

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

THE IMPERIALIST PHILOSOPHER WHO DEMANDED THE UKRAINE WAR

For decades, Alexander Dugin argued that Russia had a messianic mission, and that destroying an independent Ukraine was necessary to fulfilling it.

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Illustration by Fede Yankelevich

...**n** August, 2022, six months after Russian troops invaded Ukraine, a cultural festival named Traditions was held outside Moscow, at

the onetime summer retreat of Alexander Pushkin. The star speaker was Alexander Dugin, a scholar and a prominent proponent of the war who has been called the prophet of the new Russian Empire. In his book “Being and Empire” (2023), which runs to a Heideggerian length of seven hundred and eighty-four pages, Dugin characterizes Russia as nothing less than “*the last place of the true subject of history in time and space.*” His lecture at the festival, “Tradition and History,” was as sprawling as its title suggested. Sitting under a canopy, he extemporized on the seasonal labors of the Russian peasantry, finding in the pre-modern past the “secret center” of the nation’s spiritual life.

For Dugin, the greatest enemy of Russia is liberalism, which he has defined as the “false premise that a human is a separate, autonomous individual—a selfish animal seeking its own benefit. And nothing more.” He has written that “such a liberal person—completely detached from God, history, and society; from the people and culture; from the family and loved ones; from collective morality and ethnic identity—does not exist; and if they do exist, they ought not to.”

After the talk, some members of the audience gathered around Dugin. A young man asked, “This liberalism thing—is it possible that concealed within it is some link to the Lord that will take it and bring it down?”

“Perhaps,” Dugin told him. “That’s why there are people who fight against the liberal world, even *within* the liberal world.”

“Maybe there is simply a certain substance that has flooded everything, all the brains,” the young man went on. “Then a flame is lit inside it by its offspring, which instantly turns the game upside down?”

The crowd looked befuddled, but Dugin cottoned at once. “Ah,” he said. “That would be Donald Trump!”

Everyone laughed, including Dugin’s daughter, Daria Dugina, who’d

accompanied him to the event. A writer and broadcaster, Dugina also worked as a publicist and scheduler for her father. That evening, as they drove in different cars, an explosive attached to the underside of Dugina's S.U.V. detonated. Her father got out of his vehicle as other drivers stopped. Someone taped the scene; Dugin can be seen stepping among the flaming wreckage, holding his hands to his head. The next day, Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, sent Dugin a telegram calling Dugina's death "a vile, cruel crime."

An obscure Russian paramilitary group claimed responsibility for the bombing, but Moscow insisted that the order had come from Ukraine's intelligence services. Ukraine denied the charge, but Biden Administration officials reportedly agreed with Russia. The intended victim was presumably Dugin. In some ways, he was a curious target: Dugin is not a politician or a military commander, nor does he seem to be a secret agent, despite predictable rumors to the contrary. Yet his voluminous writings, from books to online essays, have indelibly shaped Russian politics and policy. His conviction that the Russian Federation's destiny is to become a holy empire along tsarist lines, a notion that he has been promoting for more than three decades, has been adopted by much of the Russian political élite—including by Putin himself. So has Dugin's long-held belief that Ukraine is a proxy battlefield for a larger mortal conflict with the West. Whereas the Biden Administration opposed Russia's imperial aggression, the Trump Administration appears willing to ratify it, if not to mimic it.

Since invading Ukraine, Putin has regularly invoked old arguments about Russia's imperial role in the world, yet his references amount to a mercenary patchwork. In contrast, Dugin's fluency with these arguments is as formidable as his loathing for liberalism is sincere. A close reading of his work offers an answer to the central question of the war, a question that, after three years, has still not been adequately addressed: Just why did Putin want to conquer Ukraine?

Only some of Dugin's writing is about matters of state. Other pet subjects are literature, art, theology, music, and philosophy. He composes poetry (the not bad "In a Soviet Basement" contains the lines "He spins in a waltz, black as a cat / In his hands a Walter, in his hands a Walter / In his hands, Walter Scott"), records experimental music, and translates an array of right-wing European writers into Russian, releasing the books through his publishing house. Until 2014, he taught sociology at Moscow State University. He is not a Kremlin insider but, rather, a member of Moscow's intelligentsia—or what now passes for it. He has written, co-written, or edited nearly a hundred books, and in his graphomania, if not in the quality of his work, he is a throwback to the Golden Age of Russian literature, in the nineteenth century. And, like the conservative Slavophile authors of that era who first formulated the nativist views that have resurged under Putin—such as the historian Mikhail Pogodin—Dugin assails the West and its values. He inveighs against democracy, secularism, individualism, civil society, multiculturalism, human rights, sexual openness, technology, scientific rationalism, and reason in general, which he rejects in favor of the mystical revelations of the Russian Orthodox Church. Although he is an avid tweeter and frequently posts on Telegram and Facebook, he claims to have no use for modernity. He once wrote that "the best course would be to eradicate the state and replace it with the Holy Empire."

"Dugin can write a book in one night," Marat Guelman, a former political consultant to the administration of Boris Yeltsin and a former acquaintance of Dugin's, told me. "He is full of words." Some of those words are sound enough. In "Templars of the Proletariat," from 1997, Dugin observes that "the Russian national idea" is "paradoxical," and "a colossal labor of the soul is required in order to make sense of it." But, just when you think he is onto something serious, he says something risibly unserious. In his 2012 book, "Putin vs. Putin," he presents pages of admissible arguments about Putin's lack of vision for Russia's future, only to announce, with a note of portentous climax, that Putin took office on a date predicted by Nostradamus. A critique

of the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, which lucidly dissects the contradictions of perestroika, is undercut by musings on the occult implications of the “characteristic mark” on the former premier’s forehead. Dugin’s Russian critics like to say that he has *kasha v golove*—porridge in the head. Alexander Verkhovsky, a scholar of Russian extremism, dryly told me, “His books are very impressive, especially if, when you read them, you’re not thinking much.”

Nevertheless, you can find Dugin’s latest works in Russian bookstores, and he has found some avid readers abroad. The more extreme elements of the European New Right love his disdain for democracy. His books have been translated into French, Spanish, German, Italian, and English; in the United States, at least one of them—a 2014 treatise on Martin Heidegger—was published by a company run by the white nationalist Richard Spencer. Dugin makes President Trump’s accounts of American decline seem modest by comparison. In “Being and Empire,” Dugin calls the U.S. an immoral wasteland—“*the direct opposite of the Holy Empire.*” (His writing is full of italics.)

Last April, Dugin was interviewed by Tucker Carlson during the pundit’s tour of Russia. The expression of amiable skepticism that Carlson had worn through an earlier interview with Putin descended into a baffled frown when Dugin told him that the triumph of Western liberalism, which promotes “individualism” and rejects all kinds of “collective identities,” had led mankind to “the historical terminal station” where all ties to the past—religion, family, nation-state—were cut and “human identity” was “abandoned.” His anti-Western militancy is so intense that the U.S. and the European Union have both placed sanctions on him.

More dramatically, Ukrainian prosecutors have charged Dugin with genocide, though he appears to have played no material role in the war. His crime is rhetorical: he argues that the destruction of Ukraine is essential to Russia’s continued existence. In his 1997 book “Foundations of Geopolitics:

The Geopolitical Future of Russia,” which brought him to fame in his home country, he writes, “The existence of Ukraine within its current borders, and with its current status as a ‘sovereign state,’ is tantamount to delivering a monstrous blow to Russia’s geopolitical security.” Although other Russian intellectuals have called for Ukraine’s incorporation into the Russian Federation, none have done so for quite so long, or with such a murderous tone, as Dugin. “Russia can be either great or not at all,” he writes in his 2014 book “Ukraine: My War,” adding, “Of course, for greatness, people always, in all centuries, pay a very heavy price, sometimes shedding entire seas of blood.”

Putin was once known for his distaste for ideology. Just before becoming his country’s acting President, in 2000, he wrote, “I am against the restoration of an official state ideology in Russia in any form.” In the decade after he took office, whenever he did resort to violence abroad—continuing the war in Chechnya; invading Georgia, in 2008—no grand ideology lay behind it. These were acts of opportunism by a cold-eyed pragmatist. The same could be said of Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, which was brazen and unlawful but also virtually bloodless, so much so that it moved Henry Kissinger to call Putin “a serious strategist.” (The mandarin of Realpolitik knew no higher praise.)

Putin’s decision, in 2022, to try to conquer all of Ukraine can’t be arrived at by extrapolating from those prior invasions. This was less the gambit of a master of Realpolitik than the reckless gamble of an ideologue, and the impulse to invade belongs to an antique tradition of Russian political thought—a messianic imperialism that originates not in the Soviet Union (which the former K.G.B. agent Putin has been accused, imprecisely, of wanting to revive) but in tsarist Russia.

Today, Putin talks like a Romanov-era zealot. This once terse apparatchik seems to have succumbed to the notion, as Dostoyevsky put it in “The

Brothers Karamazov,” that “all true Russians are philosophers.” Putin has even taken to quoting Dostoyevsky; not too long ago, the idea that he’d ever *read* Dostoyevsky would have been laughable. Putin waxes on about the “civilizational identity” that underlies Russia’s claims to cultural dominance, and about the “historical and spiritual space” of Greater Russia, which, naturally, includes all of Ukraine. “The world has entered a period of fundamental, revolutionary transformation,” he declared in a speech several months after attempting to topple Kyiv. Russia, he said, was defending not only its national interests but also the oppressed of the world against the “Western élites” who exploited them. His country had made “a glorious spiritual choice.”

The speech could have been written by Dugin. In “Foundations of Geopolitics,” he writes, “The Russian people certainly belong to the messianic peoples, and, like any messianic people, it has a universal, pan-human significance.” Putin has come to sound like Dugin to such an extent that Dugin has been called Putin’s Rasputin and Putin’s philosopher. “Putin’s Brain” was the headline of a *Foreign Affairs* profile of Dugin; “Inside ‘Putin’s Brain’” is the title of a recent book. All oversell the point. Putin’s telegram of condolence to Dugin notwithstanding, there is little to suggest that the two men have a personal relationship. But wars don’t arise from personal relationships. They arise from ideas—from the accretion, and corruption, of ideas over time. Putin’s assimilation of Dugin’s thinking is likely indirect, maybe even unconscious. It might be more apt to call Dugin the Russian President’s imperial id. When I asked the historian Andrei Tsygankov, the author of “Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin,” about the pair’s connection, he said, “Putin uses Dugin in the way that the tsars used the Slavophiles”—for “mobilizing the population to their cause.”

When Putin announced the start of his “special military operation” in Ukraine, on February 24, 2022, he didn’t mention that country by name until the latter half of a nearly four-thousand-word speech. The first

half was taken up with excoriating the West, and especially the U.S., that “empire of lies,” for forcing the war on Russia by seeking to “destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values . . . that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature.” That speech, too, could have been written by Dugin, who has written that “*the entirety of Russian history is a dialectical argument with the West and against Western culture.*”

Putin and Dugin came to prominence simultaneously, in the nineteen-nineties. After leaving the K.G.B., Putin became the deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, then joined the staff of President Yeltsin, who made him chief of the Federal Security Service (the K.G.B.’s successor), then Prime Minister, and eventually tapped him for the Presidency. This was one way up in post-Soviet Russia. Another was through the reactionary underground. This was Dugin’s path. February 24, 2022, can be seen as the day those two trajectories, the official and the unofficial, collided.

Putin describes himself as a “pure and utterly successful product of Soviet patriotic education” in “First Person,” a collection of interviews with him published in 2000 and the closest thing we have to an autobiography. Dugin is a more exotic specimen in Russia: a child of the sixties, almost in the same sense that Westerners would use that term. He was born in Moscow to a minor official in 1962, nine years after the death of Joseph Stalin, from whose murderous purges the Russian intelligentsia was slowly recovering. Writers and other educated élites were then “under such monstrous ideological pressure that one wonders why art and the humanities have not altogether vanished in our country,” the dissident Andrei Sakharov wrote.

Stalin suppressed Ukrainian culture and caused the death of untold numbers of Ukrainians. While Stalin’s successor, Nikita Khrushchev, continued expanding the Soviet imperium, he reversed Stalin’s policy on Ukraine. Khrushchev, who grew up in Ukraine, elevated it to the status of the second most powerful Soviet republic after Russia and, in 1954, transferred Crimea

to its control—an act for which Putin assails him today. He also instituted the thaw, as it was known, relaxing cultural restrictions. The year Dugin was born, Khrushchev both precipitated the Cuban missile crisis and approved the publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's account of a Soviet Gulag, "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," arguably the most subversive novel to have been legally published in the U.S.S.R. Beneath the sanctioned renaissance sprang up an illicit counterculture that defied the Soviet cult of reason with occult religion.

From this spiritualist subculture emerged the young Dugin, by all accounts unforgettably. Tall, regal, and formal looking, he looked like "a representative of a higher race," one of his friends said. He was a walking paradox: in the aristocratic Russian manner, he wore cavalry jodhpurs and rolled his "R"s; at the same time, he adopted the style of a medieval peasant, complete with a "pudding bowl" haircut. The writer and poet Eduard Limonov recalls in his memoir "My Political Biography" that Dugin was a "plump, cheeky, belly, busty, bearded young man" who was "full of exaggerated emotions."

While Putin got a law degree and entered the intelligence services, Dugin dropped out of aviation school and took up with a different sort of secret society: the Iuzhinskii Circle, a group of writers in Moscow's "metaphysical underground." The circle had been formed, in the nineteen-sixties, by Yuri Mamleev, a novelist who has noted, "We felt distinctly that there was a bottomless chasm beneath us and that the whole planet was sinking into it." The first members of the salon gathered in Mamleev's small Moscow apartment to listen to him read from his writings, which were too outlandish to be published even during the thaw. One novel, "Shatuny," was regarded as a kind of sacred text. A late-twentieth-century answer to "Crime and Punishment," it follows a half-witted, sex-crazed serial killer as he screws and slaughters his way through Russia, in an effort to glimpse his victims' souls. Dugin said that the novel was "the secret seed of the nineteen-sixties," writing, "It is as though what you hold in your hands is not a book, but an empty space, a black, impish vortex that can suck large objects into itself." A

similar feeling may have been induced by the circle's initiation rites—Bacchic episodes with copious drinking and sex.

Mamleev immigrated to the U.S. in 1974, before Dugin joined the circle. When Dugin became a member, the group was meeting at the dacha of Sergey Zhigalkin, a mystical philosopher who became Dugin's close friend. Zhigalkin told me that life in the circle was not just intellectually risky; members were in danger of being arrested or sent to a mental asylum. He said that Dugin opposed both the Soviet system and “modern civilization as a whole.” This gave Dugin a grim outlook, Zhigalkin explained: “In Russia, and America, too, we live in the paradigm of a new time: in postmodernism, which is purely earthly and has no spiritual dimension—that is the tragedy.”

Dugin began not as a writer but as a musician. He brought a guitar and an accordion to circle gatherings and performed original material. Charles Clover, who was a *Financial Times* correspondent in Moscow at the time, chronicles the metaphysical underground in his book “Black Wind, White Snow,” and writes that Dugin's songs were “composed of as many antisocial elements as its creator could find.” Clover recalls, “Strumming away around a bonfire in the evening sunset, he belted out a song, ‘Fuck the Damn Sovdep.’” (The Soviet Deputies were the organs of local government in the U.S.S.R.) The lyrics essentially called for mass murder of the Soviet leadership: “Two million in the river / two million in the oven / Our revolvers will not misfire.” Eventually, Dugin had his own cult following. “We just fell down and worshipped him,” one acolyte told Clover. “He was like a messiah.”

Soon enough, Dugin came to the attention of Putin's colleagues in the K.G.B. Dugin's father—his government career hindered, or possibly ruined, by his son—may have tipped off agents. In 1983, Dugin was sent to K.G.B. headquarters after performing dissident songs at a Moscow art studio. Agents later discovered a samizdat archive of Mamleev's writings at the home of Dugin's parents. According to Clover, Dugin was told by his

interrogator, “The U.S.S.R. will stand forever. It’s an eternal reality.”

Dugin was released after a night of questioning and started working odd jobs while exhausting library shelves. He inhaled the European canon and Eastern philosophy. M. Gessen, in their book “The Future Is History,” relates an anecdote about Dugin wanting to read Heidegger’s “Being and Time.” He couldn’t locate a Russian translation, so he tracked down a German copy—on microfilm. He retrofitted a 35-mm. hand-cranked projector on his desk. “By the time he was done with ‘Being and Time,’ Dugin needed glasses,” Gessen writes. He’d also taught himself German. He then learned English, French, and Italian, too, along with various ancient languages. He gravitated to latter-day Continental metaphysicians—Heidegger, the German radical conservatives Oswald Spengler and Carl Schmitt, the traditionalist school of René Guénon and Julius Evola—who shared a hopelessness about Western civilization, if not civilization generally, and a morbid aversion to modernity. A striking number of these thinkers were members of the Nazi Party, or were otherwise fascist. Dugin could declaim on their work for hours, and did.

“He liked to give a lecture,” Misha Verbitsky, a mathematician and a former friend of Dugin’s, told me. “He dared to think in directions where nobody else would. Like Nietzsche, I suppose. Of course, some of the directions were very unhealthy.”

Dugin also read deeply in the Russian canon. The notion that Russia is more than a state or nation—that it is a holy empire with a world-saving duty—goes back at least half a millennium. “All Christian realms will come to an end and will unite into the one single realm of our sovereign, that is, into the Russian realm, according to the prophetic books,” the Russian theologian Filofei predicted in 1510. “Both Romes fell, the third endures.” The idea was brought to its highest polish in the nineteenth century, the apex of tsarist imperialism and, not coincidentally, of Russian letters. That era is the origin of Dugin’s views of the West and Ukraine, and of Putin’s

recent thinking. Indeed, it can be seen as the true start of the Ukraine war.

As hard as it is to imagine now, Russia was then seen, and saw itself, not as the existential foe of the West but as its protégé. When Tsar Alexander I chased Napoleon Bonaparte from a charred Moscow to Paris, in 1814, he was hailed as the deliverer of Europe. Alexander came to believe that God had ordained him to save Europe, and also all of humanity and Christianity. Russia was both a physical and a spiritual empire—the Third Rome, as Filofei suggested. So holy was Russia that the two words merged in the language: *svetlorusskaia*, or Holy Russia. Tellingly, in “Being and Empire” Dugin calls Russia “the last kingdom—the Third Rome.”

If Alexander was the progenitor of the messianic imperialism that Putin expresses today, Alexander’s most imaginative acolytes were poets and novelists, not his court propagandists. As Eugene Onegin rides home from Europe, in Alexander Pushkin’s verse novel, he longs for “Holy Russia, her fields, her deserts, cities and her seas.” In “Dead Souls,” Nikolai Gogol rhapsodizes at Russia, “You are overtaking the whole world, and shall one day force all nations, all empires to stand aside,” and, geographically speaking, at least, he wasn’t wrong. By the time Alexander expired, in a fog of lunatic spiritualism, in 1825, his empire was the largest the world had ever known, stretching from the Baltic Sea to the far side of the Pacific Ocean, from the Black Sea to the Arctic Ocean.

Simultaneously, the Russian intelligentsia was in a debate about the empire’s soul. The so-called Westernizers, reform-minded writers who believed that Russia must continue looking to Europe to keep up in a changing world, stood against the Slavophiles, who countered that Russia was its own place with its own history, its own Church and traditions, with no need of a constitution, a free press, settled law, or other indignities of Western modernity. Ironically, the Slavophiles’ argument came straight out of European Romanticism and idealism, which similarly questioned the rationalist claims of the Enlightenment. The Slavophiles’ distinction was

their tone of self-pity. The radical journalist Alexander Herzen, a Westernizer, determined that Slavophilia was not so much a philosophy as “a wounded national feeling.”

The debate remained largely theoretical until the Crimean War broke out, in 1853. Russia’s former allies France and Britain became its opponents, joining the Ottoman Empire against Tsar Nicholas I, Alexander’s younger brother. The war gave the Slavophile argument a deadly rationale, and convinced Nicholas that Europe could no longer be trusted. When Mikhail Pogodin, the leading Slavophile historian, wrote a memorandum to the tsar, saying, “We can expect nothing from the West but blind hatred and malice,” Nicholas commented in the margin, “This is the whole point.” Nicholas came to see the war as a personal holy struggle—but this time Russia was not saving Europe from conquest but saving the world *from* Europe.

Russia lost the Crimean War, but the aftershocks can still be felt today. In Putin’s 2014 speech celebrating the annexation of Crimea, he suggested that he was belatedly righting the defeat of Nicholas, whose bust greets visitors to Putin’s Kremlin offices. Nicholas never psychologically recovered from his loss, but his ideology permanently shaped Russian politics and literature. Perhaps its most impassioned proponent was Dostoyevsky. Although he turned out monuments to humanism in his fiction, in his political writings Dostoyevsky adopted an apocalyptic nativism. “Any closer intercourse with Europe might even exercise a harmful and corrupt influence upon the Russian mind,” he warns in “A Writer’s Diary,” which brought him to fame when it was published, in the eighteen-seventies.

Dugin has written that Dostoyevsky is his country’s “greatest national genius” and “the writer who wrote Russia,” and Dugin’s political writing can be seen as a decades-long fugue on “Diary.” In “Putin vs. Putin,” he writes that the Russian Empire is “something alive, sacred,” chosen by God to “speak for all of those who have been humiliated and insulted.”

The Crimean War also helped incite an independence movement in Ukraine, which was then known in Moscow as Malorussiya, or Little Russia. The Russian intelligentsia had once admired Ukraine, seeing in it the birthplace of the Muscovite dynasty and Orthodoxy. That admiration ended, and contempt for the prospect of Ukrainian autonomy was one matter on which the Slavophiles and Westernizers agreed. The literary critic Vissarion Belinsky, a Westernizer, argued that Ukrainians were “a people without consciousness of itself.” Dugin echoes this in “Foundations of Geopolitics,” calling Ukrainian culture “devoid of any universal meaning.”

Alexander II, Nicholas I’s son and successor, banned Ukrainian-language publications. The tsar did this even as he abolished serfdom, with an eye on a new empire with messianic pretensions: the United States. Certain Westernizers such as Herzen saw promise in the U.S. But Slavophiles such as Pogodin, who, in his essay “The Slav and World Mission of Russia,” called America “no state, but rather a trading company,” saw the zenith of the soulless materialism that they believed was ruining Europe. America was the future, and the future was loathsome.

The Slavophilia debate ended with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which gave rise to Russian fascism and to the short-lived Ukrainian People’s Republic, a state that was stamped out by Moscow. In the Soviet era, Slavophilism was eventually revived by exiled thinkers such as Nikolai Trubetzkoy, an accomplished linguist and Lithuanian royalty. Trubetzkoy’s hatred for his Communist dispossessors was matched by his hatred for Europe, which had, after all, exported Communism to Russia. He envisioned a post-Soviet Russian Empire based on Orthodoxy, high Russian culture, anti-Westernism, and the subjugation of Ukraine. In his 1927 essay “The Ukraine Problem,” Trubetzkoy argued that Ukraine was the vector of inferior Western ideas into Russia. For Russia to realize its imperial destiny, he wrote, “*Ukrainian culture must become an individualized variant of all-Russian culture.*” Dugin, whose publishing house has reissued Trubetzkoy’s work, repeats this argument nearly verbatim in “Foundations of Geopolitics,”

demanding that “Ukraine should be strictly a projection of Moscow.”

As it turned out, the Soviet regime that Trubetzkoy opposed was meeting his demands. Stalin reinstated the ban on the Ukrainian language, liquidated Kyiv’s political class and intelligentsia, and starved millions of Ukrainians to death.

In Dugin’s 1997 book “Templars of the Proletariat,” he writes that, after the U.S.S.R. disbanded, “that which had seemed without end had collapsed in a single moment.” What this meant intellectually was that “the meaning and content of Russian history is a question addressed these days to everyone.”

In the West, we tend to view the end of the Soviet Union as the beginning of a tragically brief period of Russian democracy. In Russia, it is thought of less wistfully, as a period of social collapse and economic ruin. Former Soviet territories descended into a civil war that recalled the nineteenth century. The Russian Federation’s first President, Boris Yeltsin, wrote in his 1994 memoir that he was choosing “a path of internal development rather than an imperial one.” Yeltsin signed an agreement with the newly independent Ukraine that deemed it and Russia “equal and sovereign States.”

The fear and shame felt by Russians in this era can’t be overstated. Putin once said, “We remember the horrible nineteen-nineties,” when the West “called us friends and partners, but they treated us like a colony, using various schemes to pump trillions of dollars out of the country.” One result was the resurgence of Russian fascism. The movement was led by the National Patriotic Front, a party that had, for a time, a banner depicting the Romanov double eagle, a swastika, and Jesus, along with the slogan “God! Tsar! Nation!” The group’s manifesto stated that democratic reform was a plot to “open the floodgates to Western capital,” which sounds like something Dugin would write, though it’s unclear whether he contributed to the document. The main appeal for him may have been that the name by which

the party was popularly known, Pamyat, or Memory, was apparently taken from an experimental novel.

Dugin ultimately left the National Patriotic Front and began meeting with Eduard Limonov, the writer, who had just returned to Russia after nearly two decades in exile. In his absence, Limonov had become an underground legend. He had been a petty thief in Kharkiv, a samizdat poet in Moscow, a punk sensation in New York, and an acclaimed litterateur in Paris. In a series of autobiographical novels about his poverty, crimes, and sexual exploits, he helped invent the genre we now call autofiction. But Limonov, though a libertine, was no liberal. His success in the West hadn't left him applauding its freedoms but, rather, made him despise its materialism; in "My Political Biography," he describes the U.S. as "the enemy of all." Dugin wrote, "When I saw Limonov at an opposition rally for the first time, it seemed to me that a myth was coming true."

Limonov loathed what he found in the new Russia no less. He wrote that he abhorred "Yeltsin with all my being," as Dugin did, for adopting Western neoliberal policies—and for relinquishing the Soviet Empire. The two men were in synch: Dugin wrote that "all of Russia's misfortunes can be attributed" to it being a "copy of the secular European model," and Limonov argued that "what the insensitive Russian citizens, who react only to extremely brutal, horrifying and shocking events, really want is the arrival of Fascists."

In 1993, Dugin and Limonov founded the National Bolshevik Party. Article 1 of its charter stated, "The essence of National Bolshevism is the incinerating hatred of the anti-human system of the Trinity: liberalism/democracy/capitalism." Article 2 was the party's enemies list: the U.S., Europe, NATO, and the United Nations. Article 3 was the group's main policy goal: the creation of a "giant continental empire" that must include "the accession of the former union republics." In other words, the independent state of Ukraine would be abolished.

The group cited a mishmash of historical inspirations, ranging from Russian heroes of the Second World War to Hermann Göring and Joseph Goebbels. This paradox was reflected in its official banner: a red background with a white circle in the middle and, in the place of a black swastika, a black hammer and sickle. According to Limonov, they liked to suggest at press conferences that he was the Hitler to Dugin's Goebbels. Marat Guelman, the former political consultant for Yeltsin, who knew Dugin and Limonov, told me that Limonov didn't himself know whether the party was "an art project or real politics." From one perspective, their fascism was a punk gesture. The National Bolshevik headquarters, the basement of a residential building near a metro station, also served as a performance space, a literary salon, a drinking hall, a sex den, and the sole bureau of the party newspaper *Limonka*, which can translate to either little lemon or grenade. Dugin claims to be descended from a radical priest who was beheaded by the state, and the proof of it may be in his fearlessly splenetic *Limonka* columns. In one such column, he lambasts Yeltsin's Kremlin, writing, "We are disgusted by the mafia-market society of violence and oppression, we passionately love our Motherland, our people and our culture and do not want traders and bastards to squander the lands watered with the blood of our fathers."

But Dugin and Limonov were also fascists in the foulest sense. They craved absolutism and suffering, believed in cruelty for its own sake, and thought war to be the most exultant mode of existence. Their movement was an imperial death cult. The National Bolshevik greeting was an arm thrown forward and to the side—*Sieg heil* style, but with a clenched fist—alongside the exclamation "Yes, death!" Dugin's former friend Misha Verbitsky told me that Dugin's "favorite idea is that the whole world will be destroyed, and that it's actually a good thing."

Yet the National Bolsheviks, who gained an international following, did at least reject the bigotry of classical fascism: they forbade ethnic and religious discrimination. The party had Asian, Muslim, and Jewish members and at least one Black member—a Latvian activist who would later be arrested in

Ukraine for supporting pro-Russia activists. Although Dugin's obsession with Nazis is undeniable, there is surprisingly little antisemitism in his writing.

In the nineties, Limonov joined separatists fighting in Georgia and Moldova. After attempting to smuggle weapons into Kazakhstan to incite a pro-Russia insurgency, he spent two years in prison. He then went to Crimea to urge on pro-Russia separatists, and got banned from Ukraine in the process. Dugin's concession to action was a 1995 run at a parliamentary seat. The title of his platform was "With the People Against the Dictatorship of Scum." He won less than a per cent of the vote. But by that point he'd found a surer entry into the main arena of Russian politics.

Dugin was hired to write for another publication, *Den: Journal of the Spiritual Opposition*, by its editor, Alexander Prokhanov, a veteran of the Iuzhinskii Circle, a cult novelist, and an unabashed imperialist who wrote the mission statement for a group of reactionary politicians and generals who tried to depose Gorbachev in a coup, in 1991. Prokhanov told me that Dugin "astonished me with his vocabulary, terms, philosophical categories, which he brought into our public debate." *Den* ran a column called "Conspiratology." In a nine-part series, "The Great War of the Continents," published in 1992, Dugin outlined the "geopolitical conspiracy" of the Soviet Union's demise and the establishment of Ukrainian independence. Among other things, he claimed that NATO was turning Ukraine into a cordon sanitaire through which it would infiltrate Russia—the very claim that Putin would adopt two decades later. The West was, Dugin wrote, "luring Russia into a Ukrainian trap."

The Russian intelligentsia, many of whom had opposed Ukrainian independence when the Soviet Union fell, was receptive to this line of thinking. In the book "Rebuilding Russia," Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who had gone from being an anti-Soviet dissident to a neo-Slavophile, says that the Ukrainian language was a "falsehood" and warned against Ukrainian self-

governance, even though much of his family was Ukrainian.

Prokhanov introduced Dugin to Moscow's reactionary élite, and in the mid-nineties Dugin became an informal adviser to Gennady Zyuganov, the leader of the still powerful Communist Party, who ran against Yeltsin for the Presidency on a platform of a "voluntary" reconstitution of the Soviet Union. Dugin simultaneously advised the candidate Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, who wanted to invade Ukraine and even go to war with NATO, to win back the Soviet Empire. Zhirinovskiy was the son of a Ukrainian Jew, but such was the vicious vaudeville of Russian politics in the nineties. When he and Zyuganov overperformed in parliamentary elections, in 1995, a chill went through Ukraine and the West.

Dugin's *Den* series was the basis for his 1997 book "Foundations of Geopolitics." It appeared shortly after Yeltsin won reelection. Russian conservatives were crestfallen, and Dugin's book provided fresh inspiration. "The battle for Russian world domination is not over," he reassured readers. Describing the Russian Federation as a merely "transitional formation," he wrote that, throughout history, the Russian people had perpetually moved "towards the creation of an Empire." More than that, any "refusal of the empire-building function" wasn't just unnatural but "national suicide." And the first order of business of the new empire must be the end of Ukraine: "The continued existence of a unitary Ukraine is unacceptable."

"Foundations of Geopolitics" was a sensation. The historian John B. Dunlop observed, "There has perhaps not been another book published in Russia during the post-Communist period" that has exerted as much influence "on Russian military, police, and foreign policy elites," adding, "If its ideas were to be implemented, then Ukraine would cease to exist."

After Putin took office, three years later, Dugin told an interviewer that the new President was "the ideal ruler" for the times—ideal not because he was particularly competent but because he was "a tragic figure." This was

an unseasonable claim; Putin was then being hailed as an optimist, an internationalist, and a reformer. He declared that Russia might even join NATO. He was one of the first heads of state to call George W. Bush on 9/11, and, on meeting him, Bush found him “straightforward and trustworthy.” But Dugin looked at Putin’s sphinxlike frown and sensed something else. With Putin, Dugin promised, “the dawn is breaking,” but it would be a “dawn in boots.”

On December 30, 1999, Putin published an essay in the newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* titled “Russia at the Turn of the Millennium.” He has since lamented the collapse of the Soviet Union, but he didn’t take that view in the essay. Concentrating instead on the “outrageous price our country and its people had to pay for that Bolshevik experiment,” he wrote that “only fanatics or political forces that are absolutely apathetic and indifferent to Russia and its people can make calls to a new revolution.”

Putin didn’t mention Ukraine. Not until 2004 did his thoughts seem to turn to his country’s neighbor. Ukraine held a Presidential election that year. In the memoirs of Condoleezza Rice, then Bush’s national-security adviser, she recounts paying a visit to Putin in the Kremlin. Rice was surprised when a Ukrainian politician, Viktor Yanukovych, suddenly emerged from a side room. “Oh, please meet Viktor,” Putin said to her. “He is a candidate for President of Ukraine.” Rice writes that she “took the message that Putin had intended: the United States should know that Russia had a horse in the race.”

When Yanukovych prevailed in the second round of the election, amid allegations of fraud, Ukraine erupted with protests that became known as the Orange Revolution. When he relented to his Western-friendly opponent, Viktor Yushchenko, suspicious Russians smelled a plot: Ukraine had been host not to a popular uprising, they believed, but to a foreign coup. At a 2005 press conference in Moscow, Dugin warned that “an absolutely serious threat of the Orange Revolution looms over Russia.” Putin appears to have

adopted the same view around this time. Looking back, the Orange Revolution may have marked a switch in his thinking comparable to that of Tsar Nicholas I's revelation during the Crimean War: Putin became convinced that the West could not be trusted, and that its leaders sought only to undermine Russia's domestic stability.

In a 2007 speech to the Munich Security Conference, Putin jolted the room when he said that the U.S. had "overstepped its national borders in every way." He was actually voicing a sentiment felt by many, as the U.S. was carrying on two wars, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and making noises about a third, in Iran. But it was a breach of diplomatic decorum. At a NATO summit in Bucharest the next year, Bush, possibly wanting to return the favor, shocked the assembled statesmen when he called for Ukraine to be fast-tracked for membership. Russia was not in NATO, but the organization and the Kremlin had a good rapport, so much so that Putin was at the summit. The American diplomat Angela E. Stent was also present, and in her 2014 book, *The Limits of Partnership*, she recalls that Putin took Bush aside and said, "You have to understand that Ukraine is not even a country." Four months later, Russia invaded Georgia, which, like Ukraine, was in talks with NATO.

At the same time, Putin was becoming a more devout Orthodox believer, and he was evidently doing some reading. "If you look at the reasoning of our thinkers, philosophers, and representatives of classical Russian literature, they see the reasons for the disagreements between Russia and the West," he said in an interview. "The Russian world view is based on the idea of good and evil, higher powers, and the divine principle. The basis of Western thinking—I don't want this to sound awkward, but the basis is still interest, pragmatism."

In 2012, Putin published a series of essays in Russian papers laying out his new vision of the country's future—and the world's. In *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, he noted that the West was foundering because of its lack of traditional

values. Russia offered a more conservative and harmonious alternative. The echoes of Dugin were unmistakable. “European politicians have started to talk openly about the failure of the ‘multicultural project,’ ” Putin wrote. He compared the “U.S.-style ‘melting pot,’ where most people are, in some way, migrants” to Russian culture, which “has been a joint affair between many different peoples.” Putin cited Dostoyevsky’s claim that the “great mission” of the Russian people was to “unite and bind together a civilization,” one in which identity is “based on preserving the dominance of Russian culture.” (Putin didn’t mention that Dostoyevsky had arrived at this vision only after spending four years in a Siberian prison.) As though answering Dugin’s call, in “Templars of the Proletariat,” for the new Russia to wash itself in blood, Putin declared that Russians “have confirmed their choice time and again during their thousand-year history—with their blood, not through plebiscites or referendums.”

Dugin’s emerging intellectual alliance with Putin was underscored when Dugin quit the National Bolshevik Party, having fallen out with Limonov, who dismissed his old friend as a “degenerate servitor of the regime.” Dugin was given a chair in the sociology department of Moscow State University, where he formed a think tank, the Center for Conservative Studies.

He also founded a party of his own: the Eurasia Party. Ostensibly, the party was devoted to promoting Nikolai Trubetzkoy’s notion, articulated in the nineteen-twenties, that Russia’s future rested among the ancient truths and autocratic traditions of Asia. Dugin apparently believes in this notion, but, on a practical level, the party, with minimal membership and no seats in parliament, may have been a front for a more shadowy political group led by Dugin: the International Eurasian Movement. One of this group’s projects was forming a pro-Russia Fifth Column in Ukraine. Dugin’s followers set up branches around the country, according to Anton Shekhovtsov, a Ukrainian researcher who spent time with them. A member of the group told Shekhovtsov, “Our foremost priority is to focus on the creation of the empire.” They trained for violent street protests and collected signatures for a

referendum to establish a breakaway republic in the Donbas region of Ukraine. The Ukrainian government learned of Dugin and his followers' insurrectionary activities, and he was banned from the country.

As for Putin, his distrust of the West increased with his hostility toward Ukraine, which he contended was both a security problem and the primary vector of Western cultural infection. He may have arrived at the same syllogism as the Slavophiles and Trubetzkoy: Ukraine was essentially the West, the West was modernity, and modernity was loathsome; therefore, Ukraine was loathsome. Thomas Graham, a senior director of Russian affairs on the National Security Council in the Bush Administration, told me, "The evolution in Putin's thinking about Ukraine parallels the evolution in his thinking about the United States."

Russian politicians and media portrayed Ukraine as a puppet of the U.S. Russian diplomats increasingly spoke about NATO aggression and Ukrainian waywardness, often depicting them as the same phenomenon. The idea that the Ukrainians might have their own legitimate concerns about their powerful neighbor was dismissed. In February, 2014, Russia invaded Crimea. Putin claimed that he was heading off a NATO takeover of the peninsula—the threat that Dugin had warned of more than two decades before.

Dugin lavishly praised Putin. He called the President "predetermined by history," and said, "Putin is becoming more and more like Dugin, or at least implementing the program I have been building my entire life." In "Ukraine: My War," published the same year as the invasion, he writes that at stake was not just Crimea or the Donbas, where Russia had begun backing an insurgent war, but "the victory or defeat of Russia in the battle with the existential enemy (Atlanticism, the global financial oligarchy, the West)."

In an interview, Dugin offered a revelation. "I myself am Ukrainian," he said. "I'm ashamed of that small but still significant part of my blood. And I want this blood to be cleansed with the blood of the scum, the Kyiv junta." He

went on, “And I think, Kill, kill, and kill! There is nothing else to say.” That is never true of Dugin, of course, so he added, “I am saying so as a professor.” But soon enough he was no longer a professor—he and Moscow State University parted ways, with Dugin claiming that he had been fired.

By that point, however, such rhetoric was commonplace among Russia’s growing movement of neo-imperialists, and a rebuke from the traditional intelligentsia was a badge of honor. Dugin was made the editorial director at Tsargrad TV, a network affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church. His fame spread abroad, and his Twitter account surpassed two hundred thousand followers.

Dugin has said that “the American scenario in Ukraine is to bring neo-Nazis to power,” along with “their Jewish sponsors.” This was far-fetched even for him. But by 2021—as Russia prepared to invade Ukraine again—these claims, too, were commonplace. In an essay that Putin published on the Kremlin’s Web site that summer, titled “On the Historical Unity of Russia and Ukraine,” he claimed that Ukraine, with its Jewish President, was overrun by neo-Nazis. Many other passages of the seven-thousand-word essay, which is full of tendentious scholarship and specious interpretations, call to mind Dugin’s “The Great War of the Continents” series in *Den* three decades earlier. “Western authors of the anti-Russia project set up the Ukrainian political system,” Putin wrote, adding—in what could have been a direct quote from “Foundations of Geopolitics”—that this was “comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction.” He concluded, “Our spiritual unity has also been attacked.”

Putin even attempted to marshal literature to his cause. He listed famous Ukrainian writers to make the case that, although they may have been born in a *place* called Ukraine, they wrote in Russian. His chief example was Nikolai Gogol, whom Putin saw as “a Russian patriot.” He failed to mention that Gogol wrote his magnum opus, “Dead Souls,” not in Russia, where Nicholas I censored him, but in Europe. Putin also omitted the fact that

Gogol was as proud of his Ukrainian heritage as he was of his Russian heritage. Gogol once wrote, “I never would give preference to the ‘Little Russian’ before the Russian, nor to the Russian before the ‘Little Russian.’ ”

After Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Dugin became one of the war’s most vocal advocates. He wrote that it followed “the logic of the entire historical path of Russia.”

In his lecture at the Traditions festival, Dugin moved from peasants to a survey of modern Russian intellectual history. “The eighteenth century was generally serfdom, Westernism, total degeneration, rejection of all sacred aspects, traditions, modernization, science, these damned institutions,” he told the audience. “But in the nineteenth century the Slavophiles, and our colossal achievements, begin.” And “when our children begin to see history this way,” he said, “they begin to love our past.” A few hours later, the child whom Dugin had taught to see history this way—his daughter, Daria Dugina—was incinerated.

The Moscow elite turned out for her memorial service, at Ostankino Tower, near the headquarters of Channel One, Russia’s largest state TV channel, which broadcast the event. National Bolshevik demonstrators had once occupied the tower as Dugin cheered them on in the pages of *Limonka*. Now, in a cavernous, black-draped studio, politicians and oligarchs lined up at a microphone and read aloud condolences from Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Patriarch Kirill I, of the Russian Orthodox Church. The billionaire Konstantin Malofeev, the chairman of Tsargrad TV, vowed that there would be a Daria Dugina Street in the Ukrainian capital after Russia rebuilt “Kyiv and all the other cities of Ukraine as part of a future Great Russia.”

The parliamentarian Sergey Baburin said, “The entity that was the most interested in this atrocious crime is the demonic West.” The organizer of Traditions, Zakhar Prilepin, singled out “the civilized world, all Europe.”

Dugin finally stepped to the microphone, looking noble in his grief. He said, of his daughter, “Almost her first words, which of course we taught her, were ‘Russia,’ ‘our state,’ ‘our people,’ ‘our empire.’” Tearing up, he went on, “She lived in the name of victory and died in its name, in the name of our Russian victory.”

Putin awarded Dugina the Order of Courage—a state medal whose prior recipients include generals, an astronaut, and the President of Chechnya. In a speech commemorating the annexation of portions of Ukraine, he said that “the collective West,” which seemed to encompass Ukraine, “sees our thought and our philosophy as a direct threat,” He added, “That is why they target our philosophers for assassination.”

In a macabre form of poetic justice, Dugina’s death has become the subject of the sort of conspiracy theories that her father traffics in. A former Russian parliamentarian claims to have proof that she was actually killed by Russians, as part of a false-flag operation. In Paris, a man stood before the Eiffel Tower yelling that French intelligence was involved. A British scholar of Russia tweeted, “There is zero evidence that Alexander Dugin killed his daughter as part of a ritual sacrifice. I can’t believe I have to write that.”

Since his daughter’s death, Dugin has remained prodigiously productive: along with publishing “Being and Empire,” among other books, he has posted many essays online. He has a fellowship at Fudan University, in Shanghai, and has given lectures and interviews. But Dugina is never far from his thoughts. On Facebook, he regularly posts her picture or writes something about her. Last year, he told *The Spectator* that her death had made the war personal for him: “They have killed not only her. They have killed me and my wife. Everything stopped on 20 August 2022. It was a success for Satan and his slaves.” In the same interview, he urged Putin to use nuclear weapons on Ukraine.

In Dugin’s preface to “Eschatological Optimism,” a book of inspirational

Neoplatonic philosophy that Dugina had been writing, which was published posthumously, he says, “I’d rather believe that I don’t exist, that we all don’t exist, than her.” He calls her a “philosophical hero,” adding, “A Russian hero is first and foremost a victim. He knows that his fate is tragic, and his path is suffering.”

Suffering was also the theme of a speech that Putin gave, in September, 2022, celebrating the annexation of captured Ukrainian territories. For a speech meant to mark a victory, it was oddly victimized in tone. Before Putin fell in thrall to the idea that Ukraine is a Western puppet and an existential threat to Russia that must vanish from maps, he was—publicly, at least—as allergic to self-pity as he was to ideology. But the speech was a paean to that “wounded national feeling” which the journalist Alexander Herzen had identified in the Slavophiles. Putin didn’t dwell on the suffering of the thousands of Russian soldiers who had died for the cause of annexing Ukraine, nor did he touch on the suffering of the millions of Ukrainians whom he claimed to be saving from themselves. Instead, he focussed on the centuries of Russian suffering at the hands of the West, which was “ready to cross every line to preserve the neocolonial system that allows it to live off the world, to plunder it thanks to the domination of the dollar and technology.” He decried the Western “overthrow of faith and traditional values,” which was “coming to resemble a ‘religion in reverse’—pure Satanism.” The invasion, then, was meant to save not just Ukraine, or Russia, but Christianity, and therefore all mankind. The speech might have been written by Nicholas I or Fyodor Dostoyevsky—or Alexander Dugin. ♦

A sentence pertaining to Dugin’s exit from Moscow State, which was omitted from the published text in error, has been reinstated.