

Deconstructing the "Russian Idea": Emigre Visions from Lenin to Putin

Dr. Rebecca Mitchell

A. Statement of research question and its importance

My project explores how the "Russian Idea" (the cultural and philosophical concept that Russia has a unique, salvific mission to play in the modern world) evolved amongst the Russian émigré community in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. How did the founding of an officially atheist state affect émigré interpretations of Russia's messianic task in the modern age? Carrying out this research amid Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, important related questions are: how do these historical debates reverberate amid current violence and displacement? How do contemporary émigrés (Russian and Ukrainian) understand these historical concepts and debates? Among these groups, is the "Russian Idea" perceived today primarily as an imperialist discourse justifying expansionist policy or as a means of preserving the unique value of Russian culture, independent of (or even in opposition to) state actions?

Historical debates over Russian identity and culture have become all too timely with the February 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Contemporary scholars must engage with ongoing calls for the decolonization of Russian studies, and consider how the Putin regime has sought to weaponize Russian culture for its own ends. In this context, the importance of studying the development of the "Russian Idea" is all too evident.

B. List of collaborators and partners

As a cultural-intellectual historian, I work independently, primarily in archives and libraries, though I have begun exploring oral history interviews as a way of historicizing a key inflection point in Russian-Ukrainian relations. In my summer work, much of my time was spent in making initial connections with several institutions and groups in Georgia. I intend to expand on these contacts in Fall 2024, when I will be present in Tbilisi for a longer duration.

C. Summary of research findings

As this is part of a larger historical monograph project, my research findings are not yet complete, and will continue to develop over the next few years. The immediate results of this grant include the gathering of archival materials in Tbilisi, Paris and Strasbourg, as well as collecting observations from contemporary emigre communities. For the historical portion of the project, I explored émigré philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev's interaction with French philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose conception of natural law in turn informed the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in December 1948. Additionally, I focused upon an important debate surrounding philosopher Ivan Il'in's 1928 book "On the Opposition of Evil by Force". This short monograph was a direct critique of Lev Tolstoi's pacifist arguments and a justification of the necessity of violent resistance to the Bolshevik Revolution. Il'in's arguments sparked an extensive debate within the émigré community on the nature of violence and its place within Russian society and culture writ large. Finally, I explored cultural depictions of the "Russian Idea" in interwar and postwar Paris by émigré composers Ivan Wyschnegradsky and Nikolai Obukhov, noting links between philosophical ideas and cultural interpretations.

The contemporary aspect of my research sought to collect impressions from contemporary Russian and Ukrainian émigrés on their views of the "Russian Idea". This second aspect proved harder to investigate during my summer research as I spent most of my time seeking to make initial contacts in addition to carrying out archival work. In lieu of formal interviews (which I plan to carry out on my next research

trip, scheduled for fall 2024), I gathered initial impressions from informal conversations. This data is thus far from complete, but I offer a few brief observations below.

While Russian emigres in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi generally seem ready to acknowledge the suffering of Ukrainians in the ongoing war, their relationship with Georgians was less clear. The dramatic increase of Russian presence has exacerbated Georgian concerns over the situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as traumatic memories of the brief 2008 war. Pro-Ukrainian and anti-Putin/anti-war graffiti was commonplace throughout the capital city of Tbilisi. Most of the time, a differentiation was made between Russians as a whole and Putin's government. Multiple times, I heard the comment that "Russians are good people, but the politics are bad".

However, underlying tensions in the Russian-Georgian relationship were also obvious. While many Russians seemed quick to acknowledge the right of Ukrainians to feel resentment and anger towards everything Russian at the present moment, there was often surprise expressed at Georgian anger. One case in point: a particular cafe near the center of Old Tbilisi has taken an aggressive stance vis-a-vis the Russian émigré presence. At the entrance to the restaurant and on every table, an announcement appeared in both Russian and English. The announcement was geared specifically towards Russian speakers, and made several demands of the clientele: all use of the Russian language was banished (with the comment "This is not Russia"), and Russian citizens were told that they are only welcome to stay if they acknowledged a list of key points. These points in turn emphasized Russia as a colonizing power, the war in Ukraine as the result of Russian aggression, and Putin as a war criminal. They also explicitly associated the current conflict in Ukraine with the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, and the annexation of Crimea with ongoing Russian occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. While a dramatic statement about the Putin government's status as an imperial power, the effectiveness of this approach in starting a conversation was less clear. Multiple Russians who came to the restaurant or had heard about it expressed some bewilderment over the Georgian response, commenting that "I understand why Ukrainians are upset, but Georgians have no reason to be angry. They should calm down." In such instances, the parallels of a larger colonial mindset (that seem for many Georgians to be self-evident), are simply unrecognized by Russians.

D. Implications for study and practice of conflict transformation

It is incredibly difficult to discuss conflict transformation in the midst of an active military conflict. Nor does ongoing violence and conflict allow for a critical re-evaluation of a relationship. The full complexity of Russian imperial engagement with its former "borderlands" has not been sufficiently acknowledged, and runs the danger of oversimplification at the current politically charged moment.

E. List of publications, performances, media coverage, and other output

As part of an ongoing monograph project, I have not yet published on this topic. I presented a brief commentary on "The Russian Idea" at Middlebury College's Fall Faculty Forum, and will be presenting a paper at the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEES) in Philadelphia in December 2023. I have also submitted an article to the journal *Kritika* for consideration. Further presentations and publications, including a single-authored monograph, are planned as I review my collected materials and pursue further research. The research has already deeply affected my teaching, most notably in my Fall 2023 First Year Seminar "The Russian Idea", as well as a new Winter Term class "Violence, Trauma and Historical Memory in the South Caucasus".