



Nationalism and legitimation for authoritarianism: A comparison of Nicholas I and Vladimir Putin

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ABSTRACT

This article draws parallels between Tsar Nicholas I and current Russian President Vladimir Putin with respect to their use of nationalism to justify statist policies and political authoritarianism. Building upon insights by Alexander Gerschenkron about the economic development of “backwards” states, it argues that both Nicholas and Putin have rhetorically used Western concepts such as nationalism and democracy to legitimize their rule but have modified them to give them more statist content. Under Nicholas, this was exemplified in the tripartite (Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality) Official Nationality policy. Putin has emphasized patriotism, power, and statism to justify centralization of power and authoritarian policies. Putin’s policies and rhetoric are strong analogs to those of Nicholas. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to explain state-inspired Russian nationalism and how it has been aligned with authoritarian politics, as well as specifying similarities between present and past in Russia.

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1. Introduction

Much attention has been devoted to the issue of how Vladimir Putin is a product of the Russian/Soviet past. It has become a veritable cliché that his rule resembles that of Russia under the tsars.¹ Biographies of Putin stress his background as

a KGB agent and desire to emulate his former boss, Yuri Andropov, a former spy-chief who sought to modernize and save the Soviet system (Gessen, 2012). The search for historical analogs to explain contemporary Soviet/Russian leaders, has, of course, a venerable history, with the Ivan IV–Stalin pairing perhaps the most well-known (Yanov, 1981).

This article aims to give more content to the at-times simplistic label of Putin as the newest in the long line of Russian tsars, who, it should be emphasized, varied greatly in terms of the style and substance of their rule. While it is clear that Putin is not a Westernizing liberal, it is also apparent that comparisons to Stalin or Ivan IV are grossly exaggerated.² Despite his roots in St. Petersburg, the

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¹ For examples, see Time’s headline “A Tsar is Born” when it crowned Putin Man of the Year in 2007 (*Time*, December 19, 2007). Upon Putin’s re-election in 2012, commentators suggested that “Tsar Putin Returns to Kremlin,” (Human Rights House Network, March 12, 2012), and that Putin was a “21st Century Czar” (*Globe and Mail* [Toronto], March 3, 2012).

² While one can point to repressive aspects of contemporary Russia, it is not a totalitarian state based on widespread terror. For a fantasy/fictional work that advances the notion that Russia may soon resemble aspects of Ivan IV’s Russia, see Sorokin (2011). Putin is also not seeking to restore Soviet communism. His famous quote is “He who does not regret the break-up of the Soviet Union has no heart; he who wants to revive it in its previous form has no head.”

comparison with Peter I is also, in our view, off the mark.³ This article instead finds an interesting and insightful parallel between Putin and Nicholas I (1825–1855), the “Iron Tsar.” Like Putin, Nicholas was conservative, insofar as he valued the old order and was against sweeping reforms to transform Russia or re-make it in the Western image. At the same time, however, he faced a crisis and had to bow to certain political realities, making some rhetorical nods to new political ideas and movements, in particular the notion of nationalism. However, he adapted these ideas to suit his own agenda, giving them a highly statist character. Putin has done the same, both in terms of invoking nationalism and modifying the idea of “democracy” in accordance with his own priorities. The result, in both cases, was the adoption of some elements of contemporary political discourse but very little of its substance, particularly with respect to political liberalization.

This article will explore aspects of Nicholas’ and Putin’s rule, focusing on the use of nationalism and efforts to preserve and even extend state power. In both cases, leaders invoke history and aspects of Russian exceptionalism to both define the Russian nation and justify authoritarian rule. In this way, they can be viewed as innovative, albeit with the aim of preserving much of the old order. Like Nicholas, however, Putin is finding that such a strategy is not cost-free and is arguably having diminishing returns.

2. Russia, “backwardness,” and statist adaptation

The basis of the comparison in this paper rests on a fundamental insight made by Alexander Gerschenkron in his classic work, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Gerschenkron, 1962). Gerschenkron’s fundamental thesis is that late modernizers – states that are “backwards” compared to the most “advanced” states – will follow a distinct development path, one that tends to “differ fundamentally from that of an advanced country” (Gerschenkron, 1962, 7). In his examination of the organizational structures of industrialization in more “backwards” states such as Germany, Bulgaria and Russia, Gerschenkron notes that they do not have to be innovators in order to experience economic development. True, they are playing “catch up” and their development in many respects will be behind that of the leading states, but they can also develop relatively quickly as they do not have to wait and see what works and what does not. They can simply borrow and adapt what the innovators have already done. This is the classic “advantage of backwardness.” Moreover, and this is the crucial element for our purposes, the most efficient method of development is to employ the power and resources of the state. There is little need (or, for that matter, ability) to experiment with various ideas or develop an independent entrepreneurial class or open markets. The blueprint for development at a given stage has already been

crafted. The state, as the most powerful organization in these countries and the only one with coercive power, can then marshal the necessary resources for building the infrastructure to foster development. The classic example, in the Soviet case, was the use of the mass production techniques of Ford and Taylor, albeit under a regime of state planning and ownership.

The net result, in Gerschenkron’s analysis of late 19th–early 20th century economic development, is that “backwards” states will adapt aspects of the economic system from the more developed states. However, the two societies are not mirror images of each other. Development in “backwards” states will take on a decidedly statist cast, with certain repercussions, including less likelihood for political liberalization.

Our analysis borrows from Gerschenkron, but we are more interested in how a “backwards” state adapts political ideas that originally developed elsewhere. Gerschenkron himself acknowledges that the intellectual climate surrounding development will differ between an advanced and “backwards” state, with a “New Deal in emotions” required in the latter case (Gerschenkron, 1962, 25). Our interest is less in ideas of economic development (e.g. socialism) and more in nationalism, which became an important political force in the French Revolution and offered a potential challenge to Tsarist rule in early 19th century Russia, and liberal democracy, which became an important norm in the late 20th century but has been seen by Putin as problematic in the Russian case. Nicholas I would eventually embrace nationalism and Putin claims to be building democracy in Russia, but each leader (re)defined these terms to suit their particular needs. Furthermore, as Gerschenkron found in the case of economic development, in both cases these ideas, originally invoked by liberals against the power of the state, assumed a statist character. Let us now turn to the development of Russian nationalism under Nicholas I.

3. Nicholas I’s experience with nationalism

The French Revolution, with its ideas of liberty and popular sovereignty, significantly influenced developments in Russia prior to and early in Nicholas’s reign. Tsarist Russia, of course, did not welcome the events in Paris and fought against revolutionary France in the Napoleonic Wars. However, this conflict dramatically expanded consciousness of Russian nationhood. Russian elites abandoned French and began to speak Russian. The military took soldiers from a wide array of social strata, forming a more cohesive Russian identity under the common cause of rejecting Napoleon’s forces (Billington, 2004, 7–9). The “sense of what it meant to be Russian” was intensified and the war “awoke the Russian people to life” (Hosking, 2001, 259). Even as they were fighting Napoleon, soldiers exposed to the ideas of the French Revolution during the 1813–1815 campaign in Central and Western Europe found much to admire in patriotic movements, representative institutions, and the rule of law (Hosking, 2001, 260). Upon return to Russia many former soldiers spearheaded organizations and secret societies to press for changes to the

³ Such comparisons were made in the early 2000s, when it appeared that Putin might put Russia on a Westernizing course (see Bohlen (2002)). However, that course has, in crucial respects been abandoned, and Putin’s conservatism and embrace of the Orthodox faith, which we detail in this paper, deviates significantly from the main aspects of Peter’s reforms.

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