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THE CURSE OF RUSSIAN “EXCEPTIONALISM”

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In his recent op-ed in *The New York Times*, Russian president Vladimir Putin's objected to the idea of American “exceptionalism.” This is ironic because the nation whose state tradition is based on a claim to exceptionalism is not the U.S. but Russia.

In his speech calling for a military strike against Syria, President Obama said that America was exceptional because it is not indifferent to human suffering. This is quite different from making a claim to inherent superiority. Under both tsars and communists, however, Russia insisted that it had a right to remake the world because of the monopoly on truth contained in its ruling doctrine. In the post-communist era, Russia no longer has an ideology. But it glorifies its past and frequently acts as if the rights of others do not exist.

The key to Russia's sense of exceptionalism is a belief in the quasi-divine status of the Russian state. It is this notion that is responsible for the absence of the rule of law in Russia and the low value that is attached to human life. The deification of the state in Russia has deep roots. The dominant religion in Russia is Orthodox Christianity. Orthodoxy however, came to Russia from Byzantium, and, in Russia, it showed a tendency toward fanaticism that, according to Tibor Szamuely in *The Russian Tradition*, “far outdid the worldly attitudes of the mother Church.”

When Byzantium fell in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks, Russia was left as the only Orthodox state, and Russians, under siege from infidels on the edge of the civilized world, began to see the state, in so far as it was the protector and expression of what they decided was the only true form of Christianity, as semi-divine. It was out of this belief that there arose the notion of Russia as the “Third Rome.” In 1510, the monk Philotheus composed an address to the tsar, describing Moscow as the successor to Rome and Byzantium:

Know then, O pious Tsar, that... Thou art the only Tsar of the Christians in all the universe... all Christian Empires have converged in thy single one... two Romes have fallen but the third stands, and no fourth can ever be. The Christian Empire shall fall to no one.

Over the years, the state steadily subordinated the Orthodox Church which was its only potential competitor for spiritual influence, stripping it of independent authority and reducing it to the status of a department of the state bureaucracy. In the state that emerged the Tsar became the country's godlike political and spiritual ruler.

When the Tsarist regime fell, the communists took over the Russian state tradition and made it all encompassing. Under Tsarism, the state had a messianic mission but the ostensible goal was spiritual. Under the communists, the new god was socialism. The spiritual doctrine that had conferred some sense of human worth to the individual was

removed. This untied the hands of the Russian communist rulers. They were now free not only to destroy all freedom of expression but to murder millions in the pursuit of their utopian goals.

With the collapse of communism, Russia did not succeed in finding a new national ideology. Putin, however, promoted the idea that the purpose of Russian history was the creation of a strong state regardless of ideology. He authorized the ceremonial burials of tsarist figures, including Maria Fyodorova, the mother of the last Tsar, Nicholas II and, at the same time, praised Stalin and Andropov. His attitude toward the Soviet Union was that, whatever its faults, it was a fundamental part of the Russian state tradition. In an interview in 2006, he said, "Those who do not regret the collapse of the Soviet Union have no heart but those who do regret it have no brain."

The idea that the purpose of Russian history is the creation of a strong state even in the absence of any idea to justify it, makes very little sense. It is the ideal justification, however, for the self-aggrandizement of a corrupt regime and the Putin regime has used it to solidify popular support.

One of the most important sources of conflict between Russia and the U.S. has been the Russian desire to dominate the former Soviet republics which are sometimes referred to in Russia as "the near abroad" or, more simply, "our backyard." Russia has insisted, for no apparent reason, that it has the right to exercise a degree of control in the countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. In 2007, for example, it launched a massive cyber-attack on Estonia after Estonian authorities moved a six-foot bronze of a Red Army soldier from its place in the center of Tallinn to a military cemetery. Russia used economic pressure to induce Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the president of Kyrgyzstan to agree to close the U.S. air base in Kyrgyzstan which was playing a vital role in the supply of coalition troops in Afghanistan. When the U.S. succeeded in reversing the agreement, a propaganda campaign in the Russian media helped to inspire a popular revolt that led to Bakiyev being overthrown.

In the present crisis over Syria, many in the West seek to win Russian cooperation with references to the horrendous bloodshed. The Russian regime, however, carried out massacres of its own in Chechnya. It is concerned not with humanitarian issues but with using the crisis to elevate its role in world politics and rally the Russian population. The situation is similar in the case of Russian support for Iran. By voting against sanctions in the United Nations on the supposed grounds that they are a violation of international law, Russia undercuts the ability of the West to pressure Iran not to develop nuclear weapons. In this respect, the Putin regime acts against the long range interests of Russia. But its many years of non-cooperation have made Russia a crucial actor over Iran, forcing other countries to plead for its cooperation.

Similar motives are at stake in the Russian decision to give political asylum to the NSA leaker, Edward Snowden. Insofar as the NSA is one of the most important links in a worldwide anti-terrorism effort that also benefits Russia, it would seem to be in Russia's national interest to return Snowden to the U.S. The status that accrues from being the center of resistance to the power of the U.S., however, is more important than any benefit that would accrue from serious anti-terrorist measures to our population or theirs.

In the conclusion of his article, Putin insists that "it is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional." If this statement were applied to Russia, it would cast justified doubt on the value of the entire Russian state tradition. It would also negate the Putin regime's interpretation of the purpose of Russian history as the creation of a strong state. In fact, only supererogatory claims can justify a situation in which the state is the master of society instead of its servant. If a state acts in defense of innocent civilians and in defense of humane values, instead of for its own sake, it does not make such claims. Under those circumstances, it really is "exceptional."

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