

[9]For a discussion of Russian (Soviet) imperialism, see Tlostanova (2022), Morrison (2016), Thompson (2014), and Annus (2012).

reversal of Bolsheviks' initial policy-priorities and rhetorical commitments. During the first decade of the Soviet era, the Bolsheviks sought to build the edifice of the new regime on three main pillars: ending the capitalist oppression to secure the loyalty of the working class, ending the *kulak* oppression to secure the loyalty of the peasants, and ending the Russian imperial oppression and thereby securing loyalty of non-Russian peoples.

The latter manifested in the creation of various autonomous national territorial and administrative units, the policy of "indiginesation" (korenizatsiya), and active downplaying of Russian political influence. The combined effort was designed to disarm nationalist anti-imperial liberation movements and accommodate the former colonised nations into the new Soviet country on the premises of equality of all peoples and make the Soviet power seem native and intimate (Martin et al., 2001, pp. 5-13). For that end, the policy of korenizatsiya actively promoted indigenous culture and ensured that indigenous political leaders come to positions of power within state and party apparatus, particularly within their designated administrative units. Russian culture was demoted, assimilation between Russians and non-Russians actively discouraged, and the RSFSR (which itself was not quite a Russian national republic) was denied the institutional means to represent Russian national interests: it did not have a republican Communist party or TSiK, which all other republics of the USSR had.

However, this edifice proved to be too shaky. Certainly, the initial foundations were not enough to mobilise people's effort and dedication for Stalin's notoriously unrealistic industrialisation plans which included, among other things, an imperative to increase grain production via abolition of private property on land and creation of collective farms – Collectivisation. Collectivisation in particular resulted in mass starvation and death of millions and sparked a massive wave of organised resistance to the Soviet Regime second only to the Russian Civil War. In 1930 alone, there were 13754 riots with over two million participants, which involved arson, looting, murder of local party or administrative officials and activists carrying out the collectivisation (Viola, 1999, p. 4).

Crucially, violent resistance was strongest in non-Russian regions of the Soviet Union. Ukrainian peasants organised 30 per cent of all uprisings (4098), several of which involved tens of thousands of peasants (Martin et al., 2001; Graziosi and Négrel, 1994). The Central Asian region of Ferona saw a 5200-people strong uprising that evolved into the Basmachi guerrilla resistance (Hayit, 1992). Karachai-Cherkesia, Checheno-Ingushetia, and Dagestan raised armed battalions numbering 200 to 800 people (Martin et al., 2001, p. 294), among numerous other examples. Stalin's government could only suppress them with heavy involvement of the Red Army.

Stalin's response was to eliminate and suppress the people disloyal to the regime and promote ones he saw as reliable and loyal. Due to the pronounced national character of resistance, the Soviet leadership interpreted it as the failure of korenizatsiya: Instead of disarming the nationalist movements it empowered them to threaten not just implementation of concrete policies but the regime itself[10]. Meanwhile, Stalin began to view its Russian core – where resistance was much weaker – as more politically reliable than the national "periphery" (ibid., p. 295). The sheer scale of the insurgency and attribution of (dis-)loyalty on the level of nationality meant the de-facto end of korenizatsiya policy and fundamental re-configuration of regime's legitimacy pillars.

In terms of policy, Stalin purged local intelligentsia and political leadership (many of whom were promoted thanks to korenizatsiya), replaced them with ethnic Russian governors, and encouraged massive Russian settlement into the country's "periphery". In Ukraine, all oblasts' leaders were replaced by ethnic Russians, many of whom came from the all-Union OGPU[11] (KIIP, 1990). In 1932-33, Ukrainian peasants (together with largely Ukrainian Kuban region) were punished with grain quotas set far above what was possible, removal of food by state authorities which resulted in starvation; isolation of starving cities and villages, and prevention of any help reaching the starving areas. The deliberate punishment by starvation – the Holodomor – marked a turning point in Stalin's

[10]Such interpretation is evident from the 1930 GPU reports on Ukrainian uprisings which mentioned several times the presence of Ukrainian nationalist slogans (Viola, 1999; Graziosi and Négrel, 1994, pp. 120-121) and December 1932 Politburo decrees on the failure of korenizatsiya policy (Martin et al., 2001, p. 303).

[11]Ukraine further did not have a single ethnic-Ukrainian party leader since 1933 until the early 1950s.

repression policy as it targeted people by and for their nationality as opposed to political affiliations, religion, or social class[12].

The epiphany of the new Soviet approach was ethnic cleansing of indigenous peoples and replacing them with loyal Russian settlers. Such was the fate of Chechens, Ingushi, Crimean Tatars, Karachayevtsy and Balkars who were forcefully uprooted and deported *in their entirety* from their native land and sent to Siberia and Central Asia. Thousands of people were murdered or died during the deportation, and, according to the estimates of Naimark (2002), more than 100 000 people died during the first three years after the deportation. The Autonomous territorial units that were home to the aforementioned peoples were either completely abolished and restructured into administrative districts of four surrounding republics and re-settled with "more loyal" ethnic Russians and Georgians (Checheno-Ingush ASSR) or renamed to reflect the absence of the unit's formerly constitutive people (Kabardino-Balkar ASSR into Kabardin ASSR). Similar logic of territorial control was applied to the occupied Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The three countries experienced waves of deportations of indigenous populations accompanied by massive Russian settlement, purges of national political and cultural leadership, and installment of ethnic Russian political cadre to main governing positions (Annus, 2012). After a yet another purge in 1950-1951, not a single native Estonian remained among the 26 members of the Estonian Council of Ministers in the Estonian SSR and the four secretaries of the Estonian Communist Party (Raun, 2002, p. 173).

These practices of *prima facie* colonial oppression directly contradicted the initial policy-priorities and rhetorical commitments set by the Bolsheviks (and Stalin himself). As such, they required an alternative justification narrative, one that would explain and legitimise the new practices of domination and renewed Russian centrality in a way that was compatible with the socialist roots of Stalin's regime. This was how the "friendship of the peoples" representation was born.

The "Friendship of the Peoples" as Russian Supremacy

The "friendship of the peoples" declared Russians as the most valorous and strongest nation; their culture as the most socialist, advanced, and progressive; their language – the carrier of culture – as the unifying force binding all Soviet nations together. The "friendship of the peoples" maintained the rhetorical emphasis of equality of all nations, but pronounced Russians as the first among equals, and put them on top of the USSR's unspoken yet real hierarchy of nations.

Beyond the re-established centrality of Russians, the narrative introduced two other major conceptual innovations. The first was merging of Russian sense of identity with state patriotism. Because Russian culture was most advanced, it paved the way to socialism thus making the Soviet socialist state both the expression and manifestation of Russian culture, thereby fusing together the notion of a Russian imagined community with the Soviet state. The second innovation was re-defining what nationality meant in itself. Prior to the Great Retreat, nation was understood as a modern phenomenon, a product of industrialisation and capitalism, historically constituted community of people (Stalin, 1936, p. 5), and as such contingent and changeable. After, ethnicity was understood in essentialist terms, something inheritable and unchangeable[13].

The convenient effect of such rhetorical innovation was the establishment of new values, namely ones commensurate to new practices of domination and power maintenance. The Soviet leadership cultivated a sense of Russian national pride, but one deprived of any substantive notions of Russian national community. Instead, it was the pride rooted in notions of own supremacy and loyalty to the Soviet state. The rhetorical effort went hand-in-hand with the elevation of Russians to main positions of prestige and power in the USSR, from the army and government to cinema, music, and science. At the same time, the absence of any institutions designed to articulate Russian distinctive national interest remained intact. In 1950, the top Leningrad party officials were arrested and executed for the alleged crime of conspiring to create a Russian communist party – an institution equivalent to

[12]For a detailed account of Holodomor, see Conquest (1986).

[13]For a detailed discussion on the Soviet shift from Marxist notion of ethnicity towards essentialist understanding see Martin et al. (2001, pp. 442-51).

ones present in all other national republics. The net effect was securing support and loyalty of the union's by far biggest ethnic group with the biggest territory and recent historical precedent of having the world's largest land-empire, while setting in place the "checks" preventing Russian nationalism from becoming a threat to party leadership. Another complementary effect was the cultivation of a sense of inferiority and subordination among the Soviet colonised peoples. Although the centre continued its effort to promote regional development and indigenous culture, its Russocentric focus now implied these cultures were incapable of independent development. Therefore, they had to rely, and be grateful for, Russian guidance and help as carried out through the center's policy[14].

No effort was spared to establish the discoursive hegemony of the friendship of the people. Its principles were promoted through extensive propaganda and education campaigns[15], and further enforced through comprehensive Russification and development policies. Alternative representations and their carriers were eliminated, repressed, or exiled, as was the fate of Hassan Israilov and his people, among great many others. Paradigmatic here are Soviet policies of alphabetisation directed at predominantly oral cultures of Caucasus and Siberia. Native intellectuals, scholars, writers, and poets have long been working on developing written language (for instance, based on Arabic or Mongolian writing). These efforts were dismissed, and an alternative, Cyrillic-based alphabetisation enforced. That, together with purges and execution of native intelligentsia led to erasure of regions' diverse populations' cultural heritage comprising centuries-long traditions and links to other cultures[16].

By changing both the oppressive and representational practices, Stalin created two new types of people: The Russian – the older brother; an exceptional, advanced, benevolent, selfless leader devoted to the (Soviet) state – and the "non-Russian" – a backward loyal inferior who is dependent on and thus grateful for the formative Russian influence. This new foundation proved to be much more robust. In the course of the Great Patriotic War, Soviet leadership made a series of acts of colossal incompetence and mismanagement that, again, resulted in avoidable loss of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives. Yet, no crisis of legitimacy followed. Stalin made sure to acknowledge his debt and gratitude to the regime's new core - the Russian people. At the Kremlin banquette to celebrate the victory over Germany in May 1945, Stalin acknowledged that the government made "mistakes", and praised explicitly the Russian people – *the most outstanding nation of all the nations forming the Soviet Union and its governing force* – for not dethroning the government but trusting it and implementing its policies despite government's failures. Because of its capacity to withhold pressure and maintain the power hierarchy, Stalin's foundation could outlive its creator. Successive Bolshevik leaders continued to rely on it to maintain power, and efforts to dismantle it proved to be difficult[17].

Russian Supremacy and the 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

The Friendship of the Peoples remains the hegemonic understanding of of Russian social and political order today. Russians overwhelmingly believe in its constitutive narratives and think of their country as a harmonious multi-ethnic space in which Russians – the people with the highest culture – lead without oppressing the others (Blackburn, 2021). The hegemony is a result of the representation's aptness to the actual social and political reality: ethnic Russians today enjoy the highest societal prestige and most privileged access to public goods like housing (Avetian, 2022) and education (Khanolainen et al., 2022), are over-represented among the top public- and private sector jobs.

It is also a result of massive political effort by the Putin's regime to maintain the dominance of Russian supremacy over alternative representations. Its constitutive premises are enshrined in doc-

[14]Tellingly, each culture had to designate its founding national poet, and then scramble to find and celebrate reflections of Russian influence in their poetry.

[15]Paradigmatic example if the all-Union celebration of Pushkin in 1937 as the great Russian poet and the national poet of all Soviet nations (Martin et al., 2001, p. 456). See also Brandenberger (1999).

[16]For a detailed account, see Tlostanova (2022) and Grenoble (2003).

[17]Tellingly, Beria's first priority after Stalin's death was to de-Russify the indigenous republics by promoting indigenous leaders to positions of power.

uments outlining state priorities regarding nationality[18] and culture[19] policies as well as Putin's programmatic article on the nationality policy (Putin, 2012). These documents pave the way to a rich set of state policies and semi-private initiatives (e.g., production of movies heavily funded by the state) that are supported with lavish funding, while alternative representations are actively discouraged and, in extreme cases, criminalised[20].

As its communist predecessors, Putin's regime relies (with the help of his repressive apparatus and censorship) on Russian supremacy to solidify the regime's legitimacy and secure public support for policies of highest priority. The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – arguably, one of the most challenging endeavours Putin has ever attempted – is the case in point. The Russian president outlined his justifications for invading in his declaration of war speech of 24 February 2022. These justifications explicitly draw upon the narratives of Russian supremacy, namely the Russian entitlement to influence, grievances against the West, and juxtaposition between patriotism and nationalism.

The first reason is NATO expansion that threatens not so much Russia itself but Russia's *interests and absolutely legitimate demands* in Eastern Europe. To buy this argument as a plausible justification for the invasion, one has to believe that Russia can have and indeed has legitimate interests and demands in the region, namely preventing Eastern European countries from accessing NATO. Such a belief assumes that whichever interests these countries themselves have are of secondary importance to Russian interests, or neglects that these countries can have agency to being with (as Putin does with reference to Ukraine that is *governed from outside*). This belief is rooted in sincerely held notions of Russian greatness and benevolence. The vast majority of Russians agree with Putin that Russia is a great, unique, peaceful civilisation with a special mission in the world (although they struggle to articulate what this mission is) (Blackburn, 2021, p. 98). Thus, any Russian involvement is beneficial to its potential recipients and is always accepted voluntarily (hence Putin's reference to the plea of DNR and LNR leaders for Russia to invade); Russian involvement can only be refused if a hostile major power forces the unlucky recipient to refuse it.

The second reason is that Ukraine, according to Putin, is ruled by a puppet regime of neo-Nazis who threaten the lives of Russian speaking Ukrainians in the Donbas. Ukraine does indeed have far-right neo-Nazi movements, as many countries do, but their actual political influence is marginal. What Putin labels as nazism in Ukraine is civic nationalism – Ukrainian society's and government's effort to improve their common jurisdiction and economic output, and defend themselves as a political community in a hostile international environment. This effort is worlds apart from efforts to establish total supremacy of one ethnic group and unconditional subordination of others, which constitutes nazism. To find Putin's nonsensical claim plausible, one has to understand nation and ethnicity in essentialist terms: to see nation (interchangeable with ethnicity) as something inheritable and unchangeable, almost of biological origins. Unfortunately, such is the dominant understanding in Russia as is evident from large scale surveys, interviews[21], pop-culture[22], and top state officials' remarks[23]. An additional heuristic that enhances plausibility of Putin's claim is Russian understanding of patriotism. Russians see patriotism as unconditional loyalty and devotion to Russia, its multinational people, and the state. It is a fundamentally apolitical act since it requires devotion irrespective of the state's policies and priorities. Such conceptualisation of nation and ethnicity coupled with patriotism understood as unconditional apolitical devotion inevitably lead Russians to mistake any political effort of Ukrainians (or anyone else for that matter) to advance one's political community with nazism.

[18]Presidential Order on the Strategy of State Nationality Policy in the Russian Federation until 2025. Kremlin, December 19. `http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/36512/page/3` . (Accessed September 13, 2022.)

[19]"The Foundations of Cultural Policy." Ministry of Culture. `https://www.mkrf.ru/upload/mkrf/mkdocs2016/OSNOVI-PRINT.NEW.indd.pdf`. (Accessed September 13, 2022.)

[20]For instance, critical accounts of Soviet oppressive policies that draw parallels to Nazi Germany are considered a criminal act.

[21]See e.g., Blackburn (2021).

[22]Case in point: SHAMAN's song "I am Russian" (14M views on YouTube at the time of writing) with the lyrics "I am Russian, my blood comes from my father."

[23]Case in point is Lavrov's notorious claim that Hitler had *Jewish blood*.

By carefully aligning justifications for invasion with constitutive representations of the hegemonic understanding of social and political order, Putin successfully creates a solid support base for his extremely difficult, disruptive and resource-demanding war. Russian supremacy is, therefore, a major factor enabling war.

Implications

The essay's argument conveys a warning: the end of Putin's regime would not necessarily mean the end of violence. To transform Russia into a real peaceful and democratic society, it is imperative to dethrone Russian supremacy from its hegemonic position. Practically, this means dismantling the political order which grants ethnic Russians excessive privileges at the cost of their indigenous compatriots; This means denouncing Russian supremacy and its constitutive narratives of greatness, benevolence, and multi-ethnic harmony as oppressive devices and reflecting thoroughly on the genealogy of these narratives as well as the role of agential powers in establishing and securing their dominance; This means implementing thoughtful policy of reparations towards all colonised peoples, from Poland to Chukotka, for the violence wretched upon them; This means listening to and prioritising the voices of indigenous activists, politicians, and scholars in exploring Russia's imperial past and present and designing the institutional set-up of post-Putin Russia, should they decide that remaining within its jurisdiction is in their interest; Finally, this means re-defining the Russian identity. For the empire to die, the "state-bearing people" should stop bearing the state and start doing something else.

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