

Distorting Putin's Favorite Philosophers

Amid the endless demonization of Russian President Putin, David Brooks and other upscale U.S. pundits have taken to misrepresenting the views of several Russian philosophers whom Putin is known to admire, apparently following the theory that whatever Putin likes must be evil, as Paul R. Grenier explains.

By Paul R. Grenier

What started the new Cold War? According to the State Department, it was Russia's illegal violation of Ukraine's sovereign borders. The Kremlin, for its part, insists it was a U.S.-facilitated coup in Ukraine which destroyed the constitutional order there, causing chaos and dangers to Russian security to which Russia had no choice but to respond.

According to academic foreign policy "realists," the cause was the imminent threat of Ukraine's integration into an ever-expanding military pact dominated by the United States. According to [George Friedman](#), president of Statfor, the private strategic intelligence firm, the Ukraine crisis itself is more effect than cause: the conflict started in 2013 when the United States decided Russia's increasing power was becoming a threat.

And according to Kiev, Russian President Vladimir Putin created the whole crisis. He invented the threat of Ukrainian so-called "fascism" and was motivated throughout by a combination of imperial ambition coupled with a fear of democracy.

It is not my present goal to try to adjudicate among the above claims. Despite their obvious differences, they also all share a common trait: none provide any clear direction for how to get out of this mess. It's time to approach it from a completely different angle.

—

When the first Cold War ended, Francis Fukuyama explained, more in sadness than in triumph, that the United States' model of liberal democratic capitalism had won and that this was why "history" the struggle to find the correct answer to the political question regarding the optimal form of society had ended.

What had *won*, in fact, was a set of answers to such key questions of political life as the origin and purpose of the state; what it means to be human; what it is that all humans do, or should, strive for. The classic sources of the specifically American answers to these questions are well known: they are the sources of liberal political thought as such..

Here is another thing well known to the point of being cliché: since 2001, the end of history thesis has been repeatedly challenged by events. In point of fact, Fukuyama's thesis cannot be challenged by mere events, because he never said that unpleasantness would cease to be part of the human experience. He said that humans were unlikely to come up with a more effective and attractive compromise solution to the key political questions than the rather dull set of answers that make up the liberal, democratic capitalist world.

To those who point out that ISIS has disproven his "end of history" thesis, Fukuyama could with good reason reply: "Well, if you find that sort of thing *attractive*, you may accept my congratulations."

But I am writing neither to defend nor to attack Fukuyama. I am simply suggesting that we are doing ourselves no favor by ignoring all answers to the political question that differ from liberal orthodoxy. There may be in liberalism and democracy and capitalism much that is correct, but there is every reason to suspect that we have not yet discovered the final truth about either human beings or political man.

Fukuyama himself offered his own critique: his skepticism about the human material is what made him set his sights so low. It is not necessarily a criticism of Fukuyama to point out that there are many in the world today who aspire to something besides our world of comfortable autonomy and the possession of rights in the purely Lockean sense.

Among those who so aspire are many in the Slavic world, with its roots in Eastern Orthodox Christianity; or the Chinese sphere, with its Confucian heritage which is just beginning to awaken; and of course the Middle East. And that is just to name the groups the United States has identified as in dire need of a makeover.

Diversity and Liberalism

The West, and specifically the United States, has before it a fateful choice: should it seek a "live and let live" co-existence of the liberal and non-liberal nations of the world, or should it try to make the rest of the world liberal at gunpoint, and in that way prove that history really has finally ended? Should we make the world safe for diversity, or should we make the world uniform for the safety of the United States?

In the Middle East the choice has already been made. It is to be made liberal and democratic at gunpoint. The enormous difficulties this has presented has convinced the American party of war, which appears to be in the majority, that it is time to double down and try harder, not only in the Middle East, but now

in the Slavic world as well.

This raises a crucial question about diversity and difference. What is it that makes a nation *itself* and not something else? Is it the presence of borders? Is it running one's own elections using one's own manpower? Clearly, it is neither of these things, nor anything like them.

To be one's own nation, to continue to exist in fact, means exactly to continue to realize over time one's national idea, that is to say, as Ernst Renan put it (*Qu'est qu'une nation?*, 1882, as quoted by Hannah Arendt) "to preserve worthily the undivided inheritance which has been handed down."

That nations frequently borrow cultural content from others is undeniable, and often laudable. But it is crucially important, as American historian William Appleman Williams once noted, *who* makes the choice of those borrowings. Are they adapted freely from the inside, or are they forcefully imposed? The failure to understand this latter distinction is what keeps bringing about *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (also the title of Williams's book).

When nations fully share the American liberal world view, these separate nations become, in a certain sense, no longer fully "separate." This is by no means necessarily a bad thing. The nations of northern Europe do not suffer for the most part from their close alliance with the United States, including in the cultural sense.

But here's the six trillion dollar question: is the United States willing to countenance the existence, on a permanent basis, of other great powers that do not accept liberal civilizational values as America defines them? I say other "great powers" because in the long run only a great power, or a protectorate of a great power, can assure its own continued existence.

The non-liberal status of Russia has been presented recently as a dire threat to the security of both America and the world. In support of this storyline, the Russian president has been associated with thinkers from Russia's past who are, supposedly, the source of a fanaticism that justifies speaking of Vladimir Putin and Russia (the two are melded together in the endlessly-repeated "Putin's Russia") in the same breath as ISIS.

But the ideas of this non- or not-entirely-liberal Russia are by no means all dangerous. To the contrary, they offer a fruitful avenue for rethinking some of our most cherished assumptions about the nature of politics and the nature of the international order.

Then and Now

When communism was abandoned in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it became apparent to thoughtful Russians and outsiders alike that a new concept of the state, a new concept of man, and a new public philosophy would have to be created.

It was then, and remains today, an open question whether the new Russian identity would end up being an import from the West, something from the native vault of pre-Communist philosophical thinking, or perhaps a combination of the two.

As might be expected from the country that brought the world Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, when it comes to philosophy, Russia has got a deep bench.

In the months immediately following the February 2014 change of power in Kiev, and the resulting growing tension between Washington and Moscow, three Russian philosophers, only two of them widely known outside of Russia, came to be increasingly associated with the name of Vladimir Putin. The subsequent interpretation of these philosophers on the pages of several of America's most influential newspapers deserves to be considered in detail.

Maria Snegovaya, a doctoral candidate in political science at Columbia University, initiated the discussion with a March 2, 2014 [article](#) in the Washington Post. Putin's "pro-Soviet worldview," Snegovaya wrote, is poorly understood:

"To get a grasp one needs to check what Putin's preferred readings are. Putin's favorites include a bunch of Russian nationalist philosophers of early 20th century Berdyaev, Solovyev, Ilyin, whom he often quotes in his public speeches. Moreover, recently the Kremlin has specifically assigned Russia's regional governors to read the works by these philosophers during 2014 winter holidays. The main message of these authors is Russia's messianic role in world history, preservation and restoration of Russia's historical borders and Orthodoxy."

Mark Galeotti, writing in *Foreign Policy* ("Putin's Empire of the Mind," April 21, 2014) also found fault with these same three philosophers. "These three, whom Putin often cites," Galeotti writes, "exemplify and justify [Putin's] belief in Russia's singular place in history. They romanticize the necessity of obedience to the strong ruler, whether managing the boyars or defending the people from cultural corruption, and the role of the Orthodox Church in defending the Russian soul and ideal."

Finally, David Brooks, writing for the *New York Times* ("Putin Can't Stop," March 3, 2014), likewise expressed alarm about the influence of Solovyov, Berdyaev and Il'in. "Putin doesn't only quote these guys; he wants others to read them,"

Brooks wrote. Three main ideas unify Solovyov, Il'in and Berdyaev's work, Brooks wrote:

"The first is Russian exceptionalism: the idea that Russia has its own unique spiritual status and purpose. The second is devotion to the Orthodox faith. The third is belief in autocracy. Mashed together, these philosophers point to a Russia that is a quasi-theocratic nationalist autocracy destined to play a culminating role on the world stage."

Under the influence of these "guys," Brooks continues, "The tiger of quasi-religious nationalism, which Putin has been riding, may now take control. That would make it very hard for Putin to stop in this conflict where rational calculus would tell him to stop." Brooks concludes that Russia can no longer be considered a "normal" regime and "a Huntingtonian conflict of civilizations with Russia" may be the result.

Analyzing the Analysts

What are we to make of these analyses, all of them published in authoritative U.S. periodicals?

One thing is certain. These assessments represent an enormous and surprising reversal in the viewpoint of educated opinion in the West, particularly as regards Solovyov and Berdyaev (with Il'in, as already noted, being much less well known).

Up until these articles in March-April of 2014, I do not recall reading a single negative assessment of either of these Russian thinkers, at least not among Western specialists, nor a single one accusing them of being hostile to the West, nor a single one suggesting that they are friendly to Russian chauvinism or nationalism.

In *Russian Thought after Communism*, James Scanlan, a leading Western expert on Russian thought, described Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) as "by common consent the greatest and most influential of all of Russia's philosophical thinkers."

In a recent Cambridge University Press history of Russian philosophy, Randal Poole writes that "Solov'ev is widely regarded as Russia's greatest philosopher."

There are, it is true, a handful of dissenters from this nearly unanimous assessment of Solovyov. The contemporary Russian philosopher Sergei Khoruzhky considers Solovyov a very great philosopher, but a bit too *western* in orientation to deserve the title of greatest *Russian* thinker in the narrow sense.

Moreover, even scholars known to be generally hostile to things Russian, such as former Harvard professor Richard Pipes, nonetheless speak respectfully about Solovyov: "The Orthodox Church never found a common language with the educated because its conservative outlook made it pronouncedly anti-intellectual One by one it pushed away from itself the country's finest religious minds: the Slavophiles, Vladimir Soloviev, Leo Tolstoy and the laymen gathered in the early 1900s around the Religious Philosophical Society " (*Russia Under the Old Regime*, 243.)

In short, Snegovaya's misapprehension of Solovyov could hardly be more thorough. In what possible sense can Solovyov, who had no inkling of anything Soviet, be considered supportive of Putin's alleged "pro-Soviet world view"? In point of fact, the writings of this supposedly "pro-Soviet" philosopher exactly like those of Berdyaev and Il'in were banished by Soviet censors.

How can Solovyov be described as a "nationalist," when his magnum opus, *The Justification of the Good* (the book which Putin is said to have urged his governors to read), states precisely the opposite? It is hard to imagine a more absolute condemnation of national *exceptionalism* than that contained in Solovyov's definitive work of ethics:

"It must be one or the other. Either we must renounce Christianity and monotheism in general, according to which 'there is none good but one, that is, God,' and recognize our nation as such to be the highest good that is, put it in the place of God – or we must admit that a people becomes good not in virtue of the simple fact of its particular nationality, but only in so far as it conforms to and participates in the absolute good."

This same anti-nationalist theme runs through Solovyov's entire corpus. He argued bitterly against the Slavophile nationalists of his day. To learn of Solovyov's views on this subject, Snegovaya, who reads Russian, might have consulted the book *State, Society, Governance*, a scholarly volume of liberal social science co-published in 2013 by Mikhail Khodorkovsky (not known for his fondness for Putin). In this Russian-language compendium of essays by leading Russian liberal theorists, Solovyov is marshaled as an authoritative *critic* of Russian nationalism, including the nationalism occasionally voiced by Dostoevsky. [S. Nikolsky and M. Khodorkovsky, ed., *Gosudrastvo. Obshchestvo. Upravlenie: Sbornik statei* (Moskva, Alpina Publisher: 2013)].

In the article by Prof. Sergei Nikolsky, Solovyov is quoted at length precisely as an authoritative critic of Dostoevsky's disrespect for other faiths and nations and specifically for Europe. For the sake of balance, Nikolsky might have noted that elsewhere, for example in his "Three Speeches in Honor of Dostoevsky," Solovyov praises Dostoevsky in the highest possible terms and

specifically denies that his political ideal is nationalist.

It is worth noting that Nikolsky, in this same article, attacks Il'in for his too rosy views of Russian Czarist imperialism. Nikolsky probably has a point here.

Criticizing the Church

Finally, far from being a fanatical proponent of the Russian Orthodox Church, Solovyov harshly criticized the Russian Church, calling it "totally subservient to the secular power and destitute of all inner vitality." As ringing endorsements go, this one sounds decidedly weak.

And again, all this is well known. Many, including even such prominent theologians as Urs von Balthasar, believe Solovyov renounced Orthodoxy and became a Catholic, so warmly did Solovyov praise the Catholic Church.

Solovyov, the supposed conservative Orthodox zealot, praised the Catholic Church, among other reasons, for what he saw as its independence from nationalist temptations, and for its readiness to act in the world.

"The East [meaning Eastern Orthodoxy] prays; the West [meaning Roman Catholicism] prays and acts: which is right?" asks Solovyov rhetorically in his famous *Russia and the Universal Church*. Mixing with the world is good if it is the world that changes, Solovyov continues. Changes in what sense? In some respects, in the same sense as that advocated by Western *progress*.

What the French Revolution destroyed treating men as things, chattel or slaves, deserved to be destroyed. But the French Revolution nonetheless did not institute justice, because justice is impossible without the truth, and first of all the truth about man, but the French Revolution "perceived in Man nothing but abstract individuality, a rational being destitute of all positive content."

As a result, the "free sovereign individual," Solovyov continues, "found himself doomed to be the defenseless victim of the absolute State or 'nation.' "

It is impossible to reconcile the Solovyov we find in his actual writings with Snegovaya's and Brooks's portrait of a religious chauvinist and Russian nationalist, one with pro-Soviet tendencies to boot.

The reference to messianism, coming from Brooks, also demonstrates a striking lack of self-awareness. But that particular example of the kettle calling the pot black has already been ably handled by Charles Pierce ("Our Mr. Brooks and the Messianic Mr. Putin," *Esquire*, March 4, 2014).

Philosopher of Freedom

Berdyayev (1874-1948) wrote a great deal, and on a number of subjects changed his mind, but in as much as it was Berdyayev's *The Philosophy of Inequality* which Putin urged his governors read, it makes sense for us to start with that.

Do we find here a repository of 'pro-Soviet' views? Not even close. Instead, we find an emotionally-charged condemnation of everything the Soviet Union's founders stood for (the book was written immediately after the 1917 Revolution and Berdyayev was full of outrage and grief).

Berdyayev spends much of the book berating the Bolshevik movement for its exaggerated exaltation of a particular political form. But in truth, Berdyayev insists, political forms are always secondary to the human spirit. Whether a person is kind or vicious, devoted to justice or its opposite, has little to do with whether someone is a monarchist or a democrat, a proponent of private property or a socialist.

Why specifically "the Philosophy of *Inequality*"? Not because the philosopher is indifferent to exploitation and injustice. And still less because he favored tyranny he was to the contrary a tireless critic of despotism, which is the word he used to describe the Czarist order.

Berdyayev never completely abandoned his early interest in Marx, even after his conversion to Christianity around the turn of the century. He was by temperament a person more of the left than of the right, despite a lingering influence of Nietzsche.

What concerns Berdyayev is the inequality between what is higher or lower in the realm of spirit and culture. Berdyayev mostly approves of liberalism and finds in it something aristocratic or at any rate not revolutionary. By contrast, democracy and socialism, precisely because they have pretensions to fill all life with their content, can easily become false religions.

At times Berdyayev's philosophy even overlaps with libertarianism, which likewise rejects any abuse of the freedom of the individual person for utilitarian ends.

Berdyayev's religious views are difficult to characterize. He was a Christian, an existentialist and someone who believed in the absolute primacy of freedom, but not necessarily all three of these at once (they are not entirely compatible, but then Berdyayev was not always consistent). The writings of Dostoevsky were of enormous religious importance to him.

It is easy to misread Berdyayev because of his lack of system, and because he looks at the same concept from sometimes contradictory perspectives. Take for example Berdyayev's paradoxical understanding of national uniqueness.

Dostoevsky, Berdyaev writes, “is a Russian genius; the Russian national character is stamped on all his creative work, and he reveals to the world the depths of the Russian soul. But this most Russian of Russians at the same time belongs to all of humanity, he is the most universal of all Russians.”

And the same can be said for Goethe and other national geniuses, who likewise are universal not by being more generic, but precisely by being more who they are; in the case of Goethe, by being specifically *German*.

Berdyaev’s perspective here is particularly helpful if we want a world made safe for both unity and diversity. A global civilization that would level all differences is ugly, while a messianism that would exalt one nation over others is evil. [N. Berdyaev, *Sud’ba Rossii* [The Fate of Russia], (Moskva: Eksmo-Press, 2001), p. 353 and 361]

Christianity as such, however, is messianic, because it affirms what it considers a universal truth, the truth of Christ. But this truth has no coercive power.

Until early 2014, the view that Solovyov and Berdyaev represent particularly humane and attractive alternatives for Russia was not, as far as I am aware, doubted by anyone, at least, not by anyone who gave the matter any thought.

In the time of *perestroika*, when Russian philosophy was finally being rediscovered inside Russia, the likely positive influence of these philosophers was warmly affirmed. Bill Keller, writing for the New York Times, praised the Soviet magazine *Novy Mir* for focusing attention on “*the more Western-inclined* 19th-century Russian thinkers such as Nikolai Nekrasov, Aleksandr Herzen, and the Christian philosophers Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Berdyaev.” [Emphasis mine]

These were the sort of thinkers, Keller emphasized, who would help encourage “a humane alternative to zealous Leninism and the darker Russian nationalism.” By publishing such writers, Keller continued, *Novy Mir* was demonstrating that it “occupies a key centrist position, attempting to reconcile the Westernizers and the Russian patriots on a common ground of tolerance and democratic ideals.”

The ‘Liberal Conservative’

The case of Ivan Il’in (1883-1954), whom Putin regularly quotes and whom Putin is known to particularly respect, is more complex. Some of Snegovaya’s suspicions in his case are indeed accurate. Il’in has a conservative temperament.

It is fair to call him a nationalist, though one concerned with Russia alone,

and with no messianic ambitions. As will be seen below, Il'in was not against authoritarianism. Il'in was, however, complex and worthy of much more careful consideration.

The suggestion that Il'in is a source of that famous "pro-Soviet" stance is easily disposed of. The Cheka interrogators who arrested and interrogated Il'in six times between 1918 and 1922 would have been very surprised at such a characterization.

According to Prof. Iu. T. Lisitsa, who has reviewed the records on Il'in from the KGB archives, Il'in "even in the hands of the Cheka, under threat of execution remained adamant, precise, and articulate in his opposition to the Bolshevik regime." [From "The Complex Legacy of Ivan Il'in, *Russian Thought after Communism*, in James Scanlan, ed., *Russian Thought After Communism: The Recovery of a Philosophical Tradition* (Armonk, New York, M.E. Sharpe: 1994), 183.]

The "pro-Soviet" characterization also does not jive very well with the fact that Il'in, along with Berdyaev and a host of other leading Russian philosophers, was banished from the USSR in 1922 for their anti-Soviet "agitation." Il'in's literary corpus is said to include over 40 books and essays, some of them written in scholarly, technical language, so it is not an easy thing to characterize his worldview, but a good place to start is Il'in's *Our Tasks*.

Not only is this a book which Putin likes to quote, it is also another of the books, along with Solovyov's *Justification of the Good* and Berdyaev's *The Philosophy of Inequality*, that Putin urged his governors to read.

The book *Our Tasks* is a compilation of journalistic essays written by Il'in between 1948 and 1954. Their overriding theme is the need to put an end to Soviet rule, defeat communism and plan for Russia's restoration and recovery from the devastating physical, moral and political woes visited on Russia by the Soviet system.

It is difficult to imagine a more uncompromising condemnation of Soviet ideology and practice than this collection of Il'in's essays. If anything, one might fault him for exaggerating the faults of the Soviet system. It must be remembered, though, that Il'in (who died in 1954) did not live to see the post-Stalin era, or even to hear of Khrushchev's speech condemning Stalin (in 1956).

And yet Il'in was not only a critic of communism, he was also a critic of Russia's past leaders when they were vicious (as in the case of Ivan IV) or incompetent, as in the case of Nicholas II. Like Berdyaev, Il'in was also, on

occasion, bitingly critical of the Russian people, who he felt were politically immature and in need of a crash course in legal awareness.

After the fall of Soviet power, a fall he was sure would eventually take place, he was skeptical in the extreme that the character of the people living in Russia at that point would be capable of wise self-rule, which is why he urged, as a temporary expedient, a transition period of authoritarian government.

'Soviet Man'

Here is how, in *Our Tasks*, Il'in described the character of the "Soviet man" that the future Russia would inherit: "The totalitarian system imposes a number of unhealthy tendencies and habits among which we may find the following: a willingness to inform on others (and knowingly falsely at that), pretense and lying, loss of the sense of personal dignity and the absence of a well-rooted patriotism, thinking in a slavish manner and by aping the thoughts of others, flattery combined with servility, constant fear.

"The fight to overcome these unhealthy habits will not be easy. It will require time, an honest and courageous self-awareness, a purifying repentance, the acquisition of new habits of independence and self-reliance, and, most importantly of all, a new national system of spiritual and intellectual education. [I. A. Il'in, *Nashi Zadachi* (Our Tasks), sobr. soch. (collected works), vol. 2 (Moskva, Russkaya Kniga: 1993), 23-24.]

Il'in was indeed deeply concerned about the danger of Russia's disintegration and indeed was concerned about the defense of its borders, although, of course, not their restoration. To avoid such disintegration, Il'in urged Russians to not repeat what he considered the fatal mistake of the February Revolution its premature push for full democracy.

In this, as in many other respects, Il'in's policy recommendations overlap with those of Solzhenitsyn, who was profoundly influenced by Il'in. That Il'in is a major influence on Putin's brand of "liberal conservatism" was noted already in 2012 by the Canadian scholar Paul Robinson.

Unlike Solovyov and Berdyaev, in the early years of *perestroika* Ivan Il'in was poorly known both inside and outside of Russia, although Il'in had been quite prominent during the years preceding and following the Russian Revolution, including while he was living in exile.

His fame early in the Twentieth Century stemmed largely from a celebrated academic study of Hegel's writings, a work still lauded both in and outside of Russia as among the best ever produced.

Il'in burst onto the post-Soviet scene in 1991, when essays from *Our Tasks* were first published, including the prescient "What Does the Dismemberment of Russia Bode for the World?" In this essay, Il'in wrote that the rest of the world will, in its ignorance of the likely consequences, eagerly underwrite the breakup of Russia and will to this end provide lots of development assistance and ideological encouragement.

As a result, Il'in wrote, "The territory of Russia will boil with endless quarrels, clashes, and civil wars that will constantly escalate into worldwide clashes " To avoid this fate, as mentioned earlier, Il'in urged for Russia a transition period of authoritarian rule.

This point is made emphatically by Philip Grier in his *Complex Legacy of Ivan Il'in*. Grier, it should be added, who is the former president of the American Hegel Society, is also the translator of Il'in's two-volume analysis of Hegel published by Northwestern University Press in 2011.

Although Il'in quite plainly admired the United States and Switzerland for what he saw as their mature democratic self-rule, it is not clear that Il'in was confident that democracy was tailor-made for a nation and culture of the Russian type.

What is absolutely clear, however, is Il'in's fervent devotion to rule of law and legal awareness, something that sets him apart from the Slavophiles whom he in other respects resembles.

A Russia, Liberal and Christian?

There are very important differences between these three thinkers. Nevertheless, all three writers considered freedom essential to human culture and the human spirit, though they differed in emphasis. Undoubtedly, then, the worldview of all three is irreducible to a liberal formula even if their views include important liberal or modern elements.

All three agreed with the liberal world that all humans, regardless of nation, religion, or any other difference, are equally endowed with infinite dignity. But for them it was not a throwaway phrase when they added that this dignity is conferred on humans by God, which means, among other things, that a right to be absolutely secure cannot trump someone else's right not to be tortured (Il'in's absolute prohibition against torture, or anything even coming close to torture, in the above-mentioned book is excellent and quite timely).

There has been no space here to attempt more than a brief introduction to these thinkers. But it should already be clear that the tradition we have just described offers, if we would only engage with it, an opportunity: a chance to

form a partnership with a Russia that, though different from our present state of mind, shares much of our own past, and perhaps suggests some ways forward as we negotiate an increasingly dangerous world.

As his reading list recommendations strongly suggest, "Putin's Russia" represents an attempt to reconnect with this tradition, however flawed that attempt may be. Take Putin's famous speech (to the Federal Assembly) in April 2005. Although Western commentators have ad nauseum berated him for showing his true colors and displaying nostalgia for the Soviet order, in reality, as the entire text and the following excerpt makes clear, he did no such thing:

Putin said: "'State power,' wrote the great Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin, 'has its own limits defined by the fact that it is authority that reaches people from outside. State power cannot oversee and dictate the creative states of the soul and mind, the inner states of love, freedom and goodwill. The state cannot demand from its citizens faith, prayer, love, goodness and conviction. It cannot regulate scientific, religious and artistic creation. It should not intervene in moral, family and daily private life, and only when extremely necessary should it impinge on people's economic initiative and creativity.'"

Is it naive to impute such idealism to Putin? Perhaps. But Putin is not in fact the issue, but Russia. We engage after all a country, not a single person in it, and the tradition we are describing has sufficient roots in the Russia that actually exists that, if we chose to engage with it, there would be the chance for an actual productive conversation, one capable of rebuilding trust and creating an order.

Critics say that Russia recently has become a nation filled with hate. But how are Russian citizens and President Putin himself to interpret the twisting (and what we have seen above is just the tip of the iceberg) of their own words and their most cherished traditions in such an apparently spiteful and even violent way?

Knowledgeable analysts have correctly noted that Russian nationalists such as Alexander Dugin consider the United States to be Russia's implacable enemy. Representatives of this "Eurasianist" camp are waiting in the wings if Putin falls.

America's efforts at "regime change" might even succeed at facilitating such a drastic change for the worse. And then, by means of that "curious logic" of the American ideology, we will once again, with "stubborn devotion without regard for specific, varying factors," have brought about yet another catastrophe.

A Brief Footnote on Ideology

For all the United States' vaunted freedom, it exhibits surprisingly little freedom of maneuver when it comes to its foreign policy. Far from taking into consideration Russia's vital security needs, to say nothing of Russia's identity, U.S. ideologues have behaved as if both are either non-existent or fundamentally illegitimate. Such compulsive political behavior is the sure sign of ideological infection.

Brooks, Snegovaya and Galeotti apparently have all made use of the same basic logic when they examined the philosophical sources of Putin's thinking. That logic went something like this: a) Washington considers Russia a problem, therefore, b) Vladimir Putin is a thug; and therefore, c) the Nineteen Century philosopher Vladimir Solovyov dreamed of restoring the Soviet Union to its former Christian glory and might.

Such sloppy thinking would not have happened were these three otherwise intelligent people not (one hopes temporarily) previously incapacitated by ideological blinders. Unfortunately, the same ideological thinking dominates nearly all of U.S. discourse vis-à-vis Russia, making a political settlement impossible.

After all, if America's political ideal is as nearly perfect as can ever be achieved in this "fallen world," then the thing is to carry on and win, thereby bringing the perfect good (that's us!) to everyone.

Why bother seriously familiarizing oneself with a competing system? Clearly Brooks and Co. made no such effort. It was enough for them to know that Russia's political ideal significantly *differs* from America's: therefore it is *illegitimate*, Q.E.D.

As Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "The curious logicity of all isms, their simple-minded trust in the salvation value of stubborn devotion without regard for specific, varying factors, already harbors the first germs of totalitarian contempt for reality."

That America does not actually live up to its own ideals, as I have [written here previously](#), changes nothing for the ideologue. After all, every further increase in America's power brings closer the day when its actions (which are generally realist) and its speech (which is always democratic and idealist) can come into harmony. Then history can truly and finally come to an end.

And yet, in light of the above review of an important part of the Russian tradition, there is something we are now in a much better position to point out: Russia has also taken the trouble to have ideals.

Paul Grenier is a former Russian simultaneous interpreter and a regular writer on political-philosophical issues. After advanced study in Russian affairs, international relations and geography at Columbia University, Paul Grenier worked on contract for the Pentagon, State Department and World Bank as a Russian interpreter, and at the Council on Economic Priorities, where he was a research director. He has written for the Huffington Post, Solidarity Hall, the Baltimore Sun, Godspy, and Second Spring, among other places, and his translations of Russian philosophy have appeared in the Catholic journal *Communio*.
