

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > USSR, Soviet Bloc, Russian Empire (history) > History (Russian Empire, USSR) > **Russia: “If There Is No People, There Is No Left either”: Progressive (...)**

Russia: “If There Is No People, There Is No Left either”: Progressive History and Patriotism from Below

Wednesday 9 November 2022, by [MEDVEDEV Kirill](#) (Date first published: 2 November 2022).

What could unite society split by war and inequality? What are the alternatives to major post-soviet historical narratives? Poet and activist Kirill Medvedev reflects on anti-imperial solidarity and a new idea of a civic consciousness

The conversation about “progressive,” non-state patriotism, or “patriotism from below” is an attempt to describe the idea of a civic consciousness capable of uniting Russian society, the absence of which has prevented the latter from responding to many demands. First and foremost, these are demands made by the state. Now, when the regime is carrying out a war of aggression in Ukraine in the name of the Russian people using old and updated patriotic clichés, this problem is especially evident. There is an enormous number of people who share anti-war sentiment, but there is no common platform, no common history, no common language with the help of which they might demand an end to this war, recognize each other, or even talk about what is happening. What feelings in relation to those who live in the same courtyard, city, or country as us, what perspective on history, what image of an “imaginary community” might unite the majority of those ready to struggle for a new, non-imperialist Russia?

Two post-Soviet narratives

Two of the principal historical narratives that dominate today took shape after the collapse of the USSR: a liberal one and a national-Stalinist one. Under Putin’s rule one more narrative emerged, a synthesizing one that the regime successfully uses today to maintain its dominance.

The “liberal” version of national history is shaped around the idea of Russia’s age-old aspiration — through the efforts of its “best representatives” — to be a full-fledged part of Europe, an aspiration that every time remains tragically unrealized. This narrative is often preoccupied with the bloody episodes from Russian history, with the figures of slavery and subjugation, with the conservative perception of the October Revolution as both the conspiracy of criminals and a grassroots rebellion, with the image of “a nation of hangmen and victims,” born of the epoch of Stalin, and with the necessity of repentance for the sins of the Soviet regime. In its extreme form, the dogmatic western orientation of the Russian liberal tradition also brings with it “social racism” [note: *post-Soviet hatred of the poor*] toward the lower social classes and any communities who are perceived as “non-European.”

The second dominant narrative, also formed on the ruins of the USSR in the 1990s, might be called a national-Stalinist one. It is based on the myth of Stalin as the ascetic leader of a proletarian state which embodies justice and order, defeated Nazism, and successfully opposed the West. In many respects, this history grew out of the conservative and patriotic turn of the USSR in the 1930s. For

this reason, even as they appeal rhetorically to the [“friendship of the peoples,”](#) adherents of national Stalinism are often prone to anti-Semitism (which became a part of the grassroots Stalinist tradition after the “struggle with cosmopolitanism”) and other xenophobic stereotypes. In many ways, this is predicated on [prevailing notions about the state-forming and civilizing role of the Russian people within the USSR](#). It is worth recalling a meme, extremely popular among this audience: “The Russian barbarians stormed the kishlaks, auls [note: *names for villages in Central Asia and the Caucasus*], and nomadic camps, leaving in their wake only libraries, theaters, and cities.”

To be sure, there are sincere proponents of internationalism among the “Stalinists,” just as there are people wholly free of racism, including its “social” forms [note: *social Darwinism and hatred of the poor*], among the “liberals.” But it was precisely these two versions of history, which, as they pushed against, caricatured, and hypertrophied one another, became the mainstream. Both have their own uniquely expressed colonialist dimension. Both of them date back to the key events of the 1990s: the victory over the August Coup of 1991 and the firing on parliament in 1993.

1991-1993

The victory over the August Coup of 1991 promised to become the formative event in the birth of a new civic nation. “The central target chosen by the putschists was Russia, its multinational people, the position of Russia with respect to its democracy and reforms,” said Boris Yeltsin on August 22, describing the political society emerging at the time (that is, a democratic, multinational one, and so). However, it precisely these reforms that led to trouble, provoking a rift in society and in the state, the apogee of which became the defeat of the anti-Yeltsin parliament in 1993. The victory of Yeltsin, who managed to remove the “pro-Soviet” parliament, but also soon thereafter partially marginalized and partially established control over the powerful movement against liberal reforms, ultimately led to the defeat of Russian democracy. 1993 ended up becoming the fatal year in the formation of a new civic collectivity, establishing an authoritarian vector in post-Soviet history.

Since then, the ideological opposition between pro-Soviet “patriots” and anti-Soviet “liberals” became the key subject of public debate, preventing the formation of a strong, cohesive society, capable of fighting for its interests, of opposing itself to the state and the elites. The task of uniting this fragmented society was left to the state, and it began to work on this task in its own interests.

Putinist patriotism

Vladimir Putin understood this mission perfectly well. He ended up in the Kremlin at a time when Russian citizens started to experience demand for a tenable leader and new accomplishments, for an occasion for national pride. Having distanced the liberal lobby that put him in office from power or established control over it, Putin attracted the majority of the demographic that was nostalgic for the USSR to his side by way of gestures of a symbolic character, like the [return of the Soviet anthem](#).

This happened against the background of the political and intellectual marginalization both of the liberal and the national-Stalinist wings. Liberals (without any particular resistance) were forced into a niche of anti-Soviet oppositionists and were partially coordinated by the ruling apparatus (the so-called “in-system liberals”). The Stalinists (probably also voluntarily) were forced into a niche of voters that cynical political strategists, in the electoral context, call “the poor with Stalin.”

Putin’s version of history, founded on the idea of continuity between Ancient Rus’, the Russian Empire, the USSR, and contemporary Russia, began to take shape. Its essence consists in the idea that, in spite of periodic trouble and mistakes, Russia has always returned to its traditional and, importantly, inseparable values of statehood, family, and faith. What constituted a danger, according

to this version of history, was the Bolshevik Revolution with its leaders, Lenin and Trotsky. Judging by his remarks, Putin knows little about them, though he is anxious about their possible influence on the present. One leitmotif in Putin's version of history is the "collection of lands": from the Moscow princes this motif is traced through Ivan the Terrible, Peter I, Ekaterina II, and the conquering of the Caucasus up through Soviet state construction. The chaos and collapse of the 1990s, followed by the annexation of Crimea and today's war for the annexation of Ukrainian territory, are the latest milestones on this thousand-year path.

And so, we have "traditional values," territorial expansion, and the happy development of peoples and cultures under Russian tutelage. Such is the foundation of that state patriotism which developed over the course of twenty years, having adopted the statism, anti-westernism, and an unwillingness to admit historical mistakes and crimes from national-Stalinism and, from the 1990s liberals, a dislike of grassroots radicalism and the "populist" opposition of the rich to the poor.

Progressive patriotism?

One would like to hold and develop a different view on things. The people and the elites have different histories and different countries. Unity between society and the elites is a reliable means of maintaining control over the majority. But society needs unity in order to keep the political authorities under control and to change them by force in critical situations.

The patriotism of colonized nations traditionally amounts to civic nationalism and national-liberational struggle. As far as imperial nations are concerned, the idea of an *anti-imperial history of the people and of peoples* might serve as a foundation for solidarity against the elite, although there is nothing new in this idea.

"I learned that the freedom which I enjoy had had to be fought for, from the Peasants' Revolt to the Diggers and Levellers, from Captain Swing and Ned Ludd to the Chartists and Suffragettes," writes the English rock singer, Billy Bragg in his book, *The Progressive Patriot* (2006), stretching the canvas of English history over the stages of the creation of democratic mechanisms and the their incorporation of different strata and groups -- plebeians, workers, women, migrants... "For the first time I heard of Tom Paine and the Tolpuddle Martyrs, of the Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists and the Battle of Cable Street. I began to appreciate how my life had been shaped by the Labour landslide of 1945 and the founding of the Welfare State."

Almost one hundred years earlier, in his 1914 [article](#), "On the National Pride of the Great Russians," Lenin gave excellent expression to the essence of what Bragg calls progressive patriotism: "Is the feeling of national pride alien to us, conscious Great-Russian proletarians? Of course not! [...] We love our language and our motherland [...] The most painful thing to see and feel is to what violence, oppression, and mockery the tsars' hangmen, the nobility, and the capitalists subject our beautiful motherland. We are proud that this violence has elicited resistance from our milieu, from the milieu of the Great Russians, that this milieu gave us Radishchev, the Decembrists, the revolutionary raznochintsy [note: *a term used to designate educated, non-noble citizens of mixed rank in the Russian Empire*] of the 1870s."

New demand for patriotism from the left

In the 1970s, Marxist universalism, together with its internationalist program, entered into a crisis. "Identity politics" presented new forms of solidarity and resistance with a greater emphasis on activism and struggle for cultural and educational mechanisms than on representation of the nation's democratic majority in the organs of power. The neoliberal epoch began, the free market took its revenge, which ultimately led to an opposing demand for the strengthening of the national

state. The expansionist politics of the US, the triumph of the British and American and conservatives requires that the left movement fight on their territory, and this means relying on national history.

Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States* was released in 1980. The historian focuses on the struggle of workers, women, and racial and ethnic minorities. His model of patriotism is a [response](#) to the militarist and imperialist politics of his country: "[D]issent is the highest form of patriotism. [...] If the government is not defending our liberties, but is diminishing our liberties, if the government is sending young people into war or making war which is unjustified, well then the government is not following the principles of caring about life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. [...] At that point, when a government behaves like that, it is the most patriotic thing to disobey the government.

One of Zinn's accomplishments is that he writes the struggle of individual groups into the broader framework national and class history, answering, in his own way, the question of how leftists should interact with identity politics in the epoch of crisis within the traditional workers' movement and the related internationalist perspective. In his [1996 article](#), Eric Hobsbawm raises the same question: "Why then has it been so difficult for the Left, certainly for the Left in English-speaking countries, to see itself as the representative of the entire nation? (I am, of course, speaking of the nation as the community of all people in a country, not as an ethnic entity.) [...] After all, even Marx envisaged such a transformation in *The Communist Manifesto*." Todd Gitlin spoke harshly on this account in his book, *The Twilight of Common Dreams*: "[W]hat is a Left if it is not... the voice of a whole people?... If there is no people, but only peoples, there is no Left."

Hobsbawm also writes about "the remarkable marriage of patriotism and social transformation," which dominated European politics in the immediate wake of 1945. It is no accident that left populism, which combined a class agenda with a patriotic one, is popular in the world today, when again it is so apparent that those who are poor and deprived of the means of production in fact make up the majority of the nation.

Can feminism be patriotic?

Some feminists have proposed their own version of how the conversation about identities can be combined not only with a global agenda, but also a patriotic one. That said, the situation with identity politics is not so simple. For example, feminism does not only create its own global agenda but also contributes to the radical patriotic agenda. "[D]issent is also a "traditional value," and in a republic founded by revolution, a more deeply native one than smug-faced conservatism can ever be," writes American feminist Barbara Ehrenreich in her essay, "[Family Values](#)" (1988). "Feminism was practically invented here, and ought to be regarded as one of our proudest exports to the world. [...] No matter that patriotism is too often the refuge of scoundrels. Dissent, rebellion, and all-around hellraising remain the true duty of patriots."

Another first-rate feminist, the poet Adrienne Rich, also addressed the theme of patriotism. In 1991, during the Persian Gulf War, Rich was working on her poetic cycle, *An Atlas of the Difficult World*. She seeks the antidote to imperialist and corporate propaganda in private stories of solidarity and mutual aid, in the personal experience of politics, in the diversity of American nature and lifestyles:

A patriot is not a weapon. A patriot is one who wrestles for the
soul of her country
as she wrestles for her own being, for the soul of his country
(gazing through the great circle at Window Rock into the sheen
of the Viet Nam wall)
as he wrestles for his own being. A patriot is a citizen trying to

wake
from the burnt-out dream of innocence, the nightmare
of the white general and the Black general posed in their
camouflage,
to remember her true country, remember his suffering land:
remember
that blessing and cursing are born as twins and separated at birth
to meet again in mourning
that the internal emigrant is the most homesick of all women and
of all men
that every flag that flies today is a cry of pain.

“To challenge the Right’s monopoly on patriotism”

All of the authors cited above belong to the major imperialist traditions: British, American, and Russian. The imperialist machines of these countries brought the people of the world much evil, but the cultures of these countries made their own contributions to the progress of humanity. Clearly, we cannot place Dostoevsky, Tolkien, or Hemingway in the anti-imperialist tradition, but we can accept them, critically, in all of their contradictions, as part of world literature and part of the national cultures with which we associate them. This is especially true as far as the Soviet project is concerned, with its unique and, to this day, insufficiently conceptualized combination of the emancipatory and the anti-colonial.

When I hear someone say something like, “Russia is a country of hangmen, informers, and victims” I answer that my great-grandfather was neither a hangman nor a victim but participated in the Revolution of 1905, my great-grandfather as was a Hungarian communist, fought for the Zimmerwald peace program and then became a Soviet person and by some miracle managed to escape repression. My other great-grandfather fought for the reds in the Civil War, then worked on developing jet engine fuel, then labored in [“Sharashka”](#) with Academic Korolev, and his daughter, my grandmother, later designed Soviet mine shafts. Yes, my hypothetical relatives might have worked in the NKVD. Yes, my real relatives may have committed unsavory social acts about which family history keeps silent. But ultimately that would not have changed anything — after all, we are talking about collective and not only personal experience, about the collective experience of liberation and enslavement, archaization and progress.

Regarding October, 1917 as a great emancipatory event is not the same thing as supporting the excesses of the Cheka, the defeat of the multi-party system, the state’s appropriation of the labor unions, or the Bolsheviks’ refusal to fulfill many of their promises. To recognize the progressive role of the USSR in many spheres — from the colonization of space to the support for the anticolonial struggle across the entire world — does not mean to close one’s eyes to the Great Terror, the “Anti-cosmopolitan Campaign,” the repression of the Prague Spring, or the imposition of punitive psychiatry on dissidents. Recognizing that the Soviet army liberated Europe from Nazism does not mean denying the post-war takeover of Eastern Europe or the rights of its nations to their version of history.

“We need to challenge the Right’s monopoly on patriotism, not by proclaiming our blind loyalty to our country, right or wrong, but by developing a narrative which explains how we all came to be here together in this place and how we all came to be here together in this place, and how successive generations of those who were initially excluded from society came to feel that this was where they belonged,” writes Bragg. “For the past thirty years, the Left has been fighting fascism with one hand tied behind its back. Our egalitarian support for internationalism has prevented us from properly engaging in the debate over identity. Leaving it to the likes of the BNP and the Daily

Mail to decide who does and who doesn't belong here." Bragg is a patriot of England, a country with entirely clear historical borders. The imperialist problem in Russia is complicated by the fact that various national communities exist on the same territories. This is partially the legacy of the USSR. The question of the degree to which the USSR was an empire is of interest not only to scholars — today it is also of great political significance.

The patriotism of empires, borders, and regions

I was in school in the 1980s, when the accumulated ideological trends of various Soviet periods formed a fairly eclectic picture. I took with me from school the glorious history social and class warfare, uprisings, and revolutions, but also the positive sense of the word "patriot," referring to the Unification of Italy, to World War II, to the Resistance, to the anticolonial struggle of the peoples of Africa and Asia, to the Cuban Revolution. I also took with me from school the woefully well-known notion that "Russia never attacked anyone," which can likely be traced back to the state-patriotic turn of the 1930s and 1940s

A multitude of factors led "Soviet patriots" to support the Russian Federation's aggression in Ukraine: the relics of the old imperialism; the dogmatically assimilated ideas of the classics of Marxism about how centralization is more progressive than fragmentation and a common language preferable to the working class than many languages; the persistent Cold-War-era of opposing camps. This aggression is consciously presented to its target audience as a step towards restoring the USSR. There are also more complicated cases. Vladimir Stepanov, a World War II veteran who partook in the in the Invasion of the Kuril Islands and spoke out against returning the islands to Japan a couple of years ago, [took a stand](#) against the "Special Military Operation." In all likelihood, this position is consistent in its own way. Including the Kuril Islands into the structure of the USSR is perceived as a just outcome of a war with an aggressor, whereas the attack on Ukraine, especially using the slogans of World War II, contradicts this same sense of justice.

As an alternative to uncritical Soviet patriotism, Sergei Abashin [proposes](#) that we "see and accept the contradictory, ambivalent, and complex character of the Soviet — complex in terms of its temporal phasing, its spatial diversity, the coexistence of competing projects, personal experiences, and tendencies. In this ambivalence there was room for inequality together with attempts to overcome it, for coloniality together with anticolonial practices, for mass political restrictions, including repressions, together with mass social mobility, and for nation-building together with the building of supranational communion." Such an approach contradicts linear anticolonial narrative which presents Moscow categorically as the exploiter. At the same time, it contradicts the nostalgic picture of the happy equality of peoples under the tutelage of Russians as the supposedly ["first among equals."](#)

The alternative to both of these narratives is one in which the history of imperialist takeovers exists alongside the history of the coexistence and mutual development of various peoples and cultures: from the centuries-long cohabitation of Muslim and Orthodox communities and the multinational [rebellion of Pugachev](#) to elements of modernization in the national republics of the USSR. It is precisely in this way that a Russian "progressive patriotism" might oppose both the patriotism of the state and Russian ethnic nationalism, which, in all of its far-right molds, is built on the stigmatization of the Russian majority as a victim and, in its conflict with other nationalisms, threatens the bloody redistribution of various "native" territories. Recognizing and supporting the [right of peoples to all forms of self-determination](#), leftists and democrats from Russia should think about a model of inclusive society immune to all xenophobia and about a new federation, which would genuinely overcome the legacy of imperialism and which territories and communities could voluntarily join with full and equal rights. The possibility of beginning work on realizing such an idea might be lost at any moment.

This is a global summons, too. In spite of the promises of the impending opening of borders as the result of the progress of global capital, we see not only new demand for the national state but also bloodier and bloodier conflicts for borders and “native” territories across the world. The Russian Federation’s armed intervention in Ukraine is intensifying this tendency.

There is no single political framework through which the problems of the Donbass, Karabakh, Kosovo, Crimea, Catalonia, Taiwan, Abkhazia, Palestine, and other annexed, contested, self-declared, or partially recognized republics can be resolved. The case of the Donbass shows that the imperialist ambitions of large states do not allow their neighbors to solve their internal problems from federalization. The word “federalization” ultimately becomes a synonym for concessions to the geopolitical ambitions of the aggressor. For their sake, pro-Russian history is constructed from above in puppet states, using the real, existing elements of Soviet — that is, proletarian and anti-fascist — identity.

That said, is it there a possible escape from this situation which would involve not the logic of national states but the idea of a supranational federation or confederation? We can only hope. Regional patriotism, which opposes not only ethnic nationalism but, sometimes, civic nation-building projects, has not had its last word either. It can be traced back both to experiments of the past (Yugoslavia, the USSR), which left behind, among other things, a sea of positive associations, and to the continent-unifying projects with a strong anti-imperialist component (Bolivarianism, Pan-Africanism). There is also such a component in the idea of a strong, united Europe, independent from the US.

The patriotism of small deeds and local communities

But this does not just concern history. Ultimately, not everyone is interested in history, and not everyone is subject to propagandistic manipulation. [As I have said elsewhere](#), patriotism is also a response to the crisis of major ideologies and ideological narratives as such. When people no longer believe in “loud words,” they unite around “concrete actions” and “common spaces.”

In joining the struggle to preserve forests, parks, and urban development, people set the “major” political disagreements that prevent them from acting in coordination aside or at a distance. However, the need for major political programs and historical narratives does not go away. If activists are not armed with their own history, then, sooner or later, their agenda will be appropriated by the state, or else propaganda will divide them along familiar lines, those same lines of the Soviet/anti-Soviet opposition of 1991–1992. We need a narrative that is capable of overcoming this rift, which incorporates local activism into the larger history of grassroots activism and resistance, which continued in the USSR.

But such a narrative cannot be constructed from scratch. It can only be born from struggle from below. My observations of local activism in the last few years have shown: those who seriously engage in the preservation of local nature, historical landscapes, and cultures inevitably, though not immediately, reach the conclusion that such preservation requires a nationwide and, ultimately, global perspective. It is worth recalling the slogan of the alter-globalist movement, “Act locally, think globally,” which reached a dead end for the precise reason that it tried to use international mechanisms like social forums to bypass a thoroughly grounded national agenda.

The trajectory of the movement for the preservation of [Shiyes](#) is interesting. This local initiative against the creation of a landfill, planned by Moscow, in the Arkhangelsk Region on the border with the Republic of Komi mobilized not only ecological and human-rights agendas, but also regional, ethnocultural ones. It attracted people of the most diverse views and beliefs and, ultimately, reached a nationwide level (a process severely complicated by the onset of the war but not abandoned). It is

possible that a new internationalist project will be developed according to this model, one that emerges from the protection of native places and communities. A new internationalism is necessary today like never before. But it is impossible to reach it if we pass over the local, regional, and, in some cases, national levels.

State and grassroots patriotism: where they come together and where they part

In her recent book, *Patriotism from Below* (2021), [Karine Clément](#) writes about how, in the epoch of Putin, people who were relieved to feel a certain improvement in living standards, a restoration of “order,” a reduced dependence on the West, and a certain restored pride in their country began to experience a new desire for solidarity and ask the question: why do we live so poorly in such a rich country?

And so, at a certain historical moment, state and non-state patriotism came together. But this balance cannot be preserved for long. It will be disturbed either by acute social inequality or by a “short victorious war” that is no longer short and clearly will not be victorious. It was unleashed in part with the goal of suppressing the formation of a civic alternative from below.

One of the people who has been developing a program for such an alternative, the project of a new majority uniting people from 1991 and 1993 with a new generation of active citizens, is Alexei Navalny. Having combined liberal, nationalist, and anti-corruption agendas, he is trying to attract new audiences by voicing left-populist, redistributive demands, among others. The state, judging by its reaction (an attempted poisoning and a prison sentence), appraises his political accomplishments highly.

The most successful and promising attempts at creating a new majority from the left are to be found in the work of [Mikhail Lobanov](#)'s team and their related [projects](#). The combination of agendas relating to rights and freedoms, local self-governance, struggle against class inequality, recognition of the successes and the failures of the USSR, and, most importantly, work with grassroots initiatives, has helped a new generation of democratic socialists mobilize a broad coalition of people of the most diverse views (with the exception of ultra-liberals and xenophobic nationalists).

The “progressive patriotism” about which we have been speaking in this text is neither a scientific method nor a political program. It is precisely an ideology that, by uniting personal and collective experience, political views, love for one's languages and cultures, for one's relatives and friends, and solidarity with one's neighbors and fellow citizens, can provide support at moments like these, which are critical for every citizen and all citizens together. It is necessary to protect the grassroots movement from division and ideological usurpation by the state, to offer a common platform — first and foremost today, an anti-war one — to those who are scattered, lost, and prone to individual and national self-destruction, to searching for the guilty among those closest to them, and to everything that only demoralizes without bringing any use to the resistance.

If our country is *a priori* either a bastion of morality or an affiliate branch of hell, then nothing depends on us. If we “do not exist as a nation,” then there is no way for us to respond or undertake anything.

But we do exist and there also exists both that which may inspire us and that for which we must take responsibility in the past and the present. Responsibility means action, political action that changes the balance between the great and the terrifying pages of our history and is ultimately capable of building a new country.

Kirill Medvedev

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