

Liquidating the Legacy of Revolution: Ideology of the Russian Invasion

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1991, Leningrad. The private office of the deputy mayor of the city. A reporter for the city's television channel interviews a young official from Anatoly Sobchak's team. In the frame — a man with a childish face in a white shirt. Behind him, you can see window blinds, a television, a table lamp, a telephone, open folders with papers. A typical Soviet office environment. But something does not add up. From behind the scenes, the voice of the journalist says that yesterday, he could still see a bust of Lenin in this office, but today it had disappeared somewhere. What had happened?

'I find it difficult to answer what happened. Because this, probably, was done by one of my assistants,' the official answers. 'If you are interested in my opinion of this person, of the doctrine he supposedly represented, then I would say [...] that all this is no more than a beautiful and harmful fairy tale. Harmful because the implementation, or attempt to implement it in the life of our country has caused it enormous damage. And in this regard, I would like to speak about the tragedy we are experiencing today. Namely, the tragedy of the collapse of our state. You can't call it anything but a tragedy. I think it was the leaders of October 17th who laid a time bomb under the foundation of the unitary state called Russia. What did they do? They split our fatherland into separate principalities, which previously did not appear on the world map at all, endowed these principalities with governments and parliaments, and so now we have what we have [...] it's largely those people's fault, whether they wanted it or not.'

The St Petersburg City Hall official, who with such devastating criticism had attacked the legacy of the Revolution and Lenin personally, was 39-year-old Vladimir Putin. Later on, having already occupied the office of President of the Russian Federation, he would repeat, many times, in his interviews and speeches the idea that the collapse of the Soviet Union constitutes 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century' and that the perpetrators of this catastrophe were adventurist revolutionaries, who dream of the realisation of their utopian projects at any cost, and in particular, the cost of dismantling erstwhile Russian statehood.

Putin reproduced the same concept in his keynote speech from 21st February 2022, where he proclaimed the ideological foundations of the invasion of Ukraine, which began three days later.

'So I'll start with the fact, that modern Ukraine was entirely and completely created by Russia, more precisely, Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically straight after the revolution in 1917, and Lenin and his associates did this in a very crass way towards Russia itself — at the expense of separation, the exclusion from it of part of its own historical territories.'

Why exactly was 1917 chosen as the starting point for this historical excursion? Why not deep antiquity, or, alternatively, some event closer to modernity? The revolution became a turning point that predestined, according to Putin, the challenges that Russia is now facing. And which, as if destined by fate, he is now to resolve.

What did the revolution do? Putin then delves into this topic in detail. The revolution encroached on some certain unshakable millennia-old order of things — the ‘united and indivisible’ Russian empire. It abolished the empire’s centuries-old territorial conquests overnight, giving oppressed peoples the right to self-determination. This is its main ‘sin’.

‘...Lenin’s ideas, in fact, of a confederate state structure, and the slogan of the right of nations to self-determination, up to secession, laid the foundations of Soviet statehood,’ says Vladimir Putin. ‘...Here, many questions immediately arise. And the first of them, in fact, is the main one: why, making a grand gesture, did they have to satisfy each of the unlimitedly growing nationalist ambitions on the outskirts of the former empire [...] even giving the republics the right to secede from the unitary state without any conditions?’

It appears that Putin does not understand, or pretends not to understand, that the acute issue of the oppressed ‘national outskirts’ of the Russian empire was one of the major factors of all three revolutions of the early 20th century. The order of Tsarist imperial Russia had become obsolete and long-overdue changes could not get around the national question, which also required a resolution. The contradictions which had accumulated by 1917 by no means raised the question of how and why to preserve the ‘one and indivisible’, but of whether to break up the empire into a number of nation-states or to find fundamentally new, far more equal conditions for coexistence.

The revolutionaries of those times sincerely believed in the possibility of a new world without oppression, including imperialist oppression by some peoples against others — and with their struggle, they tried to bring the arrival of this world closer. For Putin, the recognition of self-determination for the peoples of the former Russian Empire is squandering the territories conquered due to centuries of aggressive wars. However, for the revolutionaries themselves, it was the complete opposite; the resolution of the urgent contradictions born as a result of these very conquests. The liberation of peoples from imperial oppression was, for the revolutionaries, the embodiment of their ideas and beliefs about a new society, free from the remnants of the past.

‘...Lenin’s principles of state-building turned out not only to be a mistake, they were, as they say, significantly worse than a mistake. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, this became absolutely obvious’ — says Putin — ‘as a result of the Bolshevik policy, Soviet Ukraine emerged, which even in our day can be rightfully called, ‘Vladimir Ilich Lenin’s Ukraine’.’ He is its author and architect.’

Of course, Lenin did not create any sort of Ukraine. By that time, Ukraine, its political movements, and its populace had already become a real factor, not only in Russian, but also international politics. Recognising Ukraine’s agency and its right to self-determination, Lenin had only recognised the actual state of affairs, which had already become impossible to ignore. And for this, Putin cannot forgive the Bolshevik leader.

Without the recognition of Ukrainian agency and right to self-determination, it would hardly be possible to reassemble the territories of the former empire into a single government federation. Lenin very clearly understood this. It is significant that in his project of the new state [constitution] even lacked the very word ‘Russia’ — the new association was called the Union of Republics, where the Russian republic was given virtually the same status as other members of the union.

It is interesting that in his speech of 21st February, Putin most aggressively attacks precisely the early years of Soviet power, when revolutionary ideas were fresh, people full of enthusiasm, and in politics, as never before or since, they were guided by principles and ideals, and not by calculated cynicism. At the same time, Putin welcomes, in every possible way, the departure in Stalinist times from the principles proclaimed by the revolution, as a return to some ‘natural order of things’:

'...life itself immediately showed that it was neither possible to preserve such a huge and complex territory, nor to manage it on the proposed amorphous, in fact, confederal principles. [...] [Subsequent events turned] the declared but non-working principles of the state structure into a mere declaration, a formality. In reality, the Union Republics did not have any sovereign rights; they simply did not exist. And in practice, a strictly centralised, absolutely unitary state was created.'

In a departure from the revolutionary idea of equality of nations, Putin eyes a return to good old 'one and indivisible' Russia, and this is clearly to his liking. But a full return was already impossible. The 'Revolutionary filth' had already been laid down by Lenin in the very foundations of this new statehood.

'And yet, it's a pity, a real pity, that from the basic, formally legal foundations on which our statehood was built, the odious, utopian fantasies inspired by the revolution, but absolutely destructive to any normal country, were not promptly cleaned out.'

It is hard to understand what Putin would call 'any normal country'. If these are colonial empires, founded on bloody conquests and subjugation of other peoples, then it is unlikely such states could be called normal, or even viable in current historical conditions.

The First World War put an end to four major empires — the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian. After the Second World War, all the remaining ones disappeared into oblivion — the British, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Italian and Japanese. No, imperialism in the Leninist understanding has not gone anywhere; more sophisticated extra-territorial forms of influence and control have arrived in place of its imperial-colonial form.

The only giant state that inherited almost all the territorial conquests of the former empire was the Soviet Union, with its famous $\frac{1}{6}$ share of the Earth's landmass. But it managed to reintegrate and preserve the unity of the state for another 70 years, not at all thanks to the imperial conception, but on the contrary — due to the rejection of it.

The idea of the Union of Socialist Republics was precisely that workers of different nations voluntarily unite in such a union to jointly achieve common goals — building a new society without exploitation or oppression. Moreover, the model invented by Lenin assumed the scalability of this union. In his thinking, more and more republics should join the union, whereupon the revolution would win; however, historical Russia would not necessarily remain the union's focal point. Its centre could very well be in Germany, should the proletarian revolution have won there. Thus, Lenin saw a Union of Republics on a worldwide scale.

Furthermore, initially, the creation of the USSR in the format of 1922 was not included in the plans of the Bolsheviks. Its appearance was a result of the failure of their initial expectations — world revolution. That the proletarian revolution lost in Europe and locked itself onto just the territory of the former Russian empire is the main tragedy of the socialist project of the 20th century. This is because, together with the territory of the former empire, the USSR inherited the many intractable contradictions and defects inherent in the previous project on these lands.

The locking of the socialist project within the framework of the former Russian empire naturally, although not inevitably, led to the beginning of a perception, both inside and outside, of the USSR as a kind of successor and inheritor of Russian statehood. The consequence of this was the relapse of national contradictions; when the state began to see in the strengthening of national cultures and the independence of the republics a threat to the unity of the project, while in Russian culture — a state continuity, a kind of cementing foundation.

Would it have been possible to revive these tendencies if the outlines of the socialist state had formed in different configurations and did not resemble former imperial Russia? It would have probably been a completely different story. But it turned out that in the case of the USSR, several generations of people, both at home and abroad, grew up with the confidence that the words 'Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' and 'Russia' were almost synonyms. Putin is one of these people.

'After all, what is the collapse of the Soviet Union? It is the collapse of historical Russia under the name of the Soviet Union,' declared Vladimir Putin in the documentary film 'Russia. Recent history' in December 2021.

Perhaps the only positive that Putin sees in the Soviet project — is that it just locked itself within the framework of the former Russian empire, and over time, moving away from its original 'utopian' principles, regained some of the empire's features, becoming the heir to Russian statehood. In other words, he extols exactly the most reactionary features of the USSR, which it acquired during the extreme conditions of its formation. And he criticises the ideas on which the Union was founded — the equality and fraternity of all peoples, genuine internationalism, hatred of autocracy and great power, hatred of predation and wars of conquest, a genuine democratic spirit, bringing the masses to politics in their multi-millions.

Characteristically, the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany, in the interpretations on which the modern Russian national myth is based, is for Putin not a victory of the ideas of humanism and egalitarianism over the ideas of radical anti-egalitarianism and anti-humanism, not a victory of the victim of aggression over the aggressor. In the current state mythology — this is the victory of 'historical Russia' over Germany, over Europe, over the West. The triumph of Russian statehood and the expansion of its borders. Just as the revolution and exit from the First World War were not refusal to participate in an imperial massacre, but the shameful capitulation of 'historical Russia'; a treacherous knife in the back of the state from utopian fanatics. An attempt on Russian statehood and its half-life.

'The Bolsheviks during the First World War wanted to defeat their homeland, and when the heroic Russian soldiers and officers shed blood at the front of the First World War, someone rocked Russia from the inside, to the point where Russia as a state collapsed and declared herself the loser — to the losing country (Germany). Nonsense, drivel, but this happened, this complete betrayal of national interests! Such people are among us today,' said Putin in August 2016 at the Seliger youth camp.

From the above quotes, it is not hard to guess how sincerely Putin blames Russia's troubles on the 'curse of the revolution'. If in modern Ukraine, they accuse the Soviet project of being 'too Russian', then this precisely [if not exclusively] what Putin appreciates in the Soviet project. If in Ukraine they say that Lenin did not give Ukrainians genuine self-determination, Putin blames him for the opposite — that he gave Ukraine too much freedom.

Let's return to the question which we asked at the beginning. Why did the keynote speech of the Russian president before the invasion become a real libel addressed to the revolution? Because it is in the revolution that he sees the true root of Russia's misfortunes. But now he is not simply accusing Lenin of betraying Russia, and crimes against its territorial integrity. Putin decides it's time to correct Lenin's 'worse than mistakes' and rewind the right of Ukrainians to self-determination, the 'thrice-cursed' legacy of the revolution.

'Do you want decommunisation? Well, that suits us just fine. But there is no need, as they say, to stop half way. We are ready to show you what real decommunisation means for Ukraine.'

On the 24th of February, Russian tanks would invade the territory of Ukraine, in order to deprive its people of statehood — which was one of the most important achievements of the revolution at the beginning of last century.

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