

Notorious Neo-Nationalism: A Cultural-Studies Reading of Post-Imperial Anxiety, Cyber-Warfare, and Russia’s Return to Authoritarianism

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Abstract

In the 1990s polls showed that the majority of Russians hoped to live in a post-Soviet country governed not only by a strong state but by the genuine rule of law. What happened to make Russian public opinion turn—or seem to turn—in the course of a few short years toward what might be called an ultranationalist, and sometimes lawless, “make Russia great again” attitude? And why did the Russian leadership decide to start exporting those views and values to democratic countries? To answer these questions Professor Clowes’s article focuses on the rhetoric and actions of two prominent ultra-nationalist demagogues—Aleksandr Prokhanov and Aleksandr Dugin, whose blueprints anticipated and then promoted aspects of contemporary Russian geopolitics. Drawing from concepts of the “cultural archive” and “usable history,” she considers why ultraconservatism became dominant in Russia today. Finally, she comments on resonances, and in some cases interactions, with various ultraconservative groups in Europe and the United States.

In summer 2017 white supremacists gathering in a park across the street from my house in Charlottesville, Virginia, launched into a chant, “Putin is our friend! Putin is our friend!” How could a crowd of American white-supremacist ultranationalists actually ally themselves with a former Soviet Communist Party

member and secret policeman, who is no friend of the United States, who bemoaned the end of the USSR in 1991 as a major catastrophe? Possibly they are attracted to the fact that Russia is indeed more than just one of the world's many mock-democratic, ultraconservative dictatorships, elected, though typically unfreely and unfairly, and now firmly entrenched. Today's Russian regime was one of the first, if not *the* first, of these ultraconservative "post-post-Cold-War" governments. Russia's single ruler of the twenty-first century has adopted the goal and practice of undermining real representative democratic polities throughout the world, and especially in Europe and the United States.

Where did those ultraconservative, ultranationalist attitudes come from? I argue that they did not arise with Putin. At base, Putin is a crafty, acquisitive, power-hungry, self-dealing secret policeman, who lacks respect for civil rights and human dignity (Dawisha, 2015). Although at times Putin might look like an ultranationalist, some Putin observers consider their man to be a pragmatist, not an ideologue (Tsygankov, 2006). Despite the fact that he views the end of the Soviet Union as a catastrophe and has engaged in various acts of carving away territory from countries bordering Russia, appearing determined to rebuild the old empire, Putin has little ideological loyalty (Laruelle, 2015, xiii). Nor is Putin himself an ultraconservative but rather takes ideological support where it supports his acquisitive goals. That sometime support comes from several prominent ultraconservative activists: this article presents two of the most vocal, visible, and radical, Aleksandr Prokhanov and Aleksandr Dugin (Laruelle, 2016, 58). Though they are not as close as some other advisors to the Kremlin, these two public figures are important because they feed the Putin administration sustained criticism, visionary vocabularies, and policy ideas that attempt to pull the government toward more radically conservative positions and actions. Different as they may otherwise be, Prokhanov's and Dugin's forms of ultraconservatism share three issues: post-imperial anxiety (what and where is Russia?), worry about border security (how do we protect ourselves from anti-

authoritarian revolt spreading to Russia?), and fervent support for anti-western aggression (how do we assert ourselves in the world?). We will return to the question posed at the start concerning the connections between these Russians and Western ultraconservatives. Finally, we clarify what a cultural-studies approach to the political situation adds to our understanding of ultraconservatism in Russia.

I define “ultraconservatism” and “ultranationalism” as political attitudes that contrast with traditional conservatism. Traditional “conservatism” can be understood as a system of political thought, based less on rationality in politics than on usual practices. Conservatism, thus understood, focuses on retaining traditional social formations, economic behaviors, and legal institutions that support existing property rights. Conservative policies typically resist social programs of broad betterment of the traditionally disenfranchised in, for example, national health, universal education, gender and ethnic equality, and, since the 1970s, environmental welfare (Hamilton, 2019). Ultraconservatism veers toward social and political control—giving the dominant (typically white) male group as much power as they can manage and sharply curbing freedoms of women, other-gendered people, and ethnic minority groups. Other traits of ultraconservative thinking can include complete gender division—masculine domination, feminine subservience; a cult of the leader; political secrecy and opacity; non-transparent, authoritarian rule by decree and special operations (secret police). Of greatest concern is ultraconservatives’ determination to hollow out civil institutions and freedoms—an independent judiciary, the rule of law, executive and legislative transparency; independent journalism, and freedoms of speech, worship, and assembly.

Several subsets of ultraconservatism bear mentioning. In the early twenty-first century, any number of ultraconservative movements have taken root around the world. Some of them are “neo-nationalist,” which I define through adherents’ devotion to a strongly exclusivist idea of the “nation,” inspired by a mythic vision of

an ideally simple, racially homogeneous society, united by language and tradition in the pre-modern past (Clowes, 2011; Bodin, Suslov, 2020). “Neo-nationalism” emphasizes the dominance of a specific ethnic group, typically “white” in the Russian, European, and American worlds. Another term I will use is “traditionalism,” a patriarchal, mainly European, and mainly conservative Catholic, line of thought developed by the mystic Catholic-turned-Muslim, René Guénon (1886-1951), and the proto-Fascist Italian thinker, Julius Evola (1898-1974) (Shekhovtsov et al., 2009; Laruelle, 2018, 209). In their aspirations neo-nationalist formations of the early 21st century have much in common with Fascist and, to some degree, Stalinist formations of the first half of the 20th century.

To understand Russia’s current neo-nationalist situation, its place in Russian history, and prospects for the future, it will help to invoke two concepts—the ideas of the “cultural archive” and “usable history.” The cultural archive is the vast set of repeating archetypal and narrative patterns and symbols, both rooted in and affecting the mentality and behaviors of a cultural community. The cultural archive also includes recurring patterns of thought, feeling, and action around which identity forms. The concept of a usable history may be understood and is typically used to mean the social, economic, and political experiences and outcomes available in that cultural community’s historical record. These outcomes are the ones most easily remembered, reimagined, and scripted in the given community. The relationship between the cultural archive and perceived usable history is arguably a causal one. Though certainly never foreordained, historical events that come to be perceived as usable history are strongly conditioned and scaffolded by deepseated elements already in the cultural archive. There will be much more to say about those ideas and their definitions once we provide the background needed for understanding our current situation.

Ultrnationalist ideas and actions have gained traction in Russian life over the last two centuries, at least since the early 1830s, during the reign of the anti-liberal Emperor Nicholas I. Nicholas's minister of education, Count Sergei Uvarov, promoted the idea of "official nationality" built on the three "pillars" of Orthodox Christianity (pravoslavie), autocracy (samoderzhavie), the "people" or the "nation" (narod). This official nationality soon became a state ideology. At the same time, among small circles of educated Russians so-called "Slavophile" anti-enlightenment views heralded the medieval Muscovite state and society of the 16th and 17th centuries and a mystical ideal of Orthodox community (sobornost) as a usable history and a workable model for the modern Russia polity. These ideas were countered among Europe-oriented, so-called "westernizing" reformers and revolutionaries, and in the Soviet era by Lenin's enlightened goals of a multi-ethnic state, gender and class equality, and universal education.

Toward the end of the Soviet era, from the 1970s onward, Slavophile and nationalist ideas resurfaced and started to bear fruit. The collapse of the Soviet empire in the late 1980s, and finally on December 25, 1991, meant the failure not only of the centralized economy but, of tremendous importance, it meant the final collapse of the guiding (if regularly violated) Soviet idea of the peaceful, multiethnic polity and goals of universal enlightenment, Soviet style. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, along with many other forms of neo-nationalism around the world, Russian neo-nationalist thinking exploded, in part, as a protest against Western-led globalization.

Economic development or lack thereof is a major cause of the emergence of neo-nationalism. At base, the Soviet era ended because of massive economic and financial failure of the centralized Soviet economy, which was cumbersome, inefficient, and run by ministers who held a tight grip on resources and raw materials. Despite the battle for Russia's rich resources and efforts by ministers and their minions to hold onto control, perestroika (economic reform) of the late 1980s and the 1990s was a

time of relative opportunity among smaller entrepreneurs, especially in light, consumer industries. However, because the Yeltsin government failed to nurture the first signs of real wellbeing among the general Russian populace and did not replace the old Soviet social contract between the government and the governed with a new "deal," by the turn of the century a significant number of Russians felt both frustration with their current condition and nostalgia for the old Soviet "order" (Gudkov, 658). Now, moving into the third decade of the 21st century, the Russian economy is still failing, caught in the vice-grip of a few oligarchs, who themselves are mainly loyal to the new dictator. Despite his early popularity and long twenty-year reign, Putin, like Yeltsin, has failed to allow the consumer economy to develop small- and middle-capital business and to help them build trade networks. Continuing poverty has fostered a tendency to blame more economically nimble groups, whether the "West," or "Jews," or small traders from the Caucasus, known as "blacks" for their black hair and swarthy complexions, instead of the corrupt but, so far, untouchable oligarchs of Russia (Clowes, 2011, 124).

At the same time as the Yeltsin and Putin governments failed to rebuild the Russian economy on a new, more productive footing, many ethnic Russians continue to suffer from powerful feelings of post-imperial anxiety and loss of self-esteem. These feelings have spilled into geopolitical worries and border anxiety. Because of its geographic location across a sprawling steppe region along much of its southern tier Russia has historically been defined by permeable borders—in all versions of the Russian empire, whether Muscovite, tsarist, or Soviet, Russian leaders have surrounded their country with layers of outlying colonies and satellites. Border anxiety rocketed in the late 1980s and 1990s during the various political rebellions against centralized Soviet rule in European Soviet republics and Soviet bloc countries. Since then the so-called "color revolutions" of the 2000s brought about the demise of Soviet-era leaders—for example, the rose revolution in Georgia in 2003, the orange revolution in Ukraine in 2005, and the tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan, also in 2005. In response to their sense

of being declass  , some groups of ethnic Russians living in newly independent states like Estonia have formed something like fifth columns in support of initiatives coming from Moscow that undermine the newly formed country's independence and its support networks with Europe (Pomerantsev, 59-64). Happy to promote Russian might in areas around Russia's borders, these attitudes among ethnic Russians played a role in the illegal 2014 annexation of Crimea and the current frozen war in eastern Ukraine.

To add to the post-imperial malaise, regional groups within the Russian Federation were taking measures to assert their autonomy. The Yeltsin administration lacked a unifying national vision, even as they worked to reunite the Russian Federation. Although they adopted the tsarist double-headed eagle and the pre-revolutionary tricolor Russian flag, they had no national anthem. Official gatherings featured a wordless "patriotic song," taken from the final chorus of Mikhail Glinka's 1836 opera, "A Life for the Tsar." We remember embarrassing moments from the 1996 summer Olympics in Atlanta when Russian athletes stood in silence as they received their medals and listened to the Glinka music. Since then, perhaps not surprisingly, Putin has adapted the Stalinist anthem, reworded however inadequately by its original author, Sergei Mikhalkov (Clowes, 2011, 170-171).

Despite these serious ideological problems, Russians, newly sprung from Soviet authoritarianism, had broad social and political aspirations. According to polls from the 1990s a large majority of Russians, 88% according to one poll, were intensely interested in rebuilding a strong state with a strong ruler and in recovering great-power status (Chinayeva, 43). At the same time, they *also* yearned for some vague notion of civil reforms and the rule of law (Chinayeva, 43-44; Gudkov, 134, 661). On the other hand, by the late 1990s growing expressions of anger were erupting in some ethnic-Russian spheres. In 2005, five years into his first presidency, Putin gave voice

to this anger, calling the collapse of the USSR “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century” (Putin, 2005).

There were segments of the population who developed a clear, positive identity for themselves and, they hoped, for the Russian polity—and here are the roots of our current ultraconservative dilemma. The easing of censorship in the 1980s gave anti-civil-society and neo-nationalist circles the chance to give voice to a public identity entirely distinct from the Soviet one. First, such major writers as Valentin Rasputin from the Soviet-era “village prose” movement, which was devoted to the search for the “real Russia,” turned toward racist rhetoric, particularly besmirching the reputation of Muslims from the Caucasus Mountains (for example, Chechens and Azeris) and Jews (Rasputin, 2003). At the same time, the Soviet institution for historical preservation (VOOPIK), active since the mid-1960s, developed a racist, neo-nationalist political arm, called *Pamiat’* (Memory), which took to the streets and the airwaves to voice a “Russia for (ethnic) Russians” attitude (Laruelle, 2018, 214). Other new ultraconservative developments followed, for example, the newspapers, *Den’* and *Zavtra*; and political developments, such as National Bolshevism and so-called neo-Eurasianism, both of which channeled a resurgent Stalinism.

It is essential to point out that in the early and mid-1990s these attitudes were considered to lie on the fringe of the political mainstream. To put these ultraconservative developments in perspective, according to a 1996 poll only 10% of Russians supported these “nationalists” (Chinyaeva, 45). How these fringe attitudes came to poison the mainstream is the conundrum I now address. While by no means the only ultraconservative voices, or the ones closest to power, the two public intellectuals, Aleksandr Prokhanov and Aleksandr Dugin, articulate important aspects of the neo-nationalist views from which Putin takes support. On one hand, Prokhanov is an ultranationalist who believes in a providentially guided Russia, and, on the other, Dugin is fundamentally a fascist, who believes in reinstituting the old empire

with ethnic Russians at the helm (Laruelle, 2015, 67). Both deserve attention, if only because of their remarkable stamina. They have stubbornly been making their gadfly's sting felt for over three decades, and their actions (along with that of several other ultraconservatives) have nudged Putin toward the ultraconservative side of the political spectrum.

Aleksandr Prokhanov was born in 1938 at the height of Stalin's Great Terror and would come of age after Stalin's death in 1953. Educated as an aviation engineer in the 1960s, he soon turned to military journalism and novel writing. A talented prose writer with an abhorrent message, Prokhanov has reached a broad readership with over 20 novels, some of which have appeared in mainstream journals and have won Soviet and Russian book prizes. As a journalist, he was embedded in many late-Soviet military adventures—Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, and Nicaragua. In the 1970s and 1980s Prokhanov wrote for the newspaper of the Soviet Writers Union, *Literaturnaia gazeta* (Literary Gazette), and in 1985, right before Gorbachev introduced perestroika and glasnost, he became the hardline, neo-Stalinist secretary of the Writers Union. Prokhanov used his byline in *Literaturnaia gazeta* to promote strongly Stalinist views—adulation of the authoritarian leader and the powerful centralized state, supported by the military and secret police (Clowes, 2020).

In 1990 Prokhanov founded the neo-nationalist newspaper, *Den'* (Day) and edited it until it was closed in 1993 for its support of the attempted coup to overthrow the Yeltsin government. Almost immediately he started the same type of rag, now called *Zavtra* (Tomorrow), using this bully pulpit to argue against social institutions that actually empower and protect citizens—rule of law, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and an independent judiciary. In post-Soviet politics Prokhanov first supported the 1990s communist party leader, Gennadii Ziuganov, and, for the last few years, especially since the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014—Vladimir Putin. This connection has paid off, giving Prokhanov greater visibility on various national

committees and, more importantly, allowing him in 2012 to found a policy group known as the Izborsk Club (named after a medieval town on the northwest border of Russia, near Estonia). An ultranationalist counterpart to the internationally known Valdai Club, the Izborsk Club offers policy briefs and ideological views to the Putin government.

Aleksandr Dugin is a generation younger than Prokhanov. The two know each other well and in the past have worked closely together on *Zavtra*. In 2007 Prokhanov has praised Dugin as the real ideological leader of post-Soviet Russia, as someone who "is resurrecting ancient [prezhnie] archetypes" (Boiko, 2007). Dugin agrees with Prokhanov on many points, though he considers himself not a real nationalist but a "neo-Eurasianist." The term "Eurasianism" comes from a group of émigré Russian intellectuals from the 1920s and 1930s who believed that Russia was in essence both European and Asian and should protect the Eurasian world against the incursions of European colonizers. In contrast, while Dugin believes in friendship and cooperation between Eurasian countries and claims tolerance for differences in religious belief, he advocates for a Russian-dominated world guided by an oppressive form of Russian Orthodox Christianity. Finally, Dugin is much more outward-reaching than Prokhanov, in the sense that he networks with ultranationalists and so-called "traditionalist" groups around Europe, Britain, and the US (Bassin, 180).

Dugin was born in 1962 into the elite, "nomenklatura" family of a highly placed general in Soviet military intelligence (Boiko, 2007). Even as a younger person he was feisty, willful, and argumentative. In 1979 and the early 1980s he studied at, then was expelled from, the Moscow Aviation Institute (Laruelle, 2018, 213). At that time he joined a conservative Moscow intellectual group, called the Iuzhinskii Circle where members were reading European traditionalist thought (Laruelle, 2018, 203-4). Toward the start of President Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of political transparency and free speech ("glasnost"), in 1988, Dugin briefly joined the governing board of the

ultranationalist group, *Pamiat’* (Memory), which, we remember, was the anti-Semitic political arm of a Soviet organization for the preservation of monuments (Laruelle, 2018, 214). Soon conflicts with the director forced him to leave (Boiko, 2007). In the following years, 1989-1991, Dugin founded his own organizations, especially the religious and historical center and publishing house, “Arktogaia” (which means “northern earth”) through which he published a steady stream of books, as well as translations of works popular in European “New Right” circles, for example, the French traditionalist, René Guénon, and the Italian proto-Fascist, Julius Evola. In 1990 Dugin’s father arranged for him to work in deep-secret military archives, which certainly affected the direction of his later geopolitical writing (Boiko, 2007). The following year, in 1991, he joined Prokhanov on the editorial board of *Den’*. A person of impressive energy, Dugin in these years (1989-1993) started traveling abroad and networking with ultraconservatives in western Europe. To this day he continues in this vein, though he is often denied a visa to appear in person and has to speak remotely with European and other groups (Shekhovtsov, 2017, 42-48).

In the mid-1990s, 1994-1998, Dugin became active in political life, collaborating with the radical fascist Eduard Limonov to found the National Bolshevik Party, now banned since 2005 (Horvath, 584). He secured his closest connection to political power in 1999 when he worked briefly as an advisor to the speaker of the Duma (parliament), Gennady Seleznyov. In 2001 he founded the so-called “Eurasian” movement, which was meant to unite traditionalists throughout Russia, Central Asia, and Europe, and in 2002 founded the “Eurasia” party. In his own party, however, he was unable to garner the broad support and the votes to become its ideologist. After this failure the party changed its name to “Homeland” (Rodina), and Dugin was expelled. Nonetheless, Dugin has persisted: he has run unsuccessfully a number of times for a seat in the Duma and has continued his political agitations. Going forward, Dugin continues as leader of the Eurasianist movement and the allied organization, the Eurasianist Union of Youth, which has demonstrated against illegal immigration

(Boiko, 2007). Since 2014 and the Russian invasion of Crimea and eastern Ukraine, Dugin has been a stalwart supporter of the frozen war.

Dugin has worked to attain intellectual respectability. In the late 1990s he tightened his connections to the Russian military. He published his most widely known work, *The Foundations of Geopolitics* (1997), and taught at the General Staff College of the Russian Army. This book still enjoys a great deal of respect in military circles (Clover, 2016). In the first decade of this century Dugin became an adjunct professor of sociology at Moscow State University but then was fired in June 2014 for an interview he gave to a media outlet. Following the Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine he was heard to have screamed a hate-filled, anti-Ukrainian call to "kill, kill, kill" people "who commit atrocities in Ukraine," by which he meant Ukrainians (Filipenok, 2014). Soon after, a petition filled with signatures demanding that Dugin be fired was handed to the rector of MSU (Filipenok, 2014).

Both Prokhanov and Dugin have done a great deal to create a potent, if abhorrent, image of Russia and to assert ultraconservative expressions of "Russianness" in Russia and around the world. They have imaginatively redrawn the map of Russia, conceived of aggressive responses to border concerns, and supported various kinds of attack against Europe and the US, which for Dugin include cyberwarfare. The first of these steps has been Dugin's effort to reimagine the map of Russia, taking it from a political backwater to a potential world center (Dugin, Maps, 2002). In his book, *The Foundations of Geopolitics*, Dugin started the process by resurrecting the early-twentieth-century ideas of the British inventor of geopolitics, Halford Mackinder, himself a racist, and the German general and geographer, Karl Haushofer, who influenced Nazi expansionist ideas. Mackinder invented the terms "heartland" and "rimland." Writing in 1904 before the terrible defeat of the tsarist Russian armed forces in the Russo-Japanese War, he argued that whoever controlled Eastern Europe and the Eurasian "heartland" would control the world (Figure 1). He saw Russian

territory as the ultimate heartland and the hub of power in the world and predicted that Russia would soon develop into a major world economic force. Dugin certainly took inspiration from these predictions. In a map of post-Soviet Russia from 2002, Dugin shows his homeland as the hinterland it has become (Dugin maps, 2002). The "unipolar" world is dominated by the United States. Next, Dugin sees Russia emerging as the center of a world network that mainly includes former fascist or ultranationalist strongholds, Japan and Germany, and, perhaps surprisingly, Iran. (It is worth noting here that Dugin's interest in Iran can be explained in terms of traditional Eurasianist beliefs in the cooperation between Turkic, Persian, and Slavic peoples and states.) The final map posits a world that clearly divides the NATO and Pacific military partnerships of the United States, leaving the US in isolation (Dugin, Maps, 2002).

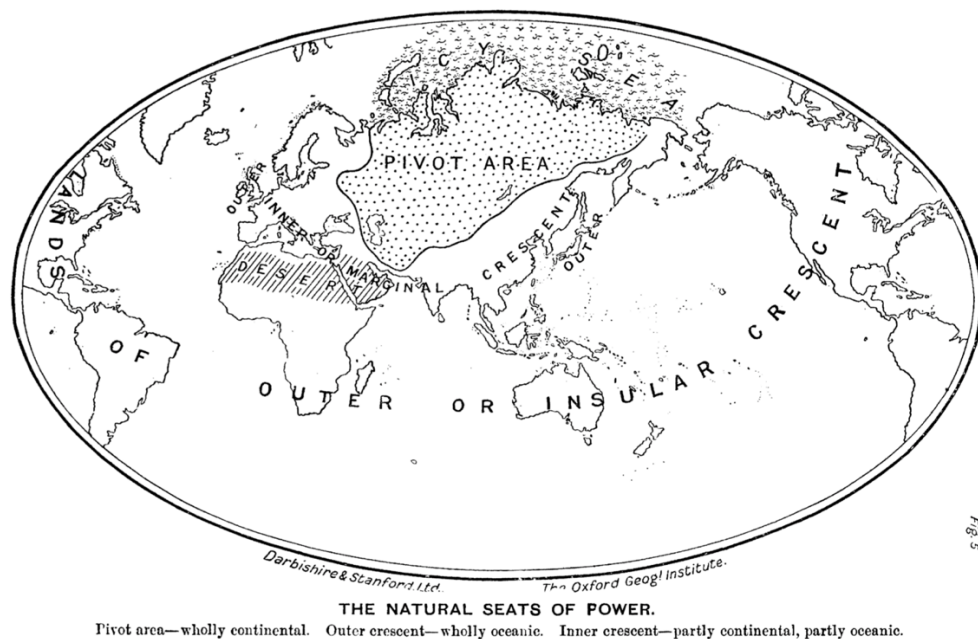


Figure 1: Halford Mackinder's 1904 map of geopolitical power structures. *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 23, No.4, (April, 1904), 421–437, 435.

Prokhanov, in contrast, is interested in creating a living ultranationalist religion and mapping his homeland as sacred ground. He has a both mystical and visceral sense of "being Russian," if such is even possible. In his most famous, and infamous, novel,

Mr. Hexogen (2002), Russia is a specifically Orthodox Christian body, and the non-Russians, especially Muslim southerners, who deal in drugs and sex in Russia, are parasites on that body (Prokhanov, 2002, 97, 102-3). In his 2016 collection of previously published opinion pieces, *Novorossia: Washed in the Blood*, he sanctifies “Novorossia,” by which he means the terrain of both Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. Since Crimea is the place where in 988 Prince Vladimir first accepted Orthodox Christianity and Christianized all Rus, Prokhanov views the peninsula as “sacred Russian ground, the altar of our religion” (Prokhanov, 2016, 26). It is the site where “the lord touched his forehead and the light of Orthodoxy whipped across Russian spaces right through to the Pacific Ocean” (Prokhanov, 2016, 26). Of crucial importance, Prokhanov’s mysticism is inextricably connected to political and military power: he also pictures Crimea as the site of Russian military power, “the bastion of a great power, the harbor of a glorious navy” (Prokhanov, 2016, 26).

Along with these essays, in 2014 Prokhanov released a novel with the unsubtle title, *Crimea*, just after Russia’s illegal annexation of the Black Sea peninsula. In a moment of spiritual rebirth, the protagonist Lemekhov imagines himself as a giant Christ figure newly risen from the dead. Again here religion is mapped onto Russian terrain, as Lemekhov lies down on the ground and extends his extremities in a way reminiscent of both the eight-point Orthodox cross and the political vectors that Dugin imagines in his Eurasianist “networking” map. Lemekhov feels himself able to reach all parts of Russia (and Eurasia):

Lemekhov walked along the evening steppe and his shadow extended into the reddish distance. He grew tired and lay down on the earth. He splayed his arms in the form of a cross. One arm stretched to the east, across great plains and rivers, Siberian cities and lakes—to China, which was raising its own skyscrapers, developing powerful armies ... The other arm stretched toward the west, touching Gothic cathedrals, great European capitals, sacred stones, suffused with beauty and eternal

debates that foretold war and invasion. His legs reached toward Iran with its green carvings and mirrored mosques, to centers of atomic power, to oil tankers sailing the hot [southern] seas. His head rested on a pillow of polar ice, under the rainbows of ever-burning northern lights. He was the gigantic country that gave birth to him (Prokhanov, 2014, 132).

It is worth pointing out how this imagined map resembles Aleksandr Dugin's neo-Eurasianist map with its anti-NATO, anti-Atlanticist vectors that link Moscow to Teheran, Tokyo, and Berlin to create a new non-Western power network. More importantly, though, Prokhanov's mystical imagined geography marks Russia with something like the eight-point Orthodox Christian cross with its three crosspieces, now represented in Lemekhov's body—his head, hands outstretched, and feet. Russia has symbolically become the "pivot area," the "heartland" of Halford Mackinder's "world island" and now radiates its power out to the rest of the world. This heartland is not ecumenical or tolerant in any sense of the word, but rather heavily marked with Russian Orthodox symbols. (In addition, it is worth noting that, while lying on the ground, the protagonist hears the "wondrous word, Crimea," from a clearly providential source, which suggests that Crimea is the key to re-empowering Russia.) By creating these vectors, first Dugin and later Prokhanov, have surmounted the traditional Russian border anxiety by making Russia the initiator of powerful international networks and condoning and even promoting the Russian government's transgressive activities, most notably invading bordering sovereign countries.

The process of reinvesting the Russian map with new political and mystical significance helps these ultraconservatives alleviate their fears of the Muslim world and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well their serious border anxiety. Here Prokhanov's, like Dugin's, solutions adhere to the saying, "offense is the best defense." We remember, too, that Prokhanov has developed his own policy center, which itself makes a statement about the Russian map and its borders. In 2012 he

founded the policy research arm of his newspaper, *Zavtra*, which he named the Izborsk Club, after a town on the northwest border of Russia with Estonia. The name of the Izborsk Club is part of a whole effort on Prokhanov's part to mark border areas, again, as "sacred ground" (Figure 2). Another way that Prokhanov marks border areas as Russian territory is through constructing what he calls "sacred mounds" [sviashchennyi kholm]. This practice started in Northwest Russia, in the Pskov area near the Estonian border, clearly as a symbolic means of confronting NATO power on the border of Russia. Prokhanov believes that the medieval town of Pskov embodies ancient Russian ideals of valor and mystical spiritual strength. He takes the idea of the sacred mound from pagan burial mounds that dot various parts of Russia, including Pskov (Prokhanov, 2002, 454-457). His mound symbolically unites Russian territory at this border spot, built with soil transported from all sorts of other "sacred" historical sites, for example, from the estate of the great Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin, a major Orthodox monastery in the far north Solovetskii Islands, and the site at Kulikovo near the Don River of the first Russian victory over the Mongols in 1380, and most importantly, the symbol of Russian might, the Moscow Kremlin (Donovan, 2018, 76). In this way, Prokhanov reminds attentive Russians of the "usable history" that, in his view, made the Russian state and Russian religion great.



Figure 2: Picture of the "sacred mound," photograph by Victoria Donovan.
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Prokhanov exhorts fellow Russians to come on a pilgrimage to the mound, which he heralds as the “earthen Gospel” and the point from which one can embrace the vast distances of what he calls the “Russian World” (Prokhanov, 2013, 39)—again reaffirming the newly reclaimed and reimagined map. Strangely, Prokhanov claims that the mound exerts spiritual power and actually helped to create the energy and will that enabled Russians to recapture Crimea (Prokhanov, Aug. 27, 2014). And after the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 soil from Crimean battle sites was added to the mound. In the future there appear to be plans to build another sacred mound in Eastern Ukraine.

Dugin has dealt with his border anxiety through aggressive network-building with ultraconservatives in other countries, ironically in the much resented “West”—among other places, France, Spain, and the United States (US), and more recently in Turkey. Among the tools Dugin promotes is cyberwarfare. We tend to associate cyberwarfare with military intelligence of various countries (including the US)—certainly the Mueller investigation makes that point (Mueller, 4, 36-51). In fact, Dugin appears to have been one of the first Russian ultraconservatives publicly to support the idea of internet aggression and particularly hacking Western sites. Though with his 1997 book, *Foundations of Geopolitics*, Dugin won the attention of highly placed leaders in the Russian military and in the Duma, I have found no mention of cyberwarfare in that book. It is in his 2005 book, *Pop Culture and the Signs of the Times* that Dugin recognized the advantages of an Internet war against NATO and the United States, the so-called “Atlanticists.” That was a year or two before the known Russian cyber actions against Estonia and Georgia (Pomerantsev, 61-62). Dugin understood relatively early that the Internet had the power to undermine traditionally solid and trusted media sources of information, which he called the “authoritative [*vlastnyi*] center,” which “sends forth the word, and the enormous passive majority of consumers ... are forced to be silent or recycle the same stupidity that they had heard on the TV screen the night before” (Dugin, 2005, 482). At the start of the 21st century

he was already urging that the Internet become the “weapon of the disenfranchised of this world” (Dugin, 2005, 489). In his view, “in the Internet everyone is equalized—both the marginalized and the System, both rich and poor, both rulers of the media [*vlastiteli SMI*] and users of information” (Dugin, 2005, 490). At that time Dugin was already praising Internet hackers and pirates as the revolutionaries of today.

It is important to stress, however, that in 2005 Dugin was not praising hackers because they were meddling in political elections but because they were succeeding in flouting Western copyright laws and pirating protected materials. He welcomed the Internet piracy industry that could conceivably set the “monopolar world of the Atlanticists” on its heels (Dugin, 2005, 485). To start with, Dugin’s Internet war was economic, though with political overtones. Now it is clearly political, and he has allies among fascists and anti-civil-society activists throughout the world, including in the United States. It should be noted that in 2016 Dugin actively and vocally endorsed Trump. The goal of cyberwarfare, to disrupt systems and sow confusion and chaos, is symbolized by the so-called “star of chaos.” Dugin’s 2002 map showing arrows crossing borders from Russia into various other countries has now been replaced in his iconography with another set of arrows which make up the so-called “star of chaos”. Since 2005, the star has become the emblem of the Eurasian Youth Union, the youth wing of the Eurasia party, which Dugin founded (Figure 3).

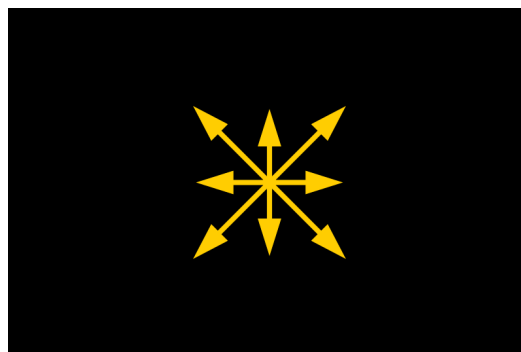


Figure 3: Flag of the Eurasian Youth Union.

What do Prokhanov, Dugin, and their European and American counterparts actually have in common? Ultraconservatives everywhere tend to worry about terrain and, as we know from current ultraconservative US politics, they share strong border anxiety, although in their details these border issues are different for Russians than they are for Europeans and Americans. European ultraconservatives and now the United States under the Trump regime fret, among other things, about incursions of peoples from largely Muslim countries. Ultranationalists in France's Front National, for example, appreciate Serbian ultras as a defense against Muslim migrants (Hunter, 23). Russia has experienced an inflow of southern emigres, and, as we have seen, Russians can often be outrageously hostile in their discourse and treatment of these southerners.

We remember the additional complicating factor in the Russian border situation. The collapse of the Soviet empire left sizable Russian-identifying populations on the other side of Russia's new borders. Although many Russian emigres acclimate to the newly created country, countries like Estonia and Ukraine that border the Russian Federation do have a "fifth-column" problem. These ethnic Russians tend to support and sympathize with the goals of the Putin regime to rebuild the former empire by chipping away at actual terrain or through cyberwarfare (Pomerantsev, 61-62). Clearly, the current Russian government and their Russian-identifying allies across the border are interested not in fencing the Russia Federation in but in expanding its borders to include these exiled populations. This situation is fuel for empire rebuilders like Dugin and advocates like Prokhanov of Russian sacred land now located in other countries.

How do Russian ultraconservatives connect to similar activists elsewhere? Although Prokhanov's following, such as it is, appears to be mainly in Russia, Dugin, in contrast, is known to American ultraconservatives, such as erstwhile Trump strategist, Steve Bannon (Hawk, 2019). In 2016 Dugin was interviewed by ultraconservative conspiracy theorist, Alex Jones, and in 2018 he gave an interview with the American



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racist and ultraconservative commentator, Brittany Pettibone, and Canadian activist, Lauren Southern (Dugin, 2018). The focus on the conversation was on reaching millennials. However, according to Southern Poverty Law Center Russia expert, Hannah Gais, this latest interview did not garner much attention, and the swirl of American ultraconservative interest around Dugin seems to have died down since 2016 (Gais, personal emails, Dec. 19, 2019).

Dugin’s greatest contact with American ultras has been with erstwhile Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, American neo-Nazi, Richard Spencer, and Matthew Heimbach, founder of the Traditionalist Worker Party. Dugin met Duke in Russia sometime in 2005 or before (Gais, 2019). In 2014 Spencer held a fascist-oriented conference, “The Future of Europe,” in Budapest. Dugin was invited as keynote speaker, though in the end he was denied a visa to Hungary and was barred from attending. Spencer’s ex-wife, Nina Kouprianova (pseudonym, Nina Byzantina), represents Spencer’s closest connection to Dugin. Kouprianova translated several of Dugin’s essays and brought them out through the publishing arm of Spencer’s National Policy Institute (Gais, 2019). Matthew Heimbach has created his own connections with Dugin, offering the opinion that: “I see Russia as kind of the axis for nationalists’.” And Heimbach helps us to answer our first question—how American white supremacists could admire a former Soviet loyalist (Vladimir Putin). Heimbach sees parallel means but a 180-degree shift in ideologies. In the Soviet era, according to him, “there was the Comintern, the Communist International. And in the modern era, it’s almost like a nationalist version — or the Traditionalist International” (Casey Michel, 2018). Here we see the close connection between “red” and “brown” politics and their shared hatred for civil society.

* * *



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How can a cultural studies approach to examining contemporary neo-nationalism enhance our understanding of this global phenomenon? We return now to the idea of the cultural archive. Every cultural community has a “cultural archive” of meaningful mental templates, or codes, for ordering the world, making decisions, and solving crises. I define the cultural archive as the imagined set of all archetypes, symbols, rituals, narratives, and places—in short, the stuff that cultural codes are made of—that have embedded themselves over centuries in a cultural community’s practice (Geertz, 13-28; Lotman, 134; Foucault, 127-131). In my culture class at the University of Virginia I start with the proposition that enduring change of attitudes and values is exceedingly hard to enact because these templates and codes are so deeply ingrained in the community’s habitual behaviors that they shape the outcome of any change imposed from outside or above. In the course of the semester students ask repeatedly how then major change takes place. In fact, change does happen and not necessarily because of war or civilizational and technological developments. However, the “cultural archive” approach to thinking about cultural attitudes and behaviors predicts that, even if a cultural community evolves—which it does—or change is imposed through trade (international economic activity), invasion (war), or governmental decree (leader), over time the change will typically be massaged to fit within this set of deep-seated cultural templates, complexly understood.

The other concept from history and cultural studies that helps us understand neo-nationalism is the idea of “usable history.” To review, usable history may be defined as the set of actions taken and outcomes experienced—whether considered to be successes or failures—that are embedded in the history and identity narratives of the cultural community. Both of these concepts can help us answer our questions about Prokhanov’s and Dugin’s success in moving from the fringes toward the center of Russian politics—though still certainly not at the very center of Russian political life.

The East Slavic lands—Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine—have what might seem a somewhat narrow political usable history in their cultural archive. Since the earliest of times, the East Slavs have had the reputation, acknowledged by the earliest chroniclers of the 10th and 11th centuries, of having difficulty ruling themselves successfully. For much of their history East Slavic peoples have been ruled by an authoritarian ruler, first the “prince” and later the “tsar,” and then the “emperor,” and in the last century and into our current time, the communist and then post-communist dictator. “Freedom” can mean not civil freedoms but rather either unbridled, anarchistic revolt or internecine warfare. Even toward the start of East Slavic written history, the Primary Chronicle from the 12th century recounts the East Slavic attitude toward self-rule. The East Slavs seemed incapable of it, so they invited the “Rus,” who were Scandinavian traders and invaders, to rule. To wit, the famous lines from the early chronicle: “Our land is great and rich, but there is no order in it. Come to rule and reign over us” (Zenkovsky, 50).

In 1969 the Soviet dissident Andrei Amal’rik published a book that received wide reception in the West, *Can the Soviet Union Last until 1984?* He created a “wheel of ideologies” that make up what he judged the set of political ideologies available in what we are calling Russians’ cultural archive (Figure 4). Using that array of available choices, we can start to explain the prominence of ultraconservatism. Several events point to this outcome. First, virtually all the ideologies on the left side of the wheel, “Marxism” and “liberal ideology,” have been officially discredited (Marxism-Leninism) or suppressed (rule of law), and beyond the educated populace in the big cities they have often been poorly understood. Second, Putin is still generally perceived as succeeding in his promise to strengthen the Russian state. In conclusion, the combination of “chauvinism” and “messianism”—with the accompanying neo-Slavophilism—appear to be the choices that remain. Prokhanov and Dugin are among the loudest proponents of these ideological choices.



Figure 4: Amalrik’s wheel of ideologies

It bears repeating that with few exceptions in Russia there is historically mainly one option for a workable political structure: “centralized” power, which traditionally has translated into some form of police state, rule by decree, and military enforcement. Whether the ruler embraces an enlightened or an ultraconservative ideology has everything to do with which ideology was last discredited. The utter hypocrisy of the “enlightened” Soviet vision has certainly affected political opinion and political choices of the last 35 years.

Historically, as now, independently organized, “grassroots” initiatives—even if they are very moderate—are typically perceived by those in power as being a “revolutionary” threat and are co-opted or suppressed by the state. A good example is the ultraconservative view of the very popular moderate leader, Boris Nemtsov, who was assassinated directly under the Kremlin wall in February, 2015. In 2015 Nemtsov was planning a demonstration in central Moscow, right near the Kremlin, protesting the Russian incursion into Eastern Ukraine. The strange perception of the “grassroots” and the “middle” as a “threat” is palpable in an interview from January

18, 2020, with Prokhanov on Ekho Moskvyy (Echo of Moscow), the one remaining independent, nationwide radio station. In the interview Prokhanov commented that he perceives Nemtsov as a revolutionary threat, in paranoid fashion interpreting the planned peaceful demonstration as a revolutionary move on the Kremlin, in other words, as another type of color revolution (Prokhanov, 2020).

Conclusions

In her book, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym defines two kinds of nostalgia: "reflective" and "restorative" (Boym, 41-48). While reflective nostalgia meditates on the ruins of the past, restorative nostalgia invents a past "home" and attempts to "bring back" that place. In our world some of us who do not like sharing the world with other cultural communities are inventing a happy past time when our cultural community (whichever it is—Russian neo-nationalist, Eurasianist, American white-supremacist, French Front National) ruled over a peaceful, homogeneous community and heroically rebuffed all invaders. Boym warns of the extreme destructiveness of this restorative nostalgia, which, as we find in Prokhanov's and Dugin's writings and actions, penetrates every fiber of the neo-nationalist project.

It should always be remembered that, accompanying this "happy" dream of a harmonious, homogeneous community, is utter violence in word and deed. In a 1998 interview Dugin went on record to say: "You must take a knife, put on a mask, go out of the house in the evening and kill at least one Yank," to which he added, "I do not know whether any of the New Right activists have ever been under artillery siege, but our people do not only go to meetings or fight at the barricades, they also go to real wars, for instance to the Dniestr district [Moldova], or to Yugoslavia....The New Right is only a project, and we are its architects. The future is truly ours" (quoted in Clowes, 2011, 43). Words have weight. Lest we massage Dugin and his kind, let's understand that he is violent and he condones radical violence, especially against any defense of civil society or rule of law.



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Finally, let us return to the white supremacist chant, “Putin is our friend!” That opinion has emerged more broadly in American and British ultraconservative politics. The American ultraconservative preacher, Pat Buchanan, has wondered aloud whether Putin is “one of us.” And British neo-nationalist, Nigel Farage, thinks Putin is brilliant (Bassin, 18). To be clear, Putin is a man lacking real ideological belief. Some see him as a pragmatist who will negotiate between various obstacles to do what it takes to stay in power. The ultraconservatives are not precisely Putin’s brains, but they have helped to script a path that he has sometimes followed, and they have generally supported him. This toxic partnership—together with the weakness of the liberal paradigm of self-rule in the Russian cultural archive—have led to a new Russian political dominant that to some degree resonates with other forms of ultraconservatism around the world.



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