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Putin and the Third Rome

Imperial-Eschatological Motives as a Usable Past

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Abstract

In this article we use the concept of ‘radicalization’ and ‘usable past’ to analyze how the Russian president Vladimir Putin crafted a specific narrative to legitimize the war against Ukraine. This narrative is the product of a series of ideologically, religiously and historically informed frames that Putin developed over the past 22 years. We outline how Putin made use of christian-imperial history as a ‘usable past’ for him to 1) formulate a new state ideology, 2) mobilize society behind the mission of the Holy Russian Empire, 3) demonize enemies and legitimize their planned destruction, and 4) embed this mission and ideology in an overarching apocalyptic, metaphysical scheme, in which death and war are noble goals for Russians to embrace, in order to obtain their place in heaven.

Keywords

Putin – usable past – Russian Orthodox Church – Russian Empire – Russian history – Third Rome – radicalization – eschatology – Apocalypse

1 Hail, Hail Our Russian Tsar!

Soon after Vladimir Putin was inaugurated again as President of the Russian Federation in 2018, bombastic music started to echo through the halls of the Grand Kremlin Palace in Moscow.¹ Canons fired their salutes outside as the orchestra played *Glory*. In this final act of the nineteenth-century opera *A Life for the Tsar*, euphoric Russians are singing for their newly coronated sovereign on the Red Square:²

Hail, hail, our Russian tsar!
 The God-given sovereign tsar!
 May your royal line immortalize,
 Through which the Russian people thrive.³

While the melody of *Glory* could be heard inside the walls of the contemporary Kremlin as well, the choir at Putin's inauguration was accompanying it with different lyrics. They sang the *Ivan Susanin* version that was rewritten at the time of Joseph Stalin. This adaptation stripped *A Life for the Tsar* from its self-evident imperial theme that was irreconcilable with Soviet rationale after the 1917 revolution.⁴ Performing this version, the choir no longer sang of glory to the tsar, but instead only of glory to the Russian motherland.⁵ Nonetheless, they were doing so at a stone's throw away from the location where the tsars used to be coronated,⁶ in an opera that was commissioned with the personal support of

- 1 The introduction of this paper is in part reproduced from the following MA thesis, written and supervised by the authors, which forms the empirical basis of this study: N. Drost, *Tsar-struck: How Vladimir Putin uses the history of the Russian Empire*, MA thesis (Utrecht University, 2021), <https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/528>.
- 2 A. Tittmann and C. Tittmann, *The Standard Operaglass: Detailed Plots of Two Hundred and Thirty-Five Celebrated Operas, with Critical and Biographical Remarks, Dates, Etc.* (New York: Brentano's, 1920), 700.
- 3 Translated from Russian, slightly altered to remain the rhyme and rhythm of the original: "Slav'sja, slav'sja, nash Russkij Car'!/ Gospodom dannyj nam Car'-Gosudar'!/ Da budet bessmertn tvoj carskij rod,/ Da im blagodenstvuet russkij narod," in: M.I. Glinka and E.F. Rozen, "Slav'sja, Slav'sja, Ty Rus' Moja." *Teksty pesen*, February 9, 2018, <http://teksty-pesenok.ru/21/Hor-Znamenie-STAROVER/tekst-pesni-Slavsya-slavsya-ty-Rus-moya---M-Glinka-E-Rozen#> (accessed November 1, 2022).
- 4 M. Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism: From Glinka to Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 61–62.
- 5 M.I. Glinka, "Hor "Slav'sja" iz opery "Ivan Susanin"." *AllLyr.ru—vsja muzyka mira*, <https://alllyr.ru/lyrics/song/151745-m-i-glinka-hor-slavsya-iz-opery-ivan-susanin/> (accessed October 5, 2021).
- 6 "Crowning and Coronation." The Moscow Kremlin State Historical and Cultural Museum and

tsar Nicholas I. The tsar attended several rehearsals before it premiered in his attendance, and afterwards it remained to be played in his court at festivities such as his birthday and name day.⁷

To what extent does Putin draw inspiration for his current military actions from a highly ideological, religiously and historically informed script? This question is pertinent now, but has been addressed before as well. Even though the contemporary choir was not singing for the tsar, Putin is repeatedly accused of being one—especially in Western publications. The article by former United States (US) ambassador Michael McFaul a few months after the Russian annexation of Crimea is a good example of this. Here, he argues that “Putin the (not so) Great” dreams of being compared to Peter the Great or Catherine the Great.⁸ Similarly, other authors speak of “Putin the Great” too, as well as “Putin the Terrible”, “a new emperor”, or that we should “recognise the tsar” in the Russian president.⁹ Such comparisons are not limited to Western authors and can be found in Russian media too. In January 2020, when Putin proposed the constitutional reforms that would nullify his number of presidential terms, a political columnist of the independent yet Kremlin-critical Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* argued that Russia will have a tsar.¹⁰ This line of reasoning was met by a wide response among the Russian opposition. The jailed opposition activist Alexei Navalny has denounced Putin as a “naked, thieving emperor” when the Kremlin was about to demolish his opposition movement,¹¹ and at anti-Putin protests in Eastern Russia, demonstrators chanted “down with the tsar!” in 2020.¹² Interesting enough, strong supporters of Putin make such com-

Heritage Site, <https://www.kreml.ru/en-US/exhibitions/virtual-exhibitions/venchanie-na-tsarstvo/> (accessed October 28, 2021).

7 Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism*, 59–61.

8 M. McFaul, “Putin the (Not So) Great.” *Politico Magazine*, August 4, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/08/putin-the-not-so-great-109711>.

9 S.B. Glasser, “Putin the Great: Russia’s Imperial Impostor.” *Foreign Affairs*, October 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2019-08-12/putin-great> (accessed November 1, 2022); J.V. Micallef, “Putin the Terrible: Understanding Russia’s New Tsar.” HuffPost Contributor platform, October 3, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/putin-the-terrible-unders_b_8200544 (accessed November 1, 2022); A. Troianovski, “A New ‘Emperor’: Russia Girds for 16 More Years of Putin.” *The New York Times*, March 11, 2020, sec. WORLD; Europe, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/world/europe/russia-putin.html> (accessed November 1, 2022); B.A. de Graaf, “Herken de tsar in Poetin.” *NRC*, January 13, 2017, sec. Opinie.

10 Y. Latynina, “Nikakih peremen.” *Novaja gazeta*, January 17, 2020, sec. Column; Politics.

11 M. Bennets, “Alexei Navalny: Thief Putin Has Turned Us All into Slaves.” *The Times*, April 29, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/putin-betrayed-russia-says-alexei-navalny-mkxhgvrp8> (accessed November 1, 2022).

12 D. Bellamy and AP, “‘Down with the Tsar!’ Anti-Putin Protests Erupt over Arrest of ‘pop-

parisons too, though in a positive light. A group of conservative Russians, led by influential business magnate Konstantin Malofeev, even wishes to see their current President become the tsar of a Russian constitutional monarchy.¹³ But how does Putin feel about being called a tsar? The Russian government-owned news agency TASS asked him exactly this question in an interview in 2021. Of course, he benignly discarded the comparison: “Maybe someone else can be called a tsar. On the contrary, I work every day, I do not reign. A tsar is someone who just sits, looks down from above and says: here is an order, and there is something to be done. While he just tries on a hat and looks at himself in the mirror. I work every day.”¹⁴

In similar fashion, Putin has gently ridiculed those who idealize tsarism at a variety of occasions, indicating for example that his ancestors used to live as serfs in the Russian Empire.¹⁵ But despite such mockery and the conviction that he works as a president rather than reigning as a tsar, Putin has been inspired by those who did once reign the Russian Empire. He loves to read history books and admires the different rulers and thinkers that played a significant role in Russia’s past, especially the tsars that safeguarded the strength and stability of the state.¹⁶ And, what was even more, represented not just earthly power, but within the framework of Russian Christian Orthodox religion also embodied the eschatological purpose of Russia as the ‘Third Rome’.

As such, Putin finds inspiration both in Russian Orthodox Christianity and Russian history, and *creates out of the combination of those two powerful resources a usable past* for the present, a concept that Van Wyck Brooks introduced in 1918 and which we will elaborate upon in this paper.¹⁷ The ways in which Putin instrumentalizes historical inspiration in his policy have been written about extensively by a variety of scholars (see introduction), and some

ular” Regional Governor.” *Euronews*, July 11, 2020, sec. Russia, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/11/down-with-the-tsar-rare-anti-putin-protests-erupt-over-arrest-of-popular-regional-governor> (accessed November 1, 2022).

13 M. Seddon, “The Russian Oligarch Who Wants Vladimir Putin to Be a Tsar.” *Financial Times*, March 13, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/63e0342c-5e2f-11ea-b0ab-339c2307bcd4> (accessed November 1, 2022); Troianovski, “A New “Emperor””.

14 A. Vandenko, “Putin ob obraze carja: planah posle 2024 goda.” TASS, March 18, 2020, <https://putin.tass.ru/ru/o-planakh-posle-2024/> (accessed November 1, 2022).

15 M. Laruelle, “Ideological Complementarity or Competition? The Kremlin, the Church, and the Monarchist Idea in Today’s Russia.” *Slavic Review* 79 (2) (2020), 351.

16 S. Walker, *The Long Hangover: Putin’s New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 20.

17 V. Brooks, “On Creating a Usable Past.” *The Dial: Criticism and Discussion of Literature and the Arts* LXIV 764 (April 11, 1918), 337–341.

touch upon Russian imperial history as part of their studies. But only few take the combination of history and Russian Orthodoxy to be the heart of their research. An analysis of how Putin has instrumentalized Russian Christian-imperial history in his policy is still missing. That is why we interrogate Putin's own words, for which we assembled a corpus of over 11,000 speeches, statements, declarations, and interviews from 1999 until 2022. These statements were made by Putin for a wide variety of audiences, both domestic and abroad, as well as on a wide variety of occasions, ranging from televised speeches to close meetings with ordinary Russians and working visits in all corners of the Russian Federation.¹⁸ In this corpus, we ask how Putin used the combination of history and Russian Orthodox theological, biblical tropes as *a usable past*, to create his powerbase, to understand how he built up to defending and legitimizing the invasion in Ukraine.

At the heart of this research is the concept of a *usable past*, which is strongly related to applied history, as it is advocated in this journal. This concept finds its origins in the work of the American literary critic and cultural historian Van Wyck Brooks in 1918, who explains the value that history has for the present.¹⁹ It stimulates creativity as a source of inspiration: "The past is an inexhaustible storehouse of apt attitudes and adaptable ideals; it opens of itself at the touch of desire; it yields up, now this treasure, now that, to anyone who comes to it armed with a capacity for personal choices."²⁰ Yet, the way in which Brooks suggested to use the past in the setting of open and free democracies is of course different from the way the past is used in authoritarian or totalitarian settings, such as in the Russian context, where history is arguably "an uncritical reconstruction of collective memory to suit the government's agenda," to follow James Pearce,²¹ and is oftentimes closer to propaganda. However, the usable

18 The empirical foundation for this article is the research we have conducted in the context of an MA thesis at Utrecht University. Using scraping software, we have collected every statement Putin has ever made since his first presidency from the Kremlin website, from December 1999 until October 2022. This corpus included all of Putin's (1) articles, (2) community meetings, (3) interviews, (4) letters, (5) messages to the Federal Assembly, (6) press conferences, (7) security council meetings, (8) speeches and addresses, (9) statements on major issues, (10) working meetings and conferences, and other uncategorized statements. We then used a corpus analysis toolkit to identify when, where and in which context Putin made relevant statements. For more about the methodology, see: Drost, "Tsar-struck", 2021.

19 Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past".

20 Brooks, 339.

21 J.C. Pearce, *The Use of History in Putin's Russia*, Series in Politics (Delaware Malaga: Vernon Press, 2021), xxvii.

past as concept is nevertheless applicable to Putin. Although Russia is not a free democracy and Russian society cannot be characterized as an open society, it is a society where different voices can be heard.²² Putin needs to use the public space to mobilize support for his rule, and he does so by means of wielding historical analogies.

In this paper, we home in on the particular combination of Christian, eschatological and biblical statements on the one hand, with the historical context of the tsarist empire on the other hand, and we will reconstruct the chronological, and radicalizing way in which Putin deployed them since 2000, culminating in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Radicalization is here understood as ‘a process towards increasing acceptance of violence which explains extremist behavior and exclusion of other groups’.²³ It entails the reappraisal of other groups from a position of moral superiority, the attribution of the out-group as morally inferior, which needs to be eliminated, based on a reappraisal fueled by the emotion of contempt. As one of us described elsewhere, ‘this process is influenced by personal and existential feelings of uncertainty, injustice, attitudes as moral outrage, guilt and narcissism, but these feelings need to be transformed into injustice frames, religious beliefs and narratives in order to trigger behavior, especially among those who engage in group-related forms of extremist and terrorist behavior.’²⁴

In short, we will show how Putin’s use of examples and narratives from imperial history and Russian Orthodoxy fueled a personal and collective radicalization process, that—not inevitably but factually—led to the invasion in Ukraine. We postulate that Putin used history to fuel a radicalization process consisting of a series of overlapping steps: Christian-imperial history served to: 1) formulate a new state ideology, 2) mobilize society to rally behind the mis-

22 I. Nechepurenko and A.E. Kramer, “Russian Court Orders Prominent Human Rights Group to Shut.” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/28/world/europe/russia-memorial-human-rights.html> (accessed November 1, 2022).

23 J. Van Stekelenburg, “Radicalization and violent emotions.” *Political Science and Politics* 50 (2017), 936–939; see also: F.M. Moghaddam, “The staircase to terrorism: A psychological exploration.” *American Psychologist* 60 (2005), 161–169; K. van den Bos, *Why people radicalize: How unfairness judgments are used to fuel radical beliefs, extremist behaviors, and terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

24 B.A. de Graaf and K. van den Bos, “Religious radicalization: social appraisals and finding radical redemption in extreme beliefs.” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 40 (2021), 56–60, here: 57. See for the concept of radical redemption and religious radicalization also: De Graaf, *Radicale verlossing. Wat terroristen geloven* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2021); Idem, *Radical Redemption. What terrorists believe* (Oxford University Press, under review).

sion of the Holy Russian Empire, 3) ostracize, *demonize enemies* and legitimize their planned destruction, 4) embed this weaponized, radical 'holy imperial'-ideology in an overarching apocalyptic, metaphysical scheme, in which *death and war were envisioned as noble goals* for Russians to embrace, to obtain their place in heaven.

2 Propping Up a New, Post-Soviet Empire and Dito State Ideology: Putin and the Importance of Christianity

From the moment of his inauguration as president in 2000, Putin stressed the importance of Christianity for him personally. Oftentimes, he mentioned how his great-grandparents went to church, how Christianity was a unifying force in Russian society's history, a source for values and a moral school: "As a matter of fact, Russia has always been a very pious country, a very religious country. My father's family lived close to Moscow, I think about 120 or 130 kilometres away from Moscow. And colleagues looked in the archives and traced this family's history back to 1680, I think, sometime at the end of the 17th century. And do you know how they calculated this? Through church records and mainly through so-called records of confession. When people come to confession every week. Imagine, a family lived for more than 300 years in one village and went to church every week."²⁵

He also, on various occasions, made it clear that he reads the Bible regularly and considers himself a believer (in a Russian Orthodox way of being a believer, which cannot simply be equated with western, individualist protestant notions of piety). When a Time Magazine reporter asked Putin if he has read the Bible, considering that Putin said "*in one of your answers that it is wrong to steal and that this is a principle of life in Russia*", Putin answers: "Yes. I have a copy of the Bible in my plane, and I fly a lot. I have the Bible in my plane and I also have an icon there, a special icon, embroidered, but everything is there. If I am flying a long distance—and we have a big country, and I also fly abroad regularly—I have the chance to read the Bible."²⁶ Yet, more importantly, Orthodoxy was in his views one of the political and moral foundations of the Russian Empire: "The church has always played a huge role in Russia. It was a state institution.

25 V. Putin, "Transcript of Meeting with Participants in the Third Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23789>, September 9, 2006 (accessed November 1, 2022).

26 V. Putin, "Interview to Time magazine." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24735>, December 19, 2007 (accessed November 1, 2022).

At the same time, it acted as a moral school and even the administrative factor could be considered essential. In Russia the moral component has always been very important for the society and the state's well-being. There is no institution in the modern world other than the church, and not only the Orthodox Church, that can fill this spiritual vacuum. And for that reason I consider that we first and foremost owe a great deal to our traditional faiths. The church had incurred big losses from the state—the Orthodox Church, Judaism and Islam—and today these losses have still not been compensated. I am convinced that the state must support the church.²⁷

Putin already made such statements, and presented these statements, from the inception of his presidency.²⁸ In fact, he even presented the Russian Orthodox brand of Christianity as a substitute for the communist state ideology, that in his eyes had gone bankrupt: 'After the October Revolution, the state went to great lengths to destroy our spiritual and religious roots, and was unwavering and cruel in pursuing this objective. Many churches were razed to the ground. Back then the state attempted to come up with a quasi-religion and replace the Bible with the Moral Code of the Builder of Communism. It did not work.²⁹ On other occasions, however, Putin also indicated that communist ideology had basically reproduced the moral and ethical principles of the Bible, Koran, Torah, and Talmud.³⁰ He explained this more extensively during his yearly press conference in 2013: "The Moral Code of the Builder of Communism, if you read it, is just a pathetic copy of the Bible Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife. The Code of the Builder of Communism has the same commandments, just that they are written in a simple language shortened drastically."³¹

In 2007, speaking with participants of the Valdai Discussion Club, Putin was asked what Russia's new mission was, and which idea Russia should propagate outside its borders. He reminded his audience that the "basic princi-

27 V. Putin, "Transcript of Meeting with Participants", September 9, 2006.

28 See V. Putin, "The inauguration of Vladimir Putin took place in the Kremlin." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/38089>, May 7, 2000 (accessed November 1, 2022); V. Putin, "Opening Address at a Meeting with Russian Orthodox Church Hierarchs." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24223>, August 20, 2000 (accessed November 1, 2022).

29 V. Putin, "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54790>, June 15, 2017 (accessed November 1, 2022).

30 V. Putin, "Встреча с участниками форума "Селигер-2012" [Meeting with participants of the Seliger-2012 forum]." <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/16106>, July 31, 2012 (accessed November 1, 2022).

31 V. Putin, "News conference of Vladimir Putin." December 19, 2013.

ples of the Russian Empire were the ideals of monarchy, the link with the people, and Orthodoxy. These were the three cornerstones of the Russian Empire.”³²

In short, while underpinning these statements with large scale donations to the Russian Orthodox Church, financing and facilitating the erection of new churches, within a decade, Putin succeeded in formulating and disseminating a new, central state ideology, connecting the ‘space of experiences’ with the ‘horizon of expectations’ for the Russian people.³³ The ideological consequences of this pointed to a revival and confirmation of the nineteenth-century imperial triad of ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality’, as Russia’s official ideological state doctrine.³⁴ So far so good.

3 Expanding the Claims, Mobilizing Society: Appropriating a Byzantine Legacy

The next step in the way Putin put the imperial and Christian Russian past to use, was in mobilizing society around a new mission: consolidating and expanding Russian patriotism by harking back to a glorious past that needed restoration in the future. As Putin stated in 2012: “Today we do not have a monopoly on ideology, but we have thrown out the child along with the water: we have stopped to pay any attention to patriotism. Simply no one does anything about it. In the Russian Empire it was the domain of the church, the Orthodox priests, the Islamic clerics; it was the work of synagogues and datsans. Today we have the separation of the church and state, and the church’s efforts in this area do not have any support from the state.”³⁵ In 2013 he explicitly condoned and advocated the role of imperial Orthodox thinking in expanding the Russian empire: “The Russian Orthodox Church played a unique role in our people’s and country’s history after all. Essentially, it was after adopting

32 V. Putin, “Meeting with Members of the Valdai International Discussion Club.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24537>, September 14, 2007 (accessed November 1, 2022).

33 See for this concept: R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. T.S. Presner, 1st ed., Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

34 See for background on this ‘triad’: N.V. Riasanovsky, *Russian identities: A historical survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 132–133.

35 V. Putin, “Meeting with public representatives on patriotic education for young people.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16470>, September 12, 2012 (accessed November 1, 2022).

Orthodox Christianity as a religion that the Russian nation began to emerge as a unified nation and began building a centralised Russian state.”³⁶

It became increasingly clear what Putin meant, in referring to this ‘unique role in history’. Russian Orthodoxy, according to Putin, had lent its support to the Russian state to expand, conquer and aggrandize itself: “Sincere, resolute faith helped our ancestors overcome the most difficult trials together, to surmount hardships and be victorious. This experience of moral improvement and cultural, socio-political development has become an integral part of the heritage of eastern Christianity, uniting entire peoples belonging to the Orthodox religious tradition. Russia holds a worthy place among them, championing justice, caring for the spiritual integrity of our Orthodox world, advocating for the development of cooperation and reinforcing active dialogue between Orthodox churches.”³⁷

In 2003, the reference to the Byzantine Empire, which took over from Rome (with Ancient Rome as the first holy empire, Constantinople as the successor empire and ‘Second Rome’), which passed the torch to the Holy Russian Empire, with Moscow as the ‘Third Rome’,³⁸ still sounded inclusive enough: “[Interviewer] *You sometimes talk about Holy Russia. And now you have also mentioned Rome, Greece and Byzantium. On the other hand, we know that Holy Russia is the Third Rome. And what is Holy Russia today?* Putin: After Russia became an object of a powerful and ruthless social experiment it turned out that the spirituality of the Russian people could not be destroyed. For thousands of years Russia developed as a multi-national and multi-confessional country with a predominantly Christian population.”³⁹ In that same interview,

36 V. Putin, “Interview for the documentary film *The Second Baptism of Rus.*” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/18872>, July 23, 2013 (accessed November 1, 2022).

37 V. Putin, “Meeting with representatives of different Orthodox Patriarchates and Churches.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/>, July 25, 2013 (accessed November 1, 2022).

38 See for example: A.D. Mashkov, “МОСКВА—ТРЕТИЙ РИМ” [MOSCOW—THIRD ROME], *Юридична енциклопедія—Шемшученко Ю.С.* [Legal encyclopedia—Shemshuchenko Y.S.], https://leksika.com.ua/10651009/legal/moskva_-_tretiy_rim (accessed November 1, 2022).

39 V. Putin, “Transcript of a Meeting with the French Regional Press and TV Channels.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21874>, February 12, 2003 (accessed November 1, 2022). See also this statement from 2002: ‘As I have repeatedly said in my public addresses, Russia is a unique land, in a sense—it is a country where Christianity, Judaism and Islam have harmoniously coexisted for centuries. Their alloy is an inalienable part of European culture and the basis of the multi-ethnic Russian nation’s strength.’, V. Putin, “Opening Address at a Meeting of Russian Jewish Communities’ Spokesmen.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21538>, March 19, 2022 (accessed November 1, 2022).

from 2003, it becomes clear that Putin tries to strike a balance between old and new: “When people speak about Holy Russia they mean the revival of traditions, of the moral foundations of our culture, which is based on Christian values. But it does not mean that the state should not be modern. It must be modern, effective and strong.”⁴⁰

Yet, a decade on, the reference to the Holy Russian Empire took on a far more menacing angle, when the legacy of the Byzantine empire was used to legitimize further expansion of Russia into Crimea, in February and March 2014. In December 2014 Putin explained the thrust of his Holy Russian Empire: ‘In addition to ethnic similarity, a common language, common elements of their material culture, a common territory, even though its borders were not marked then, and a nascent common economy and government, Christianity was a powerful spiritual unifying force that helped involve various tribes and tribal unions of the vast Eastern Slavic world in the creation of a Russian nation and Russian state. It was thanks to this spiritual unity that our forefathers for the first time and forevermore saw themselves as a united nation. All of this allows us to say that Crimea, the ancient Korsun or Chersonesus, and Sevastopol have invaluable civilisational and even sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the followers of Islam and Judaism.’⁴¹

In 2015, he postulated Russia’s imperial purpose as a ‘unique country-civilisation’, harking back to prince Vladimir, the ruler of Kyivan Rus from 980 to 1015 who converted the region to Christianity and was considered one of the main founders of the Russian empire: ‘Prince Vladimir was destined to become a great ruler. His choice was discerning and extremely responsible and became the source of Russia’s development as a unique country and civilization. The adoption of Christianity was based on Prince Vladimir’s deep love for his Fatherland, on his serious spiritual reflection, on his search for a single baseline that could unite the people and the dispersed lands.’⁴²

In 2000, Putin had already re-introduced the bicephalous eagle as the Russian coat of arms, going back to the Byzantine legacy of the dual secular and divine power of the emperor, the union between east and west, between power and authority. In May 2018 he visited Mount Athos, stood in the protaton throne

40 Ibid.

41 V. Putin, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173>, December 4, 2014 (accessed November 1, 2022).

42 V. Putin, “Reception to mark 1000 years since the death of St. Vladimir, Equal-to-the-Apostles.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50068>, July 28, 2015 (accessed November 1, 2022).

(the bishop's stasion), presenting himself as a new Orthodox emperor, fighting the nihilism of the west, and standing up for true 'patriotic values, historical memory and tradition.'⁴³

In short, Putin not only reappropriated, teleologically, a history (that of the emergence of a christianized Kyivan Rus) that equally counted as the prehistory to other states in the region, he also used this history to mobilize society, demonize enemies (everyone standing in the way of the new prince Vladimir, in the Russian "near abroad" as well as the west at large), and legitimize violent action—the invasion in the Crimea in 2014, with more to come.

4 Defending the Holy Russian Empire, Demonize the Enemy: The War in Ukraine

From 2013/2014 onwards, Putin explicitly avowed allegiance to Orthodox and spiritual values stemming from imperial times, and turned this allegiance in one of the key arguments to forward his territorial expansion. Above, we saw how he appropriated Ancient Kyivan Rus as the common source of Orthodoxy, in line with the classic Russian-imperial version of Russian history. Putin had started talking about this ever since 2001,⁴⁴ but the transition from subscribing to a spiritual unity towards laying imperial territorial claims accelerated in 2013/2014. While Putin had previously allowed for the existence of different peoples with different creeds in his statements, he now expressed increasingly more grandiose ideas of a united Russian identity of "Great Russians", "Little Russians" (Ukrainians), and "White Russians" (Belarusians), under the reign of one autonomous Russian nation.⁴⁵ While talking about Ukraine, Volodymyr

43 T. Weber, "The Key to Understanding Putin's Game of Thrones." *Haaretz*, September 3, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/2022-09-03/ty-article-opinion/.highlight/the-key-to-understanding-putins-game-of-thrones/00000182-fe82-de92-a7d6-ffdfef430000> (accessed November 1, 2022); See also: W. Voogd, "1823—Putin on Athos: the Protaton throne." *Athos—Agion Oros*, <https://athosweblog.com/2016/06/01/1823-putin-and-the-protaton-throne/> (accessed November 1, 2022).

44 'It was from here [Crimea], on this Slavic land, that St. Prince Vladimir began the baptism of ancient Russia, and it was from here that Orthodoxy began to spread among our peoples and in our countries.' V. Putin, "Vystuplenie na ceremonii osvjashhenija Vladimirskogo sobora [English translation not available on the Kremlin website]." <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21301>, June 28, 2001 (accessed November 1, 2022).

45 See: V. Putin, "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65973>, June 30, 2021 (accessed November 1, 2022). See also Putin's statement when he was asked 'why doesn't it work to develop calmly and smoothly together' in a question about Ukraine: 'No matter what happens, and wherever Ukraine goes, anyway we shall

Zelensky and Crimea to Oliver Stone in 2019, Putin connected his ultranationalism to an exclusive view on the role of Christian Orthodox as *Russian* state ideology: “Nobody thought themselves to be anything but Russians, because it was all based on religious affiliation. They were all Orthodox and they considered themselves Russians.”⁴⁶

The next step was a geopolitical and territorial move, as laid down in his essay ‘On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians’, published in July 2021. The essay postulated that different Slavic peoples belong to one holy Russian nation, and need to be ‘reunified’, in order to make that nation great again.⁴⁷

Over half a year later, Putin launched his unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. Despite unfounded arguments on the alleged necessity to ‘denazify’ the area, Putin’s declarations after 24 February 2022 had a distinct imperial, ideological ring to them. While explaining the necessity of the invasion to young engineers in June 2022, Putin once more underlined the importance of ideological and spiritual schooling of the nation: ‘If we do not rely on the basic values of the national cultures of the peoples of Russia, we will not consolidate our society. Without consolidation, everything will fall apart. And the fact that we have to sort of defend ourselves and fight for it is obvious.’ He then gave a specific example of such a schooling effort: ‘We visited the exhibition dedicated to the 350th birth anniversary of Peter the Great. Almost nothing has changed. It is a remarkable thing. You come to this realisation, this understanding. Peter the Great waged the Great Northern War for 21 years. On the face of it, he was at war with Sweden taking something away from it ... He was not taking away anything, he was returning. (...) Clearly, it fell to our lot to return and reinforce as well.’⁴⁸

What was more, Peter the Great, and 21st century Prince Vladimir were merely taking back what was theirs from a country so morally deprived, so

meet sometime and somewhere. Why? Because we are one nation. And however angry the nationalists from both sides can be with my words, and there are nationalists in our country, as well as in Ukraine, this is in fact true. Because we have one Dnieper Kiev baptistry, we certainly have common historical roots and common destiny. We have common religion, common faith, and we have very similar culture, languages, traditions and state of mind, as you have said correctly: V. Putin, “Interview to Channel One and Associated Press news agency.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/19143>, September 4, 2013 (accessed November 1, 2022).

46 V. Putin, “Interview with Oliver Stone.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61057>, July 19, 2019 (accessed November 1, 2022).

47 V. Putin, “On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>, July 12, 2021 (accessed November 1, 2022).

48 V. Putin, “Meeting with young entrepreneurs, engineers and scientists.” <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68606>, June 9, 2022 (accessed November 1, 2022).

decadent and sinful, that its inhabitants should only be grateful for this liberation and the deliverance from evil. In this vein, following the invasion of 24 February 2022, Putin and his supporters supercharged the war and elevated it from a struggle for territorial control to a metaphysical struggle between good and evil. It now was a battle against the nazi's in the Ukraine (supported by the decadent satanist West) for the soul of Russia.

On 6 March 2022, two weeks after the invasion, Russian and Ukrainian Orthodox churches celebrated the Sunday of Atonement, demarcating the moment of atonement required to enter the period of lent. The head of the Moscow Patriarchy, Kirill, held a sermon supporting the war with the following arguments: "If humankind accepts sin—a violation of God's law; if humankind concedes that sin is merely a way of human behaviour—that is the end of human civilisation. Gay Parades are designed to demonstrate that sin is just a variation of human behaviour. Any country that wants to join the club of [western] countries must organise a Gay Parade. [...] We have entered a battle outside the physical realm, but of metaphysical meaning. I know that, unfortunately, there are Orthodox Christians who choose the path of least resistance and obediently follow the path indicated by the powerful of this world. We are not judging them; we are not suggesting they chose crucifixion; we merely remind ourselves that we will be true to God's words; we will be true to His law; we will be true to the law of love and justice. When we see this law violated, we will never make peace with those who violate it."⁴⁹ With this 'blessing', the patriarch gave Putin's war a sound ideological and religious foundation, Putin was presented as the harbinger of justice, as the representative of the holy Russian nation or empire that was up against the evil Ukrainian people.

A few months later, on September 30, when Putin signed the treaties to annex the Ukrainian *oblasts* Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, he gave a fierce speech in which he lashed out against "the dictatorship of the Western elites" and denounced how this "complete renunciation of what it means to be human, the overthrow of faith and traditional values, and the suppression of freedom are coming to resemble a "religion in reverse"—pure Satanism. Exposing false messiahs, Jesus Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount: "By their fruits ye shall know them." These poisonous fruits are already obvious to people, and not only in our country but also in all countries, including many people in the West itself."⁵⁰

49 EU vs Disinfo, "Kremlin evokes Satan in support of the war." <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/kremlin-evokes-satan-in-support-of-the-war/#>, March 12, 2022 (accessed November 1, 2022).

50 V. Putin, "Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>, September 30, 2022 (accessed November 1, 2022).

5 War and the End of Times: Enacting an Eschatological Scheme

Prince Vladimir was now effectively fighting Satan. In 2022, the enemy was being demonized in Christian, imperial terms. In different video's shared on YouTube and Twitter, talkshow scenes on Russian state television were broadcasted, with transcriptions. Russia expert Julia Davis described what she saw (April 2022): 'I've been telling you that the Russian state media is being directed by their handlers to move on from Putin's absurd claim of invading Ukraine to fight the "Nazis" to an even more absurd claim of fighting "Satanists," in Ukraine and the West. Here is another example.'⁵¹ In another tweet, Davis stated: "If Info Wars and Fox News had a baby, it would look a lot like Russian state TV. Here, they are attempting to explain what happened in #Kramatorsk by blaming it on Ukraine, the US, the UK, the EU and their joint "satanic plans" for "hybrid WWII" against poor innocent Russia."⁵²

What was more, the referral to metaphysical terms, also introduced an eschatological dimension to the war—with eschatology pointing to the doctrine of the end of times and the Final Battle, featuring (atomic) death and destruction for sinners on the one hand,⁵³ and deliverance and redemption for true believers: "Russian state TV is raging about WWII and an inevitable escalation over Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the other hand. Citizens are being primed to believe that even the worst outcome is a good thing, because those dying for the Motherland will skyrocket to paradise."⁵⁴

This was not just state television fighting for more viewer figures. Putin himself also frequently used eschatological rhetoric. He talked about the world's end already in a press conference in 2012, but at that time still in a more detached, neutral way: "I do know when the world will end. *Question: When?*

51 Tweet by J. Davis, April 14, 2022, https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1514461022496739328?s=20&t=2A4dqo_8rN0Fur3U9goaA (accessed November 1, 2022).

52 Tweet by J. Davis, April 9, 2022, https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1512650079936647169?s=20&t=rWSAXo4teqKda8OC91_WA (accessed November 1, 2022).

53 Already in 2019, Dimitri Adamsky warned how Putin forged an alliance with the Orthodox Church to infuse a new spirit of grandeur into country and society through the nuclear-military-Orthodox complex. The army orders icons, has churches built, and places crosses on missile bases, and priests chant the 'divine predestination of the Russian nuclear project'. See: D. Adamsky, *Russian Nuclear Orthodoxy: Religion, Politics, and Strategy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); B.A. de Graaf, "De apocalyps weerstaan waar Poetin mee dreigt." *NRC, Opinie*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/04/08/de-apocalyps-weerstaan-waar-poetin-mee-dreigt-a4109566> (accessed November 1, 2022).

54 Tweet by J. Davis, April 27, 2022, <https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1519417943955808257> (accessed November 1, 2022).

In approximately 4.5 billion years. (...) *Question: So you are not afraid of this? Why be afraid if it's inevitable?*"⁵⁵ His end-of-times gained more urgency over time, and became imbued with a Christian Orthodox cum geopolitical significance, for example in this interview from 2019: "*Lukyanov: (...) A year ago, you and I sat on this stage and you used a very emotionally-charged expression that in the event of a nuclear war, perish the thought, the aggressors would perish and we would go to paradise. Have we moved closer to paradise during this year?*" Putin: All of us are always close to God to the same extent and He will decide where we deserve to be at the end of our lives on Earth. But, of course, the situation has not improved. It has worsened after the United States' withdrawal from the INF Treaty."⁵⁶ Indeed, Putin had made a similar statement the year before: "Any aggressor should know that retaliation is inevitable and they will be annihilated. And we as the victims of an aggression, we as martyrs would go to paradise while they will simply perish because they won't even have time to repent their sins."⁵⁷

In 2022 the eschatological, final battle rhetoric became one of the foundational arguments for the invasion of Ukraine. In a highly perverted twist of the Christian gospel, Putin, standing in the Moscow stadium, addressed a thousandfold audience, echoing the words of Jesus Christ (John 15:13), but instead of offering his own life for that of his subjects, he appealed to them to sacrifice themselves for the Russian nation: "The main goal and motive of the military operation that we launched in Donbass and Ukraine is to relieve these people of suffering, of this genocide. At this point, I recall the words from the Holy Scripture: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." And we are seeing how heroically our military are fighting during this operation. These words come from the Holy Scripture of Christianity, from what is cherished by those who profess this religion. But the bottom line is that this is a universal value for all nations and those of all religions in Russia, and primarily for our people. The best evidence of this is how our fellows are fighting and acting in this operation: shoulder to shoulder, helping and supporting each other. If they have to, they will cover each other with their bodies to protect their comrade from a bullet in the battlefield, as they would to save their brother. It has been a long time since we had such unity."⁵⁸

55 V. Putin, "News conference of Vladimir Putin." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17173/photos>, December 20, 2012 (accessed November 1, 2022).

56 V. Putin, "Valdai Discussion Club session." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719>, October 3, 2019 (accessed November 1, 2022).

57 V. Putin, "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58848>, October 18, 2018 (accessed November 1, 2022).

58 V. Putin, "Concert marking the anniversary of Crimea's reunification with Russia." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68016>, March 18, 2022 (accessed November 1, 2022).

In sum, Putin had completed his ideological radicalization process towards the final stage of invoking his subjects to sacrifice themselves and obtain radical redemption for the Russian nation. In 2022, Putin as a dark messiah was offering the lives of his subjects to regain greatness for his empire, all the while slaughtering everyone standing between him and his nightmarish dream of a Holy Russian Empire.

6 Conclusions

In this paper we reconstructed *how* Putin used the combination of Orthodoxy and empire in his expressions, and *how* this usage developed over time and contributed to the radical legitimization of the war in Ukraine, including its attack on Ukrainian nationhood. For Putin, schooled in communist ideology as he was, the past was just another weapon in the hands of state propagandists. We have asserted that Putin used history to fuel a radicalization process consisting of a series of overlapping steps: Christian-imperial history served to: 1) formulate *a new state ideology*, 2) *mobilize society to rally behind the mission* of the Holy Russian Empire, 3) ostracize, *demonize enemies* and legitimize their planned destruction, 4) embed this weaponized, radical 'holy imperial'-ideology in an overarching metaphysical scheme, in which *death and war were envisioned as noble goals* for Russians to embrace, in order to obtain their place in heaven. Putin's dark, ultranationalist eschatology could be defined as a doctrine that projected the final destiny for the soul, society and the Russian people to be in a future state of Russian supremacy, and that death and destruction (even of countless Russians themselves) was but a mere obstacle on that road to salvation.

Putin increasingly used his historical-Christian examples, be it the references to Peter the Great, the Byzantine Empire, or the Bible in a radical, militant way. At first, he only applied his historical lessons to a Post-Soviet empire and nation, trying to find a new place in the world again, after the Soviet Union fell apart. Increasingly, after 2007/2008, he used the imperial past to support a more assertive, ultranationalist agenda. Next, he used examples from the past to prove that he was on the right course of action, that specific steps had been taken before. A notable example of this was the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, which according to Putin was not an annexation but rather a reunion: "In people's hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia"—that it was given away in the past was a mistake.⁵⁹

59 V. Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>, March 18, 2014 (accessed November 1, 2022).

In this light, we should consider the invasion in Ukraine an ultimate step down this pathway of imperial-Orthodox radicalization, with the references to heaven and hell, to satanism and decay (in Ukraine and in the West). It serves to project a dark eschatological prophecy that manifested itself in Putin's sowing of death and destruction in Ukraine and his denial of Ukraine's right to exist as a sovereign state.

At the same time, in the course of the summer months of 2022, however, instead of validating this radical redemption offer, the increased setbacks on the battlefield and the dropping morale contaminated Putin's redemptive narrative. His visions for an eschatological future for Russia started to implode, as most radical redemption narratives do in the end—but that is no longer part of our paper.

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