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Schizophrenic fascism: on Russia's war in Ukraine

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Abstract
This essay describes some of the literary, psychological, and historical causes of Russia's war in Ukraine (2022) based on observations of the national character found in the fiction of Aleksandr Pushkin and Fyodor Dostoevsky and in philosophical and psychological essays of Petr Chaadaev, Sergei Askol'dov, and Sigmund Freud. The political ideology that stands behind the war can be characterized as *schizofascism*, or schizophrenic fascism that embraces the contradiction between archaic myths, chauvinism, and xenophobia, on the one hand, and corruption and cynicism, on the other. Citing the controversial results of sociological polls indicating both Russians' aspiration for friendship with Ukraine and their support for the aggressive war, the author explores the deep ambivalence inherent in the psychology of Russians as historical successors of the Golden Horde and the Moscovite State, incorporating the legacy of nomadism, militarism, messianism, and autarky.

Keywords Schizofascism · Fascism · Schizophrenia · Ambivalence · Nomadism · The Golden Horde · Orthodoxy

Schizophrenic fascism

Schizofascism is fascism under the guise of the fight against fascism. Fascism itself is an integral worldview that combines ethnic or racial superiority, imperialism, nationalism, xenophobia, great-powerhood, antidemocratism, and antiliberalism. Schizofascism is a split worldview, a caricature of fascism, except that it is a serious, dangerous, and aggressive caricature. Schizofascism manifests itself in a hysterical hatred of freedom, democracy, everything foreign, and people of a different identity, as well as in the hunt for enemies and traitors among one's own people. However, this chauvinist worldview now finds itself suffering a schizophrenic schism with its desire

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to enjoy the very benefits the "enemy" provides: real estate abroad, the privilege of giving your children an education in "Gayrope" and "Yankostan," concealing your accounts in foreign banks, and so on.[1]

According to a survey back in July 2019, an absolute majority (85%) of Russians thought that friendly relations with Ukraine were important for Russia (Mukola.Mukola.net novosti 2019). Nothing has changed in the 2.5 years since. There have been no particular clashes in the Donbas, and the ceasefire has continued. However, according to a survey by the Levada Center (March 2022), 81% of Russians approve of Russia's war against Ukraine. One and the same people, moreover a larger part of the population, want friendship with Ukraine—and also approve its annihilation. Is not that schizophrenia?

In Russian schools they teach humanism, read the great classics, and sympathize with the so-called "little man" famous in works by Aleksandr Pushkin and Nikolai Gogol. Holy Scriptures, teachings of the saints, and catechisms are available at every stall. Every day believers recite prayers and clergy perform rituals connected with the flesh and the blood of the crucified man who gave his life for humanity. Yet this does not prevent them from supporting war, killing thousands of their completely innocent brothers in faith, and extolling the leader who is forcing them to be at odds with the whole world. How can the same lips extol both Christ and Putin?

In 2022, Lent began on Monday, March 7, both in Russia and Ukraine. The purpose of Lent is penance and preparation for Easter Sunday, and consequently it requires especially painstaking restraint from sin. Among the least of the sins is gluttony, but the greatest, of course, is killing, especially fratricide, the sin of Cain. Yet, it is at precisely this time that one Orthodox people, with the tacit permission and even direct blessing of the church that requires strict fasting and refraining from non-Lenten food, has been killing another Orthodox people with especial zeal. It is a sin to eat cottage cheese and sour cream, but not a sin to kill people.

The people's duplicity

One of the first to remark on this striking feature of the people's duplicity was Aleksandr S. Pushkin (1799–1837). In his novel *Dubrovsky* (1832), Arkhip the blacksmith

[1] In his recent essay "We Should Say It. Russia Is Fascist," Timothy Snyder says that "calling others fascists while being a fascist is the essential Putinist practice... I have called it 'schizofascism'" (*New York Times*, May 19, 2022). https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/19/opinion/russia-fascism-ukraine-putin.html. In fact, the first usage of this term was in publications of mine from 2015–2017 that dealt, in particular, with "the difference between the two neomedieval periods: fascism of the 1920–1940s and *schizofascism* of the early twenty-first century. Fascism proper is an integral worldview that combines racial theory, imperialism, nationalism, xenophobia, bigotry, anticapitalism, antidemocracy, and antiliberalism. *Schizofascism* is a split worldview, a kind of parody of fascism, but a serious, dangerous, and aggressive parody... A particularly striking feature of schizofascism is to act under the guise of fighting against fascism." Mikhail Epshtein, *Ot sovka k bobku. Politika na grani groteska* (From Homo Sovieticus to Bobok Character. Politics on the Edge of Grotesque). Franc–Tireur USA, 2015, pp. 143–144; 2nd, revised, and expanded edition. Kyiv. Dukh i Litera, 2016, pp. 261–262. This term also appeared, both in Russian and English, as a separate entry in Mikhail Epshtein, *Proektivnyi slovar' gumanitarnykh nauk* (The Projective Dictionary of the Humanities). Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017, pp. 552–553. "Schizofascism. Fascism in the guise of fighting fascism…" https://www.e-reading.club/chapter.php/1052218/432/mihail-epshteyn-proektivnyy-slovar-gumanitarnyh-nauk.html.

burns down a gentleman's estate, not regretting the people who perish there in the slightest—and at the same time, risks his life to climb a burning roof and save a kitten.

> The windows were shattering, raining down, burning logs had begun to fall, and a piteous wail and shouting rang out: "we're burning up, help us, help us" … "Arkhip dear," Egorovna said to him, "save them, the cursed, and God will reward you." "By no means," the smith replied…
> At that moment a new phenomenon drew his attention: a kitten running across the roof of the burning shed, bewildered as to where to jump… The little boys were dying of laughter watching its desperation. "What are you laughing at, you devil boys," the smith said angrily. "You do not fear God. God's creature is perishing, and you're cheering like fools"—and he leaned a ladder against the burned roof and climbed up after the kitten. (Pushkin 1975, p.177)

One cannot help but notice the Pushkinian irony toward the "pious" Arkhip who sets people on fire but saves a kitten from the flames. Arkhip is an archetype of duplicity. The middle part of the soul, the human part, has fallen away—or more likely is not yet born. This is a primitive dualism, when a person is driven by two impulses and does not acknowledge their incompatibility. Where there should be something whole in the soul, a fissure forms. This is what schizophrenia is: from the ancient Greek σχίζω "splinter," "split" + φρήν "mind, thinking, thought."

In 1918, the philosopher Sergei A. Askol'dov (1871–1945), in pondering the causes of the Russian revolution, described the third principle lacking in the popular soul as the human principle:

> In the makeup of any soul there is the principle of the *sacred*, the specifically *human* and the *animal*. Perhaps what makes the Russian soul unique, in our view, is that the middle, specifically human principle is incomparably weaker in it than in the national psychology of other peoples. In the Russian as a type, what are strongest are the principles of the *sacred* and the *animal*. (Askol'dov 1918)

This strange moral shakiness was noted by Fyodor M. Dostoevsky (1821–1881), or rather by his "underground man," as being the most characteristic feature of his compatriots, not only the common people but also the educated classes. The Russian romantic can calmly behave in the most despicable fashion without this affecting the height of his ideals. He even likes to combine the two, making no efforts whatsoever to mediate them.

> Our romantic has a very broad nature and is the biggest rogue of all… What extraordinary versatility! And what a capacity for the most contradictory sensations!... That's why there are so many "broad natures" among us, people who never lose their ideals, no matter how low they fall; even though they never lift a finger for the sake of their ideals, even though they're outrageous villains and thieves... Yes, only among us Russians can the most outrageous scoundrel be absolutely, even sublimely honest at heart, while at the same time never ceasing to be a scoundrel. (Dostoevsky 2001, pp. 32, 33)

This could be called infantilism, moral immaturity. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) found it in the personality of Dostoevsky himself, in the deep traditions of the Russian "psyche": to commit crimes—sincerely repent of them—and commit new ones. To move in a circle without ever mounting the step of conscious emotional growth:

> A man who alternately sins and then in his remorse erects high moral standards lays himself open to the reproach that he has made things too easy for himself... He reminds one of the barbarians of the great migrations, who murdered and did penance for it, till penance became an actual technique for enabling murder to be done. Ivan the Terrible behaved in exactly this way; indeed, this compromise with morality is a characteristic Russian trait... An ambivalence of feelings is a legacy of the emotional life of primitive man that has been preserved in the Russians better and in a form more accessible to awareness than in other peoples. (Freud 1961, 77)

Barbarian morality does not rule out ideals—tribal, patriotic, religious—but at the same time it allows for any misdeed and meanness with respect to foreigners. This sharply bipolar division of the world into "us" and "them" is a mark of barbarity, which does not know the intermediate, civilized zone, the human zone. Such a society has its own ideals and its own sins, but absent among them is a connecting link, specifically, the work of *conscience*. One soul, the "sacred," does not communicate with the other, the "animal."

Nomadism and sedentism

The military ultimatum Russia made to the West back on 17 December 2021 (Roth 2021), and later put into effect with the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, raised questions about causes and goals. Why do it? To exacerbate the confrontation? What is the benefit from all this for people who already have everything they might desire, including the territory and resources of the largest country in the world?

Let us turn briefly to history. After the Muscovite principality that emerged in the thirteenth century as a small region within the Golden Horde refused to pay tribute to that Horde, it carried out in 1480 what would in modern terms be called a coup d'état, moreover peacefully—by taking a stand on the "Maidan" of the day, the Ugra River. Thus began the history of a new state: Muscovite Rus, subsequently the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.

Through all this, the strategy of Russia's opposition to the West remained basically unchanged, although it acquired various motivations. In the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, this motivation was religious: Moscow is the Third Rome, the bulwark of the true Orthodox faith against the Catholic and Protestant West. After that came the struggle between the most advanced socialist state and the world of capitalism, exploitation, and private property.

In our era, both these motivations have fallen away. Russia has the same kind of capitalism as in the West, albeit more predatory and corrupt, but it has no discernible ideological motives for war. Religious opposition also has lost its meaning, inasmuch as the primary and main target, Ukraine, is just as predominantly Orthodox–Christian a country as Russia is.

Thus, Russia, having cast aside all the motives of its former opposition to the West, is returning to the status of its mother state, the Horde: expansion for its own sake. The most ancient instinct is now laid bare. The coiled spring finds a reason to straighten itself out. It is hard not to agree with writer and historian Boris Akunin (b. 1956): "Muscovy, and Russia after it, inherited the great Mongol dream of unifying Eurasia from ocean to ocean" (Akunin 2014, p. 341).

This dream—naked power reinforced by the authority of a long-range bow—no longer requires religious-messianic or social-utopian justifications. Genghis Khan's (1162–1227) warriors had an arrow that could hit a target at 400 paces (even the renowned English longbow could only hit at 300). With this bow they went from the Pacific Ocean to the shores of the Atlantic. If one pictures the great khan armed with a nuclear weapon, then ideological and religious questions and cause-and-effect in general fall away. *Khan* [khan], *khanstvo* [khanate], *khanstvovat'* [to khanate], *po-khanski* [in a khanly way] ... this very root—and its derivatives—speaks for itself, it confirms and expands on its original meaning. Today's Horde, now rechristened the "Russian Federation," does not care about any kind of religion or ideology. All it needs is to do its horde thing: as much Horde as possible, always and everywhere!

Thus, the historical sources of Russian schizofascism lie deeper than the reaction to the collapse of the Soviet system. The nomadic Horde out of which the Russian state formed is still resisting the values of settled civilization. Almost two centuries ago Petr Ya. Chaadaev (1794–1856), one of the first original Russian thinkers, wrote in his most famous philosophical letter (1828): "In our homes, we are like guests; to our families, we are like strangers; and in our cities we seem like nomads, more so than those who wander our steppes, for they are more attached to their deserts than we are to our towns" (Chaadaev 1991, p. 90).

It is usually accepted that the nomadic state's foundation was not infrastructure—centers of trade and handicrafts on conquered territory—but the possession of lands, the assimilation of more and more new territories, expansion in space. So, too, for modern Russia, as in nomadic antiquity, the main thing remains the land and its bowels, not what is erected on it. Better to win one more piece of land (Ossetia, Transnistria, Crimea and Donbas, and now all of Ukraine) than to build a settled and developed civilization on the vast expanses one already has.

Might our historic schizophrenia have arisen as a result of Peter the Great's attempts to Europeanize Russia? It split in two, not only socially and culturally but also psychically, in nearly every soul, into "Asiatic" and "European" … More likely, though, this happened much earlier, when the nomadic state, at the transition from the Horde to Muscovy, became settled. Civilization and the revolt against it; law and contempt for the law; the building of institutions and the mistrust for them and readiness to destroy them in a flash… These two souls, nomadic and settled, continue to produce a schizophrenic schism and psychopathy in the Russian state.

* * *

These brief notes, of course, do not purport to explain the complex phenomenon of schizofascism, but they do point to its connection with certain psychological aspects of the national character. The term "schizophrenia," as coined by Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler (1857–1939), means literally "a splitting of the mind." To be

sure, here we are talking not about clinical, but cultural schizophrenia, whose carrier may be a social group or entire nation. As famously demonstrated by Yuri Lotman (1922–1993) and Boris Uspenskii (b. 1937), "split," binary models have been prevalent in Russian history: "A specific feature of Russian culture is … its fundamental polarity, expressed in the dual nature of its structure. The primary cultural values (ideological, political, religious) in the system of medieval Russia are arranged in a bipolar field of values separated by a sharp boundary and bereft of any neutral axiological zone" (Lotman and Uspenskii 1994, p. 220).

We have found confirmations of this duality in the above-mentioned judgments of Dostoevsky, Askol'dov, and Freud about the bifurcations of the Russian character, in which extremes are juxtaposed without any mediation or reflection. The unique history of Russia as a state that emerged from the empire of the Golden Horde and absorbed some of its nomadic mentality also explains the duality that Chaadaev noted with alarm: the desire to create a settled order of civilization, and at the same time an obvious nihilism and contempt toward its basic values. I discuss these fundamental issues in more detail in my study of binary and trinary models in Russian culture (Epstein 2011). If this binarism is deeply embedded in the structure of the national mentality, then it is understandable why even fascism, which is inherently a most homogeneous and totalistic political regime, also acquires schizophrenic traits in contemporary Russia.

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