

Anatoly Reshetnikov

# chasing Greatness

ON RUSSIA'S DISCURSIVE  
INTERACTION WITH THE WEST  
OVER THE PAST MILLENNIUM



## Chasing Greatness

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# CHASING GREATNESS

On Russia's Discursive  
Interaction with the West  
over the Past Millennium

**Anatoly Reshetnikov**

University of Michigan Press  
Ann Arbor

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Published in the United States of America by the  
University of Michigan Press

Manufactured in the United States of America

Printed on acid-free paper

First published March 2024

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data has been applied for.*

ISBN: 078-0-472-07669-7 (hardcover: alk. paper)

ISBN: 978-0-472-05669-9 (paper: alk. paper)

ISBN: 978-0-472-90438-9 (open access ebook)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12333911>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023951016

The University of Michigan Press's open access publishing program is made possible thanks to additional funding from the University of Michigan Office of the Provost and the generous support of contributing libraries.

*To Y.I.*



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Digital materials related to this title can be found on the Fulcrum platform via the following citable URL: <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12333911>





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## *Translation and Transliteration Note*

Unless specified otherwise, all translations of the Russian sources are mine. The sources originally written in French were either read in Russian translations provided by the publishers and then translated by me into English or translated by me directly from French. The sources originally written in Church Slavonic were read in Russian translation provided by the publisher, but the original text was also scrutinized for semantic nuances that could have been lost in translation. In transliterating Cyrillic letters, I used the “Passport (1997)” standard ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanization\\_of\\_Russian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanization_of_Russian)) with the exception of some last names, whose spelling variant has become widespread. I also opted for transliterating the common ending of Russian first and last names “ий” by using “y” in English.



## *Acknowledgments*

This book has been long in the making and would not have seen the light without the intellectual, emotional, financial, and administrative support of numerous people and institutions. It is impossible to mention and adequately acknowledge them all. I feel particularly indebted to the supportive community of the Central European University (CEU), where this project was originally conceived and partially accomplished, despite the turbulent political environment that eventually forced CEU into exile from its original homebase in Budapest, Hungary. I specifically thank Alex Astrov, Xymena Kurowska, Matteo Fumagalli, Jan Hennings, and Robin Bellers, who all have greatly contributed to the development and success of this project.

This book would also not have been possible without generous intellectual input from international colleagues, such as Iver B. Neumann, Einar Wiggen, Ayşe Zarakol, Jens Bartelson, Pete Duncan, Kristina Stoeckl, Stefano Guzzini, Viacheslav Morozov, Stephanie Ortmann, Evgeny Roshchin, Iain Ferguson, Maria Mälksoo, Sergei Akopov, Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, and many other scholars who commented on this project's early drafts and posed challenging questions as discussants and members of the audience at multiple panels of the ISA, CEEISA, BISA, and EISA conferences around the world.

I am also deeply indebted to my friends and peers who shared the ups and downs of the academic profession, and who were the most welcoming company during the rare breaks from my writing, teaching, and research. I specifically thank Alex and Adina Akbik, Andreea Nicutar, Aron Tabor, Sasi-kumar S. Sundaram, Bastian Becker, Jelena Belic, Georgiana Turculet, Ewa Maczynska, Jackie Dufalla, Monika Kubova, Freya Cumberlandidge, Anastasia Polner, and Csaba Pogonyi, among many others.

I am also extremely grateful to the institutions where the major parts of this research were conducted. Among those were the Department of Inter-

national Relations at CEU, the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) at University College London, and the Department of Political Science at Lund University. All those three academic units could not have been more welcoming and helpful. I am thankful for the unique research-friendly environment those institutions have managed to successfully create.

Last but not least, my deepest gratitude and love goes to my partner Yulia, who shared every bit of this journey. Thank you for your love, talent, integrity, inquisitive drive, and for setting high standards: intellectual, aesthetic, and moral. You keep me going like no one else.

## CHAPTER I

### *Introduction*

#### Great Power vs. *Velikaya Derzhava*

*Is there a “right to be great”? Russia is not alone, but it is extreme in claiming this right. What Russia wants is an agreement that it can control the destinies of other nations; an agreement which reflects not its present weakness but its past and, it hopes, its future power.*

MARTIN WOOLLACOTT, “TO THE FINLAND BUS STATION,” *GUARDIAN*,  
22 MARCH 1997: 9

*On the one hand, Putin wants you to believe that Russia is a great power. On the other Putin claims that mighty Russia is threatened by Ukraine. Both of these claims cannot be true.*

MICHAEL MCFAUL (FORMER US AMBASSADOR TO RUSSIA) ON TWITTER,  
15 DECEMBER 2021

In the last couple of decades, Russia has been talking a lot about being a great power (*velikaya derzhava* or simply *derzhava*).<sup>1</sup> Such rhetoric often appears in various programmatic speeches and political manifestos,<sup>2</sup> in expert op-eds and interviews,<sup>3</sup> as well as in forecasts and policy analyses published by Russian think tanks.<sup>4</sup> Russia also seconded its great power rhetoric with aggressive military action both in its immediate neighborhood (Ukraine and Geor-

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1. The Russian expression for “great power”—*velikaya derzhava*—is a pleonasm, meaning that, in modern Russian, the second element of this expression (the noun *derzhava*) already expresses the meaning of the attached characteristic (the adjective *velikaya*). *Derzhava* designates not any power or state, but only “an independent power/state, capable of exerting influence in international affairs” (Ushakov 2014, 113).

2. Putin 2004a; Surkov 2006; Medvedev 2009; Medvedev 2010; Putin 2013a.

3. Bordachev 2022, Sushentsov 2022.

4. Dynkin et al. 2015, 122.



gia) and in other regions (Syria). In the West, the concept “great power” evokes unambiguous connotations. Namely, it refers to some privileged status in the international system. A great power either claims to be one of only several “real” global actors, as neorealists have argued,<sup>5</sup> or, in addition, assumes some rights and responsibilities in managing international order, as suggested by the English School of International Relations (IR).<sup>6</sup> Constructivists, who admit that greatpowerhood can be part and parcel of political identity—that is, an important facet of self-perception—also often interpret it as a constructive element of *international* politics.<sup>7</sup> Hence, in the Western eye, Russian great power rhetoric is routinely interpreted as, first and foremost, a foreign policy question that is normally expected to be raised by a state, which (1) had presumably solved its immediate existential problems, (2) had accumulated enough resources and strength to project those beyond its own borders, and (3) had decided to engage in a global power competition, having rationally assessed its capacities and risks.

However, at a closer look, most contexts in which Russia speaks about being *velikaya derzhava* often have little to do with foreign policy, relational superiority, or joint management of international order. For instance, Russian elites often insist that Russia *must* be a great power, or else *it will perish*, as if there is no middle ground between shining success and total annihilation.<sup>8</sup> In this context, greatpowerhood functions as the only remedy for otherwise imminent catastrophe, while foreign policy is put at the service of domestic survival, a concern that Western great powers would normally have left behind. On other occasions, Russian politicians show that they are prepared to tolerate sanctions and be excluded from global financial flows, even to be the most sanctioned country in the world, overtaking Iran and North Korea, as the recent developments related to the war in Ukraine have shown.<sup>9</sup> According to Russian officials, this is exactly the kind of pressure that a real great power can and should withstand.<sup>10</sup> So much for international recognition and joint management efforts. Yet, most often, Russian political elites use great power talk when they address their domestic audience, and instead of appealing to the international status quo, they appeal to

5. Mearsheimer 2001; Levy and Thompson 2005; Walt 2011; Parent and Rosato 2015.

6. Bull 2002; Buzan 2004; Cui and Buzan 2016.

7. E.g., Hopf 2002.

8. E.g., see Surkov 2006; Leontiev cited in Morozov 2008, 162; Mikhalkov, 2017; Shevtsova 2003, 175.

9. Bella 2022.

10. Lavrov cited in Trenin 2017.

some version of traditional legitimacy,<sup>11</sup> capitalizing on the public's nostalgic feelings, on their current desires and future hopes.<sup>12</sup>

Evidently, Russian great power discourse connects several seemingly incompatible features: internal modernization and foreign policy, domestic ideology and international aggression, political strength and weakness, economic prosperity and underdevelopment. It also often combines the roles of an established great power and a global challenger. What is more, this pattern is, apparently, nothing new. Back in the 1990s, Russia also bedazzled the international audience that could not help wondering whether “there [was] ‘a right to be great’?”<sup>13</sup> It often seemed strange to the Western observers that Russia always wanted “an agreement which reflects not its present weakness but its past and [ . . . ] its future power.”<sup>14</sup> While, economically speaking, Russia was in much better shape in the first two decades of the twenty-first century than it used to be in the 1990s, the ambiguity persists.

Consequently, Russia's behavior frequently seems irrational to its international partners. Its actions remain misunderstood and are often treated with suspicion. Its aggressive moves that cause death and destruction also tear the fragile normative fabric of international society, creating panic and shock. That “understanding Russia” has recently become a new cottage industry,<sup>15</sup> indicates quite clearly that the Russian “enigma” is back.<sup>16</sup> Such a handle may boost Russia's self-esteem, but it surely remains an obstacle for a major actor seeking recognition from the international community. It is equally problematic for the international community to have a major actor that constantly remains misunderstood, and hence, unpredictable. This opens a whole set of difficult questions. (1) *Why is the idea of being a great power so important to Russia?* (2) *Why does Russia stick to this identity even when*

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11. Here I use the concept “traditional legitimacy” in the Weberian sense, as related to the type of political legitimation that appeals to the traditional order of things (Weber 2008, 157). Usually, such type of legitimation exists in monarchies and other old-style patrimonial regimes. While contemporary Russia is not a monarchy, the kind of authority its politicians often invoke when they talk about Russia's great power status is the authority of the “eternal yesterday”—Russia has always been a great power, therefore, it remains one today, and will continue being one in the future.

12. Putin 2004b, 2013b, 2017a.

13. Woollacott 1997, 9.

14. Woollacott 1997, 9.

15. E.g., Neef, 2017; Oskanian, 2014; Curtis, 2017.

16. Coined by Winston Churchill in relation to the Soviet Union in 1939, this metaphor survived both Churchill and the Soviet Union. Some recent uses related to Russia include Zarakol (2010) and Tassinari (2005).

doing so clearly damages its international standing and economic health? (3) What does Russia, in fact, mean when it speaks about being a great power, given that its subsequent actions often do not conform to other actors' expectations about proper "greatpowerly" conduct? (4) Why does the Russian story about its political greatness often include elements of dissatisfaction, weakness, and even decay?

Evidently, the first question is related to discursive preconditions for action. Russia does not let this idea go because it somehow helps Russia be Russia, that is, to align its perception of itself with its political circumstances. Since discursive preconditions for action are normally created in the domestic discursive space, the best way to understand how they have developed is to historicize them. Therefore, in this book, I will first trace and interpret Russia's stories about its political greatness on their own terms, that is, emically (from the subject's perspective). Like any other national discourse,<sup>17</sup> Russian great power discourse must (and does) have its specifics, even if only for linguistic and cultural reasons.<sup>18</sup> But there are also historical reasons for this, which spring from the evolution of Russia's<sup>19</sup> self-perception vis-à-vis the outside world. That is why I will also reconstruct a genealogy of Russia's self-perception as a great polity going all the way back to the very first uses of the concepts genealogically related to greatpowerhood. Toward this end, I unearth and analyze an extensive amount of original source material to reconstruct a millennial history of the Russian political concepts that express greatness and superiority (*velikaya derzhava* and some adjacent signifiers).

At the same time, the specifics of the subject matter—international hierarchy, political preponderance, and so on—presuppose relationality. Such categories as *velikaya derzhava* and great power involve and are partially shaped by outsiders. Outsiders, in this case, are neither a stable gold standard, nor irrelevant—they are actors just like Russia, who often contest or misunderstand Russia's claims. Studying these discursive interactions is essential for answering questions two, three, and four, which are formu-

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17. Together with Dunn and Neumann (2016, 2), I define discourses as "the systems of meaning-production that fix meaning, however temporarily, and enable us to make sense of the world and to act within it."

18. Both languages and cultures are always asymmetrical in cross-comparison and translation. Certain cultural phenomena either have no direct equivalents in other cultures, or may be developed to varying degrees. The same holds for concepts and their semantic baggage (Tymoczko 2014, 211).

19. In this book, I use the word "Russia" both in its conventional meaning (to refer to the Russian Federation that appeared in 1991) and, sometimes, anachronistically (to refer to the Russian Federation's predecessor polities, such as the Kievan Rus', early modern Muscovy, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union).

lated relationally.<sup>20</sup> To provide enough historical and interlingual depth, while also keeping relationality, I reconstruct a conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava* and place it in international context, comparing the history of this concept to the evolution of related non-Russian concepts, such as “great power.”

Despite its substantive historical depth, this book is not a book of history. Rather, it is a synthesizing social science work inspired by the continental tradition of the critical history of modernity.<sup>21</sup> As such, the book is more about the present than about the past. Its main aim is to provide an interpretive explanation of the tacit rules that shape Russia’s great power identity today, as well as historically. The second aim of the book is to present a displacing critique of those rules by showing how the Russian notion of greatness in its present (but also some preceding) semantics remains a kind of mobilizational ideology that can never achieve its declared intentions, given Russia’s relative position in the global economy and the current discursive hegemony on this issue. This creates an everlasting perceptive dissonance among the Russian elites, which is also conveyed onto the Russian public through often tightly controlled state-society communication channels. As Anatol Lieven put this, reacting to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, “great power mixed with great resentment is one of the most dangerous mixtures in both domestic and international politics.”<sup>22</sup> In pursuing its two main aims, the book combines an emic approach, which historicizes Russia’s own arguments justifying its claims for political greatness, with an etic analysis of the place, meaning, and consequences of those claims within a wider international-historic context.

## I. I RUSSIA’S AMBIGUOUS GREATNESS

Certainly, I am not the first to notice the pattern. Others have registered both Russia’s quasi-religious attachment to its great power identity and the ambiguity of the great power narrative it promotes. At the same time, those who registered the attachment usually stopped short of explaining its sources, while those who pointed at the paradoxical mix of seemingly

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20. I thank Einar Wigen for his remarks about the emic and etic dimensions of this inquiry.

21. Koselleck 2004, 75–92; Foucault 1977; Garland 2014.

22. Lieven 2022.

incompatible elements in the Russian great power narrative tended to ignore its local discursive roots and history, and evaluated that narrative against the assumed Eurocentric standard. Below I engage with the most relevant among the existing accounts of Russia's quest toward political greatness and make my case for an international conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava*.

### *I.I.I Greatpowerhood as a foundation of Russia's political identities*

In his study of Russian and Soviet political identities, Ted Hopf demonstrates that the idea of being a great power was deeply rooted in every version of identity competing in the Russian and Soviet political discourses.<sup>23</sup> Apparently, this point holds true regardless of which political ideologies those identities mainly relied on. Be it international socialism, democratic liberalism, or some form of Russian essentialism, all of those political identities perceived Russia as a great power and could not think otherwise. Similarly, Christian Thorun demonstrates that the evolution of Russian foreign policy from 1992 to 2007 was effectively a sequence of interchanging understandings of greatness: from “normal great power” to “Eurasian great power” to “responsible great power” to “independent great power.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, Thorun also registers that, when it comes to Russia's official discourse, a second-class status was never a thinkable option for Russian elites, no matter which political ideology guided their thinking. Just like Hopf, however, he does not problematize this finding and leaves it to his readers to wonder why alternatives to the burdensome great power status remained unthinkable for Russia even during the hardest moments of postcommunist transformation.

Both Thorun and Hopf approach the issue inductively, documenting divergent ideas about political greatness within Russia, but disregarding their fundamentally social nature and conceptual roots. However, greatpowerhood can only acquire meaning in relation to more general ideas about political order and its hierarchies. Hence, this concept should always be viewed in the process of a dialogic construction—its different meanings emerge and replace one another in the process of Russia's conversation with the world. Naturally, the world possesses its own different sets of ideas about political greatness, some more established, some less. Thus, to understand the meaning of Russia's discursive toolkit, it makes sense to try to look at it in

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23. Hopf 2002.

24. Thorun 2009, 39.

conjunction with the conceptual baggage accumulated by the international society, where greatpowerhood has a long history as an institution that continues to shape international hierarchies today.

### *1.1.2 Greatpowerhood as a psychological trauma*

A few illuminating studies that can put Russia's quest for greatness into a global context and explain why a state like Russia could be compulsive about its international status come from the authors who took the psychological route. In his study of postdefeat societies, Wolfgang Schivelbusch reconstructs an assemblage of coping mechanisms and archetypes, which those societies tend to use to overcome the negative psychological consequences of their new situations.<sup>25</sup> These mechanisms help soften the trauma and reestablish a sense of achievement for the losing side to avert depression and other nasty aftereffects. Some archetypes redefine material defeat as a spiritual victory or denigrate the victor's success as dishonest or unworthy. Thus, when contemporary Russia talks about its spiritual superiority and blames the West for breaking the rules of the game, this may be interpreted as an attempt to deal with the psychological consequences of its defeat in the Cold War.

To be sure, this is how Ayşe Zarakol explains Russia's hypersensitivity toward its great power status and the strange intermingling of greatness and fragility in its rhetorical stance.<sup>26</sup> In her interpretation, Russia, just like Turkey or Japan, is a state that was stigmatized in the process of its socialization into the international society. Its recent defeat in the Cold War reinforced the stigma, and Russia had only two available options: (1) to accept the stigma and a second-class status coming with it, or (2) to act as if the stigma was not there and submit to lifelong dissonance. Zarakol argues that Russia preferred to live in denial, for accepting the stigma seemed unthinkable. Consequently, it looks up to the West and treats it with mistrust and suspicion simultaneously; it implicitly accepts its own civilizational inferiority, and, at the same time, asserts its spiritual leadership.

While this explanation makes perfect sense, it is also true that not every great power deals with defeat in an identical fashion. Some states, like Japan and Germany after WWII, delve temporarily into self-reflection and eventu-

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25. Schivelbusch 2003, 10. The author does not discuss Russia, but his conclusions may be extrapolated to it.

26. Zarakol 2010.

ally redirect their intellectual and economic resources to excel in alternative competitive fields becoming “geo-economic powers”<sup>27</sup> or “aid great powers,”<sup>28</sup> for example. In this quest, the relatively more secure position of Germany among the established European nations did not make its restoration path significantly different from that of Japan. Other states, like Sweden, let go of their great power status and global ambitions quite easily, deciding to concentrate on domestic development and well-being. And while today one may think of Sweden as an exemplary Western nation, which would explain why it did not carry a stigma, its place among the founders of the Western civilizational core is debatable. After all, it had to go to war in 1630, despite being poor and economically backward, to put its name on the European map, from which it was soon removed by Russia.<sup>29</sup> Hence, from early on, Sweden battled with the same established/outsider dichotomy that Russia, Turkey, and Japan were confronted with, but managed to overcome it successfully without too much psychological damage.

Thus, not only are there significant variations in coping strategies of different postdefeat states, but Russia also seems to be a strange outlier in this list of cases. On the one hand, Russia has been a much better-established power than Turkey or Japan for the last three centuries: it was a member of the European Concert and one of the two protagonists of the Cold War—it is difficult to get more established than that in the international arena. On the other hand, the defeat which should have reinforced the late socialization stigma did not happen on the battlefield and was hardly perceived as a fatal loss by the Russian elites. As Zarakol puts it, Russia switched to “westophilia” “*completely on its own schedule*,”<sup>30</sup> exercising a degree of agency unobtainable by other defeated states. As a better-established outsider, Russia may have simply postponed its crushing defeat until later, as its inadequate military performance in Ukraine in 2022 may suggest. Still, perhaps, instead of settling on an explanation that grants European modernity the status of an all-pervasive and undefeatable force (i.e., the only meaningful variable), it makes sense to look at Russia itself and try to identify the configuration of ideas and process that affected its own political development and the dynamics of its encounter with the West.

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27. Kundnani 2011.

28. Yasutomo 1990.

29. Ringmar 2007.

30. Zarakol 2010, 33, emphasis original.

*1.1.3 Greatpowerhood as a self-colonizing condition*

Alexander Etkind takes one step further in explaining the ambivalence of Russia's great power standing and discovering its cultural roots.<sup>31</sup> He begins by identifying two enduring stories about imperial Russia. One is the story of a great power competing successfully with the most powerful countries in the world. The other one is the story of a backward nation, riddled with violence and misery. To make sense of the contradiction, Etkind represents Russia's imperial experience in the terms relatable to other empires from the past, but also argues that Russia applied colonial practices to its own territory, becoming a self-colonizing empire.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Russia was (and remains)<sup>33</sup> a state that colonized its own people, who developed anti-imperial ideas in response. Great power status came with empire and imperialism, while the feeling of unfulfillment was a consequence of internal colonization that turned Russia's hinterlands into colonized territories, rather than an empire's backyard.

Viacheslav Morozov supplements Etkind's argument with an international-systemic dimension.<sup>34</sup> In his view, internal colonization is what happens to some peripheral countries. Uneven development causes the inability to compete on common terms, while the internalized hegemonic ideology brings about nervous inward-oriented application of hegemonic categories, such as empire and colonization. He calls the resulting political construct "subaltern imperialism," meaning that in addition to colonizing its own people, the Russian elite has itself become a subject of cultural colonization by the West during its socialization in Europe. Hence, Russia is a subaltern empire that remains outside the hegemonic core (which means that its right to sit at the table is always contested), but also claims a contemporary equivalent of imperial status and a sphere of influence that comes with it (which means that it insists on being a great power).

My objection to this line of reasoning is twofold. First, both Morozov and Etkind take preexisting categories developed in a different sociopolitical environment and try to stretch them to explain a deviant case, whose deviance only becomes apparent against those preexisting categories to begin with. Thus, their analyses remain Eurocentric. Second, Etkind's explanation

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31. Etkind 2011.

32. Etkind 2011, 2.

33. The process that still goes on, in Etkind's opinion (2016).

34. Morozov 2015.



of Russia's self-colonizing condition (which may explain the ambivalence of its political discourse) would probably be a materialist one—such was Russia's resource profile and geography. Morozov would also attribute this to uneven development and cultural colonization. In contrast, I argue that Russia's self-colonizing condition and the resulting ambivalence of its great power identity also have conceptual and ideological roots.

The two stories that Etkind identifies do not merely exist side-by-side. In Russian political imagination, they are conceptually interwoven. Moreover, various manifestations of the idea that true greatness and complete submission are two sides of the same coin already emerge a few hundred years before the age of colonialism. It is an important part of the Orthodox Christian philosophy that shaped early Russian political culture, and it keeps reemerging in different forms and shapes as a leitmotif of Russian political thinking at least since the eleventh century. Certainly, the early Russian political concepts did not fully determine the country's response to European imperialism. Still, I believe it is more productive to look at the current Russian great power identity as an outcome of the conceptual evolution of Russian political culture *affected by* Russia's encounter with other empires, as well as the dominant ideas of the age. Without fully understanding the assortment of available discursive resources with the opportunities and limitations they entail, it is difficult to grasp why Russia got stuck in this somewhat erratic state of a self-colonizing polity and why it arguably remains in it until today.

#### *1.1.4 Greatpowerhood as a conceptual legacy*

Conceptual history is not a new genre for the scholars of Russia. In fact, there already exists a sizable legacy of comprehensive investigations of Russian political concepts. For instance, Oleg Kharkhordin studies the histories of such concepts as “state,” “civil society,” “the collective and the individual,” and others.<sup>35</sup> Sadly, he did not address the equally ancient and complex Russian concepts used to designate “power” and “great power.” Reacting to this omission, Vsevolod Samokhvalov lamented that such a study was long overdue, since the Russian and Western usages of those concepts seem manifestly different, even at first glance.<sup>36</sup> The concept Samokhvalov had in mind is *derzhava*. Still, while outlining the differences between equivalent concepts in

35. Kharkhordin 1999, 2001, 2005.

36. Samokhvalov 2017, 12.

different languages, he limits his own study to the last fifty years, that is, virtually nothing on the scale of linguistic and conceptual evolutions. Consequently, he excludes some crucial transformative moments from the analysis—for example, the eighteenth century diplomatic discourse where the concept of great power emerged and took shape, and the beginning of the nineteenth century, when Russia was recognized as a great power, having defeated Napoleon.

In contrast, historian Michael Cherniavsky did not shy away from long timeframes. He lays an important groundwork for this study by looking at the early development of the idea of the ruler in Kievan Rus'.<sup>37</sup> Cherniavsky discovers that the very concept of “state” was introduced into the Russian discourse as a part of Christian ethos; that is, no concept of secular state existed in Kievan Rus' before it was baptized around 988, no concept outside the purposes of Christianity. Consequently, early Russian princes almost literally embodied the state and its continuity, as there were no other physical or symbolic entities that could embody it.<sup>38</sup> Because of this, *personal*, human saintliness was attributed to princes. Their person and their functions could not be divided as neatly as it was done in the West—both the person and the office of the Russian prince were likened equally to Christ.<sup>39</sup> With personal saintliness came the most prominent Christian virtues of humility and complete submission to God's will and authority. Hence, “the ideal of the angelic ruler . . . is translated into the concrete image of the monk-tsar, the synthesis of glory and humility; in his glory [the Russian prince] wishes to be humble, and through his humility before God he gains the tsarlike glorious victories.”<sup>40</sup> This is a clear example of how greatness and humility were already intertwined a few centuries before the age of colonization.

Cherniavsky showed how the myth of political power in Kievan Rus' and some of its successor polities incorporated a mixture of leader-centrism and peculiar Christian ethics which rendered greatness in moral, rather than in relative terms. Alas, he did not look at the concepts *derzhava* or *velikaya derzhava* specifically. In his book, he also pointed at a few historical ruptures in the Russian understandings of the ruler and the people. Yet he did not say anything about the consequences of Russia's interaction with international society and its political institutions. In my turn, I am equally interested in

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37. Cherniavsky 1961.

38. Cherniavsky 1961, 33.

39. Cherniavsky 1961, 34.

40. Cherniavsky 1961, 27.

both: the conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava* from its very early uses and the political and discursive effects of Russia's entry into the European society of states.

Thus, the main focus of this study is threefold. First, I will trace the uses of greatness in Russia's discourse related to its international stance from the time when Russia's predecessor polities began to contemplate on and assert their special position vis-à-vis their neighbors. Second, I identify the ruptures in Russian understandings of political greatness and reconstruct the conceptual evolution of *velikaya derzhava* as a sequence of those fundamental semantic breaks. Third, I pay specific attention to the effects of the conceptual entanglement of *velikaya derzhava* with the related concepts produced and developed within the broader international society. Before I begin, however, it makes sense to provide a more substantiated clarification of the differences between the Russian and the Western usages of the concept designating "great power."

## 1.2 WHAT IS A "GREAT POWER"?

### 1.2.1 *Great powers as seen by Western politicians and journalists*

Contemporary policymakers and political writers often hold different opinions on what a great power is supposed to be. Still, there are a few family resemblances in how all of them talk about great powers, at least in the West. For Western policymakers and political writers alike, this concept only makes sense in several interrelated contexts. The first context is *resources and relationality*. Great power is a status which is usually ascribed to *several* states in the international system that are well-endowed with *resources*, are *comparable* among themselves, and happen to be *more powerful* than most other actors. Hence, for example, when someone is trying to assess whether Russia is or is not a great power, it often comes down to measuring Russia's resources and capabilities and comparing those to the resources and capabilities possessed by other states.

For instance, for Jonathan Adelman, Russia is a great power simply because it spends USD 49 billion a year on security, retains 1,790 strategic nuclear weapons, has a population of 140 million (with 13 million college graduates), and because in some of those aspects it is comparable to the US

and surpasses other major powers, such as Japan or India.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Stephen Fortescue measures Russia's economic potential vis-à-vis other powerful states and concludes that even though "Russia wants to behave as a great power . . . there are serious restraints, resistant to policy action, that limit its economic capacity."<sup>42</sup>

The second context which always accompanies the discussion of great powers is *norms*. Great powers are also the great responsables that must maintain general peace and order. Or at least, this argument is "always . . . put forward to justify their right to the veto in the Security Council."<sup>43</sup> Great powers are supposed to be the moral caretakers of the international system, and as such, their greatness should "not depend on [their] military might but on [their] ability to maintain the balance of forces in the world."<sup>44</sup> Therefore, when Russia acts disruptively, as it did in 2014 when it invaded Ukraine, it is often reproached as unworthy of great power status. For instance, after the annexation of Crimea, Barack Obama called Russia "a regional power" and insisted that Russia did what it did "not out of strength, but out of weakness."<sup>45</sup> In Obama's view, by invading Ukraine, Russia behaved irresponsibly, which a legitimate great power cannot afford.<sup>46</sup>

The third context is *recognition*. Great power status cannot be purely self-ascribed. A state may brag endlessly about being a great power, but without systemic recognition, such talk is nothing but empty rhetoric. Hence, it is usually up to other great powers and third states to assign this label. No doubt, great power status is not as formal as the recognition of sovereignty or a state's accountability for grave wrongdoings. Even though, at present, the most pertinent politicolegal reflection of great power status is a UNSC permanent seat, this status remains semiofficial in a sense that no UNSC permanent member would use the concept self-referentially in UN debates, even when it vetoes some resolution; that is, when it de facto exercises its great power privilege. On the other hand, recognition remains the most controversial aspect of greatpowerhood, for it does not emerge out of thin air. A state cannot do nothing and be recognized as a great power. It is also true that greatpowerhood is the power to define what greatpowerhood is. Thus, a

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41. Adelman 2016. For a more recent assessment along the same lines, see Rogan 2021.

42. Fortescue 2017.

43. United Nations 1980, 9.

44. United Nations 1980, 9.

45. Obama cited in Borger 2014.

46. Bull 2002, 222.

great power must be capable of both defining and altering the regulating principles of international order, maintain the existing rules and, at times, introduce new rules and have them recognized by other actors.

Consequently, great power politics is always a stimulus-response type of game. In this context, many discussions of Russia's great power status center around a double-stage process: Russia's performative uptake interpreted as a claim for great power status, and a reaction to this move coming from other actors. For instance, Samuel Ramani interprets Russian foreign policy toward North Korea as aimed at achieving an international recognition of its great power status, as well as its role as the leading counterweight to the United States. This and other similar moves, Ramani notes, have not been entirely successful, but have managed to draw support from Cuba and Iran, and may potentially bolster Russia's international status in the future.<sup>47</sup> In the same vein, Richard Reeve insists that Putin is "developing Russia as a great power again, [and Syria is] a theatre to test out [Russian] military equipment and doctrine."<sup>48</sup> Russia's involvement in Syria, Reeve concludes, "sends a message to the rest of the world that Russia is a capable, modern military player,"<sup>49</sup> and it is now up to the world to either ignore this message or take it seriously.

### *1.2.2 Great powers as seen by Western academics*

In academic discourse, the concept "great power" does not have a consensual definition either. Yet, as a rule, it is also related to some privileged status in the international system. The exact meaning and consequences of possessing this status vary across different IR theories. The thin definitional common ground is that a great power conducts foreign policy with global implications, while also having some shared understanding of the international order. Even though almost every IR theory has something to say about great powers, traditionally it remains the bread and butter of realist IR and the English School.

For realists, great powers are the most important international actors, meaning that they are the only ones that matter, when it comes to the configuration of international order.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, the realist nostrum—

47. Ramani 2017.

48. Reeve cited in Rahman-Jones 2017.

49. Rahman-Jones 2017.

50. As Jack Levy put this (2004, 38), "while balance of power theorists speak very loosely

balance of power theory—has a strong great power bias, as becomes especially obvious in Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, where the number of great powers in the international system defines political context for every other member of that system.<sup>51</sup> Realists tend to justify this bias by asserting that smaller and less powerful states simply do not possess enough capabilities to be able to change anything at the systemic level, and hence are not worth scholarly attention, when the global balance of power is concerned.

For the English School, great powers are the members of an exclusive club of powerful states, who (1) possess special rights and responsibilities and (2) jointly manage international order. That is, they perform an institutional function in relation to what Hedley Bull called “international society,” defined as “a body of independent political communities linked by common rules and institutions as well as by contact and interaction.”<sup>52</sup> In Bull's view, great powers assume responsibility to alter their foreign policies when it may be required for maintaining international order and global peace. Other states in the system both recognize this duty as bestowed on great powers, and expect them to act on it when there is a need.<sup>53</sup> While particular circumstances in international systems/societies may either facilitate or obstruct the operation and legitimacy of great power management, as well as widen and deepen its agenda (e.g., include human rights and migration issues in addition to standard maintenance of interstate order), great power management remains one of the primary international institutions within the framework of the English School.<sup>54</sup>

Apart from the realists and the English School, great powers also emerge in other scholarly discussions. For instance, constructivists study greatpowerhood as it manifests itself in national identities. While looking at both official and popular political discourses of certain states, they sometimes discover that those states insist on presenting themselves as great powers to the

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about ‘states’ balancing, nearly all [of them] strongly imply that the great powers do most of the balancing.”

51. Waltz 2010. For related arguments, see Huth, Bennett and Gelpi 1992; Mearsheimer 2001; Mearsheimer 2013; Braumoeller 2013.

52. Bull 2002, 196.

53. Bull 2002, 196.

54. Cui and Buzan 2016; Little 2006. For a critical application of the English School's concepts to contemporary Russia, see Astrov 2013.

outside world and their own populations.<sup>55</sup> It is also the case for Russia.<sup>56</sup> However, since that identity is mostly based on self-assessment, in the Western discourse such cases raise concern rather than receive recognition. Symptomatically, most constructivist accounts of great power identities involve China, Russia, Turkey, Japan, and other latecomers to the international great power rivalry.

Even though the political and media uses of the concept “great power” may differ from its uses in IR scholarship, those two conceptual fields are entangled. The Western academic discourse both digests the everyday and political uses of the concept and substantiates them with theoretical foundation. It perpetuates their discursive lives by approaching them systematically and bringing forth criteria that define greatness, such as relational superiority, endowment with resources, a specific take on global norms, and a need for recognition. Since the Russian great power discourse does not always operate the same way, this produces misunderstandings. Consequently, when Russia speaks about being a great power, it is usually denied (but sometimes granted) recognition, frequently criticized (and occasionally supported) on normative terms, or assessed against a set of criteria (military, economic, demographic, etc.) to be found fitting, or more often deemed unfit. I take issue with such an approach, because it tends to ignore the local Russian discourse, its history and specifics. Despite its unavoidable relationality, any national great power discourse also feeds on domestic resources, has to answer to certain domestic demands and account for long-lasting discursive legacies to produce resonance. Hence, in the next section, I perform a brief inductive analysis of the contemporary Russian great power discourse to identify its main patterns and to compare them with how great powers are conceptualized elsewhere.

### 1.3 WHAT IS *VELIKAYA DERZHAVA*?

#### 1.3.1 *Linguistic contextualization*

As already mentioned, the concept “great power” has an unambiguous, yet curious, Russian equivalent—*velikaya derzhava*. It is unambiguous in a sense

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55. Rozman 1999; Demirtas-Bagdonas 2014; Foot 2017; Boon 2018.

56. Hopf 2002, 2013; Neumann 2008a.

that it has no synonyms identical or sufficiently close in meaning. It is curious because *velikaya derzhava* is a pleonasm—namely, an expression where one element already conveys the meaning of another element, making the latter semantically redundant. In modern Russian, *derzhava* bears a connotation of real (as opposed to formal) sovereignty and strength and hardly requires a qualifier. Unlike in modern Ukrainian, where *derzhava* means any state, no matter how powerful, the Russian concept *velikaya derzhava* includes a redundant adjective. Consequently, when *derzhava* is used with some other attribute (like “nuclear,” “leading,” or “large”) or as a standalone word, the compound meaning of *velikaya derzhava* (i.e., great power) is always looming somewhere in the background.

For example, while in English it is possible to use an expression “nuclear state” to refer to a country possessing nuclear weapons, in Russian this would sound strange (*yadernaya strana* or *yadernoe gosudarstvo*). On rare occasions when those collocations still appear in the press, they either refer to a nuclear state which is neither a great nor a rising power (e.g., North Korea),<sup>57</sup> are put between quotation marks to emphasize that this is the only suitable contextual translation,<sup>58</sup> or are translated from Ukrainian.<sup>59</sup> However, in most cases, nuclear states, most of which are also great powers, are referred to in Russian as *yadernaya derzhava*—that is, “nuclear great power.” In this expression, the superfluous characteristic “great” is reduced, while the archaic-sounding word *derzhava* keeps a touch of exaltation to it, unmistakably elevating its referent object to the level of great powers.

What follows below is a quick vetting of the uses of *velikaya derzhava* in the official texts published on the Russian president’s website ([www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru)).<sup>60</sup> I analyze at least 113 uses of the concept for the years 2000–2019 from the official website, as well as a handful of other occasions when the concept was invoked by the members of the Russian political elite, and discover several discursive trends that appear structural. To facilitate comparison with the previous section, I group those trends around three clusters of meaning: (1) *resources and relationality*, (2) *globalized norms*, and (3) *recognition*.

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57. E.g., Vzgl'yad 2016.

58. E.g., Berezin 2008.

59. E.g., Gordon 2016.

60. The texts I am referring to here include speeches, transcripts of public events and meetings with foreign leaders, interviews with national and international media, etc.



### 1.3.2 *Velikaya derzhava as a nonrelative phenomenon*

The first trend manifests itself in Russia's emphatic refusal to discuss its great power status in *relative terms*. In his speeches and interviews, Putin habitually resorts to comparisons and statistics. However, when it comes to Russia's great power status, all comparisons stall. In rare cases, he can even downplay Russia's resources to emphasize that political greatness is not about relative measurement. For instance, in an interview to the German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* in 2000, the journalist pointed out that Russia had increased its military budget by 50 percent and lowered the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons, and that the West was concerned with Russia's growing ambition to be a great power. Putin promptly responded that "Russia is not trying to haggle (*ne vytorgovyvaet*) a great power status for itself. It is a great power. This has been determined by its huge potential, history and culture."<sup>61</sup> Then, however, he also noted that Russia's military spending was 100 times lower than that of the US. Apparently, Putin saw no contradiction between Russia's incapacity to compete militarily and its culturally and historically predetermined great power status.

On most occasions, Putin speaks of Russia's current great power status in either historic or prophetic terms—namely, projecting it into the past or the future. For example, in his 2004 inaugural speech he called the Russian people "the heirs of a thousand-year-old Russia, the motherland of distinguished sons and daughters [who] left us as their inheritance a vast great power."<sup>62</sup> On another occasion, Putin presented a grim picture, in which Russia was surrounded by hostile and economically superior powers with clear "geopolitical ambitions" and was literally fighting for its life. To stay in one piece,

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61. Putin 2000a, emphasis added.

62. Putin 2004b. In the original transcript of this speech, there is a comma between the words "vast" (*ogromnuyu*) and "great" (*velikuyu*). Such punctuation would suggest that the two adjectives are equivalent in their function, which should point in the direction that the second adjective (great) must be semantically detached from the compound "great power" and interpreted as a separate characteristic meaning general greatness, not specific greatness attributed to great powers. Presumably, this comma has something to do with the fact that Putin made a clearly audible pause between the words "great" and "power"—it either conditioned the pause or was conditioned by it. Yet, despite the pause, the prosodic (i.e., intonational) structure of the phrase is telling a different story. A rising tone on "great" and a falling tone on "power" unequivocally suggests that the two words should be treated as integral parts of a single semantic compound. Whether Putin intended this or not, his prosody convinces the audience that *velikaya derzhava*, in this case, is a holistic construction, and that the comma is superfluous.

said Putin, Russia had to be a “strong [great] power, [because] in all periods of weakness . . . the country invariably faced a threat of disintegration.”<sup>63</sup> Consequently, he continued, Russia had “to possess substantial economic, intellectual, moral and military superiority.” However, every time he invoked some conventional attribute of political greatness, such as military superiority, strong economy, and the advancement of globalized norms, he used the expression “must and will be” in relation to Russia, projecting those qualities into the future.<sup>64</sup> For outside observers, such claim for greatness probably seemed merely aspirational.

In a similar vein, Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, while addressing the UN General Assembly in 2016, accused the Western great powers of trying “to set the criteria of greatness for one country or another.”<sup>65</sup> He used the same argument in his programmatic article on Russia’s foreign policy, published the same year. In it, Lavrov cited the Russian religious and political right-wing philosopher, Ivan Ilyin, who insisted that “greatpowerhood is determined not by the size of one’s territory or one’s population, but by the capacity of a nation and its government to take on the burden of great world problems and to resolve those problems in a creative way.”<sup>66</sup> Here again, the sum and substance of the Russian position on greatpowerhood is that resources and relationality have less importance compared to inherent creativity, whatever it is supposed to mean.

### 1.3.3 *Velikaya derzhava as the last bastion of morality*

The second consistent pattern is related to *globalized norms* and Russia’s normative antagonism. Russia does speak the normative language, appealing to the supremacy of international law and global peace and security, but it mostly does so in the context of opposing hegemony.<sup>67</sup> Yet just as it often represents itself as the “true Europe” confronted with the decadent “false Europe”<sup>68</sup> or even “post-Europe” of the West,<sup>69</sup> it also poses as a carrier of the

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63. Putin 2003a.

64. Putin 2003a.

65. Lavrov 2016a.

66. Lavrov 2016b. My translation of the original Russian text of Lavrov’s article is somewhat different from the official translation published by the Ministry and the journal, but it is also more accurate.

67. Putin 2003b, 2007a, 2014a, 2016b, 2017; Medvedev 2008b.

68. Morozov 2015, 119–28; Neumann 2016, 1383.

69. Karaganov et al. 2016, 16.

true global norms and values, upon which the UN was built. Russia criticizes the Western hegemonic powers (mostly the US) for having corrupted the principles that Russia is still upholding.<sup>70</sup> Hence, instead of acting in concert with other great powers toward maintaining some normative consensus, it often puts itself in opposition to the rest of the club, revealing its normative marginality.

As a result, it faces criticism for being a revisionist power, but continues using the normative language whose reference point remains the conventionally understood international system (that has apparently been corrupted), not some isolationist, revolutionary, or eschatological alternative. In other words, Russia does not promote any substantive modification of the existing structures and institutions, except for championing multipolarity as a fairer systemic arrangement. Putin insists that those “institutions are sufficiently versatile . . . [to be] filled with more modern content, corresponding to the current situation, [which should create] a new ‘edition’ of interdependence.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, Russia insists on being a great power that stands as the last bastion of international tradition and morality in the system that is no longer capable of recognizing and appreciating its role. In the Western eye, however, it looks rather like a toxic revisionist power.

### 1.3.4 *Velikaya derzhava as a domestic ideology*

Finally, the third and, perhaps, the most important pattern is related to *recognition*. Putin demonstrates his perfect awareness of how to play the recognition game. In the vast majority of primary sources that belong to the international context, Russia is normally called a great power by either foreign journalists and politicians,<sup>72</sup> or some domestic actors only indirectly related to the Russian political elite.<sup>73</sup> Putin, by contrast, *almost never* calls Russia *velikaya derzhava* in the foreign policy context. While he uses the expression quite a lot, in most cases, he applies it to other states (mostly the US,<sup>74</sup> but also China,<sup>75</sup> France,<sup>76</sup> and India<sup>77</sup>). In exceptional cases, he refers to Russia

70. Putin 2000b, 2007a.

71. Putin 2014a.

72. Putin 2004c, 2004d, 2005a, 2007b, 2007c, 2013c; Medvedev 2008a.

73. Putin 2006, 2007d.

74. Putin 2002a, 2002b, 2014b, 2015a, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e, 2017b, 2017d.

75. Putin 2017e, 2017f.

76. Putin 2016d, 2016f.

77. Putin 2000c, 2000d, 2015b, 2016d.

as a great power in foreign policy terms only pairing it up with a rising power (e.g., India).<sup>78</sup> Yet in those few instances (17 times in the analyzed sample) when he ascribes this status to Russia alone, he clearly speaks to the domestic audience. This usually happens when Putin attends relatively low-profile events, such as youth contests and forums,<sup>79</sup> award ceremonies for veterans and other distinguished persons,<sup>80</sup> and the meetings of the government.<sup>81</sup> When he called Russia a great power in his inauguration speech (2004), he also spoke to the domestic audience and used the concept in the historical context, insisting that greatness had to be “backed up by the new deeds of today’s generations.”<sup>82</sup> Another time, when he addressed his electorate before his first presidential term, Putin used the concept to contrast it with Russian realities, riddled with poverty and social injustice.<sup>83</sup> In his understating, Russia had always been a great power, but, at that point in time, it was a great power “in potentiality.”<sup>84</sup>

Occasionally, Putin rejected the label “great power” when someone attached it to Russia, or did not repeat it in his replies. In the interview for *Le Figaro*, he protested openly, emphasizing that Russia had too many internal problems to concern itself with global tasks.<sup>85</sup> Yet he still insinuated that Russia remained a *velikaya derzhava* on some other level, just not at the level of great power management. In 2007, Putin suggested (in the international context) that the present-day Russia, just like the Russian Empire in the early 1900s, would be much better off if it “did not pose as a great power.”<sup>86</sup> In 2014 and 2015, Putin insisted that Russia did not want to be a superpower (*sverkhderzhava* or *superderzhava*), because it was not fond of imposing its own ways upon other countries and had enough space to reclaim in its own hinterlands. Yet Putin also made clear that he criticized hegemonic ambitions, and that Russia was not going to give up the role of *velikaya derzhava*—that is, one among several equals (the message, however, remained implicit).<sup>87</sup>

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78. Putin 2014c, 2017g.

79. Putin 2003c, 2013b, 2017a.

80. Putin 2005b, 2005c, 2007e, 2014d, 2015c.

81. Putin 2000e, 2012a.

82. Putin 2004b.

83. Putin 2000f.

84. Putin 2000f.

85. Putin 2000b.

86. Putin 2007f.

87. Putin 2014a, 2015d; also see Putin 2003d.

In other words, Russia also appeals rhetorically to the institution of great power management in its Western understanding and has no difficulty in recognizing other powerful states as the members of one club. Yet it usually abstains from self-ascribing the role of a great power in the international context. Meanwhile, it strongly insists on being a *velikaya derzhava* when speaking to the domestic audience, using the concept and the image associated with it as a powerful ideological and mobilizational tool.

#### 1.4 CONCEPTUAL ENTANGLEMENT

Why do these two concepts that are supposed to be direct equivalents in English and Russian for signifying a major actor in international relations who shapes one of its primary institutions—great power management—have such different semantic fields (see Figure 1)?<sup>88</sup> My answer to this is relatively simple: *velikaya derzhava* is not exactly equivalent to “great power,” or, more specifically, these two concepts have become conceptually entangled through (1) translation, and (2) their further discursive interaction in the political field.<sup>89</sup> Einar Wigen defines conceptual entanglement as “the process that sets up conventionalized *translation equivalents* between languages.”<sup>90</sup> Importantly, this process usually does not entail an invention of a new word or a direct borrowing and localization of a foreign word. It is indeed about finding *equivalents*, which, naturally, have their own linguistic histories and are never completely equivalent, due to the varying semantic structures of cultures and languages.<sup>91</sup> Thus, conceptual entanglement gives agency to individual translators, statesmen, and intellectuals, who can *interpret* a certain conceptual framework and reformulate it in local, culturally grounded terms. It also provides a certain conceptual leeway for diplomats

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88. By a “semantic field” I mean a closely connected group of words and connotations united by an overarching concept that (1) delimits the group and (2) shapes the contextual meaning of its lexemes. For a more detailed discussion of semantic fields, see, e.g., Andersen 1997, 350–70.

89. Given that the institution of great power management has its roots in the European political discourse of the eighteenth century (Scott 2001) and was formalized (and later legalized [Koskenniemi 2004]) in the nineteenth century, when the main language of diplomacy was French, the original counterpart of *velikaya derzhava* was the French concept *une grande puissance*, not the English “great power.” Yet, since in this chapter I mostly refer to the modern usage, the Russian-English opposition seems appropriate.

90. Wigen 2018, 42.

91. Cf. footnote 18 in this chapter.

great power			<i>velikaya derzhava</i>		
resources	norms	recognition	resources	norms	recognition
relational superiority	int. order & peace	external club	non-relative history	continuity counter-hegemonic	domestic diplomatic
military economic	responsibility consensus	special rights	culture creativity	repository of values	equality (of the few)
demographic territorial			potential nuclear weapons		

Figure 1. Great power vs. *velikaya derzhava*. A comparison of semantic fields.

and policymakers when they engage in interstate contacts and communicate with their domestic audiences.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, *velikaya derzhava* is both the same as and different from “great power.” It is the same because it is not some isolated, idiosyncratic concept—it is a direct translation of “great power” and it acquires meaning only in international context, even when it is used domestically. Yet *velikaya derzhava* is also not the same as “great power,” because it has its own history and conceptual baggage—it does not share all the key semantic characteristics with “great power” in its Western meaning. Meanwhile, *velikaya derzhava* remains tightly related to and dependent on its Western equivalent, since Russia seeks inclusion and strives to remain understood. So it balances within the leeway provided through conceptual entanglement, capitalizing on some inherent semantics of *velikaya derzhava* (e.g., its compatibility with nonrelational assessment of inner political qualities, its mobilizational power, and its ad hoc creativity manifested in tackling world problems), but also demonstrates its sound understanding of what it takes to be a Western great power. For instance, Russian politicians and diplomats are always careful with the recognition aspect of greatpowerhood. They rarely openly self-ascribe this status in international and institutional contexts, while often using the concept in relation to other great and rising powers. They do not invite and frequently sever comparisons, as they realize those might end not in Russia’s favor. They plead allegiance to the existing international institutions (especially the UN), which globally validate Russia’s great power status. In the meantime, Russia can freely talk to its domestic audience about being a *velikaya derzhava* even when (or especially when!) the times are dire, relying

92. Wigen 2018, 36.

on the concept's mobilizational power and historical entrenchment. Thus, even when much of the world is opposing Russia's international actions (as happened when it attacked Ukraine in 2022), the domestic ideology of Russia being a *velikaya derzhava* may appeal even more strongly to its population at home.

To what extent the choice of semantic nuances is strategic, or even conscious, is certainly up for debate, but since languages play a fundamental role in shaping our lifeworlds,<sup>93</sup> I would assume that *velikaya derzhava's* conceptual history and semantic field cannot be a mere toolkit for occasional situational usage, even for those political professionals who are perfectly fluent in languages other than Russian. First, the semantic specifics of the native concept, while not completely determining, may always kick in as a default mode of meaning making. Second, it is the native concept that remains responsible for domestic resonance, and hence, its semantic field cannot be ignored by any political professional who wishes to remain popular, even if she perfectly understands all interlingual variations.

To sum up, *velikaya derzhava* is the product of both (1) the evolution of Russia's domestic political discourse, and (2) Russia's international and interlingual relations with its neighbors. Most importantly, it has been affected by a conceptual entanglement with the European society of states that turned greatpowerhood into an international institution. I prioritize the "European" political discourse as the main reference point for Russia's political imagination because it indeed remained Russia's dominant Significant Other for several centuries.<sup>94</sup> At the same time, I do this with reservations. First, there are enough differences in every European language and local context when it comes to political concepts. Yet there are also enough similarities in how these concepts evolved in separate European discourses, as well as the discourses of their immediate neighbors, including Russia (hence the idea of the European society of states).<sup>95</sup> Thus, I choose to risk a simplification to be able to present a synthetic picture of conceptual evolution with a millennial timespan. Second, due to the country's sheer size and geography, the Russian discourse was also affected by the polities to the east and to the south of Russia.<sup>96</sup> I accept this point and try to also account for

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93. As Ludwig Wittgenstein famously argued, "*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*" and "We cannot think what we cannot think; so what we cannot think we cannot say either" (2001, 68, emphasis original).

94. Neumann 2008a, 2008b, 2016; Morozov 2015.

95. Scott 2001.

96. Neumann and Wigen 2018; Ivakhnenko 1999; Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012; Shlapentokh 2013.

both the Steppe (i.e., eastern) and the Byzantine (i.e., southern) political traditions while tracing the conceptual evolution of *velikaya derzhava* (see especially chapters 2 and 3). Still, my main object of analysis remains the Russian political discourse, while the European discourse serves as the main external reference point. I argue that those two discourses developed on colinear tracks and underwent the most consequential and long-lasting conceptual entanglement that both enabled Russia to have its voice heard in the Eurocentric political environment, and limited its discursive options to achieve recognition.

### 1.5 ARGUMENT OUTLINE

There were many similarities in how the understandings of political greatness evolved in Russia and in Europe. Time lags and certain local specifics notwithstanding, one could say that the Russian and European discourses developed on colinear tracks, sometimes converging, but sometimes drifting apart from each other (see chapter 4). In my reconstruction, the historical repertoire of discursive manifestations of political greatness and superiority includes four separate, but genealogically related, modes<sup>97</sup> that were competing with and replacing each other, taking turns to claim discursive hegemony: *absolute*, *theatrical*, *civilizational*, and *international socialist* (I explain the content of each mode a bit further down). Their competition was both intra- and international, meaning that, at any given time, within one national discourse, there could (and often did) exist other modes (either in hibernation, or on the margin),<sup>98</sup> apart from the one that successfully exercised hegemony. At the same time, different international actors (in my case,

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97. My understanding of “mode” is similar to Dunn and Neumann’s “position”; i.e., it is an assemblage of similar and related discursive representations that form a distinguishable whole (2016, 5). However, I prefer the term “mode” because it is semantically more detached from concrete and organized groups of actors, and draws attention to the *manner* of reasoning, i.e., the habit or choice to *connect* individual representations in a certain way, rather than to the semantic content of individual representations.

98. In this context, the difference between hibernation and margin is similar to the classical Marxist distinction between a class “in itself,” i.e., similarly positioned economic subjects sharing common grievances, and a class “for itself,” i.e., similarly positioned economic subjects aware of their unity and common interests (Munro 2013). In other words, a *hibernating mode* entails the existence of disconnected or politically inactive representations that potentially resonate and could form a distinguishable whole, while a *marginalized mode* presupposes the existence of an organized and self-reflexive position that is being suppressed by the agents of discursive hegemony.



Russia and its Western neighbors) could represent different hegemonic modes of political greatness, or even experience discursive uncertainty, when their hegemonic mode was being undermined and hollowed by a competing position, *either internally or externally*. Whether the two discourses were internally stable or challenged, if they differed significantly in terms of their dominating modes, this created dissensus on the international level, and the participating actors entered a phase of discursive contestation, even when they allegedly utilized equivalent concepts and pursued similar goals.

In a simplified way, the four modes of greatness mentioned above can be classified along two axes, representing their attitude toward the international status quo and their main validation mechanism: (1) conservative vs. revolutionary, and (2) auratic vs. materialist.<sup>99</sup> When classified, the four modes fit neatly into a two-by-two matrix presented in Figure 2.

While the separation seems neat, each of those modes is an open system and none is hermetically sealed from the others. Hence, they are all prone to spillovers and interpenetrations. This makes discursive evolution possible and, in fact, inevitable over long periods of time—every mode carries the seed of its own disruption. For the same reason, however, adjacent modes are always related. So long as every discursive contender has to make sense of the existing practical consequences of the previously hegemonic system of meaning, the new mode is never revolutionary enough to reach the point of complete detachment from the ways and notions of its predecessor. Below I explain the meaning of all four modes and reconstruct the sequence of their emergence, dominance, and decline in the Russian (and partially European) political discourse.

### 1.5.1 *Absolute greatness*

In Russia (but also, presumably, in the part of Europe to the west of Russia), the most ancient recorded way to make sense of political greatness was by conceiving it in *absolute* terms (see chapter 2). That is, political power was usually rendered great or *majestic* through its direct connection to divine

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99. Here I use Walter Benjamin's understanding of aura which comprises the "unique manifestation of distance," or the obviously ceremonial nature of a phenomenon or an event (2019 141). Even though all modern and premodern regimes of power depend on ceremonial manifestations that generate consent or belief (Agamben 2011), I treat *absolute* and *theatrical* types of political greatness as particularly dependent on ceremonies, as well as distance, "however close it may be" (Benjamin 2019, 173). I label the other two types materialist, because of their explicit reliance on either relative assessment and comparison or dialectical materialist ontology.

*main validation mechanism*

<i>attitude towards status quo</i>		<b>auratic</b>	<b>materialist</b>
	<b>conservative</b>	<i>absolute greatness</i>	<i>civilizational greatness</i>
	<b>revolutionary</b>	<i>theatrical greatness</i>	<i>international socialist greatness</i>

Figure 2. Four genealogical modes of greatness in Russia and its predecessor polities.

authority. Even though every concrete instantiation of this quality depended on a combination of earthly rituals and human-made symbols, the latter merely represented something that was believed to exist independently of human sense and perception. Postulating direct connection between the deity and the sovereign as a concrete instantiation of the divine political authority on earth, absolute greatness is, simultaneously, *auratic* and *conservative*.

It is auratic because it contains elements of a cult and presupposes an unbreachable distance between the sovereign and the people (but also between different sovereigns). It is based on an unconditional acclamation (internal and external) of the sovereign's moral preponderance and political grandeur. Consequently, absolute greatness does not lend itself easily to measurement, comparison, and systemic recognition. It usually derives its legitimacy from the history and quality of a given domestic regime founded on the idea of divine enthronement. Absolute greatness is also distinctly conservative, since it essentializes political regimes and aims to protect them from possible transformations that could put their divine pedigree into question. Often, it functions as a legitimizing political ideology and may be adopted in the face of external strategic challenges. The prime example of its concrete application is the communication of Russia's most ruthless tsar (and a successful military commander), Ivan IV (1547–1584),<sup>100</sup> with his

<sup>100</sup>. Here and below I include the time of rule in the brackets, when I first mention monarchs and state leaders.

western neighbors: Johan III of Sweden, Stephen Báthory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and Elizabeth I of England (see chapter 2).

### 1.5.2 *Theatrical greatness*

While Russia was proactively trying to join the already shaping European society of states in the second half of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, it also changed its dominant mode of manifesting political greatness to something more fitting for the age—*theatrical greatness*. Within that mode, political greatness loses its essentialist character and universalist foundation. It is primarily activated through assertive action and convincing performance, often adorned with glorification and pomp. Instead of staying linked to some internal and imperceptible quality, greatness becomes a property of the discourse itself, as well as of the given political moment, while its validation largely relies on persuasion through spectacle and action. In Russia, such political style reached its peak in the eighteenth century, when panegyric literature and sermons excessively praised Russian monarchs as sacral creators and guardians of Russia's national glory and grandeur that were supported by military victories (see chapter 3, especially sections 3.8–3.15). In Europe, the early example of claiming theatrical greatness was Sweden's intervention into the Thirty Years' War in 1630.<sup>101</sup>

Theatrical greatness remains *auratic*, but also becomes *revolutionary*. While it continues to rely on appearance and perceptive distance, it rejects the essentialism that attributed to political regimes both stable transhistorical qualities and a direct connection to the divine. Thus, the sky is no longer the limit, so to say—what matters for changing one's status is a convincing performance of power and glory that may remain relatively independent of one's political history and domestic regime. The Russian monarchs of the eighteenth century utilized the discourse of theatrical greatness extensively, both to justify their radical domestic reforms, and to improve their international standing.

### 1.5.3 *Civilizational greatness*

Meanwhile, in Europe, political greatness was reinterpreted yet again. Absolute and theatrical versions of political glorification were synthesized into a

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101. Ringmar 2007.

*civilizational* narrative, which was universalist, but not essentialist (see chapter 4, especially sections 4.1–4.3). While it postulated the existence of the family of mankind developing in one common direction, the position of each individual polity on that axis was to be established through a rigorous civilizational analysis and comparison. At the same time, the resulting status of every polity was not set in stone and could potentially change, if the polity were to prove its civilizational worth by scoring high on an imprecise list of underspecified factors, such as culture, wealth, population, military and technological advancement, political history, and so on. Such understanding of universal development conditioned the emergence of great power management. Political greatness was then conceived as a fruit of individual states' political histories. At the same time, those histories were still considered as parts or stages in the development of one global whole, and great powers assumed the role of the main driving forces of human progress. This process was further facilitated by the transformation of international law, where the principles of natural law were replaced with positive international law, which was based on state practices and legitimized colonization (see chapter 4, section 4.1).

Civilizational greatness *loses the auratic component*, but regains its *conservative* ethos. Rigorous comparative undertakings in politics, enabled by the emergence of statistics,<sup>102</sup> corrupted the aura of power, replacing it with the all-pervading gaze of the status quo-oriented “gentle civilizers.”<sup>103</sup> Concurrently, this mode of greatness also facilitated the establishment of a legal hierarchy of states, in which Russia's position was assessed as, at best, ambivalent. Nevertheless, having managed to secure a seat at the table, Russia eagerly joined the European great powers in embracing and promoting the civilizational narrative that legitimized great power management and the Congress System.

Yet, when others, or even Russia itself, applied the narrative to Russia, it often did not play in Russia's favor. While its political elites and a few major hubs of industry and culture were, by then, thoroughly Europeanized (read: civilized), Russia at large did not resemble a European nation, due to a number of political practices it inherited from the Steppe tradition,<sup>104</sup> to poverty and misery of the most part of its population,<sup>105</sup> as well as to its hypercentral-

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102. Scott 2001, 8.

103. Koskenniemi 2004.

104. Neumann and Wigen 2018.

105. Etkind 2011, 2–3.

ized, unaccountable, and nonrepresentative autocratic regime.<sup>106</sup> The picture was further darkened by multiple travelogues about Russia, often exorbitantly orientalist, that were published in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>107</sup> Having internalized the civilizational narrative within its political discourse, Russia continued to experience constant problems with recognition. As a result, internationally, it chose to tackle the emerging dissensus by falling back on the alternative modes of political greatness: for example, absolute greatness, which especially came to the fore during the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815).

However, at home, the influence of the civilizational mode remained supreme. Consequently, Russia came up with a discursive construct that *domesticated* greatness. In doing so, it relied heavily on the preexisting mobilizational power and conceptual baggage of *velikaya derzhava*. In other words, what applied to the international system in the European version of the civilizational narrative was projected on Russia's own political history and domestic regime. The ruling elites presented Russia discursively as a *velikaya derzhava* in potentiality, which was supposedly predetermined by the centuries of uninterrupted political practice. Yet, even though Russia was in the process of becoming great, it was not truly there yet—according to the then current consensus about the nature of political greatness, the country badly needed to modernize. Toward that end, Russia applied the civilizational narrative self-referentially. To be a proper great power and to legitimately engage in colonization, Russia first needed to colonize itself. So, instead of being a foreign policy issue, the story of *velikaya derzhava* turned into a powerful domestic ideology and a regime-entrenching factor that refashioned in foreign policy terms what in fact was a domestically oriented modernization program (see chapter 5, sections 5.11–5.12).

#### 1.5.4 International socialist greatness

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the *civilizational* narrative of political greatness faced a powerful discursive contender. Seventy years later, following a successful social revolution in Russia (1917), the new mode temporarily replaced the civilizational narrative in the Russian political mainstream (although it never managed to leave the margins in Europe). It was *interna-*

106. Troshchinsky 1868.

107. E.g., Chappe d'Auteroche 1768; de Custine 1843, etc. For an overview of Western European accounts of Eastern Europe, see Wolff 1994.

*tional socialist greatness*, inspired by Marxist internationalism, which radically reimagined the existing international hierarchies and categorizations in political-economic terms. What matters for Marxists is not so much to which nation each person or group belongs, but what place they occupy in the economic class structure. Those who own the means of production (e.g., factories and capital) that enable them to extract surplus value and further increase their assets, belong to the capitalist class (or the *bourgeoisie*), regardless of their citizenship. Those who own nothing but their own labor, and hence become subjects of capitalist exploitation, belong to the working class (or the *proletariat*). Despite the fact that Marxists perceive national borders as real and consequential, both the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are, first and foremost, *cosmopolitan* economic classes—hence the *internationalism* of the Marxist thought. Thus, the concept of “great power management” has no independent sense in the Marxist vocabulary, since international affairs are actually managed by the capitalist classes of the Western states, while the state executives are mere committees aiding the settlement of common capitalist affairs.<sup>108</sup>

As sovereign units, great powers are byproducts of the accumulation and redistribution of capital, while all imperial policies are, in fact, economic—that is, very *materialist* in nature. At the end of the day, within the capitalist socioeconomic formation, everything is about capital and resources, but this basic pursuit is disguised by the ideology of national or civilizational greatness. On their own, however, great powers have no role to play in promoting the communist cause, and hence, they are regressive, rather than progressive entities. Yet, the progressivist spirit of Marxist internationalism, in which it resonates with the civilizational discourse, makes it susceptible to a different kind of greatness. This greatness is derived from Marxists’ historical determinism—namely, their utter certainty about the endpoint of human progress (communist classless society). Such greatness operates not on the level of international relations, but on the level of relations between classes and, eventually, History.<sup>109</sup>

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108. This is not to say that state bureaucracies were completely irrelevant for Marxist analysis. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, for instance, Marx demonstrates (2009) how state bureaucracy acquires its own autonomy balancing between the interests of different classes to protect its own interests. The outgrowth, resulting in autonomy, and hence self-interest of state bureaucracy was also the main charge that Leon Trotsky brought (1937) against Stalin in his late contemplations about the trajectory of the USSR.

109. Leon Trotsky, one of the masterminds of the Russian Revolution, renders this aspiration for a different kind of greatness most aptly. In the second part of *Literature and Revolu-*

In addition to its pronounced *materialism*, Marxist internationalism is also explicitly *revolutionary*. A quintessential example of critical theory, it allied with the underdogs of the international system and was centered on their enlightenment and mobilization for the cause of an international workers' revolution. Thus, national greatness, delegitimized as a notion, was replaced by a transformative future-oriented mission bestowed on the global proletariat to create an international classless society.<sup>110</sup> However, as mentioned above, every mode carries the seed of its own disruption. In the case of international socialist greatness, it was rooted in the ambivalent Marxist treatment of nations that soon enough (already in the 1930s) became a gateway for the elements of the civilizational mode to penetrate the Marxist narrative and to bring along the ideas about great powers and great power management into the very core of the Soviet ideology.

Joseph Stalin (1924–1953) made the decisive move to relegitimize great power management, and every subsequent Soviet leader had to somehow grapple with the inherited discursive tension. Nikita Khrushchev (1958–1964) tried to revive the original Leninist principles of Marxist internationalism, but was soon removed from office. In contrast, Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982) prioritized the Soviet Union's role as a conventional great power. And even though international socialist greatness formally maintained its discursive hegemony throughout Brezhnev's lengthy tenure, it was effectively undermined and corrupted from inside. Large sections of the Soviet political elite, especially those in the KGB and the military (from whom the current Russian *siloviki* largely inherit), de facto switched back to the civilizational mode—and specifically *Russian great power chauvinism* (*russskiy velikoderzhavny shovinism*) as its concrete instantiation.<sup>111</sup> By the time when Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–1991) finally launched a moderately open discussion about the ideological content and economic policies of the Soviet regime, intro-

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tion, he described how a German emperor once called social democrats *vaterlandslose Gesellen* (i.e., “subjects without a fatherland”), accusing them of being insusceptible to the redolence of national greatness. “Let it be so!” responded Trotsky, “They may be lacking that official fatherland represented by a chancellor, a prison guard, and a pastor. Yet, these subjects without a fatherland are truly blessed, as they will inherit the world” (1991, 198). It is difficult to miss Trotsky's allusion to religious rhetoric here. Despite the materialist substance of their ideology, Russian Marxists often resorted to figures of speech inspired by religious discourse (Etkind 2011, 208); i.e., they were, quite perceptively, employing rhetorical tropes that were typical for the absolute mode of greatness. Thereby, they increased the resonance of their writings and speeches with the masses.

110. Duncan 2002, 49–54.

111. Zubok 2008, 435.

ducing *glasnost*' and *perestroika*, the conditions of possibility for a major implosion within the Soviet discourse were already in place. Catalyzed by Gorbachev's frequent appeals to universal values, global challenges and threats, as well as one common family of humanity, Marxist internationalism was completely uprooted, together with its critical analytical predisposition and revolutionary spirit.

### 1.5.5 *The contemporary condition*

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia reached another discursive fork in the road. Symptomatically, at this historical moment, the first thing the new Russia's president, Boris Yeltsin (1991–1999), uttered when he was invited to speak at the US Congress in 1992 was that he was “a president of a country with millennial history [and] a citizen of a great power (*velikoy derzhavy*), which has made its choice in favor of liberty and democracy.”<sup>112</sup> In the provided consecutive interpretation, *velikaya derzhava* was mistakenly translated into English as a “great country,” while the predominant focus remained on the final clause, featuring “liberty” and “democracy.” Such must have been the assumption: the new Russia was so economically weak and unstable that it could not possibly measure up to the great power status. It did not tick all the features on the civilizational list and was undergoing a fundamental transformation.

However, Yeltsin's choice of words, especially in the opening sentence that was preceded and followed by three and a half minutes of standing ovation, certainly was not random. The discursive rupture Russia had experienced in the preceding years forced its political elites to search for alternative, yet reliable, identity anchors. While liberty and democracy were part of the story, the most fundamental and resonant tropes were to be borrowed from the available image bank of a country that (1) had not once elected its government through a free and fair process,<sup>113</sup> (2) could hardly afford the ethnic nationalist solution, and (3) had no tradition of civic nationalism.

*Velikaya derzhava* was, in fact, a very logical choice: it gave the citizens a sense of historical continuity, a feeling of pride that somewhat compensated for the miserable realities of the 1990s, it possessed a powerful mobilizational potential that had also been activated in the 1930s and 1940s (i.e.,

<sup>112</sup> Yeltsin 1992.

<sup>113</sup> Yeltsin also emphasized this in the first sentence of his speech, presenting himself as the very first popularly elected Russian leader in the last one thousand years.



within the lifespan of a sizable portion of Russian population). Importantly, it possessed discursive characteristics that did not necessarily require external validation—it could accommodate relative weakness and underdevelopment, as it had many times before, when Russia capitalized on the concept’s absolute features (see chapter 2, sections 2.5 and 2.6). Last but not least, by the 1980s, *velikaya derzhava* had *already become* one of the most important identity anchors for the Soviet bureaucratic elites. Most of those people unproblematically coupled it with the official hegemony of international socialist greatness (see chapter 6, especially 6.4), and later, themselves safely transitioned into the political elite of contemporary Russia, bringing their identities along.<sup>114</sup>

In other words, it should not be surprising that Yeltsin chose to include the concept in the very first (scripted) sentence of his Congress speech, which introduced the new Russia to the global audience. It also makes sense why Putin later amplified this discourse to an even higher degree. Having done so, however, Russia not only officially reestablished the civilizational mode of greatness as its new discursive hegemony, but also destined itself to a set of challenges that were very similar to the ones it struggled to resolve before, especially in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Yet again it internalized a discursive framework that was *conservative* and *materialist* at the same time. That is, it amplifies the voice of those major actors who pay their respects to the international political status quo, but it also includes a rigid international hierarchy, built and maintained through rigorous relational assessment of material, ideational, cultural, and political factors. In such circumstances, Russia can only count on partial recognition that would never satisfy its restless urge to remain (1) markedly special and (2) completely equal as a great power at the same time.

As the developments of the past three decades have shown, Russia has been actively using the leeway provided by the conceptual entanglement of “great power” and *velikaya derzhava* to assuredly mobilize domestic support, but to also claim its international privileges in an intelligible way. This explains both the difference between the concepts’ semantic fields, and Russia’s unceasing attachment to its great power identity. At times, however, the conceptual stretch seems too much for the international audience. Importantly, sometimes it also seems too much for people at home. Hence the sociological fluctuations of preferences between “*velikaya derzhava* that is

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114. Kryshatanovskaya and White 2011.

respected and feared by other states” and “a country with high living standards, but, perhaps, not very powerful” as different versions of perfect Russia in the eye of the Russian public.<sup>115</sup> Whether the public preference for *velikaya derzhava* will continue to degrade is an open question. Yet, the way the sociologists from Levada-Center formulate their “either-or” question indicates that the civilizational mode of political greatness is not going anywhere any time soon. In Figure 3, I visualize the conceptual evolution of *velikaya derzhava* as it proceeded in the Russian political mainstream.

## 1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

I substantiate my argument in five distinct steps, each performed in a separate chapter. In chapter 2, I describe the first stage of the previously mentioned conceptual evolution. I look at the uses of the concept *velikaya derzhava*, as well as its separate components, from the eleventh century until the beginning of the seventeenth century. First, I reconstruct separate discursive lives of the two parts of this concept and show how they merged into one in the sixteenth century. The underlying idea is to show that discursive manifestations of political greatness in that period could be united under one label—*absolute greatness*—that is, existing in unverifiable form and independently of perception. I also touch upon the first Russian political ideologies that extensively utilized the idea of political greatness for mobilizational purposes and, for the first time, connected it with the Orthodox Christian ideals of submission and humility.

Chapter 3 covers the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the time when the absolute mode of greatness was challenged and later replaced by *theatrical greatness*. Working with seventeenth-century sources, I trace how greatness understood in terms of *majesty* got slowly reinterpreted as *glory*, and how this concept’s absolute foundation disappeared. I argue that this process developed alongside a growing trend toward sacralization of the Russian monarch, which, somewhat counterintuitively, culminated in the time of the most well-known Russian Europeanizer, Peter the Great (1682–1725). To illustrate how the transformation proceeded, I analyze two large groups of sources. First, I focus on Peter’s institutional reforms and specifically their

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115. Levada-Center 2021. As of August 2021, the share of people who prefer to see their country as *velikaya derzhava* has reached its historic minimum of 32 percent.

### Timeline of hegemonic modes in Russia's great power discourse

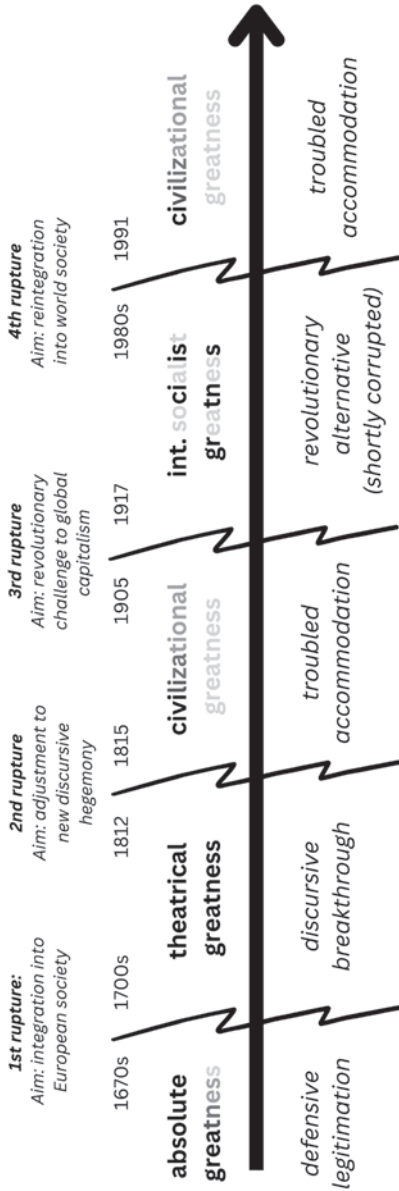


Figure 3. A timeline of hegemonic modes in the evolution of great power discourse in Russia and its predecessor polities.

\*Gray scale represents the strength of discursive hegemony from very strong (in black text) to challenged (light gray text) or corrupted (interchanging black and gray text). Challenged hegemony implies that Russia, while accepting the general discursive framework, increasingly appeals to the alternative modes afforded by the conceptual leeway of *velikaya derzhava*, trying to overcome the crisis of recognition. Corrupted hegemony implies that the formal hegemony of a discursive mode remains intact, while its semantics are no longer taken seriously. Fading represents chronological developments.

discursive backing. Second, I look at the time of another great tsarina, Catherine II (1762–1796), and define the dominant political style of her epoch. In the same chapter, I also bring the Russian political discourse into dialog with the more familiar and better-studied ideas about political greatness coming from the West (e.g., the European theorists of natural law and diplomatic correspondence).

In chapter 4, I analyze the discourse produced during the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815), one of the crucial moments for the recognition of Russia's great power status. In this chapter, I show how theatrical manifestations of political greatness that Russia had relied on until that moment stopped working with the European audience. I argue that this mismatch could help explain the puzzling transformation that occurred to Napoleon's nemesis, Alexander I (1801–1825), during and in the immediate aftermath of the Congress. I suggest that, while trying to adjust to the new civilizational narrative reflected in the European consensus, Russia reinvented its greatness relying on alternative, nontheatrical discourses that had been lying dormant in its political image bank until then.

Chapter 5 covers the rest of the nineteenth century, as well as the decade preceding WWI. In it, I show how Russian statesmen and public intellectuals were struggling to adopt the story of world-historic progress and ended up domesticating this narrative, reinterpreting *velikaya derzhava* as an ever-becoming but perpetually underdeveloped political entity that masked in foreign policy terms what essentially was a domestic project. I focus on both the official discourse and literary debates that took place outside the policy circles.

In chapter 6, I discuss the rise and fall of the Soviet project and the international socialist mode that swiftly asserted hegemony in the Russian discourse, following the successful social revolution of 1917. I also demonstrate how it was corrupted by competing narratives related to national history and great power management very shortly after. I also show how it was effectively hollowed out, despite its formal discursive hegemony during the Cold War, and how the Soviet bureaucratic elites fell back on one of the conventional versions of great power management as their main discursive identity anchor.

Finally, in chapter 7, which concludes this book, I contemplate the consequences of the described conceptual entanglement, as well as the separate stages of *velikaya derzhava's* conceptual evolution for contemporary Russia. I

discuss possible future trajectories for both Russia and the West in addressing the present discursive conundrum. I also explore my argument's broader implications. One of the core problems of Russia's international politics over the last few centuries has been the problem of trying to speak authoritatively from the periphery (or semiperiphery). Even though in my book this issue is presented as a Russian problem, in fact, the problem is much more general, and it applies to other peripheral and semiperipheral actors, such as Turkey or China. What is more, it is as much a discursive problem as it is an economic or a sociopolitical one.

### 1.7 ANALYSIS

When it comes to my analytical choices, I proceed as follows. First, I treat *velikaya derzhava* as a concept, not a (compound) word. As Reinhart Koselleck has it, "each concept is associated with a word, but not every word is a social and political concept."<sup>116</sup> Together with Koselleck, I maintain that political and social concepts, such as *velikaya derzhava*, "possess a substantial claim to generality and always have many meanings—in historical science, occasionally in modalities other than words."<sup>117</sup> Hence, on the one hand, concepts can never be defined unequivocally. On the other hand, they encapsulate "the entirety of meaning and experience within a sociopolitical context within which and for which a word [associated with the concept] is used."<sup>118</sup> Second, while reconstructing a conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava*, I am trying to see whether the semantic and contextual substance of this concept remained the same through time and space, and if it did not, then I ask myself how it changed and through which processes. Third, I accept Einar Wigen's basic premise that "international relations are also inter-lingual relations."<sup>119</sup> To that end, I add an interlingual dimension to my analysis by looking at how Russian concepts related to political greatness interacted with foreign concepts attached to similar designata and how the meaning transfer proceeded. The greatest attention devoted to this exchange coincides with the time when Russia was trying to join European society and

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116. Koselleck 2004, 84.

117. Koselleck 2004, 84–85.

118. Koselleck 2004, 85.

119. Wigen 2015, 427.

sought recognition of its great power status—that is, in the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

The choice of sources is conditioned by the discursive specifics of the periods in question. I mostly follow the debate about Russia's political greatness (and later—great power status) to where it unfolds during each historical period. The starting point is the very early known uses of the concept *derzhava* that occurred in the eleventh century. For the eleventh through sixteenth centuries, the most relevant and pretty much the only widely available discourse is religious literature. For the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I look at the sources that still belonged to the realm of religious writing, but were already slightly changing their genre, addressing a wider audience. Their exact purpose and style vary greatly and include anything from doctrinal documents of the Old Believers (Russian schismatics) to political pamphlets of the Time of Troubles (the lengthy interregnum in early modern Russia that lasted from 1598 until 1613). I also analyze some recognized discursive monuments<sup>120</sup> of the time, such as Ivan IV's diplomatic correspondence. As my data for the eighteenth century, I use the writings of Petrine ideologues, diplomatic correspondence, and polemic essays, as well as the works of some nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian historians. In the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, my focus is mostly twofold. On the one hand, I engage with the debates among Russian public intellectuals, paying specific attention to Westernizers and Slavophiles. On the other hand, I read and interpret memoirs and other writings of the Russian political actors. For the twentieth century, I look at the Soviet cultural output (e.g., Stalinist cinema) and also address a number of secondary sources published by renowned historians of the Cold War. I also provide a more detailed justification for my data selection in each individual chapter.

Due to my main focus on the evolution of Russian political concepts, I pay more attention to the Russian sources, reconstructing the European side of the story in a cursory way, mostly relying on secondary literature and the moments of Europe's interaction with Russia. On the Russian side, however, I try to present a fully fledged conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava* from its very early uses.

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120. Unless the literal meaning of the word “monument” is obvious from the context, hereinafter, I mostly refer to discursive monuments—i.e., important and consequential texts.

My analysis is mostly inspired by three interrelated schools of thought: the German school of conceptual history (*Begriffsgeschichte*),<sup>121</sup> the Cambridge school of intellectual history,<sup>122</sup> and the critical history of modernity through the genealogical method coming from France.<sup>123</sup> All their nuances notwithstanding, these schools of thought share a set of fundamental assumptions about social continuity and change that I subscribe to as well. First, they all disagree with a vision of history as a progressive path toward modernity—that is, as a gradual emergence, development, and perfection of modern ideas and institutions, culminating in their contemporary most flawless shape. This intellectual position presumes that history is not a constant progression from chaos to order or from primitiveness to harmonious complexity, but that it is rather a sequence of alternating orders each having its own unique semantic structures and appropriate rules of conduct. Second, they all insist that ideas and concepts *in use* are instances of political action—that is, they perform productive work related to the stabilization of contextual meaning or alteration thereof. This proposition implies that language is not a mere reflection of reality, but rather a site of productive contestation where actors define, redefine, and challenge social concepts in their (actors' and concepts') contextual milieus, thereby reproducing or changing semantic structures of given orders. Third, since languages (and discourses more broadly) are both instrumental for and constitutive of their speakers' social realities, the appropriate way to create awareness of their fluidity is through a diachronic exposition of changing meanings attached to political concepts, practices, and institutions. Thus, by tracing conceptual evolutions, the representatives of all three schools (1) denaturalize social realities that are usually taken for granted by social actors; and (2) investigate social change by looking at how the key political concepts change their meaning.

As mentioned above, this book is not a work of history. Rather it is a synthesizing social science work, inspired by the critical history of modernity. It is what Michel Foucault called a “history of the present.” Hence, I do not claim expert authority on the question of Russia’s social and political development in the bygone centuries. Instead, I reconstruct a genealogy of the present-day discourse. This discourse, as I will demonstrate, came into being through digestion, reinterpretation, and amalgamation of the previously existing discursive modes. What I am trying to do is to immerse into those

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121. Koselleck 2004.

122. Skinner 1969; Palonen 2003.

123. Foucault 1977; Garland 2014.

preexisting positions and to understand their internal logic—that is, to analyze them emically. Rejecting the commonly held opinion that concepts preserve an unchanged meaning through time, I look at how they operate from within each discursive locality. I am trying to understand what meaning those concepts acquire while at work in an argument, accompanied by their discursive surroundings.



## CHAPTER 2

### *Absolute Greatness*

#### Origins and Early Evolution

*it is with God's hand that we possess our state—we do not accept it from the people; it is only a son who could accept from his father what is his by father's blessing*

TSAR IVAN IV IN HIS LETTER TO STEPHEN BÁTORY, KING OF POLAND AND GRAND DUKE OF LITHUANIA (1579)

*You should probably ask yourself: Is this how things are supposed to be done in great states?*

TSAR IVAN IV IN HIS LETTER TO JOHAN III, KING OF SWEDEN (1573)

Language is a notoriously fluid matter. Words change their meaning over time and space. They take up new designata and free themselves from the old ones. They gather different constellations of meaning in different places and may sometimes mean slightly different things even for two individuals coming from the same cultural and temporal context. It is equally true that meanings change their words—certainly over time, as the rapid evolution of any youth slang can demonstrate, but especially through space, which becomes obvious to anyone who has done translation or studied regional dialects.

At the same time, the new words referring to old designata do not appear as innocent and empty labels devoid of any independent significance. Even if a new word is a pure neologism that did not exist prior to being attached to some new or old phenomenon, it bears a distinctive connotation pointing to the willingness to break away from the ties of norms and traditions. And while some linguistic contexts are more open to such innovations (e.g., the

early Soviet Union, which embraced the Bolshevik newspeak filled with neologisms and abbreviations),<sup>1</sup> others remain conservative (e.g., the present-day Icelandic, whose speakers can still read the Old Norse literature created a thousand years ago).

Similarly, when old words are attached to newly emerging notions and objects, they carry parts of their discursive genealogies with them. Those genealogies do not necessarily completely determine how language speakers think about the categories they refer to by using specific words. Yet they may have impact on contextual interpretation and they certainly matter insofar as they can illuminate various bendy paths that concepts travel before they take up their contemporary constellations of meanings.<sup>2</sup> That is, discursive genealogies help demonstrate that *meanings are path-dependent*. Words mostly carry (but also selectively lose) their connotations throughout the history of their colloquial usage.

In this chapter, I start reconstructing a conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava*. Importantly, I am not trying to present this history as a continuous and uninterrupted improvement and rectification that leads to the purest and most semantically consistent version of the concept as we know it in contemporary usage. Instead, I reconstruct a genealogy of a slightly odd (upon external evaluation) and sometimes controversial constellation of meanings that define *velikaya derzhava* today, as a product of Russia's local political history, as well as its political interactions with the outside world. I treat the concept as a synthesis of qualitatively different ideas about political greatness, international hierarchies, and modes of international socialization.

Thus, this will be a story of ruptures rather than a story of continuity. This will be a story of different discursive modes and hegemonies that competed with and superseded one another. Each of those modes and hegemonies represented a different story of what it meant to be a great polity. Often those stories were based on qualitatively different premises and posed diver-

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1. A quintessential illustration of how this newspeak was penetrating the young Soviet society is Mikhail Bulgakov's novella *Heart of a Dog* (1925), which recreates a linguostylistic triad of the aristocratic Russian, the common Russian, and the Bolshevik Russian, thus creating a real challenge for Bulgakov's translators.

2. E.g., while the English word "king" is believed to be etymologically related to either "kinship" or "noble birth" (Partridge 2002, 329), its Russian direct equivalent—*korol'*—is presumably an adaptation of the name Charles (or Karl) borne by Charlemagne (Chernykh 1999, 431). The former word ties the concept to a respected status in a local political community, while the latter emphasizes its foreign (and specifically European) origin.

gent goals for Russia's political development. They also had different visions of the international system (if any). Most of those visions only vaguely relate to the idea of great power management as it was articulated in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, they still contain some genealogically related traits in a sense that every subsequent position or mode, as it was trying both to adapt to and to break away from its discursive surrounding, was feeding on the array of antecedent positions and modes, and was utilizing their structures of meaning. In other words, the common challenge of any novelty is to digest the available possibilities and to assemble them into something qualitatively new, yet still familiar to the audience. This is why even Marxist internationalism had to somehow converse with the narratives of national greatness and great power management (and eventually fell victim to those, see chapter 6). Likewise, when Russia entered European society in the eighteenth century and claimed great power status, domestically it had to converse with, and account for, the conceptual origins of *velikaya derzhava*, the signifier it chose to be a direct equivalent of *une grande puissance*, or a "great power."

Therefore, I go back in time to the very first uses of the concepts *derzhava* and *velikaya derzhava* (from the eleventh century on) to see what connotations they might have brought along into the later periods. Naturally, their original meaning was quite different from what they mean today. Yet they were always related to the idea of political order, which was, at that point in time, understood predominantly in religious terms and believed to gain its legitimacy via God's blessing. In addition, I analyze how God-given greatness came to be utilized as a political ideology for mobilizational purposes during political crises.

This chapter's main argument is that, while the religiously conceived idea of political order, as it revealed itself in Russian political discourse, had always been implicitly connected to greatness, understood in transcendental terms, greatness as a concrete feature of the Russian regime was emphasized explicitly only in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. At that time, this discursive shift was a defensive reaction to contemporary strategic challenges and the transformations of political orders in some European states. This shift unearthed a set of underlying assumptions that early modern Russian rulers held about great (i.e., proper and legitimate) political entities more generally. This set of assumptions related to what I call *absolute greatness*—namely, the belief that a truly great polity, first and foremost, had to found its greatness on a proper domestic regime (claiming its attachment

to the intangible transcendental truth), and a long-lasting political tradition. I certainly do not mean to say that international hierarchy was completely irrelevant. Rather, I mean that the mode of instantiating that hierarchy was mostly based on the claims related to the histories and qualities of domestic regimes.

I have largely based the forthcoming analysis on the primary sources (and their expert contextualizations) published as part of the project “The Literary Library of Ancient Rus” (*Biblioteka literaturny Drevney Rusi*), hereinafter referred to as *Biblioteka*. The project was originally spearheaded by the researchers from the Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences, but eventually it outgrew itself and attracted many other scholars from all over Russia. To date, *Biblioteka* is one of the most comprehensive collections of Old Russian literature, which contains the most important texts that were written from the eleventh century on. It comprises twenty volumes (fifteen of which have been fully digitalized and published in open access)<sup>3</sup> that cover all genres of Old Russian literature, from Christian hagiography and translations of foreign texts to chronicles and political pamphlets to diplomatic letters and everyday correspondence, in both Church Slavonic<sup>4</sup> and modern Russian. Thus, *Biblioteka* presents the most balanced and complete slice of premodern and early modern Russian discourse, which allows for an exhaustive and in-depth analysis.

## 2.1 THE EARLIEST SOURCES: *VELIKAYA*

It makes little sense to study the evolution of the compound concept *velikaya derzhava*, assuming that the semantic effect carried by both its elements, as well as their combination, remained unchanged throughout the centuries. For a speaker of modern Russian, both parts of the concept have a touch of exaltation to them, and are usually reserved for truly “great” individuals and events (e.g., “great [velikiy] Russian poet Alexander Pushkin” and “Great [Velikaya] Patriotic War”) and truly capable international actors (e.g.,

3. Institute of Russian Literature 2006.

4. Church Slavonic was a general literary language in Kievan Rus’ and early modern Muscovy until the eighteenth century, when it was replaced by the Russian language in secular literature and remained in use only in clerical circles. It was, however, almost never spoken outside church services. In everyday communication, Old Russian (aka Old East Slavic) or one of its dialects was preferred between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries.

“nuclear power” [*yadernaya derzhava*] and “space power” [*kosmicheskaya derzhava*]). This was not the case in the past. Moreover, there existed a tangible misbalance, since *derzhava* was a concept that directly referred to the highest political power (usually presented as God-given), while *velikaya*, unlike in modern Russian, could refer to anything at all.

In Church Slavonic texts, the adjective “great” (masculine—*velikiy*; feminine—*velikaya*; neuter—*velikoye*) was almost like a buzzword. It was extremely polysemic and could refer to big size, goodness of soul, geographical location, intensity of a feeling, and superiority within political hierarchy—often all in one text. In one of the early fourteenth-century sources, the word *velikiy* was used to describe (1) hierarchically superior titles of grand princes and grand princesses (*velikiy knyaz’* and *velikaya knyaginya*),<sup>5</sup> (2) their reign (*velikoye knyazheniye*), (3) the great happiness that was brought to Rus’ by its baptizer Vladimir I (*velikaya radost’*), (4) the high intensity of striving toward one God (*velikoye ustremeniye*), (5) a very violent fight (*secha velikaya*), (6) awe and horror (*velikiy strakh i uzhas*), (7) great martyr, as a title in the church hierarchy (*velikomuchenik*), (8) archangel Michael (*velikiy arkhangel Mikhail*), (9) a big wooden log (*velikaya koloda*), and (10) the beginning of the Mongol-Tatar yoke (*velikoye zhestokoye plenenie*).<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, authors could use such constructs as “[grand prince] Dmitry . . . was . . . great in his greatness” (*velik v svojom velichii*),<sup>7</sup> which was perceived as an acceptable form of glorification rather than a tautology.<sup>8</sup> In addition, several prominent Russian cities also had the word *velikiy* in their names (e.g., Velikiy Novgorod and Velikiye Luki). Thus, unlike in contemporary Russian, in Church Slavonic there was an extremely wide array of things, persons, and phenomena that could be described as great. At the same time, quite surprisingly, until the sixteenth century the word *velikiy* was almost never attached to either political power (*vlast’*, *vladychestvo*, or *derzhava*), or the Russian polity (*Rus’*, *derzhava*, or *gosudarstvo*).<sup>9</sup>

There are a few notable exceptions to this rule. For instance, in the eleventh-century source describing the lives of the first canonized saints in the infant

5. Grand prince was the highest title in the Russian political hierarchy until Ivan IV was crowned as tsar in 1547.

6. Likhachev et al. 1999f.

7. Likhachev et al. 1999i, 225.

8. No doubt, *velichie* (to which I will return in this and the next chapters) may have already then possessed its very concrete and independent meaning, comparable to *majesty*; i.e., the Grand Prince Dmitry was, in fact, great in his majesty, or performed his princely duties in a laudable way.

9. At this point I keep both “power” and “state” as possible translations of *derzhava* until the further discussion on how this word was understood in Kievan Rus’ and how it changed its meaning.

Orthodox Church, the two younger sons of Russia's baptizer, Vladimir the Great, the brothers were "placed by God to bring light to the world and shine with miracles in the *great Russian land*."<sup>10</sup> In this context, however, *velikaya* was likely to be used as a simple laudatory epithet or a characteristic of big size, for this case seems too solitary in the general context. The same must be true for another source from the turn of the fourteenth to the fifteenth century, whose author, in a rather Machiavellian, yet much more moralistic, spirit mentors grand princes on how to rule well. The author admonishes his readers against being ungrateful to God, who endowed them with "this *great power* [*velikuyu vlast*]," and urges them "to provide Him with an equally great gift in return."<sup>11</sup> An exception that proves the rule can be found in the three epic descriptions of the Battle of Kulikovo (the game-changing victory of the Russian forces against the Tatars in 1380). In all three epics, medieval Rus' is called *velikaya* only once, although Rus' and Russians are mentioned more than 150 times in the entire series. Another exception is related to the same battle: Dmitry Donskoy, the commander of the Russian forces, later canonized by the Orthodox Church, was said to "accept God-given power, and, with God's guidance, created a *great kingdom* thereby revealing the *greatness of Russia's throne*."<sup>12</sup>

However, these and a few other instances<sup>13</sup> notwithstanding, collocations when the word *velikiy* describes political power (*derzhava* and its synonyms) or the Russian polity are glaringly absent from the Church Slavonic sources before the sixteenth century. Why was such a polysemic adjective only very sporadically attached to power and the Russian polity? Was it not only natural to praise the power of grand princes and the polity they governed by using this laudatory word? To find an answer, I look at the literary usages of *derzhava*, as well as some other lexemes signifying political power.

## 2.2 THE EARLIEST SOURCES: *DERZHAVA*

As a concept, *derzhava*<sup>14</sup> was also widely used in the old Russian writings. Its original meaning was somewhat different from the modern interpretation, related to a strong polity, capable of projecting its influence on the interna-

10. Likhachev et al. 1997c, 347.

11. Likhachev et al. 1999j, 427.

12. Likhachev et al. 1999i, 221, emphasis added.

13. One can also find the expression *velikaya vlast*' in Likhachev et al. 1997e, 2003a.

14. This word could be spelled as *держава*, *дъръжава*, *дерьжава*, *държава*, *дръжава*, or *дръжава* in different versions of the Church Slavonic orthography.

tional level. In the sources from the eleventh to the thirteenth century, *derzhava* was frequently presented as a divine attribute. In modern translations of those texts, it was often rendered as “power of God” (*сила Господа*),<sup>15</sup> “might of God” (*mogushchestvo Gospoda*),<sup>16</sup> or left without translation (*derzhava Gospoda*).<sup>17</sup> Tellingly, one of the most widespread codas of Church Slavonic texts was some variant of the affirmation “Glory and power (*derzhava*) to our God with Father and Holy Spirit always and for all eternity! Amen.”<sup>18</sup> When referred to the earthly life, *derzhava* could mean the “rule” of a prince (translated as<sup>19</sup> *vlast'*),<sup>20</sup> or the “ruler” (translated as *gosudar'*),<sup>21</sup> but almost never “polity,” “country,” or “land.” In later sources, it could also signify “reign” (translated as *pravlenie*).<sup>22</sup> The fact that sometimes, just like the divine *derzhava*, the earthly one was also left in its original form in translation indicates that all those meanings are still discernible for a speaker of modern Russian.<sup>23</sup> Oftentimes, *derzhava* was translated as “Majesty” (*Velichestvo*), which in Russian is cognate and almost homonymous to “greatness” (*velichie*),<sup>24</sup> and in those occasions when *velichestvo* was used in Church Slavonic, it could sometimes be translated as *velichie* (“greatness”) into modern Russian.<sup>25</sup>

One thing that the ancient authors were crystal clear about was that *derzhava*, as an attribute of an earthly ruler, was only given by the grace of God and, in itself, remained of divine origin. In his analysis of the Russian political myths, Michael Cherniavsky illustrated this point by looking at how political power was conceptualized in the twelfth-century *vita* of the grand prince of Vladimir, Andrew Bogolyubsky, a victim of political assassination who was later canonized by the Orthodox Church. Cherniavsky writes that

in Andrew’s case, for the first time the chronicle reveals the theological status of political power in order to condemn the murderers the more: “As the apostle Paul says: Every soul obeys the ruler, the rulers are established by God. In

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15. Likhachev et al. 1997b, 162–63.

16. Likhachev et al. 1999e, 404–5.

17. Likhachev et al. 1997e, 482–83.

18. E.g., Likhachev et al. 1997g, 191; 1997h, 291; 1997k, 65.

19. Here and below in this subsection translations are into modern Russian, as they appear in *Biblioteka*.

20. Likhachev et al. 1999b, 34–35.

21. Likhachev et al. 2004, 144–45.

22. Likhachev et al. 2006d, 472–73; Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006i, 120–21.

23. Likhachev et al. 1999a, 484–85.

24. Likhachev et al. 1997g, 172–73; 1999c, 218–19.

25. Likhachev et al. 1997d, 50–51; 2001d.

his earthly being, the caesar is like every man, but in his power he has the rank of God . . . ; those who oppose the ruler oppose the law of God.”<sup>26</sup>

In that setup, God could grant and take *derzhava*, as he saw fit. That is why the author of the vita, enacting their Christian forgiveness and humility, asks the soul of the assassinated prince to beg the almighty God “to forgive [Andrew’s] brothers and to grant them a victory over their enemies, peaceful power [*derzhavu*] and long and respected reign for all eternity.”<sup>27</sup>

The idea that *derzhava* is God’s endowment was also present in many other Church Slavonic sources. One fifteenth-century source praises a grand prince by singling him out among his equals, since “none of them are like our ruler, grand prince Boris Aleksandrovich, who, by the grace of God, is power (*derzhava*) and support for our city.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in one of the very few sources that praise female rulers, *The Tale of Tsarina Dinara*, tsarina rallies her troops by promising that she would “attack the barbarians, . . . forget feminine weakness and strengthen herself with man’s wisdom, . . . for [she does] not want to hear any longer [her] enemies’ threats to capture the Holy Mother’s lot—the power [*derzhavu*] given by her.”<sup>29</sup> Evidently, in the first half of the sixteenth century, not unlike today, strong women in power often had to mobilize their constituents by convincing them that they were just like men.

Thus, a grand prince or princess, in this respect, was a transmission link, or a “mediator,” for God to be able to exercise his divine power over people.<sup>30</sup> And when the people were God-fearing and righteous, God imposed a kind and wise ruler upon them. When people were sinners, a cruel and selfish ruler would be sent to punish them. One way or another, grand princes did not possess any power of their own—they were only endowed with God’s power, which could be withdrawn at any moment and which, by default, was unlimited, all-pervasive, and great, for it was an attribute of the transcendental creator. If there was still a potential for comparison, when one dealt with different polities in the system, or when it was about different rulers, each governing a private domain of their own, the *derzhava* given by God could not be compared to anything. It was a constant, which, in addition, could only be great to begin with, for the greatness (*velichie*) of the Christian

26. Cherniavsky 1961, 12.

27. Likhachev et al. 1997f, 216.

28. Likhachev et al. 1999k, 91.

29. Likhachev et al. 2006a, 91.

30. Cherniavsky 1961, 27.



God was not something that anyone would be ready to question in premodern Orthodox Russia. Hence, such an expression as “great power” (*velikaya derzhava*) would probably sound like a tautology for the contemporary reader, since (not unlike today) the second part of this collocation (*derzhava*) already contained the meaning of the first part (*velikaya*). It was conceived in absolute, rather than relative terms.

*Derzhava* as the “God-given power” preserved this meaning all the way through the premodern and early modern periods. As late as in 1617, in the immediate aftermath of another lengthy political crisis that culminated in the Polish-Lithuanian occupation of Moscow, an anonymous author attests that it was the “undefeatable power [*derzhava*—the hand of Christ, our Lord,” which eventually saved Moscow from invaders.<sup>31</sup> On this occasion, however, it was translated into modern Russian as *sila*, “strength,” perhaps to differentiate it from other, by then more common, referents such as “polity” or “country.” Meanwhile, when *derzhava* was used in the latter meanings, it was usually left untranslated in *Biblioteka*’s sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources, since it aligned with the meaning this concept possesses today. When used in the meanings that are perceived as more archaic (e.g., the “God-given power”), translators would usually change it to *sila*<sup>32</sup> or *mogushchestvo* (“might”).<sup>33</sup>

## 2.3 VELIKAYA DERZHAVA AS A COMPOUND NOUN

### 2.3.1 Conceptual fusion in the fifteenth century

It was only in the beginning of the fifteenth century when the words *velikaya* and *derzhava* started to occasionally appear side by side, and it was not until the sixteenth century when they started to be used together systematically. Initially, they were connected to make up an adjective *velikoderzhavny*, which could be translated as “possessing great power” and was mostly used to refer to grand princes. In the second decade of the fifteenth century, it was used a few times in a vita of one of the most venerated saints in the Russian Orthodox Church, Sergius of Radonezh.<sup>34</sup> In most cases, *velikoderzhavny* (*knyaz*)

31. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006e, 543.

32. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006e, 543.

33. Likhachev et al. 2005, 702–3.

34. Likhachev et al. 1999g, 375, 379.

would simply be translated as “grand prince,” but the adjective was also used to describe big cities (*velikoderzhavniya grady*)—that is, the cities where grand princes resided. The same adjective was also used in some later chronicles.<sup>35</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, the earliest and closest we get to *velikaya derzhava* as a standalone collocation, is *derzhava veliya*, used in the beginning of the sixteenth century by Maksim Grek, a writer of Greek origin, who was schooled in Italy and was influenced by Girolamo Savonarola. Grek used the expression to describe France as “a state, great and glorious, and rich with abundant weal [in Church Slavonic: *дръжава веля, и преславна, и богатыяци бесчисленными благами*].”<sup>36</sup> While the contextual usage makes it clear that, for Grek, *derzhava* was already a polity, as opposed to God-given power, *veliya* was most probably an indication of the country’s large size, rather than its qualitative political superiority, even though it was translated as *velikaya* into modern Russian. Whether it was a simple coincidence, or a meaningful discursive mark, Grek’s writings opened a new period in the evolution of Russian great power discourse, when the political greatness and superiority of the Russian polity was explicitly reflected upon and brought to the fore. The discursive breakthrough was mostly associated with Ivan the Formidable (aka the Terrible), who inherited the Russian throne in 1533 (crowned as tsar in 1547), and with the first imperial expansion to the east carried out under his leadership.

### 2.3.2 Greatness as qualitative superiority

When it comes to Great Russia (*Velikaya Rossiya* or *Velikaya Rus'*), a clarification is needed. When old Russian authors called medieval Rus' and early modern Muscovy “great” they could mean several things. Sometimes, the adjective was used in a geographical sense, to distinguish Great Rus' from Small Rus' (*Malaya Rus'*)—namely, the metropole of Galicia-Volhynia (now Western Ukraine) established in 1305.<sup>37</sup> However, in many cases it was still obvious that the adjective “great” served a different semantic function. For instance, in the sixteenth-century source *The Tale of the Princes of Vladimir of Great Rus'*, the geographical interpretation of “Great” could only be anachronistic, since the events described in *The Tale* took place well before the geo-

35. Likhachev et al. 1999I, 403.

36. Likhachev et al. 2006C, 315.

37. Solovyov 1947; Pospelov 2001.

graphical distinction appeared.<sup>38</sup> More importantly, some scholars of the Old Russian literature attest that *The Tale* may have been created as an ideological pamphlet, intended for political purposes.<sup>39</sup> Some of its ideas were widely utilized in diplomatic disputes during the reigns of Vasily III (1505–1533) and Ivan IV (1533[1547]–1584). For instance, one of those was the fake genealogy of the Russian tsars going all the way back to the Roman emperor Augustus, as well as the transfer of the royal regalia from Byzantium to medieval Rus' during Vladimir II Monomakh's reign (1112–1125).<sup>40</sup>

If *The Tale* indeed had this ideological function, then the greatness ascribed to early modern Muscovy may have, in fact, signified some qualitative distinction of the Russian polity that the Russian authors from the sixteenth century began to recognize and promote. Additionally, this distinction likely stemmed from the intersection of politics and religion. According to the author of *The Tale*, the then current Byzantine emperor Constantine IX Monomachos sent ambassadors to his grandson Vladimir II Monomakh asking to accept his regalia and negotiate peace, which would “establish God’s church, and all Orthodoxy would remain in peace under the reign of [Byzantine] tsardom and [Vladimir’s] free sovereignty [*svobodnogo samoderzhavstva*] of *great Rus'*, and Vladimir from [then on] would be called a tsar, appointed by God and crowned . . . by the hand of metropolitan Neophytus and his bishops.”<sup>41</sup>

Most likely, the whole story about passing the regalia was a sixteenth-century invention (Vladimir was only two years old when Constantine died, and his chances to inherit the grand prince’s throne were very low, for he was not the oldest son; in addition, he was certainly never called “tsar”).<sup>42</sup> Yet this did not matter: the attribution of some qualitative greatness to the Russian polity was becoming a very real phenomenon, which first subtly manifested itself in *The Tale*, and later became the norm, when another literary monument, *The Kazan Chronicle*, reached its audience.

*The Kazan Chronicle* written in 1564–1565 is a story about three hundred years of Russia’s relations with the Golden Horde, which culminated in Ivan IV’s military campaign of 1552, the prolonged siege of the city of Kazan, its final occupation, and the fall of the Khanate of Kazan, the remaining frag-

38. Likhachev et al. 2006b.

39. Likhachev et al. 2006b, 535.

40. E.g., in Likhachev et al. 2001b, 2006b.

41. Likhachev et al. 2006b, 285, emphasis added.

42. Akunin 2014.

ment of the Golden Horde founded in the middle of the fifteenth century. The *Chronicle's* genre is identified by its anonymous author as a *new novel*. And it is this new novel which appears to be the first source in *Biblioteka* where the characteristic “great” (*velikiy*) is routinely attached not only to rulers and other personalities, but also to *derzhava* (be it a polity or power), its synonyms (e.g., *tsarstvo* meaning “tsardom”), Russia, and the Russian land.<sup>43</sup>

Describing the transfer of power from Vasily III to Ivan IV, the author of *The Kazan Chronicle* writes that “[Ivan’s] father left the whole of the great power [*velikuyu vlast'*] of the Russian state [*Russkoy derzhavy*] to him after his death.”<sup>44</sup> Ivan, in his turn, after reaching the age of maturity (he was only four years old when Vasily died), “accepted the power over the *great Russian tsardom* of Muscovy . . . and was proclaimed the tsar of the whole of *great Russia*.”<sup>45</sup> After the victory over the Khanate, the author remarks, “Kazan has ceased to be an independent tsardom and, against its will, became a subject to the *great tsardom* of Muscovy.”<sup>46</sup> Finally, when it comes to Ivan’s domestic politics, he, according to the *Chronicle*, “tried to get rid of any wrong, dishonor and injustice, and spread wise people and loyal centurions . . . across the whole of his great state [*velikoy derzhave*] and made all the people to swear fealty, like Moses once did to the Israelites.”<sup>47</sup> As a result of this domestic restructuring and foreign expansion, “the glorious city of Moscow began to glow as if it was the second Kiev, or . . . as the third and new great Rome, which has recently started to shine like the great sun in our great land of Russia [*v velikoy nashey Russkoy zemle*].”<sup>48</sup>

Despite the difficulty of ascribing a single unambiguous meaning to the word “great” in each case, one could sustainably argue that in *The Kazan Chronicle* this word was quite often attached to the Russian land, *derzhava* and *tsarstvo* not as a geographic indicator (which is evident from the grammar, as in “*velikaya nasha Russkaya zemlya*” [our great land of Russia]) and not as a simple laudatory epithet (for it preserved an unusual degree of regularity). One could also suggest that, because it was insistently used when either Rus’, or tsardom, or power (meaning “rule”) were mentioned, *velikiy* here was not (or not always) a characteristic of size. Then, if the adjective “great” as it

43. Likhachev et al. 2000b.

44. Likhachev et al. 2000b, 307.

45. Likhachev et al. 2000b, 309, emphasis added.

46. Likhachev et al. 2000b, 505, emphasis added.

47. Likhachev et al. 2000b, 507.

48. Likhachev et al. 2000b, 263.

was used with *derzhava* (meaning “power” or “polity”) or its synonyms (*vlast*, *tsarstvo*, and *gosudarstvo*) could be conceived as a qualitative differentiation, what could the meaning of this differentiation be?

One potential answer to this can already be found in the *Chronicle* itself—in the part where the author describes Ivan’s coronation for tsardom in 1547 and the international reaction to it. On 16 January 1547, Ivan IV “went through the ritual of sacring and [was crowned] according to the ancient royal ritual that Roman, Greek and other Orthodox monarchs went through, while being crowned for tsardom . . . [In this] he was akin to his grandfather, grand prince Ivan, for prior to him no one from his great grandfathers was called ‘tsar,’ and none of them dared to be sacred for tsardom and adopt this title, for they feared jealousy and attacks from pagan and infidel tsars.”<sup>49</sup> This self-proclamation was followed by an international response, which, according to the author of the *Chronicle*, was favorable. “Having heard about this, all his enemies—pagan tsars and godless kings—were surprised, but praised and glorified him, and sent their ambassadors with presents, and recognized him as a *great tsar* and autocrat [*samoderzhets*].”<sup>50</sup> Allegedly, the Ottoman sultan even sent Ivan a letter saying that from then on he was recognizing Ivan as a *great tsar* and “all his hordes were fearing [him] and would not dare to approach [his] borders.”<sup>51</sup>

Traditionally, this discursive shift was interpreted as a reflection of the changing status of the Russian monarch within the nascent international hierarchy of the sixteenth century. Having liberated itself from the Mongol yoke and having witnessed the fall of Constantinople in the preceding century (which had effectively turned Russia into the last standing stronghold of Orthodox Christianity) Russian rulers, allegedly, began to aspire for the highest possible political title in the world—that of an *imperator* (or *tsar*, as its Russian equivalent). In Cherniavsky’s words, “The [ruler’s] myth shifted from the saintly princes of Russia to the imperial rulers of Rome, Constantinople, and Kiev as the models and justification of the Muscovite Tsar.”<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, it seems plausible that in the sixteenth century, the word “great”

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49. Likhachev et al. 2000b, 309. In fact, neither Ivan III (Ivan IV’s grandfather), nor Vasily III (Ivan IV’s father) went through this coronation ritual, although both were occasionally called tsars. The ritual was performed for the first time in 1498, when Ivan III consecrated his grandson Dmitry. However, Dmitry never inherited the throne. Thus, Ivan IV was the first head of state who officially underwent the coronation ritual.

50. Likhachev et al. 2000b, 311, emphasis added.

51. Likhachev et al. 2000b, 311.

52. Cherniavsky 1961, 51.

in relation to the Russian polity became an indication of international rank, which was believed to be qualitatively different from the lower ranks of some other kingdoms. However, it is equally true that the validation mechanism of this rank of greatness had little to do with dependency, measurable resources, size, military might, or any kind of relational assessment. Instead, this greatness was believed to be built upon certain characteristics of Russia's domestic regime, while its international validation depended on the recognition of Russia's essentialist superiority—that is, the unconditional acclamation of the Russian ruler's moral preponderance and political grandeur. At least, this is how it was presented in the domestic discourse, the international response to Ivan's coronation from the *Kazan Chronicle* being the prime example.

Frequently, such essentialist interpretation of political greatness compelled the observers of Russian politics—especially our contemporaries—to speak of the Russian messianism driven by some eschatological fervor.<sup>53</sup> I, however, argue that the attribution of messianic sentiments to the rulers of early modern Muscovy may be anachronistic, and it obscures the real issue: the contemporaries of Ivan IV wrote about political greatness in this exact manner because they understood greatness in general, as well as the mechanism of its validation, in absolute terms, not because they believed themselves to be on a world-conquering mission. What is more, they were forced to reflect on this subject under tangible international pressure coming from the west. In response, they chose to construct the greatness of the Russian polity drawing on the available discursive resources borrowed from the religious writings. The latter, as I have shown above, conceived greatness as a product of divine enthronement coupled with a proper type of relationship between ruler and subjects. To illustrate this, I address one of the most well-known discursive monuments of the sixteenth century—the diplomatic correspondence of Ivan IV.

## 2.4 IVAN IV AND HIS WESTERN NEIGHBORS

Historians tend to compare Ivan the Formidable (aka the Terrible) with Philip the Prudent of Spain (1556–1598), despite their antonymous popular

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53. Duncan 2002.

handles.<sup>54</sup> During Philip's reign, Spain reached the peak of its power and influence and completed the conquest of the Inca Empire. In Ivan's time, Muscovy advanced much farther east, conquered Kazan and Astrakhan, and commenced the conquest of Siberia. Both also belonged to the pronouncedly new type of rulers, who were much more alike between themselves rather than in comparison to their local predecessors. However, the main ground of comparison for the two monarchs was neither their wars of conquest, nor Renaissance ideas, widespread in their age. Instead, it was their intensive religiosity, in which both Ivan and Philip aspired for the "original, simple, correct Christianity," each in his own confession.<sup>55</sup> It may have been Ivan's religiosity and spiritual conservatism that shaped his discursive mode of claiming and reasserting political greatness in the early modern Muscovy.

Most pronouncedly, Ivan's understanding of political greatness is manifested in his extensive correspondence with European monarchs. In his 1572 letter to King Johan III of Sweden, Ivan repeatedly used in relation to himself an expression which could be translated as "our degree of greatness" or "our degree of majesty" (*nasha stepen' velichestva*).<sup>56</sup> This indicates that he embraced and reproduced discursively a certain international hierarchy, to which the nascent diplomacy of the sixteenth century was supposed to cater. In this context, "great" marked a qualitative hierarchical distinction, as opposed to being a simple laudation. In another known letter to Johan III sent a year later, Ivan elaborated on his understanding of hierarchy at some length.

First, he was unhappy with the sequence, in which Johan arranged his and Ivan's names in the letter, since, in Ivan's opinion, the Swedish land was markedly inferior to Muscovy that was, allegedly, related to the Romans and other "great princes," which Ivan was set to demonstrate further on. Hence, Ivan's name needed to come ahead of Johan's.<sup>57</sup> Second, Ivan tried to reject all potential accusations of arrogance, emphasizing that he addressed Johan exactly how Ivan's "autocratic [*samoderzhavnaya*] power" was supposed to address a king of Johan's rank.<sup>58</sup> Third, he suggested that Johan could send a record of his genealogy to help Ivan get "an idea about the greatness of [Johan's] state."<sup>59</sup>

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54. E.g., Bogatyrev 2020.

55. Bogatyrev 2020, 11.

56. Likhachev et al. 2001c. Ivan IV used the majestic plural in all of his correspondence.

57. Likhachev et al. 2001c.

58. Likhachev et al. 2001c.

59. Likhachev et al. 2001c.

Ivan's further statements reveal that his objections to political equality between Muscovy and Sweden, presumed by Johan, were mostly related to procedural and regime-related concerns, as opposed to external recognition or material factors. His procedural complaints were related to the nitty-gritty of the cross-kissing ritual:<sup>60</sup>

Another reason why [Johan's] family is rustic and [Sweden] is not a great state<sup>61</sup> [*gosudarstvo nevelikoye*] is that . . . [his] father should have kissed the cross on behalf of the whole of the Swedish state [*derzhavy*] and on behalf of the city of Vyborg and the Vyborg state [*derzhavy*], and the Archbishop of Uppsala had to vouch for this; instead, . . . the ambassadors of the Swedish Kingdom [did it on their behalf] . . . You should probably ask yourself: is this how things are supposed to be done in great states [*v velikikh gosudarstvakh*]?<sup>62</sup>

Ivan's regime-related concerns, however, seemed more substantive and uncompromising. Essentially, the tsar was edifying Johan on how great polities are expected to organize their domestic regimes. According to Ivan, the key feature of a truly great polity is the undivided and unparalleled authority of one autocratic ruler. Since *derzhava* for him is God's endowment, it is granted temporarily to a chosen representative and cannot be shared with anyone, which was not entirely the case in Sweden. Ivan writes,

if your state [*gosudarstvo*] was truly great [*velikoye*], then the Archbishop of Uppsala would not be mentioned among your father's peers . . . And why are the advisors of your father named as his peers? And why were the ambassadors sent not from your father alone, but from the whole Swedish Kingdom, while your father is like an elder among equals, as if he was a chief in a district. And if your father were a great ruler [*velikiy gosudar*], then the Archbishop would not be his peer, and the advisors and the whole of the Swedish land . . . would not be mentioned, and the ambassadors would be from your

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60. Kissing crosses was a general practice denoting peace in Medieval Europe, and it was extensively used in Russia for confirming treaties and alliances.

61. While I mostly translate the Russian word *gosudarstvo* as "state" in this and the following sections, which corresponds to this word's contemporary meaning, in most of its sixteenth-century usages, *gosudarstvo* could be more accurately translated as "a regime of domination." For explanation, see footnote 64. Meanwhile, the word's contemporary meaning was also gaining traction, having first emerged in the 1430s (Kharkhordin 2001, 216).

62. Likhachev et al. 2001d.



father alone, and not the Swedish Kingdom . . . And this is why you cannot align yourself with great rulers: the great rulers do not have such customs.<sup>63</sup>

Another essential aspect of political greatness for Ivan is the exact opposite of how we currently interpret the main functions of elected governments. In a truly great polity, the type of relations between the ruler and the people, as well as the entire polity, is that of *possession*, as opposed to *management* or *government*.<sup>64</sup> This, again, is explained in religious terms, for great rulers receive their mandates from God, and not the people. The wrong kind of relation between the ruler and the people was Ivan's main charge against Stephen Báthory, the elected king of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was also the main ground upon which Ivan could treat the Commonwealth as an inferior polity. In 1579, Ivan wrote,

we rule for 717 years from Ryurik the Great, and you were put in charge of such a great state [*velikom gosudarstve*] only yesterday. You were . . . elected by the peoples and estates of the Kingdom of Poland and placed upon those states *to manage* them, but not *to possess* . . . We, on the contrary, received our state from God's all-mighty hand, not from the people, and it is with God's hand and grace that we *possess* our state, rather than merely accept it from the people.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the fact that Muscovy did engage in successful conquest in the sixteenth century, it would be misleading to correlate Ivan's political claims and rhetorical condescension with the objective international balance of power during his reign. Ivan had a reputation of an eccentric and volatile ruler, and offensive remarks were not uncommon in his correspondence (while Stephen Báthory defeated him on the battlefield). Thus, the main aim of this subsection is *not* to evaluate the objective distribution of capabilities

63. Likhachev et al. 2001d.

64. The concept Ivan uses to refer to other rulers, as well as applies to himself is *gosudar'*, which is semantically linked to "head of household, property owner, and male spouse," while *gosudar*'s realm is called *gosudarstvo*, which still designates "a state" in modern Russian. Originally, however, the concept was semantically linked to the Latin word *dominus* that could be contextually translated as "domain". Thus, in its sixteenth-century usage, the concept *gosudarstvo* indeed implies the ruler's personal ownership of both his/her subjects and their property (Kharkhordin 2001, 213–16, Pipes 1974, 78). Yet Ivan also applies the concept to other polities with different political regimes, marking their difference by placing them lower in the hierarchy of political greatness.

65. Likhachev et al. 2001b, emphasis added.

in sixteenth-century Europe, but to interpret (1) how Muscovy discursively represented itself vis-à-vis its neighbors, (2) which rhetorical tools it used to claim and reassert its status as a great polity (and why), and (3) how this discursive representation was affected by Muscovy's first (conquest-related) imperial experience, amply described by contemporary authors.

Ivan's position on the true meaning of political greatness appears to be rather simple and conservative. A great polity needs to maintain the myth of the divine origin of political power, which technically makes *gosudar'* unaccountable in front of his/her own people, but preserves his/her accountability in God's eye. Second, a great polity should be organized as a strictly hierarchical domain, where a single ruler possesses and disposes over all subjects and property. In general, Ivan's interpretation of the most appropriate mode of rule is not unique or even too special for his political environment. His contemporary and agemate Jean Bodin, the famous French jurist and political philosopher, conceptualized sovereignty in very similar terms, insisting that it must be absolute, unconditional, indivisible, unlimited, unaccountable, and also irrevocable.<sup>66</sup> Ivan also accepted Bodin's point that the sovereign remained accountable to God, even though Bodin's direct implications of such accountability—the promotion of the commonwealth's well-being as the baseline principle—did not figure prominently in Ivan's rhetoric.

Yet, in some European polities, those foundational principles were evolving, and Ivan was trying to make sense of the new political situation. Having looked around, Ivan may have noticed some challenging realities that could neither be completely ignored, nor eliminated in a total war as uncooperating colonial subjects, as had happened earlier with the Khanate of Kazan. The Western rulers that Ivan corresponded with were, at the same time, rather similar, but also sufficiently different from himself. Consequently, they became the real significant Others, in relation to whom Ivan had to somehow (re)define himself. Importantly, both Sweden and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (as well as England)<sup>67</sup> posed strategic challenges. Responding to those strategic challenges, Ivan reasserted his own understanding of political greatness and superiority.

Evidently, the above-mentioned features of political greatness that Ivan appealed to mostly relate to domestic political regimes, not external recognition (i.e., internal, as opposed to external sovereignty). What is more, they

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66. Bodin 1992.

67. An effusive letter to Elizabeth I triggered by the failure of the Russian-English alliance is another well-known monument of Ivan's epistolary work. See Likhachev et al. 2001e.

reflect a specific religious outlook that had shaped Russian political discourse for centuries: greatness is a product and consequence of divine enthronement, and it makes no sense to look for its sources anywhere else but the holy religion. Challenged by the ideological transformation of its significant Others, the Russian ruling elite fell back on reaffirming the history and quality of their domestic regime.

Functionally, such understanding of greatness as a thing-in-itself (i.e., an absolute, shielded from direct sensual perception and comparison) was utilized as a defensive and mobilizational political ideology, which clicked semantically with the preexisting image bank founded on the moral principles of Orthodox Christianity. To fully position it within the variety of discursive modes presented in chapter 1, it stands to mention that, in addition to being politically conservative, *absolute greatness* was also auratic, insofar as it mostly relied on the ritualistic and discursive manifestations of preponderance, and excluded the possibility of precise relative assessment.

Naturally, Ivan was not the first who decided to emphasize Russia's moral righteousness and political superiority in the face of strategic challenges. The earlier instances of the same phenomenon were connected to the periods of political hardship and decline even more directly. To illustrate the pattern, I dedicate the remaining sections of this chapter to discussing the cases when the ideology of Russia's political superiority and absolute greatness was used for mobilizational purposes.

## 2.5 THE FIRST RUSSIAN POLITICAL IDEOLOGY: THE CULT OF BORIS AND GLEB

### 2.5.1 *Ideology as an interpretative template*

There were several periods in Russian political history when the idea of the country's political greatness was most forcefully pushed to the fore. Almost without exception, these were the periods of political and economic decline. To understand why this happened, it is useful to look into the functions of political ideologies, interpreted not as propagandistic tools creating false consciousness, but as "[cultural] template[s] . . . for the organization of social and psychological processes."<sup>68</sup> Clifford Geertz argued that ideology most

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68. Geertz 1973, 216.

crucially comes into play when other guides for social behavior and mobilization (be it tradition or institutions) are either absent or undergoing some fundamental change. That is, ideology may become essential when stability is lost and when a society enters a period of hardships.<sup>69</sup> As history consistently demonstrates, economic, social, or military crises often happen concurrently with ideological upheavals. For instance, Erich Fromm showed how the collapse of the social order in the interwar Germany facilitated the emergence and popularity of National Socialism, which provided some form of security amid economic and political chaos.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, in his critique of Theda Skocpol's seminal work on social revolutions,<sup>71</sup> William Sewell insisted that the impending bankruptcy reinforced by institutional and ideological contradictions of the Old Regime threw France into the 1789 crisis, which triggered a much speedier adoption of the ideology of Enlightenment.<sup>72</sup>

Arguably, Kievan Rus' entered its first period of instability and fragmentation in the eleventh century, after the death of Yaroslav the Wise (1016–1054), a prominent lawgiver in Russian/Ukrainian history and one of the most well-networked monarchs in medieval Europe (judging by very high-profile dynastic marriages of his multiple offspring). Yaroslav introduced a new succession system, wherein all his sons were supposed to inherit Kievan Rus' as a family, while the elder son would simply be the first among equals, having his seat in Kiev.<sup>73</sup> Numerous conflicts followed, but the succession system remained in place and its principles were observed more often than violated.<sup>74</sup> Yet the system was also not fully developed originally and remained dynamic and evolving, which created tensions and hostilities among the ruling family.<sup>75</sup> This triggered a lengthy period of feudal fragmentation. Responding to the political crisis, Yaroslav's grandson, Vladimir II Monomakh, a gifted grand prince in the twelfth century, was the first who attempted to create and promote a coherent and unifying political narrative that was both based on and resonated with the popular image bank, and carried a distinct political message. In other words, he, arguably, created the first coherent and comprehensive political ideology.

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69. Geertz 1973.

70. Fromm 1994.

71. Skocpol 1979.

72. Sewell 1994.

73. Akunin 2014.

74. Kollmann 1990.

75. Martin 2006.

### 2.5.2 *The humble greatness of Boris and Gleb*

Vladimir's *Edification* is an important part of the *Primary Chronicle*, the magnum opus of the Old Russian literature and a fundamental source for interpreting the history of Eastern Slavs.<sup>76</sup> In *Edification*, Vladimir voices his concerns about frequent military interventions among Yaroslav's disciples. Allegedly, such interventions and intrafamily wars significantly weakened Kievan Rus' and increased the chances of possible interventions from without. To reverse the trend, Vladimir II perceptively picked up and amplified the political cult of Boris and Gleb, the two youngest sons of Russia's baptizer, Vladimir the Great, who were assassinated by their elder brother during an interdynastic conflict.<sup>77</sup> Essentially, the idea was that Boris and Gleb, who later became the first Orthodox saints, consciously preferred to suffer martyrdom instead of bearing arms against their elder brother. This was a clear message to the members of the ruling dynasty to respect the order of succession and to be obedient to their elder relatives.

From many perspectives, Boris and Gleb were an odd choice for the heroes of a unifying ideological narrative. They were murdered young before they could accomplish anything politically significant. They were neither war heroes, nor sagacious statesmen. In fact, according to the *Primary Chronicle*, the only time Boris was given a chance to reveal his military talents was when his dying father sent him to fight the Cumans. Boris, however, returned home empty-handed, for he had not found them.<sup>78</sup> Even by the Christian standards Boris and Gleb did not fit the criteria for canonization, since they were laymen and did not die as martyrs for Christ, but were killed in a political conflict.

Evidently, the main idea of the Boris and Gleb political cult was that the true strength and greatness could only be achieved through submission and humility, which may have been the Orthodox version of the attribution of value to personal sacrifice for the greater good, but with explicitly collectivist and kinship-related undertones. In general, this message resonated well with then currently promoted Orthodox Christian ethos.<sup>79</sup> On both politi-

76. Likhachev et al. 1997a.

77. Likhachev 1997.

78. Likhachev et al. 1997b, 173–77.

79. Historians also argue that the popularity of Boris and Gleb as passion-sufferers and “priest-kings” could be explained by the fact that it fitted nicely into the dual-faith atmosphere of the early Kievan Rus' and resonated with Slavic and, especially, Scandinavian paganism, emerging as a remnant of the cult of Odin (Reisman 1978).

cal and personal levels, greatness could be interpreted similarly. For instance, a very popular 1076 source, which was a compilation of “wise thoughts,” borrowed from Greek philosophy and translated, with appropriate modifications, into Church Slavonic, invited its readers to “rejoice in submission, for that highness which is from submission is undefeatable, and in it is the true greatness.”<sup>80</sup> Such was the political message of practical morality promoted among the “new people”<sup>81</sup> of Kievan Rus’.<sup>82</sup> Thus, for the first (but not the last) time in Russian history, the idea of political greatness and superiority was linked to the Orthodox Christian ideal of self-renunciation and sacrifice. Naturally, the new ideology did not put an end to all intradynastic fights. Yet it strengthened the perception of a common political identity and, importantly, married the idea of true political greatness to the ethos of Orthodox Christianity.<sup>83</sup>

### 2.5.3 *Saintly princes*

The reason why the political and religious discourses in Kievan Rus’ turned out to be so neatly compatible is best explained by Cherniavsky, who draws on the specificities of Russia’s Christianization process. For Cherniavsky, the firm connection between greatness and humility was a consequence of the symbolic position that grand princes occupied in their discursive universe. He argued that, in Kievan Rus’, no secular concept of State existed before it was introduced as an aspect of the Christian religion.<sup>84</sup> Thus, since the Christian faith and the State were virtually synonymous for the Russian people, any prince attending to state affairs was also automatically a worker for Christ—hence the unusually high number of princes among the Russian Orthodox saints.

The image of a saint-prince tuned the focus of public attention to the person of the ruler that was believed to be one with his divinely established office and power.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, the Western idea of the separation between the prince’s two natures—the divine and the human—was not eas-

80. Likhachev et al. 1999d, 437.

81. In the sense of being newly Christianized.

82. Likhachev et al. 1999d, 549–50.

83. Boris and Gleb left a very lasting impact on the Russian political culture and became *princely* saints par excellence (Likhachev et al. 1997j; Likhachev et al. 2003b, 19; Solovyov 1896, 507).

84. Cherniavsky 1961, 33.

85. Cherniavsky 1961, 34.

ily applicable to Russia, where a prince as a person was equally as saintly as his function and office. Instead, there was a duality of a different kind, which Cherniavsky describes as “a mystical dialectic wherein, as a glorious Tsar, [every Russian ruler was supposed to seek] monkish humility, and this humility in turn exemplified and explained the glory of his leadership.”<sup>86</sup> Trying to implement this principle in their political practice, many premodern and early modern Russian rulers ordered to have themselves admitted to monastic vows on their deathbed.

Today, the sacrificial undertones, even if grossly misused, still claim their space in Russia’s great power discourse. Without allowing for their embedded semantic linkage, it is difficult to comprehend how Putin could connect martyrdom with a traditional great power function of nuclear balancing and the issue of the second strike, when he said that “any aggressor . . . will be annihilated, [and] we as martyrs would go to paradise while they will simply perish because they won’t even have time to repent their sins.”<sup>87</sup>

## 2.6 USES OF GREATNESS IN DARK TIMES

The synthesis of the ideal of humility as a personal attribute of Russian princes and the ideological function this idea played starting with the cult of Boris and Gleb triggered a tendency with a long-lasting effect on the Russian great power discourse. Namely, it became possible to emphasize the relative superiority of Kievan Rus’, and later Muscovy, in the periods of political and economic decline. When the Russian polity was doing great economically and politically, its superiority over other polities was not explicitly emphasized in domestic discourse. On the contrary, there was a focus on equality—that is, on its belonging to a collective of equal political entities united by the Christian religion. For instance, the main theme of the opening piece in *Biblioteka*, the religious internationalist manifesto by Metropolitan Illarion, written between 1037 and 1043, is precisely the equality of all peoples,<sup>88</sup>

86. Cherniavsky 1961, 34.

87. Putin 2018.

88. Illarion argues that “the blessed faith spread across the whole world and reached our Russian people as well” and “All countries were pardoned by our Blessing God, including ours. He desired to save us and so He did, and He led us to the understanding of the Truth” (Likhachev et al. 1997d, 27 and 41).

which, by the way, contradicted the widespread medieval theories about the chosen people, the universal empire, and the universal church.<sup>89</sup>

Yet equality always took a back seat when the Russian polity was in dire straits. In those moments, the producers of discourse often emphasized that their polity was unquestionably superior to its neighbors and always excessively glorified its greatness and might. Further, I illustrate this tendency with the example of discourse that was produced during two serious political crises. The first crisis took place in the thirteenth century, when Kievan Rus' suffered an invasion by its eastern neighbors (that turned into a 240-year-long yoke). The second crisis was a lengthy interregnum in the beginning of the seventeenth century and is also known as the Time of Troubles (1598–1613).

### 2.6.1 *The fearsome Russia*

The first source in *Biblioteka* that unambiguously points at Kievan Rus' superior political standing, as compared to other Christian and pagan political communities, has a telling name, *The Tale of the Perishing of the Russian Land*. It was supposedly written between 1238 and 1246, that is exactly during Batu Khan's very consequential invasion. In the tale, the largeness of Russian territory, the Orthodox faith, the great Russian princes and warriors, as well as the country's abundant resources, receive an unprecedented glorification. In all fairness, the glory attributed to those was mostly based on fear in other polities, the previous military successes, and the external recognition, manifested in gifts and contributions that Russian princes had allegedly received from abroad.<sup>90</sup>

Originally, *The Tale* was supposed to be a foreword to a lay biography of Alexander Nevsky, one of the thirteenth-century grand princes and military

89. Likhachev 1987, 31.

90. Here is one particularly illustrative passage from the tale: "From here to Ugrians, to Poles, to Czechs . . . and beyond the Breathing Sea . . .—all those territories were conquered by the Christian people with God's help; those pagan countries obeyed the grand prince Vsevolod . . . [and] his grandfather Vladimir Monomakh, whose name the Cumans used to scare their little children in cradles. And the Lithuanians did not raise their faces from the swamps, and Ugrians fortified the stone walls of their towns with metal gates, so that great Vladimir could not get them . . . And Constantinople's emperor Manuel sent [Vladimir] great gifts fearing that Vladimir would take Constantinople from him. In those days . . . a disaster came upon the Christians" (Likhachev et al. 1997i, 91).



commanders, whose image was later reclaimed within the framework of the Stalinist cultural policy as representing one progressive ruler who made Russia great, but the biography itself was lost. However, in a similar hagiographical source, written contemporaneously, the theme of projecting fear beyond Russian borders is also present.<sup>91</sup> It was also then when folkloric monsters and villains began to resemble and represent the highly generalized enemies of the Russians. Before that, villains mostly represented in their looks and behavior Kievan Rus' own pagan past.<sup>92</sup> Evidently, all those texts may have served mobilizational and identity-related purposes, as foreign invasions were occurring concurrently on both the eastern and the western borders of what was vaguely perceived as "the Russian land."<sup>93</sup>

Just like the semantic linkage between martyrdom and greatness, the connection between greatness and the projection of fear abroad remained an important element of Russia's great power discourse until this day. Symptomatically, one of the two images of ideal Russia, which the respondents of one of Russia's independent polling organization, Levada-Center, are invited to choose between, is formulated as "a great power that is respected and feared by other countries."<sup>94</sup> Yet while the previous examples are only thought-provoking at best, the following point is safe to make: the next occasion when great power rhetoric flourished in the Russian political discourse was during the Time of Troubles (1598–1613). At that time, early modern Muscovy suffered not only a famine that killed around two million people, but also an occupation by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a few civil uprisings, and three impostors.

### 2.6.2 Political greatness in its religious abode

If in the sixteenth century the idea that Muscovy was a *velikaya derzhava* (as a polity or a type of government) was mostly present in royal diplomatic cor-

91. For instance, the author writes that "the women of Moab began to scare their children by saying 'Aleksander is coming!'" (Likhachev et al. 1997j, 367).

92. Propp 1999.

93. At least, this is how the situation was represented in the contemporaneous political discourse. As is often the case, the reality was more complicated. Not only the Livonian Order from the west was likely attacking Novgorod, then Alexander's grand principality, at the behest of Yaroslav Vladimirovich, another Russian prince, who set his eyes on the neighboring city of Pskov (Nazarova 1999), but Alexander himself eventually pledged allegiance to the Golden Horde in the east, subsequently serving as their trusted local representative and sometimes tribute collector (Martin 2007, 164–74).

94. Levada-Center 2021, emphasis added.

response, one widely circulating literary work, and a work of historiography, after the death of Ivan the Formidable's unhealthy and, by some reports, intellectually disabled son and heir Fyodor in 1598, such rhetoric penetrated practically everywhere. In a biographical source, written shortly after Fyodor's death, its author was attributing greatness to virtually anything that was related to statehood and power: "great Russia," "great Russian state" (*gosudarstvo*), "Russia, the great power" (*velikaya Rossiyskaya derzhava*), "great Russian tsardom," "great power, protected by God" (*bogokhranimaya derzhava*), "the greatest scepter of the Russian tsardom," "the highest Russian tsardom" (*prevysochayshee Rossiyskoye tsarstvo*), etc.<sup>95</sup>

Given that the last years of Ivan's reign, Fyodor's supervised reign (1584–1598), and a few years when Fyodor's supervisor and father-in-law, Boris Godunov (1598–1605), was solely in charge were a period of a steady political decline, it is interesting to compare the official rhetoric that surrounded their royal activities. Among other sources, this rhetoric is currently available in the form of celebratory toasts, written specifically for Ivan and Boris. In Ivan's toast the tsar and his family were very plainly wished good health, military victories, and God's protection. In general, the tone of Ivan's toast was modest for the occasion—neither the tsar, nor his state or power, were ever called great (save for his standard title *velikiy knyaz*), despite all his conquests.<sup>96</sup> Boris' toast, on the other hand, addressed him as "the great sovereign and the grand prince and the autocrat [*samoderzhets*]," as well as "the sovereign and possessor . . . of the great, and the highest, and the lightest, and the most glorious tsaric degree of majesty," who, at the same time, was "God-loving, . . . chosen by God, honored by God, decorated by God, given by God, crowned by God, and sacred by God."<sup>97</sup> Such a voluminous title in the opening phrase was followed by an explicit assertion of Muscovy's imperial status: "in their glorious great states of the highest Russian tsardom;"<sup>98</sup> and then—by an evaluation of its international standing: "and all the great sovereigns shall honor and glorify [Boris] according to his tsaric [i.e., imperial] rank and degree."<sup>99</sup>

Evidently, the tone of such rhetoric had little to do with the actual political achievements or realities of the day: Boris Godunov was unlucky to reign

95. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006g.

96. Likhachev et al. 2000a, 557.

97. Likhachev et al. 2000a, 559.

98. Likhachev et al. 2000a, 559.

99. Likhachev et al. 2000a, 559.

having to face and combat a set of very unfortunate political circumstances. And, if it was not for his personal taste for flattery, one could suggest that the abovementioned exaltation may have been triggered precisely by the depth of the ongoing political crisis, as had already happened before with the elite-sanctioned discourse. Meanwhile, on the popular level, the idea of Russia's political greatness was forcefully reclaimed in yet another mobilizational ideology.

The pamphlet entitled *The New Tale of the Glorious Russian Tsardom*, calling for an armed resistance against the foreign intruders, was written as a patriotic appeal to the population in reaction to the Polish-Lithuanian invasion of December 1610–February 1611.<sup>100</sup> It is known to have been circulated to aid the popular mobilization on the eve of the Moscow uprising of March 1611. It tells the story of the siege of Smolensk (a Russian town located four hundred kilometers west of Moscow), which occurred just before. The anonymous author used such expressions as “great state” (*velikoye gosudarstvo*) and “our great Russian tsardom” (*nashe velikoye Rossiyskoye tsarstvo*) in relation to Muscovy with almost no variation throughout the whole text. Yet the interesting part comes with the author's contextual interpretation of that greatness, as it could no longer be invested into the figure of the tsar. Tellingly, the word *derzhava* is totally absent from the text—as an attribute originally belonging to the legitimate ruler, in the absence of that legitimate ruler, it had no other discursive agent to be attached to. Therefore, the emerging political actors of the seventeenth century had either to reconsider Muscovy's political status that it had self-ascribed thus far, or to find a new vessel for its absolute greatness that could preserve its specific mode of political identification amid the continuing succession crisis.

Historically, succession crises occurred everywhere, including Muscovy's immediate western neighbors, as well as other countries in Europe. Concurrently, most European countries also experienced a breakdown of religious universalism, undergoing two important political transformations. First, instead of a king's physical body, they began to present the territory of his domain as the true locus of government. Second, most of them abandoned the aspiration to be recognized as an empire and shifted to achieving recognition as a sovereign state.<sup>101</sup> However, in Russia, as can be deduced from *The New Tale*, the succession challenge was handled differently. The theme of

100. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006f.

101. Neumann 2008b, 16.

greatness developed by Ivan IV, as a quality established internally, was not recalibrated from religious universalism to the vision of Muscovy being a strong and sovereign state in the international hierarchy. Instead, the greatness, which kept being interpreted in essentially religious terms, temporarily shifted from the figure of the long-absent rightful monarch to the figure of a new sovereign, the patriarch (named Hermogenes), who had been captured by the invaders in Smolensk and effectively functioned as a temporary discursive abode for Russia's absolute greatness.

As rendered in *The New Tale*, Hermogenes decisively refused to cooperate with the Polish-Lithuanian forces regarding the change of faith. While holding his ground, the patriarch was depicted as performing a truly sovereign function, embodied in the etymology of the word *derzhava* (from *derzhat'*, which means "to hold"). He held the polity together as an "unshakable *pillar* standing bravely and steadfastly by his own spirit"; and, if it was not for this "*sovereign, holding everything*, then who else would have stood and countered our enemies bravely?!"<sup>102</sup>

Thus, in seventeenth-century Muscovy, instead of being secularized, the idea of political greatness was further "orthodoxalized" through the mobilizing ideology of the Times of Trouble. One possible reason for taking this direction might have been that the Orthodox faith was still the most widespread and deeply rooted of potential allegiances, and it was one ideology that simply met the demand, for it resonated with the largest share of the population. The ideals of humility and submission that had been interwoven into the Russian understanding of appropriate political order, as well as the absolute greatness attributed to it, made this ideology intelligible for the masses. As a result, despite its seemingly passive premises, this ideology clicked and ensured a large-scale social mobilization.

## 2.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I tried to reconstruct the inception and the first stage of the conceptual evolution of *velikaya derzhava*. Originating in the religious discourse which largely informed the political thinking of Kievan Rus' and early modern Muscovy, *derzhava* obtained its relatively independent existence in the fifteenth century, when its meaning shifted from God's power

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102. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006f, 161, emphasis added.

delegated to a grand prince on Earth toward a polity or a state. In the sixteenth century, *derzhava* merged firmly with the adjective *velikaya*, forming a political concept that was supposed to describe the qualitative superiority of the Russian polity vis-à-vis its neighbors. Importantly, that superiority was discursively amplified in the face of strategic challenges that the Russian ruling elites saw beyond their western borders. Responding to these challenges, Ivan IV emphasized the qualitative superiority of his political domain, calling Muscovy a great power and self-ascribing the highest degree of majesty. Partially, this reflected his then current aspirations for an imperial rank and highlighted the fact that the polity Ivan governed was the only remaining stronghold of Orthodox Christianity.

However, Ivan did not craft his rhetoric ex nihilo. In his argumentation, he drew on available discursive resources. The greatness of the Russian *derzhava* that Ivan and his contemporaries tried to discursively establish and promote was largely shaped by the religious discourse. In the literary sources and diplomatic correspondence of the time, the labels *velikaya derzhava* or *velikoye tsarstvo* (great tsardom) attached to the Russian polity were supposed to emphasize that the power of Russian princes continued to be interpreted as divinely instituted, unconditional, and undivided, in opposition to some European rulers, who, in the eyes of the Russian ruling elite, may have preserved their power, but lost greatness. I call this essentialist understanding of political greatness (as a quality established internally, without international deliberation and comparison) *absolute*—namely, proclaimed to exist independently of perception or verification of any kind. Arguably, absolute greatness was a product of religious universalism that informed Russian, but also European, politics before the universalist foundation of the European political order was shaken during early modernity. Recovering and amplifying such essentialist thinking was Ivan's way to deal with strategic challenges. Yet, importantly, it was also the way Russian political and religious actors dealt with crises historically, from the time when the first Russian political ideology—the cult of Boris and Gleb—was utilized to ensure social cohesion. Analogous ideologies based on the proclamation of the absolute greatness of the Russian land and on a curious amalgam of superiority and submission were also used during other challenging periods of Russian political history, including the Mongol-Tatar yoke and the Time of Troubles.

When it comes to linguistic representation, I would argue that, once *velikaya derzhava* turned into a compound noun, its constituent parts divided its semantic content. The word *derzhava* preserved the immanent and per-

formative dimension of political power associated with undivided government. Translated literally, this word may also mean “holding something together,” and the Russian polity was this something that a ruler was supposed to hold together (during the Time of Troubles, this important function was temporarily transferred to Patriarch Hermogenes). On the other hand, the characteristic *velikaya*, attached to the political domain that a grand prince or tsar oversaw, pointed at what was referred to in Russian by a cognate word *velichestvo* meaning “majesty,”—that is, ordination as opposed to execution, or kingdom as opposed to government. In other words, Russian political greatness was mostly invested in its majesty, which was interpreted in absolute terms as some objective truth that required (and stood) no scrutiny or verification.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Theatrical Greatness*

#### From Majesty to Glory

*whether it is true that daisies are born by the lightning, as natural historians tell us, we know for sure that all the trophies and benefits of this Russian state [derzhavy Rossiyskoy], like the daisies of the tsaric crown, were conceived and born from the lightning and thunder of the battle of Poltava.*

THEOPHAN PROKOPOVICH, PANEGYRIC FOR THE BATTLE OF POLTAVA (1717)

*Raise your eyes, God-blessed Russian state [Derzhavo Rossiyskaya], and see the ineffable metamorphosis in your forces, not a fable one, but the genuine.*

GAVRIIL BUZHINSKY, SERMO PANEGYRICUS IN DIEM NATALEM SERENISSIMI AC POTENTISSIMI PETRI MAGNI (1723)

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how the concept *derzhava*, rooted in religion, always contained an element of greatness in premodern and early modern sources. It was recognized as an attribute of an earthly ruler only insofar as the ruler was a transmission link for the Christian God to exercise his divine power over people. *Derzhava* was God's endowment and, as such, this power was unlimited, nonrelative, all-pervasive, supreme, undivided, transcendental, and *always* great. Consequently, in medieval Rus' and early modern Muscovy, *derzhava* was associated with the tsaric office, but never with the tsar/prince himself, even though the tsar/prince as "body natural" was always much more important in Russia, compared to other European polities. Since the prince and the faith were the only concrete manifestations of the idea of statehood in Russia, each prince as a person was considered saintly and monastic piety and humility were ascribed to him. Still, any

tsar/prince remained only a mediator between God and people, in life (as a ruler) and after death (as a saint).<sup>1</sup> A ruler possessing *derzhava* was like an ancient master of a private household exercising power that was complete and undivided. However, although he enjoyed full *potestas*—namely, power through force—in the polity he possessed, his *auctoritas*, or power through authority, depended crucially on the Orthodox Church, which supplied the tsaric office with *majesty*, or true greatness, mostly through its performative and ritualistic input.

This arrangement resembled Byzantine *symphony*—that is, the separation of the supreme power between a tsar and a patriarch.<sup>2</sup> The former had an exclusive mandate for government, while the latter represented majestic authority. The recognition of this arrangement by other polities was relatively less important. That is why some Russian tsars could openly reject the offers of inclusion into the European political hierarchy since they treated their political mandate as God’s endowment, and not as a systemically defined status.<sup>3</sup> The early Russian version of symphony also made it impossible to glorify the monarch by comparing him to a deity. It would have been perceived as a clear blasphemy, since the supreme power was symbolically divided.

However, by the time when Russia’s most famous Europeanizer, Peter the Great (1682–1725), came to the throne, discursive patterns had changed, and in a surprising direction. The foundational idea that Russia was a great polity remained in place, but its manifestations moved entirely into the panegyric literature and sermons that sang glory to the monarch personally, comparing him (and subsequently her) to a living deity. “The saintly prince . . . became the godlike Tsar,” as Cherniavsky put this,<sup>4</sup> which had been unthinkable in the seventeenth century. This tendency was also amply recorded by foreign observers.<sup>5</sup> In the eyes of the people, the Russian monarch obtained personal charisma and mystical significance, and the *majesty* of Russian *derzhava* previously associated with the Orthodox Church turned into personal *glory* attributed to the monarch.

In this chapter, I will trace the discursive shift from majesty to glory and, correspondingly, from the *absolute* to the *theatrical* understanding of politi-

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1. Cherniavsky 1961, 33.

2. Velichko 2013.

3. Zorin cited in Neumann 2008b, 15.

4. Cherniavsky 1961, 78.

5. Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 1–2.



cal greatness, which commenced in the seventeenth and peaked in the eighteenth century. Theatrical greatness depends heavily on appearance and the power of affective persuasion. It detaches itself from the transcendental religious foundation and relies on the power of political spectacle. Naturally, this change was a radical discursive shift, which required a fundamental reinterpretation of the main roles and relations in Russia's domestic political sphere—especially the roles of the tsar, the patriarch, and their mutual standing. The reinterpretation mostly occurred in the seventeenth century, as an outcome of the religious schism initiated by the official church in 1653 and the subsequent persecution of the so-called Old Believers, who refused to accept the new religious practices. I trace the political implications of the schism in the first part of this chapter.

In the second part, I compare how rulers were glorified before the eighteenth century with how this happened thereafter. I also trace the intellectual influence of European thinkers on Peter's chief ideologues and show how they translated the European conceptions of natural law into a specifically Russian theory of political order. Finally, I also analyze the dominant mode of glorification during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–1796), a German-born princess who married a Russian heir to the throne but shortly after his coronation joined a coup d'état that brought her to power. As Russian empress, Catherine became one of the most venerated Russian monarchs in history for her particularly enlightened absolutism. The great power discourse of her time, as I will argue below, remained structurally and semantically similar to that of the Petrine era.

### 3.1 SACRALIZING THE MONARCH

Russian philologists and historians of culture, Boris Uspenskij and Viktor Zhivov, argue that Russian tsars began to emphasize their special charisma and sacred nature, as God-chosen persons, in the middle of the sixteenth century, starting from Ivan IV.<sup>6</sup> While it is debatable whether Ivan's claim for his special status and unaccountability to his people (see chapter 2) was accepted by the population at large, the normalization of such rhetoric triggered further sacralization of Russian monarchs. Analyzing early

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6. Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 7–8.

seventeenth-century sources, Uspenskij and Zhivov document an important shift in the usage of the Russian title *tsar*, which took place during the Time of Troubles and its immediate aftermath. Borrowed from Byzantium, where the title was chiefly associated with the imperial tradition and used to describe the office of a supreme ruler (basileus as an heir to Roman emperors), the Russian title “tsar” was also firmly embedded into religion, where it was used as one of God’s names (God as the *tsar* of the world). However, initially, homonyms could be distinguished in writing by a special abbreviation mark (*titlo*), which was used to indicate sacred words. Yet, later, it began to be also used for writing the titles of pious earthly tsars, which meant that pious tsars were effectively included into religious tradition and special divine charisma was attributed to them.<sup>7</sup>

Hence, appropriated by the Russian discourse, this title, when applied to a living person, generated mystical connotations. Thus, it was not surprising that during the Time of Troubles the formerly relevant opposition between just and unjust ruler (and the idea that whether a ruler was just could be established by looking at his deeds) gave way to a new opposition between true and false tsar (which was not subject to rational judgment, for the only difference would be the agent of enthronement—God or Devil—and this could never be told with confidence). This shift triggered a rather disorienting sequence of impostors, who laid claims for the Russian throne in the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Meanwhile, this was still simply the beginning of a long process that would come to fruition only during the reign of Peter the Great, who became the official head of the church and whose personal divine charisma turned into an established discursive fact. In panegyric literature, Peter was compared to Jesus Christ himself (correspondingly, he was also condemned by the marginalized opposition as Antichrist). Although some of his predecessors (e.g., Peter’s father Aleksei Mikhailovich) already developed a habit of placing their portraits in contexts which hinted at their holiness (e.g., on a fresco or inside a Bible), this habit still triggered opposition from both the official church and schismatic communities.<sup>8</sup> Aleksei himself also held off

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7. Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 8.

8. The most adamant critic was Patriarch Nikon, who urged Aleksei to “learn not to prescribe Divine glory prophesied by prophets and apostles to ourselves,” and insisted that “the depiction of the tsar on an eagle and on a horse [was] indeed pride, ascribing to him prophecies prophesied about Christ.” Another vocal critic was archpriest Avvakum, the spiritual

on claiming personal holiness. For instance, in one of his letters to the most important Russian monastery, the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius in the town of Sergiev Posad, he described himself as “faithful and sinful slave of Christ . . . seated on the tsaric throne of this transient world and preserving, by the grace of God, . . . the scepter of the Russian tsardom and its borders, the perishable Tsar Aleksei.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, Peter’s predecessors, save for a few symbolic breaches of sainthood,<sup>10</sup> still mostly ascribed the majesty of their *derzhava* to the tsaric throne and scepter (i.e., the office of supreme power), and not to themselves as “perishable” individuals. Then how did the majestic authority of the tsaric office manage to relocate into the tsar’s personal charisma, endowing it with divine glory? In the following sections, I trace the path of the nomadic majesty that was sent on its journey by the succession crisis of 1598–1613.

### 3.2 NOMADIC MAJESTY

The end of the Rurikid dynasty in 1598 triggered a fundamental transformation of the then dominant understanding of supreme power in early modern Muscovy. Divine majesty, previously invested in the tsaric office and the figure of the tsar as God’s vicar for governing earthly affairs, needed to relocate, even if temporarily, into alternative discursive shells, because of the unfolding succession crisis. Over the following fifteen years, the majesty of the Muscovite regime—and hence its political legitimacy in the eyes of its subjects—was routinely claimed by or attributed to various strata of Muscovy’s early modern society: from proto-oligarchs (the Seven Boyars government), to the church elite (Patriarchs Hermogenes and Philaret), to the people (Minin and Pozharsky’s militia). Below, I reconstruct some stages and

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leader of Old Believers and Nikon’s nemesis. Reacting to the emerging practice of calling the tsar holy during church services, Avvakum lamented that it was unprecedented “that someone order himself to be called holy to his face, apart perhaps from Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon!” (Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 10 and 23).

9. Act No. 127 1836, 172.

10. In fact, such breaches occur and remain potentially acceptable until this day, in the political context that is much more secular, compared to the seventeenth century. Recently, the portraits of Vladimir Putin, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, and Joseph Stalin (!) were supposed to be encrusted as part of the wall mosaic in the newly built Orthodox cathedral dedicated to the Armed Forces (*Moscow Times* 2020). Following a public uproar, the political leaders were removed from the mosaic, which, nevertheless, still preserved a number of controversial images (Soldatov 2020).

hurdles of this process, and explain what crucial role the Orthodox Church played in preserving the continuity of the early modern ideas about political greatness in Muscovy.

### 3.2.1 *People's majesty?*

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how the idea of state (*gosudarstvo*),<sup>11</sup> formerly understood as a private domain of a certain grand prince, was discursively appropriated by the people of the “Great state [*velikoye gosudarstvo*] of Muscovy.”<sup>12</sup> Illustratively, in *The New Tale of the Glorious Russian Tsardom*,<sup>13</sup> an influential political pamphlet widely circulated in Moscow during the Polish-Lithuanian invasion in winter 1610–1611, Muscovy is almost exclusively referred to as “our Great state [*Gosudarstvo*].”<sup>14</sup> Historian Mikhail Krom, who reconstructed a genealogy of Russian patriotism, singles out this time and context as crucially important for the birth of Russian national consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

Given the scale of social mobilization in the beginning of the 1610s, the collective of subjects (aka “the people”) seemed like a natural alternative locus of sovereignty. Perhaps, Muscovites, who managed to organize and successfully repel an occupation, but who still lacked a popularly legitimate

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11. The Russian word *gosudarstvo* (which currently means “state”) first appeared in the middle of fifteenth century and signified the individual power of a grand prince and a corresponding political regime. For example, when the grand prince of Muscovy, Ivan III, defeated the rival province of Novgorod in the 1470s, in his communication with the defeated, Ivan insisted that he wants his “*gosudarstvo* in Novgorod to be like [he has it] in Moscow. And [his] grand-princely *gosudarstvo* is such that [Novgorod’s] assembly bell [*vechevoy kolokol*] will be no more; [and Novgorod’s] magistrate [*posadnik*] will be no more also” (Sharymov 2004, 131–32). For more substantive analyses of the concept *gosudarstvo*, see Kharkhordin 2001; and Krom 2018. The Novgorodian Assembly Bell was used to summon its citizens for general assemblies. It often serves as a symbol of the nascent republican tradition in Russia, which was supposedly nipped in the bud by Muscovite absolutism. Until this day, the democratic opposition in Russia represents the story of the Novgorodian republic as a hibernating potentiality and a counterweight to Putin’s consolidated autocracy (Petro 2009).

12. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006f, 151.

13. This source is notably absent from both Kharkhordin (2001) and Ortmann (2007). This omission made both authors conclude that it was only in the time of Peter the Great (save for singular occasions during Peter’s father’s rule) when the concept *gosudarstvo* started to be used to signify something separate from the tsar’s personal domain. In fact, already in 1612, some used this concept to designate something completely detached from the figure of the sovereign.

14. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006f, emphasis added.

15. Krom 2018, 229–32.

tsar, could have used this occasion to rethink their political community along these new lines. The opening appeal of *The New Tale* strongly suggests that it could have been the genesis of the idea of a patriotic society,

To the Orthodox Christians of the mother of cities of the Russian Tsardom, the prominent and Great state—to people of all ranks, who still have not turned their souls away from God, and from the Orthodox faith, and have not fallen into misbelief, but hold to piety, and have not given themselves up to the enemies, and have not been seduced by unholy faith, but are ready to shed their blood for our Orthodox faith.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, however, in other contemporaneous sources, the people, as a political category, are often described as a passive object of deceit and manipulation. Instead of actively embodying and defending the idea of the Russian land, they are being “pastured,” “dazzled,” “offended,” “patronized,” “killed,” “enlightened,” “aroused,” “attacked,” “saved,” and so on, while rarely they “ganged up” together or “banished” someone.<sup>17</sup> In yet another source, produced in Pskov, the most independent and self-sufficient political actor of the time, the people were mostly presented as a disjointed, quarrelsome, and “pusillanimous” crowd that was “agitated,” “seduced,” “captured,” “stoned and burnt,” “robbed,” “tortured,” and was even called “raving mad [*buyno pomeshannye*].”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the structure of the seventeenth-century discourse was not yet conducive to fully transplanting the idea of the state from the sovereign’s divine power to either territory or people.<sup>19</sup> It would also be incorrect to think that the idea of political order entirely loses its transcendental component and begins to be conceived as established from within the community. As I argued in the previous chapter, Russia did not externalize the idea of greatness (as happened in Sweden).<sup>20</sup> “Great” in “our Great *gosudarstvo*” continued to be interpreted in essentially religious terms.

16. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006f, 151.

17. E.g., Khvorostinin 2006.

18. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006h.

19. Iver Neumann (2008b) comes to a similar conclusion about the locus of government.

20. Ringmar 2007, 145–86.

### 3.2.2 Patriarch's majesty?

The unabated importance of the Orthodox Church in the legitimation of the Russian early modern political order explains the significance of the figure of the patriarch in all of the abovementioned sources. Even in *The New Tale*, which historians interpret to be the genesis of patriotic society and the Russian national consciousness, the patriarch plays the leading and crucial role. The main reason for this is that Patriarch Hermogenes, who was in office from 1606 to 1612, was one of the loudest critics of the impostors and largely inspired the popular uprising, becoming the symbol of patriotic movement. In contemporary literature, Hermogenes was often referred to as “*gosudar*” and “father of fathers” [*otets ottsov*]. It is telling that the former of these titles with the addition of the word “great” (*velikiy gosudar*)—a traditional royal title—was subsequently shared by the crowned tsars of the new Romanov dynasty and their first patriarchs.<sup>21</sup> The latter title in a slightly modified version (“father of fatherland” [*otets otechestva*]) was given to Peter the Great together with the title of Emperor in 1721—that is, in the same year that he established the Most Holy Synod, which effectively subjected the Russian Orthodox Church to secular authorities.

The transmission of the locus of sovereignty to Hermogenes was an ambiguous but important political move, which was crucial for the process I am tracing here: the appropriation of spiritual power by the state. Essentially, the attribution of divine majesty *and* earthly political authority to Hermogenes was the inverse operation, which uncovered the existing contiguity between the spiritual and earthly powers and opened a general possibility of spillovers and substitutions. In the beginning of seventeenth century, the figure of the patriarch filled the lacuna of political authority by virtue of being previously adjacent to it. Later, when the whole experience of the Time of Troubles was being digested and interpreted in the literature, one could see that this metonymic sequence was extended to connect the two dynasties (Rurikids and Romanovs). At the same time, the newly established order anticipated the ascription of the royal title to its first patriarchs. One contemporary, for instance, explained that the choice of the main negotiator with the Polish king fell on one Philaret (the father of the first Romanov

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21. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006f.

and the next patriarch), because he “came from the lineage of the former glorious tsars [and] through this union with them he was *endued with a part of their authority*.”<sup>22</sup> This mode of legitimation—the continuity of Russian statehood through the patriarchal lineage—was ubiquitous in the contemporary popular discourse.<sup>23</sup> Thus, after 1613, the Russian political discourse was restructured in such a way that the idea of greatness, without being radically modified, was preserved in its *absolute* form by and through the hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The situation when the patriarch was venerated as a patriotic hero and the leader of nascent nationhood also received controversial treatment. Hermogenes was criticized by some boyars who participated in the elections of the next tsar precisely for taking up the function of propaganda and encouragement of social struggle, which was *unnatural* for his holy rank.<sup>24</sup> Thus, despite the successful social mobilization it managed to amass, the role of the Orthodox Church as the leader of an essentially political process was already deemed dubious in the seventeenth century. Today, the political role of the Orthodox Church and its patriarch also remains ambivalent. While it is rather common to see the patriarch meet with Putin and his administration, and while his inclusion into the topmost circle of the Russian political elite (with all its corruption benefits) is unquestionable, at present, the Russian Orthodox Church rather resembles a powerful corporation seeking relative independence from the government than an aspiring political actor.<sup>25</sup>

### 3.2.3 *Boyars' majesty?*

Another potential locus of majesty and political legitimacy during the Time of Troubles was the nonpermanent representative assembly called *Zemskiy Sobor*, which some historians compare with the contemporaneous representative organs in Western Europe.<sup>26</sup> In fact, in the early seventeenth century, this institution became established so soundly in Russia that initially it functioned as the main legitimizing organ for all of the frequently changing monarchs during the Time of Troubles. Then, between 1610 and 1613, it held

22. Khvorostinin 2006, 637, emphasis added.

23. E.g., Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006j.

24. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006k, 754.

25. Erzhakov 2020.

26. For a good discussion of the structure of *Zemskiy Sobor* and its potential equivalence with the Western institutions, see Klyuchevsky 1988, 176–99.

supreme power (both legislative and executive) and governed domestic and foreign affairs. Finally, starting from 1613, after *Zemskiy Sobor* elected a new monarch, it presumably remained active almost uninterruptedly until 1622, as the main deliberative body counseling the new tsar.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the important role of the clergy in the operation of *Zemskiy Sobor*, the notion *Zemskiy* (from *zemlya*, meaning “land”) initially emerged in opposition to *Holy Sobor* (i.e., the Orthodox Church Assembly). Thus, in Russia, *Zemskiy Sobor* is often interpreted as the genesis of secular government and representative administration.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the idea of political representation clearly had a hard life in early modern Muscovy and, later, the Russian Empire. The history of Russia’s seventeenth and eighteenth centuries demonstrates rather plainly that, although there had been many attempts on the part of the Russian nobility to limit the unconstrained power of the monarch, it was often not the monarchs but the population at large who resisted that change.

The main reason for the popular opposition against a purely representative government was that in the contemporaneous discourse, the absolute, divinely enthroned monarch was represented as a guarantee of some sort of justice and, quite paradoxically, equality, while the idea of an incipient oligarchic republic was perceived as exploitative and unjust. The absolute monarch was seen as the main protector of the masses against the corrupt and selfish elites.<sup>29</sup> In the sources produced around the time when *Zemskiy Sobor* elected a new tsar, the popular dislike toward the candidates who could not be easily associated with the idea of divine enthronement was manifested quite clearly.<sup>30</sup> For instance, the Cossacks and regional representatives featured in the *Tale of the 1613 Assembly of the Land* accused the boyars of protecting their selfish interests, instead of submitting to God’s will, and sup-

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27. Myakotin 1894.

28. E.g., Meleshko 2013.

29. For instance, Vasily Klyuchevsky, one of the most famous Russian historians from the nineteenth century, insisted that the Time of Troubles uncovered “a mismatch between the boyars’ aspirations and claims regarding the nature of supreme power, and the vision of it that lower classes subscribed to: the boyars wanted to put chains on the supreme power, which had become accustomed to think of itself as unlimited and which *had to be unlimited* in the people’s eyes” (2000, emphasis added). In the same context, the British historian Geoffrey Hosking (2000, 309) recalls an age-old legal right of every Russian subject to present petitions to the sovereign, which existed until 1767.

30. E.g., the two candidates who failed to win popular support were the son of the Swedish king Charles IX and the rich nobleman Dmitry Trubetskoy, who also acted as the head of government from 1611 to 1613.



ported the candidacy of the young, uncharismatic boy Mikhail Romanov (who was eventually elected as the new tsar). They justified their choice by pointing out that Mikhail was the patriarch's son and hence had the most unencumbered connection to divine majesty (which had been preserved through the patriarchic lineage).<sup>31</sup>

In the nineteenth century, such popular mindset and the related political practices were commonplace. Most illustratively, this position was rationalized by a Russian statesman, Dmitry Troshchinsky, who was justifying Peter I's administrative reform. Among other things, Troshchinsky argued that, since the political representation mechanism was broken in Russia, due to a number of institutional failures and the history of relations between the ruling and the ruled, the unconstrained power of the absolute monarch was a necessary counterweight against the possibility of exploitative oligarchic rule. In his rendering, the absolute monarch was "the only representative of the people, which, given its position, cannot have any other representative, except him."<sup>32</sup>

In the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, the trope "the tsar is good, the boyars are bad" is more alive than ever. It is frequently invoked in popular culture and often functions as the main explanans for independent sociologists trying to uncover the roots of Putin's unceasing popularity. As the head of the independent sociological think tank Levada-Center, Lev Gudkov, put it:

The stability of the system is backed up by the well-known ambivalence in the people's attitude to power: the tsar is good, the boyars are bad. Therefore, . . . when the economy is stagnating for 10 years in a row—people direct their dissatisfaction against the state officials, but not the "national leader"—who remains the symbol of power [*derzhavy*], and is, therefore, untouchable.<sup>33</sup>

### 3.3 THE ROLE OF POPULAR ACCLAMATION

When it comes to God's will, there is always a question on how it can be manifested. In 1613, one could see that the manifestation of God's will was effectively equated with the people's will. More precisely, the great power of

31. *Voprosy Istorii* 1985.

32. Troshchinsky 1868, 56.

33. Gudkov 2021.

a ruler remained transcendental, and so did the ruler's enthronement, yet the enthronement happened not supernaturally, but through the agency of the people understood as a collective subject, and not as a group of individuals who could debate, negotiate, and eventually elect a monarch.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the people did not *elect* their ruler—they functioned as a channel of God's power, rather than an acting subject (or a group of subjects) on their own; individuals did not delegate their sovereignty to a ruler, as happened later in Hobbes, for the sovereignty was certainly not theirs to give away. To bring in a familiar electoral analogy, a tsar should have been chosen by *acclamation*, rather than through general consensus or by casting votes.

A very similar theme was a leitmotif of the Charter of Enthronement (*utverzhden'naya gramota*) of 1613, a lengthy document confirming the enthronement of Mikhail Romanov that was read at the Assembly and signed by its participants. In it, Mikhail was said to be “a ruler-tsar and a grand prince . . . by God's grace and by the election of *all people* of the whole of the great Russian tsardom.”<sup>35</sup> Here again, the people functioned as a unitary legitimizing tool that allowed the exercise of God's power. Of course, that exercise was only possible, if “by the grace of the all-mighty God, all the people in all the towns of the whole Russian tsardom achieved a complete consonance between them.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, as individuals, the people subsequently remained rightless, as the boyars should have as well, in the people's eyes. Therefore, the social pressure may have pushed against any kind of accountability or restraint of the monarch.

To sum up, by the end of the first quarter of the seventeenth century, *velikaya derzhava* continued to represent divinely endowed vicarious power to govern (*derzhat'*) and was legitimized by the virtue of its attachment to transcendental majesty. Thus, it remained part and parcel of the religious discourse and was ascribed to the tsaric office or the symbolic figure of the tsar, as opposed to any particular tsar as a person. At the same time, the border between spiritual and earthly powers was blurring, as Patriarch Hermogenes assumed the role of a patriotic hero and became the locus of ineffable

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34. For example, one early modern author describes the election process as a true miracle, when all the orthodox people, “great and small, rich and poor, old and young, became enriched with abounding wisdom from the one who gives life to everyone, and were illuminated by the light of harmonious goodwill.” This miraculous unison, the author hastens to add “*was not composed by the people*, but was divinely established” (Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006e, 559, emphasis added).

35. Belokurov 1906, 50, emphasis added.

36. Belokurov 1906, 55.

sovereignty. The blending of the two continued with his successors, who effectively became corulers with the first Romanov tsars and adopted the title *velikiy gosudar*. In addition, as was already evident in Ivan IV's time, the idea of proper government began to solder with undivided absolutism, wherein the tsar remained accountable solely before the Christian God and no other living soul in his dominion.

### 3.4 RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF RUSSIAN AUTOCRACY

Despite the perceived unnaturalness of the fact that seventeenth-century church hierarchs would take up political tasks,<sup>37</sup> the Orthodox Church also played an important role in the evolution of Russian statehood. Both Russian philosophers and academic historians suggest that the Orthodox Church was instrumental for the emergence of absolute autocracy. The philosopher and theologian Vladimir Solovyov maintained that the church “‘nurtured’ Muscovite monocracy”<sup>38</sup> by transplanting the Byzantine idea of the grand prince as a ruler appointed by God, as opposed to the Slavic, but also Nordic, idea of the prince as an elder chieftain leading an army that conquered territories by fire and sword. This conceptual entanglement elevated “the weak Muscovite prince, first, to grand-princely and then to tsaric greatness [*velichiya*].”<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, Cherniavsky treated the church as the chief educator of Russian cultural and political unity, which would not have been there, were it not for the common Orthodox faith and Slavonic language.<sup>40</sup> This unity was reaffirmed through the acceptance of political hierarchy with an autocrat on top borrowed directly from Byzantium, but also, perhaps, was cemented in place on the level of political practice through the lengthy experience of relations with the similarly governed nomadic empires in the East.<sup>41</sup> This constellation came under pressure during the religious Schism, initiated in the 1650s by Patriarch Nikon, the ambitious religious reformer and the “Russian reversal” of Martin Luther, the German priest and beacon of the Protestant Reformation. If the latter tried to modernize religious teachings and practices to make them more accessible to the masses, Nikon modified

37. Likhachev, Dmitriev, and Ponyrko 2006k, 754.

38. Solovyov 1911, 167.

39. Nikanor cited in Solovyov 1911, 166–67.

40. Cherniavsky 1961.

41. Neumann and Wigen 2018.

Orthodox religious teachings and practices in an attempt to modernize the masses. In Solovyov's rendering, Nikon tried to "suddenly undo, for the sake of church power, that same thing that that power had successfully worked towards for many centuries."<sup>42</sup>

### 3.5 DECOUPLING THE CHURCH FROM THE STATE

Essentially, Nikon tried to bring the ritual of the Russian Orthodox Church in compliance with the Greek Orthodox tradition (e.g., through modifying the sign of the cross and bows). Yet, his clericalism, highly abstract in essence, had no foundation in Russian practice. On the one hand, it troubled the masses by demanding alterations of the most basic rituals.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, it gradually began to trouble the tsar, for, while pushing through unpopular changes, Nikon affirmed the spiritual power of the church as unconditionally independent not only from the people, but also from the state.<sup>44</sup> He tried to decouple the church from the state that had already regained its strength and authority. In its new declared status, the church not only became an unnecessary competition for the tsar, but also managed to alienate large masses of people. Each of the disputing parties, by promoting their own visions of how things should stand, in fact, exposed their respective understandings of the ideal political community. It is those ideal images that I will try to reconstruct below.

The Schism was not a debate about Christian dogmas—the reforms mainly touched the procedural side of the religious practice. In this light, its intensity and longevity were indeed surprising. Hundreds of Old Believers were executed. Tens of thousands more committed suicide through self-immolation.<sup>45</sup> Numerous Old Believers' communities continued to live in isolation for centuries after.<sup>46</sup> Explaining the intensity of the conflict, Boris Uspenskij suggested that, instead of being merely procedural, the conflict unfolded at a much deeper level where the status of language in general (as it reveals itself through scripture and ritual) was defined.<sup>47</sup> He argued that the Old Believers were so adamant in standing

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42. Solovyov 1911, 168.

43. Spinka 1941, 356–58.

44. Spinka 1941, 359 and 363–66.

45. Pul'kin 2006.

46. Even today, one can find the descendants of the Old Believers who fled Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in places like Uruguay and Brazil (Pivovarov 2020).

47. Uspenskij 1996a.

their ground because they perceived the language as, first and foremost, a means of expression, as opposed to the new believers, who began to perceive it as a means of communication.

The difference between the two is significant. While in the first case the meaning preserves its transcendence—one proceeds from language to meaning, which means that incorrect language leads to incorrect thoughts—in the second case, the meaning is recognized to be immanent to the message, which can be communicated in various ways. Nikon's supporters proceeded from meaning to language, and by correcting the books they were, at the same time, trying to accomplish a cultural rapprochement of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Greek Church. This should have helped the Russian church to claim religious universality and to dispose of the fetishization of form, which provincialized its ideological ambition. From the Old Believers' perspective, the form was still not separated from the content. In their view, it was through the sign of the cross and the appropriate prayers that commoners gradually became familiar with the sacred meaning of the holy scriptures. Hence, the reform was taking the only true ritual and scripture away from them, depriving the flock of the possibility of salvation.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, Nikon's reform reflected a substantial change in the general world view (triggered, perhaps, by the Gutenberg revolution). By pulling the Russian church out of its inward-oriented self-righteousness, Nikon aspired to expose it to external recognition—to the judgment of those outsiders who could accept it as the new spiritual leader of the Christian world. Thus, his discursive enterprise was not dissimilar to various later attempts to globalize Russia and to subject its conduct and claims to external scrutiny. Yet Nikon's methods undermined his original designs.

### 3.6 BACK INTO THE STATE'S FOLD

Similar in its spirit to the Protestant Reformation, the Russian Schism was also different in several crucially important ways. The essentially humanistic and individualistic ideas of the Reformation, in principle, corresponded to the bottom-up manner in which the Reformation proceeded. However

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48. Uspenskij 1996a. To support his claim, Uspenskij provides illuminating examples related to the changes in confession procedures for deaf people and the regulations governing the declamation of holy texts. In line with Uspenskij's argument, the spiritual leader of the Old Believers, Archpriest Avvakum, insisted (Petrov 2010, 180) that, by modifying the holy texts, "the new believers lost the divine essence [and seceded] from the true God."

unlikely and unexpected it was in the first place, one has to admit that, once it started, the revolution against the transcendental authority of the pope was driven by local communities, which turned the Reformation into “a vast cultural upheaval, a social and popular movement, textured and rich because of its diversity.”<sup>49</sup> In Muscovy, however, it was the resistance to the transformation which was bottom-up and diverse, while the reformist drive, as is often the case in Russian history, came from the top.

Therefore, to a Western eye, accustomed to the Weberian tradition, there is something antilogous about the Russian Schism. Without support from below, Nikon could promote his reforms only by also placing the locus of religious truth in the church hierarchy, which was supposed to be able to dictate its will. Having no institutional apparatus to impose its truth (e.g., to prosecute and execute heretics), the church subsequently delegated this responsibility to the almighty state (which, as Solovyov would argue, had been previously created by it). Thus, the latter obtained the full *de facto* authority over both spiritual and earthly matters. Later, this takeover was institutionalized by Peter the Great, and the church, which Nikon had claimed to be unconditionally independent, became “a branch of state government under the supreme authority of the ruler [*Gosudarya*—‘the ultimate judge of this collegium’ and under direct command of a special statesman—‘a good officer, who was brave and familiar with synodic matters.’”<sup>50</sup> As Alexander Gerschenkron put this, the official church merely initiated the process, while the “actual Russian Reformation was carried out . . . by the police state of Peter the Great.”<sup>51</sup>

To restate, the ideational transformation was originally launched by the high clergy. Subsequently, the autocratic state took the lead. Yet, at the same time, the whole legitimation of the latter was based historically on (and backed from below by) the idea of transcendental enthronement, which contradicted the Reformist ideas of individualism and immanently established order. Consequently, there emerged a curious amalgam in which the newly emerging ideas of public weal and good governance penetrating the state-affiliated rhetoric were mixed with the apology of an autocratic regime and the unaccountability of the God-chosen ruler. When the ruler himself eventually became the head of the church, he accumulated the power in full scope: both *auctoritas* and *potestas*, mysterious charisma acquired through the ruler’s direct connection to transcendental majesty (as the head of the church) and unlimited power to govern (as the head of the state apparatus).

49. Jacob 1991, 215.

50. Solovyov 1911, 174.

51. Gerschenkron 1979, 45.

Arguably, this fundamentally altered the understanding of the monarch's status and transformed the idea of Russia as a great polity. Previously, it was the *majestic government* that made Russia great. The *government*, in its turn, belonged undividedly to the grand prince, while the *majesty* was an attribute of the tsaric office, whose main legitimizer and the only source of authority was the Orthodox Church.<sup>52</sup> In the Petrine epoch, *majestic government* transformed into *great power* meaning quite literally the full scope of the monarch's supreme power that had both spiritual and earthly affairs subjected to it and that manifested itself in the monarch's personalized charisma.

Naturally, from then on, it was the figure of the monarch himself, not the legacy of the age-old tradition, that gilded Russia with greatness and glory. During Peter I's rule (1682–1725), the new and nearly sacred status of the monarch was promoted across-the-board: in political writings, religious sermons, and, somewhat later, in the lay literary genres. Consequently, the transcendental kind of greatness (or *majesty*) of the Russian polity turned into personalized *glory*, which manifested through the excessive glorification of the monarch. In Petrine Russia, but also throughout the rest of the eighteenth century, the greatness of Russian *derzhava* was interpreted as a product of its salvation by Peter the Great, who was functionally equated to another savior, Jesus Christ. Both his military victories and political reforms were presented as sacrifices that nurtured *velikaya derzhava* and brought it to full maturity. In the eighteenth century, Russia's greatness was either believed to be born with Peter or reborn through a fundamental metamorphosis. That is, there was no longer anything primordial about it. Instead, it revealed itself in the official panegyric literature and in the official and unofficial sacralization of the monarch, becoming purely *theatrical* in its operation. In other words, it was confined to the discourse itself, needing no external point of reference, but crucially depending on external recognition.

### 3.7 PETER, THE EUROPEANIZER?

In popular imagination, Peter the Great is often portrayed as the Europeanizer of Russia. By moving Russia's capital to the newly founded Saint Petersburg on the Baltic Sea (founded in 1703, capital from 1712) and carrying out

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52. For a good discursive illustration of that political constellation, see Hosking 2000, 303–4.

his fundamental reforms, Peter is said to have defined Russia's political and cultural orientation for centuries. This was repeatedly argued by the nineteenth-century intellectuals, the prerevolutionary historians, and the authors of contemporary historical textbooks alike.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, during his long reign, Russia absorbed a tremendous influx of European specialists, goods, and traditions. Its institutions and lifestyle (at least in the capital) became undoubtedly more familiar to a European observer,<sup>54</sup> while its regular political communication with Europe began to be carried out through several permanent diplomatic missions.<sup>55</sup>

Historians also argue that the religious reforms accomplished by Peter can be interpreted, if not in letter then in spirit, as the import of the Lutheran and Anglican models of monarchical church.<sup>56</sup> Just as it happened in the British Empire, but also in Sweden and Denmark, where monarchs took it upon themselves to head national churches, Peter decided to liquidate the Russian version of the Byzantine symphony and to concentrate both spiritual and earthly power in the hands of one ruler. B. H. Sumner argued that the Lutheran interpretation of citizens' duties toward the state, as well as the general Western model of Christianity, strongly appealed to Peter as a person, even though it is hard to prove that he directly borrowed and implemented any Western conceptions in his ecclesiastical policy.<sup>57</sup> Hence, the outcome of the long-lasting seventeenth-century confrontation between the patriarch and the monarch, which ended in the subjugation of the Orthodox Church to the mighty state, could also be interpreted as quite "European."<sup>58</sup>

However, when it comes to the discursive implications of Peter's reforms, there were several important processes that stood out as specifically Russian. First, in the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Russian monarch became the target of excessive glorification, bordering sacralization, which not only proliferated in its natural religious abode, but also spilled over into lay literary genres, fine art, and architecture. It also produced a bulk of pompous odes, paintings, sermons, and monuments. One could say that the tsar

53. Chaadayev cited in Kohn 1962, 53; Platonov 1917, 287; Danilov et al. 2013, 4–17.

54. Orlov et al. 2006, 143–44.

55. Neumann 2008b, 15.

56. Sumner 1950, 138–50. Admittedly, however, there were a few important differences in their local application, such as Peter's relatively permissive policy toward monasteries and his refusal to adopt the official title of the "Head of the Church."

57. Sumner 1950, 138.

58. I thank Kristina Stoeckl for drawing my attention to this important fact.



was effectively equated to God in that context.<sup>59</sup> This practice equally applied to Peter's successors, especially the most famous of them, Catherine II (1762–1796), and it did not cease until the beginning of the nineteenth century, when panegyric genres gave way to the classical Russian literature and art.

Second, in its natural context—namely, among the clerics, the glorification of the Russian monarch took a peculiar shape that had been yet unseen in the Russian religious discourse. On the one hand, religious figures writing sermons about Peter's reforms glorified the monarch by comparing him to a living deity. On the other hand, many church officials, but also schismatic communities, were criticizing this practice as blasphemous and even compared Peter to Antichrist, or one of his agents.

Third, the discourse on Russia's political greatness, which had been previously formulated in absolute terms and attached to Russia's pristine essence, got almost completely disconnected from the state's millennial tradition and proper domestic regime. Instead, it was invested into the figure of the monarch, and began to be presented as a product of the salutary metamorphosis initiated by Peter the Great. Political greatness was no longer formulated in terms of being contiguous to the majestic absolute, but became a function of the all-pervasive and purely theatrical glorification, completely immanent to the discourse. An ostensive symbolic manifestation of this change was the introduction and incessant use of fireworks in Petrine Russia, which Alexander Etkind called “an official language that integrated the sophisticated and the illiterate, those who understood the changing assortment of languages of the Empire and those who did not.”<sup>60</sup>

One could, of course, argue that both sacralization of the monarch and the theatrical turn in the Russian great power discourse were consequences of the assimilation of the baroque culture. The latter implied that bold comparisons and symbolic exaggerations were not supposed to be taken seriously. As Uspenskij and Zhivov insisted, “metaphorical usage is but one particular aspect of the Baroque attitude to the word; characteristic of the Baroque was not only play with words but play with meanings.”<sup>61</sup> That is, baroque culture exhibited a novel attitude toward language use—instead of faithfully attaching oneself to the meaning, baroque authors could utilize linguistic tools for mere ornamentation.

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59. Cherniavsky 1961, 74.

60. Etkind 2011, 120.

61. Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 19.

However, it was also evident that this baroque approach brought to Russia from the southwest clashed with the world view adhered to by a large part of the Russian audience, who often took seriously what was meant to simply adorn ideologically motivated speech.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, I try to analyze the outlined discursive changes in their own right to reveal their internal logic. I address the assemblage of the novel representations of Russia's greatpowerhood as they emerged and operated in their discursive localities. For the purposes of this book, I treat them as newly crystalized discursive modes that became the sources of the Russian great power discourse in its current shape, the latter being qualitatively different, yet genealogically related, to its discursive predecessors.

### 3.8 TSAR AND GOD IN DISCURSIVE COMPARISON

Certainly, eulogies and praiseful texts devoted to tsars and grand princes had existed before—it was not Peter's invention. Yet, in most cases, such glorification was embedded into symbolic frameworks that established clear limits on acceptable comparisons. For instance, in the two sources from the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries mentioned before, piousness and humility were attributed to the lauded princes.<sup>63</sup> A comparison reveals that the primary means of appraisal used by the two hagiographies were very similar. The princes' qualities and deeds were compared to that of some biblical heroes as in

his face was like Joseph's face, who was appointed as the second tsar by the tsar of Egypt; his strength was a part of Samson's strength; and the wisdom God endowed him with was that of Solomon; his courage was akin to that of Roman tsar Vespasian.<sup>64</sup>

Yet the hagiographers never went so far as to call any of the heroes "God" or "Christ" in direct comparison, since this would have been perceived as clear

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62. To substantiate this point, Uspenskij and Zhivov present two types of evidence: (1) the response to sacralization practice as blasphemous, and (2) the actual practice of religious adoration of the monarch that spread through some churches in Russian towns and villages. Both phenomena, the authors argued, sprang from the same world view.

63. Likhachev et al. 1999i; Likhachev et al. 1997j.

64. Likhachev et al. 1997j, 359.

blasphemy. More precisely, both authors approached the possibility, but stopped one step short, preferring evasion to sacrilege.<sup>65</sup>

### 3.8.1 *Peter the Christ*

The comparison of monarchs to various biblical personalities was a tool that remained in use in Peter's time.<sup>66</sup> However, the abovementioned consolidation of both spiritual and administrative power in the hands of one ruler, as well as the emergence of baroque tradition, allowed his glorifiers to go much further than this. One of the first among Peter's contemporaries who called him "Christ" was Theophan Prokopovich, the first vice president of the Holy Synod known for his panegyric sermons and political writings. In the latter, he also developed a relatively systematic political teaching, in which he engaged with the European doctrines of natural law, as well as reflected and justified the political changes happening in Russia. In one of his sermons, written to commemorate Peter's most significant military success in the Battle of Poltava (1709), where he defeated the Swedes and effectively altered the course of the Great Northern War, Prokopovich called one of Peter's enemies "Judas" precisely on the premise that Peter for him was comparable to Christ. He wrote, "O unexpected enemy! O pariah to your own mother! O new Judas! And no one should imagine that to call a traitor Judas is excessive indignation . . . The lawfully reigning monarch . . . is Christ the Lord . . . hence it is fitting to call a Christ's betrayer Judas."<sup>67</sup>

Later, Prokopovich also tried to defend the legitimacy of his comparison by referring to the etymology of the concept (Christ as "anointed"). Yet, as Uspenskij and Zhivov insist, it was certainly not just a matter of etymology—Prokopovich pointed at the tsar's immediate likeness to Christ, which becomes evident from the chosen spelling: with *titlo* and capitalized "C[X]."<sup>68</sup> Moreover, Peter was also called "Savior" in many other contemporary sources. For example, Stefan Yavorsky, another Orthodox bishop and Peter's associate, compared Peter to the Savior, whose economy of salvation was aimed specifically at the Russian land:

And about our monarch, what will I proclaim? I bring you great joy, for your Saviour is born. Born for you, and not for himself. And what salvation is this?

65. E.g., Likhachev et al. 1997j, 369.

66. E.g., Prokopovich 1961, 57–58.

67. Prokopovich cited in Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 26.

68. Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 25.

For our eyes have seen his salvation. Oh, great is the salvation of our earthly Saviour—our fatherland unjustly stolen and for many years groaning to be free of the enemy yoke.<sup>69</sup>

Yavorsky was also critical of Peter.<sup>70</sup> In fact, he asked for resignation several times, unhappy with some religious reforms curbing ecclesiastic power. Yet, despite his anti-Protestant views, he was still unable to put up an open struggle, opting for convoluted scholastic hints at his dissatisfaction; and Peter kept him close until his own death. Nevertheless, high-principled Yavorsky, despite his views on Peter's policies, still adopted and promoted the new panegyric language, which made it possible to glorify the monarch with the most holy of names.

### 3.8.2 *Peter the Antichrist*

As is often the case, the most convincing evidence of an ideational transformation can be found on the discursive margins affected by or resisting the transformation. In the Old Believers' literature, largely squeezed out of the official discourse, the change in the status of the Russian monarch was strikingly evident. If the reformists of the seventeenth century identified the locus of religious truth (i.e., the agent of connection to the divine majesty) in clerical hierarchy, and criticized the state for claiming spiritual authority on that ground, the supporters of Nikon's nemesis and spiritual leader of the Old Believers, Avvakum Petrov, believed that the religious truth was kept in the pristine piety of the people.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, for them, in the same way as for Nikon, the state's gradual appropriation of spiritual leadership was unacceptable—in fact, as unacceptable as the church reform itself. And since the ancient piety that the Old Believers so cherished was firmly based on the agreement and harmony between the clergy and the laymen, who formed one church in Ancient Rus',<sup>72</sup> the whole structure of the Old Believers' traditional church (and indeed traditional world) was broken. Hence, the “national-democratic”<sup>73</sup> and heterogeneous nature of their dissent was triggered not by the realization of the individual's worth and the people's possible independence from ecclesiastic authority, but by an utmost disaster

69. Yavorsky cited in Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 26.

70. Zhivov 2004, 6.

71. Solovyov 1911, 169–70.

72. Solovyov 1911, 172.

73. Solovyov 1911, 169.

that happened to their world—a disaster comparable to apocalypse. Consequently, the Old Believers' communities perceived themselves as autonomous and self-regulated only insofar as they were also the only remaining righteous in the world captured by the Antichrist.

The coping strategies that people chose to adopt, while waiting for the Judgment Day, differed depending on the radicalism of a community's leader and the practical sense of its members. Some, actively persecuted by the authorities, were choosing voluntary martyr's death—namely, collective suicides. Others prepared themselves for an endlessly long autonomous existence. Ironically, it was the latter who, in Etkind's words, “became the driving and even revolutionary factor of the Russian life.”<sup>74</sup> Consistently avoiding all contacts and relations with the state and the official church, Old Believers established and maintained autonomous settlement communities that were extremely efficient economically and became the first capitalist subjects in the Russian Empire.

The amount of attention that eschatologically minded schismatic authors paid to the figure of the Antichrist was remarkable. Starting with Avvakum, who compared Nikon's genealogy to that of the Antichrist and called the patriarch his “ultimate precursor,”<sup>75</sup> the tradition to mention the Beast in religious and political writings persisted for several centuries. Soon enough, schismatic authors were already representing Nikon himself as the Antichrist.<sup>76</sup> As the locus of spiritual authority was shifting from patriarch to monarch, the label was transferred as well.

Peter the Great was called Antichrist astonishingly often.<sup>77</sup> Among other abundant evidence of such practice, one could mention three notable cases: the 1700 case of “bigot-schismatic” Grigory Talitskiy, who was accused of “compos[ing] a letter in which he spoke [*sic*] about . . . the coming of Antichrist into the world, actually having in mind the tsar”;<sup>78</sup> a monument of Old Believers' polemical literature *A Collection from Holy Writ about the Antichrist* (end of seventeenth century), where Peter was consistently referred to as the “false Christ,” “Antichrist,” and “Christ's adversary”;<sup>79</sup> and a popular historical novel *Peter and Alexis* (1903) written by Dmitry Merejkowski.<sup>80</sup>

74. Etkind 1998, 28–29.

75. Demkova 1965, 230.

76. Breshchinskiy 1977.

77. For sources and literature on this topic see Cherniavsky 1961, 76n12.

78. Imperatorskoye Russkoye Istoricheskoye Obshchestvo 1912, 274–75.

79. Anonymous 2006.

80. Merejkowski 1905.

The ascription of such a label to the monarch was a reaction to the opposite trend in the dominant ideology to call the monarch “Christ” and “Savior.” As one influential schismatic source explained this, by taking upon himself the patriarch’s title and by becoming the head of the Russian church, Peter, “that false Christ, exalted himself higher than all the so-called gods, that is, the anointed.”<sup>81</sup> Uspenskij and Zhivov maintained that the Old Believers interpreted this as nothing else but the fulfillment of the prophecy about the Antichrist, who would reveal his coming by “exalt[ing] himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.”<sup>82</sup>

### 3.8.3 *Glory everywhere*

Another important development characteristic of Peter’s reign was that the monarch’s glorification spilled over into the nonreligious discourse. The diversity of genres in Peter’s artistic glorification became virtually endless: theatrical performances, triumphal arches, welcome addresses, communiqués about victories and international treaties, engravings and commemorative medals, and so on.<sup>83</sup> Excessive glorification was ubiquitous in the literature and art of the first quarter of the eighteenth century.<sup>84</sup> What is more, one of the essential features of the literature and art not only of Peter’s time,<sup>85</sup> but also in the remainder of the eighteenth century, was their multilingualism. Writers and artists aimed at the widest audience and designed their works for multiple readings and multilevel interpretation. An example of such multilingualism are various structural allusions. That is, the acquired sanctity of political discourse revealed itself not only in concrete labels and comparisons, but also in structural similarities between praiseful letters to the monarch and Orthodox hymns.<sup>86</sup>

Another important evidence of multilingualism, which is directly relevant to the great power discourse in question, was the confluence of religious and military-historic symbolism. Having analyzed the symbolism of one iconostasis built in Tallinn in 1718–1719, Smorzhevskikh-Smirnova con-

81. Anonymous 2006.

82. Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 20.

83. Smorzhevskikh-Smirnova 2014, 105–13.

84. Derzhavina and Grebenyuk 1979, 33.

85. Smorzhevskikh-Smirnova 2014.

86. Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 32–35.

cluded that virtually every icon and inscription on it was meant to convey a double meaning: the traditional religious interpretation was always accompanied by a reference to some contemporaneous historical event—as a rule, this or that victory in the Northern War.<sup>87</sup> Allusions to Russia's military achievements were also present in many other forms of art. A short walk through Peterhof, Peter's suburban residence near Saint Petersburg, would be enough to see that the glorification of Russia's victories was performed not only in religious and lay literatures, but also in architecture and sculpture.

Consequently, there emerged an aura of glory around Peter's personality, which was close to sacralization.<sup>88</sup> Almost two centuries later, philosopher Solovyov admitted that it was difficult for him "to call [Peter] a great man—not because he was not great enough, but because he was not enough human."<sup>89</sup> We also know that this atmosphere developed with Peter's immediate assistance—he supported and sponsored the massive publication of panegyric propagandistic materials.<sup>90</sup>

### 3.9 FROM PRISTINE TRADITION TO SALUTARY METAMORPHOSIS

Presumably, one important cause of the described symbolic and conceptual transformation was the fundamental change in the status of the Russian monarch and the Orthodox Church. When Peter subjected the church to his control, claiming both spiritual authority (the former patriarch's function) and power to govern (the traditional monarch's prerogative), he indeed became functionally equivalent to Christ. The latter, on the one hand, possessed the absolute spiritual authority because of his ontological unity with the Father, and, on the other hand, through the separation of divine acting, oversaw the economy of salvation.<sup>91</sup> Such functional equivalence invited personal glorification, since, theologically speaking, it is precisely the Father and the Son who are worthy of eternal glory.

In the eighteenth century, the greatness of Russian *derzhava* began to be perceived as an outcome of its salvation by Peter-Christ. Be it his military

87. Smorzhevskikh-Smirnova 2014.

88. Stennik 2006.

89. Solovyov 1911, 177.

90. Derzhavina and Grebenyuk 1979.

91. Agamben 2011.

victories or reforms, it was only through his sacrificial policies that the true Russian great power was conceived and brought to maturity. Russia was believed to be either born with Peter, or reborn in a salutary metamorphosis. What used to be a backward wasteland transformed into a *great* polity, but only because of Peter *the Great*. In the Russian eighteenth-century discourse, this position was extremely popular.

For instance, Gavriil Buzhinsky, a Russian bishop and author, and another one of Peter's protégées, openly referred to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* when he accounted for Peter's reforms, but said that in Peter's case it was for real, "Raise your eyes, God-blessed Russian state [*Derzhavo Rossiyskaya*], and see the ineffable metamorphosis in your forces, not a fable one, but the genuine."<sup>92</sup> It was also Buzhinsky who often described the Muscovite past as utterly murky and sad, as "the time so terrible that it is painful to recall it."<sup>93</sup>

Similarly, Peter's political associate Pyotr Shafirov attested that "Peter conceived a metamorphosis in Russia, or, in other words, a transfiguration."<sup>94</sup> Prokopovich also certainly could not have failed to notice Russia's inception in Poltava: "whether it is true that daisies are born by the lightning, as natural historians tell us, we know for sure that all the trophies and benefits of this Russian state [*derzhava*], like the daisies of the tsaric crown, were conceived and born from the lightning and thunder of the battle of Poltava."<sup>95</sup> The eighteenth-century historian, Pyotr Krekshin, also pointed out that Peter, whom he referred to as nothing short of "Our Father [*Otche Nash*]," bringing in another structural analogy with a prayer, "brought us from unbeing into being . . . Before [him] everyone called us last, but today they call us the first."<sup>96</sup>

### 3.10 EUROPEAN POLITICAL DOCTRINES IN THE RUSSIAN MIRROR

Just as with Peter's religious reforms, which may look similar to the contemporaneous or earlier transformations of the church-state relations in some European polities—yet only on the surface—the Russian political thinking

92. Buzhinsky 2006, 59.

93. Buzhinsky 2006, 52.

94. Shafirov 1717, 9.

95. Prokopovich 1961, 58–59.

96. Krekshin cited in Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 35.



of his time also looked rather Western in form, but remained locally specific in substance. In other words, Russian political philosophers indeed looked at Europe and attempted to converse with the classics of the European political and legal thought, yet their ideas and concepts underwent a thorough localization, which adjusted them to the realities of the Russian regime and often modified their substance. In this section, I look at the localization of the European political doctrines of natural law in the writings of the main Petrine ideologue, Theophan Prokopovich, who was born and educated in the south-west of the Russian tsardom, which is now the territory of modern Ukraine (like many of Peter's other close associates).<sup>97</sup>

I have chosen to pay closer attention to Prokopovich's legacy for three main reasons. First, his writings present a fairly systematic political teaching addressing precisely the issue at stake—the origin, the qualities, and the application of the supreme political power, which Prokopovich calls *velichestvo* or *maiestat*. Second, being the main Petrine ideologue, he reflected and justified the changes happening on the ground—that is, he was one of the most practice-oriented thinkers of his time. Third, Prokopovich was openly trying to adapt the theories of Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, and Samuel von Pufendorf to the Russian context and to reconcile them with the Byzantine influence interlaced in the Ruthenian tradition from which he had emerged. In addition to Prokopovich's original texts, I also largely rely on Georges Gurvitch's book *Theophan Prokopovich's "The Truth of the Monarch's Will" and Its Western European Sources*, published in 1915 in Tartu.<sup>98</sup>

### 3.10.1 *Velichestvo and maiestat*

When it came to the origin and the nature of supreme power embodying greatness, Prokopovich maintained that “supreme power ha[d] its beginning and reason in the being itself, [that is]—in God, the creator of being.”<sup>99</sup> And although he admitted that the first power was established through people's agreement, it was the human conscience (which was the seed of God) that forced people to seek for a strong protector of natural law implanted by God into human hearts. Hence, Prokopovich still argued

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97. For a nuanced historical analysis of religious reforms and the influence of Ukrainian clerics, see Zhivov 2004.

98. Gurvitch 1915.

99. Prokopovich 1961, 82.

that God himself was the true origin of the supreme political power.<sup>100</sup> Equally important is his take on the prospects of relationality of the supreme power and its potential comparisons with other external sources of authority. Since this point seems crucially important for a proper illustration of the mode of greatness, as it operated in Peter's time, I quote Prokopovich's argument at some length here:

Let us approach the Tsaric throne even closer, and let us ask, what is the meaning of that glorious Tsaric title VELICHESTVO, or how other European peoples call it in Latin MAESTAT' or MAESTET'. In simple grammatical use this term means any kind of superiority of one thing over another, in social and natural worlds alike. We, however, do not use the term VELICHESTVO in this broad sense here, but only in the sense related to political philosophy. Yet, even in political philosophy the word VELICHESTVO has a double meaning. Since sometimes, in free use, it indicates the superlative degree of someone's honor and not the supreme one: a few examples of such use can be found in the writings of some ancient Roman writers. Yet, it is accepted by all Slavic and other peoples that this name MAESTET' or VELICHESTVO is used to indicate the most superlative honor and is only attributed to the supreme power. Hence, it does not only point at its highest dignity, which cannot be excelled by any other in the world, but also at its fullest legislative power, holding the ultimate court, and issuing infeasible judgment, but being in itself not subject to any law.<sup>101</sup>

Further, Prokopovich also commented on sovereign's responsibilities in front of the divine authority:

When [we] say that the supreme power called VELICHESTVO is not subject to any law, it should be clear that we only speak about human law: for it is subject to God's power . . . and should obey the ten commandments . . . Yet, it is subject to God's law in such a way that for its violation should be held liable in front of God alone, and not the human court.<sup>102</sup>

To sum up, for Prokopovich supreme power (τ) was characterized by the ultimate degree of greatness and could not be relationally compared to and

100. Prokopovich 1961, 82.

101. Prokopovich 1726, 21.

102. Prokopovich 1726, 22.

superseded by any other existing authority; (2) was not bound by laws; (3) was not accountable for its actions in front of anyone but God; and (4) was also untouchable.<sup>103</sup>

### 3.10.2 *God's will and the people's will*

One curious moment in the above discussion is that Prokopovich tried to reconcile the idea of social contract, borrowed from the European school of natural law, with the then dominant Russian idea of divine enthronement. The author, in fact, accepted both grounds for a sovereign's right to supreme power, but he could not escape some necessary clarifications. Both Hobbes and Pufendorf identified the main source of the supreme power in the original contract of association.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, they could only do this by also developing the idea of *individual sovereignty*, which logically led "to the full rejection of theocratic foundations of power."<sup>105</sup> The Hobbesian contract was at the same time the contract of association, which created *populus*, and the contract of subjection, which created *rex*. Like Hobbes, Pufendorf tended to present separate individuals, not the collective people, as the opposing side to the *rex*, while the people's sovereignty was resurrected only occasionally when the sovereign was falling away.

For Prokopovich, however, God's revelation remained not only an independent source of cognition, but also an important force in the establishment of any political order. Trying to accommodate the contractual foundation of supreme power, Prokopovich "assume[d] the initial sovereignty of a people, not of an individual. The contract discussed in *The Truth of the Monarch's Will* [was] exclusively *pactum subjectionis*; the people function[ed] in it as a previously constituted unity possessing the common will."<sup>106</sup> At the same time, every sovereign was endowed with the absolute right because of the people's common will and God's enthronement *simultaneously*. That is, for Prokopovich God's enthronement and the will of the people were always effectively the same. Gurvitch compared this principle with the Catholic formula *omnis potestas a deo per populum* (all power comes from God but through the people). Yet in Prokopovich's writings this formula received a slightly different meaning. If for Catholic scholars the nature of power in

103. Gurvitch 1915, 3–4.

104. Gurvitch 1915, 49.

105. Gurvitch 1915, 59.

106. Gurvitch 1915, 68.

general was divine, but the right for it was given through the people, for Prokopovich it was “the power of *every given ruler* that [came] from God, . . . yet, . . . not directly, but through the people’s will directed by God.”<sup>107</sup>

In the above principle one could easily discern the logic similar to the one which was activated during the 1613 Assembly of the Land. There, the people, understood as a preexisting entity, performed the function of God’s hand. Hence, the people’s will should have always been unanimous. Prokopovich left no space for deliberation or debate in his political theory. The ruler was always enthroned by acclamation, which was a mere actualization of divine providence. Consequently, unlike Pufendorf, who interpreted the second contract as reciprocal, Prokopovich presented his contract as strictly unilateral. What is more, unlike Hobbes, whose contract was also unilateral, but who specifically reserved a semblance of individual rights in his conception of simple obedience, Prokopovich left no space at all for individual freedom. In *The Word on Tsaric Power and Honor* (1718), he complained that many Russian people “[did] not know that the highest power [*vysochayshaya derzhava*] was established by God, and weaponed by him, and that resisting it [was] a sin against God himself, which [was] punished by not only temporal, but also eternal death.”<sup>108</sup> In his opinion, this should have been the case, because “Christ did not give us the freedom to disregard God’s commandments and to disobey the powers that be, but he specifically affirmed [that we should obey them].”<sup>109</sup>

### 3.10.3 Peter’s religious absolutism

Consequently, even though many historians argued that the religious foundation of power, which was crucial in Muscovite Russia, became a thing of the past in the eighteenth century,<sup>110</sup> the situation was not exactly that straightforward. While it is true that the official church was distanced from the state government, the power as such did not lose its religious nature. No doubt, Peter the Great sympathized with the utilitarian conception of the state and even commissioned the publication of one of Pufendorf’s books in Russian. Yet, at the same time, he effectively possessed absolute power and did not make it legally subordinate to the interest of the state. As an auto-

107. Gurvitch 1915, 13, emphasis added.

108. Prokopovich 1961, 77.

109. Prokopovich 1961, 79.

110. Stennik 2006; also see Lappo-Danilevsky 1914.

cratic monarch, he could also always intervene in any affair and subject any private individual to the pressure of his bureaucratic machine. Finally, Peter was also always referring to the theory of the Orthodox tsar and the Orthodox state in most of his political statements.<sup>111</sup>

This controversy did not escape the attention of the most attentive observers. Oleg Kharkhordin argued that Peter's attempt to introduce the notion of common good was self-undermining. In his view, separating the body of the state from the person of the ruler in the context when that ruler also controlled the state body completely, and was "divinely sanctioned" to do so, was a no go. Kharkhordin interpreted the idea of common good as a convenient fiction to exert even more control over the population, not as a socially instigated model for a just society. Peter's example was useful for Kharkhordin insofar as it made this contradiction more visible, while in the West, where the idea of common good was, in his view, utilized for similar purposes, this manipulation was clouded by the dominance of republican thinkers.<sup>112</sup>

It becomes evident from Prokopovich's writings that, discursively, the Russian political regime remained explicitly connected to its religious sources with providence and God's will being both the foundations and the instruments of sovereignty. What seemed as almost complete secularization was, in fact, the consolidation of absolute power in the hands of the monarch-theocrat. Hence, in Peter's time, despite the monarch's negative attitude to Byzantium, "Byzantinization [of the Russian political regime] was not only compatible with Europeanization, but as concerns the sacralization of the tsar's power, it combined with Europeanization, forming a single whole."<sup>113</sup>

This Byzantinization, however, was not a blind replanting of Byzantine tradition, but a reflective reconstruction of the latter that attained an important generative effect, because of which old structures gave birth to new meanings. If in Byzantium the relation between the figure of the basileus and the deity could be characterized as parallelism at most, in the Russian tradition the image of the tsar almost entirely merged with that of the Christian God. In the middle of the eighteenth century, this shift received its symbolic manifestation in the altered ritual of coronation.<sup>114</sup> Triggered by the

111. Lappo-Danilevsky 1914.

112. Kharkhordin 2001, 221–22.

113. Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012, 17.

114. Cherniavsky 1961, 90–91.

state's takeover of the church, because of which the monarch was gradually turning into a spiritual leader of the nation (in addition to being a civic one), strong and all-pervasive sacralization of the monarch developed into an important attribute of the Russian Empire's discursive structure. This attribute outlasted Peter's reign and preserved its importance (not without opposition) throughout the whole period of the empire's existence.

### 3.11 GREATNESS AS APPEARANCE

The problem with Russia's greatness revealing itself through glory, however, was that it always remained markedly artificial. To be more precise, glorification was and is always unbreakably tied to appearance. It is actualized through enactment and has no positive content of its own. Glorification merely affirms what has been said or done already. Like "amen" coming in the end of a liturgical utterance to simply validate the statement, not to add any new content to it, political glorification usually capitalized on the words and deeds already said and undertaken, without producing any new discursive stuff (e.g., systems of ideas or arguments). One could, of course, argue that as such it does not become less important for exercising political power. Giorgio Agamben insisted that in theology glory hid the unthinkable majesty of the Father and resolved the problem of the finitude of the salvation economy. He also suggested that political power needed glory for similar purposes—to justify and maintain political order by hiding the hollow center of sovereignty.<sup>115</sup> Still, the key purpose of glorification is to create an aura.<sup>116</sup> Hence, greatness affirmed through glorification was neither appealing to some pristine essence of Russian polity, nor did it establish itself through measurement and deliberation. However, it depended on external recognition, as it was purely *theatrical*—that is, it manifested itself through appearance and could only be experienced sentiently. Theatrical greatness reproduced itself within Russian political discourse by means of its own articulation.

However, theatrical greatness can only be called "unreal" if one prioritizes consensual deliberation and measurement, or tries to reach some immanent substance behind appearance. Such considerations, however,

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115. Agamben 2011.

116. Kagarlitsky 1999.

may be irrelevant for social facts, whose validity can be evaluated on an altogether different scale. One could think of the actual, literal theater performance, for example. It is not necessary for a theater audience to believe in the historicity of the play on stage or in the truthfulness of all the actors to still admit that their performance can produce profound social effects and be recognized as a great work of art. The point is that, when one attends a performance, one looks at it through a slightly different lens, assesses it using a different set of criteria, and participates in it utilizing a different selection of practices. A theatrical performance is also not subject to consensual validation. It can, of course, be discussed and compared to other performances, but only by means of aesthetic judgment, which is always subjective. The recognition of its success hinges upon the feeling of transcendence that it must be able to create. To become great, it should merely be persuasive. Thus, within the framework sketched out in the introductory chapter, theatrical greatness can be classified as auratic and revolutionary, meaning that, while still evading relative comparison and evaluation, it was also aimed at radically changing the position of the speaker within the then current international status quo.

### 3.1.2 POLITICAL IMPRESSIONISM OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

Indeed, throughout the eighteenth century both domestic and international discursive manifestations of Russia's political greatness had a clear element of theatricality to them. They were largely dependent on visibility and creating impression. This is how historian Vasily Klyuchevsky described Catherine II's influence on Russia's domestic political order and international standing. He argued that the kind of enlightenment Catherine brought to the Russian people was not about instilling a just and corruptless political order, but about showing the true value of those principles and giving a taste of what they may feel in private, individual existence.<sup>117</sup> Klyuchevsky insisted that

this glory was a new impression for the Russian society, and it is in this glory where the secret of Catherine's popularity lies. In her worldwide glory the Russian society felt its own international strength, they discovered them-

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117. Klyuchevsky 2008.

selves through it: *Catherine was admired just like we admire an actor*, who opens and awakes previously unknown feelings inside us; she was admired because through her we began to admire ourselves. Since Peter, Russians hardly thought of themselves as people, let alone true Europeans; under Catherine, however, Russians not only felt they were people, but they also felt as if they were the first people in all of Europe.<sup>118</sup>

Like most representatives of the “State School” of Russian historiography, Klyuchevsky was probably overestimating the significance of the allegedly all-pervasive state and the gifted rulers for Russia’s political evolution. Yet what remains important in his account of Catherine’s reign is a very specific mode of state-society interaction, which he pinpointed very lucidly as being theatrical. This interaction hinged upon creating a powerful impression strong enough to forgive the empress for numerous smaller failures and losses in domestic administration. It also seems that Catherine chose to employ a similar strategy in her interactions with foreign intellectuals, who propagated her cause in Western Europe—she preferred to be viewed from a distance. The positive impression she had managed to create on people like Voltaire and Diderot through generous gifts and blandishment was carefully guarded.<sup>119</sup>

Another example of Catherine’s political impressionism in action is the (in)famous myth about Potemkin villages—namely, the colorful facades of village houses that Grigory Potemkin, Catherine’s probablemorganatic husband, allegedly installed along the banks of the Dnieper River during the empress’ trip to Crimea in 1787. Like A. M. Panchenko and Andrei Zorin, I abstain from debating the truthfulness of this myth and look instead at its symbolic significance. Both Panchenko and Zorin argued convincingly that Potemkin’s “performance,” if it ever happened, was more about “symbolic transformation of space, a theatre decoration that allowed the spectators to feel themselves participants in a mythologic act.”<sup>120</sup>

In the eighteenth century, the Russian empire utilized this mode of political interaction in its international relations as well. Klyuchevsky, a contem-

118. Klyuchevsky 2008, emphasis added.

119. E.g., this was Anthony Lentin’s (1974, 31–32) explanation of Catherine’s unwillingness to let Voltaire come to Saint Petersburg to meet her in person.

120. Zorin 2001, 133. Zorin wrote these lines about another Potemkin’s “performance,” a 1779 celebration organized on the occasion of the birth of Catherine’s grandson Konstantin, but he admitted that the principle of his symbolic interaction with the audience was similar to the one used during Catherine’s trip to Crimea.



porary of Monet and Renoir, discerned in such mode of conduct the curious effect of an impressionist painting. The historian wrote that “the Empire . . . was seen by law and by general impression as a magnificent and harmonic building, while at a closer look it revealed chaos and disorder, as a painting with sweeping brushstrokes only fit for observing it from the distance.”<sup>121</sup> A similar effect was later reportedly created by Catherine’s grandson emperor Alexander I (1801–1825) during the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815). When Alexander represented the “new and enigmatical” Russia at the Congress, he was generally perceived as “a theatrical, mystical, and versatile personage.”<sup>122</sup> Perhaps, Prince Talleyrand captured something beyond mere flattery when he told Alexander that “the foremost of [his] interests is the care of that personal glory which [he] has acquired, and whose lustre [was] reflected upon [his] Empire,”<sup>123</sup> because it was solely on the account of this personal glory that the acceptance of “the intervention of Russia in the affairs of Europe . . . [had] been suffered to take place.”<sup>124</sup> Pointing in the same direction as Klyuchevsky when he was writing of Catherine, Talleyrand also added, “[His] majesty must guard that glory, not for [his] own sake only, but also for the sake of [his] people, whose patrimony it [was].”<sup>125</sup>

### 3.13 DISPELLING THE CHARM AND THE BINARY LOGIC OF PEOPLE’S UNISON

One obvious weakness of political impressionism is disclosure, for it is through disclosure that the charm of performative greatness gets dispelled. Russian elites understood this clearly, but naturally they did not rush to emphasize this in their foreign relations. This was not the case for some of their private correspondence though. For instance, in 1795, the grand chancellor and the architect of Russian foreign policy, Alexander Bezborodko, while complaining to Prince Nikolai Repnin about the lack of resources, wrote, “Fortunately, everyone believes that we [Russia] are stronger than we really are in our essence, and such good impression will help us get out of this chaos, given that we act modestly and with prudence.”<sup>126</sup>

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121. Klyuchevsky 2008.

122. Pallain 1881, xii.

123. Pallain 1881, 74.

124. Pallain 1881, 74.

125. Pallain 1881, 74.

126. Kostomarov and Polovtsov 1875, 207.

The issue of “charm” as an attribute of great powers persisted at least until the very dusk of the Russian empire. Before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), the ultimate point of weakness for Imperial Russia, Baron Roman Rosen, the Russian ambassador in Tokyo, wrote that Russia could not pursue two foreign policy goals in the Far East simultaneously, and that the only option was “to concentrate all its efforts . . . in Manchuria, . . . for Russia could not withdraw from it without significant damage to its *charm* [*obayanie*] and *political interests* as a world power in the Far East.”<sup>127</sup> Rosen also believed that the Japanese had been effectively deterred by that “*charm* of Russia as the greatest world power.”<sup>128</sup>

However, already in the eighteenth century, the susceptibility and irritation triggered by potential disclosure and comparison became obvious. The most telling discursive example revealing such sensitivity was the anonymous opus called *Antidote* (1770), which was often attributed to Catherine the Great herself. This 238-page (!) pamphlet was a response to one “obnoxious, but gorgeously printed book”<sup>129</sup>—Abbot Jean-Baptiste Chappe d’Auteroche’s unflattering account about his journey through Russia, published in 1768.<sup>130</sup> In her autographic rescript from the pamphlet, Catherine bitterly noted, “out of all the agents, who, driven by selfishness and intrigue, have been disturbing peace in the world, I would eagerly believe the abbot to be the most cunning and methodical.”<sup>131</sup> The empress was revolted by the fact that the abbot was set to debunk the allegedly exaggerated evaluations of Russia’s power and significance in the European discourse through subjecting the country to rigorous in-person research.

According to Catherine, Chappe d’Auteroche, pretending to pursue some astronomic fieldwork, in fact, compiled a set of detailed tables that scrutinized and assessed all the parameters and profits of the Empire,

*measuring* in his own way *the sources of our power* [*mogushchestva*]*—that is, bringing out the worst in our political regime, and in the features and character of our people. In addition, he began to belittle our state’s annual profits, its land and naval forces, its population, the efficiency of its trade and mines, and the quality of its soil.*<sup>132</sup>

127. Rosen cited in Ryabushinsky 1910, 46, emphasis added.

128. Ryabushinsky 1910, 46, emphasis added.

129. Catherine II 1869, 226.

130. Chappe d’Auteroche 1768.

131. Polovtsov 1872, 317.

132. Catherine II 1869, 298, emphasis added.

The general line of critique was to insist that d'Aueroche's data and observations were either noncredible, nongeneralizable, or typical of all European nations and not of Russia alone. Thus, the author insisted that the abbot's observations were nothing but defamation, contradicting the obvious reality of Russia's power and significance.<sup>133</sup> The evidence of Russia's significance, however, was not presented in *Antidote* in the kind of format that d'Aueroche would have deemed acceptable. Throughout all 238 pages the author did not move beyond deconstruction. Yet one important feature that did, in the author's opinion, make Russia great and that was expanded upon in the text of the pamphlet was the ability of the Russian people to connect in one unified feeling during difficult times. In *Antidote*, this ability was referred to as *obshchiy golos naroda* (i.e., "common voice of the people") or *soglasie* (i.e., "consonance").<sup>134</sup> Allegedly, such consonance always emerged when the country was weak and endangered.

The idea of the people's consonance is, in fact, another reemerging theme in Russia's political discourse. Its importance should not be underestimated, whereas it unites the absolute and theatrical modes of political greatness. Since the absolute realm is unknowable through human sensation, while theatrical manifestations are pure appearances detached from any universal foundation, the only way of their collective validation is a consonance of some sort, because such validation would necessarily need to follow a binary logic.

On the one hand, if appearance does not matter, since greatness is some objective inner truth, all arguments and discussions become irrelevant. A belief is considered true only if it perfectly corresponds to some discursively represented, but experientially unattainable, absolute entity. I rendered this mode of greatness in mostly religious terms, because it largely remains a matter of belief, rather than comparative analysis, while collective unison represents the most natural form of its external validation.<sup>135</sup> On the other hand,

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133. Catherine II 1869, 258 and 299.

134. Catherine II 1869, 302–3.

135. The importance of unison comes to the fore very often in the Russian political discourse. For example, here is how Lev Löwenson (1936, 7–8) described the procedure of *vieche*, i.e., the adult inhabitants' assembly in the city of Novgorod in premodern times: "Whenever the Prince or the city elders had anything of importance to communicate, the *vieche* bell was rung and the adult inhabitants assembled in an open place . . . There was no secret or individual vote. The assembly made known its will by a mighty shout, and if there was no strong opposition the vote was regarded as unanimous. If, however, the opposition was loud and persistent, the question was finally settled by a free-fight." The unison of all people also figures prominently in the story of the 1613 Assembly of the Land, the 1613 Charter of Enthronement, and Theophan Prokopovich's political philosophy.

if there is no real foundation, and only appearance matters, there is no etalon for anything at all, just as there are no universals. Truth, in this case, is internal to the process of signification. And the endless debate that comes as its consequence can only stop in persuasion. When it comes to political entities, this moment of persuasion is always problematic, for it must be immediately overwhelming to work at all. Thus, for instance, however convincing Leviathan looks in the end, Hobbes could not convincingly demonstrate how an arrangement like this could start to develop.

### 3.14 MAINTAINING THE APPEARANCE

The emerging European tendency to measure political greatness and the troubles that Russia seems to have had with it that revealed themselves in *Antidote*, were also characteristic of contemporaneous Russia's diplomatic relations with its European neighbors. For example, in 1766, Sir George Macartney, British ambassador in Saint Petersburg, was quick to notice that Russia and Great Britain were "under mutual mistakes with regard to each other . . . [and the British mistake] with regard to [Russia was] in looking upon this nation as a civilized one and treating them as such, [for] it by no means *merit[ed]* this title."<sup>136</sup> Noting and setting Macartney's blatant orientalism aside, one may look into his justification principle. Trying to rationalize such behavior of the Russian court, Macartney, recalling how much Russia was courted by "the most formidable powers of Europe," suggested that the insolence that Russians were "swelled with" was "generally the attendant of *unmerited* good fortune,"<sup>137</sup> insinuating that for a Briton, merit was the only measure of greatness.

In another piece of correspondence that took place in 1768, Macartney's successor, Mr. Henry Shirley, wrote to Lord Viscount Weymouth, the British secretary of state for the Northern Department, about his personal feelings toward Russians:

One cannot help pitying Russians, who think themselves so wise, so powerful, when they are at such an immense distance from the happy situation of some nations in Europe. I confess that their credit and influence is great, that their army is numerous, though not invincible, as they believe; but as the

136. Polovtsov 1873, 248–49, emphasis added.

137. Polovtsov 1873, 253.

brightness of their power proceeds in a great measure from the weakness of some of their neighbors, and the strength of the King of Prussia . . . it would be injudicious to suppose that it will shine for ever.<sup>138</sup>

However, the most interesting diplomatic exchange occurred a year earlier between Shirley and the then current British secretary of state for the Northern Department, Lord Henry Seymour Conway. While trying to negotiate a trade agreement with Russia, Shirley assured Conway that Russia would most likely agree to align with such a powerful ally as Britain, but not without the Turkish clause.<sup>139</sup> In response, Conway suggested that Shirley could emphasize British grandeur by touching upon several topics in his conversations with Nikita Panin, the Russian minister of foreign affairs. These topics included

the unparalleled successes of the last war . . . important acquisitions gained in every part of the world [which] render[ed] the success of [British] arms not a *vain blaze of glory*, but the source of such a *solid increase of power and riches*, as [would] be of the most durable advantage to the Nation.<sup>140</sup>

Conway also added that “the finances of the whole Russian Empire [would] not, *on comparison*, be found more superior.”<sup>141</sup> In addition, he also evaluated Russia’s strengths (e.g., its remote position, land, and manpower) and concluded that “each State seem[ed] *calculated* by nature to supply the defects of the other, and were their union once established and generally known, it would add consideration to both, and enable them . . . to pursue . . . those arts of peace and cultivation which form the real grandeur and happiness of a people.”<sup>142</sup>

Having discussed the matter of Britain’s greatness with Panin, Shirley reported the latter’s response, which proved both puzzling and curious to both British diplomats. Panin, “observing the warmth with which [Shirley] spoke, smiled, and taking [Shirley] by the hand [said that he] could show [him] the same fair prospect on [Russia’s] side.”<sup>143</sup> When Shirley assured Panin that he did not intend “to under-rate the power of Russia,”<sup>144</sup> Panin

138. Polovtsov 1873, 330.

139. Polovtsov 1873, 310.

140. Polovtsov 1873, 311, emphasis added.

141. Polovtsov 1873, 312, emphasis added.

142. Polovtsov 1873, 315–14, emphasis added.

143. Polovtsov 1873, 318.

144. Polovtsov 1873, 318.

interrupted his interlocutor and, promising to open his heart to Shirley, tried to articulate the real obstacle that he saw in front of him. For Panin, those measurements and justifications of greatness were missing the point. And the point was that Russia wanted “to render it unnecessary . . . to renew her former connection[s] . . . She ought to be not only absolutely independent of every other connection, but the base also of every other connection.”<sup>145</sup> That is, she could not afford, given her unquestionable highest dignity and status, to put herself in a position of needing to seek, in addition to the alliance with Great Britain, some other alliances to protect herself from Turkey. In Panin’s opinion, Russia needed to minimize potential further compromises and maximize its independent, but also almost isolated position, and, together with Great Britain as an equally great power, she should have been able to hold the fate of European war in her hands, which would not have been the case, had the Turkish clause been excluded from the agreement.

In other words, if for Great Britain its political greatness gave it some competitive advantage, which could be measured, explicitly articulated and eventually translated into *leverage* in international negotiations, Russia’s political greatness was treated, if anything, as an *obstacle* for international negotiations, because it made it impossible to agree to anything which could be perceived as dishonorable or degrading for the dignity of the Russian great sovereign. The discursive consequences of such a position were long-lasting and rather destructive.

### 3.15 CONCLUSION

The acute need to justify Peter’s reforms that fundamentally transformed the Russian domestic regime invariably altered Russia’s essentialist narrative on its political greatness. Political greatness was no longer perceived as contiguous to Russia’s pristine essence. Instead, it began to be interpreted as a product of Russia’s salvation by Peter the Great. Fully attached to the figure of the monarch, it reproduced itself within political discourse by means of its own articulation in panegyric poetry, sermons, architecture and art. After losing its absolute foundation, greatness turned into *theatrical glory*, and as such it remained as detached from international hierarchies and comparisons as was its preceding analog.

Russian political discourse of Peter’s and Catherine’s times reveals that

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145. Polovtsov 1873, 317.

maintaining the appearance of political greatness was at least as important as exposing and capitalizing on measurable resources, political institutions, and alliances. Russian political impressionism, characterized by implicit theatricality and overreliance on persuasion, became a new mode of discursive representation of greatpowerhood, both domestically and abroad. Such a mode of action was heavily based on grand gestures and impressive breakthroughs and was allergic to the nitty-gritty of institution building and scrupulous accumulation and management of resources. It was also preoccupied with honor and the protection of the dignity of the Russian throne.

Such position was not unique. Performance and persuasion were (and are) politics' essential parts not only in Russia and not only on the superficial level of diplomatic rituals and political ceremonies. They also matter on a more profound level of constructing political subjects—theater does possess its own peculiar materiality.<sup>146</sup> While power does need glory, and not as a simple adoration or as accommodation of monarchs' selfish caprices. Without glory, sovereignty would not work.<sup>147</sup> Indeed, post-*res publica christiana* Europe largely relied on theatrical manifestations and appearance in its quest for asserting political identities and having them recognized within the international system. At the same time, the dominance of the theatrical representations of greatness in Russian political discourse coincided with two other important international processes: (1) Russia's gradual inclusion into the European society of states and the great power club that ran it; and (2) the transformation of the discourse on political greatness in many European states into the story of world history and universal progress. Gradually becoming a full-fledged member of the European system and internalizing some of its foundational narratives, Russia also found itself deficient in terms of the newly established dominant standard and had to reinvent itself and reformulate the theatrical position that had sustained it so far. This reformulation took place against the background of uneven development and the emergence of the new mode of international conduct that manifested itself in the establishment of great power management as an institution of international society. In the next chapter, I look at how Russia tried to cope with this new challenge.

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146. Ringmar 2016.

147. Agamben 2011.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Troubled Encounter*

#### Back to Absolute?

*the three allied Princes looking on themselves as merely delegated by the Providence to govern three branches of One family . . . thus confessing that the Christian world, of which they and their people form a part, has in reality no other Sovereign than Him to whom alone power really belongs*

“HOLY ALLIANCE” BETWEEN AUSTRIA, PRUSSIA, AND RUSSIA SIGNED IN PARIS  
(26 SEPTEMBER 1815)

*Foreseeing the awkwardness of this piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense, especially to a British Sovereign, I examined with Prince Metternich every practical expedient to stop it; but the Emperor of Austria, with all his sobriety of mind, did not venture to risk it.*

LORD CASTLEREAGH TO BRITISH PRIME MINISTER, LORD LIVERPOOL  
(28 SEPTEMBER 1815)

If continuous socialization brings actors closer together, one common enemy brings them closer together several times as fast. In this respect, the rise of Napoleon and his joint defeat were crucial factors facilitating Russia's speedy rapprochement with Europe. Thus, the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815) that immediately followed the Napoleonic Wars and became the main site for the renegotiation of European political order was another transformative moment in the evolution of Russian great power discourse. As hinted in the previous chapter, this discursive transformation was influenced by two important factors. The first influence was Russia's official assumption of the role of a European great power. The second factor was the evolution of the discourse on political greatness in many European states that started in



the second half of the eighteenth century and received its institutionalized manifestation in Vienna in the form of the Congress System.

In its turn, the emergence of the Congress System as an institution of international society was accompanied by two intellectual processes in international legal and political thought. First, international law began to distance itself from natural law and transformed into positive international law. Positive international law relied on states' practices, as opposed to decontextualized abstract ideals, and was only applicable to "civilized" states, not colonized territories (the latter continued to be treated through natural law). Second, this shift translated into the story of world-historic progress which conditioned the discursive construction of an international hierarchy consisting of civilized, barbarian, and savage peoples, where the civilized lot could legitimately engage in imperial and colonizing practices and self-assumed the right to manage international order. States' involvement in colonization became a box to tick for every great power.

Reflecting on this, the Russian Empire found itself in an ambivalent situation. On the one hand, as a recognized participant of the Congress System, Russia could not but adopt the new dominant narrative of the progressive development of universal humanity. On the other hand, as a recent and unevenly developed newcomer, it found itself somewhat deficient in those terms and could not claim to be on par with the most advanced European polities when it came to its civilizational level. Russia spent most of the nineteenth century trying to devise its own mobilizational narrative that could become a catching-up ideology but would not contradict the already internalized European ideas and challenge the fragile recognition of its great power status.

In 1814–1815, the mismatch between the previously dominant theatrical understanding of Russia's foundational narrative on its political greatness and the newly established European consensus became especially obvious. However, that troubled encounter was just a culminating point of deeper and longer discursive transformations that took place both within Russia and outside its borders. In this chapter, I try to accomplish five tasks that should help contextualize the crisis of the theatrical understanding of political greatness that had enjoyed prevalence in Russia's discursive universe up to that point and explain the emergence of a genealogical offspring of the previously marginalized absolute position.

First, without going too deeply into the ideational evolution that made the emergence of the Congress System and great power management possi-

ble (for this is not the focus of this book), I briefly reconstruct this process as it is reflected in the existing scholarship. Second, I trace the path that Russia had accomplished before it was recognized as a member of the European society of states, even if provisionally and not completely. Third, I discuss the triumphant entry of the Russian army and its allies into Paris in 1814 to illustrate the specific mode of glorification adhered to by the Russian emperor Alexander I (1801–1825). Fourth, I elaborate on the clash of discursive positions on political greatness that took place in Vienna and possibly triggered Alexander’s puzzling individual transformation during and in the immediate aftermath of the Congress. The sudden shift in his discursive position—from progressive liberalism to religious mysticism—could, as I will argue, be better understood from within the semantic framework I propose in this book. Finally, I look at the remnants of the discourse on Russia’s absolute greatness, which had been marginalized in the eighteenth century and remained in hibernation ever since. I suggest that in the nineteenth century some of its elements were resurrected to reinforce Russia’s great power discourse and aided the construction of a specifically Russian progressive narrative of political greatness, which was formulated in terms congruent with the European story of progress, but functionally dissimilar to it. A detailed discussion of the resulting discursive construct in all its complexity will follow in the next chapter.

#### 4.1 EMERGENCE OF GREAT POWER MANAGEMENT IN EUROPE

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russia’s status as one of the European great powers was always on shaky ground.<sup>1</sup> While its successful participation in the most important continental wars put Western powers in a position of having to talk to Russia, the tone of that talk, as well as Russia’s international recognition, were always ambivalent. Why was it difficult for Russia to socialize into the European society of states and adopt the language of relative and measurable greatness that started to dominate the European political arena? Where did this relational language come from to begin with?

According to Hamish Scott, the language of relativity and precise measurement of political power became hegemonic in European politics in the

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1. Neumann 2008a, 2008b.

second half of the eighteenth century—that is, at the time when the term “great power” entered the policymakers’ lexicon. Scott argued that “the very notion of ‘great powers’ underlined the extent to which a state’s standing within the international hierarchy was now being assessed both with greater precision and relative to that of other participants.”<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on precise measurement of states’ relative and potential power coincided with the emergence of the science of statistics.

Yet it was not only the degree of precision that began to matter when it came to assessing greatpowerhood in late eighteenth-century Europe. If in the early modern system the standing of a polity had been mostly measured in military victories and territorial conquest, in the eighteenth century, the predominant conception of power in Europe became more nuanced and complex. It began to include the demographic, economic, and geographical factors that, considered and calculated together, constituted a state’s relative power.<sup>3</sup> In addition, power and status got inextricably intertwined with the matters of culture and civilization. The story of national greatness became the story of civilizational superiority and progress, which translated into a legally codified hierarchization of international society often described as the distinction between civilized, barbarian, and savage peoples.<sup>4</sup> Within the discursive matrix provided in the introductory chapter, such *civilizational mode* of political greatness can be categorized as *materialist* (since it begins to heavily rely on a careful relational assessment of various state’s attributes and political factors), and *conservative* (since it produces a civilizational hierarchy and sides with the interests of those who end up on the top).

The production and maintenance of the progressive understanding of world history was accompanied and facilitated by an important transformation of international law. Martti Koskenniemi described this process as an emergence of a liberal internationalist legal sensibility, which “not only [exhibited a] reformist political bent but [also a] conviction that international reform could be derived from deep insights about society, history, human nature, or developmental laws of an international and institutional modernity.”<sup>5</sup> For Koskenniemi, the fundamental shift in the international legal discourse occurred in the central decades of the nineteenth century. By the period between 1869 and 1885, international law had already detached itself from “the highly abstract under-

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2. Scott 2001, 8.

3. Scott 2001, 8. Also see footnotes 26 and 27 for a good list of sources on this topic.

4. McNeill, Bentley, and Wallerstein 2005, 358–63.

5. Koskenniemi 2004, 3.

standings of natural law that had attracted earlier generations, stressing instead the socially embedded and ever-evolving character of legal systems.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the new international legal story remained essentially universalist so long as it considered the national laws as mere “aspects or stages of the universal development of human society.”<sup>7</sup>

From this perspective, world progress was understood in Hegelian terms as a series of progressive revelations of the universal spirit through concrete historical manifestations of national spirits. This meant that, internationally, various political entities were supposed to be ranked through historical and cultural analysis of their civilizational levels. On the other hand, those entities which scored low in terms of their civilizational standards could, in principle, be brought into the family of humanity, but only with the help and guidance of those who were already in. These ideas enabled the construction of a legally codified international hierarchy with an exclusive club of great powers on the top, and legitimized imperial practices of various degrees of brutality. Great powers’ self-ascribed responsibility for maintaining international order and for civilizing the uncivilized bunch gradually sedimented into an international institution, which Hedley Bull much later called “great power management.”<sup>8</sup>

#### 4.2 COMMON DISCURSIVE TRENDS

The story of universal progress and the idea of great power management stemming from it are good illustrations showing that Russian ideational evolution was not as idiosyncratic as it may have seemed. The transition from absolute to theatrical understanding of political greatness could, in fact, be interpreted as a wider European pattern. The sole fact that in the sixteenth century Russia started to emphasize the greatness of its *derzhava* (great power) in opposition to some European states by introducing a tautology *velikaya derzhava* (great great power) suggests that before the sixteenth century the two discourses were not in disagreement as to what proper polities should have been like. The idea that principalities were princes’ private domains, and that princes’ right to unconditionally possess and govern them was divinely instituted, was first shaken only by the republican think-

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6. Bell 2006, 289.

7. Koskenniemi 2004, 46.

8. Bull 2002, 194–222.

ers of the sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Thus, when Ivan IV reproached some European monarchs for not being great enough, he may have merely alluded to a common frame of reference, which, in his opinion, had been broken.

Similarly, an understanding that political greatness was a matter of appearance and the recognition of persuasive performances came to dominate the European political discourse, when the universalist religious foundation beneath the previously existing world order began to crack—that is, in the sixteenth century. As Erik Ringmar put this, in reaction to the Renaissance and the great geographical discoveries, “the Europeans were able to attain new perspectives on themselves, and from these new perspectives it became possible for them to question themselves in a radically new fashion.”<sup>10</sup> This new fashion detached itself from associating one’s political identity with the idea of the universal Christian empire, and was drawn more to the idea that identities could be enacted and subsequently recognized without being necessarily mounted on the foundation of some eternal truth not perceptible by the senses.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these two understandings of political greatness merged to constitute a qualitatively new, yet genealogically related, synthetic position. The latter postulated that great power was a relational status in the international system, which depended on concrete cultural-historical manifestation, but, at the same time, was anchored in the idea of the universal progress of humanity. Thus, the new synthesis was neither purely absolute (as greatness was necessarily established within a community through competitive recognition), nor simply theatrical (as the recognition was granted not on the basis of a sheer persuasiveness of political performance but based on a state’s conformance to the standards of universal modernity). Instead, it was an intermediate progressive position, which relied on the detailed analysis of cultural and material sources of political might and on the institutionalization of the resulting civilizational spectrum through positive international law.

#### 4.3 JOINING THE CLUB

Even though Russia’s great power status was constantly questioned by its Western counterparts,<sup>11</sup> there is also little doubt that on many levels Russia

9. Kharkhordin 2001.

10. Ringmar 2007.

11. Neumann 2008a; Neumann and Pouliot 2011.

was still considered to be one of the club members, even if provisionally, temporarily, or not completely.<sup>12</sup> What explains this ambivalence in Russia's relations with the West, and when could Russia be said to have achieved its imperfect recognition as a great power club member? In his work on Russia's great power standing from 1494 until 1815, Neumann tried to answer this question by tracing the development of Russian-European diplomatic relations and military alliances.<sup>13</sup> He concluded that, even though Russia actually never managed to acquire full recognition of its great power status, since its domestic autocratic regime was perceived as abnormal (viewed against the emerging European governmentality),<sup>14</sup> it nevertheless passed a number of stages of inclusion into the European society of states. Furthermore, by the end of the eighteenth century, Russia already became an important participant in the European balance of power.

Muscovy's first diplomatic contacts with its Western neighbors took place at the turn and throughout the sixteenth century (e.g., formalized diplomatic relations with Denmark in 1493 and formalized trade relations with England in 1553). In the seventeenth century, Russia established the first temporary diplomatic missions (to Sweden in 1634–1636 and to Poland in 1673–1677), and undertook several decisive military moves and alliances (the First Northern War of 1655–1660, and the Eternal Peace with Poland-Lithuania of 1686).<sup>15</sup> During this stage, however, despite the fact that Russia was certainly noted as a factor in European relations, it was still “not being recognised as having *droit de regard* (right of being taken into account).”<sup>16</sup> Back then, it was mostly seen as a Baltic, as opposed to European, power. Most of the international exercises that reaffirmed the idea of the European system as based on the balance of power (e.g., the Treaty of Utrecht of 1713) did not include Russia.

The second stage of Russia's entry into the European society of states was marked by the rapprochement and military efforts undertaken by Peter I. During his reign, permanent diplomatic missions became the norm (to the Netherlands in 1699, to Sweden in 1700, to Austria in 1701, etc.). Even more importantly, Russia's success in the Great Northern War (1700–1721) caused a swift and radical reinterpretation of its role on the European continent. As

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12. Scott 2001.

13. Neumann 2008b.

14. The perceived abnormality of Russia's domestic regime, in fact, remained an obstacle for the external recognition of Russia's great power status long after 1815. On this, see Neumann 2008a.

15. Neumann 2008b, 19–21.

16. Neumann 2008b, 20.

Janet Hartley noted, “both during and after the Northern War . . . Great Britain attempted to restrain Russian ambitions through the formation of coalitions against her, which is itself indicative of a new respect for Russian power.”<sup>17</sup> Hans Bagger also noted that after the Peace of Nystadt (1721), Russia attained a “new status as a great power and became a European state insofar as the Russian Empire had to be incorporated into the system of European international relations.”<sup>18</sup>

At the same time, both Peter’s contemporaries and descending generations recognized that that international respect which Peter had managed to secure, was largely a function of the impression created on the battlefield. For example, Peter’s close associate, Pyotr Shafirov, admitted that

the greater part of [Russia’s] neighbours view very unfavourably the good position in which it has pleased God to place [Russia]; that they would be delighted should an occasion present itself to imprison [Russia] once more in [its] earlier obscurity and that if they seek [an] alliance [with Russia] it is rather through fear and hate than through feelings of friendship.<sup>19</sup>

Two centuries later, another statesman and Russia’s first prime minister (1903–1906), Sergey Witte, contemplating the effects of Russia’s defeat in the war with Japan (1904–1905), remarked that, in fact, the Russian Empire was made great “not primarily, but exclusively by its army,” and that the status of “the most dominant European great power [*velikuyu Evropeyskuyu derzhavu*]” was attained by “nothing else but the . . . army’s bayonet.”<sup>20</sup> Witte also suspected that once Europe “saw, somewhat exaggeratedly, that [Russia was] not as strong . . . the picture changed at once.”<sup>21</sup> Hence, it would be fair to conclude that, in Peter’s time, the limited interaction between Russia and international society mostly happened through war and emulation. Peter did not talk to Europe on common terms, he simply fought and imitated it. At home, Russia’s political greatness was predominantly understood in theatrical terms and it largely depended on the monarch’s personal charisma and the continuous glorification thereof.

Finally, the third stage of Russia’s entry into international society took place in the second half of the eighteenth century. Having gathered the larg-

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17. Hartley cited in Neumann 2008b, 24.

18. Bagger 1993, 36.

19. Shafirov cited in Dukes 1990, 77.

20. Witte 1924, 312.

21. Witte 1924, 312.

est army in Europe by the time of the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), Russia started to play the key role in the great power management and also became a “great responsible” in that system.<sup>22</sup> Neumann points at several crucial moments that reflected this change: “[1] Empress Elizabeth’s secret negotiations with the heads of France and Austria in 1760 . . . [2] the role Russia played in all three of Poland’s partitions . . . [and] [3] the Treaty of Teschen concluded in 1779 [when] for the first time [Russia became] a guarantor power.”<sup>23</sup>

Scott adheres to a similar chronology identifying 1756–1775 as the decisive years when the rise of the Eastern Powers and their incorporation into the European system took place. In addition, Scott also admits that initially Russia’s recognition in Europe rested on the foundation of its military strength and the impressive territorial gains the country had managed to secure.<sup>24</sup> As mentioned above, military victories and territorial expansion used to be the currency of the time. Yet the situation was slowly changing and, toward the beginning of the nineteenth century, Russia already had a different international society to converse with. This was a society held together by the discursive theme related to the progress of universal humanity.

Yet, already in the last third of the eighteenth century, whatever Russia was perceived to be in cultural or economic terms, it had to somehow be included into the system to ensure the system’s stability. Europe started looking at Russia more attentively. First, it was an apprehensive look: in Zorin’s words, “the main sphere of application of the balance of power doctrine in European, and particularly French, politics becomes the deterrence of Russia.”<sup>25</sup> Finding itself on the gaze, Russia had to look, and eventually talk, back saving its weapons and armies for other occasions (which, however, were not long in coming).

#### 4.4 EMPEROR IN PARIS: A CIVILIZED SOVEREIGN

Inside the Russian domestic discourse, Russia’s entry into international society was initially reflected from within a typically Petrine stance—panegyric literature of Catherine’s time cast Russia’s inclusion into the European soci-

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22. Neumann 2008b, 27.

23. Neumann 2008b, 27.

24. Scott 2001.

25. Zorin 2001, 75.



ety of states in terms of shining Russian glory. For instance, in one of his odes, Catherine's librarian and Potemkin's friend, Vasily Petrov compared Russia's symbolic incorporation into European politics to the rise of "another sun" that started to "shine" in Europe, its "blaze" being "annoying" to others.<sup>26</sup> This solar metaphor, one could argue, was not a particularly fortunate one for describing a member of a society regulated through close communication. Usually, a natural reaction to direct sunlight is that those who look at it immediately want to turn away, temporarily blinded. Certainly, this was not what the great power club was supposed to be about. Looking at and talking to each other was the sole most important precondition for preserving the European system's stability.

The same atmosphere of shining glory was purposefully created, when Alexander I, a grandson of Catherine II, victoriously entered Paris in 1814. This time around, however, his political performance was supposed to co-opt the French into accepting Russia's civilizational equality and impress the defeated with Russia's magnanimity and grandeur. British foreign secretary, Lord Castlereagh, treated Alexander's "*chevaleresque* tone" with caution insisting that it was of the "greatest danger" and wrote to his prime minister Lord Liverpool on 30 January 1814 (i.e., two months before the Battle of Paris) that Alexander "has a personal feeling about Paris [and] seems to seek for the occasion of entering with his magnificent guards the enemy's capital, probably to display, in his clemency and forbearance, a contrast to that desolation to which his own was devoted [i.e., to Napoleon's destruction of Moscow]."<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, Alexander invested a lot of effort into doing precisely this. Officers marching the streets of the capital on 31 March 1814 were carefully handpicked. On the eve of the allies' parade, they were obliged to clean up and mend their uniforms after the exhausting journey. Looting was strictly prohibited and could be punished by death, if it occurred. Many Russian officers were mannerly, spoke excellent French and indeed did not remind Parisians of the horde of barbarians that Napoleon's propaganda had been portraying—they did not shy away from communicating with ordinary people and the general atmosphere in the streets of Paris was amicable, not antagonistic. As the French historian Marie-Pierre Rey attested, such behavior of conquerors who captured the enemy's capital was "a unique occasion in history."<sup>28</sup>

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26. Petrov cited in Zorin 2001, 75.

27. Castlereagh cited in Russell 2001, 27, emphasis original.

28. Rey cited in Safronov 2014.

Such a neatly orchestrated spectacle may, in fact, be interpreted as a symbolic response to a conversation that Alexander had in Erfurt with Prince Talleyrand, the former (and future) French foreign minister, who had defected from Napoleon several years prior to the occasion. The Austrian foreign minister Klemens von Metternich wrote in his memoirs that Talleyrand, having presented himself to the emperor on the first day of his arrival to Erfurt, said memorable (and later oft-cited) words, trying to convince Alexander to be an ally of the French people and to resist Napoleon. In a markedly civilizationist tone, typical for that age and circle, Talleyrand lamented that “the French people are civilised, its Sovereign is not, [while] the Sovereign of Russia is civilised, and his people are not.” The proposed solution was that “the Sovereign of Russia should be allied with the French people.”<sup>29</sup> Hence, the solemn procession that introduced Russian soldiers headed by their civilized sovereign to the French public may have meant to demonstrate that not only the tsar himself, but also (some of) his people could claim the highest standards of civility.

To what extent this worked on the Parisians is, of course, up for debate. On the one hand, the stunning impression that Alexander and his army managed to produce for the French public was amply reflected by historians and artists.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, however, one could also convincingly argue that throughout the nineteenth century, the discursive construction of the Russian people in the West was significantly aided by writers and travelers, the likes of Marquise de Custine, who carried on the earlier Western European tradition of orientalizing Russians and other Eastern Europeans as exotic and undercivilized.<sup>31</sup>

Yet regardless of whether Alexander’s strategy for Russia’s self-inclusion into the European dominant discourse on civilization was effective, what seems important here is the mode of action the emperor chose to employ. While most officers and soldiers left Paris shortly after the march (and those who remained were still seen with a fair degree of exoticism), the emperor stayed and, relying heavily on his personal charisma and generosity, he continued to represent Russia’s body politic by displaying widely his majestic persona. He attended museums and theaters. He paid visits to hospitals, pro-

29. Talleyrand cited in Metternich 1880, 298.

30. Rey 2014; Boilly 1814; de Maleque 1815; Kivshenko 1880.

31. de Custine 1843. For a detailed account of the eighteenth-century literature that “invented” Eastern Europe, see Wolff 1994. For primary sources on the exploration of Russia by European travelers, see Poe 2003.

voking agitation among his associates, and took it upon himself to be the “‘new Christ’ leading the dispossessed.”<sup>32</sup> He paid spectacular sums for all the works of art he fancied and demonstrated unusual leniency to Napoleon’s former circle and family. Alexander provided Napoleon’s first and still beloved wife Joséphine with one million francs of yearly rent and even supposedly developed an affection toward his stepdaughter, Hortense.<sup>33</sup>

Virtually everything the emperor did in Paris was meant to show his, and by extension Russia’s, civility, but the way this civility was acted out remained essentially Petrine. Alexander relied on grand gestures and his own personal charm. His presence was overwhelming and often theatrical. He engaged in conversations about culture and arts and demonstrated respect toward French laws and customs, for which the French thanked him by composing flattering panegyrics.<sup>34</sup> Just as in the eighteenth century, Russia was made great through the metamorphosis carried out by its savior Peter the Great, in the nineteenth century, Russia was supposed to be brought into the civilized life of Europe through the actions of Russia’s civilized sovereign Alexander. Subsequently, the emperor exhibited a very similar political style during the Congress of Vienna. Below, I argue that such style, largely idealistic and reliant on appearance, was one of the reasons for the discursive mismatch that resurfaced in Vienna and may have conditioned the shift in Alexander’s position, which historians still find puzzling today.

#### 4.5 EMPEROR IN VIENNA: A LIBERAL IDEALIST

As is the case for any critical juncture, the Congress of Vienna, as well as its immediate aftermath, unearthed several ideational clashes between different political actors. Yet the most puzzling thing occurred on the personal level. It was an unexpected shift in the Russian emperor’s position that Andreas Osiander described as “an image neurosis”<sup>35</sup>—from hard-core progressive liberalism to religious mysticism. In other words, the emperor drifted in his argumentation from an almost revolutionary stance to a hyper-

32. Rey 2014, 211.

33. Rey 2014.

34. E.g., Rey (2014, 207–8) cites a panegyric that was sung during a celebration organized by Talleyrand in Alexander’s honor: “Long live, Alexander! / Long live the king of kings! / Without demanding anything, / without dictating laws, / this most august prince / with triplicated reputation / of a hero and a righteous man / gave us back the Bourbons.”

35. Osiander 1994, 181.

conservative position, and while conservative European powers were yet unprepared to accept the former, they also perceived the latter to be doltish and almost insane (even though, despite such perception, they, as the outcome of the negotiations showed, were a bit more comfortable with it).

In the very beginning of the Congress, Alexander astounded his counterparts with his radical views. He began with arguing forcefully that there was no coming back to the old European order, since the “consequences of the revolutions of our time that changed the relations inside states cannot be eliminated and superseded by a sudden return towards former principles.”<sup>36</sup> Alexander admitted that nationalism became the new style of political life. It was impossible, he continued, “to only accommodate in the agreements the exclusive and misinterpreted interests of cabinets, as if nations were their property.”<sup>37</sup> His argument met a frosty response on the part of the European monarchs. Talleyrand recalls that when Alexander suggested that “sovereigns [were] obliged to conform to the wishes of the people and to observe them, [and that] the wish of the Saxon people [was] not to be divided,” the Austrian emperor responded that he “[knew] nothing about that doctrine,” and that sovereign rulers always had the right to divide and give away their territories and people as they saw fit.<sup>38</sup> In Alexander’s opinion, such views were not in tune with the times.

Notably, in the beginning of the Congress, Alexander also accepted an interpretation of greatpowerhood that his grandmother, Catherine II, was so much trying to avoid. That is, he admitted that Russia could only effectively integrate into the European society of states if it adopted its principles of competitive recognition and comparability. Presenting Alexander’s position, Count Nesselrode, the diplomatic head of the Russian delegation in Vienna, emphasized that the governments,

having estimated the sacrifices [of European] peoples, should . . . receive . . . a share *proportional* to those sacrifices, and not for expansion, but to guarantee the prosperity and independence of their states by *increasing their relative power [otnositel’naya sila]* that could strengthen this guarantee and make others respect it.<sup>39</sup>

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36. Narochnitsky et al. 1972, 146.

37. Narochnitsky et al. 1972, 147.

38. Pallain 1881, 101.

39. Narochnitsky et al. 1972, 210. Emphasis added.

The same principles were also communicated to the Ottoman Empire through the Russian ambassador in Constantinople, Andrey Italinsky.<sup>40</sup>

The fact that the emperor desired to tie Russia's status to some transparent and commonly accepted foundation indicated that Russian political discourse was departing from the modes represented by Bezborodko and Panin, and was opening to embrace the understanding of greatpowerhood that became dominant in the European society of states. Such reasoning also presented a clear departure from the empire's eighteenth-century political rationality that treated greatness as a matter of appearance. Alexander's initial openness to adopt the dominant language of European great powers was eagerly welcomed by some of his foreign counterparts. For instance, such rhetoric resonated with Lord Castlereagh, who wrote that Alexander was trying to build "a system of real political equilibrium [founded] *on the solid base of the real and intrinsic strength of each power.*"<sup>41</sup>

#### 4.6 BACK TO PARIS: A PUZZLING TRANSFORMATION

However, Alexander's liberal stance did not evoke enthusiasm in most of the Congress participants, and quite shortly, the emperor seemed to have radically changed his rhetoric, deciding to introduce a weighty pinch of religiosity and proposing to establish "a fraternal association of the sovereigns, guided by the precepts of Christianity."<sup>42</sup> This proposal was the Holy Alliance, which reformulated his liberal views, effectively turning them upside down. As Andrei Tsygankov rightly pointed out, "the Holy Alliance was anything but a diplomatic document"<sup>43</sup> (at least in the European understanding of this term). It had only three short, and vaguely formulated, articles, none of which preserved any traces of Alexander's original take on the postrevolutionary situation. Instead, the emperor was appealing to the maxims of the Christian faith and admitted that it was necessary to submit "both . . . the administration of their respective States, and . . . their political relations with every other Government [to] the precepts of [the] Holy Religion."<sup>44</sup> Alexan-

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40. Narochnitsky et al. 1972, 339.

41. Castlereagh cited in Osiander 1994, 241, emphasis added.

42. Kissinger 1957, 187–88.

43. Tsygankov 2012, 64.

44. Hertslet 1875, 317.

der suggested that religious principles were equally applicable in private domains and that “the Three contracting Monarchs [would need to] remain united by the bonds of a true and indissoluble fraternity [and] regar[d] themselves towards their subjects and armies as fathers of families.”<sup>45</sup> This mode of reasoning was reminiscent of how political legitimacy was constructed two and a half centuries prior to that.

Many contemporaries believed that this turn in Alexander’s position happened due to some intimate transformation of his world views that may have been caused by Alexander’s intensive communication with Madam de Krudener, “an old fanatic who [had] a considerable reputation amongst the few highflyers in religion that [were] to be found in Paris,” as she was described by Castlereagh.<sup>46</sup> That is, the adherents of this opinion would simply claim that Alexander became a religious fanatic himself. No doubt, this position was also shared by some of the top European ministers, who occasionally testified in their correspondence that the emperor’s mind had “latterly taken a deeply religious tinge,” “was [clearly] affected,” and was “not completely sound.”<sup>47</sup> Correspondingly, the project of the Holy Alliance was received as a “piece of sublime mysticism and nonsense,”<sup>48</sup> “insolent and nonsensical document . . . claiming to lay down the law,”<sup>49</sup> and “high sounding nothing.”<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, it was only signed by some great powers because of the general belief that Alexander was “disposed to found his own glory upon a principle of peace and benevolence.”<sup>51</sup> Yet all of those who originally signed the declaration, as well as those who joined later, “realized they needed to be a part of the Alliance, but they each hoped to mold it into something that [could] fit their own worldviews.”<sup>52</sup>

I, however, argue that such interpretation of the outlined shift is superficial. It does not take long to discover, for example, that religion, which occupied an important place in Russia’s communication with European powers, was absolutely and understandably absent from its contemporaneous correspondence with Ottoman diplomats, which changed neither the general

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45. Hertslet 1875, 318.

46. Webster 1921, 382.

47. Webster 1921, 382–84.

48. Webster 1921, 383.

49. Pallain 1881, 128.

50. Metternich cited in Tsygankov 2012, 64.

51. Webster 1921, 384.

52. Tsygankov 2012, 64.

theme (construction of durable European political order), nor the tone (fairly benevolent and inclusive) of that communication.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, those Europeans who actually had a chance to follow Russia's domestic politics a bit more closely, also attested that religious fervor was not characteristic of the tsar, as a person. For instance, in July 1816, Lord Cathcart, British ambassador to Russia, was writing to Castlereagh from Saint Petersburg that he knew "of no secret influence [on Alexander], nor [did he] believe that there exist[ed] any excess of predominancy of religious disposition."<sup>54</sup>

It is also important to note that Alexander's position was *always* seen as somehow deviant from the norm. In Western sources, Alexander was constantly presented as mystical, prone to exaltation, fond of ethical and religious maxims, as opposed to his pragmatic counterparts who, allegedly, were always in touch with reality. Be it his early radical liberalism, or his later religious turn, he was invariably thought to be detached from concrete practical matters (ironically, it was Alexander who consistently argued that it was impossible to effectively govern relying on the ideas that were out of synch with the time). Hence, the problem that European ministers had with Alexander was not his religious fanaticism, but his idealism. As Kissinger put this, while comparing the tsar's disposition to that of Metternich,

Alexander sought to identify the new international order with his will; to create a structure safeguarded solely by the purity of his maxims [liberal or religious]. Metternich strove for a balance of forces which would not place too great a premium on self-restraint. The Tsar proposed to *sanctify* the post-war period by transforming the war into a moral symbol; Metternich attempted to *secure* the peace by obtaining the definition of war aims expressing the physical equilibrium.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, the transformation of Alexander's views stops being a real transformation when one realizes that it was his approach and political style that the European audience had most difficulties understanding. Maintaining a similar approach to liberalism and religiosity, the emperor simply changed the subject matter, while he continued to insist that true political greatness lay in the purity of one's moral principles, which could inspire political communities to accept and obey them. Even though the ministers mocked the

53. E.g., Narochnitsky et al. 1972, 335–41.

54. Vane 1853, 264.

55. Kissinger 1957, 111, emphasis original.

content of Alexander's propositions, it was rather his approach and style that mostly caused their dissatisfaction.

At the same time, I argue that Alexander's approach, instead of deriving from his personality or from the context within which he was acting in 1815, was built upon the assortment of discursive resources that were available to him and that had developed in the Russian political sphere in the preceding centuries. Read through the lens of absolute and theatrical understandings of greatness, Alexander's take on Russia's international status stops being odd. In fact, given the discursive baggage the emperor brought with him to Vienna, it comes as no surprise that he remained misunderstood. Other European great powers, embedded by then into the discourse on world-historic progress and the hierarchies and procedures resulting from it, could appreciate neither the emperor's fixation on transcendent and highly abstract ideas, Christian and liberal alike, nor his theatrical and a bit overwhelming political style, shining with the "lustre of glory." Even if what Alexander enacted was, in fact, the spectacle of civilization, as was the case in Paris in 1814 and in the early months of the Congress, this was not appreciated by his audience. However, from within the Russian political discourse, both features of Alexander's conduct were perfectly normal instantiations of absolute and theatrical understandings of political greatness. The former, as one could recall, was based on proclaiming the truthfulness and superiority of an ideological system that should have inspired the masses. The latter capitalized on the persuasive effect produced by an outstanding and glorified royal persona.

#### 4.7 MYSTERIOUS CHARISMA

Why did the theatrical understanding of greatpowerhood, which had the upper hand in the Russian political discourse throughout the eighteenth century and worked so well domestically, falter in Vienna and needed to be fortified with alternative discursive positions? Arguably, this happened because theatrical greatness capitalizes on mystery and extravagance and comes into force only through its own enactment. For a domestic political regime like Russia's, this may have just been the perfect match. In the previous chapter, I mentioned the work of Dmitry Troshchinsky, who insisted that the political bond between the lower and the higher classes in Russia had been weak and unbalanced historically, and it was precisely for this reason that the bond between the lower classes and the monarch had to be



strong, as the monarch was perceived as “the only true representative of the people [*narod*], which, given its position, cannot have any other representative, except him.”<sup>56</sup>

In a similar vein, the father of Russian socialism, Aleksandr Herzen, wrote in 1851 that the Russian peasant “submitted to . . . but never believed in either landowners’ rights, or the legitimacy of executive power, [yet] imagined the tsar as a formidable vindicator, the fixer of truth, and the eternal providence.”<sup>57</sup> This was also how most Slavophiles conceptualized the connection between the lower class and the monarch. As Mikhail Bakhtin put this, “the Tsar is the Russian Tsar, peasant’s [*muzhitskiy*] tsar, there is no wall of people’s representatives between him and the people.”<sup>58</sup> In such a setup, a semimythic figure of the sovereign, imbued with the burden of universal representation and other almost supernatural qualities, was perfectly well fit for glory—that is, for the kind of greatness that evades scrutiny, measurement, or direct accountability, and acquires substance through its own articulation. Presumably, this is how it worked in the panegyric literature of the Petrine epoch and in Catherine’s political impressionism.

This may have also been the underlying rationality behind the project of the Holy Alliance, which was effectively promoting the privatization of political space. In Russia’s domestic experience, the strong bond between the monarch and the people could not be balanced in any civic or representational sense. The monarch was believed to receive God’s enthronement and was functionally equivalent to an authoritarian head of the household: the “father of the fatherland” (as Peter I was officially called), or the “mother of the fatherland” (this title was proposed to Catherine II, but she did not adopt it).<sup>59</sup> Consequently, all the interactions inside that dichotomy were limited within the confines of the available sets of representational practices. The monarch was immune to any kind of liability, but, at the same time, was always positioned in the center of attention and, far from being a mere symbol, had to somehow exert a considerable impact on his or her folk.

The people had no channels of constructive influence on the decision-making processes, but often had very close attachment to the figure of the monarch and could only voice their opinion through what the author of *Antidote* called “consonance.” Thus, the relationship between the monarch

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56. Troshchinsky 1868, 56.

57. Herzen 1956, 319.

58. Bakhtin 2000, 426.

59. Polovtsov 1869, 61–65.

and the people proceeded as an exchange of theatrical manifestations aimed at achieving inspiration and the sense of transcendence on the part of the monarch, and acclamations and mobilizations on the part of the people. This was also the kind of relationship that the Holy Alliance projected on European monarchs and their respective folks.

However, as became clear in Vienna, when it comes to nineteenth-century international society, theatricality and inspiration-oriented idealism were not the best currencies to trade in the business of negotiating shared norms and rules for international order. This is not to say that glory and glorification *per se* had no place in the international context. On the contrary, apart from Russia's military performance, as follows from Prince Talleyrand's discursive representation of Russia's entry in Europe, Alexander's personal glory played an important role in securing Russia's recognition and its right to be accounted in European affairs. In Talleyrand's view, Alexander should have known better than to dispel the charm.<sup>60</sup> Yet audience matters. What worked at home, where Alexander enjoyed his uncontested supreme status and absolute authority, which may have, in fact, been necessary within the logic of his contemporary Russian political regime with all its problems related to the disunity between social classes, did not resonate the same way with the audience mainly consisting of European diplomats and monarchs. There, it was interpreted as unnecessary pomp and naïve idealism.

The splendor that saturated Alexander's presence in Vienna, as well as the skeptical attitude it provoked among his somewhat bedazzled spectators, was vividly reflected in contemporaneous British satire. This is how John Wolcot (aka Peter Pindar) ridiculed the tsar's pretentious and unrealistic claims for greatness in 1815:

Cried Alexander, as he view'd  
 The moving, motley multitude -  
 "How sweet to strut in gold and gems,  
 "Bedeck'd with robes and diadems!  
 "How great to stride, with giant span,  
 "Over the pigmy breed of man; -  
 "See empires tremble at my nod,  
 "And hail me more than half a god!"<sup>61</sup>

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60. Pallain 1881, 74.

61. Pindar 1815.

The last lines of the cited verse allude to the practice of the monarch's sacralization that was typical for Russia's domestic regime at the time and whose traces the British satirist also noticed in the emperor's self-presentation in Vienna.<sup>62</sup> Abroad, such excessive glorification and pretense could only seem comical.

Characteristically, in Wolcot's bitter stanzas, Alexander delivered this monolog while dancing—that is, preoccupied with the most common performance of the time. Whirling his way ahead, the emperor went on imagining both quite realistic and fantastical futures for his majestic persona and his great state:

“I'll have more homage and more sway,  
 “Poland my sceptre shall obey,  
 “And, spite of statesmen's saucy quirks,  
 “I'll overwhelm the impious Turks!  
 “Like my great namesake, I will reign  
 “Over an unconfined domain,  
 “And not a fish shall put in motion,  
 “Without my great consent, the ocean.”<sup>63</sup>

Eventually, Alexander even put his eye on the holy of holies—the British navy:

“Yes, since I have begun my dance,  
 “I'll caper from the Don to France,  
 “And make Great Britain's tyrant navy,  
 “Before I die, cry out *peccavi!*”<sup>64</sup>

This misunderstanding, coupled with a general disillusionment about Russian greatpowerhood that was spreading in British and other European policy circles in the decades following the Congress,<sup>65</sup> may have also affected (or reflected) a shift in the domestic debate. The enchanting and largely positive effect that Alexander's magnificent presence initially produced on some

62. Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012.

63. Pindar 1815.

64. Pindar 1815.

65. Twenty years after the Congress, British secretary of state for foreign affairs Henry Palmerston called Russia “a great humbug” and asserted that “if England were fairly to go to work with her we should throw her back half a century in one campaign” (Palmerston cited in Ward and Gooch 2012, 169).

of his contemporaries was aptly conveyed by the passionate devotion of Nikolai Rostov, Tolstoy's character from *War and Peace*.<sup>66</sup> As time passed, however, the emperor's theatricality started receiving more ambivalent characteristics. For example, the most important Russian poet, Aleksandr Pushkin, wrote the following lines after seeing a bust of Alexander sculpted by Bertel Thorvaldsen:

This look is two-faced for a reason.  
That is how the sovereign was like:  
Accustomed to conflicted feelings,  
A harlequin in face and life.<sup>67</sup>

Another nineteenth-century Russian poet Pyotr Vyazemsky allegedly<sup>68</sup> called Alexander “a sphinx that remained mysterious until his death” and gave the emperor a very controversial, but still somewhat sympathetic characteristic,

a child of the eighteenth century,  
he was a victim of its passions:  
he both despised the human,  
and loved humanity.<sup>69</sup>

The next emperor, Alexander's brother Nicholas I (1825–1855), was already called “an actor” in a derogatory sense. In his case, the charismatic splendor of royal persona could already not be interpreted as a positive characteristic that served as a guarantee of Russia's greatness and recognition. Following Nicholas' death which shortly preceded the end of the Crimean War (1853–1856), Fyodor Tyutchev, the Russian poet and diplomat, dedicated to Nicholas the following epitaph:

You served neither God nor Russia,  
You served your vanity alone,  
And all your deeds, good and evil—

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66. E.g., Tolstoy 2010, 442.

67. Pushkin cited in Annenkov 1873, 215.

68. There is no consensus on who was Vyazemsky's true inspiration when he wrote this poem. Some literary scholars claim it was Voltaire (e.g., Gille'son 1969, 69). However, as Aleksandr Arkhangelsky (2012, 293) pointed out, some nineteenth-century readers were recognizing Emperor Alexander in those lines.

69. Vyazemsky 1896, 373.

All those were lies and phantoms:  
You were an actor, not a tsar.<sup>70</sup>

In a similar vein, one of the main charges that both Slavophiles and Westernizers were constantly bringing against the Russian regime throughout the nineteenth century was related to its grandiosity and superficiality. This bipartisan consensus regarding the lacking substance of the Russian political machine indicated that the appreciation of purely theatrical manifestations of political greatness was pushed to the margins of Russian political debate in the first half of the nineteenth century. After the Congress of Vienna, Russian political thinkers and intellectuals started looking for alternative foundations for their country's political identity. The hibernating discursive mode of absolute greatness conveniently came to their aid.

#### 4.8 HIBERNATING DISCOURSE

Discursive modes, especially those that have once been dominant, are often slow to disappear. Instead, they may get marginalized and continue living in hibernation until someone discovers and reinterprets them. Such reinterpretation either re-centers an old position in a new discursive context, or, more frequently, re-centers a genealogical offspring of that old position, which bears some resemblance to its predecessor, but constitutes something qualitatively new. Hence, when I argued in the previous chapter that one understanding of political greatness in Russia (absolute) gave way to another understanding (theatrical), this was not to imply that one simply replaced and erased the other.

Certainly, the discursive transformation in the beginning of the eighteenth century was based on a series of stark antitheses. In Viktor Zhivov's words,

the contradistinction between the old and the new Russia was founded on a set of mutually exclusive characteristics, so there was no space for any succession. . . . If the new Russia was accredited with enlightenment, the old one was associated with ignorance; if the new Russia was perceived as rich and

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70. Tyutchev 1922, 76.

magnificent, the old one was presented as miserable and poor. The new Russia was kind of drawing a caricature of the old Russia.<sup>71</sup>

The same can be said about the utmost importance of patriarchs (especially, starting from the Time of Troubles [1598–1613]) in the old Russia and the complete submission of the Orthodox Church to the mighty state and the ridicule of ecclesiastic hierarchy in the new one.<sup>72</sup> The same is true for the impersonal and transcendent nature of political greatness in the old Russia and the highly personalized, almost “biological” ownership of both executive and authoritative power in the new one.

However, as I have implied above, discursive positions may be extremely resilient. Naturally, the belief that Russia was a great polity in absolute terms was preserved by those who opposed Peter’s reforms and his new status. In the eighteenth century, it was nurtured by the Old Believers, who quit the political sphere, for its practice no longer conformed to their conviction that Russia was the last ark of the true faith. Yet even in the official discourse the traces of this position were sometimes discernible. Even the myth about Potemkin villages may be said to have a double meaning. Seeming pretense and theatricality characteristic of the anti-foundationalist take on political greatness, in fact, overlapped with the conviction that greatness was something primordial and predestined. Catherine’s Greek Project, to which today’s Crimea owes all its Hellenic toponymy, was a claim to some essential superiority of Eastern Christianity. That superiority should have manifested itself in the restoration of the Byzantine Empire with its capital in Constantinople, whose throne should have been occupied by Catherine’s second grandson Konstantin.<sup>73</sup> The 1783 annexation of Crimea and the empress’ 1787 visit to the peninsula, which was associated with the mentioned myth, were two important intermediate steps toward the Project’s implementation.

In the nineteenth century, and especially after the Congress of Vienna, one could already see how the elements of the same idea (of Russia’s absolute greatness) were penetrating the mainstream discourse across the entire ideological spectrum. For instance, an early Slavophile Konstantin Aksakov insis-

71. Zhivov cited in Sergeev 2015.

72. A prime example of mockery of the church hierarchy was, of course, the All-Joking, All-Drunken Synod of Fools and Jesters, organized by Peter I for debauchery and amusement.

73. Zorin 2001.

tently argued that Peter “glorified Russia [by] giving her a lot of *external* greatness, but he also corrupted her *internal* integrity.”<sup>74</sup> He then went on to suggest that the “external greatness of imperial Russia is certainly bright, but this external greatness can only be enduring when it emanates from the internal one . . . And it is this *internal greatness* that must be the first and the most important goal for the people, and, of certainty, for the government.”<sup>75</sup> For Aksakov, such internal greatness resided somewhere in the arcane and pure might of the pre-Petrine Russia and, no doubt, in the institution of the Orthodox Church.

On the opposite side of the great debate, a similar exchange about internal and external greatness appeared in an 1860 issue of *Kolokol*, the censorship-free London-based Russian newspaper that was the stronghold of Russian liberal thought (until 1861 when it took the revolutionary democratic side). One of *Kolokol*'s Polish readers admitted that it was “through no fault of his own that the Russian has been accustomed from his infancy to . . . far reaching dimensions and goals, and that therefore even his dreams tend involuntarily towards *outward greatness*. [Yet],” he continued, “with his mental powers fresh, and his mind not yet matured, he develops *every* idea into prodigious dimension and has no presentiment of some other, *inward greatness*. This is childish enthusiasm, not manly thoughtfulness,” concluded the reader.<sup>76</sup> The paper's editor, Aleksandr Herzen, initially fended off the Pole's accusations by asserting that “a desire that the ‘Russia of the future should be *democratic and socially just*’ . . . cannot . . . be called ‘outward.’”<sup>77</sup> Yet, in the following sentences, he also immediately revealed the transcendence and nonrelationality of his ideals by insisting that the mode of goal-setting described by the reader was, in fact, “a tremendous strength [and] a main-spring of forward movement, . . . [for only those] achieve great things who have even greater things in mind.”<sup>78</sup>

In addition, Herzen added another feature of Russian thought that had been unrecognized by his correspondent. He asserted that Russia has great intellectual freedom, because “it does not think of political independence and national uniqueness at all; we do not have to prove our nationality, [for] it is such an unshakable, indisputable and obvious fact that we forget about

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74. Aksakov 1910, 88, emphasis added.

75. Aksakov 1910, 89, emphasis added.

76. Herzen 1860, 555.

77. Herzen 1860, 555, emphasis original.

78. Herzen 1860, 555.

it as we forget about the air we breathe or about our own heartbeat.”<sup>79</sup> The editor also compared this Russian feature with French and British political self-confidence, but he insisted on specifying that unlike the old Western nations, whose tradition was as alive as their present, Russia was “as *independent in time*, as it was in space, [for she] forgot [her] distant past and tr[ies] to forget even [her] previous day.”<sup>80</sup> Thus, whether Russia’s greatness was inward- or outward-oriented, Herzen tried to make sure his readers understood that it was nonrelative and was part and parcel of its inner nature.

#### 4.9 CONCLUSION

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the previously dominant discursive position that was about enacting Russia’s political greatness through manifesting it theatrically was seriously shaken. However, if the previous discursive shift—from absolute to theatrical greatness—was mostly a consequence of the transformation of Russia’s domestic regime, this time around, the discursive shift seems to have been a reaction to Russia’s entry into the European great powers club. Idealism and theatricality that Alexander I brought with him to Paris and Vienna did not produce the same effect on the European diplomats and monarchs as they had been producing on Russia’s domestic audience. The new interlocutors misunderstood Alexander and treated his political style with great caution. Consequently, to fit in, Russia had to restructure its political discourse and introduce into it several elements that would reflect some solid and universal basis beneath its claim for great power status.

Initially, those elements were retrieved from the hibernating discourse on Russia’s absolute greatness (hence the religious undertones of the Holy Alliance). This position had resurfaced occasionally ever since it was pushed to the margins of the debate. Yet, in the nineteenth century, it seemed to have penetrated the mainstream. Those representations, however, were not identical to their early modern predecessors. Since they were resurrected as a response to Russia’s inclusion in the European society of states which featured a different discursive consensus—the story of civilization and progress—they were refashioned to conform to that story and aided the con-

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79. Herzen 1860, 555.

80. Herzen 1860, 555, emphasis original.



struction of a specifically Russian civilizational narrative of political greatness, which was formulated in terms congruent with the European story of progress, but, at the same time, functionally dissimilar to it.

Importantly, Russia's entry into European society did not make it abandon the idea of theatrical greatness altogether. Instead, it facilitated a synthesis of the absolute and theatrical stories into a narrative of political greatness that was self-centered and ambivalent. This synthesis reflected both Russia's awareness of its civilizational deficiency and its commitment to overcome this deficiency by revealing its true greatness that resided somewhere within its inner coffers. In practice, it turned into a catching-up ideology, which was qualitatively different from the dominant Western story about great powers. In the next chapter I will describe and analyze the uses of this ideology in more detail. I will demonstrate that its functional specificity was a result of Russia's attempts to grapple with the emerging international institution of great power management and the story of universal progress associated with it.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Failed Synthesis*

#### Modernization through Self-Revelation

*can we count merely on . . . the bonds of our faith and ethnicity connecting our nations? Undoubtedly, we should not neglect this inner impulsion, for it is our only strength at the present moment . . . [But we need] to fortify these moral ties by military, financial, industrial and trade relations [which can only be established, if Russia] develops its inner forces, which currently constitute the only true source of a state's political greatness.*

ALEXANDER GORCHAKOV, RUSSIAN FOREIGN MINISTER (1868)

*three successive stages of our nationalism appear as, first, the cult of our people as the privileged bearers of universal truth, then, the veneration of this people as an elemental force irrespective of all truth, and finally, the cult of its exclusive cultural and historical character—a negation of the very idea of universal truth.*

RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHER VLADIMIR SOLOVYOV, AGAINST EXTREME NATIONALISM (1889)

In the previous chapter I argued that the emergence of the international institution of great power management was accompanied by a discursive transformation that brought into being the progressive understanding of world history. The story of progress, in its turn, was ingrained in an idea of hierarchical organization of the world political order where civilized states occupied the top level of the international hierarchy, while those political entities that were externally labeled as “savage” and “barbarian” were turned into legitimate objects of patronage and colonization. The European story of progress was formulated in universal and unidirectional terms as referring to the “family of mankind” climbing the ladder of human development, which

at that point in time found its most advanced realization in “civilized” European states that unilaterally self-ascribed this label. That is, human progress was based on an underlying universal teleology. At the same time, this story was not essentialist, for instead of proclaiming some predestined and unchallengeable superiority of European nations, it presented the level of civilization as a product of those states’ political histories. Their, but potentially any state’s, civilizational level could be subjected to cultural-historical analysis, comparison, and eventual recognition, even though the exact comparative criteria and procedure were never precisely defined, leaving ample space for orientalism, racism, and club mentality.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, Russia was provisionally recognized as a European great power. As a full member of the Congress System, it adopted the new dominant narrative of the progressive development of universal humanity. At the same time, it often found itself deficient in civilizational terms. Within European discourse, it was still frequently imagined as exotic and semibarbaric. In response to the failures of its theatrical greatness that Alexander I originally resorted to during the Congress of Vienna, Russia tried to devise its own mobilizational narrative that could serve the purpose of modernization but would also be congruent with the already internalized European ideas and would not damage its fragile recognition as a great power. The conversation about Russia’s position in the story of progress took place mostly within the framework of the public debate between the liberal and conservative Russian intellectuals, also known as “Westernizers” and “Slavophiles.” At the official level, that discussion translated into mobilizational narratives in both domestic and foreign policy discourses. The solution to Russia’s unwillingness to abandon its great power status coupled with perceived underdevelopment and retardation was a peculiar synthesis of the absolute and theatrical understandings of greatness that turned into a mobilizing domestic ideology formulated in foreign policy terms. On the one hand, Russia followed a path that was similar to the core European nations by discursively merging absolute and theatricality into one universalist, but not essentialist narrative. By doing so, it effectively contracted the most pervasive disease of the capitalist world-system, which thrives on selectively promoting universalism and anti-universalism at the same time, which normally translates into discursive hierarchy and discrimination.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, however, the resulting synthesis applied not exclusively to the whole

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1. Wallerstein 2004, 38–41.

of international society through reproducing boundaries and hierarchical structures and putting Russia on top, but to Russia's own political history, its domestic regime, its troubled relations with its neighbors, and its obsession with external recognition. That is, Russia got trapped in the discursive prison of semiperiphery, which manifested in a strange combination of (1) claiming the leading role among the world's civilizational champions, and (2) a painful realization of its own underdevelopment, measured against the previously internalized standard.

Russia's greatpowerhood started to be presented as historically predetermined, yet always unfulfilled and threatened by other actors. Greatpowerhood became, at the same time, the telos and the reason for modernization. Russia tried to compensate for and overcome domestic underdevelopment through intensive self-colonization but justified the need to do this in great power terms, which elsewhere were understood as related to foreign policy. Thus, in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Russian great power discourse became a cover-up for a domestically oriented policy of modernizing self-colonization. Arguably, in the nineteenth century this discourse was eagerly accepted by the masses, for it capitalized on the familiar and widespread stories of salvation coming through suffering, and true greatness being the outcome of complete submission to collectivity. At the same time, since that domestic policy was always justified as somehow related to foreign policy and greatpowerhood, it often spilled over into the international realm, dragging Russia into unwinnable wars and overextending its relatively modest capacities.

I begin this chapter with the analysis of selected monuments from the Westernizers-Slavophiles debate. I pay specific attention to the discussions about Russia's place in the progressive development of universal humanity. Then, I address an influential domestic ideology formulated by Count Sergey Uvarov. On the example of Uvarov's "Theory of Official Nationality" I demonstrate how theatrical and absolute understandings of Russia's greatness were synthesized into a mobilizational narrative that utilized foreign policy concepts for achieving domestic ends. Further, I touch upon the legacy of Alexander Gorchakov, the influential Russian foreign policy maker of the nineteenth century. I look at how Gorchakov, similarly to Uvarov, utilized foreign policy issues to attend to domestic reforms. Finally, I present my take on some turn-of-the-century Russian politicians and intellectuals who promoted the policies of intensive self-colonization, justifying those by appealing to Russia's international standing and great power status.

## 5.1 THE GREAT DEBATE: INCEPTION

The Russian political and intellectual discursive mainstream in the nineteenth century was mostly populated by what present-day Russian students of philosophy call “philosophism” (*filosofstvovanie*), or political “opinion journalism,” as one would probably call this in the West. Stopping short of formulating logically coherent philosophical systems, many Russian thinkers and public intellectuals were still preoccupied with constructing arguments about the logic and laws of history and society, especially Russian. It was mostly in this area of the domestic political discourse where the great debate between Westernizers and Slavophiles unfolded.

Below, I analyze some monuments of this debate that seem important within the context of my analysis. The main reason why I decide to look in that direction is simple. The debate was overwhelmingly concerned with Russia’s international status. This status was believed to be largely dependent on Russia’s inclusion into, or separation from, “the family of mankind,” “the concert of powers,” or “universal humanity”—that is, what could be called “international society” or “world society” in the terms of the English School, or “world history” in the Hegelian language. The Westernizers-Slavophiles debate helps demonstrate that Russian great power discourse in the nineteenth century transformed under the heavy influence of Russia’s interaction with Europe, and particularly with the European ideas about social progress. Both Westernizers and Slavophiles tried to apply this idea to Russian history and attempted to find Russia’s place in the development of universal humanity.

I certainly do not claim to provide a complete or even a fully representative overview of all the conversations that took place within the “Westernizers vs. Slavophiles” framework. What I am trying to do, however, is to conduct a detailed analysis of a small number of positions that seem to be most illustrative of the general trends and that speak directly to the subject of my investigation: Russia as a great power and a great state.

It is believed that the great debate was kickstarted by Pyotr Chaadayev’s *Philosophical Letters*, the first of which was published in 1836 (after being in circulation as a manuscript since 1829). The publication immediately caused a great scandal, while Chaadayev himself was officially proclaimed insane and was put under house arrest. In an oft-cited passage from the first letter, Chaadayev contemplated the question of Russia’s place and status among other nations. He asserted that

nothing from the first moment of [Russia's] social existence has emanated from [it] for man's common good; not one useful idea has germinated in the sterile soil of our fatherland; we have launched no great truth; we have never bothered to conjecture anything ourselves, and we have adopted only deceiving appearances and useless luxury from all the things that others have thought out.<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, Chaadayev's initial take was not equivalent to those who supported Peter the Great and lauded the societal metamorphosis that he had allegedly accomplished through his political genius. Living in the reactionary climate of Nicholas I's Russia (1825–1855), Chaadayev argues that Russia, “in order to call attention . . . , had to expand from the Bering Straits to the Oder,” and that it can be said to be great only insofar as it is supposed to “teach some great lesson for the world”; on its own, however, Russia is “one of those nations which do not seem to form an integral part of humanity.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Chaadayev's position was almost the first of its kind in the Russian public discourse.<sup>4</sup> The early Chaadayev not only portrayed Russia as a purely emulating and immature nation, but he also stripped it of all attributes of political greatness, however defined, except for military might, which was largely meaningless for the author. In his second letter, written in 1830, he expanded on this subject to pass a decisive verdict: “The point is that the significance of any people among mankind is determined exclusively by their *spiritual might*, and that the interest which they evoke is dependent upon their moral action in the world, and not upon the noise that they make.”<sup>5</sup> And it was due to the lack of normative influence and spiritual might, according to Chaadayev, that Russia was so “abstruse . . . despite all [its] exterior power and . . . grandeur (*moshch' i velichie*).”<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising that such an argument, instead of being recognized as unpatriotic or even treacherous, was simply deemed insane by Russian officials—after all, Chaadayev was bringing forth a position that had been very marginal before him. In fact, this position was so unusual that Chaa-

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2. Chaadayev 1991b, 25.

3. Chaadayev 1991b, 22 and 25.

4. Schapiro 1967, 40.

5. Chaadayev 1991c, 36, emphasis added. I had to modify the original translation of the italicized collocation—“intellectual efficacy”—due to its semantic inadequacy.

6. Chaadayev 1991c, 36.

dayev himself could not properly stick to it in the *Letters*. One dent, noticed by his Russian translators (the *Letters* were originally written in French), was particularly telling. After claiming that Russia could only teach the world a great lesson, Chaadayev slightly softened his tone asserting that, “the lesson which [Russia is] destined to provide will assuredly not be lost, but,” he continued, “who knows when [Russia] shall *find [itself] once again* amid humanity and how much misery [it] shall experience before the fulfillment of [its] destiny?”<sup>7</sup> In the French original, Chaadayev used the verb *retrouverons* to convey the italicized expression—namely, “find once again” or “return,” instead of *trouverons* that would simply mean “find.”<sup>8</sup> Where did Russia have to return to and what did it have to find again, when, according to the author, it had never been an integral part of universal history and humankind? This is an important semantic contradiction that puzzled both his translator and his first editor. His Russian translator subsequently chose to change the semantics opting for *obresti* (“to find”), instead of *obresti vnov’* (“to find again”),<sup>9</sup> while his editor decided to completely reformulate that sentence in the final version that was eventually published.<sup>10</sup>

This minor detail may, in fact, be interpreted as an important symptom. In the nineteenth century, Russia’s perceived (and self-projected) civilizational deficiency, coupled with its decisive refusal to take off the mantle of a great power, triggered a severe image neurosis, where Russia’s international ambitions and self-identity often remained underappreciated and unfulfilled. This predicament haunted not only Chaadayev himself, making him drift toward a reinvigorated version of the story of Russia’s absolute greatness by the time he wrote *Apologia of a Madman* (1837), but also a whole plethora of Russian thinkers and statesmen, who shaped the debate about Russia’s international status—until the eve of the October Revolution. I spend the remainder of this chapter interpreting this ambivalence across the whole ideological spectrum of Russian political discourse.

## 5.2 THE ANCIENT RUSSIAN ELEMENT

The tension between the progressive and the essentialist positions on political greatness revealed itself in both Westernizers’ and Slavophiles’ circles. In

7. Chaadayev 1991b, 22, emphasis added.

8. Chaadayev 1991d, 93.

9. Chaadayev 1991d, 694, endnote 6.

10. Chaadayev 1991d, 653.

his immediate response to Chaadayev's publication, the prominent Slavophile Aleksey Khomyakov contemplated the meaning of Russia's position in the world, and fended off Chaadayev's scandalous escapade by insisting that indeed "[Russia] is nothing, . . . but [it is] the centre within the humanity of the European hemisphere, a sea into which all concepts flow. And when it is overflowed with particular truths, it will flood its own shores with the truth which will be general."<sup>11</sup> It was this central all-receptive position that, according to Khomyakov, was responsible for Russia's disorderliness, or "heterogeneity of concepts"<sup>12</sup> (*raznorodnost' ponyatiy*), as he called it. Yet Khomyakov also believed that even when acting as such a vessel of myriad inflowing concepts, Russia was generally safe, for "this vessel has an ancient Russian element that will protect [its content] from spoilage."<sup>13</sup>

All of the above basically reflects Khomyakov's and other Slavophiles' essentialist position that renders Russia's political superiority in absolute terms, but also harbors progressive universalist aspirations imagining Russia in the process of becoming, while the telos of that process is supposed to have universal significance. For Slavophiles, Russia was a vessel that contained some primordial truth, some element that made it great simply because of what Russia was, not because of what it had managed to achieve in relation to others. At the same time, they believed that Russia had not yet fully realized its potential and the final manifestation of its true greatness was yet to come. However, the most interesting part of Khomyakov's response is the following coda:

One remaining thing that would need to be done is to calculate our natural qualities and acquired weaknesses, as well as those of other enlightened peoples, to weigh them, and to conclude based on that measurement which people is more suited for amalgamating within itself material and spiritual power. But this is a new vast topic of discussion. Enough has been said against the point that [Russia is] negligible.<sup>14</sup>

In this finale, Khomyakov pitched the possibility of measuring and comparing different nations' qualities and achievements, thereby revealing that he, as well, had internalized the civilizational discourse, but then he chose to end his narrative abruptly, as his own practical suggestions had probably

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11. Khomyakov 1986, 126.

12. Khomyakov 1986, 127.

13. Khomyakov 1986, 127.

14. Khomyakov 1986, 127.



come into conflict with his original assumptions. Had he gone a bit further though, Khomyakov would have unavoidably faced the need to somehow quantify the “ancient Russian element,” which alone kept Russia from “spoilage” and which other conceptually mongrel nations presumably lacked. Predictably, he chose not to open that can of worms. Yet the sole idea that measurement and comparison may play a role in the international context, and that power can be relational, eventually penetrated his writings. Nevertheless, he did not follow up on that thought, as this could have become detrimental for Slavophiles’ argument about Russia’s pristine and incomparable essence.

### 5.3 SUBLIME GLORY OF THE GOOD

Khomyakov was not alone in trying to battle with the contradiction between the relationality of political power and the power as pristine truth kept intact in the Russian vessel. Several other Slavophiles were also addressing this dichotomy in their writings. The most conventional way to do this was to admit the importance of relative superiority achieved through possession/accumulation of material and cultural resources, but also to posit subsequently that all those riches were temporal and not that important, that there was something higher in Russia’s possession and this higher good was what made Russia a great nation. Such, for example, was Mikhail Pogodin’s take on the problem.

In his *Letter on Russian History* (1837), Pogodin initially described at great length all the material and human resources that Russia had come to enjoy. On the material side, in addition to Russia’s great size and population, Pogodin mentioned the vast amounts of gold, silver, iron, grain, timber, wine, sugar, wool, coal, the pace of industrial development, and many more items along the same lines, invariably emphasizing that in those terms Russia was incomparably richer than any other European country. On the human side, he pointed to the Russian people’s (and particularly *muzhiks*) *tolk* (“insight, good sense”) and *udal’* (“prowess, courage”). Those words, according to him, did not have equivalent translations in other languages. Taken together, he maintained, “these physical and spiritual forces form a gigantic machine, constructed in a simple, purposeful way, directed by the hand of one single man, the Russian Tsar.”<sup>15</sup>

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15. Pogodin cited in Kohn 1962, 63.

Yet, even though the above description presented Russia as *already* being superior on all fronts, it was still not enough for the author, as if, while he was writing about Russia's greatness, he still felt some insecurity and deficiency in his great state. Hence, for Pogodin, who was a Pan-Slavist, such a detailed rationalist account of Russia's cumulative power was a mere prelude to what he subsequently articulated—that all this power faded in comparison to the higher truth:

But, my Lord, there is another glory, a pure, beautiful, sublime glory, the glory of the good, of love, of knowledge, of right, of happiness. What does power matter? Russia does not admire feats of power, any more than a millionaire is impressed by thousands. She stands calmly and silently—and the world is trembling before her, intriguing [*sic!*] and busy about her. Russia can do everything. What more does she want? The other glory is more flattering and more desirable. We can shine forth in that glory, too.<sup>16</sup>

When it comes to the content and purpose of this other glory, Pogodin did not go further than Khomyakov in trying to define it. Russia (together with other Slavs), in his opinion, was supposed “to consummate, to crown the development of humanity (which hitherto has been only piecemeal) in one great synthesis . . . to reconcile heart with reason, to establish true justice and peace.”<sup>17</sup> It was meant to produce a “sacred good.”<sup>18</sup> Citing Ján Kollár, a contemporaneous Slovak poet, Pogodin insisted that “it is impossible . . . that so great a people [i.e., Slavs led by Russia], so great in numbers, spread over so wide a space, of such talents and qualities, with such language, should accomplish nothing for the good of humanity . . . Everything great is destined for great purposes.”<sup>19</sup> However, at the moment when Pogodin wrote these lines, Russia and Slavs were not quite there—their true greatness was still dormant.

Importantly, the glory that Pogodin was writing about was not the same kind of glory that I discussed in the chapter about Petrine reforms. While the latter should be understood in theatrical terms and could be said to be mostly about appearance, for there is no transcendental foundation that could support it, the former glory is a sacred good with an intangible yet very real presence. The latter works through inspiration invoked by the monarch's myste-

16. Pogodin cited in Kohn 1962, 65–66.

17. Pogodin cited in Kohn 1962, 68.

18. Pogodin cited in Kohn 1962, 67.

19. Kollár cited in Kohn 1962, 67.

rious charisma, the former is validated through people's acclamation, and the monarch is simply a navigator of the "gigantic machine." The Slavophiles' mode of greatness was closer to the formerly marginalized mode of Russia's absolute greatness that reemerged after Russia's entry into international society. Yet, importantly, their position was also markedly unfulfilled. They always presented Russia as being great in potentiality, in some glorious future where it was supposed to consummate and crown the development of humanity. In that, they were constructing a specific teleology of Russian political development that bore traces of the progressivist paradigm of world history that had become hegemonic in Western political thought. Thus, in essence, Slavophiles produced a mobilizational discourse, where the rhetorical figure of great Russia functioned as a telos of Russia's domestic development and a guarantee of the world community's common future. In practical-political terms, this mode of reasoning certainly included a number of triggers for Russia's neighbors.

#### 5.4 FROM BALANCE OF POWER TO THE POWER OF COMMON SENSE

As had already happened before, the major boost to Russia's absolute greatness was created during a serious political crisis—the Crimean War (1853–1856). In April 1854—that is, at the height of hostilities between Russia and the European nations, Pogodin directly addressed the issue of the great powers' policies and functions. He made two points that seem important for this analysis. First, Pogodin returned to the idea of Russian *tolk*, which in that case was interpreted as a kind of superpower that allowed all Russians to see and access the truth directly.

There is politics, which operates in the darkness and consists of mysteries; there is diplomacy, whose main aim is, according to Talleyrand, if I correctly recall, to conceal thoughts behind words, not reveal them; but there is also common sense, which judges the actions in this world without further ado and tries to bring everything down to one simple formula: two by two equals four.<sup>20</sup>

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20. Pogodin 1894.

Pogodin went on to note that Russians possess a special kind of common sense, which they call *talk*.<sup>21</sup> This sent a peculiar message: Russians just know the truth, regardless of what you, Europeans, should say or do—it is that simple.

Second, Pogodin touched upon the reasons why the abovementioned understanding of greatness came to dominate the Slavophiles' discourse. He admitted that the initial principle of Russia's European politics was, in fact, in line with the function that European great powers were supposed to perform—helping to maintain the balance of power (which could only be done after preliminary ranking and measurement of European powers) and jointly managing the newly established international order:

We now must say a few words about the very inception (*principe*) [of Russia's politics in Europe], about this so-called legal order, for whose sake she acted for so long, with such effort and self-sacrifice, to receive such a wretched award . . . from the [European] governments and peoples . . . [Has Russia] managed to maintain, in accordance with [its] goal, Europe's legal order? No.<sup>22</sup>

More precisely, as Pogodin further formulated, Russia both failed and succeeded in the performance of its great power function at the same time. It failed in maintaining the legal order, but saved Europe from a continent-wide revolution.

A more well-known argument along these lines was formulated by the Russian diplomat and poet Fyodor Tyutchev. In 1848, Tyutchev argued that “there were only two real powers in Europe: Russia and the Revolution, [and] the life of one of them means death to the other.”<sup>23</sup> The Revolution for him was akin to a virus that had penetrated the European organism and proved to be immune to legalistic prescriptions. It infiltrated “the public blood [and all the] consensual formulas [were] merely narcotic drugs that [could] sedate the patient, but [were] unable to prevent the further spreading of the disease.”<sup>24</sup>

Symptomatically, two days after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the spokesperson of Russia's Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, also

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21. Pogodin 1894.

22. Pogodin 1894.

23. Tyutchev 1848.

24. Tyutchev 1848.

resorted to Tyutchev's oeuvre. She posted one of his poems on her Facebook page that both condemned Europe for betraying the standard of civilization, and implicitly appropriated that standard for Russia herself. Given the context and content of Russia's actions in Ukraine, as well as their near unanimous international condemnation, this invocation of civility came across as tragicomical and outrageous:

They can't be brought to reason—not a chance,  
The more they're liberal, the more they're vulgar,  
Civilization's their fetish dance,  
But its idea dodges them, no wonder!  
It doesn't matter, gents, how low you bow  
Before Old World: it'll never recognize you,  
For in its eyes you'll always be lowbrows,  
But not the kindred servants of enlightenment.<sup>25</sup>

Reflecting and anticipating what would then become one of the discursive constants in Russia's relations with Europe, both Tyutchev and Pogodin believed that Russia had to change its European policy. As Pogodin put this, it would be better off, "if it stopped patching others' roofs and started taking care of its own"<sup>26</sup>—not in the sense of going into seclusion and focusing on developing its interior, but in the sense of mounting the greatness of its power on a different foundation: on ethnic and cultural unity of all Slavs. Thus, in Pogodin's logic, by ceasing to actively maintain the European order, Russia did not stop being a great power. On the contrary, it found a better and truer application for its political greatness, which should yet again become manifest through its sheer nonrelational being, as opposed to its relational superiority and the responsibilities related to the international order that emanated from it. Just like other Slavophiles, Tyutchev and Pogodin could hardly conceal their dissatisfaction with how Russia's European affairs unfolded, but not only that. Their positions exhibited an ambition to bring Russia itself into conformity with a distinctive set of ideas of what a great Russia should be. Both authors were not satisfied with the status quo. Hence, the discourse they produced was mobilizational and ideological.

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25. Zakharova 2022. Poem translated by St. Sol.

26. Pogodin 1894.

## 5.5 THE IDEOLOGY OF NATIONAL GREATNESS

The two points made by Pogodin serve as a good illustration of how the progressive understanding of greatpowerhood, initially picked up and processed by the Russian political discourse in the beginning of the nineteenth century, transformed into a reinvigorated version of absolute greatness (with some progressive and universalist elements). Absolute greatness took the upper hand in the Russian political discourse as a reaction to another political crisis. It reemerged in the form of a popular ideology that capitalized on all-encompassing claims about the Russian people, their unity and their greatness understood in predominantly Christian terms—as being actualized through “self-renunciation and self-sacrifice, which constitute [the] moral nature [of the Russian people].”<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, the internalized standard of civilization and the implicit dependence on external validation did not go away. That is, Russia largely remained outward-oriented and continued to utilize explicitly civilizationist conceptual apparatus, but its political rhetoric conveyed a sense of perceived mistreatment and offence coming from the West, and an attempt to claim the true meaning and fruits of civilization for itself. In its nationalist-civilizational mode,<sup>28</sup> the Slavophile discourse attributed special superior features to Russians/Slavs simply because of their ethnic origin, which effectively was a form of semiperipheral racism, which, on the one hand, internalized the idea about the hierarchical spectrum of civilization, but, on the other hand, was revolting against the perceived discrimination. This Russian/Slavic ethnic argument varied from blatantly messianic to pragmatic and nonessentialist. The former remained true to the idea of Russia’s higher purpose and specific primordial characteristics. The latter moved away from discussing transcendent truths but stayed attached to special qualities of the Russian regime, which, however, were interpreted as transformable and his-

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27. Tyutchev 1848.

28. Slavophiles’ “civilizational nationalism” was, in fact, very similar to the kind of nationalism that has been promoted by the officials in the contemporary Russia. In 2012, Putin published his (in)famous article “Russia: The National Question,” where he referred to Russians as a “state-forming people.” In the West, his rhetoric was immediately interpreted in ethnic terms. Yet, at a closer look, in his version of Russian nationalism Russia was presented as a “civilizational state,” not a nation state or an ethnically homogeneous nation. According to him, there existed “Russian Armenians, Russian Azeri, Russian Germans and Russian Tatars” that were connected in one coherent whole by “a common culture and common values” (Putin 2012b).

torically conditioned. It is this latter, nonessentialist, yet still universal, version of the Russian great power discourse visibly affected by the hegemonic paradigm of world history that presents the greatest interest for my analysis. It not only informed the most influential nineteenth-century state ideology (Official Nationality), but also affected Russia's foreign policy discourse. Yet before I turn to this analysis, I will show what happened to the Westernizers' discourse about Russia's international status and what fruit the seed planted by Chaadayev eventually bore.

## 5.6 RUSSIA'S GREAT ESSENCE

One of the most oft-cited lines from Chaadayev's *Apologia of a Madman* (1837) is this: "Peter the Great found only a blank sheet of paper, and he wrote on it: Europe and West; since then we belonged to Europe and to the West."<sup>29</sup> In it, Russia is presented as a *tabula rasa*; not in the sense that it had no history, but that in order to become truly great it had to adopt another, European history. For Chaadayev, Russia so easily submitted to Peter's reforms because it had little worthwhile to hold on to in its previous political life. In addition, it had not lived under the rule of historical necessity, and thus could measure and consider every single step and idea.<sup>30</sup>

Even though these formulations may suggest that some Russian intellectuals came to terms with the idea that political greatness, in its consensual meaning, is not something granted by default, it was not the case for Chaadayev, who, despite all his initial political sacrilege, still promoted Russia's great primordial essence. Since he voiced this position in his *Apologia*, written as an attempt to fend off multiple accusations of the lack of patriotism, he may have intentionally stretched his views a little. Similarly, since the *Apologia* was not published until Chaadayev's death, he may have doubted the resulting argument. Yet it is not important in this context, whereas the *Apologia* still became an important discursive monument, which was appropriated and reappropriated by various public intellectuals and political actors and used to support their claims.

In *Apologia*, Chaadayev reiterates the point about the absence of original ideas in Russia.<sup>31</sup> However, in his interpretation, this predicament eventually turned out to be the doing of Divine Providence:

29. Chaadayev 1991a, 104.

30. Chaadayev 1991a, 109–10.

31. Chaadayev 1991a, 105.

Since human logic has been denied us [*sic*], providential logic watched over us and directed us toward its goals. There are great nations, just as there are great historic personages which cannot be explained by the laws of our reason, but which supreme reason decrees in its mystery: so it is with us.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, Chaadayev presents Russia's primordial greatness as natural and unquestionable, for it had been determined by God's will, like every other phase of its troubled history.

At the same time, this greatness was certainly unfulfilled. This is why Chaadayev also professed Russia a "great future which will be realized."<sup>33</sup> What is more, he insisted that these "beautiful destinies . . . will undoubtedly simply be the result of this special nature of the Russian people which was pointed out in the fatal article [i.e., *The First Philosophical Letter*]."<sup>34</sup> Toward the end, Chaadayev was also quick to admit that his indictment against the great nation was exaggerated. Subsequently, he also decorated his essentialism with the all-too-familiar idea of greatness that only comes after complete submission: "Moulded and lined, crafted by our rulers and our climate, we became a great nation, but only due to our obedience."<sup>35</sup> Thus, Chaadayev's take on the Russian nation was ambivalent. As he presented it, Russians were passive, obedient, and, through this, great, yet only in potentiality, because their true destiny was still unfulfilled.

## 5.7 ON GREAT MEN AND GREAT PEOPLES

While Chaadayev was writing his *Apologia* from a position where some compromise with the official line was in his best interest, other, better-positioned and more radical Westernizers were also rethinking the meaning of the Petrine reforms that were supposed to bring Russia closer to Europe. Heavily influenced by Hegel's philosophy of history, the literary critic and theorist Vissarion Belinsky reinterpreted the role of Peter the Great in Russia's political evolution. In the process, he also accommodated Russia's providentially determined greatness into the story of the country's transformation in the preceding century. Without denying Peter's profound importance and paying respect to his glory, Belinsky reevaluated his significance. While doing so, he promoted the

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32. Chaadayev 1991a, 105.

33. Chaadayev 1991a, 110.

34. Chaadayev 1991a, 110.

35. Chaadayev 1991d, 538.



most pure (and blatantly racist) form of civilizational discourse on political greatness, centered around embracing universalism on the one hand, and creating hierarchical divisions on the other.<sup>36</sup> Most illustratively, he distinguished between *geniuses* and *great men*, Peter clearly representing the latter. Belinsky saw “a great difference between Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, Peter the Great, Napoleon—and Attila, Genghis, and Tamerlane—the former must be called *great men*; the latter, *les grandes kalmuks* [the great Kalmyks].”<sup>37</sup> The main characteristic that set the two apart was their belonging (*great men*) or nonbelonging (*geniuses*) to a great people:

A *genius*, in the sense of having superior abilities and spiritual strength, may appear anywhere, even among the wild tribes, living outside humanity; but a *great man* may come to existence only among a people that either already belongs to the family of mankind, in the historical sense of this word, or is destined by world-power fate (*miroderzhavnymi sud'bami*) to be brought into kinship with it through the agency of a great man like Peter.<sup>38</sup>

Russia supposedly belonged to the latter bunch, which was *destined* to be great, but that destiny was (and, to some extent, was still meant to be) realized through the effort of great men guided by divine providence. In other words, Russia’s breakthrough into international (high) society was presented as a function of absolute and theatrical greatness combined. Yet the synthesis of those two modes remained dissimilar to the mode of civilizational discourse that took root in Europe. The latter was based on often discriminatory, but still relational, assessment of certain (and often underspecified) civilizational parameters, and preserved a more or less clear distinction between the self and the other. The Russian civilizational discourse insisted on Russia’s primordial civilizational superiority that was supposed to “always be there” in potentiality (and hence constantly remained insecure), and that could always reveal itself in critical situations.

Belinsky called this predetermined potentiality the nation’s *substance* (read *Volksggeist*). He argued that “just as some individuals have ingenious substances, so some peoples emerge with great substances and relate to other peoples as geniuses to ordinary men.”<sup>39</sup> Peoples with great substances were

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36. Wallerstein 2004, 38–41.

37. Belinsky 1979, 8.

38. Belinsky 1979, 8.

39. Belinsky 1979, 38.

capable of enduring any hardship, while people with “petty” substances could perish at any moment, and no genius was capable of making them great. Belinsky was also certain that Russia did not belong to the group of nations with “petty” substances, since if it had not had a great substance, it would have been killed, and not strengthened, by Peter’s reforms. Whereas “such a giant as Peter could not have possibly appeared among a people with petty spirit.”<sup>40</sup> Belinsky concluded that “a great man does not create anything new, but only brings into real existence what had previously existed in potentiality.”<sup>41</sup> That is, in his interpretation, Russia was a great nation among other nations, ordinary and great.

Such reinterpretation was close to what the Slavophile Khomyakov had argued just a couple of years prior. Moving away from the traditional Slavophile take on Peter the Great as the corruptor of Russia’s pristine essence,<sup>42</sup> he forgave Peter his mistakes and gave credit for reawakening Russia’s hibernating strength and honor. Khomyakov maintained that “the spiritual forces belong to the people and the church, not the government, while the government is only supposed to awaken or kill their activity by means of some kind of violence, less or more severe.”<sup>43</sup>

## 5.8 VARIETIES OF ESSENTIALISM

Regarding Peter’s role in bringing Russia into world history, some Westernizers and Slavophiles managed to achieve a limited bipartisan consensus by the middle of the nineteenth century. According to the philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (who was not a Westernizer, but still criticized Slavophiles a lot), the main remaining difference between their positions was that Slavophiles were not prepared to take on the responsibility that sprang from Russia’s greatness. He maintained that “the sin of Slavophilia is not in ascribing to Russia a higher mission, but in not being insistent enough on the moral consequences of such a mission. Let those patriots glorify their nation even louder, as long as they remember that *greatness brings responsibility*.”<sup>44</sup>

Even though this may look like an inception of the ideas about good gov-

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40. Belinsky 1979, 38.

41. Belinsky 1979, 38.

42. Such was, for instance, the interpretation of Konstantin Aksakov (1910, 88).

43. Khomyakov 1988, 54.

44. Solovyov 1911, 393, emphasis original.

ernance and international restraint which were later associated with great powers within the English School framework, this was, in fact, not the case. For Solovyov, but also for most Westernizers inspired by Hegel, this responsibility was formulated in world-historic terms. What is more, rather than being relevant for the immanent practicalities of international order and aimed at preserving the status quo, this responsibility was always formulated in connection to future humanity. In other words, the bearer of that responsibility was answerable to God, not other nations. The philosopher continued his critique by charging Slavophiles of “zoological patriotism, which freed the nation from service to a higher cause and turned it into an object of its own idolatry.”<sup>45</sup> For Solovyov, that higher cause, as he wrote in 1888, was in Russia’s connection with the universal Christian unity and in its mission to use all its talents and power to bring about “the final realization of the social trinity, where each one of the three main organic entities—the church, the state, and the society—are independent, free and powerful [*derzhavno*].”<sup>46</sup> Thus, even though Solovyov understood that no nation can live in, through, and for itself, the external point of reference for him was still not the international, but the universal, and not the present, but the future.

On the one hand, Solovyov criticized Russian messianism, recognizing its untenability for international relations. For him, this was the case because messianic claims must either be declaratory and hollow or result in a struggle for world domination. This struggle “would not prove the fact that the winner had a higher mission, for military preponderance does not mean cultural superiority.”<sup>47</sup> Yet, on the other hand, Solovyov did not entirely subscribe to the idea of greatness established through competitive recognition. His definition of greatness was relational only to the universal, and not the real political actors around, because that greatness could only be attained through addressing the “great questions.” And while resolving those, “every nation must only think of its own duty, without looking at, expecting, or demanding anything from other nations.”<sup>48</sup> In a nutshell, Solovyov was generally receptive toward humanist ideas, understood the problem of international coexistence, and even devised his own religious version of the separation of powers—between the state, the church, and the society—but, all in

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45. Solovyov 1911, 393.

46. Solovyov 2001.

47. Solovyov 1911, 10.

48. Solovyov 1911, 16.

all, the cultural superiority he was seeking for Russia was still conceived in mobilizational and future-oriented terms, having little to do with Russia's then current relative standing.

Thus, both Westernizers and Slavophiles ended up being quite essentialist, but in their own ways. If the former adopted a providentialist world-historic outlook, where Russia was (or was destined to be) one great nation among many, the latter subscribed to the story of Russia's national uniqueness and pristine essence that made it capable of deeds that were supposed to have universal repercussions. Importantly, both Slavophiles and Westernizers also propagated the idea that Russia's greatness was still in the making, and the country's main responsibility was to develop that greatness to its full potential, not simply project on the rest of the world what has already been achieved. This mode of greatness reveals some striking similarities with how the great power discourse has operated in post-Soviet Russia (see chapters 1 and 7), where, short of turning completely autistic and messianic, it still took the mobilizational and future-oriented forms, which ideally implied assertive and transformative international moves for their eventual fulfillment.

At the same time, the idea that greatness can be instantiated through mere appearance seems to have lost a major share of its appeal in the nineteenth century. Thus, the panegyric genre in Russian mainstream literature was largely forgotten, barely surviving on the margins, within ecclesiastic circles. The attitude to glorifying poetry among Russian intellectuals was hardly enthusiastic. In Belinsky's words, all those panegyric writers "both wrote and sang in the same fashion and in one voice, and the form of their phrases was tediously monotonous, which pointed at the absence of substance in them, i.e., the absence of thought."<sup>49</sup>

## 5.9 OFFICIAL NATIONALITY

The official political discourse of the time was much less essentialist. Yet it was also not entirely detached from the debates I have described above. On the one hand, politicians had to deal with real life problems. This made the most successful of them extremely pragmatic. On the other hand, as Russia's "discursive inhabitants," they had to rely on culturally intelligible categories

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49. Belinsky 1979, 34.

while justifying their choices and formulating their policies. This locked them within a given range of representations of what Russia could be seen to be in itself and which international status it could aspire to. As Jutta Weldes put this, “state policy and international politics have a fundamentally cultural basis and state and other international actions are made commonsensical through everyday cultural meanings.”<sup>50</sup>

“Official Nationality” was the dominant conservative ideology that shaped Russia’s domestic politics starting from its formulation by the minister of education, Count Sergey Uvarov, in 1833, and for several decades thereafter. It included three foundational elements that were presented as being essential for the stable existence and further development of the Russian state: Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality (or National Spirit). This ideology came to symbolize Nicholas I’s era of reaction that began in the immediate aftermath of the Decembrists’ Uprising of 1825, an attempted military coup by the progressive factions of the Russian elite that was harshly suppressed by the authorities very shortly, and lasted until Nicholas’ death in 1855.

On Uvarov’s own account, by formulating his doctrine, he was trying to address several pressing issues. Here again, those issues stemmed from and were overwhelmingly concerned with Russia’s integration into European society:

How to establish a national education that would correspond to our order of things and would not be alien to the European spirit? Which rule should be guiding our action in relation to the European enlightenment and European ideas that we can no longer do without, but that also threaten to inflict an imminent death upon us, were they not skillfully restrained?<sup>51</sup>

The cited passage is interesting in several ways. Why could Russia no longer do without European ideas? Why did their unrestrained adoption threaten Russia with an imminent death? (Death of what?) How could those ideas be restrained without any change in their spirit? According to the minister, “each land, each nation has its own Palladium”;<sup>52</sup> namely, a nation-specific protection of its safety and strength, or what Khomyakov would call the “ancient element.” And it was only through preserving that element that “Russia [but potentially any nation] could prosper, become more powerful,

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50. Weldes 2006, 178.

51. Uvarov 1995, 70.

52. Uvarov 1995, 70.

[and] live.”<sup>53</sup> At the same time, in Uvarov’s view, the European enlightenment with its republican and atheist moods was posing a threat to the most important composite parts of the element that was specific to Russia: its Orthodox faith, its autocratic regime, and its national spirit.

On the surface, this interpretation of national power seemed congruent with the familiar idea of Russia’s absolute greatness that Slavophiles fell back on. Naturally, the new ideology was eagerly welcomed by the leading Slavophile thinkers.<sup>54</sup> However, at a closer look, Uvarov’s position appears more nuanced and complicated. For him, the question of Russia’s integration into Europe was not to be formulated in metaphysical terms. What needed to be achieved was Russia’s entry into the international society that would also allow for the preservation of its domestic political stability and regime, which were perceived to be both threatened by European ideas and essential for Russia’s successful adaptation to those ideas. In Uvarov’s own words, the puzzle he was attempting to resolve was straightforward, “how to keep abreast with Europe and not move away from our own position . . . what kind of art one needs to master to take from the enlightenment only that which is necessary for the existence of a great state, and [at the same time] reject decisively everything that bears seeds of unrest and disorder.”<sup>55</sup>

Surely, one obvious solution to the puzzle is to change the regime and to see what happens. But that is what the Decembrists had tried to achieve, and Uvarov, as the chief ideologue, certainly took the proregime position and, first and foremost, attempted to preserve the autocracy. Yet how exactly was Russian autocracy perceived to be threatened by European ideas? Neumann gives one possible answer, arguing that by that time, “the discourse of great powers [became] embedded in the wider discourse of regime type . . . A power [could] also count as great by governing in a way that [was] deemed exemplary by others.”<sup>56</sup> Assessed against the context of emerging governmentality, Russian autocracy seemed outdated. Therefore, in Uvarov’s view, had Russia adopted the European ideas and language in an unrestrained fashion, it would have been forced to make an impossible choice: to preserve either its regime, or its great power status.

Why was the Russian autocratic regime considered to be essential for Russia’s political stability and its successful adaptation in Europe? On the one hand, as Troshchinsky, Herzen, and Bakhtin have argued, the broken

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53. Uvarov 1995, 70.

54. E.g., Riasanovsky 2005, 138–39; and Hoffmann and Kotsonis 2000, 55.

55. Uvarov cited in Zorin 2001, 367.

56. Neumann 2008a, 132.

bond between the lower and the higher classes was perceived to be reinstated through universal representation that was believed to be carried out by the monarch, but only insofar as the monarch's power was absolute.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, as Kharkhordin and Gerschenkron demonstrated convincingly, the monarch had historically been the everlasting agent of change in the country's political evolution.<sup>58</sup> Be it the "Russian Reformation" (Gerschenkron) or the inception of nationalism and the idea of common good (Kharkhordin), it was always the case that the ideational and institutional transformation was initiated and carried out in a top-down manner. Thus, it was believed that by conserving autocracy Russia would also maintain its transformative potential, even though this brought the risk that its international recognition as a great power would be undermined. This being said, there was nothing in autocracy itself that would make it specifically Russian or perpetually necessary in Uvarov's opinion.

Consequently, the problem that Uvarov saw in front of him "was so difficult that even its simple exposition [left] any sensible person flabbergasted."<sup>59</sup> The solution the minister decided to propose, on the one hand, fed from the repertoire of ideas about Russia's absolute greatness (proper religion and regime), and, on the other hand, in its formulation it remained markedly nonessentialist, and hence amenable to potential change. That is, Uvarov's ideology was entirely rooted in the societal image bank, thereby remaining familiar and comprehensible for the literate masses, but also reserved an opening for political transformation.

While defending Orthodoxy as one of the necessary pillars of his ideology, Uvarov insisted that "Without the love for the faith of the ancestors, a nation, just like a private individual, must perish; to weaken the nation's faith would be the same as to deprive it of its own blood and to tear its heart out."<sup>60</sup> Despite this bombastic language, Uvarov could not hide his confessional indifference—Orthodox Christianity was important for him only as a *traditional* religion, not as a *sacred* one. In the French original of his report, this was even more obvious, for he did not use the name of the Russian religion even once, "always opting for formulas '*religion nationale* [national religion]' and '*église dominante* [dominant church].'"<sup>61</sup>

57. Troshchinsky 1868, 56; Herzen 1956; Bakhtin 2000, 426.

58. Gerschenkron 1970, 45; Kharkhordin 2001, 226–27.

59. Uvarov 1995, 70.

60. Uvarov 1995, 71.

61. Zorin 2001, 360.

Uvarov's justification of autocracy seemed equally pompous:

Autocracy presents the main condition of Russia's political existence *in its current shape*. The Russian Colossus is supported by autocracy as by a cornerstone; a hand touching the pedestal shakes the whole body of the State. The innumerable majority of Russians feel this truth fully, even though they are positioned at different levels and differ in terms of their enlightenment, mindsets, and relations to the government.<sup>62</sup>

Yet here again, just one phrase—“*in its current shape*”—gave the minister away. In addition, even though this report was prepared for the monarch himself, Uvarov did not say a word about the transcendental nature of Russia's supreme power, which potentially pointed at his utter indifference toward metaphysical ideas, disconnected from the real world.<sup>63</sup>

Uvarov presented both Orthodoxy and autocracy as historically conditioned traits of the Russian body politic. For his pragmatic mind, however, those elements were neither providentially predetermined, nor inescapable in the long run. They were both thought of as characteristically Russian, not in some transcendental way, but as products and attributes of national history—that is, as the modes of existence which proved to work somewhat stably so far, despite all their vices, and that also eventually somewhat shaped the preferences and habits of the folk they were applied to. Arguably, Uvarov's main conceptual mistake (or his intentional logical distortion) was that he also defined the third element of his triad by identifying the first two elements as the third's main definitional features. Uvarov's bearers of the national spirit were also supposed to have certain convictions: beliefs in the omnipotence of the Throne and the Church. As Zorin noted perceptively, in formal logic terms, this was a classical vicious circle.<sup>64</sup>

## 5.10 SYNTHESIS FOR DOMESTIC ENDS

The described features of Uvarov's ideology are crucial for my overall argument. Official Nationality for the first time reflected very explicitly the synthesis of theatrical and absolute understandings of Russia's greatness. What is

62. Uvarov 1995, 71, emphasis added.

63. Zorin 2001, 361–62.

64. Zorin 2001, 366.



more, it also admitted that this synthesis emerged through Russia's interaction with the European political discourse. However, if in the European context a similar synthesis created an international hierarchy, a scale of progress and the idea of great power management applied to the world political order, in Russia it took a different shape and was utilized for other purposes.

While justifying his ideology, Uvarov performed the same intellectual operation in relation to Russia's political development that nineteenth-century international lawyers performed on international law. Orthodoxy, autocracy, and national spirit were presented as the fruits of the history of Russia's state practice, just as the common conscience and positive international law were the fruits of the historical development of the political society called Europe.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the sources of Russia's greatness were not understood metaphysically in the theory of Official Nationality. Hence, Uvarov's appeal to the utmost value of Russia's "palladium" was not a return to the absolute understanding of political greatness. Contrary to how this was interpreted by Slavophiles, Uvarov was telling a different story, which structurally resembled the story of European progress in the sense that Russia's political development was understood progressively as a series of consecutive revelations of its political worth that accumulated and created a great polity, as opposed to simply reflecting its everlasting inner nature. What is more, this story heavily depended on interaction with others and on the internalization of the dominant norms.

At the same time, Uvarov's ideology was still universal, because it exhibited an acute understanding of the common telos, and Russia, in his opinion, had no other choice but to accept the fact that universal history had a specific direction. Hence, true greatness could no longer be about mere appearance—theatrical manifestations of political power had to have a foundation in the form of the universal progress beneath it. Russia, however, did not play a leading role in advancing human development—this was pretty much obvious for all the participants of the Russian political debate. In fact, Russia badly needed to modernize. Moreover, to become a great power proper, it needed to do what normal great powers usually do—to engage in great power management through colonization. Yet before Russia could effectively do this, it needed to colonize and civilize itself, for it seemed obviously deficient for then current standards. To accomplish this, it utilized the

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65. Koskenniemi 2004, 46 and 51.

available discursive sources—namely, the story of its own greatness, refashioned to conform to the European greatpowerhood story, but serving domestic needs.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Russian great power discourse became a domestic ideology. This ideology started to present in foreign policy terms what essentially was a domestically oriented policy of self-modernization and self-colonization.<sup>66</sup> What was, in fact, an internal problem of perceived underdevelopment and civilizational deficiency was externalized and given the appearance of a foreign policy issue. It turned into a story of Russia having to become and to resist Europe at the same time. Without having to accept the straightforward position of a European colony and being unable to claim the status of a proper European great power, Russia opted for an ambivalent position of an undercivilized civilizer, whose main object of colonization was Russia itself. And the ideology of being a great power whose status was insecure and unfulfilled, but, at the same time, historically predetermined, began to function as a widely accepted and welcomed cover-up for the queer position of a self-colonizing colonizer.

### 5.1.1 BRINGING THE EASTERN QUESTION HOME

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the domestic agenda showed through Russian foreign policy discourse very explicitly. Russia contemplated its own incapacity to count as a proper great power through concentrating on what Solovyov perceptively called “great questions,”<sup>67</sup> most of which were, of course, foreign policy questions. One of those questions was the so-called “Eastern question”—that is, the struggle of Eastern Christians (predominantly Orthodox) for political independence from the Ottoman Empire and Russia’s political projects related to their support.

Alexander Gorchakov, the renowned Russian foreign minister and the most venerated diplomat among the contemporary cohort of Russia’s foreign service, wrote on the Eastern question quite extensively. Some of his thoughts directly relevant to my analysis deserve to be quoted at some length.

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66. On Russia as a self-colonizing political entity, see Etkind 2011.

67. Solovyov 1911, 16–17.

We should expect—writes Gorchakov—that the Eastern Christians, left to their own means, will not be able to avoid the influence of Western capital and material progress, which is so powerful today. But can we count merely on their Christian gratefulness and the bonds of our faith and ethnicity connecting our peoples? Undoubtedly, we should not neglect this inner impulsion, for it is our only strength at the current moment.<sup>68</sup>

Betting on the strength of this essentialist cultural bond, Gorchakov insisted that Eastern Christians would eventually appreciate this unconditional friendship, when they compare it to the profit-oriented sympathies of France that was eager to provide ample financial resources to the Ottoman Empire. Yet, in Gorchakov's opinion, Russia also needed to strengthen those moral ties through industrial, military, financial and trade relations. He concluded by admitting that the latter could only be achieved if Russia developed its inner forces, which “[at that] point in time, constituted *the only true source of states' political greatness.*”<sup>69</sup>

Thus, Gorchakov presented Orthodox Christianity and cultural ties as the only available, but still insufficient instruments of political influence abroad. The main aim of that influence, however, was not as much the realization of Russia's proverbial mission to build a supranational political entity based on the obsolete and incomprehensible spiritual unity of morally upstanding peoples. Instead, Russian foreign policy toward Eastern Christians was somehow meant to aid the development of the Russian interior, to make it modern. Hence, it was the restoration of Russia's material capabilities and domestic reforms that, on the one hand, became the main objective of the Russian Cabinet in the 1860s, and, on the other hand, this turn was justified in essentialist, still externally oriented terms. Despite his relatively peaceful rhetorical disposition, Gorchakov could not abandon the civilizational and world-historic discursive modes that promulgated Russia's belonging to the global political elite, while also admitting its then current incapacity to keep up with it. This incapacity was cast in explicitly civilizationist tropes of dignity and manners, wherein “hasty agitation is unbecoming for a healthy nation, just as cunning agility is unworthy of a people, whose future is even greater than its past; 20 years of idleness and stagnation are nothing for the life of such a people.”<sup>70</sup>

68. Gorchakov cited in Lopatnikov 2003, 311.

69. Gorchakov cited in Lopatnikov 2003, 312, emphasis added.

70. Gorchakov cited in Lopatnikov 2003, 292.

Gorchakov wrote these lines a decade after Russia's crushing defeat in the Crimean war, and the domestic restoration agenda looked quite natural here. Yet one could also see how in this quote, just as in Uvarov's ideology, political greatness is presented as a product of Russia's national history, while the content of the message is openly mobilizational and inward-looking, instead of being preoccupied with the international status quo and great power management in its Western understanding (i.e., concerted maintenance of international order). The same can be said about Gorchakov's famous aphorism reiterated by Otto von Bismarck: "une grande puissance ne se reconnait pas, elle se revele" (a great power does not have itself recognized, it reveals itself).<sup>71</sup> For Gorchakov, greatpowerhood was about what a country needed to do itself, not about how others reacted to it. That is, recognition was an epiphenomenon of that self-revelation. The latter, however, was still problematic and incomplete in the Russian case, which Gorchakov hinted at in his other famous saying about Russia: "Nous sommes une grande impuissance" (we are a great powerlessness/impotence).<sup>72</sup>

## 5.12 SELF-COLONIZATION IN FOREIGN POLICY TERMS

### 5.12.1 *Sergey Witte*

At the turn of the century it became obvious for the Russian elites that the biggest challenge for Russia's modernization was its domestic institutional and economic structures. Those, too, were invariably discussed as primarily related to Russian foreign policy and its quest for great power status. Sergey Witte, a minister (1892–1903) and a prime minister (1903–1906) of Imperial Russia, filled a lot of pages with his contemplations about Russia's domestic condition and its international standing. In his memoirs, published in 1911, Witte attested that the turn from free trade to protectionism that took place during the rule of Alexander III (1881–1894), occurred primarily because "Emperor Alexander III realized that Russia could *become great* only when it would be an industrialized country in addition to being an agrarian one; that a country without a well-developed manufacturing industry *could not be*

71. von Bismarck 1940, 201.

72. Zayonchkovskiy 1961, 326. *Une grande impuissance* is a witty modification of the French "great power"—*une grande puissance*.

great.”<sup>73</sup> Witte also suggested that the primary reason for Russia’s retardation was its lack of capital, which it had been unable to accumulate throughout its economic history, for “Russia, having turned within the two preceding centuries into the greatest power [*mogushchestvennyuyu derzhavu*] in the world, and having concentrated all its efforts on this great task, could not make any savings.”<sup>74</sup> Thereby, in Witte’s reasoning, Russia’s international great power obligations paradoxically figured as the primary cause of Russia’s domestic underdevelopment.

As an influential econometrician, Witte did not cherish any illusions regarding Russia’s economic condition—it was hopelessly behind the leading European states. As a politician, however, he also believed that Russia deserved “full greatness, corresponding to the spirit and strength of the great Russian people.”<sup>75</sup> Why was the Russian people still great for Witte, if the state was so weak and challenged? Apparently, in Witte’s opinion, Russia was still great in potentiality, because it was more democratic than any other Western European state, but democratic in a “*muzhik*-ian” sense—that is, its peasantry and lower classes were the main source of Russia’s greatness and strength.

At the same time, the so-called “peasant question” (i.e., the problem of reintegration of liberated peasants into Russian society as independent and free economic subjects) was still unresolved. The peasants’ mistrust in Russia’s judicial system, their skepticism toward regional bureaucracies, as well as the strength of traditional peasant communes, were the main obstacles to reintegration. Therefore, to make Russia great again, Witte expected Nicholas II (1894–1917) to instill legality into his subjects’ everyday life, to eradicate lawlessness, to educate and truly emancipate his subjects. It was obvious for him that a peasant needed to be turned into a person (Witte thought peasants were still “semi-persons” at that point in time).<sup>76</sup> It was necessary to free the peasants from the ties of their local community, which would bring about the actualization of Russia’s potential greatness.

Thus, in Witte’s discursive universe, the question of Russia’s modernization was inextricably connected to civilizing Russia’s own peasants and turning them into modern political subjects. This, and only this, would ensure successful reforms of Russia’s domestic institutions. At the same time, this policy of self-colonization was formulated and justified in foreign policy

73. Witte 1923, 373–74, emphasis added.

74. Witte 1899.

75. Witte 1924, 288.

76. Witte 1924, 470.

terms. Witte presented Russia as a great power that had earned this status through centuries of political practice, had internalized the telos of European civilization, found itself temporarily deficient in those terms, and was sprinting toward its resurrection. The opportunity to finish this sprint resided in the yet unploughed and exotic spirit of the Russian peasant.

### 5.12.2 Pyotr Stolypin

The intimate connection between the domestic and the international was discussed very widely in the Russian official discourse of the early twentieth century. Pyotr Stolypin, who became the prime minister the same year Witte left the office, agreed with his predecessor regarding the peasant question and the improvement of land use, which he saw as “the issues . . . of existential importance for Russia as a great power [*voprosami bytiya russkoy derzhavy*].”<sup>77</sup> What is more, Stolypin claimed consistently that he intended to keep Russia from participating in any military disputes—primarily due to Russia’s internal institutional fragility and the ongoing agrarian reform.<sup>78</sup> In addition, Stolypin emphatically abstained from engaging in foreign policy making and, reportedly, once refused to meet the last German Emperor Wilhelm II, believing that their meeting “could bring more harm than good.”<sup>79</sup> Yet, in this light, it becomes even more interesting to see how and why Stolypin spoke about Russia’s great power status, which he did regularly and with passion.

For instance, in one of his speeches, the prime minister argued for the necessity of allocating a vast amount of resources for the restoration of the Russian navy that had been destroyed during the Russo-Japanese War:

If we want to preserve our military power, which protects the dignity of our motherland, and if we do not agree to lose our rightful place among the great powers, we would not retreat before the need to make these expenditures, which we are obliged to bear for the sake of Russia’s great past.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, the navy, which elsewhere was mainly perceived as a precondition of prosperity and a means of trade and colonization, turned for Stolypin into

77. Stolypin 1911, 45–46.

78. Stolypin cited in Bok 1953, 300.

79. Bok 1953, 282.

80. Stolypin 1911, 24.

the shield of the motherland's violated dignity and of its great past. Russia's present, however, was such that emergency measures were required to restore and maintain its place among the great powers, which for him was as uncertain as it was rightful. Coming from a person who was primarily preoccupied with Russia's domestic development and who was against its involvement in international disputes, such a take on Russia's great power status seemed again very inward-looking. More precisely, Stolypin's discussion of Russian greatness was a mobilizational narrative with a domestic agenda, which was formulated in foreign policy terms.

Another illustrative example of this fusion of the domestic and the international was Stolypin's take on the obligations of great powers:

Great world powers have global interests. Great world powers must participate in international combinations; they cannot reject their right to vote in the resolution of global problems. The navy is that lever which provides an opportunity to exercise this right; it is a necessary attribute of every great power that has access to the sea.<sup>81</sup>

It is clear from this quote that Russia had an obligation to participate in great power management not because otherwise the world order would be in crisis, but because if Russia abstained from this duty, it would cease being a great power. That is, Russia needed to engage in great power politics for the sake of self-preservation.

As Stolypin made clear in one of his other speeches delivered in the State Duma in 1908, the continued colonization of Russia's interior was the main strategy of that self-preservation. Defending the need to build the Amur railway in Russia's Far East, Stolypin resorted to the kind of rhetoric that one hears very often in today's Russia—either Russia will be a great power or it will not be at all:

If we do not have enough lifeblood to heal all the wounds, the most remote and tormented parts of our motherland may painlessly and imperceptibly fall off . . . And . . . the future generations will bring us to account . . . We will be held accountable for the fact that, while minding our own internal matters, preoccupied with the country's reconstruction, we overlooked more important worldly matters, worldly events.<sup>82</sup>

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81. Stolypin 1991.

82. Stolypin 2013, 154.

In Stolypin's rhetoric, the narrative of Russian greatpowerhood and its involvement in the resolution of global problems went hand in hand with another narrative concerned overwhelmingly with Russia's internal fragility and retardation. This perceived retardation was an outcome of many factors, including Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. Yet, most importantly, it was measured against the internalized scale of universal progress. By manifesting its capability to engage in great power politics, Russia was believed to be modernizing itself and bringing itself closer to the desired ideal of a highly developed nation. This ideal, however, was a distant potentiality that required an emergency mode of governance for catching-up development. For Stolypin, such emergency measures mostly included self-colonization through resettlement and agrarian reform supplemented with a very cautious foreign policy of avoiding conflict.

### 5.12.3 Pyotr Struve

Almost all other discursive positions that gained ground in early twentieth-century Russia retained the core ambivalence of Russia being great and inferior at the same time. They also exhibited a sense of urgency and the feeling of trauma from which Russia needed to recover. The recipes they prescribed differed from the self-centered strategies proposed by Witte and Stolypin, putting more emphasis on an assertive foreign policy. Yet, despite this emphasis, one could still see that the main problem they were supposed to resolve was the discrepancy between the level of Russia's development and the ideal of a civilized nation it had internalized in the preceding century. Similarly, the main resource that should have been deployed to ameliorate that discrepancy was located at home.

In 1910–1911, Vladimir Ryabushinskiy, the brother of the liberal-minded banker and Old Believer, Pavel Ryabushinskiy, edited a two-volume book *Velikaya Rossiya* (Great Russia). Disillusioned with Stolypin's repressive reforms, Ryabushinskiy stood in opposition to his government. The book addressed military and social issues related to Russia's political and economic development and “proclaimed ‘love towards the motherland and the army’ as the way to restore the great power status which Russia had historically possessed.”<sup>83</sup> The contributing authors were a collection of nationalist, right-wing politicians, academics, and military officials, whose positions differed in some ways, but who all agreed that Russia needed to build up a mate-

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83. Petrov 1992.



rial and, most importantly, military foundation beneath its claim for political greatness.

The mastermind behind the publication of *Great Russia* was said to be Pyotr Struve, the Russian academic, one of the founding fathers of Russian Marxism, whose views later drifted toward a right-wing liberal-conservative position and who participated in the White movement. Struve was also an editor of *Russkaya Mysl'* (*Russian Thought*), one of the most popular Russian journals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Earlier, Struve had already published an essay with the identical title in the abovementioned journal. He wrote this essay as a response to Stolypin's 1907 speech, which the prime minister crowned with a rhetorical formula that later became famous. Criticizing radicals' approach to his land reform, he exclaimed, "They want great shocks, we want Great Russia!"<sup>84</sup>

Struve, excited about this exclamation, decided to elaborate on its significance. In his understanding, the internal and the external dimensions of political greatness were closely intertwined and could never be actualized without one another. In claiming this, he allegedly argued against what he called "banal radicalism" and "banal conservatism." The former, in Struve's recollection, prioritized the state's internal well-being and perceived foreign policy in general, and external greatness in particular, as mere "unfortunate implications, incurred by racial, national and . . . other historical moments."<sup>85</sup> The latter, on the contrary, submitted the exercise of foreign policy to domestic needs, and, attempting to preserve and reinforce the autocratic-bureaucratic system, pushed Russia into a completely unnecessary war (with Japan), which it lost miserably.

Struve argued that both camps were misguided. In his turn, he approached the problem of state power anthropomorphically: "Psychologically, any emergent state is a kind of personality, which has its own supreme law of existence."<sup>86</sup> That supreme law attested that any healthy and strong state wanted to be powerful. And to be powerful, in Struve's view, meant that a state necessarily had to strive toward external greatness. Consequently, any weak state, when it was not defended by the conflict of interests of strong states, was potentially and often in practice a prey for strong states. Hence, for Struve, the main measure of success for any domestic policy was the

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84. Stolypin 1911, 40.

85. Struve 1996, 142–43.

86. Struve 1996, 143.

answer to one question: “To what extent does that policy advance the so-called external power [*vneshnee mogushchestvo*] of the state?”<sup>87</sup> Thus, maximizing this external power was presented as the sole and absolute end of any state’s existence, but that external power also could not be maximized through obvious self-harm. Russia had to *restore* its inner strength by maximizing its external power, but since external power was also the main measure of inner strength (and in Russia’s case this meant that Russia was weak on all accounts), Struve could only conceive and present the idea of Great Russia as creative and “revolutionary, in the best sense of this word.”<sup>88</sup> He thought of Stolypin’s formula as “a motto of the new Russian statehood that relies on [Russia’s] ‘historical past’ and living ‘cultural tradition,’” that is, on some future state that would be mounted on the foundation cast from the fruits of Russia’s political history.

It bears mentioning that by restoring Russia’s external greatness Struve did not mean expansionist or aggressive foreign policy. He was writing this in 1908, when Russia had barely recovered from the war with Japan and the 1905 revolution. Struve believed that Russia’s Far-Eastern foreign policy was a logical outcome of Alexander III’s reaction that was overly preoccupied with preserving Russia’s internal regime. What he suggested instead was a form of cultural hegemony, which would need to gradually turn into an economic one. In his opinion, too great a focus on the Far-Eastern dimension was Russia’s mistake, because that region was neither culturally compatible (Russia did not have any religious or linguistic connections with either Japan or China), nor economically attractive (due to its remoteness and the difficulty of ensuring competitiveness resulting from it). Struve urged Russia, in its then current position of weakness, to turn to the Black Sea basin, where it had cultural ties which could potentially become economic ties in future.

He believed that the most solid foundation of real greatness and might was a strong economy, which Russia did not have at that time. Hence, in order to become great again it had to utilize the means available to it—cultural leadership. Importantly, that cultural leadership was still a potentiality for Struve, a potentiality that could be made real only through the eradication of Russia’s domestic vices: the anti-statist spirit of its people and the break between the authorities and the most cultured classes. The former

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87. Struve 1996, 144.

88. Struve 1996, 142.

undermined labor discipline, which Struve presented as the main foundation of power and culture. The latter led to the disconnectedness of the elites from the people in general. To correct those vices, he proposed a form of domestic population management reminiscent of colonizing practices. This was supposed to alleviate Russia's "deeply abnormal"<sup>89</sup> condition complicated by the country's multiethnicity, to breach the proverbial gap between the state and the people and turn Russia into an exemplary civic nation.

Two concrete policies that Struve proposed applied to Russia's Jewish and Polish minorities, whom he called *inorodtsy* (literally meaning "people of foreign/alien origin"). Essentially, the ultimate purpose of the proposed policies was the co-optation of Jews into the process of Russia's economic recovery as "invaluable pioneers and mediators,"<sup>90</sup> and the appeasement of the Polish elites in order to turn them into loyal and satisfied Russian subjects. Struve concluded his argument by suggesting that, "only if the Russian people is bitten with the spirit of true statehood and defends it bravely . . . only then will Great Russia be created on the basis of the living traditions of the past and the precious acquisitions of the current and forthcoming generations."<sup>91</sup>

In other words, the core problem for Struve was the peculiar condition of Russian domestic society, which was an outcome of its imperial experience and the evolution of its domestic political institutions. That condition was caused by a lack of national consciousness in the lower classes and the disconnectedness of the educated classes from the state. As such, it hampered the establishment of Russia's cultural leadership in the Black Sea basin and the construction of a strong economy. That is, it did not let Russia acquire the two main preconditions of power and might—the supposedly natural goals of every healthy nation.

Having formulated the problem, Struve then introduced an important twist. Allegedly, power and might made sense for him only if they were manifested externally. Thus, Russia was supposed to solve the problem of its domestic underdevelopment by foreign policy means—through engaging in great power politics. At the same time, in its early twentieth-century shape, Russia was weak and fragile. Hence, Struve's argument that political greatness was only achieved through external manifestations did not reflect the

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89. Struve 1996, 148.

90. Struve 1996, 149.

91. Struve 1996, 150.

status quo. Instead, just like a plethora of other domestically produced arguments about Russia's greatness, *from premodern times to the present day*, this argument functioned as a mobilizational ideology, which formulated in foreign policy terms what was entirely and completely a *domestic* problem.

### 5.13 CONCLUSION

Contemplating the evolution of Russian nationalism, Vladimir Solovyov concluded that it proceeded in three distinct phases,

first, the cult of [the Russian] people as the privileged bearers of universal truth, then, the veneration of this people as an elemental force irrespective of all truth, and finally, the cult of its exclusive cultural and historical character—the negation of the very idea of universal truth.<sup>92</sup>

In other words, the idea of the Russian nation was first conceived in fantastic and metaphysical terms, then shifted to being opportunistic and amoral (i.e., lacking any moral sensibility shared with others), and finally turned into a self-centered, and somewhat autistic, narrative that synthesized the previous two modes into one in the nineteenth century.

Certainly, such representation of this discursive process fitted Solovyov's purpose very nicely—his main philosophical task was to reinstate the idea of universal morality and, by proclaiming the absence of universals in the Russian nationalism of the nineteenth century, he (mis)represented the position of his philosophical opponents whom he intended to debunk. Yet this reconstruction is also revealing, since it captures, even if imperfectly, the transformation of Russian great power discourse, which I have reconstructed thus far. It reflects how the once hegemonic discourse on Russia's absolute greatness gave way to the theatrical mode of glorification, which, in its turn, was replaced by the civilizational mode in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Where Solovyov may have gone wrong, however, was his assertion that the resulting discursive construct negated the idea of universal truth altogether. As I have shown in this chapter, throughout the nineteenth century,

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92. Solovyov cited in Kohn 1962, 222–23.

Russia tried to grapple with the idea of universal progress. It could hardly see any meaningful alternatives to it, but found it difficult to relate to it unproblematically. This was mostly the case because Russia found itself in the discursive trap of semiperiphery. On the one hand, it assumed the role of a full-fledged European great power and a member of the Congress System after the Napoleonic Wars. On the other hand, it kept being exoticized within European discourse and sensed its externally ascribed civilizational and economic deficiency very clearly.

That deficiency only made sense, however, if it was measured against a universal standard and discussed in a common language that Russia, as a member of European society, had internalized. Indeed, the proverbial “exclusive cultural and historical character” that Solovyov referred to was never an isolationist narrative indifferent to reactions and opinions coming from abroad. On the contrary, Russia was always extremely concerned about its international image. This fact even convinced some IR scholars that honor was an unchanging transhistorical category in Russia’s relations with the West.<sup>93</sup> Yet its understanding of honor and its perception of disrespect was and still is often unpredictable, since it got partially detached from the West-oriented consensus about proper greatpowerly conduct and was reinvested into Russia’s cultural essence and political history.

Even though this predicament may be presented as a consequence of Russia’s encounter and lengthy cohabitation with a universalizing and hierarchically discriminating discursive regime, which the European civilizational discourse was and, to some extent, remains, the ideational mix that Russia chose to adopt as its main communicative strategy was and, to some extent, remains highly inflammable. The perceived deficiency of one’s position, measured against the previously internalized universal standard and compensated through appealing to one’s political history and cultural superiority, can only remain harmless when history and culture is all that state has in its arsenal.

As the recent, unprovoked, and largely irrational (from the Western point of view) Russian aggression against Ukraine has demonstrated, most questionable cultural-historical narratives about one’s political greatness emerging as replacement legitimation mechanisms within a more or less common understanding of the general international order may easily turn into violence, especially when they take the upper hand in an unchecked

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93. Tsygankov 2012.

and resourceful autocratic regime. Whether they indeed shape the genuine beliefs of the autocratic elite or function as the most reliable popular legitimations of political actions that, in fact, pursue entirely different purposes is not of primary importance. The main problem is their discursive embeddedness, which creates favorable conditions for political adventurism that often relies on inaccurate and somewhat autistic self-assessment.

## CHAPTER 6

### *A World Apart*

#### The Rise and Fall of International Socialist Greatness

*The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie.*

KARL MARX AND FRIEDRICH ENGELS, *MANIFESTO OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY*  
(1848)

*I drink, first and foremost, to the health of the Russian nation, because it is the most outstanding of all the nations that the Soviet Union is composed of. . . . I toast the health of the Russian nation not only because it is the leading nation, but also because it has lucid mind, stiff character, and patience.*

JOSEPH STALIN, SPEECH AT THE GRAND RECEPTION IN THE KREMLIN  
(24 MAY 1945)

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the European world-historic narrative of civilizational progress that legitimized imperialism and justified the necessity of an international legal hierarchy with a club of civilized great powers on the top faced a powerful discursive contender. The new narrative went approximately as follows. Drastic transformations in communication, production, and trade enmeshed the globe in a dense network of supply chains, telegraph lines, and large factories. Coupled with a gross imbalance in capital accumulation, those processes created new collective subjects, unprecedentedly cosmopolitan in nature. Reflecting on the consequences of rapid economic globalization, soon-to-be superstar German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels insisted that the capital-owning class, the bourgeoisie “[drew] all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization.”<sup>1</sup>

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1. Marx and Engels 2007, 13.

Enjoying its structural economic advantage, the cosmopolitan bourgeoisie forced all nations, on pain of oblivion or extinction, to embrace the elements of civilization and adopt the new mode of production governed by bourgeois economic principles. In other words, the bourgeoisie “[created] a world after its own image.”<sup>2</sup> Naturally, this was not a more equal world where the light of civilization could shine on even the most backward societies. The relationship between “the East” and “the West,” the “nations of peasants” and the “nations of bourgeois” remained that of exploitation and dependency.<sup>3</sup>

Concurrently, the emerging mode of industrial production gave birth to another cosmopolitan class—the proletariat—who, in addition to losing their distinctly national character, also cast off the shackles of kinship, religion, and morality, thanks to massive population movements and rapid urbanization. The people who earned their living as industrial workers were alienated both from the products of their labor, and from their traditional life, becoming “spiritually impoverished.”<sup>4</sup> For Marxists, this precarious state of the proletariat was at once a problem and a promise, since this class was prone to developing a critical gaze toward the previously unquestioned coordinates of their social existence and could often perceive them as mere facades masking the real and selfish interests of the bourgeoisie, especially when the mechanism of exploitation was rendered visible by Marxist intellectuals. Already immense and growing in numbers, the proletariat was expected to form a transnational unity and to act collectively toward the redistribution of capital (to correct the existing structural flaws), and the abolition of individual property as such (to prevent future possibilities of capitalist predation). The multiple workers’ Internationals that assembled from 1864 onward were the key sites where the Marxist narrative developed and gained momentum.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I demonstrate how the Marxist narrative, which posed a radical challenge to the previously hegemonic discourse of great powers as champions of civilization and managers of the international order, was adopted by the revolutionary parties of Russia as the main frame of reference for making sense of Russia’s place in the international system and its role in world history. When, following a successful social revolution, Bolsheviks

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2. Marx and Engels 2007, 13.

3. Marx and Engels 2007, 13.

4. Bronner 2011, 40.

5. For a history of the first three Internationals, see Novack, Frankel, and Feldman 1974.



took power in Russia in 1917, the Marxist narrative became the official ideology of the new Soviet state and the master playbook for its relations with other nations.

In concrete terms, Vladimir Lenin (1917–1924) presented himself as, first and foremost, an *international* socialist leader—that is, the leader of the Bolshevik working class, which, in its struggle with capitalist imperialism, was always prepared to sacrifice in the name of not only the Russian revolution, but also the international workers’ revolution, which was believed to be the true and ultimate goal of history.<sup>6</sup> Within this paradigm, *communist internationalism* was opposed to *great power chauvinism* (*velikoderzhavny shovinizm*), or discriminatory and oppressive politics carried out globally by the capitalist classes of Western states under the banner of national and civilizational superiority.<sup>7</sup>

I then show how communist internationalism evolved into a revolutionary-imperial paradigm under Joseph Stalin (1924–1953).<sup>8</sup> Having realized that the international workers’ revolution was not yet out of the woods, the Bolsheviks embraced pragmatic realism and started promoting the communist cause by concluding tactical alliances with various factions of global capitalism.<sup>9</sup> This disposition created a tension on the discursive level. Ideologically speaking, the Soviet Union had neither a (hi)story nor an appropriate agency to back such uncommunistic alliances, which threatened both the domestic and international legitimacy of the Soviet regime. In response, the Bolsheviks ransacked their historical materialist hat to conjure a solution: they idolized history as the most powerful, all-encompassing force, and the transcendent source of authority that justified (retrospectively) the progressiveness of the Soviet regime.<sup>10</sup> In discursive terms, this meant that Russia’s legacy as an old and independent polity—and later, a great power—was reclaimed, appropriately amended, and put into the service of the socialist cause. The resulting discursive construct was a curious

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6. Lenin 1969, 99.

7. Zhukov et al. 1963, vol. 3, 242.

8. Since the Communist Party technically exercised collective leadership, the exact starting date of when one or another Soviet leader de facto concentrated the supreme power in his hands sometimes remains unclear. After a death or an ousting of the former head of government there sometimes followed a short period of “interregnum” when different members of the Politburo competed for supreme power. In this chapter, I use the broadly accepted periodization.

9. Zubok 2008, 428.

10. Dobrenko 2008, 18.

combination of communist internationalism, historical determinism, and great power nationalism.

The Stalinist discursive transformation was the most important one in the evolution of Russia's great power discourse during the Soviet period. Hence, I allot ample space in this chapter to the discussion of the first four decades of the Soviet regime, accompanying it with many discursive examples. After Stalin's death, all subsequent heads of state had to somehow grapple with the inherited discursive tension between revolutionary-internationalist class struggle on the one hand, and great power management, which the Soviet Union was taking part in internationally, on the other. With every Soviet leader who ruled long enough to leave a discernible discursive pattern, the ideological pendulum swung from one side to the other, prioritizing either the revolutionary-internationalist roots of communist ideology, or the Soviet Union's international standing as a great power. Each time, the pendulum's ideological counterphase understandably suffered.

Nikita Khrushchev (1958–1964), for instance, stayed loyal to the revolutionary-internationalist roots of communist ideology. His programmatic design for the international order—also known as “peaceful coexistence”—made a clear distinction between ideological struggle and relations between states. That is, the former could and had to continue (for historical materialist reasons) without necessarily igniting armed conflicts in the latter.<sup>11</sup> This is why, despite Khrushchev's general drive toward disarmament and openness to contact, his Western counterparts were not really sold on the idea. They still operated within the framework of great power management and were apprehensive of the disproportionate growth of Soviet ideological influence after WWII.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, Khrushchev's time in office was marked by a number of piquant international episodes, including his subversive behavior at the United Nations and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1982), on the other hand, prioritized the Soviet Union's role as a responsible great power. Historians argue that he not only paid more attention to foreign policy in general,<sup>13</sup> but also promoted a premise that the United States and the Soviet Union, as two superpowers, “had a joint obligation to maintain a stable world order.”<sup>14</sup> Combined with the

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11. Khrushchev 1959, 4–6.

12. Kennan 1960.

13. Raleigh 2016.

14. Zubok 2008, 431.

Soviet Union's deep reintegration into the global capitalist economy and Brezhnev's unwillingness to publicly reinterpret Leninist maxims on international class struggle, this discursive position hollowed out the formerly strong internal consensus and became fertile ground for cynicism and duplicity among the Soviet domestic audience and political actors. While the *formal* hegemony of communist ideology was not only unchallenged but also carefully guarded by the ruling elites, its values and ideals became decoupled from its ritualistic representations. That is, performing the formal ideological rituals became more important for enacting one's political identity than complying with the ideology's semantic prescriptions. As a result, Marxist internationalism lost its vitality in the public eye. Certain elite factions (especially in the military and the KGB) resorted to Russian great power chauvinism as the main anchor of their identity.<sup>15</sup> The masses, while generally remaining attached to the socialist discursive regime, also developed a critical distance from its literal pronouncements.<sup>16</sup>

By the time Mikhail Gorbachev (1985–1991) finally launched a moderately open discussion of socialist policies and ideological tenets, introducing *perestroika* and *glasnost'*, the conditions for a major implosion within Soviet discourse were already in place. Trying to alleviate (but also potentially exacerbating) the discursive confusion, Gorbachev added a pinch of liberal internationalism into the mixture, frequently appealing to universal human rights and values, as well as the necessity of joint and coordinated management of new global challenges and threats, such as, for instance, the ecological challenge. Just like that, the main ideological foundation of Marxist internationalism, which envisioned the global political processes as a dialectics ignited by class struggle, was replaced by the unitary vision of the world as one hierarchically organized functional whole with common opportunities and problems.<sup>17</sup> With Gorbachev, the Soviet Union rejoined the global discursive hegemony of universal and unitary world order managed by an exclusive club of great powers. For Marxist internationalism, as a state policy and as a specific discursive mode of political greatness, which I refer to as *international socialist greatness*, this proved to be the final—and fatal—blow.

The twentieth century produced such an overwhelming amount of discourse relevant for the argument of this book that I cannot even hope to make this short chapter fully representative of all the important develop-

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15. Zubok 2008, 435.

16. Yurchak 2003.

17. On two possible representational models of society, see Lyotard 1984, 11–14.

ments that took place in (and around) the Soviet Union. Therefore, I choose a slightly different approach to presenting the conceptual evolution of the Soviet ideas about greatness and political superiority. To a large extent, I rely on the already existing scholarly narratives, making use of the most relevant historical analyses of the Soviet ideology and discourse. On the other hand, I also analyze a broad sample of discursive monuments, both domestic and international, which I see as particularly illustrative of the conceptual evolution in question. In choosing my illustrations, I remain guided by the historical accounts of the period, as well as the newly emerging formats and fields relevant for the public debate.

To illustrate Lenin's radical break with the great power system, I rely on the writings of Lenin's philosophical predecessors, his associates and critics, as well as Lenin himself. Following the genesis of the revolutionary-imperial paradigm under Stalin, I study the correspondence related to Stalin's interactions with his party fellows, his own speeches and statements, as well as Stalinist cinema, which served as the main reclamation device for Russia's millennial history and great power status. From the discourse produced during the relatively short tenure of Khrushchev, I choose to concentrate on his exchange with George Kennan on the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, where the clashing world views of the two superpowers became particularly apparent. I also consult with secondary historical analyses of Khrushchev's ideological stances. The same goes for Brezhnev's, whose lengthy rule was studied by historians of the Soviet Union in great detail. I pay specific attention to Brezhnev's domestic cultural policies that unveiled his dislike for liberal reformists and to his international advocacy of peace, which he considered to be the main value for the global community. To represent Gorbachev's take on the issue of the Soviet Union's international status, I use his own speeches as well as the writings of his associates, mostly within the context of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

## 6.1 BOLSHEVIKS AND GREAT POWER CHAUVINISM

After Socialist Russia emerged from the fog of the revolution (1917) and the civil war (1918–1922), its role and relative position in world politics had to be reimagined. For ideological reasons, it could no longer present itself as an imperialist great power, but what was it then? And how did it imagine its role in the post-WWI world order? Lenin wrote about international order and

global processes rather frequently and with great passion. In 1921, he symbolically divided the world into the old and the new, insisting that “there are two worlds in the world now: the old one—capitalism, which is confused and will never retreat, and a growing new world, which is still very weak, but which will grow, for it is invincible.”<sup>18</sup> A year earlier, Lenin constructed a similar binary and antagonistic division, but in more political-economic terms: “One key characteristic of imperialism is that the whole world . . . is currently divided into a great number of oppressed peoples and a tiny minority of oppressing peoples that possess tremendous wealth and great military power.”<sup>19</sup> The early Stalin advocated a similar vision. In his 1919 article, he insisted that “the world has split, decidedly and irreversibly, into two camps: the camp of imperialism and the camp of socialism.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, both envisioned the role of the Soviet Union as a revolutionary force resisting global imperialism and, initially, neither tried to reclaim the status that had been ascribed to Russia before 1917. Equally, both interpreted global processes through the economic lens and appealed to historical materialism as their main analytical foundation. This means that within the discursive matrix presented in the introductory chapter, *international socialist greatness* can be classified as *materialist* and *revolutionary* discursive mode.

### 6.1.1 Great powers as retrograde actors

The Soviet elites could not call their young country a great power, not only because of the dire state of Russia’s economy, but also and more importantly, because the paradigm in which that position was rendered meaningful was replaced in the Soviet political imagination by the idea of international socialist mission and the greatness associated with it. The latter, as mentioned above, preserved the evolutionary and progressivist connotations that allowed for international stratification and measurable inequality. As such, this paradigm leaned toward hierarchy, just like its civilizational counterpart. However, the dialectical underpinnings of the process of social change, as well as its stark rejection of philosophical idealism and its new normative content, made Marxist internationalism a doctrine primarily focused on antagonism as opposed to universal consensus; revolution as opposed to reform; and qualitative paradigm shifts as opposed to catch-up

18. Lenin cited in *Zeri i Popullit* 1977, 8.

19. Lenin cited in *Renmin Ribao* 1977.

20. Stalin 1947a, 232. See also Stalin 1947b, 94.

development.<sup>21</sup> A concert of great powers managing their balance of power and, by extension, the affairs of the rest of the world simply had no place within it.

More precisely, in the new discursive universe, great powers had a retrograde role to play. To describe that role, Russian revolutionary parties invented a special concept—*great power chauvinism*<sup>22</sup>—the imperialist policy which Bolsheviks harshly criticized in their rhetoric and writings. In 1923, Nikolai Bukharin, then editor-in-chief (1918–1929) of the main Soviet newspaper *Pravda*, and later also a Politburo member (1924–1929), called great powers “fortresses of capitalist exploitation.”<sup>23</sup> He compared them to “octopuses [that spread] their arms all over the world [and] sucked out juices from all the globe’s corners.”<sup>24</sup> Bukharin conceded that the Left could thrive in Russia only because Russia’s “greatpowerhood [had] collapsed in the imperialistic war.”<sup>25</sup>

The 1963 edition of the Soviet Historical Encyclopedia defines “great power chauvinism” as “an ideology and politics of hegemonic classes of ‘great’ nations in an exploitation-based society; a striving to manipulate and enslave other nations, as well as to deprive them of their independence, under the banner of the ‘great’ nations’ own national supremacy.”<sup>26</sup> It ties the phenomenon directly to the birth of European nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and extrapolates it all the way to the expansionist policies of Germany and Japan during WWII, as well as the foreign interventionist policies “of the ruling circles in the US and of a number of capitalist countries in Western Europe [during the Cold War].”<sup>27</sup> By 1963, however, the discursive tension between international socialist greatness and great power management was already in full swing. Consequently, this edition of the encyclopedia also included an article about “great powers,” where the USSR, as a permanent member of the United Nations’ Security Council and a claimant of the historical legacy of the Russian Empire, is unproblematically presented as the first among the twentieth century’s

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21. Stalin 2013.

22. This concept is still alive in the Russian political discourse. For instance, Putin used it during the 2007 meeting with pro-Kremlin youth groups, when he admonished them about xenophobic sentiments (see RIA-Novosti 2007).

23. Bukharin 1968, 304.

24. Bukharin 1968, 304.

25. Bukharin 1968, 304.

26. Zhukov et al. 1963, vol. 3, 242.

27. Zhukov et al. 1963, vol. 3, 243.

great powers,<sup>28</sup> despite the country's alphabetical disadvantage.<sup>29</sup> In other words, by the second half of the twentieth century, in the Soviet official imagination, the international status of a great power had already been decoupled from the policies great powers had traditionally pursued. Yet, for the purposes of this section, I pay attention to the original Marxist internationalist premises behind the Bolsheviks' dislike of great power chauvinism (and imperialism as its natural extension).

### *6.1.2 Great power chauvinism as both external and internal threat*

A direct outcome of the colonial mindset, great power chauvinism was often presented as a grave danger to the international revolutionary movement, but also as a tangible *internal* threat. Since national borders were deessentialized by Marxist thinkers, great power chauvinism was often used interchangeably with “great Russian chauvinism” or “Russian great power chauvinism” and denoted the oppression and discrimination exerted by the Russian nation/ethnicity against other nations/ethnicities living in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. In one of his articles, published three years before the revolution, Lenin insisted emphatically that “the economic prosperity and speedy development of Great Russians [*velikorossov*]<sup>30</sup> requires putting an end to the violence exerted by Great Russians against other ethnicities.”<sup>31</sup> He also argued that for the revolution to continue, “the proletariat must be consistently educated in the spirit of complete national equality and fraternity.”<sup>32</sup> Still, between the two types of allegiances—to one's nation and to one's class—Lenin clearly prioritized the latter. “In Europe . . . of the 20th century,” wrote Lenin shortly after the outbreak of WWI, “the only sensible way to ‘defend the fatherland’ is to use all available revolutionary means to fight against the monarchy, the landowners, and the capitalists

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28. Zhukov et al. 1963, vol. 3, 139–40.

29. CCCP, which stands for USSR in Russian, would have to appear toward the end of the list of great powers, if they were arranged alphabetically. Yet the chosen order in that list presumably reflected the perceived balance of recognition in 1963, as viewed by the Soviet Union.

30. Here and below in this section “Great Russian” is used by the authors of quotes in the geographic sense (see my comment on the polysemy of the concept in chapter 2, section 2.3.2).

31. Lenin 1914.

32. Lenin 1914.

of that fatherland, i.e. the worst enemies of [the] nation.”<sup>33</sup> This position was part of Lenin’s consistent critique of the Second International that weakened their commitment to Marxist internationalism in favor of national defense during wartime. Concluding his “red” response to “yellow” ideas,<sup>34</sup> Lenin insisted that “the interest of Great Russians’ national pride (interpreted in a non-servile manner) coincides with the socialist interest of Great Russian (and all other) proletarians.”<sup>35</sup>

Bukharin, while trying to conceive a solution to the domino effect of larger ethnicities discriminating against smaller ones, which, in their turn, discriminated against their local minorities, went even further and argued that

we [i.e., the Russians], as a former great power nation . . . must put ourselves in an *unequal* position meaning further concessions to national movements. Only such a policy . . . of *artificially lowering* our position vis-à-vis other nations [read: ethnic minorities] can buy us the genuine trust of previously subdued nations.<sup>36</sup>

Bukharin, as befits a loyal Bolshevik, attributed this idea to Lenin. However, Lenin himself was not fully decided on the matter. On the one hand, he indeed argued that Russian internationalism “should consist not only in [maintaining] the formal equality of nations, but also in the kind of inequality at the expense of the big oppressor nation that would compensate for the de facto inequality that exists in life.”<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, he recognized the “great socialist role of the Great Russian proletariat, as the main engine of the communist revolution,” and particularly disliked the idea of small self-governing nations, favoring centralization over the “petty-bourgeois ideal of federative relations.”<sup>38</sup> Still, the policy of internal colonization that was forcefully imposed by the tsarist administration of the Russian Empire was subject to harsh critique by Russian Marxists. The cruel practice of

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33. Lenin 1914.

34. Marxists used the label “yellow socialism” as an umbrella term for all socialists and unionists sharing nationalist and sometimes racist or anti-Semitic sentiment. The term originates in works of Pierre Biétry (e.g., Biétry 1906). In the American context, “yellow socialist” ideas were related to the business unionism of Samuel Gompers (see Mandel 1954).

35. Lenin 1914.

36. Bukharin 1968, 613, emphasis added.

37. Lenin cited in Slezkine 1994, 425.

38. Lenin 1914.



knocking together different ethnic minorities that had a history of conflict between them was also amply corroborated by foreign visitors who witnessed the final years of the tsarist regime.<sup>39</sup>

Within the Marxist internationalist discourse, Bukharin's point about Russia as a former great power nation that must bend its knee and confront its colonial legacies made sense (hence the tumultuous applause he drew during his speech at the 12th Party Congress). Yet, in the grand scheme of things (and even to many of the 12th Congress participants),<sup>40</sup> this argument was a clear discursive outlier, not unlike Chaadaev's thesis about Russia's cultural and historical poverty, voiced one hundred years earlier (see chapter 5). No wonder that Bukharin's take on the national question was soon enough replaced by the simple and hierarchical dichotomy "between 'Great Russians' and 'non-Great Russians,'" discursively normalized under Stalin.<sup>41</sup> Yet, on the level of international politics, early Soviet Russia, encircled (and invaded) by capitalist states, was soon enough forced to take part in the well-established mode of international conduct facilitated by the then current international institutions. Domestically, the centuries-old habit of ascribing to Russia a certain kind of greatness, which had never failed to resonate with the masses, remained a vital source of legitimacy. These tendencies shifted the Soviet domestic and foreign policies to the right remarkably quickly.

### 6.1.3 Bolsheviks' right-wing diplomacy

Already five years after the revolution, the editors of *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*, the well-established Menshevik journal published in Berlin, brought accusations against the Bolsheviks' *nationalist* diplomatic maneuvers.<sup>42</sup> The editors insisted that, during the Lausanne Conference (1922–1923), Bolsheviks had miscalculated at least twice. First, they tried to act in competition to the traditional imperialistic great powers, but since the main points on the agenda were mostly unrelated to Russia and its immediate interests, Russia's antagonistic position could be (and was) manifestly ignored by the established

39. E.g., Durland 1907, 77–84.

40. For instance, Slezkine also points out (1994, 435) that, while there were no objections to the proposed indigenization (*korenizatsiya*) program that anticipated the promotion of small nations' cultural-political rights and privileges at the 12th Party Congress, the loudest applause was still provoked by the few attacks on local nationalism.

41. Slezkine 1994, 423.

42. Abramovich, Dan, and Martov 1923.

great powers. Second, the Bolsheviks supported militarist-nationalist movements (e.g., Kemalists) without concerning themselves with the dynamics of the local class struggles, and thus betrayed the trust of the international working class.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, they also pursued what Mensheviks saw as imperialistic foreign policy in Russia's immediate neighborhood. Allegedly guided by the Russian "national" interest, Moscow subjugated Azerbaijan and Armenia, occupied Georgia, Khiva, Bukhara, and carried out the violent "sovietization" of the Far East. The head of the Soviet delegation in Lausanne, Georgy Chicherin, also threatened the British representatives that the Red Cavalry would set their feet and hooves in Pamir, explaining this move by referring to "longstanding traditions" of Russian diplomacy.<sup>44</sup> Thus, what may have been an attempt at a tactical alliance with certain factions of global capital looked suspiciously similar to a mere continuation of Russian imperialism, natural and appropriate for Tsarist Russia, but quite outlandish for the early USSR. Naturally, it caused mockery on the part of the established great powers, and increased neglect from the side of the international workers' movements.

#### *6.1.4 From a country of workers and peasants to a great power*

The narratives of imperialism and colonization, presumably alien and anti-thetical to the Marxist internationalist cause, made a strikingly quick comeback to Soviet policy discourse. They were justified by the alleged need to accomplish an industrial breakthrough and to confront the growing internal and external tensions. One of the earliest examples of such thinking is Joseph Stalin's theory of intensification, which Bukharin's biographer Stephen Cohen called Stalin's "only original contribution to Bolshevik thought," and which Bukharin himself derided as "idiotic illiteracy."<sup>45</sup> The theory implied that the resistance of internal enemies is bound to intensify, as socialism draws nearer, and hence, the Soviet Union needed (1) a quick industrial breakthrough and (2) a strong and centralized state that could clamp down on the growing resistance. When Stalin managed to fully con-

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43. In Bolsheviks' defense, their ideological position differentiated between national oppression and colonial liberation, where the Kemalists were a quintessential example of the latter.

44. Abramovich, Dan, and Martov 1923, 3.

45. Cohen 1975, 314–15.

solidate power in his own hands, crushing both the left (Trotsky) and the right (Bukharin) oppositions, his theory of intensification translated into a countrywide witch-hunt against the “enemies of the people” and the ideology of mass terror.<sup>46</sup>

Conspiratorial and notoriously indiscriminate at the point of its maturity, Stalin’s ideological line, in fact, originated in purely pragmatic and materialist assumptions. Those assumptions, however, revealed his colonialist mindset and exploitative ambitions that must have echoed the deepest sins of capitalist great powers in the eyes of many devout communists. What is more, just like the turn-of-the-century Russian officials and intellectuals, he directed his colonial gaze toward Russia’s own interior. This time around, however, that gaze did not cherish any civilizing or enlightening ambitions, sufficing itself with sheer material extortion.

Allegedly, Stalin had shared his ideas with his fellow party members in 1928. In Bukharin’s rendering, Stalin lamented at the party congress that capitalism developed either through sucking dry its colonies, or by securing loans, or by exploiting its workers. Since the Soviet Union had no colonies and no one wanted to lend it money, the only tangible way to acquire resources for an industrial breakthrough was to extort “tribute” (*dan*) from Russian peasants.<sup>47</sup> This was the dawn of collectivization. Thus, already by the end of the 1920s, the Soviet senior leadership started reasoning along the lines that were reminiscent of the extortionist policies practiced by their predecessors: the main source of wealth for a polity experiencing a crisis in the core is its expendable periphery.

By the end of WWII, little remained of the internationalist doctrine of complete equality and fraternity of all ethnicities and nations. In May 1945, when Stalin toasted the health of the Soviet people during a grand reception in the Kremlin, he could already single out “the Russian people, [as] the greatest nation/ethnicity [*narod*] among all the nations/ethnicities comprising the Soviet Union.”<sup>48</sup> He emphasized that, during the war, the Russian

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46. Even the members of the CPSU’s Central Committee retrospectively characterized the label “enemy of the people” as violating the principles of “revolutionary legality” (see Khrushchev 2002, 58).

47. Kamenev 1929. In his speech at the joint congress of the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission of the CPSU in 1929, Bukharin also voiced (1989, 257–58) his disapproval of the idea of “tribute” from peasantry. However, having undergone a defamation campaign prior to the congress, he shifted his criticism to the unfortunate and anachronistic choice of the term (*dan*), abstaining from substantive criticism of the policy.

48. Stalin 1997, 228.

people deserved universal recognition as “the leading force” of the Soviet Union, endowed with “lucid mind, stiff character, and patience.”<sup>49</sup> Thereby, Stalin legitimized and promoted a discursive position that prioritized ethnocultural characteristics over sociopolitical ones; the leading role of a certain ethnicity over the leading role of the working class and the party.<sup>50</sup>

Certainly, the hegemonic discourse of Soviet Russia did not switch completely to the nationalistic track. Yet, with Stalin’s immediate assistance, it once again embraced elements and positions that had been temporarily sent into hibernation by the Bolsheviks. These elements conveyed the hierarchically superior position of the Russian nation within the Soviet family of nations and the family of humanity as such. The preponderance of this vision conditioned the rise of Russian nationalism and Soviet patriotism after WWII. Meanwhile, his virtually unrestrained power notwithstanding, Stalin could not flip his rhetoric as he pleased. Any discursive interaction between a state and its society crucially depends on (a degree of) resonance. That resonance, however, is only possible when the messages sent by the state are intelligible to the masses and overlap with the ways they imagine the world. As Antonio Gramsci argued repeatedly, conscious leadership cannot ignore the traditional popular conceptions of the world—namely, the “common sense” formed through everyday experience.<sup>51</sup>

*How, then, did it become possible for Stalin not only to reimagine the Soviet Union along ethnocultural lines, but also to unproblematically single out Russians as the greatest Soviet nation, even though it was the class and economic lens that had empowered the Soviet peasants and workers to begin with? A comprehensive answer to this question involving remarkably diverse and often mutually colliding ideological, bureaucratic, and locally specific challenges should be sought (and can be found) in the historical work on the period. In a nutshell, it was conditioned by the positional victory of those party members (e.g., Stalin, Dzerzhinsky, and Ordzhonikidze), who prioritized the great power chauvinist interpretation of the Soviet nationalities question, and the policies they could implement as a result. Yet I also argue that those policies could not have possibly achieved their desired effects of popular legitimacy and massive mobilization if they had not resonated with “the ‘spontaneous’ feelings of the masses”—that is, if they were not immediately intelligible to the target audience. Their intelligibility, on the one hand, was probed and*

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49. Stalin 1997, 228.

50. Bordyugov and Bukharaev 1999.

51. Gramsci 1999, 433.

constructed through utilizing mass art, and, on the other hand, it appealed to the preexisting discursive image bank of the population related to Russia's premodern and modern history. Thus, in the imagination of the masses, the Soviet Union was paradoxically reinterpreted as the legitimate successor of Russia's political history and great power status. Hence, in the next section, I analyze the popular dimension of Stalinist cultural discourse that created the conditions that allowed the world's first state of workers and peasants to turn into a more or less conventional great power, taking part in the historical-civilizational game. The most productive and popular site for this reimagination was Stalinist historical cinema.

## 6.2 RECLAIMING NATIONAL GREATNESS THROUGH MASS ART: STALINIST HISTORICAL CINEMA

Walter Benjamin famously argued that mass art has political (and revolutionary) potential. Before the age of mechanical reproduction, art could never achieve immediate and massive political resonance, as it had always been too far from the people. It had been insulated by its "aura" (defined as "distance, however close it may be").<sup>52</sup> Mechanically reproducible art, in its turn, merges "the critical and receptive attitude of the public,"<sup>53</sup> which opens channels for shaping and influencing collective political subjects. The Bolsheviks were acutely aware of this, and eagerly utilized the political power of mass art, especially the "most important" art—namely, cinema,<sup>54</sup> in which they saw a powerful tool of communist enlightenment and agitation. Early Soviet cinematographers, such as Dziga Vertov, Yelizaveta Svilova, and Sergei Eisenstein, were fundamentally important cultural and political conduits for the Soviet regime. In their early works, they often reconstructed a genealogy of the revolution or supported the communist cause, emphasizing its progressive, egalitarian nature, as well as its collectivist spirit. Their films not only bore an important ideological message, but also served as legitimizing devices for the nascent regime.

52. Benjamin 2019, 173.

53. Benjamin 2019, 186.

54. Allegedly, in his conversation with Anatoly Lunacharsky, the people's commissar for education, Lenin insisted that "of all the arts, the most important for us [i.e., the revolutionary government of Soviet Russia] is the cinema" (Napper 2017, 50). In Lunacharsky's rendition, the quote became one of Lenin's iconic sayings amplified through constant reproduction and propaganda (e.g., Evgenov et al. 1929, 33).

### 6.2.1 *Early Soviet cinema and Stalin's cultural challenge*

The principle of legitimation invoked in the early Soviet cinema was, on most occasions, perfectly congruent with the main tenets of international socialist greatness. The main focus of early Soviet films was predominantly class, be it the crew of a rebellious battleship (as in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* [1925]), or the first cooperatives and the linkages between the urban and the rural (as in Vertov's *Cine-Eye* [1924]). Thus, the early Soviet cinema aided the establishment of international socialist greatness as the dominant frame of reference for making sense of Russia's place and role in international society and world history. It also specified the terms on which the Soviet Union was willing to be recognized globally and defined the main political subjects of the new polity—the proletariat and the peasants—whose will was represented by the Vanguard of the Revolution—namely, the Communist Party.

At first, Stalin followed this line and emphasized not only the “great, invaluable force” of cinema and its “exceptional possibilities to exert spiritual influence on the masses,” but also specified that the party and the working class needed cinema to “educate workers in the spirit of socialism, . . . [and] to improve their culture and political capacity.”<sup>55</sup> Yet, already then, his class-based approach was infused with a clear sense of historical process. Speaking to the workers of the Soviet film industry, he emphasized that the new films were supposed to “glorify . . . the greatness of the historical struggle for power on part of the workers and peasants of the Soviet Union.”<sup>56</sup> Historical materialism, as one foundational element of the Marxist internationalist doctrine, pulled Stalinist cultural production toward embracing history and reflecting upon the stages of world-historic progress.

In his excellent analysis of Stalinist cinema, Evgeny Dobrenko argues that the historicizing aspect of Stalinist art serves the purpose of legitimizing the already stagnating regime. He shows how “the adjustment of ‘historical images’ to fit their ‘historical prototypes’” becomes the most important point on the agenda of Stalinist cultural production.<sup>57</sup> There emerges a whole new genre of historical cinema that represents various popular historical personalities as the prophetic agents of progress. Among those were the thirteenth-century prince and saint, Alexander Nevsky, the sixteenth-

55. Stalin 1935.

56. Stalin 1935.

57. Dobrenko 2008, 18–22.

century tsar and conqueror, Ivan the Formidable, and the eighteenth-century emperor and reformer, Peter the Great. All of them are already well-familiar to the reader, as they have appeared often on the pages of this book, which proves their firm entrenchment into Russia's great power discourse. With Stalin's guidance, those historical personalities were reinterpreted as actors in the gradual making of the modern Soviet subject, while the history itself, viewed through the lens of historical determinism, turned into "a machine of correct prophecies."<sup>58</sup> At the same time, while using history as a legitimizing device, Stalinist cinematographers performed a number of crucial discursive moves that made possible a revival of nationalist and great power rhetoric, normalized by the time of Stalin's grand reception in the Kremlin in 1945. In what follows, I identify four discursive shifts in the employed mechanisms of legitimization that I deem most consequential.

### 6.2.2 *From class to nation*

The first shift was *the relocation of agency from classes to nations/ethnicities*. This shift was particularly evident in films about the various peasant revolts, such as *Stepan Razin* (1939) and *Pugachev* (1937). The former tells the story of the Cossack military leader, Stepan Razin, who headed a large peasant uprising in 1670–1671 which was eventually stifled by the tsar. The latter addresses a similar personage, Yemelyan Pugachev, another Cossack leader of the crushed peasant rebellion which took place a century later. In their representation of the real historical events, both films manifestly ignore the history of classes and political-economic relations, replacing it with the history of "the people" (*narod*) who become the main acting force, with the struggle for their "truth," denounced as nonexistent "slavish truth" by the tsar.<sup>59</sup> The people, in this case, include both the Russian people, aka "the real treasure, which is on the ground, and not beneath it," as they were described by the character of Stepan Razin while he was being tortured on the rack,<sup>60</sup> as well as other oppressed ethnic groups, such as Tatars, Chuvash, Bashkirs, and so on. The main loci of the rehabilitated national community—the "motherland" (*rodina*) or the "fatherland" (*otechestvo*)—took Stalinist culture further away from its revolutionary origins and wielded more legitimizing authority

58. Dobrenko 2008, 18.

59. Pravov and Preobrazhenskaya 1939, 1:52:20.

60. Pravov and Preobrazhenskaya 1939, 1:53:07.

in their discursive setting.<sup>61</sup> Importantly, Stalinist cinema does not reserve the role of a people's hero for rebels against the monarchy. Occasionally, this role is allotted to the tsar himself, as happens in Vladimir Petrov's *Peter the Great* (1937) and Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Formidable* (1944). In such cases, directors usually create an intimate link between the leader and the people, as the main sources of authority, and juxtapose this imaginary duumvirate to foreign invaders and, sometimes, corrupt elites.<sup>62</sup> However, just as with the films about rebel leaders, Stalinist hagiographers of progressive Russian tsars adopted an explicitly nationalist rather than class-based approach, and made their characters fight for their fatherland, rather than their economic freedoms.

### 6.2.3 *From revolution to the state*

*Peter the Great* provides an excellent illustration of the second discursive shift successfully accomplished in Stalinist historical cinema and general cultural output: *the relocation of the object of legitimization from the revolution to the state*. Even though some Soviet directors continued making films about the revolution throughout Stalin's era (e.g., Mikhail Romm's *Lenin in October* [1937]), the dominant focus shifted to other sources of political legitimacy, such as Russia's political history and the value of statehood. To give just one example, while boosting his troops' morale during the Battle of Poltava (1709), the character of Peter the Great urges his soldiers to fight "for their state . . . , their kin, and their fatherland," specifically emphasizing that it is not him personally that they should be fighting for.<sup>63</sup> Compositionally, Peter's nationalist appeal is explicitly juxtaposed to Charles XII's plea to his army to fight "for God and for [their] King!" uttered a minute later. Similarly, in the movie's finale, the director visually constructs a unity between Peter and the nation by editing together a series of still images of (mostly) common folk and Peter's passionate coda about the greatness of Russia. In Peter's words, it was precisely "due to [his] and [people's] joint efforts that [they] managed to crown Russia with glory, and Russian ships are already sailing towards all ports of Europe."<sup>64</sup> The legitimization of the state was a common

61. Dobrenko 2008, 26.

62. This arrangement closely resembles the mode of legitimization from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries discussed in chapter 3.

63. Petrov 1937, 1:40:53.

64. Petrov 1937, 3:12:41.



feature in virtually all Stalinist cultural experiments with history. Be it Peter the Great, who crowns Russia with glory, or the Georgian military commander Giorgi Saakadze, who fights for his “beloved Georgia” in Mikhail Chiraueli’s eponymous film (1942), or Ivan the Formidable in Eisenstein’s 1944 classic, who acts “for the sake of the great Russian kingdom”—all of them put the state ahead of everything. All of them are also intended to be presented as Stalin’s avatars. Thus, between the class and the state, represented by the union of the people and their great leader, Stalin clearly chooses the latter. By doing this, he effectively abandons Marxist internationalist premises, renationalizes Russia’s history, and places the state at the center of Soviet popular discourse.

#### 6.2.4 *From equality to hierarchy of nations*

The reinstated state-centric paradigm also includes hierarchy, which reflects the third discursive shift: *the replacement of declared equality with a hierarchy of nations*.<sup>65</sup> Within the context of the ongoing WWII, naturally accommodating for patriotic fervor, Stalinist cultural output related to Russian history was not simply patriotic, but pronouncedly “great power.” For instance, *Peter the Great*’s scriptwriter Aleksey Tolstoy, a Russian and Soviet novelist and a three-times laureate of the Stalin Prize, who produced a great number of historical works, was consistent in his ambition to represent Russia as a European great power and to preserve continuity between the tsarist and the Soviet regimes. For Tolstoy’s Peter, the glory of the moment in the film’s finale is precisely that the Russian ships are sailing toward *European* ports. In the same movie, Peter gets infuriated when a European scholar suggests that the “true historic mission of the Slavic race” is to go East, to make headway toward China and India for European merchants, and hence the “great Russian state” does not need an academy of sciences.<sup>66</sup> The reference to the Slavic race is probably an anachronistic Soviet riposte aimed at the racism of German National Socialism, but it also looks perfectly organic within the European imperialist discourse of the eighteenth century and connects the two contexts by the bond of imposed civilizational hierarchy. The same Tolstoy, in his 1943 letter to Stalin, suggested that

65. Slezkine notes (1994, 445) that the same kind of shift concurrently occurred on the policy level. He points out that, after the mid-1930s, Soviet nationalities could be officially ranked, which further solidified the differences in status that had been attributed to various ethnoterritorial units even before.

66. Petrov 1937, 1:52:04.

the history of the first twenty years of the Soviet regime and its inexhaustible power in this war demonstrated that the Russian nation—almost unique among the European powers that maintains sovereignty on its own land for two millennia—hides within it a powerful, original, national culture, even though it may have been maturing, until a certain point in time, underneath a sordid appearance.<sup>67</sup>

Tolstoy brought up this argument in the context of his novel *Ivan the Formidable* and also added that “the idea of the greatness of the Russian state, the grandeur of its tasks, its striving towards the good . . . all those features are uniquely Russian.”<sup>68</sup> In a similar vein, Dobrenko notes that Stalinist cinema communicated great power ambitions when it retold the stories of Russia’s military commanders—for example, Alexander Suvorov, the eighteenth-century Russian general who had never lost a single battle. The general is portrayed as “fighting ‘for the Fatherland’ . . . in the Swiss Alps” in the 1941 film *Suvorov*.<sup>69</sup>

#### 6.2.5 Greatness as tragedy

Finally, in Stalinist art, *the greatness of the Russian nation is often intertwined with tragedy*. More precisely, Russia’s historical path is presented as a “noble tragedy,”<sup>70</sup> where every political achievement is accompanied by great, but necessary, sacrifice, which is rendered most illustratively in Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Formidable*. Stalin encouraged Eisenstein to portray Ivan as a cruel leader, noting that it was also “required to show, why it is necessary to be cruel,” and that Ivan was, in fact, not cruel enough, since he “failed to slit [*ne dorezal (sic!)*] five large feudal families.”<sup>71</sup> In Stalin’s view, such sacrifices are unavoidable and go hand in hand with progress. In holding this view, Stalin to some extent reinforces, but partially also resonates with the constant refrain of Russian political discourse, where tragedy and greatness are often dialectically intertwined and reemerge together in various shapes and forms at different points in history: from the first Russian political ideology (the cult of Boris and Gleb, see chapter 2) to the cult of the Great Patriotic War (1941–

67. Artizov and Naumov 1999, 486.

68. Artizov and Naumov 1999, 486.

69. Dobrenko 2008, 91.

70. Dobrenko 2008, 47.

71. Artizov and Naumov 1999, 613.

1945) that was formed in the 1970s.<sup>72</sup> The tragedy of greatness, on the one hand, tempers Stalinist cultural output with an apposite pinch of drama, often through Stalin's own interventions.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, it allows for controversial representations of Russia's leaders (e.g., Eisenstein's Ivan), which stimulate reflection about the overwhelming burden of absolute power and its vices.<sup>74</sup>

#### 6.2.6 *The double-edged sword of national determination*

To conclude, the original Marxist idea that nations are still “real” (even if imagined),<sup>75</sup> despite the mostly economic nature of Marxist analysis, affected Lenin's ideological stance rather deeply. The latter did not fudge on the challenge, but confronted it in a rather deconstructivist way, by embracing and facilitating national fragmentation and promoting the right of secession as a fundamental principle of national self-determination. By doing this, he sought to eliminate all forms of national oppression through “a total democratization of all spheres, including the determination of state borders according to the ‘sympathies’ of the population, not short of complete secession.”<sup>76</sup> For Lenin, however, nations and nationalities were a form, devoid of substantive content, and the national fragmentation he promoted was not an end in itself, but a tool to relieve *all* national tensions and abolish nationality-based distrust. Local nationalism was a weapon against imperialism, which should have disempowered the great powers and made the state as such unnecessary in the long run.

Not so for Stalin, who not only returned nations and nationalities their agency, but also normalized hierarchy among their ranks and singled out the Great Russian nation as the leading force of historical progress. This new status was legitimized through reclaiming Russia's millennial political history and

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72. For an excellent analysis of the dialectics between terror and greatness in Russian political discourse, see Platt 2011. For a detailed discussion of tragedy and greatness in the Stalinist cultural rehabilitation of Ivan the Formidable, see Platt and Brandenberger 1999.

73. For instance, Stalin demanded from Mikhail Chiaureli that his heroic-romantic story about Giorgi Saakadze needed to be turned into a tragic one, where the main hero dies in the end (Dobrenko 2008, 46).

74. This message rarely passed the censorship barrier. Eisenstein's *Ivan the Formidable* was originally intended to premier as two episodes. However, the second episode, where Ivan is presented as a particularly troubled tsar, was initially banned and could only be screened after Stalin's death in 1958.

75. Anderson 2006.

76. Lenin 1959, 136.

by capitalizing on the main tropes that had accompanied the evolution of Russia's great power discourse for centuries, such as its status as a European great power and the intimate link between greatness and tragedy. The former trope came in handy when the USSR was seeking to realign with the Western powers after its former ally, Adolf Hitler, invaded Russia in June 1941; the latter could, to some extent, justify the horrendous human cost of the Great Purge and the Great Patriotic War. This not only set the stage for the somewhat oxymoronic phenomenon of "Soviet imperialism,"<sup>77</sup> but also created a serious discursive tension in Marxist internationalism, which was badly unfit for accommodating the new tropes. Stalinist cinematic discourse effectively returned to pre-Marxist sociology where the history of classes and socio-economic formations was replaced with the history of nations. The kind of national history that Stalin reclaimed at the hands of his court cinematographers was the Russia-centric history of a great power. Another mechanism Stalin used extensively in both educational and cultural policies was the excessive glorification of the leader (i.e., himself), a familiar trope from Russia's discursive image bank that resonated with the *theatrical* mode of political greatness enacted rhetorically in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

### 6.3 REANIMATING INTERNATIONAL SOCIALIST GREATNESS: KHRUSHCHEV'S PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

Nikita Khrushchev, who eventually won the intraparty struggle for power after Stalin's death, started his demarche against Stalin by attacking precisely those policies and ideological "aberrations" that had distanced Stalinism from the original Marxist internationalism. In his famous (secret) report at the 20th Party Congress, he denounced, among other things, Stalin's personality cult, his nationalities policies, his disregard of the collectivist spirit of the Communist Party, as well as his gross mistakes as the commander in chief during the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945).<sup>78</sup> By doing this, he tried, on the one hand, to rehabilitate Marxism-Leninism (along with several loyal Leninists who had crossed paths with Stalin), and, on the other hand, to

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77. By the mid-twentieth century, accusing the Soviet Union of "imperialism" (or even "Russian imperialism"), rather than of "aggressive foreign policy" or "ideological propaganda," became a commonplace among both its ideological opponents and (former) allies. See e.g., Schoenfeld 1948; Ader 1963; and Mao 1964.

78. Khrushchev 2002.

reestablish and reaffirm the collectivist leadership of the Communist Party as the *Vanguard* of the Revolution, as opposed to Russian millennial history. Promoting a return to the Leninist principles, Khrushchev emphasized that “the socialist revolution was carried out by the working class allied with the labor-oriented peasants [*trudovym krestyanstvom*], by the people, guided by the Bolshevik Party.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, domestically, Khrushchev assumed the role of the savior of socialism. Internationally, however, his report undermined the reputation of communist parties among the global left, as they effectively lost their capacity to define unequivocally the direction of social development. As polycentrism within communist parties became the norm, they started to sink in ever mounting internal ideological debates and power struggles.<sup>80</sup> By delivering his report, Khrushchev planted the seed of ideological duplicity and opportunism that blossomed in Brezhnev’s era.

### 6.3.1 *The paradox of “peaceful coexistence”*

Meanwhile, what remains of particular interest for this section are the transformations that occurred on the level of foreign policy discourse. Khrushchev’s design for the international order is widely known as “peaceful coexistence,” or the “principle of international relations in a world that is divided into two social systems—socialist and capitalist,” as the 1963 edition of the Soviet Historical Encyclopedia defined it.<sup>81</sup> With full authority of the main source of true and credible knowledge, the encyclopedia also emphasized that “with two opposing systems that divide the world, peaceful coexistence [was] the only reasonable principle of international relations, serving the interests of the whole of humanity.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, in his conceptualization of relations between states, Khrushchev was, on the one hand, returning to the Marxist understanding of the world order as a dialectical opposition between two antagonistic forces,<sup>83</sup> echoing early Bolshevik thought. On the other hand, however, he also stripped that dialectic of real antagonism, since the two mutually opposed and incompatible systems of social organization were supposed to coexist peacefully, as if the underlying economic

79. Khrushchev 2002, 110–11.

80. Eimermacher 2002, 8.

81. Zhukov et al. 1963, vol. 9, 483.

82. Zhukov et al. 1963, vol. 9, 483.

83. Lyotard 1984, 11–14.

relations between the classes that composed them were not that of exploitation and dependency.

In his programmatic article published in *Foreign Affairs*, Khrushchev, on the one hand, remains a good student of Marx. He argues that

the world of the twentieth century is not the world of the nineteenth century, that two diametrically opposed social and economic systems exist in the world today side by side, and that the socialist system, in spite of all the attacks upon it, has grown so strong, has developed into such a force, as to make any return to the past impossible.<sup>84</sup>

He bases this conviction on his belief in the irreversible force of historic progress and the irrefutable laws of social development. On the other hand, however, Khrushchev also takes issue with the alleged contradiction that President Nixon identified between the Soviet people's willingness to live together in peace with capitalist nations and the slogans promoted publicly and ubiquitously within the Soviet Union that were calling for the speediest victory of global communism. In Khrushchev's opinion, "people who treat the question in this way confuse matters, willfully or not, by confusing the problems of ideological struggle with the question of relations between states."<sup>85</sup>

From within the Marxist-Leninist internationalist discourse, Khrushchev's pacifism certainly makes little sense, as nation states, however real, are mere forms, and hence are expected to vanish in the long run, with assistance from the workers' movement of all sides. On the other hand, with the coming into existence of a relatively sizable socialist camp practicing planned economy, perhaps Khrushchev was indeed describing a new configuration of the world order, where the capitalist-owning class was effectively deglobalized, at least compared to thirty years earlier. In that context, and certainly from within the Soviet world view, the proletariat was not ubiquitously exploited on a global scale, while the bourgeoisie became much less cosmopolitan in terms of their effective reach and presence. Thus, instead of the global solidarity of workers and a world revolution, what the socialist states could hope for was some kind of controlled isolation from the

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84. Khrushchev 1959, 15.

85. Khrushchev 1959, 4.

formerly global capital combined with the international propaganda of the socialist lifestyle, which could peacefully tilt the balance in their favor.

### 6.3.2 *The Western view*

The opposing side had also read Lenin and Marx very carefully and found Khrushchev's "let's-be-friends-while-the-socialist-ideology-is-eating-you-and-others-from-the-inside" type of argument rather unconvincing. One of the most attentive American observers of the Soviet Union, George Kennan, summarized (quite accurately) the Soviet ideology as based on four main assumptions: (1) the mode of production and exchange of material goods is the determining characteristic of any society; (2) the capitalist economic mode is exploitative in nature; (3) capitalism is also unsustainable, which means that, sooner or later, the economic power will be claimed by the working class; and (4) in its final, imperialist stage, capitalism brings war and revolution.<sup>86</sup> From this followed that the outside world was hostile and that the final consolidation of the Soviet regime, allegedly still unfinished, also implied that "it was their [i.e., the USSR's] duty eventually to overthrow the political forces beyond their borders."<sup>87</sup> It was with this mindset that Kennan decided to respond to Khrushchev's 1959 article in *Foreign Affairs*.

Kennan's main charge against Khrushchev was rather paternalistic, as he accused the Soviet leader of distorting the original Marxist internationalist premise and of presenting an image that was out of synch with the political practices and goals that the Soviet Union was, in fact, pursuing. He distrusted Khrushchev and questioned his sincerity, since this newly declared "attachment to liberal and tolerant principles of international life" was effectively distorting the premises that both Lenin and Stalin had earlier subscribed to and was going against "the nature of the social and political system prevailing in the Soviet Union."<sup>88</sup> Having in mind the previously described fundamental ideological transformation of the Soviet regime during the Stalin era, as well as Khrushchev's subsequent critique of Stalinism that effectively brought him to power, Kennan's perceptive inflexibility may have been unwarranted. Still, he preferred to stick to ideological coherence, as opposed to contextual accommodation of his opponent's views. Hence, in Kennan's eye, the idea of "peaceful coexistence" was, first and foremost, antithetical to the underlying principles of Marxist internationalism.

86. Kennan 1947, 566.

87. Kennan 1947, 569.

88. Kennan 1960, 174.

### 6.3.3 *One world, two world views*

The main contention between Kennan and Khrushchev was probably caused by different assumptions they held about the operation of international order, as well as their different argumentative goals. Khrushchev, on the one hand, was trying to rehabilitate Marxist internationalism, to purify it from Stalin's imperialist ambitions and great power mindset, and to demonstrate that relations between states were indeed epiphenomenal to the underlying ideological competition, which essentially bypassed the official channels of interstate interaction. Thus, he pulled the Soviet foreign policy discourse toward its Bolshevik origins. (It is rather telling that, despite his country's rather confident international standing, Khrushchev neither called the Soviet Union a great power in his essay, nor attributed any other kind of political greatness to it as a state). On the other hand, he decoupled interstate relations from ideological competition and proposed that the former need not include any fierce power struggle, since, in his interpretation, revolutions cannot be imported "in baggage trains like Bourbons,"<sup>89</sup> and model ideological practice is always more important than a country's size or its relative power.

Kennan, in his turn, understood and feared the consequences of the revival of the Leninist doctrine (which loomed in a much clearer form in his own reconstruction of it than in Khrushchev's half-hearted rendering). The American interpreted this doctrine from within his own discursive universe, where "balance of power" and "great power management" remained most tangible concepts. Most explicitly, he revealed his concerns about Soviet conduct when he wrote that

the Soviet Union is not only an ideological phenomenon. It is also a great power, physically and militarily. Even if the prevailing ideology in Russia were not antagonistic to the concepts prevailing elsewhere, the behavior of the government of that country in its international relations, and particularly any considerable expansion of its power at the expense of the freedom of other peoples, would still be a matter of most serious interest to the world at large.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, unlike Khrushchev (but similarly to Stalin), Kennan continued seeing the world through the statist-imperialist lens of great power manage-

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89. Rolland cited in Khrushchev 1959, 5.

90. Kennan 1960, 178.



ment, reminiscent of the one adopted at the Congress of Vienna and later institutionalized in the positive international law. Within that discourse, the inherently internationalist Soviet ideological project, revived by Khrushchev, certainly constitutes a major challenge, similar to the Napoleonic and the Fascist disruptions of the status quo, as it questions the fundamental principles of international order.<sup>91</sup> In Kennan's view, of utmost concern to the Western powers should be the rapid and "quasi-permanent advancement of the effective boundaries of Moscow's political and military authority to the very center of Europe."<sup>92</sup>

#### 6.3.4 *A Marxist in the UN*

The idea of great power management was discursively alien to Khrushchev's international agenda. His (in)famous provocations during the 15th session of the UN General Assembly in 1960 align rather well with his alleged intention to revive the Leninist (and critical) mode of disruptive political action in the circumstances where a systemically disadvantaged actor cannot possibly hope to improve their position through playing by the rules. Instead, that actor may choose to resort to performances that target (and ridicule) the system as a whole, hoping to alter the game and draw other marginal actors toward its orbit. In the meantime, the audience may also be invited to consider an altogether different stratification principle, such as, for instance, economic class or social system. This mode of action, in fact, reemerges on multiple instances in the history of Russia's engagements with the world, and not only in socialist guises. In recent years, too, Russia has resorted to transformative subversions in its diplomacy and foreign policy statements. Xymena Kurowska and I have called this discursive strategy "trickstery" and analyzed a number of situations when Russia adopted it.<sup>93</sup> Yet, unlike Khrushchev, who had a picture of the new international order in mind when enacting his subversions, Putin's trickstery seems much less far-sighted.

While in New York, Khrushchev shook his finger at and rebuked the Spanish delegation (sent by Generalissimo Franco) that refused to applaud

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91. It is also true that Kennan interpreted the Soviet challenge as qualitatively different from the one that had been posed by Hitler. In an interview to PBS, Kennan specifically emphasized that the aspirations of the Soviet leaders were political, not military (Kennan 1996).

92. Kennan 1960, 178.

93. Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2021.

his speech; shouted that rockets were pouring “like sausages” from the Soviet factories when he was upset with the lack of agreement on disarmament; and also banged his shoe on the desk (twice) in reaction to the speeches by Lorenzo Sumulong of the Philippines and O. Wilcox of the United States.<sup>94</sup> His outbursts were apparently interspersed with “smiles and winks” between him and the Soviet foreign minister Andrey Gromyko.<sup>95</sup> One (presumably) Russian-speaking reader of the *New York Times* immediately recognized the overall tactics employed by the Soviet delegation in the fall of 1960 as reminiscent of what Lenin and his Bolshevik party performed in the Fourth Russian Duma (1912–1917). According to him, Bolsheviks “consistently obstructed the regular business of this body, denounced it as ‘comedy’ and delivered inflammatory speeches not intended for fellow members but for the proletariat of the cities beyond the walls of the Duma.”<sup>96</sup> By ridiculing the existing international institutions and status quo, still favoring the established Western great powers, Khrushchev was probably trying to rise above the game to deliver his metapolitical message through diplomatic transgressions and political adventurism (e.g., his decision to deploy Soviet missiles in Cuba). His apparent return to the idea of international socialist greatness in Soviet foreign policy was met with extreme suspicion, both at home (as reckless brinkmanship)<sup>97</sup> and abroad (as a return to the Soviet globalist aspirations).<sup>98</sup>

Another discursive process that Khrushchev triggered by delivering his secret speech during the 20th Party Congress was the further deterioration of trust toward the party when it came to defining not only the general direction of social development, but also the best practices and value profiles of party cadres. As Karl Eimermacher argued in his commentary on the secret report, Khrushchev’s demarche “negatively affected the persuasiveness of communist arguments, resulted in cynicism (open opportunism) on the part of some party members and functionaries, and subsequently caused an almost massive departure from the communist ideals towards selfish interests.”<sup>99</sup> When in Brezhnev’s era the ideological pendulum swung back toward the normalization of the Soviet Union’s relations with the outside

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94. Welles 1960, 1; Hamilton 1960, 1.

95. Welles 1960, 1.

96. Roodkowsky 1960, 38.

97. Zubok 2008, 428.

98. Kennan 1960.

99. Eimermacher 2002, 8.

world and the affirmation of its global role as a normal great power (as opposed to a revolutionary challenger to the system), the domestic ideological duplicity and opportunism among the higher party officials became the new norm. In the next section, I illustrate how that transformation proceeded and what consequences it had for the Soviet ideology and the evolution of Russia's great power discourse.

#### 6.4 RESOCIALIZING THE SOVIET UNION AS A GREAT POWER: BREZHNEV'S DÉTENTE

Arguably, the moment when Kennan voiced his concerns about the Soviet Union being not “only an ideological phenomenon, [but] also a great power, physically and militarily,” was the closest Russia ever got discursively to being recognized as a proper and equal great power in the Western-centric international system. Ironically, this also happened at the moment when the Russian leadership was trying to move away from the great power management paradigm back to Marxist internationalist class struggle. Trying to resolve the discursive tension in Marxist internationalism sowed by Stalin's historical-imperialist turn, Khrushchev probably did not care what kind of state the Soviet Union was systemically, so long as it remained the flagship of communist ideology and continued to attract/produce/acquire domestic and international ideological allies. Yet, as mentioned above, it was precisely the mobilizational potency of the communist ideology in its Soviet interpretation that had suffered as a result of Stalin's crimes and Khrushchev's destalinization efforts.<sup>100</sup> On the other hand, in 1960, the formal international recognition of the USSR as a leading party in the Cold War and a great, or even a superpower was already unquestioned. Meanwhile, the domestic audience, boosted by the Stalinist cultural output that had reclaimed nationalism and greatness, remained perceptive toward both culturally indigenous and status-oriented representations, concurrently weakening their attachment to the communist cause (hence the birth of the dissident movement in

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100. See, for instance, an exchange between Brezhnev and Tito, witnessed and retold by Anatoly Chernyaev, who later became Gorbachev's chief foreign policy adviser. According to Chernyaev, Brezhnev expressed his surprise that the Yugoslavian press continued making a fuss about Stalinism, since the Soviet Union had put an end to such practices and the decisions of the 20th Party Congress remained in force. In response, Tito exclaimed, “You ask, why stir up the past? Of course we should not fixate on it, but we should not lose sight of it either. You cannot remove the past with declarations alone” (2016, 82).

the 1960s).<sup>101</sup> It is within this discursive configuration that Leonid Brezhnev took the lead in Soviet politics in 1964.

#### 6.4.1 *Marxist internationalism and great power management: An impossible mix?*

Incremental changes in the Soviet discursive environment and in the objective relative position of the Soviet Union on the world stage conditioned a gradual rehabilitation of the civilizational mode of great power discourse and triggered the slow-burning demise of Marxist internationalism as the main ideology legitimizing Soviet domestic and international conduct. Both processes were further catalyzed by Brezhnev's consistently contradictory discursive position that combined appeals to classical Leninist principles with markedly uninternationalist foreign policy rhetoric. Analyzing Brezhnev's lengthy tenure, students of Soviet foreign policy often emphasized the tension between revolutionary messianism and greatpowerhood, between expansion and management.<sup>102</sup> The historian Vladislav Zubok notes that Brezhnev "continued using the trappings of 'proletarian internationalism' that Stalin had discarded in the 1940s and Khrushchev had restored to prominence in the 1950s." "The Soviet leader believed," writes Zubok, "[that] he could be a 'true Leninist' as well as a legitimate world statesman at the same time."<sup>103</sup> Whether Brezhnev indeed believed this is certainly beyond the scope of this analysis, yet, on the discursive level, that dualism was indeed manifest.

In foreign policy discourse, this often translated into a curious and subtle mix of international socialist greatness and great power management. To be more precise, it is quite difficult to find in Brezhnev's speeches any explicit hailing of Russia's greatpowerhood or any devaluation of the original Leninist principles and the class-based approach to international relations. Yet it is equally difficult to interpret his statements as revolutionary subversions aimed at overturning the existing political status quo and renegotiating the rules of the game. One clear illustration of Brezhnev's discursive dualism is his take on the state of international relations voiced at the 26th Party Congress in 1981:

Since bygone days, relations between states have been called "international." Yet, it is only in our time, in the world of socialism, when they indeed became

101. Alexeyeva and Goldberg 1993.

102. Ulam 1968; Zubok 2007; Raleigh 2016, 844.

103. Zubok 2008, 433.

international. Millions and millions of people are directly participating in them. This, comrades, is a principal achievement of socialism, its great contribution to the whole of humanity.<sup>104</sup>

What Brezhnev probably meant to say is that, globally, people-to-people contacts became much more dense and inclusive (at least in the Soviet bloc) as they began to involve the common folk, workers, and other groups previously excluded from that process. Hence the great egalitarian potential of socialism. Yet he still chose to prioritize nations as the primary agents of international relations, reserving the leading role to the vanguards of those respective nations, represented by their party cadres within their established national boundaries. Certainly, this principle is not incongruent with Marx and Engels, but it also allows Brezhnev to denounce the anti-communist protests in the Soviet Union's satellite states (e.g., Hungary and Czechoslovakia) as a breach of national sovereignty instigated from abroad *and* a nationalist counterrevolution at the same time. Such ideological dualism naturally produces various discursive entanglements and entrapments, similar to the ones that the Russian elites face today. In the context of the socialist-nationalist duo legitimizing a given regime, any autochthonous challenge to that regime is presented as both a foreign interference and a counterrevolution, while anyone who opposes the Soviet Union's attempts to "restore order" (e.g., in the context of the Prague Spring) is labeled a "counterrevolutionary" receiving support from the "outside."<sup>105</sup>

Similarly, when Brezhnev discusses the situation in the Middle East, he makes two rhetorical moves that reveal his dualistic position. First, he (hesitantly) supports the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran as an anti-colonialist revolution that aligns with the global socialist cause, despite its manifest religious fundamentalist underpinnings. Second, he accuses the United States and the Western world of trying to benefit from the oil riches of the Persian Gulf countries. To resolve the tensions, he proposes an international agreement that would "create an atmosphere of stability and tranquility in this region and guarantee the sovereign rights of states and regions, and the safety of sea ways connecting them to the rest of the world."<sup>106</sup> In other words, he is effectively proposing to peacefully manage order in a nonsocialist part of the world by concluding an agreement

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104. Brezhnev 1981.

105. Bovin 2017.

106. Brezhnev 1981.

between the most powerful (mostly nonsocialist) states, which strongly resembles typical great power conduct.

In general, the matters of international peace were certainly very important for Brezhnev, which was reflected both in his personal diaries, and in his foreign policy statements.<sup>107</sup> As a veteran of WWII, he also favored the kind of peace management that could be conducted from a position of strength, hence his eager support for the Cold War's largest armament program.<sup>108</sup> In addition, he was keen to establish friendship and economic cooperation between the Soviet Union and the Western great powers hoping to overcome all (or some of) the existing clashes. This intention was both commendable and misplaced, due to a plethora of ideological, political, and economic disagreements between the two blocs.<sup>109</sup> Yet, from the position of a relatively well-established, even if ideologically different, great power that had experienced difficulties with the mobilizational capacity of its main ideological cause, but also possessed discursive reserves related to its lengthy and presentable political history, it was definitely worth a try. And Brezhnev gave it a try. However, the precise discursive configuration that emerged as a result became a ticking time-bomb for Marxist internationalism.

#### 6.4.2 *Back to the nation's essence*

In the context of the clear priority Brezhnev gave to foreign policy and the international climate, the main discursive troubles awaited at home, where the secretary general decided to combine an inflexible, conservative approach to political ideology on the official level with a promotion of essentialist and nationalist narratives of greatness on the level of memory politics and culture. When it comes to memory politics, Brezhnev was the first Soviet leader who created and maintained the cult of the victory in the Second World War (the Holy Grail of today's official patriotic culture in Russia).<sup>110</sup> Annual celebrations, always with a bombastic parade on Red Square, grew costlier every year, while the excessive glorification of veterans and fallen victims became one of the main foundations of the regime's popular legitimacy.<sup>111</sup>

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107. Raleigh 2016; Brezhnev 1981.

108. Brezhnev 1981.

109. Zubok 2008, 431.

110. Tumarkin 2003; Mann 2020.

111. Zubok 2008, 441.

On the level of culture, Brezhnev and some other members of the Politburo supported the revival of various forms of essentialism, such as the so-called “village prose” that lauded the simple truth and moral purity of village dwellers.<sup>112</sup> These authors, the folk philosophers, contemplated the key moral qualities of the Russian people and almost invariably found them in angelic patience, unquestioned acceptance of external circumstances, unselfishness, and inexhaustible optimism. Frequently, the new literary heroes were tested by having to undergo the new collectivist practices of the Soviet regime, which they often happened to handle with naive simplicity, yet remaining attuned to their internal moral compass.<sup>113</sup>

Conveniently, the village writers stayed purposefully away from ideological critique and, if anything, only subtly hinted at certain infelicities that a typical village dweller would normally face in the Soviet system. Yet, in competition with the structuralist-internationalist premise of Marxism-Leninism, which often remained obscure to the common folk, the newly discovered essentialism of the Russian village seemed many times more appealing and honest to the Soviet audience of the 1960s and 1970s. In the context of all-pervasive duplicity and ideological corruption, the masses effectively rediscovered Russian essentialism at the height of détente—that is, the peak of the USSR’s international recognition. Viewed through this lens, the might and strength their country had managed to acquire was from then on supported by the integrity of “the righteous person, without whom, as the saying goes, neither a village, nor a town, nor our entire land can stand upright,” as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it in his most important contribution to the new literary movement.<sup>114</sup> In the words of Yitzhak Brudny, Brezhnev’s attempt “to co-opt village prose and other Russian nationalist intellectuals was a direct response to the decline of the mobilizational power of the official Marxist-Leninist ideology and an attempt to strengthen the regime’s legitimacy and its mobilizational power.”<sup>115</sup>

#### 6.4.3 *The return of Russian great power chauvinism in socialist disguise*

The peak of Soviet power during the Cold War coincided with a deep crisis of Marxist internationalism and the idea of international socialist great-

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112. Authors associated with the village prose include Vasiliy Belov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr Yashin, Valentin Rasputin, and Fyodor Abramov among others.

113. E.g., see Belov 1994.

114. Solzhenitsyn 2006, 148.

115. Brudny 1998, 60.

ness adjacent to it. As Zubok demonstrated, Brezhnev's 'live and let live' approach resulted in a situation where "duplicity, conformism, and corruption reigned supreme, [while] double-think, and cynicism became social norms."<sup>116</sup> At the same time, Brezhnev did not even try to open a discussion about how Marxist internationalism could be reformed, but simply reiterated, now and again, that détente was, in fact, a direct outcome of the new relative balance of power between the socialist and the capitalist blocs, and hence the great power management type of conduct was supposed to be somehow normal in that setting. Consequently, ideas related to different incarnations of Russian nationalism and greatpowerhood spread through the Soviet intellectual milieu and policy making circles, slowly becoming the main discursive foundation for Russia's international politics. A large proportion of party officials, but especially members of the military and the KGB, effectively gave up on revolutionary Marxism. Instead, they embraced great power chauvinism and started treating communism "as a transitional phase towards the triumph of Russia as a world power, [a time when] the communist shell would be tossed off [revealing] the 'great Russia.'"<sup>117</sup>

At the same time, the public ideological monopoly of Marxist internationalism remained in place and, in fact, was carefully guarded by the regime's officials. If anything, individual interpretations and free-floating speculations related to ideological maxims became even less acceptable, compared to the previous decades of the Soviet regime. If Khrushchev could occasionally deviate from the text of his speeches, switching to the working class vocabulary, Brezhnev never diverged from the text.<sup>118</sup> At the same time, Brezhnev and some of his fellow party members often drove their speechwriters mad by demanding multiple corrections to their speech drafts, aimed at (1) complete rhetorical congruence with the ideological tenets of scientific communism, and (2) impeccably crafted and recognizable individual style.

Brezhnev's speechwriter, Aleksandr Bovin, noted in his memoirs that, in that context, "the style [was] the person."<sup>119</sup> In terms of ideological content, whatever Brezhnev was saying publicly was, in fact, predetermined by his position and role. Thus, it was the form and the style of his speeches that were supposed to reveal his personality as a Soviet leader. His notoriously

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116. Zubok 2008, 433–35.

117. Zubok 2008, 435.

118. Yurchak 2003, 490.

119. Bovin 2017.



soporific presentation style (especially toward the end of his tenure) did not make the job of his speechwriters any easier. Yet even semantically his rhetorical oeuvre gravitated toward “a strange mix of common sense and a genuine belief in the ‘heaving earth’ [on Lenin’s anniversary], of naivete (‘thwart falsifications!’), and ideologically blinkered vision, indissociable from complete falsification.”<sup>120</sup>

In his work on the discursive regime of late socialism, Alexey Yurchak called this the “Soviet hegemony of form,” which presupposed a shift from the *semantic* to the *pragmatic* model of discourse (as these had been conceptualized by Elizabeth Mertz).<sup>121</sup> In practice, this meant that, to maintain and protect one’s public political identity, it became more important to perform and comply with ideological discursive rituals than to interpret and follow that ideology’s semantic prescriptions. Thus, as political ideology, Marxist internationalism “died a quiet and lowly death sometime during Brezhnev’s rule,” as one attentive observer put this.<sup>122</sup>

The ideological crisis, exacerbated by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the firm reintegration of the Soviet Union into the world economy, opened up spaces for new discursive contestations, which then for a while brewed outside of the official public debates and later exploded during perestroika. In contrast to common belief, these contestations formed not only along the “communism vs. liberal democracy” axis, but also, and very importantly, along the axis that defined Russia’s role in international politics. The two ends of this axis were introduced in rudimentary form and further crystallized already during Stalin’s time: Russia’s role as *a leading force of the world socialist revolution* was juxtaposed to its role as *a European nation and a great power with millennial political history*. It was the latter role that nimbly gained discursive strength throughout the 1980s.

## 6.5 THE END OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIALIST GREATNESS: GORBACHEV’S PERESTROIKA

The new and, finally, young and amicable face of the Soviet regime, Mikhail Gorbachev, was one among the three Russian and Soviet nationals to ever

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120. Bovin 2017. Here Bovin refers to Brezhnev’s initial instructions with regard to the desired content and style of his speech for Lenin’s centennial anniversary.

121. Mertz 1996; Yurchak 2003.

122. Furman 2005, 317.

receive the Nobel Peace Prize (1990). The other two laureates, Andrey Sakharov (1975) and Andrey Muratov (2021), received their awards for their patriotic dissent against the Soviet and Putin regimes that, nevertheless, remained, for a time, quite dictatorial and atrocious. In his turn, Gorbachev, who had a lot to lose as the Soviet leader, received his medal for personally facilitating the radical changes in East-West relations and for ending the Cold War, without turning the entire region into a nightmarish bloodbath. For this alone, he deserves the utmost respect and praise. Still, like any important public figure, he also deserves scrutiny. For my analysis, his takes on the Soviet Union's political greatness are especially interesting.

*6.5.1. Mikhail Gorbachev: A liberal idealist, an international socialist leader, or a great power club member?*

Gorbachev embraced and promoted the mode of greatness that was especially convoluted. On the one hand, he repeatedly disavowed the commonly held Western position that he started perestroika because he had become disillusioned with socialist ideals and ends. "This is a false conclusion," Gorbachev wrote dismissively in his memoirs.<sup>123</sup> As we also know from the memoirs of his advisers and associates, his decision-making was deeply affected by the desire to preserve, if not strengthen, the Soviet Union's role as the leader of the communist world.<sup>124</sup> In his statements within the Politburo, he invoked the Soviet anti-imperialist struggle and the importance of supporting national liberation movements, just as Lenin did in much of his writings.<sup>125</sup>

On the other hand, Gorbachev and his team discursively embraced the idea that the world should be treated as one functional whole, founded on universal human values. In Gorbachev's rendering, global society kept climbing up the ladder of progress. That ladder might have had a fork or two, meaning that it could have led different societies toward different progressive endpoints. Yet a lot of joint effort and a limited universal consensus were required to keep the ladder upright. In this spirit, Gorbachev proposed a de-ideologization of relations between states, which, however, was not supposed to apply to those states' domestic regimes. Rather, echoing Khrushchev, he had in mind a fair competition of ideologies and social systems,

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123. Gorbachev 2000, 67.

124. Kalinovsky, 2009, 59–60.

125. Gorbachev 1987.

wherein the competing ideologies could demonstrate their advantages “not just by words or propaganda, but by real deeds.”<sup>126</sup>

In such discursive setup, it was quite difficult for Gorbachev not to slip into liberal idealism, given his sympathy to the universal humanist values. Most illustratively, this slippage shone through in his 1988 speech in the UN, where he argued for a revolutionary rethinking of the global order, seemingly staying true to the revolutionary roots of the Soviet system. Yet the kind of revolution the Soviet leader proposed, in fact, resembled a restoration of the old humanist paradigm. The world that Gorbachev saw in the making was, allegedly, driven by progress, “shaped by universal human interests.” That, in its turn, meant that “world politics, too, should be guided by the primacy of universal human values.”<sup>127</sup> In essence, this was a mere belated reiteration of the liberal idealist principles that accompanied the foundation of the League of Nations and the UN, and which also figured prominently in the Helsinki Final Act’s third basket. Needless to say, the Soviet Union had a particularly poor track record in upholding those principles domestically.

Last, Gorbachev also continued Brezhnev’s line, which presented the Soviet Union as a normal and status quo-oriented great power that was managing global affairs together with its partners from the great power club. The combination of all three modes created a curious discursive trap that complicated the Soviet decision-making in many areas. The political context that was, perhaps, the most damaging for the Soviet regime was their intervention and prolonged presence in Afghanistan (1979–1989), which Gorbachev failed to end quickly after he assumed office in 1985, and which (1) seriously undermined the utility of military solutions in the eyes of the Soviet leadership, (2) discredited the Soviet Army, revealing its weaknesses, (3) put the Soviet Union’s international legitimacy in question, and (4) opened new channels for domestic political participation through civil and veterans’ organizations that eventually flourished during glasnost and undermined the ideological hegemony of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union).<sup>128</sup> In the last substantive section of this chapter, I illustrate, on the example of the Soviet decision-makers’ discussions about Afghanistan, how the discursive hegemony of international socialist greatness finished its days, giving way to the new discursive consensus, founded on the return to

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126. Gorbachev 1988, 12.

127. Gorbachev 1988, 8.

128. Reuveny and Prakash 1999.

the civilizational mode of greatness—universalist and imperialist at the same time.<sup>129</sup> In such form, this mode was especially problematic for Russia, given its externally assessed relative position on the civilizational spectrum and the unravelling political tumult at home.

### 6.5.2 *The pains of the Soviet withdrawal*

Historians agree that Gorbachev decided to withdraw the Soviet troops from Afghanistan either before or immediately after he took office in March 1985. His decision was also sealed by the Politburo vote in October of the same year.<sup>130</sup> Yet it took the Soviet Union four years to fully withdraw. Why did this take so long? Apart from the material and organizational limitations, what were the discursive preconditions for action that stalled the withdrawal? I argue that one of the important reasons was a combination of discursive concerns related to the image and status of the Soviet Union as a great power, which both protracted the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan and depleted its resources and legitimacy. The late Soviet fixation on the country's international status that was not matched by its mobilizational capabilities (both material and discursive) brought the Soviet regime and ideology to their demise. In this way, Russia's preoccupation with greatness finished off yet another incarnation of its body politique.

The main obstacle in the way of the USSR's speedy withdrawal from Afghanistan was the threat it would have allegedly posed for the Soviet Union's international prestige, especially among the Third World countries. Gorbachev repeatedly mentioned to his colleagues that “the third world’ [was] watching us closely,” and that he did not want to create an impression that the Soviet Union was “running away.”<sup>131</sup> A quick leave, justified through putting the blame on the previous leadership for a poorly planned intervention, was certainly always an option on Gorbachev's policy horizon, as his statements in the Politburo reveal, but he decidedly refused to choose it, as presumably both India and Africa “would be concerned.”<sup>132</sup> Notably, this

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129. By calling this mode of greatness “imperialist,” I do not mean that the reinstated civilizational mode was founded on the premise of further militarist expansion. Rather, it remained imperialist discursively, i.e., in Russia's cultural and political imagination which portrayed the status of a great power and a regional hegemon, as well as the natural protector of the “near abroad,” as the only thinkable options for its post-Soviet future.

130. Kalinovsky 2009, 59–60.

131. Chernyaev 2009, 6.

132. Gorbachev 1987.

was purely a question of status, trust, and prestige, since the expansionist drive, as a principle, had been already excluded from the Soviet Union's international agenda.<sup>133</sup> In other words, the USSR continued losing lives and burning resources in a rather unsustainable way hoping to maintain its reputation as a reliable senior partner and a socialist great power.

In its relations with and expectations from other great powers, the Soviet Union indeed avoided emphasizing the ideological component, thus effectively losing the socialist part of its greatness. By 1989, the rhetoric of the Soviet representatives to the UN Security Council related to the Afghan question bore all the quintessential features of a normal great power manager, ready to serve as a guarantor of the present and future international agreements, and expecting other great powers (especially the United States) to fulfill their guarantor's obligations as well.<sup>134</sup>

In the meantime, the Soviet great power management discourse also, from time to time, came into collusion with the *de facto* liberal idealism promoted by some Soviet high officials, especially Eduard Shevardnadze, the Soviet minister of foreign affairs. Hesitant to abandon the idea of great powers altogether, he still criticized the division of the world into spheres of influence, as well as "great" and "small" states, pointing out that the only sense in which the great powers should remain great is related to their "great responsibility towards the rest of the world." When it came to spheres of influence, the minister attested that "we must all have only one sphere of influence—our planet."<sup>135</sup>

The admixture of all three modes of greatness in the Soviet official rhetoric produced a discursive environment that relied on contradictory value systems. On the one hand, this was the "socialism with a human face" that arrived two decades too late,<sup>136</sup> but still opened some avenues for bottom-up political participation and public dialogue, while also self-ascribing the great responsibility for the well-being of our entire planet. On the other hand, this was the global socialist leadership with some stakes in and promises made to the so-called Third World—in essence, the polities that the late Soviet Union perceived as its junior allies and dependents—but primarily on

133. Chernyaev 2008, 68.

134. United Nations 1989, 46.

135. United Nations 1988, 71–72.

136. Gati 1990, 178. Responding to a Western journalist's question about the main difference between perestroika and the Prague Spring during Gorbachev's visit to Prague in spring 1987, his spokesperson, Gennadi Gerasimov, uttered only two words: "Nineteen years." Notably, Gorbachev himself decided not to criticize Brezhnev's policies.

the ideological front. Finally, this was also a rather ideologically neutral great power management that embraced the idea of the rigid international hierarchy, where “strong” and “civilized” states assumed the right to police the existing world order. Importantly, neither of the three modes remained consistent in practice. They also could not accommodate any alternatives to Russia’s great power status, however differently understood. None of them preserved the idea of the antagonistic nature of world politics, or even the slightest hope for a world revolution, which had been the foundational tropes for international socialist greatness. Consequently, overstretching itself in all directions, but also opening up some space for domestic contestation, which did not have any other discursive sources to feed from except the various modes of Russia’s political greatness, the Soviet Union departed this life, leaving some potentially explosive (but, at that time, still hibernating) discursive legacies.

## 6.6 CONCLUSION

Having survived a social revolution and a civil war in early twentieth-century Russia, the Bolsheviks, as the main protagonists of Marxist internationalism and the new hegemonic political power in the newly born Soviet polity, quickly found themselves in international political and economic isolation. Encircled by capitalist states, they had to, from very early on, make questionable compromises and rethink some of the original Marxist internationalist principles to be able to lead an acceptably normal stately life within the international system and to form stable alliances. It is also true that, despite their predominantly economic analytical lens, the vanguard of the Communist Party did not need to be convinced that the national question was, in fact, of utmost importance. The general anti-imperialist sentiment of Marxist internationalism, as well as the importance of national boundaries and subnational identities, acknowledged by Marx and Engels, spoke loud enough. What is more, the national question also contained a solution to itself in the form of anti-imperialist and endlessly fragmenting national liberation movements. Lenin supported and used those movements as a handy tool to disassemble empires.

In most cases, a disassembling tool can also be used for assembly. This is exactly what Stalin used it for, when he reclaimed Russia’s imperial legacy, presenting it as a sequence of preceding and necessary stages of progress that

eventually brought Russia to its then current socialist form. In his reasoning, the history of class relations was replaced with a history of a great nation that revealed itself stepwise in full accordance with the historical-materialist logic. To continuously remain great, however, the nation needed a strong national core, which Stalin happened to place into the Russian people. From the Marxist point of view, this was a senseless and dangerous move, which further conditioned a series of pendulum-like ideological fluctuations in the Soviet international rhetoric: from its willingness to revive revolutionary Marxism (Khrushchev), to managing the global peace and security irrespective of one's ideological predilections (Brezhnev), to a strange combination of both, with a pinch of liberal idealism added to the mixture (Gorbachev).

Importantly, all of the abovementioned discursive modes self-ascribed some degree of greatness, mission, or global responsibility, which the Soviet Union could never let go of even during the times of hardships and political overstretch that especially came to the surface during the last decade of Soviet rule. Still, even when everything was falling apart, the great power identity remained the default mode of making sense of Russia's global role and position, despite the country's obvious relative weakness. Domestically, this discourse could feed on ample historical examples and resources, the various meanings of *velikaya derzhava*, which I described in this book and which did not depend on relative assessment and external recognition, but mostly bore a mobilizational function. With this discursive assemblage claiming its public sphere, Russia entered its fourth, and final, revolution of the twentieth century in 1991.

## CHAPTER 7

### *Conclusion*

#### Uses, Legacies, and Traps of Greatness in Post-Soviet Russia

*I would like to draw the Security Council members' attention to Mr Zelensky's statement in which he said that Ukraine wants to regain its status as a nuclear power. "Power" [derzhava] may not be the right word. A nuclear country [yadernaya strana].<sup>1</sup>*

SERGEI SHOIGU, RUSSIAN MINISTER OF DEFENSE (RUSSIAN SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING, 21 FEBRUARY 2022)

*We propose to create a union—U-24. United for Peace. A union of responsible countries [vidpovidal'nikh derzhav]<sup>2</sup> that have enough power and conscience to stop conflicts. Immediately.*

VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY, PRESIDENT OF UKRAINE (ADDRESS TO THE US CONGRESS, 16 MARCH 2022)

On 24 February 2022, Russia started an unprovoked and full-scale aggressive intervention in Ukraine, shelled Ukrainian cities, and triggered the largest refugee inflow into Europe since WWII. The assault was backed up by a col-

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1. By saying this, Shoigu has (perhaps, unwittingly) capitalized on the semantic difference between the Russian ("great power") and the Ukrainian ("country") meanings of the word *derzhava*. Zelenskyy did not use this concept in his Munich speech, to which Shoigu was presumably reacting, but he had previously used it on Twitter (on 20 January 2022), responding to Joe Biden's admission that a limited Russian intervention in Ukraine was possible. The usage and the proposed applicability of the concept *derzhava* is rather telling. Russia refers to some explicitly underspecified set of qualities that presumably constitute political greatness. While doing this, Russia also excludes one of the most significant features of greatpowerhood, as it is understood globally—the possession of nuclear weapons.

2. Or *otvetstvennykh gosudarstv* in Russian.



lection of narratives in the Russian state media and in the speeches of Russian officials, which relied on a combination of the same ideas and tropes that I have analyzed in this book. Putin appealed to the existential nature of threats that Russia was allegedly facing, threats to the very “historical future of Russia as a nation”<sup>3</sup> that would have been destroyed, if Russia failed to act immediately. He also identified the national culture, values, and traditions as the main sources of greatness, whereas the real power for him was invested in truth and justice, not material force or relational superiority. The sense of acute resentment and betrayal, the sharp dissatisfaction with the complete corruption of norms in the collective West, which he called “the empire of lies,” was juxtaposed to the shining image of Russia, as one of the “mightiest nuclear powers [*yadernaya derzhava*] in the world,” which, however, had lost much of its potency and steam in 1991, but kept running on a mixture of spiritual strength, mobilizational capacity, and people’s consonance resulting from it.<sup>4</sup> In response to Russia’s essentialist and confrontational vision of greatness, Ukraine, as one can see from the epigraph to this chapter, appealed to responsible management and conflict prevention as the key values of the international system and the main functions of great powers—that is, Zelenskyy articulated a quintessentially modern and Western interpretation of greatpowerhood.<sup>5</sup>

What the world witnessed in 2022 is how the paradoxes that haunted Russia’s modernization projects in the nineteenth century and that resurfaced after the collapse of the Soviet Union, materialized into an unmitigated disaster—for Ukraine, but also for Russia. The internalized standard of civilization, as the main benchmark, coupled with (1) yet another crisis of recognition, (2) the refusal to accept a second-class status, (3) the willingness to utilize the traditional (and outdated) engines of Russia’s political evolution, and (4) the weakening of moral restraint caused by limited and encumbered socialization—created a discursive mix that proved explosive. Certainly, it was explosive not in the sense of directly causing the war, but in the sense of making it *thinkable* and *justifiable* for the population within a political regime with an abnormally high concentration of power within the hands of one person and a strictly hierarchical political subordination system—what Bálint Magyar and Bálint Madlovics call a “single-pyramid system” with a “chief patron” on top.<sup>6</sup>

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3. Putin 2022a.

4. Putin 2022a.

5. Zelenskyy 2022.

6. Magyar and Madlovics 2020, 58–61 and 136–37.

How did all this become possible, given Russia's very promising democratic takeoff in the 1990s? In this concluding chapter, I sum up the main takeaways from the conceptual history of *velikaya derzhava* that I have reconstructed thus far and show how they affected the workings of great power discourse in contemporary Russia. I pay specific attention to some of the most enduring legacies, as well as the discursive traps those legacies have created. I begin by sketching the new Russia's discursive encounter with the world in 1991 and the years that followed. While doing this, I emphasize the point that is usually overlooked by most observers of Russian politics, which is the fact that Russia *never* managed to weaken its enduring attachment to the great power identity, even in the early 1990s. I then return to the main questions raised in chapter 1 and provide both laconic and more contextualized answers to all of those questions.

## 7.1 AFTER THE FALL

### 7.1.1 *Yeltsin's message to the West*

As already mentioned, when the Cold War ended and Russia was a superpower no more, Boris Yeltsin insisted in the very first sentence of his historic speech in the US Congress that he was “a citizen of a great power (*velikoy derzhavy*), which has made its choice in favor of liberty and democracy,” and also appealed to Russia's millennial heritage.<sup>7</sup> Symptomatically, *velikaya derzhava* was mistranslated into English as “a great country”—perhaps because in 1992, Russia was neither a superpower, nor a great power by Western standards. Yet there is little doubt that, unlike Lenin, Yeltsin claimed some uninterrupted continuity there, the sense of which indeed had a profound impact on Russia's political discourse both in the 1990s and in the twenty-first century.

In addition, Yeltsin argued that the bipolar world “shaken by the storms of confrontation,” which almost brought that world to its tragic end, became a thing of the past.<sup>8</sup> Notably, this happened because the Russian people found strength to shake off the totalitarian system and chose reason over madness. As Yeltsin put this, “Russia has made its final choice in favor of a civilized way of life, common sense, and the universal human heritage.”<sup>9</sup>

7. Yeltsin 1992.

8. Yeltsin 1992.

9. Yeltsin 1992.

Thus, by democratizing its domestic regime, it symbolically rejoined the family of humanity, which was founded on the universal principles of freedom, dignity, and equality—the principles axiomatically attributed to reason and common sense.

Yet Russia's "final choice" was not as straightforward as Yeltsin presented it in Washington. Despite (or maybe because of) the multiple standing ovations that Yeltsin received while talking, as well as due to some of his (or his speechwriters') rhetorical choices (such as "God bless America!" in the script's finale), this speech was actually never shown on Russian TV. Speculatively, it was interpreted by Yeltsin's PR people as being generally too slavish to be welcomed by the domestic audience, despite the fact that he appealed to Russia's great power status in the very first sentence of his speech.

The second indicator of the surviving great power identity is Yeltsin's domestic take on the anticipated declarations of independence of certain Russian regions in 1990. His frequently misquoted and mistranslated offer to the regions from 1990, often presented as "take as much sovereignty as [you] can swallow,"<sup>10</sup> in fact sounded like "take that share of power [*tu dolyu vlasti*], which you would be able to swallow."<sup>11</sup> Formulating his proposal in this exact way, Yeltsin not only exposed his paternalistic attitude toward the republics and regions within the Soviet Union, making it clear that the burden of the supreme power would still be carried by Russia, but also combined it with a promise to commit to bottom-up self-determination, so dear to both Marxist internationalist and liberal idealist causes.

Thus, Russia rejoined the unified world, self-ascribing the status of a great power, which, as the abovementioned dent in translation could demonstrate, was not immediately recognized by Russia's interlocutors. In other words, after seventy-plus years, Russia was yet again perceived as an aspiring member of the international concert founded on normative universals, who enjoyed only partial recognition of its duties and rights; that is, it found itself in the exact same position it occupied in the imagined structure of international order before 1917. This was the first discursive trap, which post-communist Russia has been ever since stepping into, trying to make sense and use of its new international status. By doing so, Russia, as well as the great power discourse it produced, was mired in ambiguities that resembled the ones it had to battle in the nineteenth century.

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10. Milyukov cited in Erlanger 1992, 5.

11. Saitov 1990.

### 7.1.2 *The tactical ploy of Russian Westernizers*

Despite the widespread interpretation of Russia's early post-Soviet identity as being thoroughly westernized and devoid of great power ambitions,<sup>12</sup> this was not really the case. Even the most liberal and westernized Russian foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, who was equally despised by both Yeltsin's hardliners<sup>13</sup> and Putin's current diplomatic elite<sup>14</sup> (for proposing Richard Nixon to help define Russia's national interest), in fact, accommodated and routinely promoted Russia's great power rhetoric. As befits a true Westernizer, he interpreted Russia's greatness as a "burden" or "destiny," instead of seeing it as a competitive advantage.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, disagreeing with Tsygankov, who did not include greatpowerhood in the ideological toolkit of Liberal Westernizers,<sup>16</sup> I argue that even the most liberal Russian politicians (i.e., the least-likely cases in positivist slang) never abandoned the idea of Russia being a great power. Just as most Westernizers did a century and a half earlier, they merely transformed the content of this idea, while keeping its grandiose scope, ideological form, and mobilizational function. In his 1995 book, Kozyrev addressed the issue of political greatness explicitly. In a section suggestively entitled "What is the meaning of greatness for a great power?" (*V chyom velichie derzhavy?*), he admitted that the meaning and content of greatness in the contemporary world have changed. Economic prosperity, advanced science and culture, as well as high living standards became much more important and desirable goals for great powers, and served as the main indicators confirming that status. Military might, on the contrary, became relatively less important. At the same time, realizing that Russia would probably score low on all those new criteria, Kozyrev also argued that Russia "was *destined* to be a great power."<sup>17</sup> For the minister, the main reason to think this way was Russia's historical record—it always emerged victorious from every crisis, and so it should overcome that new crisis as well. Thus, Kozyrev used the same (dubious) argument that Lavrov used twenty years later, when he justified Russia's present claims for greatness by referring to its history of successful crisis management.<sup>18</sup> The key dif-

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12. E.g., Tsygankov 2010, 62.

13. Primakov 2004, 126.

14. Zakharova 2022b.

15. Kozyrev 1995, 51–52.

16. Tsygankov 2010.

17. Kozyrev 1995, 51, emphasis added.

18. Lavrov 2016b.

ference between the two was that Kozyrev wanted Russia to abandon the interests of Russia as Empire and to adopt the interests “of Russia as great democratic power [*velikoy demokraticeskoy derzhavy*].”<sup>19</sup> Yet the greatness itself was not something that either Lavrov or Kozyrev was prepared to abandon.

Importantly, to show that Russia was not just an obedient student of the West, Kozyrev insisted that what some interpreted as a “romantic” period of Russian foreign policy in the early 1990s was, in fact, a tactical ploy implemented for the sake of achieving Russia’s strategic interests, as a de facto regional hegemon and an aspiring democratic great power.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, it is curious that Kozyrev entitled his book *Preobrazhenie*, which bears unmistakable religious connotations and means “transfiguration”—the revelation of his godly greatness and glory by Jesus Christ. Applied to post-Soviet Russia, this seems to be the fittest concept to describe its take on political greatness, which always evaded scrutiny and comparison, but was, at the same time, always there, ready to be revealed to persuade those who were losing belief: most importantly, the citizens of the Russian Federation.

### 7.1.3 *The discursive cocktail of greatness in contemporary Russia*

When I say that in the 1990s, but also today, Russian politicians often echo in their rhetoric the modes of greatness that were widespread and popular before the October Revolution, I do not mean that some mode of that discourse has resurrected in the present in its unchanged form. The assuredness with which Yeltsin and everyone else around him spoke of Russia’s great power status probably came from the experience of the Cold War (when the special status of the Soviet Union was hardly in question), not from reanimated memories that were almost a century old. However, in Yeltsin’s rendering, Russia’s Cold War experience seemingly merged with the general image of the world that indeed resembled the pre-1917 situation, as well as its respective hierarchies. Putin, too, when he refers to Russia’s greatpowerhood, often displays a colorful and nostalgic discursive cocktail, sometimes mourning the dissolution of the Soviet Union<sup>21</sup> and sometimes using the tropes borrowed from the image bank of either the Russian Empire or its

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19. Kozyrev 1995, 51.

20. Kozyrev 1995, 54.

21. E.g., Putin 2022a.

political predecessors.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the present day Russian great power discourse is an agglomeration of different discursive modes, some exerting more influence than others.

Consequently, whichever discursive mode(s) the elites of contemporary Russia have been (and are currently) choosing for conveying the idea of Russia's greatness, they invariably create an acute dissonance with Russia's political environment. The main reason is that the discursive mechanics of those modes remain almost identical to all or some of the previous incarnations of Russia's great power discourse. Russia's ideas about greatness simply (and familiarly) remain out of synch and invite precaution. Just like other Russian leaders before him, Putin often refuses decisively to discuss Russia's great power status in relative terms. Despite his habit to play with numbers, all comparisons stall when it comes to Russia's greatness. Certainly, the Russian elites never fail to mention that they run a state which possesses nuclear weapons. Yet, outside strategic community, they rarely count warheads. In most cases, nuclear weapons are simply presented as an attribute of a great power. At the same time, Russian officials often brandish their pride in Russia's glorious past and forecast an equally glorious future, emphasizing that the unquestioned great power status is *the only* possible future for Russia, if it wants to survive in its current borders.

When it comes to the present, Russia often claims that its greatness is premised on creativity (whatever it is supposed to mean) and capacity to manage crises (as opposed to order). As such, Russian greatness is (1) legitimized by the past that is long gone and is not returning; (2) projected into the future, whose coming is uncertain and requires a mobilization on a tremendous, "greatpowerly" scale; and (3) mostly remains unrealized in the present, because creativity and crisis management are exceptional modes of conduct, not daily routines. In addition, Russian elites often demonstrate their irritation when some (mostly Western) observers try to subject Russia's capabilities to rigorous assessment and pass their judgment on whether Russia qualifies as a member of the great power club.

In addition, for a great power, contemporary Russia has a curious attitude toward globalized norms. If one agrees with the English School that the main functional specificity of great powers is the management of international order, then establishing and upholding a consensus on international norms should be one of the key tasks of every major international actor.

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22. E.g., Putin 2014e.

Indeed, norm-making was a traditional business of great powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Russia, however, often exhibits its ambivalent take on globalized norms. On the one hand, it does appeal to a fairly traditionalist set of normative universals, including the supremacy of international law, the tantamount importance of global peace and security, and the principle of nonintervention. Illustratively, Russia chooses to dress up in the style of precedents and conventions even its most disrupting international demarches, such as the annexation of Crimea and the aggressive war against Ukraine, conveying the impression of a conservative, rather than revolutionary, power. On the other hand, in its interaction with the outside world, Russia constantly argues that the current normative order is in crisis and that emergency measures are necessary to salvage it.<sup>23</sup> Acting on its own perception of the crisis, Russia often activates the emergency mode and infrequently breaks the rules, justifying this by immediate and essential necessity. In response, the West labels Russia a revisionist power, imposes sanctions, and denies a proper recognition of its great power status.

Yet, in fact, the discursive vibe has been similar ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia, as a proverbial expression goes, has been a great power “rising from its knees.” However, to truly lift itself up (and even to keep itself together), it *always* needed to utilize emergency measures. In 1993, it was the shelling of a democratically elected parliament in the name of freedom and democracy. A superpresidential constitution that was adopted shortly after was also supposed to help Russia move away from dictatorial rule. By 2000, that superpresidential constitution received its superpresident, whose main achievement, according to the population at large, became “the restoration of Russia’s great power status” (curiously, along with “preventing Russia’s disintegration”).<sup>24</sup> Yet, from the position of the international normative consensus, such strongman mentality is precisely what seems to be holding Russia back from receiving full and unproblematic recognition. Thus, the internalized progressive vector of Russia’s development combined with the perception of lagging behind and the willingness to capitalize on its alleged transformative engines that come across as emergency measures, but in fact become normalized for the Russian domestic context, lock the country in a never-ending race after its own projection.

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23. Dynkin et al. 2015.

24. Dergachev 2018.

## 7.2 THE MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Returning to where it all began, one can now approach the questions I posed in my introductory chapter with much more certainty and contextual depth. I start with providing succinct and straightforward answers. This, certainly, comes with a cost, as so much more has, in fact, been going on there that those short answers cannot possibly be both (1) concise and policy-relevant, and (2) reflect all the multiple stages of the conceptual evolution I have reconstructed in this book. To ensure more depth and contextuality, I supplement the short answers with a more detailed discussion, in which I relate the main takeaways back to the main body of my argument. In this discussion, I reflect on the relevance of my findings for the wider debate on political greatness, and bring them into dialogue with the operations of great power discourse in contemporary Russia.

### *7.2.1 The main takeaways, in a nutshell*

*Why is the idea of being a great power so important to Russia?* At present, but also historically, great power status operates discursively in the Russian political space not only as something related to international prestige and foreign policy opportunities, but as something unbreakably connected to the health and survival of Russia's domestic regime. This connection of *velikaya derzhava* with domestic politics is an outcome of the concept's evolution, as well as its interaction with the transforming discursive frameworks of the European society of states. As a result of those processes, Russia managed to both internalize the progressive understanding of world history with all the hierarchies and modes of conduct pertaining to it, and apply it self-referentially, reinterpreting its own greatness as, on the one hand, a fruit of its political history and, on the other hand, the only viable means to overcome its perceived/imagined underdevelopment.

*Why does Russia stick to this identity even when doing so clearly damages its international standing and economic health?* Russia often insists on being a great power to the detriment of its own prosperity and well-being, because, in the Russian symbolic universe, greatpowerhood, among other things, is a mobilizational ideology. This ideology is future-oriented and is supposed to help overcome precisely the condition of economic weakness and deteriorating international recognition. Hence, it makes sense from within the Russian frame of reference that the great power identity is rearticulated and



brought to the fore precisely at those moments when Russia's international standing is compromised and its economic health is far from being ideal. This happened many times before in Russian history. In political terms, this naturally leads to antagonism, which facilitates mobilization, but also to significant overstretching of state capacity, which places a disproportional load on the Russian population, as opposed to its political elites, insulated by the staggering inequality.

*What does Russia, in fact, mean when it speaks about being a great power, given that its subsequent actions often do not conform to other actors' expectations about proper "greatpowerly" conduct?* The meaning that Russian officials attach to the concept *velikaya derzhava* is a local meaning with a rich history, which combines the appeals to the eclectic legacy of Russia's historical victories and achievements with a mobilizing and self-forgetful drive toward collective action and sacrifice. Importantly, despite its local specifics, this semantics developed in interaction with the discourses of Russia's significant Others (in other words, the self-forgetful drive is only justified by the aspiration to live up to a certain common standard). In this sense, *velikaya derzhava* and "great power" are both the same and different. They are the same because whenever Russia speaks about being a *velikaya derzhava*, this is usually translated into English as "great power," which carries a load of very distinct connotations related to foreign policy, confident international standing, and clear relative superiority. They are different because the set of connotations that "great power" carries with it—foreign policy, relative superiority, and the management of international order—is not fully equivalent to the semantic baggage of *velikaya derzhava*, which designates a status allegedly earned through the centuries of Russia's political practice and, at the same time, the telos of its current development, proceeding in the format of *normalized emergency*.

*Why does the Russian story about its political greatness often include elements of dissatisfaction, weakness, and even decay?* This story often exhibits signs of dissatisfaction, weakness, and decay because Russia's great power aspirations and expectations do not match its objective capabilities.<sup>25</sup> By objective capabilities I mean not only wealth and other kinds of material power, but also, and importantly, the general capacity to get one's message across, to secure

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25. For a recent iteration of a similar argument in relation to Russia's actions in Ukraine, see Remnick 2022.

such level of respect and recognition that one aspires to, or at least requires for maintaining one's composure and avoiding mortal anxiety. In the course of its troubled interaction with the West, Russia seems to have internalized the Western discursive framework, but did not find a way to relate to it unproblematically. Viewed as an ambivalently positioned latecomer from within the progressivist paradigm, Russia never came to terms with that role, refused to leave the club altogether, but also was unable to greatly improve its relative standing vis-à-vis the core. Consequently, it ended up oscillating between two poles: (1) forceful assertions of its own greatness (retrieved in different genealogical variations from its cultural image bank), and (2) acute realizations of its underdevelopment, triggered by various blunders and failures. The latter was supposed to be mitigated through an emergency modernization program that Russia was believed to be capable of, empowered by the ideology of being a *velikaya derzhava*. This created an uneasy tension in Russia's self-image, as well as in its interactions with the outside world, which turned into yet another discursive trap for Russia and its political narratives.

### 7.2.2 *The main takeaways, contextualized*

Further, I provide a more nuanced reconstruction of the conceptual evolution of *velikaya derzhava*. By doing so, I also expose a bigger story. This story combines local Russian specifics with the global discursive processes. The ruptures in the Russian conceptualization of political greatness, as I have tried to demonstrate, were not only affected by interlingual encounters with Russia's significant Others, but also reflected the conceptual evolutions that were taking place on regional and global scales. Thus, the conceptual evolution of *velikaya derzhava* reflected larger discursive developments: namely, the evolution of how international actors conceived political greatness in general. Consequently, the following discussion is not only about Russia, it is also about international society and the dynamics of interactions therein.

#### 7.2.2.1 Absolute greatness

Initially, the idea of political power in Russia, but also in Europe, was deeply embedded in religious discourse. The concept meaning "great power" in present-day Russian—*derzhava*—was then first and foremost God's attribute.

God, in his turn, enthroned a grand prince, temporarily endowing him with great power. The prince, however, did not possess any personal charisma of their own. Then, around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the word *derzhava* began to signify “a polity” in addition to “great power,” and the greatness of the Russian polity and its power started to be explicitly emphasized through the addition of the word “great” to it—it became *velikaya derzhava*, which could be tautologically translated as “great great power.” I suggest that, arguably, the vision of Russia being a “great great power” emerged as a conservative response to European modernity.

As follows from contemporaneous literary sources and diplomatic correspondence, the labels *velikaya derzhava* or *velikoye tsarstvo* (great tsardom), used to characterize the Russian polity, not only reflected its claim to an imperial rank but were also supposed to emphasize that the power of Russian princes continued to be interpreted as divinely instituted, unconditional and undivided. While some European rulers who were elected by nobles (e.g., Stephen Báthory) or shared supreme power with the ruling class (e.g., Johan III of Sweden) may have preserved their power in the eyes of the Russian political elite, but had lost their greatness. In other words, the first disagreement on what constitutes true political greatness emerged as a result of the shifting normative consensus regulating the operations of domestic regimes. Facing what would later become a new norm for some European polities, Russia held firmly to the idea that supreme executive power must be undivided, while the relation it had with regard to its subjects could better be described as *possession* rather than *management*.

Notably, such a political regime, whose practices may have either been adopted and adapted from the Byzantine standard,<sup>26</sup> or experienced the influence of the steppe tradition,<sup>27</sup> was believed to be superior to its European analogues, and hence was deemed greater. That is why Russian monarchs of the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries did not explicitly look for endorsement from other European rulers. And when they were offered that endorsement, they could sometimes reject it.<sup>28</sup> This was the case because, among other things, the greatness of the Russian polity was conceived as an *absolute* fact, rather than a matter of international consensus and recognition.

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26. Uspenskij 1996b.

27. Neumann and Wigen 2018.

28. For concrete examples, see Neumann 2008b, 15.

### 7.2.2.2 Theatrical greatness

It is important to reiterate that *derzhava* was God's attribute—that is, it could be associated with the tsaric office, but never with the tsar himself. Endowed with *derzhava*, the tsar was perceived as a father of the family holding his daughters and sons in complete possession. Yet, although he had full *potestas*—namely, the performative dimension of power to govern through force, his *autoritas*, or power through authority, was still very much dependent on the Orthodox Church and the Russian patriarch. It was only through them that the tsaric office was endowed with *majesty*, or true greatness. This arrangement was very close to the Byzantine idea of *symphony*, when the tsar and the patriarch shared supreme power between them. One executed majestic authority, while the other one represented it. As long as things remained like this, the Russian domestic regime was perceived to be great, or *majestic*, regardless of external validation.

By the time of Peter the Great (end of the seventeenth through the beginning of the eighteenth centuries), the narrative of Russia's greatness not only remained in place, but also intensified significantly. However, it also turned entirely into a mass of panegyric poetry and sermons glorifying the monarch himself and comparing him to a living deity. This was an unthinkable comparison by the standards of the sixteenth century. It was also in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that many Western travelers noticed that Russians nearly sacralized their tsar. The monarch seemed to have acquired some personal charisma and mystical significance.<sup>29</sup>

Political greatness remained an important quality of the Russian domestic regime, but it changed its meaning because the regime changed as well. By subjugating the church to the state authority, Peter became the head of the church. Thus, he accumulated the full spectrum of power: *autoritas* and *potestas*, mysterious charisma acquired through the ruler's direct connection to transcendental majesty (as the head of the church) and unlimited power to govern (as the head of the state apparatus). Consequently, the transcendental kind of greatness (or *majesty*) of the Russian polity turned into personified *glory*, which manifested itself through excessive glorification of the monarch.

In Petrine Russia, the greatness of Russian *derzhava* was perceived as an outcome of its salvation by Peter-Christ. (Correspondingly, those who opposed the official line labeled him Antichrist). Be it his military victories

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29. Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012.

or reforms, it was only through his sacrificial policies that the true Russian great power was conceived and brought to maturity. Russia's greatness was either believed to be born with Peter or reborn through a fundamental metamorphosis. That is, there was no longer anything primordial about it. Instead, it revealed itself through official panegyric literature and official and unofficial sacralization of the monarch.

These two understandings of greatness were of fundamentally different nature. In the first case, political greatness was perceived as an *absolute characteristic*, as some objective truth that required (and stood) no scrutiny or verification. This was a very religiously rooted understanding, both substantively (it was just like God's greatness) and procedurally (there was no point in trying to verify or measure it—it was the truth which was absolute, non-relative and transcendental—hence, it was supposed to be a matter of belief). In the second case, greatness was understood *theatrically*. It was thought of as sheer power instantiated through its performance. That is, it was intrinsic to the discourse itself: it justified and reproduced itself in the public space by means of its own articulation. Importantly, the “theater of war” was also an important stage for that mode of greatness. Conveniently covered by the fog of war, a sovereign relying on theatrical greatness could often doctor public images in his or her favor.

Importantly, both modes of greatness were neither uniquely Russian, nor exclusively modern for that matter. The pristine essence of the Christian faith served as a foundation of European politics for many centuries. Similarly, appearance always had an important role to play when it came to representations of state power. What is more, in post-*res publica Christiana* Europe, all states relied increasingly often on theatrical manifestations and appearance to assert and shape their political identities, moving away from proclaiming divine enthronement as the primary foundation of their political regimes. In that sense, Russia was reproducing a set of practices that certainly had some contextual specificity (discussed in detail in chapter 3), but, in general, were more about adopting the common normative ground, and seeking recognition from the European society of states. Yet once it finally gained that recognition during the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–1796), it was quickly undermined due to a new set of norms that developed in the European context. That set of norms was informed by ideas about world history and universal progress that subjected all states to relational assessment of measurable resources (material and not) constituting their civilizational levels.

### 7.2.2.3 Troubled encounter

Evidently, calculable resources and relational superiority have not always been the primary foundation of political greatness. In Europe, they only came to occupy an important place in the second half of the eighteenth century, at the very time when the concept “great power” became an established status in European political communication.<sup>30</sup> This coincided with the emergence of the science of statistics which made it possible to assess the position of every state in the international hierarchy both with greater precision, and relative to other states (see chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion). The practice of measurement of states’ demographic, economic, and geographical resources was accompanied by the construction of a progressivist understanding of world history. The latter phenomenon triggered (and was facilitated by) the emergence of the liberal internationalist legal sensibility, which postulated the social embeddedness and permanent evolution of national legal systems. At the same time, those legal systems were interpreted as different “aspects or stages of the universal development of human society.”<sup>31</sup> Such understanding of universal development had its roots in the eighteenth century but became fully dominant and legally codified only in the second half of the nineteenth century. The new discursive hegemony meant that humanity as a whole followed the path of universal progress, but did so unevenly. That is, different countries passed through different stages at different times, and the most advanced of them (aka great powers) had a legitimate right to “help” backward political entities to catch up, and could not be held accountable for treating them unequally.

Russia was socialized into this system in the second half of the eighteenth century but continued meeting challenges when it came to relative assessment. Even though it had gathered the largest army in Europe by 1756, which proved its worth in the Seven Years’ War, whenever it was subject to closer scrutiny, it invariably scored quite low in economic, demographic, and civilizational aspects. Lack of civility, for example, was continuously reported by (Western) European travelers who visited Russia in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. These accounts, as Larry Wolff has shown, contributed to the discursive construction of Eastern Europe, which was turned into a marginal and undercivilized part of the expanding European society.<sup>32</sup>

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30. Scott 2001.

31. Koskenniemi 2004, 46.

32. Wolff 1994.

The unattractive portrayals of Russian life invariably triggered disgruntled reactions among Russian ruling circles. In protest, Russian policymakers sometimes published extensive rebuttals.<sup>33</sup> In composing those, however, they often contented themselves with rhetorical indignation and deconstruction, instead of providing an alternative relative assessment and comparison. They also put forth a proposition that one of the most important foundations of Russia's greatness was people's unison, which invariably solidified into large-scale mobilization in times of trouble. It goes without saying that people's unison, which had been and remained a reemerging theme in Russian political discourse, could not be measured at any moment in time. Yet it constituted a source of greatness allegedly always present in potentiality. A very similar set of tropes about the complete unity and mobilizational power of the Russian nation has also been used by the leadership of contemporary Russia—this time around, with an ominous, fascist twist. Since the nation is supposed to be completely united in its mind and capable of collective action, anyone who attempts to swim against the current is immediately recognized as alien matter and a traitor. In Putin's view, the Russian nation should and will detoxify itself by distinguishing "true patriots from scum and traitors and [spitting] them out like an insect in their mouth."<sup>34</sup>

Returning to the Imperial Russia, different approaches to what constitutes a country's grandeur permeate the contemporaneous diplomatic correspondence (see chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion). While it was clear for the British, for example, that the most important sources of their country's glory were national wealth, colonial acquisitions, and military successes, the Russian cabinet claimed that the measurement and exposition of those characteristics missed the point, and that the greatness of the Russian Empire was a simple fact independent of nitty-gritty calculations. Thus, that greatness endowed the Russian sovereign with the highest measure of dignity, which, as the dynamics of some international negotiations showed, often became an obstacle to entering international agreements instead of giving Russia some leverage in the negotiation process.

Most visibly, the contradictions revealed themselves during the Congress of Vienna. Alexander I's theatrical and largely idealistic style—first, while he entered Paris, and then, during the Congress itself—was received

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33. E.g., Catherine II 1869.

34. Putin 2022b.

coldly by European diplomats and monarchs (for a more detailed discussion, see chapter 4). However spectacular was the impression the emperor himself made on his audience, the question of civilizational belonging was not solely about impressions any longer. It was about the measure of progress. Consequently, his foreign interlocutors misunderstood Alexander and treated his extravagance with great caution. To find a better fit, the emperor had to change his rhetoric, backing his political impressionism with a solid universal foundation. That foundation, however, was retrieved from Russia's own image bank, and the resulting construct—The Holy Alliance—was a curious mix of world history and national essence. It was the story of the family of humanity united by the most progressive ideas about the management of international order, and, at the same time, the Christian faith combined with a privatized relationship between the monarchs and their peoples. Alexander's new proposition was accepted with no less skepticism, but less caution.

#### 7.2.2.4 Failed synthesis

As time passed, some Russian officials started admitting that economic, financial, and industrial resources (or “inner forces,” as they sometimes called them) were “the only true sources of a state's political greatness”<sup>35</sup> (see chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion). They also realized that Russia did not possess the mentioned assets in sufficient degree to pursue effective foreign policy and hence it had to utilize what was available to it—cultural and religious ties—but *only as a replacement measure*. Russian statesmen demonstrated that they had internalized the hegemonic consensus about civilizational sources of political greatness. They realized that the political impressionism that Russia successfully utilized in the eighteenth century no longer worked. Impressive performance on the battlefield, great messianic projects, and the grandeur of imperial glory could not replace the scrupulous relational assessment of various factors that came to constitute the then current consensus about greatpowerhood. The Russian population was poor, the Russian institutions—dysfunctional. The country's intellectual milieu became divided into Westernizers, who admitted that Russia lagged behind and needed to modernize in accordance with the European model, and Slavophiles, who sought to cure their dissatisfaction with how things stood

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35. Gorchakov cited in Lopatnikov 2003, 312.



through reinventing Russia's pristine essence. Notably, both were unhappy with the status quo and interpreted European ideas as either the main corroding influence, or the strongest empowering factor.

The status quo, of course, was not disastrous. Russia did manage to secure international recognition, but not on grounds fully equivalent with the leading European states. The areas where full recognition was still missing were (1) Russia's civilizational level and (2) the nature of its domestic regime. As a result, Russia was taken for an actor to be accounted with, but it could not really claim the role of a proper champion of civilization that other great powers self-ascribed. In response, instead of suggesting that Russia should learn from the West, many Russian politicians argued for the need to carry out an emergency modernization program. To accomplish the latter, they proposed to rely on the available mobilizational resources: the Russian autocratic regime and the fabled national spirit, *inter alia*.

What made this situation difficult for Russia was that perceived civilizational inferiority and the fruits of Russia's political practice (autocracy, orthodoxy, etc.), which were supposed to help bridge the gap, did not seem to conflict in the imagination of Russian elites, while they most certainly did in the imagination of Russia's interlocutors. In other words, Russian politicians recognized the legitimacy of normative universals underlying the story of progress, and they also recognized the necessity to catch up. Yet, to catch up, they sought to use things that no longer counted as fully appropriate for a civilized great power, and to rely on them seemed self-defeating.<sup>36</sup>

This created several paradoxes that pierced Russia's modernization projects throughout the nineteenth century, and Russia got permanently caught up in a loop of trying to become a "proper" great power by using "improper" means and self-referentially legitimizing that process by presenting those means as, in fact, the proper foundations of its political greatness. Thus, the great power narrative turned into a powerful domestic ideology which was supposed to solve the problem of perceived underdevelopment and civilizational inferiority. This essentially domestic problem was externalized and began to appear as a foreign policy issue according to which Russia had to resist and become Europe at the same time. The ideology of greatpowerhood was welcomed by both the Russian elite and the broader audience as a convenient rationalization for the odd position of a self-colonizing colonizer.

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36. On this see also Neumann 2015.

### 7.2.2.5 International socialist greatness

Russia turned its great power narrative into a mobilizing ideology and a tool of internal colonization on the eve of two fundamentally important events: the First World War (1914–1918) and the October Revolution (1917). As a consequence of those pivotal moments, Russia became a socialist country and reimagined both its internal political organization and its relations with other states. One could say that the Imperial Russia disappeared to give way to a new political entity of a totally different breed that had little to do with the previous tenant of that hostile geography. To be sure, this is what many Bolsheviks would have argued. Indeed, the Marxist internationalist narrative deessentialized national boundaries and reimagined the world in economic and class terms. Within that framework, imperialist great powers were seen as retrograde actors that needed to fall as a result of the international workers' revolution that would have created a global and classless communist society (for a more detailed discussion, see chapter 6). Correspondingly, anyone who shared the imperialist sentiment and sympathized with great powers was labeled a “great power chauvinist” and politically cancelled.

Having found itself in complete political isolation and capitalist encirclement, Soviet Russia had to make ideological compromises and conclude uncommunistic alliances with certain factions of global capital just a few years after the revolution. Bolshevik diplomacy shifted toward the right already in the 1920s and later developed into a revolutionary-imperial paradigm under Joseph Stalin. Stalin turned Lenin's deconstructivist take on the nationalities question on its head. He replaced the unlimited right of secession for smaller nations and obligatory compromise on part of the larger nations toward their ethnic minorities with a simple and discriminatory dichotomy between Great Russians and non-Great Russians. The former were also treated as the leading and the most outstanding nation in the Soviet Union. He also supplemented this rhetoric with quasi-colonialist de facto extortion of tribute from the Russian peasantry that later transformed into the ideology and practice of mass terror and the persecution of the “enemies of the people,” the category which is arguably related genealogically to Putin's “national traitors”—that is, a part of the nation that needs to be cleansed to restore the nation's pristine unity.

In parallel, Stalin reclaimed Russia's historical legacy as a millennial polity and a great power and venerated many historical personalities that were

previously discussed in this book as bearers and creators of Russia's greatness. Among them were Peter the Great, Aleksandr Nevsky, and Ivan the Formidable. Under Stalin's watch, those historical figures were reinterpreted as progressive rulers and the agents of history that helped Russia pass through the most crucial stages of historic development, usually at great human cost. Importantly, Stalin returned to pre-Marxist sociology in his cultural policies, where the history of classes and socioeconomic formations was replaced with national history. The move was also affected and reinforced by ubiquitous national consolidations during WWII and the Soviet Union's alliance with the Western powers.

Stalin's successors had to deal with the legacies of his revolutionary-imperial ideological hybrid. Khrushchev tried to rehabilitate its Marxist internationalist origins, but was shortly removed from office, since his return to subversive-revolutionary rhetoric and action (despite the doctrine of peaceful coexistence that he proposed to the West) was interpreted as reckless brinkmanship (by his party fellows) and globalist aspirations (by the West). Brezhnev promoted the upgraded imperial (or "great power light") part of the hybrid. Yet by combining this with maintaining a purely formalist domestic hegemony of Marxist internationalist maxims, he facilitated the spread of opportunism and ideological duplicity among the party cadres, which hollowed out the previously stable ideological consensus and brought back the Russian great power chauvinism as the main identity anchor (especially among the army and the KGB). Gorbachev, while launching an open discussion about the possibility of reforms within socialist ideology and practice, also returned in his rhetoric to the universalizing and humanist principles, presenting the world order as unitary and bound with common problems. By doing this, he abandoned the premises of revolutionary critique and the foundational antagonism of socioeconomic forces, which reintegrated the Soviet Union into the global discursive hegemony of universal civilizational development and (perhaps, unwittingly) reignited the fears and insecurities ingrained into its civilizational mode of greatness.

### 7.3 THE MAIN SOURCES OF GREATNESS IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

After reconstructing the general conceptual evolution of *velikaya derzhava*, one is tempted to ask: *which discursive modes of greatness exert influence on how*

*the great power discourse has operated in Putin's Russia?* The simple answer, already sketched in section 7.1.3, is that all the modes play their part creating a discursive cocktail of greatness that can often switch its underlying logic and rationality, depending on the concrete purposes of the political elite and the level of received resonance from the masses (partially doctored through propaganda). A more nuanced answer requires uncovering more structural specifics.

### 7.3.1 *International socialist sources*

As the most recent discursive hegemony for post-Soviet Russia, Marxist internationalism still exerts a significant influence on Russia's great power discourse, especially when it comes to its intensifying antagonism to the Eurocentric world order that the Soviet Union had managed to sustain (at least discursively) for all seventy-four years of its existence. This happens even though the ideological content of Marxist internationalism had been corrupted very early on in the Soviet Union. Despite the fact that the elites in Putin's Russia have been deeply integrated into the Western capitalist system and largely benefited from the possibility of taking the best of the two worlds—that is, they have (1) extracted corruption rents at home through manipulating the broken domestic institutions, and (2) moved the acquired assets (as well as families) to countries where their rights were protected by law—they have still been able to promote the antagonistic rhetoric that stood in opposition to the globally hegemonic procedures and values.

However, there still exists an important difference between the Soviet Union and Putin's Russia. As Mark Lipovetsky noticed, the Soviet Union did not really fit well into the Popperian definition of a "closed" society, which was supposed to be immobile and inflexible.<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, the Soviet society was founded on a "new faith in reason, freedom, and the brotherhood of all," which, according to Popper, was "the only possible faith, of the open society."<sup>38</sup> Other attentive observers also identified the Soviet cultural project as a genuinely new type of modernity, which was "based not only on repressions, but also on mass enthusiasm, triggered, among other things, by new possibilities for developing human personality, provided by the Soviet regime."<sup>39</sup> In comparison to this ideologically backed mobilizational drive,

37. Lipovetsky 2009, 6.

38. Popper 1991, 184.

39. Lipovetsky 2009, 6. See also Kotkin 1995; Fitzpatrick 1999; and Kozlova 2005.

Putin's Russia, as well as its core discourses are only *quasi*-patriotic and *quasi*-revolutionary.

Despite the ideological duplicity that became the norm in Brezhnev's era, there was still a coherent ideological system behind the formalistic reenactment of that ideology, however viable it may have been in its contemporaneous political circumstances. In Putin's Russia, ideology always remained thin, extremely eclectic, and contradictory. Its only stable element has always been Russia's greatness, ambivalently understood—it was founded not on the Western conventional understanding of political greatness stemming from the institution of great power management, but from Russia's past achievements and its present identity narratives, the Soviet identity being one of them.

One important legacy, which can be interpreted as both institutional and discursive, is that a large share of former Soviet elites simply kept their positions in the decision-making bodies of the Russian Federation.<sup>40</sup> This ensured the transfer of knowledge, practices, and world views. The delegitimized Marxist narrative, which had been internally compromised long before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, could now be openly disposed of, yet not in favor of liberal democracy, as its main public ideological opponent, but in favor of the discursive layers and identities that previously blossomed in the shade of international socialist greatness (specifically, Russian great power chauvinism that spread through the late-Soviet security bodies, which Putin was deeply socialized into).

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the narrative that has been promoted by Putin's elites may indeed seem revolutionary and deeply antagonistic. Yet it contains no modernist, future-oriented project, as was the case with Marxist internationalism. In essence, the new challenge is, in fact, a genealogical offspring of the same old discursive predicament: Russia's implicit internalization of the civilizational discourse (especially its imperialist and colonizing elements) coupled with the extreme efforts to achieve proper recognition of Russia's great power status by using improper, outdated means of brute force and authoritarian consolidation.

### 7.3.2 *Absolute and theatrical sources*

In addition to the Soviet legacies, Putin's Russia often made use of much older modes of greatness. Trying to avoid relational comparison with other

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40. Kryshchanovskaya and White 2011.

great powers, which has been the common mode to symbolically establish international hierarchies from the eighteenth century on, Putin and his associates frequently emphasized Russia's hidden inner forces, predetermined by its millennial political history (which was a natural, but still somehow odd thing to claim for a polity that was officially just a few decades old and whose predecessor polities experienced four revolutions in the twentieth century alone). They also brandished, from time to time, in an explicitly theatrical fashion, Russia's capacity to reciprocate any external attack by flashing new weaponry and technologies (such as Sarmat and Zircon missiles).<sup>41</sup> The reality of Russia's war-fighting effort was, however, often very different from the formidable picture it tried to create in the public realm: the Russian army in Ukraine often came across as underequipped, demoralized, and unprepared, in stark contrast with the "world's second army" status proverbially ascribed to it.

Perhaps, the most long-lasting and destructive legacy of the older modes of greatness is the relative popularity of the idea about the benevolent and people-loving sovereign, whose primary function is to police and punish the corrupt, incompetent, and self-interested elites, who only care about their own well-being. "The tsar is good, but the boyars are bad" type of thinking unfortunately remained one of the foundational elements of Putin's legitimacy. Perhaps, echoing the perceived lack of effective representation, the popular approval of the president's actions has been consistently and substantially higher than the approval of the government and the parliament in Putin's Russia. What is more, save for some brief periods, post-February 2022 period included, the share of those who disapproved of the actions of the Russian government and the elected legislators was routinely higher than the share of those who approved of it.<sup>42</sup> Such disposition resembles the representational model, which resurfaced from time to time in Russia and its predecessor polities, when the sovereign is presumed to be conscientious and entrusted to protect the rights and dignity of the masses through personal interventions (see a more detailed discussion of this representational model in section 3.2.3). And while he remains too busy to tackle every injustice, each wrongdoing can still be attributed to the corrupt elites, while the sovereign's utter neglect or personal corrupt interest, as well as personal accountability, remain excluded from the horizon of possibilities in the eyes of the population. Even though in the very beginning of his tenure, Putin

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41. E.g., Ankel 2023; Ellyatt 2023.

42. Levada-Center 2023.

tried to present himself as “a manager hired by the people to run the huge ‘Russia Inc. Corporation,’”<sup>43</sup> that rhetoric was dropped rather quickly and replaced with a more discursively ingrained representational model. This image is also being forcefully promoted and carefully guarded by the Russian state propaganda.

### 7.3.3 *Civilizational sources*

Still, if one has to choose one discursive mode that exerted the most influence on Putin’s great power discourse (analyzed in detail in chapter 1), it would be the *civilizational mode*. The nineteenth-century civilizational discourse promoted a progressive, but also discriminatory and hierarchically organized, tripartite division of the world based on cultural, historical, economic, and other indicators. In concrete terms, the Eurocentric progressivist vision implied the existence of civilized, barbaric, and savage political entities. In addition to all the good things, that version of civility also had an imperialist dimension and claimed the right to manage and rule savage and barbaric societies. Russian rulers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries understood this well and frequently self-ascribed this right in relation to other ambivalently positioned polities, such as the Ottoman Empire, actively orientalizing them to sustain Russia’s “European” image.<sup>44</sup> Russia’s “civilizing mission” in relation to the Ottomans was also willingly accepted and encouraged by some European Russophiles (e.g., Voltaire).<sup>45</sup> The political imagination of Putin’s Russia operates with very similar categories. Its world is divided into three tiers based on the level of development and acquired resources. Numerous forecasts and reports produced by Russian think tanks speak about “three leagues” of states<sup>46</sup> and organize their presentations around three levels of politics: global, regional, and subregional.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, they always embed these levels in a unified global whole.

In its application to semiperipheral Russia, the civilizational mode gets riddled with various kinds of grievances and insecurities, as was also the case in late Imperial Russia. Russia’s exact position and perspectives remain ques-

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43. Putin 2008. This specific quote comes from the question of a journalist who referred to Putin’s narrative in the early years of his presidency.

44. Taki 2011, 323.

45. Wolff 1994, 195–234.

46. E.g., Dynkin et al. 2015, 88.

47. Karaganov et al. 2016.

tionable. Even though some Russian researchers place Russia within a “triangle” of great powers together with China and the US,<sup>48</sup> others admit that Russia “faces a risk to remain backward forever,” if it does not take urgent measures to prevent that.<sup>49</sup> Such thinking, as well as the symptoms of insecurity it exhibits, also penetrate the rhetoric of the Russian officials. Putin, for instance, often goes defensive when someone hints at Russia’s second-tier status. Most famously, he snubbed a German journalist who mentioned Obama’s assessment of Russia as a regional power. Putin invited the lad to look at the map and decide which region Russia, in fact, belonged to. Expectedly, the correct answer was that Russia had a stake in virtually all world regions, having common borders with the European Union, the US (in the east), China, Japan, Canada (across the Arctic Ocean), and the entire Global South (through its geographical and historical links to Central Asia and the Middle East).<sup>50</sup>

This vision not only has obvious structural resemblances to how a similar progressivist discourse operated in the nineteenth century, but also inherits the same problems related to Russia’s recognition and perceived inferiority. Inter alia, Putin’s Russia inherited the sharp and persistent cognitive dissonance of late Imperial Russia, which was caused by the constant mismatch between her self-image and aspirations within the internalized civilizational standard and international hierarchy on the one hand, and her capacity to make others take those aspirations seriously on the other. Such a challenged discursive mode was and remains unsustainable and explosive—in the sense that the protracted cognitive dissonance conditions the possibility of unexpected and erratic moves that can also gain public legitimation through appealing to one of the usual compensation mechanisms ingrained in the discourse. As both the desperate attempts by late Imperial Russia to cure its domestic problems by foreign policy means (discussed in detail in chapter 5) and the late Putinist geopolitical adventures have demonstrated, a prolonged mismatch between one’s self-image and one’s capacity to convince others of the reality of that image is unlikely to end in a peaceful and harmonious way, especially if the actor experiencing that dissonance has enough power to deter potential external involvement.

In policy terms, even though one can potentially prolong that kind of existence, feeding on internal resources, in the long term it seems unsustain-

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48. Karaganov et al. 2016, 8.

49. Dynkin et al. 2015, 92.

50. Putin 2016a.



able and is likely to cause further dramatic ruptures and crises in Russia's own political history. Even though it may be deeply ingrained discursively and may resonate well with the domestic audience, realistically, *Russia's unending chase for greatness and superiority is injudicious*. Russia's fixation on the phantoms of the past, as well as its hypersensitivity to external validation and opinion, presents a big obstacle to its international socialization efforts. Indeed, the protracted belief that the only solution to the crisis of recognition is some kind of greatpowerly revelation involving huge costs or even loss of lives seems not only misguided, but also inflexible and politically unwise. It is certainly important to adequately assess and capitalize on one's competitive strengths (military power and natural resources might indeed be those competitive strengths for Russia), but to use them as tools of explicit coercion to compensate for repressed grievances and dissatisfaction seems inexpedient and counterproductive.

After Russia yet again attacked Ukraine in February 2022, its domestic discourse deteriorated toward embracing the staunchest versions of political greatness present within the population's discursive image bank. Since political action always needs to rely on some degree of legitimacy granted from below and since the inductively assessed local identities in Russia often include the element of (differently understood) greatpowerhood, cherished and amplified through the state-controlled mass media, possible prospective solutions remain unclear. In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war and Russia's international isolation, the tightening internal censorship is also accompanied by domestic defensive consolidation that feeds on various discursive modes of greatness, all of which, as we now know, thrive in the times of crises. This happened many times before and is yet again happening today. One thing is certain, however: if an international or domestic policy solution is ever to be found, it cannot and should not be about defining and acting upon the best, or the most civilized, or the most effective version of political greatness, as this would likely exacerbate inequality and create resentment. Perhaps, the solutions need to emerge on the level of equal communication, mutual respect, and the deconstruction and flattening of discursive hierarchies.

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