

Themes of Russian history

Every one of these themes is alive in Russia today. All are relevant to the war in Ukraine.

1. State and society. The supremacy of the State.¹ Restriction on individual liberty and on civil society. The social and economic elite organized by and serving the State.²
2. Territorial expansion and defense. Resistance to attack and invasion. Great Power status and military glory. War or incipient war as Russia's natural situation.
3. Empire. Russia as a multinational state. The "Gathering of the Russian lands." Imperial expansion. Soviet variant: Moscow as the center of world communist revolution. Putin's "Russian world." The "national question" : how can the peoples and nations be melded together and nationalism contained?
4. Backwardness. Lag of technology and industry relative to the West. Inefficiency and bureaucracy. Overcoming backwardness.³
5. Poverty of the masses. Rich-poor gap. Moscow and St. Petersburg vs. the provinces and rural misery.
6. Russia as distinctly "Eurasian" vs. European (or Western). Slavophiles/Eurasianists vs Westernizers. Debate about the character of Russian civilization and the path forward.
7. Spiritual character of the People (*narod*). The spiritual character of the people linked to Russian nationalism.⁴ Spiritual freedom in confinement. Suffering and endurance, to prevail.

¹ See Pushkin, *The Bronze Horseman*, where, deranged by the great St. Petersburg flood which has swept away his sweetheart, poor everyman Evgenii in his delirium is pursued through the streets of the capital by the statue of Peter the Great, the Bronze Horseman. The Russian capital, St. Petersburg, named after the Autocrat, was built at great effort (tens of thousands of serfs died in the swamps that became the city) in an unsuitable place as a monument to his power.

² Successive elites subordinate to the State: the *boyars* (Ivan IV, 1500s); the officials (*chinovniki*) and military officers from Peter the Great to the 20th century; the Communist Party *nomenklatura* 1917-91; the present elite of *siloviki* (power-people) and oligarchs tied to Putin's "power vertical."

³ Stalin to Soviet industrial managers, 1931: "We must overcome this lag in ten years, or they will crush us."

8. Church and state are one. Morality and faith are fused with obedience to the state. The Orthodox Church is an arm of the state, cheering on its military glory. Soviet communism suppressed the Church, but it was the total fusion of ideology and morality with state power.
9. Russia's world ideological mission.⁵ Variants: the Third Rome, the 19th century "Holy Alliance" vs revolution, Soviet communism. Putin claims leadership of the world forces of national tradition and conservative morality.

⁴ This is the underlying theme of much of Russia's greatest literature: see Tolstoy, *War and Peace*; Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*; Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago* and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

⁵ See Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*,