Russian Totalitarianism: From Leninism to Putinism?

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Abstract

To what extent was 20th and 21st-century Russia totalitarian? To answer this question, an analysis was conducted of the level of totalitarian maturity of the Bolshevik party, the degree to which Soviet Russia fell short of the totalitarian ideal, and the extent to which Putin's Russia fulfills the essential features of said regime. The evolution of the Bolshevik faction into a mature totalitarian party took a dozen or so years. However, from the beginning it possessed the most salient features of the party of the new type, and the totalitarian political gnosis constituted a dominant and increasingly mature characteristic of the thought of its members. Bolshevik Russia had been totalitarian since its inception, although there were periods of significant deviation from the standard (the era of the New Economic Policy, the temporary resignation from the hegemony of the totalitarian political gnosis during the Second World War, and the era of "perestroika"). However, from the assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934 until 1941, and then from shortly after the end of the war until Stalin's death, we may justifiably maintain that the polity of the USSR was fundamentally convergent with the totalitarian ideal. Whereas Putin's Russia evolved from moderate authoritarianism, and eventually – after a quarter of a century – became a state with a hardline authoritarian regime and with visible elements of the totalitarian political gnosis.

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The aim of the present paper is to examine the extent to which Russia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been, and continues to be, totalitarian. To this end, it will be necessary to analyze three fundamental issues. First, to what extent the Bolsheviks, founded in 1903, met the criteria of a new party type, and what level of totalitarian maturity characterized the mindset of its members; second, to what extent the Soviet Union diverged from the ideal type of totalitarianism; and finally, third, to what extent Putin's Russia can be regarded as a totalitarian regime.

In addition to the introduction and conclusion, the text is divided into six parts. Following a review of the literature concerning the concept of totalitarianism, it will present the author's own interpretation of the theoretical framework of totalitarian regimes, along with a methodological section. The subsequent parts will address, respectively, the Bolsheviks, the evolution of Soviet totalitarianism, and the position of the Putin regime on the spectrum between totalitarianism and authoritarianism.

Review of the Literature

Due to frequent misunderstandings, it is necessary at the outset to make a fundamental distinction between totality, totalitarian character, and totalitarianism (Kamenka, 2007). A total institution is one in which the individual plays only a single social role at all times. Monks, soldiers in barracks, hospital patients, and prisoners are typical examples of clients of total institutions, as described by Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault (Scott, 2011). Such institutions thus exist in every modern society and under every type of political regime whether democratic, authoritarian, or totalitarian. Undeniably, however, the proportion of total institutions in totalitarian regimes is far greater than in others. A characteristic example, typical of centralized economies regulated by a monistic state, is that of a monotown (monogorod) – self-sufficient communities built around factories, and consequently closed societies, increasingly isolated the farther they are from other human settlements (Golubeva, Zaika, Tul'skaya, 2018). A totalitarian regime, therefore, comprises total institutions to a greater extent than other regimes, but it is not synonymous with them.

The literature on totalitarianism is vast. As early as 1971, Martin Jänicke listed over 660 works devoted to this phenomenon (Jänicke, 1971). More than half a century later, that number can be estimated to have multiplied several times over. This does not mean, however, that all of these works are of high scholarly quality. In this literature review, only the most representative studies will be discussed.

Totalitarianism became a central concept in political science during the Cold War. It provided a conceptual bridge between Hitler's

Nazism, Italian Fascism, and Japan's military dictatorship on the one hand, and Soviet imperialism threatening the democratic world on the other. This does not mean that comparative approaches are meaningless (see e.g., Geyer & Fitzpatrick, 2008), but rather that the concept at that time functioned largely as a useful journalistic tool – one that allowed for the identification of a variety of political actors as the greatest enemies of democracy.

The definition formulated by Carl Friedrich and later refined by Zbigniew Brzeziński (Friedrich & Brzeziński, 1956) contributed most significantly to this understanding. This definition was instrumental rather than essential: it served to draw a sharp contrast between the realities of the American world and the monistic, statocratic regimes of the totalitarian type. Such an understanding of totalitarianism had considerable propagandistic and educational value, as it enabled a clear and simple distinction between "us" and "them". Yet it did not provide an actual explanation of what precisely constituted that "otherness" (Bäcker & Rak, 2021).

Hannah Arendt's monumental work (1951) is devoted not so much to totalitarianism itself as to its driving force: antisemitism. More broadly, this form of hatred can be understood as hostility toward collectivity as such – toward a group perceived as striving to destroy "our" world. Arendt's study offers numerous intellectual insights, not all of which were subsequently explored by later generations of scholars. Among these are her notions of the "objective enemy" and the "protective membrane" surrounding the totalitarian party – that is, the conglomerate of various organizations enabling its communication with the external environment.

Juan Linz formulated a definition of totalitarianism consisting of three essential features (2000, p. 70), the coexistence of which constitutes totalitarianism. The first is a monistic center of public authority; the second is the existence of a single official ideology serving as the foundation of policy and providing meaning to fundamental concepts shaping the understanding of reality, the representation of history, and the projection of the future; the third feature is the evocation of dynamic mass mobilization of the broadest possible social groups to achieve the goals set by the monopoly party, while treating apathy and passivity as undesirable.

Totalitarianism as a Theoretical Category

All political regimes can be divided into democracies and autocracies. The former are those in which the political nation – that is, the part of the population capable of making independent political decisions – is the sovereign. Autocratic regimes, by contrast, are those in which

the political nation does not hold sovereignty. Instead, sovereignty lies with another social group such as the bureaucracy, a military junta, or the party-state apparatus (Rak, Bäcker, 2022, pp. 7–9). In this last case, one may speak of totalitarianism.

The most suitable point of departure for developing my own definition of this political regime has been Juan Linz's conception of totalitarianism. For this purpose, I supplemented the first criterion and modified the second (Bäcker, 1992; 2011). The monistic center of public authority, identified by Linz as the first element of his definition, occurs in many autocratic systems. However, what is specific to totalitarianism is the existence of a new party type, which constitutes the core of the party-state apparatus. Such a party is, in Maurice Duverger's terms, a party of the Order type (Duverger, 1954; cf. Sobolewski, 1974) – that is, an extremely hierarchical structure demanding absolute obedience from its members. The party-state apparatus simultaneously fulfils both the functions of governing the state and of providing the social masses with organizational frameworks. The functionaries of this apparatus constitute the ruling class, and it is they who are collectively the ultimate authority in determining the execution of the most important tasks within the totalitarian regime. The party-state apparatus is therefore the sovereign. The most essential condition for recognizing a given regime as totalitarian is thus the sovereignty of the party-state apparatus.

The second feature, concerning the existence of a single official ideology, requires clarification. The concept of ideology has often been treated in very broad terms – from being understood as the false consciousness of a given social class to being equated with a worldview (Siemek, 2005; Bauman, 1991). For the sake of precision, however, it has been more narrowly defined as a hierarchically ordered set of axiomatically accepted values. This understanding was appropriate throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, yet from the mid-twentieth century onward, it became increasingly difficult to exemplify (Bell, 2000; Brick, 2013). I therefore propose redefining contemporary ideologies as hierarchically ordered sets of desired public goods. This makes them something distinct from a worldview (Weltanschauung) or from fundamentalist modes of thought. Still less should ideology be equated with a totalitarian mode of thinking. Since the interwar period, scholars have noted significant similarities between totalitarian thought and religion, chiefly due to their shared element of faith, although the object of that faith differs radically. Yet a far closer affinity can be found between totalitarian thought and Manichaean Gnosis. In both cases, the core belief is that salvation is attainable through knowledge. Consequently, in the final quarter of the twentieth century, scholars began to speak of a particular form of gnosis: totalitarian political gnosis (Besançon, 1977; Voegelin, 1987).

Totalitarian political gnosis can be identified by three fundamental elements: 1) apokatastasis – the idea of temporal or eternal salvation

achieved via 2) an imagined subject, who attains this salvation by overcoming the efforts of 3) objective enemies. Literally, and in accordance with the theological understanding, apokatastasis denotes the return of created being to its original unity with God (Antonienko, 2021). However, in the sense typical of totalitarian thought, it is understood much more narrowly; it signifies the idea of temporal or eternal salvation achievable relatively quickly – here and now – for example via the dominion of the Aryan race over the world, or at least within a European empire, or through the rule of the proletariat across the globe, or, failing that, within a single country. Such salvation is believed to be attainable through the heroic deeds of the imagined subject, conceived as a superhuman entity capable of overcoming all difficulties. This subject is created by the new party type. The greatest threat and obstacle on the path toward the world of light and goodness lies in the very existence of objective enemies, who, regardless of their intentions, obstruct the realization of the idea of apokatastasis. Their evaporation, annihilation, or at least total exclusion thus becomes a necessary condition for achieving salvation. The presence of these three elements of totalitarian political gnosis indicates that it exists in its complete form. The absence of any one of them, or its manifestation in only partial form, signifies that we are dealing with a defective or incomplete variant of totalitarian political gnosis (Bäcker, 2011, pp. 189–198). Totalitarian political gnosis employs religious or ideological vocabulary, but this does not mean that it is identifiable with any particular religion or ideology. Moreover, the party-state apparatus possesses considerable flexibility in transforming a given terminology – for example, ideological – into another, depending on its needs. Thus, it is possible to transform the language of primitive Leninist Marxism into xenophobic nationalism (Zaremba, 2001) while retaining all the essential features of totalitarian political gnosis.

The third defining feature of totalitarianism according to Linz – dynamic mass mobilization – has two dimensions. The first is organizational; the new party type assumes the external form of a community party in the Duvergerian sense, striving to establish its structures in all social groups and state institutions. It then creates numerous specialized organizations aimed at monopolizing social bonds within each collective, thereby acting as an intermediary between the masses and the apparatus. In the ideal type of totalitarianism, only organizations completely subordinated to the new party type exist. The second dimension is the level of engagement. Everyone living within a totalitarian world is encouraged, persuaded, and compelled to participate in events organized by the party-state apparatus. This constant involvement serves as one of the surest guarantees of the totalitarian regime's stability.

While the sovereignty of the party-state apparatus is the constitutive feature of a totalitarian regime, political gnosis and dynamic mobilization are its essential ones. The presence of not only the first, but

also of the other two features in their mature form indicates that the political regime in question is fully totalitarian.

As an ideal type, totalitarianism is contradictory to authoritarianism. In the former political regime, sovereignty lies with the party-state apparatus; in the latter, with the bureaucracy or the junta (Linz, 2000). The notion of a junta, characteristic of Latin America, may in the case of Russia be replaced by that of the *siloviki* or officials of the power structures, that is, those authorized to use force on behalf of the state. This category includes not only the army but also the political police and numerous other armed formations such as, for example, the National Guard of Russia. Antinomic to the dynamic, mass, and centrally directed mobilization characteristic of totalitarian systems is, in authoritarian regimes, the apathy of the masses (Linz, 2000). Powerlessness, withdrawal, and passivity are perhaps the traits that best describe this condition – a state of incapacity for spontaneous activity and a reluctance to expend any energy not directly devoted to survival. Totalitarian political gnosis in totalitarian systems may thus be regarded as the opposite of the emotional mentality described by Linz (2000), which in authoritarianism manifests as an exaggeratedly positive evaluation of one's own leader accompanied by the denigration of leaders belonging to rival political camps. This mode of thinking may be termed fundamentalism only when it becomes far more developed than mere emotional judgment of a few politicians. In such cases, one may speak of a black-and-white worldview grounded in the image of a "besieged fortress" that must be defended against enemies (Bäcker, 2011, pp. 179–188).

The sovereign domination of the bureaucracy and/or coercive structures, the apathy of the masses, and fundamentalist thinking constitute the most essential features of authoritarianism. Depending on the degree of repressiveness, one may distinguish between soft (moderate) and hard authoritarianism. Furthermore, according to the criterion of which group holds dominance, one may distinguish military, bureaucratic, technocratic, and other forms of authoritarianism. All autocratic political regimes of mass societies in the industrial age fall somewhere within the spectrum between ideal types of authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

Remarks on Methodology

The word totalitarianism was first used in the 1920s in Fascist Italy, where it was initially perceived as a positive term. Since the Second World War, however, it has been employed globally in journalism and public discourse in an overtly pejorative sense. Politicians and journalists frequently use it to describe states regarded as hostile, while avoiding applying it to those that are currently considered "ours" or "allied with us". I take a different position.

It is worth treating totalitarianism, authoritarianism, and democracy as theoretical categories. In such an approach, the division between democratic and autocratic regimes becomes not a consequence of political sympathies or alliances, but rather an assessment based on the fulfillment of the essential criteria characteristic of a given type of political regime.

In this text, I employ the idealizational method (Brzechczyn, 2012; 2019) typical of qualitative research. According to this approach, no concrete entity, phenomenon, or process can ever fully embody all the essential features of a given ideal type (Bielanowska, 2019; Nowak, 1973). Each occupies a position along in a spectrum between two antinomic ideal types, possessing to some extent the essential features of one and, in inverse proportion, those of the other. Consequently, all political regimes are situated somewhere between the ideal types of democracy and autocracy. A given regime may thus be considered democratic to the degree that it exhibits a predominance of the essential features of democracy. Conversely, when nondemocratic traits prevail, the regime is situated on the side of autocracy and therefore placed into a further spectrum between authoritarianism and totalitarianism. It should be noted that authoritarianism and totalitarianism are regimes characteristic of mass societies in the industrial era. In earlier epochs, it becomes necessary to distinguish other forms of autocratic regimes.

The purpose of this text is to analyze the extent to which the Bolsheviks in their pursuit of power, followed by Soviet Russia and Putin's Russia, may be regarded as totalitarian entities. These three political formations are connected not only by the dominance of the Russian ethnos but also by their rootedness in Russian culture and traditions of governance. In all three cases, we are therefore dealing with a shared Russian linguistic community, the semantics and patterns of primitive Marxism (Kołakowski, 1978, vol. 3), as well as worldviews characteristic of Russia since the period of Mongol rule. For each of these entities, it is necessary to examine how far the given political formation diverges from the ideal type of totalitarianism, and thus how closely it approximates the ideal type of authoritarianism.

Given the vast quantity of available sources and studies, it is essential to employ the desk research method. This involves the analysis of pre-existing data, coupled with their continual verification – particularly in the case of statistical data, and especially those produced by the institutions and personnel of autocratic regimes.

The Bolsheviks – the World's First Totalitarian Party

The world's first totalitarian party emerged in 1903, when Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (better known by his pseudonym Lenin) engineered a split within the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP). Having

secured a majority in one of the votes, Lenin's supporters broke away from the party, proclaiming themselves *Bolsheviks* – literally, "those who are more numerous". Until the name was changed in 1918 to the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), the group continued to operate under the title RSDLP (Bolsheviks). With the next change, to the All-Union Communist Party, the qualifier "Bolsheviks" was retained. Only in 1952, during the Soviet imperial period, was the term finally dropped with the adoption of the name Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Hill & Frank, 1986; Lih, 2024). The name Bolsheviks, positively connoted by Lenin's followers, came in Soviet thinking to signify not only correctness of doctrine but also, implicitly or explicitly, the support of the majority – first within the Russian Empire and later across the world.

The key features distinguishing the Bolsheviks from all other political organizations were outlined a year before its formal emergence, in 1902, in Lenin's text *What Is to Be Done?* This phrase, one of the so-called "eternal Russian questions", had been used several decades earlier as the title of a novel by Nikolay Chernyshevsky. Ulyanov, writing under the name Lenin for the first time, instead produced a pamphlet describing the principles of a clandestine party. The central idea of this pamphlet was as follows: the working class, by itself, is incapable of performing the revolutionary act or establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat. It can attain only the level of economic consciousness, one that leads to a struggle for better living conditions; nevertheless, it is incapable of rising to the political level, that is, of acquiring the ability to subordinate the rest of society to its will.

This thesis is most often analyzed in the context of Lenin's polemics with various factions of the underground movements operating in tsarist Russia or in exile (le Blanc, 1993). Far more important, however, is to consider these words through the prism of the antinomic ideals of subjectivity and objectivity. In this respect, Lenin's position clearly reflects a belief in the impossibility of transforming the Russian proletariat into a political subject. This is not a matter of assessing the actual level of consciousness among Russian workers of the time; rather, Lenin believed that workers, by their very nature, could never, under any circumstances, achieve political subjectivity on their own. This constitutes a faith in the continuous reification of the proletariat, an outlook completely opposed to the experiences of many other Marxist movements in Europe. An alternative interpretation of this thesis has been advanced, most notably by Hal Draper (1999) and Lars Lih (2005). According to these scholars, Lenin's statements should be analyzed carefully within their context and compared to contemporary debates within European social democracy, especially those of its strongest manifestation in Germany. I do not reject this perspective, yet neither do I consider it decisive. Neither Draper nor Lih has been able to dispute the existence of Ulyanov's conviction in the enduring objectivity of the working class and his assumption that the proletariat could acquire revolutionary consciousness only from outside itself.

Lenin's profession of faith bore the characteristic features of gnosis. There exist conscious revolutionaries who possess knowledge of the course of world history, and only they are capable of enlightening the rest of the people so that the victory of light over darkness may be achieved. In the language used by Lenin, this was expressed through the idea of the victory of the proletariat, led by the revolutionary party, over the evil final stage of capitalism: imperialism. A careful reading of *What Is to Be Done?* reveals the embryonic form of a worldview typical of totalitarian political gnosis. At this stage, it was merely a concept, a means by which to understand the surrounding world, as well as the other Russian Marxist underground and émigré movements, and their social base in the Russian working class.

With the formation of a separate Bolshevik grouping, Lenin began to implement his ideas, which directly opposed the views of Julius Martov (leader of the Mensheviks) regarding the necessity for all party members to belong to one of its cells (*yacheyki*). This change might appear minor, serving merely to clarify the status of individuals who identified with the party's program and paid dues but did not attend meetings. In fact, it was a fundamental transformation that caused the party to begin resembling an army rather than a loose association of people united only by shared beliefs. From that moment, the party leadership acquired the right to issue any orders it deemed necessary, even those contrary to the organization's official program. From its very inception, the Bolsheviks became members of a new party type, which Maurice Duverger would later describe as a party of the Order type.

In the following years, Lenin's party continued to expand its understanding of the world. This development found expression in the pamphlet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which described the common objective enemy (see Pahnke, 2021). In 1908, Ulyanov wrote another pamphlet, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, aimed at refuting Alexander Bogdanov's thesis that the proletariat could independently create its own culture. Lenin consistently denied the proletariat any right to subjectivity, not only political but also cultural. He formulated the following creed: "Human thought by its very nature is capable of giving, and does give, absolute truth, which is compounded of a sum-total of relative truths. Each step in the development of science adds new grains to the sum of absolute truth, but the limits of the truth of each scientific proposition are relative, now expanding, now shrinking with the growth of knowledge" (Lenin, 1987, p. 119). The statement that absolute truth consists of the sum of interrelated and mutually interacting lower-level truths, such as scientific propositions, may seem rather trivial. What is striking, however, is Lenin's choice of the word *istina* (absolute truth) rather than *pravda* (truth as the correspondence of words to facts) (Ballestrem, 1964). In Russian, two distinct words express the notion of truth: *pravda*, the truth experienced by human beings, and

istina, the absolute, often hidden truth, inaccessible to man. God can be only *istinnyy* and not *pravdivyy* in *chelovecheskaya pravda* (human truth). Lenin's linguistic choice was by no means accidental. It reveals the germ of a conviction that would later crystallize into a doctrinal profession of faith: that only the Bolsheviks were capable of uniting every *istina* – all the fragments of absolute truth – into a single, omnipotent, and all-encompassing ultimate *istina*.

The Bolsheviks, under the leadership not only of Lenin but also of Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, Alexei Rykov, and Lev Bronstein (Leon Trotsky), did not yet constitute a mature totalitarian party. Differences of opinion were openly expressed, debates were conducted publicly, and the degree of internal hierarchy within the party elite remained relatively low. Nevertheless, a gradual expansion of totalitarian political gnosis was clearly observable. The party itself was slowly transforming into a structure increasingly dominated by its leadership – the professional revolutionaries – over the rank-and-file members, and to an even greater extent over sympathizers, supporters, and those who merely accepted its existence.

The Bolsheviks were only one among many anti-tsarist organizations in imperial Russia before and during the First World War. This small group of revolutionaries held little significance until the collapse of the tsarist regime and the success of the February Revolution in 1917. The evolution of the Bolsheviks from a small circle of activists into a mature totalitarian party could not occur too rapidly. Yet from the very outset, it already possessed the most essential characteristics of a totalitarian structure: it was a new party type, and totalitarian political gnosis was its dominant, increasingly refined mode of thought.

Soviet Totalitarianism

The disintegration of the Russian Empire accelerated following the failure of the Brusilov offensive in 1916 and culminated in the collapse of the tsarist regime, initiated by popular uprisings and the army's defection to the protesters' side in Petrograd in February 1917. The fall of the tsar was synonymous with the dissolution of the state, most notably with the disintegration of the army as a hierarchical structure. In its place, soldiers' councils began to emerge, these being spontaneously elected representative bodies of the rank-and-file. This model was soon replicated by workers and peasants. The councils (*soviety*) were gradually taken over by revolutionary political parties (including the Bolsheviks) and became alternative forms of social organization alongside the democratic state, governed more or less effectively by the Provisional Government established in the wake of the revolution. This period of coexistence between two parallel systems of authority within the same territory ended with the military coup carried out by the Bolsheviks' paramilitary forces, the Red

Guard, on 7 November 1917 (according to the new calendar) (Pipes, 1990; Rabinowitch, 2004).

This spontaneous and largely anomic form of political subjectivity among the masses, who created their own representative organs in the form of councils, lacked any connection to enduring social interests. Soldiers deserted the front in vast numbers and returned to their home villages, thereby eroding the purpose of the soldiers' councils. Peasants were dividing up the land, often accompanied by the burning of manor houses, thus also reducing the need for self-organization. The independence of the councils, and the anomic form of mass subjectivity they embodied, were swiftly annihilated by the Bolsheviks. Their first method was to subordinate the councils, especially the workers' (in Petrograd) and soldiers' councils; their second was to dissolve them entirely, resorting, when necessary, to the bloody suppression of any expression of dissent, as in the case of Kronstadt in 1921 (Berkman, 1922). The principle of unconditional subordination or destruction applied not only to the councils but also to all other forms of social organization in Russia. Terror during the establishment of the new order affected every social group. Its purpose was not limited to the imposition of new social norms or the enforcement of obedience to the Bolshevik elite. Of equal importance was the elimination of all alternative elites and objective enemies.

The introduction of war communism in territories controlled by the Bolsheviks was a utopian project based primarily on attempts to abolish money and replace it with a system of requisitions and compulsory labor. Efforts to eliminate traditional moral norms were visible mainly within the circles of the new ruling elite, rather than among the masses (Malle, 1985; Landis, 2020). The Bolsheviks abandoned war communism when the wave of uprisings, and in particular peasant revolts, became so widespread that they faced the imminent threat of losing power. The attempt to construct communism (as it was rather crudely imagined) was defeated by the desire to preserve political control. The party-state apparatus reduced the scope of its authority especially in rural areas, but at the same time demonstrated a strong instinct for self-preservation.

The New Economic Policy (NEP) did not signify a retreat of the party-state apparatus from its aspiration to maintain monopoly control. The NEPmen – private entrepreneurs in Soviet Russia during the 1920s – were entirely dependent on this apparatus. The most visible consequence of that dependence was the complete absence of any concern for the preservation or durability of their property and enterprises (Glaza, 2009; Nove, 1990). These individuals knew that their possessions, their businesses, and even their lives depended on the decisions of state officials.

In 1928, the Soviet Union entered a period of significant social transformation. A campaign of forced industrialization began, accompanied by a rapid and violent process of compulsory collectivization in the countryside. An article written by Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili (better

known as Stalin) and published on 2 March 1930, titled *Dizzy with Success*, was evidence that the first phase of this process had not been fully under control. Stalin also recognized the need to prevent an escalating wave of peasant uprisings, particularly dangerous in Ukraine (Conquest, 1986; Kuśnierz, 2005). This, however, did not mean abandoning collectivization altogether, but rather spreading it over time. The end of the NEP, combined with industrialization and collectivization, represented the most significant elements in the rapid expansion of the party-state apparatus's authority.

Along with the so-called Kirov Affair of 1934 (Johnson, 2011), a period of repression began that targeted the highest-ranking functionaries of the Soviet state apparatus. Stalin had already been eliminating his rivals by depriving them of office, stripping them of real power, or – as in the case of Leon Trotsky – forcing them into exile. But it was only in 1934 that he crossed the ultimate boundary and began to make decisions about their lives. The immediate inspiration for these actions was likely the Night of the Long Knives of June 1934, being Adolf Hitler's execution of the leading figures of the Sturmabteilung (Höhne, 1984). In both cases – the Kirov Affair and the Sturmabteilung purge – this marked the attainment of a stage of maximal concentration and intensification of party-state power. From 1934 onward, the totalitarian ruler, in both instances, ceased to be constrained by any social norms. He wielded absolute power over the entirety of society without exception, including the functionaries of the party-state apparatus itself. Both Hitler and Stalin became absolute masters of life and death, not only over ordinary citizens but also over their own party comrades. The sole remaining principle organizing the entirety of social life was the will of the leader. From the Night of the Long Knives and the assassination of Kirov onward, one can speak of the complete establishment of the *Führerprinzip* in both Nazi Germany and Communist Russia.

Ever since the completion of collectivization, the party-state apparatus exercised unlimited control over all social groups. The scope and reach of this domination can be regarded as evidence of full hegemony. Any manifestation of divergent opinion disappeared completely, even in scientific matters. One may recall, for instance, the accusations concerning "bourgeois genetics" and the role of Trofim Lysenko (Soyfer, 2001; Reznik & Fet, 2019). Truth was considered truth only when it had been sanctioned by the Party. The Stalinist version of totalitarian political gnosis was obligatory and ruthlessly enforced through every available channel of social communication. It was finally codified with the publication of the *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course* in 1938 (Sadowski, 2017; Brandenberger & Zelenov, 2019). Directed and centrally controlled mobilization encompassed everyone, though not to the same degree. Different expectations applied to small children and pensioners than to students or workers regarding participation in rallies and parades. By the early 1930s, Soviet Russia had developed a mature regime very close to the ideal

type of totalitarianism. The few remaining deviations, typically in traditional communities of Central Asia and Siberia or among certain groups of geologists, do not alter this overall assessment.

Stalin's death on 5 March 1953 marked the end of the period of mature totalitarianism, though it did not constitute a qualitative transformation. The subsequent "thaw" in the Soviet Union primarily involved a reduction in the level of political repression, an expansion of literary and artistic expression, and the emergence of specific niches where the official version of totalitarian political gnosis did not fully apply. A symbol of this brief era was the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* in the literary magazine *Novy Mir* in 1962 (Suchanek, 2019; Dobson, 2005).

De-Stalinization, the key moment of which was Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech made to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1956, did not entail a rejection of the totalitarian regime. Its goal was to ensure the survival of the party-state apparatus. The critique of the "cult of personality" targeted not the institution of leadership as such, but one specific leader who had usurped the right to decide over the life and death of the apparatus's functionaries. Freedom of speech increased somewhat, but remained under strict regulation: every text still required official permission prior to publication. The regime's limited "opening to the world" involved the adaptation of technological innovations from the West. New ideas were first filtered through other countries of the Soviet bloc. A notable example is the practice of Soviet scholars familiarizing themselves with Western sociological texts through their Polish adaptations, such as those produced by Jerzy Wiatr (Croan, 1974). The Soviet totalitarianism of the Khrushchev era and the early years of Leonid Brezhnev's rule was no longer an overtly repressive dictatorship. Nevertheless, all institutions of the party-state apparatus continued to function efficiently; the level of managed mobilization remained very high; and the Soviet form of totalitarian political gnosis still prevailed, though not absolutely. The same observation applies to the Brezhnev period, commonly described as the Era of Stagnation or, more gently, of stabilization. The fundamental goal of his administration was to guarantee the functionaries of the party-state apparatus the best and most stable living conditions possible (Tompson, 2014; Fainberg & Kalinovsky, 2016).

This drive to preserve the status quo also became the primary motivation behind the Brezhnev Doctrine, which guaranteed the continuation of their privileged positions of the pro-Moscow ruling elites in the various states of the bloc. As a result, decisions such as the deployment of Soviet troops to Afghanistan were undertaken – actions that significantly increased the costs of maintaining the Soviet empire while simultaneously creating a dilemma: withdrawal would risk destroying the image of the USSR as a superpower. The Soviet Union thus fell

into a kind of trap, which became one of the key factors destabilizing the balance of the Soviet system. Another such destabilizing factor was the Solidarity revolution in Poland. It was impossible to conceal the fact that Solidarity represented a vast, self-empowered collective of state employees and, above all, industrial workers. Adherents began to abandon the traditional maxims of Stalinist totalitarian political gnosis, such as claims about the rule of the working class in the people's democracies under the leadership of the world's proletarian vanguard, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The erosion of totalitarian political gnosis advanced most rapidly within the Polish party-state apparatus (Bäcker, 2009), though they were also increasingly visible in other segments of the Soviet empire.

The rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev signaled not only an attempt to rejuvenate the Soviet ruling elite but also a necessity to address the fundamental question of the Soviet Union's future: what was more important, the preservation of the state or the continuation of the autocratic political regime? Perestroika – or, more precisely, the program of restructuring, acceleration, and openness – envisioned a profound transformation of the existing political system into one that would allow greater labor productivity and thus enable a transition toward an information civilization (Battle, 1988; McCauley, 1990). In the second half of the 1980s, within the then-prevailing democratic and liberal *Zeitgeist*, this meant that Gorbachev's administration sought to create new spaces for social subjectivity across all social groups. It was, in essence, a top-down revolution (Gooding, 2007). After replacing the upper echelons of the party-state apparatus, Gorbachev began expanding economic freedoms, permitting the formation of independent economic entities. The broadening of freedom of speech simultaneously entailed both the marginalization of totalitarian political gnosis and the breakdown of the party-state apparatus's monopoly on truth. The setting of the public agenda gradually shifted from that apparatus to increasingly liberated media in print, radio, and television that was freed from censorship and self-censorship alike (Gibbs, 1999). However, Gorbachev's program proved impossible to realize. The empire could not be transformed through the creation of a democratic federation of Soviet nations. A striking example of this failure was the campaign to impose permanent sobriety among Soviet citizens. The sale of alcohol was severely restricted, which in turn led to a surge in the production of home-distilled liquor. Not only did the population continue to drink, but the state budget also lost a major source of revenue, further deepening instability (Tarschys, 1993; Treml, 2016; Powell, 1985).

This was not the only illusion concerning the level of social cohesion within Soviet societies. The primary lines of division ran along ethnic and regional boundaries. The most powerful forces within the disintegrating Soviet power structure turned out to be the republic-level elites of the Communist Party, who began to take over the governing

competencies from the Kremlin center. Consequently, fifteen post-Soviet states emerged, their borders largely reflecting the administrative divisions between the former Soviet republics. The process of disintegration of the Soviet version of totalitarianism began in the mid-1980s and accelerated rapidly after the Autumn of Nations, triggered by the June 1989 elections in Poland. The August 1991 coup led by Gennady Yanayev was an unsuccessful attempt to restore the pre-Gorbachev status quo. After the coup's failure, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union ceased to exist and with it, the Soviet Union itself, although the formal dissolution took place three months later, in December 1991 (Smith, 2005; Hollander, 1999; Zubok, 2021).

This did not mean, however, that the social structures typical of a totalitarian regime had vanished. Despite the formal bans then in place, communist parties continued to operate in Russia, including the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which initially gathered around one million members and for many years was led by Gennady Zyuganov (March, 2022). This indicated that approximately 5–10 percent of former CPSU members felt it necessary to openly express their desire for a return to Soviet times. Other parties, regardless of their stated programs, generally took on a leader-centric character, with a distinctly hierarchical structure. From the time of the first Komsomol cooperatives under Gorbachev, Russia had been undergoing a rapid process of spontaneous privatization, comprising the illegal appropriation of state property by the most influential and resourceful former functionaries of the Soviet power apparatus, especially those from the economic administration and the KGB (Gerber, 2000; Abegaz, 2023). This was one of many signs of the absence of a state governed by the rule of law and the clear predominance of features typical of its opposite – a prerogative state. The Yeltsin era is seen by many commentators as yet another *smuta*, a period of anarchy, disorder, devastation, and the growing impoverishment of the many alongside the unimaginable wealth of the "new Russians" (Smith, 1990), the modern incarnation of the NEPmen.

The collapse of the Soviet empire simultaneously marked the beginning of rapid social change. On one hand, it brought a sudden opening to the outside world. This openness, however, was largely superficial and consisted mainly of the importation of foreign goods, the Anglicization of language, and the borrowing of institutions (for example, the adoption of the German parliamentary electoral system). On the other hand, new centers of political decision-making began to emerge not only at the level of the rapidly autonomizing entities of the Russian Federation, but also within oligarchic structures and the leadership of major state institutions. At the same time, new informal social institutions (in the sense of recurring social behavior patterns) began to form. The Russian words *reyderstvo* and *prikhvatizatsiya* appeared at the time to describe the criminal seizure and looting of property by organized groups under the guise

of privatization. The condition for the success and survival of such operations was having a *krysha* – protection from powerful figures within the state apparatus. This alliance, known as a *blat* (a term borrowed from criminal slang), functioned through *vzyatki*, or bribes (Ledeneva, 1998; Hanson, 2014). Such a social system was commonly referred to as crony capitalism (Sharafutdinova, 2010; Ilyin, 2017), though a far more accurate term would be a "system of organized kleptocracy" (Granville, 2003).

Russia under Yeltsin is often portrayed as a democratic state. In reality, however, its society could be described as post-totalitarian – a mass of people existing at a vegetative level, forming only a rudimentary proto–civil society. During this period, Russia possessed an autocratic regime with a façade of democratic institutions. The mechanisms of state functioning were directly inherited from the only social world known to Russians: the one shaped during the Soviet era.

Putin's Russia and Totalitarianism

Many contemporary scholars of Russia describe Vladimir Putin's regime as fascist, neo-Nazi, or even totalitarian (Laruelle, 2020; Motyl, 2016). Such characterizations appear even more frequently among journalists and commentators (Gudkov, 2015; Snyder, 2022), but are these assessments accurate?

The image of Putin's Russia during his first presidential term was entirely different from that of his fifth, which began with the "presidential elections" of March 2024. The official results of that vote, held two years into the invasion of Ukraine, resembled those of the Central Asian republics. Yet at the outset, many believed that Putin was a democrat seeking cooperation with the West. This proved to be far from the truth. From the moment he assumed the office of prime minister and, as of 31 December 1999, of president, Putin's foremost goal was to build the strongest possible state, conceived as the successor to the Soviet Union. He pursued this objective by creating and then consolidating a rigidly hierarchical power structure. All organs of public authority, as well as the economic entities that had retained some degree of autonomy under Boris Yeltsin, were gradually subordinated to the Kremlin.

The destruction of Mikhail Khodorkovsky's business empire (Sakwa, 2014; Bulavka & Buzgalin, 2016) served as a clear warning to all remaining oligarchs, compelling them to demonstrate loyalty to the Kremlin. The state apparatus accelerated its efforts to bring the economy under tighter control following the launch of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The government imposed regulations determining the scale and type of production, as well as the allocation of profits for the war effort. A portion of private enterprises, including many outside the military-industrial complex, was nationalized (Zhilin, 2024). Today,

the Russian economy is largely state-owned. The remaining private sector is doubly subordinated to the state: through both a system of legal mandates and informal dependencies on political decision-makers.

The subjugation of the regions was a long-term operation. The first stage involved altering the tax system to make regional governments financially dependent on the Kremlin. The second was stripping the Federation Council of its role as a political representative body of regional leaders. The next step was the abolition of direct elections for regional heads; Kremlin-appointed candidates now required only the approval of regional legislative assemblies. In nearly all such assemblies, an overwhelming majority of seats are held by nominees of the Kremlin's ruling party, United Russia (*Yedinaya Rossiya*). This process culminated during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency, when several of the most powerful regional leaders, including those of Moscow and Tatarstan, were removed. These so-called "heavyweights" had previously held such extensive local political resources that their removal had been impossible. The subordination of the regions to the Kremlin completed a broader process: the creation of the so-called power vertical (*vertikal' vlasti*). Already under Boris Yeltsin, judges had become dependent on the presidential administration via a system of appointments in which disloyal figures were dismissed or even imprisoned. Putin consolidated control over the legislative bodies during his first term, not only by uniting all pro-government parties into United Russia but also by establishing a comprehensive system of control over so-called systemic opposition parties (Słowikowski, 2018).

It was ultimately during Dmitry Medvedev's presidency that a fully monistic apparatus of state power took shape. Thus, while during Putin's first two presidential terms Russia could be described as having a moderate autocratic regime, from 2012 onward it is more accurate to speak of a mature autocratic regime. But to what extent was it authoritarian, and to what extent totalitarian? The answer depends, first, on determining whether sovereignty lay with the bureaucracy and/or security apparatus (*siloviki*) or with a party-state apparatus; second, whether society was characterized by apathy or by directed mass mobilization; and third, whether the dominant mentality was emotional or based on a form of totalitarian political gnosis.

The first issue seems clear. Since the Yeltsin era, bureaucracy and security structures have dominated in Russia, with the only changes manifesting in the relations between them. During Putin's first two presidential terms, and throughout his tenure as prime minister, it could be said that the bureaucracy was the most important social group. To put it more precisely: the majority of the "Kremlin towers" – the key institutional lobbying groups within the Kremlin – were represented by members of the state and regional administrations and economic sectors (including the extractive and energy industries). Nevertheless, the security services and the military always played a crucial role (Rivera & Rivera, 2006).

The balance among these elements began to shift with the onset of Putin's third presidential term, which followed mass civic protests, most notably those on Bolotnaya Square at the turn of 2011–2012 (Olszanecka, 2021; Bäcker & Rak, 2018; Rivera & Rivera, 2018). Subsequent events, including the Ukrainian Maidan of 2013–2014, intensified the Kremlin's sense of threat from so-called color revolutions, which it defined as being inspired and directed by the West. The annexation of Crimea and the seizure of Donbas – and thus the start of an armed conflict with Ukraine – followed by intervention in Syria, significantly increased the influence of the military. In 2016, Putin established the *Rosgvardiya* (National Guard), a militarized formation responsible for internal security, which by 2018 already numbered 340,000 personnel (Savage, 2017). The start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 unleashed a protracted conflict that would alter the world's geopolitical landscape, brought massive increases in defense spending, caused the conversion of the economy to a war footing, and a sharp expansion of the armed forces to 1.5 million soldiers. Other branches of the state apparatus were compelled to divert parts of their resources to serve the war effort. By 2022, the military-industrial complex,[1] comprising the coercive institutions (the army, *Rosgvardiya*, intelligence agencies, and other military bodies) and the armaments industry had become the hegemonic force within the Russian state. The process of consolidating that hegemony culminated in the failed mutiny of Yevgeny Prigozhin in June 2023 (Titov, 2022). Thus, in Putin's Russia, the first period may be described as one of state apparatus sovereignty, dominated by both regional and economic bureaucratic apparatus. In the second period, beginning with Putin's third term, the security structures increasingly gained ascendancy, culminating in 2022 with the hegemony of the military-industrial complex.

This does not mean, however, that there are no arguments for the existence of a party–state apparatus in Russia. In 2011, the All-Russia People's Front (ONF) was established, intended to unite all political currents supporting the Kremlin. Yet it never became a new or effective channel of vertical mobility for officials and functionaries, nor did it serve as a significant means of mobilization or communication between the state apparatus and the masses. Nor did it replace the Kremlin's ruling party, United Russia, in fulfilling its core function of providing a platform for cooperation among various groups of state officials. Thus, it remained merely one of many organizations orbiting the country's key centers of decision-making (Bäcker & Rak, 2019; Czachor, 2023). Russia is home to numerous paramilitary organizations, operating independently

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1 This term was popularized by Dwight Eisenhower in 1961.

of both the Rosgvardiya and the Chechen units that are not subordinate to the Russian army. These security and protection services tend to be larger and better equipped the more powerful the state institution or economic organization that created them. One might mention, for example, the security services of the railways or Gazprom. More importantly, such units exist in nearly every major institution. This points not only to these institutions' drive toward self-sufficiency but also to their high degree of autonomy within the broader state apparatus. Some of these institutions also form propaganda-oriented organizations, tasked with actions such as arranging street demonstrations or paramilitary shows of force (Bäcker & Olszanecka, 2019). Yet neither after 2014 nor after 2022 did the ruling camp transform into a party–state apparatus. Organizations like the ONF remain marginal, and only in theory could they serve as the foundation for such a structure. Nor is it possible to identify any group of officials or functionaries whose interests would necessitate the creation of such an apparatus.

As for the second issue, mass mobilization in Russia is largely episodic. The only recurring ritual of nationwide significance, accepted not only in Russia but also in several post-Soviet states in the "near abroad", is the annual Victory Day celebration marking the end of the Second World War. In Russia, it is commemorated on 9 May as the culminating event of ceremonies that sacralize the military efforts of the Soviet Union during the so-called Great Patriotic War (Brunstedt, 2021; Kuryłowicz, 2021; Malinkin, 2020). Since February 2022, regional elites have organized mass displays of support for the military aggression against Ukraine. These propaganda campaigns were symbolized by the letter "Z", derived from the slogan "*Za pobedu*" ("For victory"), meant to signify popular support for what was portrayed as a struggle against the modern incarnation of Nazi Germany (Ostashchuk & Litkevych, 2023). The letter "V", also used as a marking on Russian military vehicles in Ukraine, did not acquire the same symbolic importance. In many Russian cities, crowds were assembled and arranged to form the letter "Z". These events were jointly organized by regional administrations, local branches, and youth wings of United Russia. For example, in Khabarovsk, such a rally on 12 March 2022, drew only about 350 participants – a negligible portion of the city's population (#Svoikhnebrosayem!, 2022). Thus, efforts to evoke the kind of patriotic war enthusiasm seen at the outset of the First World War in many European countries (Gregory, 2003) failed to generate significant public response. As in earlier periods of Putin's rule, so too after February 2022, the level of state-directed social mobilization has remained low. Apathy, helplessness, and a desire to withdraw from public life continue to dominate Russian society.

With regard to the third issue, totalitarian political gnosis began to manifest on a broader scale in the public sphere from the time of Russia's aggression first against Crimea and then against Donbas in 2014.

Its most salient element was the reappearance of the category enemy of the nation, previously characteristic of the Stalinist period. This category has been identified and legally sanctioned in terms such as foreign agents, undesirable organizations, and – less frequently – the historical label "fifth column" (Nadskakuła-Kaczmarczyk, 2017). The explicit phrase "enemy of the people" has in practice been used almost exclusively by the ruler of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov (Bäcker & Rak, 2019, p. 13). By contrast, the epithet "foreign agents" has become the identifying mark applied to all those whom state functionaries treat as threats. Successive legislative changes proposed by deputies in the Duma have progressively restricted the scope of public activity available to persons and institutions, forcing many to register themselves as "foreign agents". This process is in many respects comparable to the treatment of people of Jewish origin under Nazism, although it unfolds much more slowly.

Up to 2022, public invocations of both the external objective enemy and apokatastasis – usually framed in terms of a luminous future – were relatively rare. One of the few such instances was Putin's 2018 remark that, in a nuclear Armageddon, Western people would "die like animals" while Russians would go to paradise (Bäcker & Rak, 2019, p. 13). Yet statements of that kind did not enjoy broadly positive resonance in society. After 24 February 2022, however, the number of utterances characteristic of totalitarian political gnosis increased markedly. Gnostic motifs are present in texts delivered by Vladimir Putin, beginning with his morning address to soldiers on 24 February. Putin's most important public addresses in 2022 concerned the West even more than they defended the decision to start the war. He portrays the West as the embodiment of the greatest evil. In this logic, Ukraine is treated as an instrument used by the West to subjugate Russia. Consequently, the liberation of the ancient lands of Rus from the rule of evil – and thereafter the liberation of the entire world from the amorality, aggression, and destruction allegedly characteristic of a West led by the United States – becomes Russia's sacred duty. Russia's task, in this view, is to free not only the peoples of Ukraine but also the whole of the West from the dominion of evil and to introduce harmonious cooperation among empires in a new multipolar world (Bäcker, 2022). This line of thinking satisfies to a large extent the essential criteria of totalitarian political gnosis. It also implies that, should these plans be threatened – or, perhaps more precisely, should Putin's rule be threatened – the Russian president might consider the use of any means available (including nuclear weapons) to destroy the West. In that worldview, Russia itself becomes less important than the supreme objective: the annihilation of the diabolical evil identified with the West.

Totalitarian political gnosis also appears in numerous writings by the Russian ideologue Aleksandr Dugin in precisely the same form. This is particularly evident in his public statements after February 2022. The degree of convergence, not only with the structure of thought

characteristic of totalitarian political gnosis but also with the semantic embodiments of its individual features, is very high (Bäcker, 2023a). It is also possible that elements of this gnosis appeared after 2022 in the written statements of Dmitry Medvedev, though due to the brevity and often fragmentary logic of his texts, proving this hypothesis conclusively may be difficult. The vast majority of Russian politicians, by contrast, rely on simplistic, fundamentalist oppositions. Consequently, the reach of thinking patterns typical of totalitarian political gnosis among Russia's political elites remains relatively limited. One of the few notable exceptions is Ramzan Kadyrov. Meanwhile, an analysis of the central Russian press and selected regional publications shows that journalists tend to avoid both fundamentalist and totalitarian modes of thought. Their writing is usually descriptive, focused on concrete issues and local problems (Bäcker, 2023b). Thus, while totalitarian political gnosis has become, since 2022 and primarily due to the prominence of Putin's speeches, an important prism through which Russia perceives the world, it does not play a dominant role. It is not the principal cognitive framework of Russia's political elites. However, given Putin's central role within the Kremlin power structure, this mode of thought can, at critical moments, determine the regime's key strategic decisions.

During the first quarter of the 21st century, Putin's Russia became increasingly autocratic. The already limited level of political subjectivity, which at the start of the century covered only a small minority of Russian society, continued to decline over time. The mass emigration of young, educated people in 2022, followed by the murder of Alexei Navalny in 2024 (Hartog, 2024), effectively brought about the disappearance of the political nation. Russians are no longer capable of organizing large-scale independent action, nor do they possess a charismatic leader. Russia today is an autocratic regime of organized kleptocracy, governed by the state apparatus. While in the early years of Putin's rule there was still a relative balance among competing interest groups within the Kremlin's decision-making elite, from 2014 onward the *siloviki* began to dominate, and since 2022 it is possible to speak of the hegemony of the broader military–industrial complex. The result is an increasingly rigid authoritarian regime that ever more closely resembles full-scale military authoritarianism.

At the same time, elements of totalitarian political gnosis have become more visible, even as the structures typical of a party–state apparatus show no signs of advancing beyond their embryonic stage. Added to this are the failed attempts to generate large-scale, state-directed social mobilization. In consequence, the conclusion is as follows: before 2014, Russia was a state with a moderate authoritarian regime; by 2022, it had undergone a steady evolution. During the full-scale war with Ukraine, its political system crystallized into a hardened, militarized authoritarianism containing distinct elements of totalitarian political gnosis.

In Russian historiography, there exist two opposing schools of thought regarding the origins of Bolshevism. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn regarded it as a product of the West, which arrived in Russia in the form of Marxism and destroyed its traditional society (Elliott, 1980). Richard Pipes, by contrast, argued that it was the Russian political tradition itself that transformed Marxist movements into totalitarian structures (Pipes & Bracken, 1974).

It is possible to present compelling arguments in support of both positions, yet far more important is the observation that remarkably few modifications were needed for the Bolshevik faction to evolve, over a paradoxically long period of time, into a mature party of a new type, one professing totalitarian political gnosis grounded in the semantic framework of Marxism. The first step in this transformation was the obligation for party members to belong to its basic organizational cells. Though seemingly a merely administrative measure, this initiated a process of extreme centralization and forced all members without exception into absolute obedience. The second crucial step was the assertion that Lenin's party alone was capable of transforming the proletariat into a revolutionary force striving to build communism. This was a claim to exclusive and indivisible subjectivity. The third step was the party's self-granted right to define essential truth, or *istina*. The organization holding such truth did not merely determine the path toward the inevitable triumph of proletarian rule – it became itself the subject that defined and simultaneously created the proletariat. Consequently, it was not external actors who determined who the enemy was – the party itself decided, regardless of facts. For, according to the patterns of totalitarian political gnosis, only the party could lead humankind to the inevitable victory of the proletariat, and thus to communism.

After the armed seizure of power in Russia, the Bolshevik Party learned through combat experience how to implement the idea of "building communism" while simultaneously ensuring its own survival. The Soviet state, on one hand, introduced war communism, enforced collectivization of the countryside, industrialization, and the creation of the "new man". On the other hand, it was compelled to fight for survival, rebuilding its basic resources during the NEP period and later avoiding military catastrophe and the collapse of state structures in the early months of Operation Barbarossa. In the first instance, the state retreated from a monistic system of control over all social and economic life; in the second, it abandoned totalitarian political gnosis in favor of a simple fundamentalist dichotomy: "us" versus "them", those ones who seek to destroy us. The same logic characterized the reforms initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, who, in his attempt to preserve the Soviet empire, gradually dismantled successive totalitarian social institutions.

Yeltsin's Russia, despite its unrestricted, almost anarchic economic freedom, pluralistic elections, and the broad independence of many institutions from central authority, was in fact an authoritarian state – a weak state with a moderate level of authoritarianism and a proliferation of façade democratic institutions. In the early 21st century, a process of centralization began. The vertical power structure (*vertikal' vlasti*) started to absorb or destroy regional elites and economic entities, and by the end of the quarter-century, all forms of social organization, down to the smallest associations. By the time of the armed aggression against Ukraine, Russian society had been transformed into a fully monistic structure. The Kremlin had become the central decision-making hub, supervising and controlling an archipelago of institutions that governed individual regions and sectors of social life. The political nation, weak and incapable of sustained and effective collective action, only occasionally managed to erupt in temporary waves of social mobilization through protests and public demonstrations, such as during the winter of 2011–2012. By 2022, the Russian political nation had lost even this limited capacity for agency, and Russia had become a state that met, to a very significant extent, the essential criteria of an autocratic regime. The party–state apparatus continues to exist only in an embryonic form, while attempts at mass, state-directed social mobilization remain brief and limited to small portions of society. By contrast, patterns of thought typical of totalitarian political gnosis are clearly visible, though not dominant. Thus, by the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, Russia can be characterized as a hardened authoritarian regime with distinct elements of totalitarian political gnosis.

(transl. by Ian Stephenson)

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