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Militarism in Russia:

from censure to approval



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‘So long as there’s no war.’ This oft-used phrase, attributed to the collective archetype of representatives of the older generation in the later Soviet period, has become a kind of meme amongst Russian speakers, simultaneously characterising war as the most terrible and unacceptable thing of all, while denying militarism in society.

‘The struggle for world peace’ was a common ideological cliché in the Soviet Union. In Putin’s Russia there have been many attempts to restore the Soviet legacy and the USSR’s ‘greatness’ on the international arena. However, militarism, in the form of pro-war sentiment and investment in military might, has gradually been not only accepted in the Russian Federation, but also approved, encouraged by the ruling elite, and ultimately the ‘only correct’ form of behaviour for the ‘patriotic Russian’.

How did Russia go from ‘peace to the world’ to ‘we can do it again’, and what role does militarism play in contemporary Russian society?

The USSR: ‘We are for peace, we don’t want war!’

This line from a children’s poem popular in Brezhnev’s USSR was a simple interpretation of one of the cornerstones of the late-Soviet ideological model. In practice, the Soviet leadership allowed itself to ‘step back’ from the actively propagandised thesis of ‘the peaceful coexistence of two systems’ by financing communist parties and anti-Western insurgencies around the world, pursuing a policy of expansion, and investing a significant percentage of its GDP in the military-industrial system. But they carefully concealed these facts from their own citizens.

By the 1970s, a stable ideological construct of ‘peace above all else’ had emerged for domestic consumption and for the USSR’s potential sympathisers abroad. It consisted of several key components.

Firstly, militarism was unequivocally condemned as a ‘bourgeois’ phenomenon, antithetical to the Soviet state

and the Soviet way of life, and peculiar to non-socialist foreign countries. The third edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia, published between 1969 and 1978, repeatedly brought the reader’s attention to its negative connotations. Prominent figures from global Communist and workers’ movements were characterised as ‘fighters against militarism and imperialism’.

The ‘anti-militarist movement’ was presented as progressive and friendly to the USSR, whereas militarism was mentioned in the same context as the forces that fought against the Soviet state, such as the ‘Japanese militarists’ of the 1930s and 1940s, or the ‘militarist-interventionists’ of the Civil War period.

Secondly, peace and the struggle for peace became the purpose of the USSR’s statehood, its spiritual core. In the 1976 edition of the textbook *The History of the CPSU*, the word peace, in the sense of ‘peaceful coexistence’, was mentioned at least 200 times. The idea that peace was a top priority was reinforced by numerous posters and other propaganda materials, at events ranging from industrial meetings to ‘line-ups’ at school assemblies. Quotes from Leonid Brezhnev’s speeches were reproduced en masse, in particular his speech at the 26th Congress of the CPSU: ‘The guiding light that will lead us into the future is not preparation for war, which condemns nations to the senseless waste of their material and spiritual wealth, but the consolidation of peace.’

Thirdly, the idea of banking on war was presented as an inherent characteristic of the West, e.g., the ‘American imperialists’ and ‘West German revanchist militarists’. In propaganda, the USSR’s military potential was purely defensive in nature. The idea was drummed into people’s minds that Moscow would only be prepared to use force in the event of an existential threat to its national interests. Nuclear weapons were associated with the total destruction of humanity, and making verbal threats to use them was taboo.

Finally, communist ideologists believed that the USSR was not just a guarantor of peace, but also a key instigator of peace initiatives. Moscow paid lip service to a policy of détente, while Washington and its allies were ascribed the role of militarists, building up a military presence in Europe and other regions of the planet, and thereby increasing the likelihood of a major conflict.

One of the practical manifestations of this course was the wary attitude of the party-state elite towards servicemen. The party set up bodies to monitor the USSR's armed forces at all levels. There was actually only one high-ranking officer in the Politburo who had real influence on state decision-making - Defence Minister Dmitri Ustinov. The other several dozen generals and marshals, who were nominally members of the CPSU Central Committee on account of their high office, had no real power. It was customary for the USSR's state security agency, the KGB, to be 'diluted' every so often with Party and Komsomol functionaries, who in fact served as a counterweight to the intelligence service staff in inter-ministerial power struggles.

Gorbachev's perestroika marked a fundamental change in the USSR's domestic and foreign policy. What followed was the almost complete rejection of the practices and attitudes of the Brezhnev period, which was decried as a period of 'stagnation' and subjected to criticism. However, the prioritising of peace and the rejection of militarism remained, perhaps as one of a handful of elements borrowed from the past.

Before he became General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, he assessed the latest peace initiatives in a speech to the British Parliament in 1984 as follows: 'Reason has prevailed, the understanding that war is an unsuitable, unacceptable method of solving contentious issues, and that, in a nuclear war, or indeed an arms race or a confrontation, there can be no winner. It has become obvious that the Cold War is an abnormal state for our relations to be in, one that constantly carries with it a military threat.' Two years later, at his first congress as leader of the party and the state, Gorbachev outlined the CPSU's 'main areas of focus' for the period: 'the struggle against the nuclear threat, against the arms race, and for the preservation and strengthening of universal peace'. Later on, the country's leadership presented the concept of a 'common European home': the antonym of militarism, and the logical product of the peaceful coexistence of states with different systems. This concept included the de-ideologisation of foreign policy, and the freedom of choice and self-determination of nations.

A new Russia that stands for peace

After the collapse of the USSR and the formation of an independent Russian state, Russian President Boris Yeltsin followed a similar path to that of his antagonist Gorbachev. For him, getting rid of the Soviet legacy, closing down the former structures, and bringing about radical change in the socio-political system and the model of relations

in the country did not mean rejecting the 'policy of peace'.

Firstly, Russia tried to create a new, attractive image of a democratic, non-militaristic state open to foreign investment. Secondly, the Cold War was at an end, as were any direct threats. This was formalised in the symbolic Russo-American declaration signed on 1 February 1992. The set phrase 'a new era in relations between Russia and the United States' had become commonplace in the media. There was no longer any practical justification for militarism. Thirdly, the state could not afford to have a military-industrial system on the same scale as the Soviet one. In times of crisis, reliance on peaceful dispute resolution and the rejection of the militarisation of society became not just the subject of ideologised rhetoric, but an urgent necessity.

Although the Yeltsin period failed to create a standardised institutional democracy, it did dismantle one of the main tools of authoritarianism: state propaganda. For this reason, calls for 'peace' and the rejection of militarism ceased to appear in society as ideological messages, but this remained the essence of the country's political course. Yeltsin considered himself a 'civilian president', and although he had held the rank of colonel since the days when he worked for the party in Sverdlovsk, he never appeared in military uniform in public. Nor did he ever achieve a higher military rank to match his status as Supreme Commander-in-Chief. Yeltsin's inner circle included military officers (such as Pavel Grachev) and representatives of the intelligence services (Alexander Korzhakov, Mikhail Barsukov and Nikolai Kovalev), and charismatic generals (such as Alexander Lebed) became his political partners. However, the first president of the Russian Federation did not allow a militocracy to take shape within the structures of power. According to Vladimir Sogrin's calculations, military figures made up just 6.7 per cent of those structures under Yeltsin. Serving in the military was not seen as very prestigious. Even after the outbreak of the First Chechen War in December 1994, the Kremlin did not resort to a strategy of forced militarisation of society.

Putin's 'pivot'

Having gained power by agreement with the elites, and by riding the wave of the strong public reaction to a series of terrorist attacks in Russia and the resumption of military operations in the southern regions of the country, Vladimir Putin initially pitched himself as the exact opposite of Yeltsin. The 'civilian president' had stepped aside for a 'military president' - one who visited the sites where Russian troops were stationed, and tried his hand in fighter jets and submarines.

Using all means possible, and his media image as a starting point, a simple formula has been hammered home in Russian society since the 2000s: any

state-level problem - the fight against terrorism, the preservation of the country's territorial integrity, the creation of a new power hierarchy or a protest movement - is most effectively solved through force. In his 2004 address, Putin characterised the new state doctrine of prioritising strength in one short sentence: 'We have shown weakness, and the weak get beaten up'.

Even administrative reforms relating to civil matters appeared to have military undertones. Back at the beginning of Putin's first term, Russia had created new territorial units: the first seven federal districts, headed by plenipotentiaries of the president's choosing. Their boundaries corresponded almost exactly to what were known as 'military districts'. Putin also placed his bets on the siloviki (law enforcement and security chiefs) in his inner circle. In 2002, they had already made up 26.6% of the power structures, according to Sogrin, i.e. there were four times as many of them as in the very recent Yeltsin period. In the subsequent years, the percentage of 'men in epaulettes' in the state administration of the Russian Federation reached 31.5%, and there was a record 66.7% in senior managerial roles.

Almost immediately after the new administration entered the Kremlin, considerable attention was given to the militarisation of the young.

In 2000, the pro-Kremlin organisation Walking Together was established. This was followed, in 2005, by Nashi, a remake of the paramilitary organisation founded by Alexander Nevzorov back in 1991. Its structure, with its military-style hierarchy, and indeed its very name reflected the mood of the times, with the black-and-white division of people into Nashi, or 'our guys', and Ne-nashi, 'not our guys', characteristic of militaristic, authoritarian social models. The movement was used as a tool for both supporting Putin and fighting dissent, resulting in the coining of the word 'Nashists', a term evoking historical parallels that are immediately clear. An important activity of the movement was the Our Army project, which enabled Nashi commissars to work closely with military units and use various methods, including online blogs, to increase the appeal of the Armed Forces. Over time, these and other similar movements, such as Young Russia, were wound up as they were not found to be effective. There are three dominating state-funded, pro-government youth movements in the modern-day Russian Federation: the paramilitary Young Guard, the youth wing of the All-Russian People's Front, and the fully militarised Yunarmia ('Youth Army'), created by the Russian Ministry of Defence. It should be noted, however, that Putin's team have not succeeded in creating a militarist youth movement on a genuinely large scale, comparable to the Komsomol. In its heyday, Walking

Together had about 50,000 members. The Nashi leaders' stated goal of increasing their numbers to 250,000 has never been achieved. In Putin's subsequent terms of office too, nostalgia for the youth organisations of the USSR continued to be felt in Russia. In a 2018 poll, 34% of Russians said they would definitely support a revival of the Komsomol, while 46% said they would probably support it. By 2021, these figures, reflecting the proportion of people in favour of a Komsomol-like structure, had reached 37% and 42%, respectively.

But the militarisation of the young, stimulated by political apathy, bore fruit. A more successful project for the Kremlin was the militarisation of secondary education.

Along with a paradigm shift in history textbooks, making military victories an unquestioned priority as the 'pinnacle of Russia's might', a whole strand of militaristic narratives began to appear in the school curriculum (first as part of a lesson and, later, in the form of 'Conversations about Important Things', as an independent 'subject'). The cornerstone of the new concept was a drive - traditional in authoritarian and totalitarian states - to make the concepts of 'homeland' and 'fatherland' synonymous with the concept of the 'state', and thereafter with the ruling regime. In parallel with this process, the usual 'Soviet' children's poems about peace and the condemnation of armed conflicts disappeared almost without a trace from the repertoire of nursery school performances and school festivals.

'We can do it again.'

Contrary to popular belief, the slogan 'we can do it again', which has now become a meme, did not emerge after the start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, nor even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Stickers bearing this slogan, an adapted version of one of the inscriptions left on the wall of the Reichstag by a Soviet soldier after the capture of Berlin in May 1945, were first seen on 9 May 2012. And that was no accident. One year later, in December 2013, the Rossiya Segodnya media holding company was established, bringing a radically different paradigm to television and radio broadcasting, and, eventually, to web content too. Militarism played a significant role in it.

In 2022, Russian militarism underwent another transformation.

Whereas in the past, top Russian politicians were holding formal 'conversations about peace' while at the informal level 'peaceful coexistence' had already been made taboo in society and was perceived as weakness and a policy of concessions, once the large-scale

invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation had begun, reliance on force became the only approved form of behaviour, and the 'struggle for peace' was criminalised.

As early as in March 2022, Alexander Dugin published an article on RIA Novosti entitled 'Russia needs total militarisation', in which he called for this instrument to be implemented as broadly as possible, including in the culture, mass consciousness and everyday life of Russians. Dugin's article did not meet with any objections in the other pro-government media, except for an argument about the possible negative impact of total militarisation on the country's demographics.

A relatively new phenomenon for modern Russia is what we might call 'church-based militarism'.

The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) had already become an important institution in the Russian Federation in the 1990s. Whilst not exactly helping to form the state, it certainly supported the state and refrained from entering into polemical debate with it. As early as in 1995, a special Synodal Department for Co-operation with the Armed Forces and Law Enforcement Agencies was established. At that time, however, this decision could be explained by the church's desire to access structures that had previously been closed to it, and in which, against the backdrop of a general growth in religiosity in Russia, a congregation had now emerged for it. To some degree, the same reasoning can be used to explain the emergence of the institution of military chaplains, particularly in connection with the removal from the armed forces of army political workers and the absence, at the time, of equivalent figures to them in the army. Under Putin, the ROC has increasingly become a body that relays Kremlin narratives, both supporting the Kremlin's authoritarian course and providing institutional patronage to various paramilitary formations, such as the Cossack movement. But prior to 2022, the church, represented by its top leadership, had avoided taking a stance on the issue of the state's use of military force, be it in the war in Georgia, the war in Syria or the occupation of Crimea.

At the beginning of military actions by the Russian army throughout Ukraine, the ROC began to speak about what was happening, applying the Kremlin's ideological clichés ('one nation', 'support for Donbass', anti-Western rhetoric and homophobia), without openly praising the use of military force. As early as in March-April 2022, however, the Russian Orthodox Church, through Patriarch Kirill, openly expressed support for Moscow's militarism, described Russian sol-

diers as 'defenders of the fatherland', endorsed the use of violence, and participated in the demonisation of Ukraine in the Russian public consciousness.

Generally, however, by the time the annexation of Crimea took place, the current militaristic model had already been formed in Russia, and this model was only strengthened (but not radically altered) with the start of Russia's full-fledged entry into a major war. It is driven by the following seven core elements and propaganda messages:

1. The principle of peaceful co-existence with the West has failed. This thesis is repeated in one variation or another by the most senior officials in the Russian Federation, starting with Putin. It is the democratic states of the 'collective West' that are blamed for Russia's militarism, whilst the militarist course itself is presented as an 'inevitable reaction' to geopolitical challenges.
2. Military might is portrayed as the basis of Russian statehood and its only defence. Without the use of military force, statehood is threatened and Russian national interests abroad will be compromised.
3. Militarism as an extension of Realpolitik. The Kremlin does not see militarism as a unique and reprehensible phenomenon, casting it as a 'typical' domestic and foreign policy tool and citing, as a rule, the track record of the US.
4. Militarism as a fundamental component of traditionalism. The Kremlin often resorts to excursions into history (whether real, 'corrected' or completely made up) in order to demonstrate that 'Russia's might' has always been linked to its combat readiness and military power. Andrei Tsygankov writes about 'sacrifice' and 'service' as 'virtues' that are inculcated into society, on the one hand, and the allegedly 'historically proven effectiveness' of the militaristic model on the other. And Fyodor Krasheninnikov characterises this parallel as a 'barracks-based ideal'.
5. The primacy of the collective over the individual, the values of 'state interests' over any individual human life. This thesis is promoted as the polar opposite of the 'Western, liberal approach' based on the value of every life; such an approach is ridiculed and used as an 'argument' in favour of the superiority of the Russian path of development over the democratic, Western one.
6. The 'inevitability' of militarism in the present context. Dmitry Tsybakov talks about the 'fetishisation of armed violence' and the transformation of it into a 'priority factor' in politics, the economy and the social sphere, both inside and outside the state's borders.

7. The criminalisation of anti-militarism, and a black-and-white perception of reality. Militarists are made to seem synonymous with patriots in the public imagination: a militarist is a good Russian who is willing to defend his homeland and not 'rock the boat in difficult times' by criticising the actions of the authorities. Anti-militarism is effectively likened to betrayal, high treason, disregard for Russia's interests and complicity with its adversaries.

A way out of the impasse?

Militarism is often thought of as being merely about increased military spending and the army having a role in the state. In practice, it is a more profound phenomenon that has dire consequences. Militarism contributes to tensions in society, leads to a rise in crime, creates false priorities in the minds of a significant portion of the populace, hinders economic development and, as a result, strengthens authoritarianism, because all paramilitary structures are, in their very essence, anti-democratic. It involves a clear hierarchy, a minimal number of horizontal ties, unconditional obedience to orders and instructions, and the consolidation that an authoritarian leader requires.

Such a system is the antithesis of plurality of opinion, diversity of approaches and free competition among different concepts. If it becomes part of state governance or even synonymous with it, then the state itself will inevitably be anti-democratic. Militarism helps divert attention away from problems in the economy, the political mistakes made by the leadership, corruption and mismanagement. This is why militarism is so valuable to putinism.

The rejection of militarism as one of the pillars of the state's course is not possible without a large-scale democratisation of the executive state bodies and society as a whole.

In democracies too, the military capabilities of a state play a role that is not insignificant, as an argument on the international stage and a signal to the state's own population. The US, for instance, has the largest defence budget on the planet and a huge network of nearly 5,000 military bases around the world. The prestige associated with military service, and respect for a citizen in uniform, are enduring features of that country. Democracies, too, resort to military instruments to resolve one conflict or another, or to defend their national interests, at times without the approval of international institutions. However, in democracies, there are deep-seated mechanisms that help to restrain the military and impose limits on politicians

who opt for demonstrations of force or the use of force. These are the levers of parliamentary control, the idea - enshrined in fundamental foreign policy documents - that diplomatic avenues should take precedence over military action, a strong anti-war movement within civil society, a network of NGOs and other citizens' associations, free media, and the ability to openly express one's disagreement with the course taken by the government. In authoritarian and dictatorial models, by contrast, there is no counterweight to militarism, or, if there is one, it is extremely weak. For these reasons, militarism will continue to be an inevitable component of putinism.

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In Putin's Russia, there have been many attempts to restore the Soviet legacy. But militarism, which was frowned upon in propaganda in the USSR, has started to be approved in the Russian Federation, encouraged by the ruling elite, and, as a result, has become the 'only correct' form of behaviour of the 'patriotic Russian'.



Militarism is often thought of as being merely about increased military spending and the army having a role in the state. In practice, it is a more profound phenomenon that has dire consequences.



Using all means possible, and his media image as a starting point, a simple formula has been hammered home in Russian society since the 2000s: any state-level problem - the fight against terrorism, the preservation of the country's territorial integrity, the creation of a new power hierarchy or a protest movement - is most effectively solved through force.

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