

In Putin's Head: Book Review

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Michel Eltchaninoff. *Dans la tête de Vladimir Poutine*. Arles: Solin/Actes Sud, 2015. 171pp.



Michel Eltchaninoff's prize-winning *Dans la tête de Vladimir Poutine*—*In the Head of Vladimir Putin*—is a fascinating examination of the development of the Russian president's ultra-conservative and nationalist ideology from assuming the presidency in 2000 until today.[1] Eltchaninoff, the author of two books about Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky and many essays, might seem like an unlikely candidate to write an intellectual biography of the twenty-first century president Putin, but as it turns out, Eltchaninoff's knowledge of nineteenth and twentieth century Russian philosophers makes him the ideal author, because that is where Putin's ideas come from, Russia's conservative, religious past.

Putin, as he has himself said, was never a believer in Communism and the classless society, but rather, serving as a KGB spy, a dedicated servant of the Soviet Union. Appalled by the collapse of the Soviet state, which he viewed as a tragedy, he has as president sought to preserve Russia—and to expand it. With the fall of Communism, Putin initially adopted the liberal rhetoric then popular in the United States and the European Union, though how sincere he was in those views is unclear. In any case, writes Eltchaninoff, he gradually began to move to the right until with the “conservative turn” of 2013 he adopted profoundly reactionary religious and political views, becoming “an imperialist the following year” with the taking of Crimea. Putin's quest for a worldview was not simply a personal intellectual odyssey, but rather the search by Putin and the political class he led for an ideology that could serve as the intellectual and political foundation of Russia and of a new empire.

At each stage of this rightward-moving evolution, Putin would in his political speeches, public lectures, and articles quote from Russian philosophers, some of them from the nineteenth century, others émigré intellectuals exiled to Paris or to Berlin after the Russian Revolution of October 1917. His interest in these thinkers is not unique. During the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of Communism, its official Marxist-Leninist philosophy, “dialectical materialism” or *diamat* as it was called, also collapsed. Consequently many Russian intellectuals and political leaders began to look to the past for a new ideology for the new post-Soviet society.

There were a boatload of philosopher to choose from. In fact, there were two boatloads, the “ships of philosophers,” who had been expelled from the Soviet Russia by Lenin.[2] One of the first in whom the post-Soviet intellectual society became interested was Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954), a Hegel specialist, an opponent of the Soviet Union, and the author in 1925 of *On the Resistance to Evil by Force*. Always close to the whites, that is, the counter-revolutionaries attempting to overthrow the Soviet government, his thinking provided an ideology for the General Wrangel's army. Ilyin not only opposed Soviet Communism, but also Leo Tolstoy's Christian pacifism, arguing that passive resistance would fail and that genuine Christianity demanded a struggle, forceful and violent if

necessary, against evil.

Living in exile in Berlin, in 1933 Ilyin became enthused about the “new National-Socialist [i.e. Nazi] spirit,” though he soon gave up on Hitler, turning instead to admire the fascist Christian dictators Francisco Franco in Spain and Antonio de Oliveira Salazar in Portugal. Ilyin was a believer in a “national democracy” and a “democratic dictatorship”—not a democracy based on things like elections, but rather on the rule of the natural elite. He believed in “freedom,” but the freedom through belief in the Orthodox religion, the Russian nationality, and in the fulfillment of one’s station in life.

Ilyin’s writings caught the interest to post-Soviet intellectuals and thus entered into the intellectual atmosphere that Putin and others breathed. Putin first cited Ilyin in a speech to a joint session of the Russian legislature on April 25, 2005, in reference to the “consolidation of the institutions of a real democracy.” “Real democracy” was Putin’s term for what he called the “dictatorship of law” and the “verticality of power.”

During this period, Putin was deeply disturbed by the revolutions of colors taking place in neighboring states: Revolution of the Roses in Georgia that brought to power the young, pro-American reformer Mikhail Saakashvili and the Orange Revolution of pro-Western Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine. Putin saw these revolutions as the work of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, and was infuriated by the idea of a foreign power controlling elections in nearby states, states that were once and by all rights should be part of Russia. One of his advisors, Vladislav Sourkov proposed a new term to describe the Russian point of view: “sovereign democracy,” meaning democracy without foreign intervention. This became a theoretical pillar and a central term of Putin’s political vocabulary.

A turning point event in Putin’s political career was the Beslan school hostage crisis of September 2004 when an ethnic Ingush and Chechen Islamic group occupied a school taking 1,100 hostages, 777 of them school children. The group, led by Shamil Besayev, demanded recognition of Chechnya’s independence and the withdrawal of all Russian troops. Using tanks and rockets, Russian security forces stormed the school, killing an estimated 330 hostages, some 186 of them school children. This horrifying event became a catalyst for Putin’s thinking. Putin reacted to Beslan by further consolidating power in his own hands, but also by turning further to the right.

In Putin’s mind, Islam was not the greatest threat to Russia. Europe was. NATO and the European Union threatened to expand, absorbing more formerly Russian territories, as they already had the Baltic nations. By 2007, Putin had become preoccupied, one could say obsessed by the idea of protecting Russia from the evils of Western life: the Internet, pornography, and homosexuality. In the “Munich discourse” of 2007 he spoke out violently against the United States and the European Union for attempting to create a unipolar world that threatened Russian culture and morality. What was needed, Putin saw, was a political and philosophical defense against the West.

Putin’s protégé Dmitry Medvedev served as president from 2008-2012, a brief interregnum, and in 2013 Putin returned to the presidency. That year he made what Eltchaninoff calls “the conservative turn.” This turn against what was perceived as the decadent West and everything it represented required a new intellectual foundation and Putin found one source in the philosophy of Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891), sometimes called the “Russian Nietzsche.” Leontiev’s aristocratic and religious philosophy challenged the West’s democracy, liberty, and equality as well as its secularism and hedonism. Leontiev was an admirer of the Byzantine Church, not for its Christian morality, but for its hierarchy. Prophetically it must have seemed to Putin, Leontiev warned that one day a “federal Europe” would threaten to absorb Russia. Influenced by thinkers like Ilyin and Leontiev, Putin’s ideology was becoming more and more nationalist and religious.

On March 18, 2014, Putin ordered the Russian Federation to seize Crimea; as Eltchaninoff writes, for “the first time since the Second World War that a European state annexed part of another state.” How could this act—condemned by most of the world—be justified? Putin now turned to other thinkers, the slavophiles, to argue that there’s “a Russian Way.” Putin made the argument that Russia, “holy Russia,” as it was often called, was the guardian of authentic Christian values against Western decadence. And the Ukraine was not only part of Russia, it was the very heart of Russia, for it was in Kievan Rus that in 988 Russia first adopted Christianity; and joined the Orthodox Church is the very soul of the Russian culture. It was the people, the *narod*, imbued with this faith that had always fought for and defended Russia at every step, against Napoleon, against Hitler, and now against the United States and Western Europe. This was what was now called “the Russian Way.”

Slavophiles such as Alexis Khomiakov (1804-1860) and Ivan Kireivsky (1806-1856), Konstantin Aksakov (1817-1860), and Youri Samarine (1819-1876) had argued in the mid-nineteenth century that it was a mistake to follow the West, but rather Russians should turn to their own nation, religion, and culture and build a future on those. The problem was, that many of the slavophiles were themselves cosmopolitan figures influenced by the West, and in any case they were not sufficiently political, nationalist, or imperialist to provide an ideology for Putin. Eltchaninoff writes a separate chapter to argue that Slavophiles such as Nikolai Berdyaev and Fyodor Dostoyevsky could never provide a Putin with the nationalist ideology he sought.

However, Nicolas Danilevski (1822-1875), author in 1871 of *Russia and Europe*, provided an ideological foundation that was both powerfully nationalistic and dynamically expansionist. He argued that Russia’s backwardness was in fact its strength; its mountains, forests, and steppes harboring a population that was always silently growing, a people filled with “tribal ethnographic energy.” These were the people who would “by osmosis” follow a Russian leader in a struggle against the West that would galvanize the surrounding Slavic nations and peoples. These Slavophile ideas became the foundation for Putin’s “Russian Way.”

The Russian Way was all very good as an approach to the Slavic nations, in many of which there were both Russians and many Russian speakers, but what about the East? At the end of 2013 Putin had announced that Siberia and the Far East would be the “national priority for the twenty-first century.” How could Putin justify his desire to create there some new version of the Russian empire among the Turkic speaking nations and other Asian peoples? The key idea here was the notion of Russia’s unique role as the pivot of “Eurasia,” not simply a term of physical geography but the notion that Russia had always been at the center of a vast cosmopolitan world, nationally, ethnically, and religiously diverse.

The philosopher who provided ideas for this “International Eurasian Movement” was Piotr Savitsky (1895-1968), who argued that Eurasia—with Russia at the center—represented a “third continent,” neither Europe nor Asia, “a geographic world apart.” Eurasian Russia, Savitsky claimed, was really the “center of the Old World,” of which Europe, the Near East, India, Indonesia, China, and Japan were merely extensions. It is Eurasian Russia that is destined once again to reassert its centrality of this entire region.

There was also Lev Gumilev (1912-1992), another important influence on Putin. In fact Putin participated in a Gumilev study group in the 1990s. Gumilev argued that the English, French, and Germans would always be enemies of the Russians, but that Russia could find fast friends among the Turks and Mongols. Gumilev believed that a cosmic force had influenced the Russian people—one could say their DNA—and given them something he called “passionate power.”[3] Putin quotes Gumilev in a speech to the Federal Assembly in December 2012, saying that one of the great resources of the world—beyond coal and oil, for example—is intellect, “and as Lev Gumilev says, passionate power, the capacity to go forward and to change.”

Among currently active Eurasianists, Alexander Dugin who has sometimes been mistakenly called the guru of Putin, is the best known. Dugin melds the ideas of the Russian Old Believers with Nazi intellectual Carl Schmitt and the French “new right,” among many other extreme rightwing currents. Dugin sees Eurasia as part of what will become a rightwing “new world order,” with Russia at the center.

Eltchaninoff asks whether or not the theories that Putin has adopted can provide the ideology needed for the construction of a new Russian empire. Clearly, he notes, the old Soviet empire based on Marxism-Leninism is an impossibility, while the Slavophile and the Eurasian ideologies stand in conflict with each other. Eltchaninoff states that, “Putin practices an imperialism a la carte. He invokes nostalgia for the USSR, common religious principles, Russianness and the Russian language, and the Eurasian project according to the situation at the moment...The only common basis of all of the president’s imperialist whims is the market economy.” When Putin took Crimea he referred to the project of Novorossia, a new Russia—yet it looks very much like the old Russia, the old Czarist Russia and the old Soviet Russia.

Dans la tête de Vladimir Poutine concludes with a discussion of Putin’s adoption of the old term the “Russian world,” to refer to his attempt to promote Russian culture abroad, especially in Europe. This is his government’s projection of the Russian state, the Orthodox Church, the Russian language through a variety of government programs, from attempts to unify the Eastern Rite churches to the promotion of the Russian language abroad. It is also an attempt to influence and establish good relations with groups abroad from the far right party of Hungary to the leftwing Front de Gauche in France.

Putin has had surprising success in winning support from leftists in the Western countries—including in the United States—for his imperial adventures in Crimea and the eastern Ukraine and for his backing of al-Assad in Syria. These leftists see his struggle against the United States and the European Union as aiding other nations in their fight for political sovereignty and economic independence. Perhaps after reading this book, the left will learn that Putin has adopted the most reactionary philosophies not only to support his authoritarian state at home, but also to justify his expansion abroad.

[1] Winner of the Prix de la Revue de Deux Mondes in 2015.

[2] The only book available in English about the boatloads of philosophers is written by the very conservative Lesley Chamberlain, *Lenin’s Private War: The Voyage of the Philosophy Steamer and the Exile of the Intelligentsia* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2007).

[3] The word in Russian is *passionarnost*. Elchaninoff’s French neologism is *passionarité*. See Charles Clover, “Lev Gumilev: passion, Putin and power,” *Financial Times*, at: <https://www.ft.com/de1e5c6-e0c5-11e5-8d9b-e88a2a889797>