

Is Russia Really “Fascist”?

A COMMENT ON TIMOTHY SNYDER

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Over the past decade, and even more overtly since the annexation of Crimea, there has been a growing tendency to describe Russia—or at least the Putin regime—as “fascist.” On the political scene, this assessment has been articulated by everyone from Western policy leaders like former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson to Russian opponents of Vladimir Putin such as Garry Kasparov. The label has also made inroads into academic discourse, being deployed by scholars such as Timothy Snyder, Alexander Motyl, Vladislav Inozemtsev, and Mikhail Iampolski. Labelling Vladimir Putin’s Russia a fascist regime is a serious accusation, with policy and potentially legal implications.

Scholars have at their disposal a rich literature on fascism that includes numerous toolkits which can be applied to see if that terminology 1) fits Russia’s political system; and 2) offers a probing analysis capable of capturing the “nature” of the Putin regime. Unfortunately, the most vocal of Russia’s academic accusers seem to have little interest in testing the “fascism” hypothesis using scholarly tools. First, they do not try to apply key findings from the fascism studies literature to Russia and therefore do not advance clear criteria for determining whether a regime is fascist. Second, they appear to be using the term not as an analytical category but as an epithet to denounce Putin’s system. If the academic community wants policymakers to take charges of “fascism” seriously, it needs to stick to scholarly standards. And if it considers the concept inapplicable, it should state so clearly. This memo opens up such a discussion by debunking the four main claims Snyder uses to justify labelling Russia a fascist regime.

False Historical Analogies

In a series of op-eds published in *The New York Times* and *The New York Review of Books*, Snyder drew parallels between Putin’s Russia and Hitler’s Germany. In an [article](#) from

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March 20, 2014, he compared Russia's take-over of the Crimean peninsula—which had occurred just a few days earlier—and the swiftly brewing conflict in Donbas with Nazi Germany's actions on the eve of the Second World War. Yet unlike [Andreas Umland](#), who has drawn a similar analogy, Snyder has made no attempt to undertake a solid study that would juxtapose the legal arguments used for the *Anschluss* with Austria or Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland with those made by Putin for the annexation of Crimea. Instead, Snyder prefers to make broad-brush claims, [stating](#), for instance, that, "Vladimir Putin has chosen to rehabilitate the alliance between Hitler and Stalin that began the Second World War." With such statements, Snyder seeks to kill two birds with one stone, simultaneously analogizing Putin to both Hitler and Stalin. Yet he fails to provide a structured analysis demonstrating that the current Russian system belongs to the tradition of totalitarian regimes.

He further depicts events and sentiments throughout Russia as echoes of the worst moments of Nazism. In Russia, he [writes](#):

Jews are blamed for the Holocaust on national television; an intellectual close to the Kremlin praises Hitler as a statesman; Russian Nazis march on May Day; [and] Nuremberg-style rallies where torches are carried in swastika formations are presented as anti-fascist.

This portrayal falls dramatically short of recognizing—to say nothing of analyzing—the complexities of Russian society. Instead, it cherry-picks the moments with the highest shock factor and presents them as routine, producing a portrayal of Russia as inaccurate as if one were to suggest that everyday life in the United States could be interpreted only through the Charlottesville riots of August 2017. Selected historical analogies may offer some stimulating avenues for discussion, but they do not hold up to the rigors of social science-based analysis, do not have any predictive power, and have limited utility for understanding current trends.

Another shortcoming can be found in Snyder's attempted parallel with a despised regime, namely his claim that the flag of the Donbas insurgency and the self-proclaimed Novorossiia republic was inspired by the flag of the U.S. Confederacy.² In fact, several sources have documented that this is not the case, showing how the insurgents were instead inspired by tsarist-era symbolism that just happened to resemble the Dixie rebels' flag.³ This mistake illustrates well how Snyder's *presentism* creates an artificial—and US-centric—frame of interpretation, distorting facts to make them more alarmist for a U.S. public anxious about domestic polarization.

² Timothy Snyder, [The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America](#), Tim Duggan Books, April 2018, 148.

³ See, for example, warlord Pavel Gubarev discussing the selection of such symbols in his book, [Fakel Novorossij](#), St. Petersburg: Piter, 2016, 226.

Snyder's use of historical analogies also creates false references. To take one example, he [accuses](#) Putin of having justified the annexation of Crimea by reference to Germany's "changing borders" doctrine, implying that Putin openly compared his actions to those of Nazi Germany: "It is with such historical references (seizing Austria and part of Czechoslovakia) in mind that we must understand Putin's suggestion in the speech that Germany should sympathize with the doctrine of changing borders."

This is a gross mistake. Putin's speech very clearly [refers](#) to German reunification in 1990, not to the *Anschluss* nor to the annexation of the Sudetenland:

Let me remind you that in the course of political consultations on the unification of East and West Germany, at the expert, though very high, level, some nations that were then and are now Germany's allies did not support the idea of unification. Our nation, however, unequivocally supported the sincere, unstoppable desire of the Germans for national unity.

This does not, of course, justify the annexation of Crimea, but it does demonstrate that Putin's reference was to German reunification rather than to the actions of Nazi Germany. Snyder's polemical inflation is a baleful distortion of rhetoric and events: Moscow's standard of normalcy is the Cold War, not the Molotov-Ribbentrop era.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact Issue

Beginning in November 2014, Snyder began to make strong [arguments](#) that a sign of Russia's newfound fascism was the growing tendency by Putin and Russian officials to rehabilitate the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

In 2009, just before a conciliatory trip to Poland, Putin [published](#) an article in Poland's daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* that condemned the old agreement as immoral: "Without doubt, the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of August 1939 can be fully condemned." But in November 2014, speaking before an audience of Russian historians at the Museum of Modern Russian History, the Russian president partially retracted his comments on the immoral character of the Pact. He again insisted that Western countries were the first to try to avoid conflict with Hitler, leaving the Soviet Union alone to face war on the Eastern Front. He added a new nuance by [asserting](#) Moscow's right to avoid a war: "But what is so bad about it, if the Soviet Union did not want to fight? What is so bad?"

Snyder's claim that Russia's official line has changed dramatically is questionable. The Russian narrative has long equated the Munich Agreement with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In the Kremlin's view, the Pact is the Russian equivalent of the West's Munich Agreement and cannot be seen as having singlehandedly accelerated Europe's entry into war. This line has not changed. Moreover, Putin's 2014 statement about the merits of avoiding the war was carefully tailored to its context: it was made during a

moment of high international tension over Ukraine, and its implicit message was that Russia wanted to avoid war with the West. In 2015, Putin reiterated the traditional reading of the Pact as a defensive strategy, [stating](#), “safeguarding the security of Soviet Union was the first element of the Pact.”

One may condemn the silence of the Russian official historiography on Soviet violence in occupied territories, but contrary to Snyder’s claim, there is no genuine rupture in Putin’s thinking that would confirm the Russian leader’s move toward fascism – the line of argument on the Pact remains the same.

Russia’s Befriending of the European Far Right

In repeated statements, Snyder has [contended](#) that the Kremlin’s support for the European far right is the continuation of Stalin’s alliance with Hitler to destroy the European world order:

Just as Stalin sought to turn the most radical of European forces, Adolf Hitler, against Europe itself, so Putin is allying with his grab bag of anti-European populists, fascists, and separatists. His allies on the far right are precisely the political forces that wish to bring an end to the current European order: the European Union.

This attempted historical parallel does not hold, for several reasons.

Firstly, the recent political success of populism and/or the far right in Europe cannot be simplistically reduced to “the rise of fascism.” Although this is a concern, it does not justify the conflation of different terms and notions. The vast majority of specialists on the European far right, among them [Cas Mudde](#), agree that these movements cannot be seen as post- or neo-fascist in their sociological and ideological stances. The far more complex concept of illiberalism(s) seems a better fit for capturing the nature of current trends.

Secondly, questioning the legitimacy of the EU in its current state cannot be paralleled with Nazism. There are many reasons to question the EU that have nothing to do with the fascist way of thinking. One cannot forbid citizens to criticize the functioning of their institutions on the basis that populist forces also advance anti-EU discourses.

Thirdly, waves of illiberalism in Hungary and Poland, two countries whose populations have historically been shaped by an anti-Russian stance, demonstrate that Russia cannot be blamed for the growing Euroskepticism and illiberalism of European public opinion. As University of Tartu’s Andrey Makarychev and Aliaksei Kazharski [note](#), although Russian and Central European discourses conflict on numerous memory issues, they may nevertheless be united in their criticism of prevailing visions of Europe as a liberal,

cosmopolitan, and supranational project and instead seek to advance the narrative of “another Europe” that is more conservative and centered around the nation-state. Moscow is undoubtedly playing on current European pessimism, but much of the blame should fall on domestic sources.

Fourthly, the Kremlin’s European policy has one, overarching goal: finding voices that reject current bellicosity and call for dialogue with Russia. Moscow is therefore ready to engage with everyone advancing such an agenda, including far-right as well as far-left groups and, most importantly, mainstream conservative parties and large corporations. It is a *Realpolitik* policy of finding any point of influence in the European theater rather than a consistent and exclusive ideological marriage with the far right.

Ivan Ilyin as Russia’s Official Ideologist

A fourth, and more consistent, set of arguments advanced by Snyder relates to the alleged leading role of the White émigré thinker Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954) in Putin’s ideology. In his articles, and to an even greater degree in his book, *Road to Unfreedom*, Snyder seems obsessed with the idea that the Kremlin has given Ilyin the status of official ideologist. In a fruitless detour, he even tried to [blame](#) Ilyin’s ideology for the Kremlin’s meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Here, I will not discuss Snyder’s definition of Ilyin as “[a prophet of Russian fascism](#)” – a characterization that would necessitate a deeper exploration of Ilyin’s political philosophy – but will rather investigate his purportedly central role in nurturing everything that Snyder abhors about the current Russian regime. Snyder proclaims that “no thinker of the 20th century has been rehabilitated in such style in the 21st century, nor enjoyed such influence on world politics” (*Road to Unfreedom*, 19). This is an egregious exaggeration of Ilyin’s status that reveals Snyder’s ignorance of the way the Russian regime functions and instrumentalizes ideologies. Several arguments rebut this claim.

Firstly, Snyder systematically sidelines scholarly discussions on the nature of the Putin regime. He ignores research conducted on the Kremlin’s balancing between different vested-interest groups, as documented by many leading scholars, including Brian Taylor in his recent book, [The Code of Putinism](#). Snyder’s typical claims that “Ilyin serves post-Soviet billionaires” (*Road to Unfreedom*, 29) and that fascism is used by Russian oligarchs are good examples of such reductionist formulations that do not articulate the supposed relationship between the regime’s ideology and its status as a rentier economy.

The Putin regime has demonstrated a vivid ability to be context-sensitive and continually reinvent itself. It is doctrinally weak by design, not by default. Yet Snyder does not take into consideration research done on this theory, documented by several scholars as well as by Russian experts and political-technologists such as Gleb Pavlovsky and Evgeni Minchenko. Instead, he prefers to cherry-pick data points that serve his

polemical argument as a whole, contributing to turning solitary thinkers such as Ilyin – as other scholars did to Dugin before him – into the tree that obscures the forest.

Secondly, as I substantiate in detail [elsewhere](#), Putin has showed Ilyin some special deference (he quoted him on five occasions and consecrated his grave in 2009) but this does not mean he is the regime’s philosophical authority. There is no new Marx or new Lenin in Putin’s system. To wit, the Russian president has also made favorable references to Lev Gumilev, a modern-day proponent of Eurasianism, on six occasions. Although Ilyin never read Gumilev’s work, he denounced Eurasianism as a “mental subterfuge.” Moreover, the Ilyin quotations selected for Putin’s official statements mirror the most conventional framings of Russia, its culture, and the role of the state; none are related to Ilyin’s more controversial declarations about Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. When Ilyin’s writings are brought into the Kremlin’s pantheon, it is only for very mainstream statements about Russia’s statehood.

While Ilyin has indeed been held up as the ideological inspiration for a pro-Orthodox, pro-White emigration, and pro-Romanov faction in the Russian elite, it is wrong to claim he has become the main philosophical authority of the presidential administration. The latter draws inspiration from a wide variety of figures and themes, offering a multifaceted ideological bricolage in which Ilyin is just one among many, many others. The only direct doctrinal production of the presidential administration, via the ISEPI think tank, is the so-called Berdiaev Lectures, named for philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev (1874-1948), whose vision of politics is less conservative than Ilyin’s. Unfortunately, apparently avoiding points that would counter or weaken his arguments, Snyder does not discuss the meaning of the presidential administration’s selection of Berdiaev rather than Ilyin, nor does he ponder the meaning of Berdiaev’s own opposition to Ilyin’s writing.

Thirdly, Snyder seems to genuinely believe that Putin writes his annual address to the Duma himself (*Road to Unfreedom*, 18) even though it is well known that – like any other leader – he has speechwriters who compose texts for him. Similarly, he seems to believe that Putin’s mentions of Ilyin during his annual Direct Line question-and-answer program and meetings with students are spontaneous references to the émigré thinker, even though the scripted nature of these events, which involve pre-organized questions and several [rehearsals](#), has been widely documented.

Last but not least, Snyder frequently relies upon rhetorical techniques of facile association, adding “like Ilyin,” “similarly to Ilyin,” “for Putin as for Ilyin,” “familiar to Ilyin,” and similar statements to almost any quotation from Putin regarding Russia’s positioning on the international scene. This creates the false impression that Ilyin’s thought informs Putin’s every statement and policy decision. Yet there is no need for any Russian official to read Ilyin to celebrate Russia’s civilizational uniqueness, claim Ukraine as an inseparable part of the Russian realm, or criticize the European Union.

The Kremlin did not have to read Ilyin to believe that the annexation of Crimea would be a good strategic response to the uncertainties produced by the Euromaidan revolution. Similarly, the statement that the 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept included “a series of changes corresponding to the ideas of Ilyin, the Eurasianists and their fascist traditions” (*Road to Unfreedom*, 99) is not only a claim unsubstantiated by any evidence, but a striking negation of the complexity of the bureaucratic process that goes into producing official documents.

Conclusions

The fact that Timothy Snyder is an influential public intellectual and respected historian is no reason for scholars not to challenge his facile and polemical analysis of the contemporary Russian state. By obfuscating the broad debate on Russia, Snyder denies the need for a serious, unbiased analysis of those features of the Putin regime that could be characterized as fascist. Distortions, inaccuracies, and selective interpretations do not help illuminate what motivates the Russian leadership’s self-positioning on the international, and in particular the European, scene. Simplistic reductionist techniques and invalid reasoning further confuse the analysis – and bias policy responses.

Contrary to his claims, the Kremlin does not live in an ideological world inspired by Nazi Germany, but in one in which the Yalta decades, the Gorbachev-Yeltsin years, and the collapse of the Soviet Union still constitute the main historical referents and traumas. It is Snyder himself who persistently evokes the atmosphere of pre-war Europe, portraying a world in which seemingly every contemporary issue becomes meaningful only as a supposed repetition of a moment in the past.

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