

Tyrant on the Icon: Stalin's Functions for Russia's Imperialist Ideology and Its Application in Georgia

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Introduction

Depicting Stalin, the erstwhile Soviet tyrant, on an icon in the Holy Trinity Cathedral further illustrates the strong influence of the political project to restore imperial autocracy in Russia over Georgia. The appearance of Stalin's image in the Holy Trinity Cathedral cannot be explained without considering the dynamic of the Russian regime's development. The fact that individuals who carried out the operation on the ground to place Stalin in a church are openly affiliated with the Kremlin is not the sole reason behind it.

The instrumentalization of Stalin's persona beyond the goals of Russian imperialism, and without them, particularly given the fact it was carried out by individuals with ties to Putin's regime, is implausible and lacks any rational basis. Therefore, the most appropriate framework for interpretation would be Russia's current imperialist and authoritarian regime and its ideological pillars.

Hybrid Totalitarianism – Putin's Neo-Stalinist Regime

At the beginning of Vladimir Putin's second presidential term, Russia was already categorized as an authoritarian regime.² However, from 2005 until the present day, Putin's authoritarianism has significantly deteriorated.³ After Putin's return in 2012 and the invasion of Ukraine, along with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia's authoritarian regime has been consistently backsliding.⁴ This period witnessed the re-emergence of totalitarian practices which were systematically embedded after Putin unleashed military aggression against Ukraine in 2022.⁵

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² Freedom House, Russia Country Profile - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia>

³ Gel'man, Vladimir. *Authoritarian Russia: Analyzing post-soviet regime changes*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015.

⁴ Frye, Timothy. *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*. Princeton University Press, 2022.

⁵ Kolesnikov, Andrei. "Blood and Iron: How Nationalist Imperialism Became Russia's State Ideology." (2023). - <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/12/06/blood-and-iron-how-nationalist-imperialism-became-russia-s-state-ideology-pub-91181>

As a result, the Kremlin regime, after the invasion of Ukraine, is characterized as a hybrid totalitarianism. Specifically, it is a consolidated authoritarian regime that systematically applies totalitarian practices. Totalitarian practices in Putin's regime toolkit are not something new; they were borrowed from the Stalinist era of the Soviet empire.

The return of thought crimes, sending political opponents to Gulags based on thought crimes, imprisoning them in individual cells, and virtually cutting off all communications are some of the most prominent Stalinist totalitarian practices. Vladimir Kara-Murza's Stalinist court process and his sentencing to Gulag for 25 years are tangible examples of Neo-Stalinism.⁶

Neo-Stalinism in Putin's regime is not only manifested in the restoration of Stalinism's totalitarian practices. This type of hybrid totalitarianism requires ideological justification. In this regard, Putin's Neo-Stalinism uses the legacy of Stalinism as an element of ideological justification.

Stalin Among the Historic Figures Featuring in Putin's Pantheon of Nationalist Imperialism

After the aggression in Ukraine, there are no further questions about categorizing Putin's regime as imperialist. The ideological justification for such a hybrid form of totalitarian imperialism is both hybrid and eclectic. The imperialism of Putin's regime is indisputably nationalist and relies on assertions of Russian exceptionalism.

Putin's nationalist imperialism is anchored in and incorporates elements of 19th-century Slavophile and autocratic ideology, as well as ideas from Stalinist totalitarian imperialism and Russian nationalists of the 1960s and 1970s.⁷

Putin's nationalist imperialism also utilizes the formula elaborated by Minister Uvarov of Czar Nikolay I in the 19th century: "Orthodoxy, Nation, and Autocracy."

To define a "nation" in this construct, Putin's regime largely draws on major elements of 19th-century Slavophile/Pan-Slavic ideology. Both Pan-Slavism and Slavophilia are identified as Orthodoxal. This version of tribalistic nationalism glorifies communitarian and collectivist forms of the nation.

⁶ Russia: Political activist Vladimir Kara-Murza is a prisoner of conscience who must be released immediately and unconditionally- <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur46/5578/2022/en/>

⁷ Kolesnikov, "Blood and Iron"

Essentially, orthodox Pan-Slavism is a substantially illiberal and antimodern ideology that stresses the superiority of communitarian unity ("Соборность") in contrast to modernist individualism. It promotes autocratic rule versus democratic and limited government.

The idea of a radical rejection of Ukrainian nationalism and the equation of Ukrainians with Russians as a "single nation" – one of the central ideological justifications for Russia's imperial war of conquest – has also stemmed from orthodox Pan-Slavism.⁸ However, the mythologized idea of belonging to a common Slavic tribe further necessitates manipulation of the past and the fabrication of history.

Stalinism provides specific tools for the instrumentalization of history within Putin's Neo-Stalinism. In particular, Stalinist history, as an instrument of ideology, utilizes a pantheon of historical statesmen.⁹ Figures from the Pantheon created by Stalin, such as Peter the Great or Alexander Nevsky, are also glorified by the Putin regime as part of the ideological justification project. However, Putin's Neo-Stalinism expands this Pantheon and places Stalin in the forefront.

Stalin's return to the official ideology's pantheon was preceded by a rehabilitation process guided by Putin's discourse about Stalin. This process culminated in a Stalinist manner with the introduction of two Kremlin-sponsored books – a history textbook for high school seniors and a mandatory university course entitled "Foundations of Russian Statehood" – into the teaching process. Both textbooks firmly establish Stalin as the key historical figure of the official nationalist-imperialist ideology.

The essential eclecticism characterizing Putin's nationalist imperialism implies serious problems of internal consistency for this ideology. Orthodox Pan-Slavism may be used to justify the colonization of Slavic nations but is ineffective with respect to non-Slavic and non-Christian colonized peoples. Additionally, when Orthodox Pan-Slavism is added to the Pantheon of historical figures, some members of this Pantheon are in no way related to other Slavic nations except for the Russians.

For instance, Orthodox Pan-Slavism is ineffective concerning the peoples of Central Asia or the North Caucasus. At the same time, Alexander Nevsky had nothing to do with the occupied city of Mariupol in Ukraine, although this did not prevent the Kremlin from erecting a statue of Alexander Nevsky in the occupied city.

⁸ Kasianov, Georgiy. "The war over Ukrainian identity." *Foreign Affairs* 4 (2022).

⁹ Kolesnikov, "Blood and Iron".

Therefore, inventing arbitrary ties between incompatible elements of the official eclectic ideology is a maneuver characteristic of the Kremlin's nationalist imperialism. Arbitrarily dealing with internal inconsistency is the only practical solution for imperialist ideologues. Otherwise, it would be impossible to create a cohesive nationalist imperialism ideology, not only for ethnic Russians but also for other colonized peoples. It is important in this regard that seeking averaging elements vis-à-vis the colonized people makes imperialist ideology even more eclectic.

Orthodox Stalinism Instead of Orthodox Pan-Slavism?

Stalin's presence in the Pantheon of the Putin regime's official nationalist-imperialist ideology also serves to justify the autocratic rule of the imperial center. The historical Pantheon of the imperial center often lacks direct links with the peripheral colonized nations and requires further averaging. Such arbitrary averaging is a phenomenon characteristic of Russian imperialism.

In Stalin's case, his birthplace and ethnic origins offer a unique opportunity to adapt the historical figures in the imperialist ideology's Pantheon to Georgia. This opportunity is particularly significant for the ideologues of Russian imperialism because, given Georgians' non-Slavic ethnicity, their full integration into the Orthodox Pan-Slavism matrix remains impossible.

Arguments of common Orthodox faith have always been presented by the Russian empire during Georgia's colonization process. However, emphasizing common faith alone, given Christianity's universal nature (even if tainted by imperialist ideology), has never been sufficient to shape a collective and communitarian mass subjected to the empire. Ideologues of Russian imperialism were aware of this, leading them to mix Orthodoxy with Pan-Slavism as an instrument of imperial domination over Slavs in the east and south.

Creating arbitrary ties between Stalin and Orthodoxy is not new for the ideology of Russian imperialism. However, within the Georgian context, it's possible that these ties may assume a different, averaging function for Russian nationalist-imperialist ideology.

The attempt to introduce Stalin, a central figure in Russia's imperialist ideology's Pantheon, into Georgia through Orthodox Christianity may indicate the imperial ideologues' intentions. Stalin's historical persona could become that particularistic component added to the doctrine of shared Orthodoxy, serving

as an averaging tool for Russian nationalist imperialism in Georgia. Instead of Orthodox Pan-Slavism, it may use Orthodoxy-based Stalinism as a justification for Georgia's colonization.