

A large, solid black silhouette of an oil rig dominates the left side of the cover. The rig's structure is complex, with a tall derrick and various platforms. At the top, a crane arm extends to the left, and a pumpjack is visible on the right. The silhouette is set against a solid blue background. A horizontal line in a bright yellow color divides the image, with the rig's base appearing to sit on the yellow ground.

RUSSIA AGAINST MODERNITY

ALEXANDER ETKIND

"Etkind situates Putin's 2022 war in a much bigger story about Russian history and the country's role as a major oil producer in a world facing a climate crisis. A concise book packed with big ideas."

Shaun Walker, *The Guardian*

Putin's war is a "special operation" against modernity. The invasion has been directed against Ukraine, but the war has a broader target: the modern world of climate awareness, energy transition and digital labor. By trading oil and gas, promoting Trump and Brexit, spreading corruption, boosting inequality and homophobia, subsidizing far-right movements and destroying Ukraine, Putin's clique aims at suppressing the ongoing transformation of modern societies.

Alexander Etkind distinguishes between Russia's pompous, weaponized *paleomodernity*, on the one hand, and the lean, decentralized *gaiaomodernity* of the Anthropocene, on the other. Putin's clique has used various strategies – from climate denialism and electoral interference to war and genocide – to resist and subvert modernity. Working on political, cultural and even demographic levels, social mechanisms convert the vicious energy of the oil curse into all-out aggression. Dissecting these mechanisms, Etkind's brief but rigorous analyses of social structuration, cultural dynamics and family models reveal the agency that drives the Russian war against modernity. This short, sharp critique of the Russian regime combines political economy, social history and demography to predict the decolonizing and defederating of Russia.

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Russia Against Modernity

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ALEXANDER ETKIND

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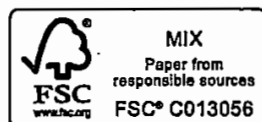
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Introduction

This is a lean book about lean modernity and its pompous, archaic enemies. It is a wartime book, and the reader will sense my impatience. However, I started formulating this narrative long before the Russian war in Ukraine resumed in February 2022. The chapters consist of my briefs on Russia's energy, climate action, Covid response, public sphere, demography, gender issues, inequality and war. The last chapter imagines an adventurous though increasingly realistic project of defederating Russia. At the time of writing, the war was not over. Since I was sure it would end at some point, better sooner than later, I decided to write the whole text in the past tense.

I wished this book to be a short and sharp text, a pamphlet rather than a treatise, written with a playfulness that would help the reader grasp its gruesome themes. Peace is good for complexity; war brings clarity. Nothing cleanses the palate better than war. It changes everything – first the present, then the future and, finally, the past. In developing my concept of Russia's "*stopmodernism*," I draw on political economy, intellectual history, international relations and much else.

Some of my favorite authors – Alexander Chayanov, John Maynard Keynes, Karl Polanyi, Mikhail Bakhtin and Fernand

Braudel – wrote their greatest books during a major war. Despair is critical – it zooms in on the worst parts of life and brings them to fore where the hidden can be revealed and the invisible analyzed. Compassion for some and contempt for others reduce academic prudence to smoking ashes. Mourning consists of memories, visualizations and speculations: How could this have happened? Could it have been prevented? But this mimesis is also nemesis: How to resist and overcome? What kind of revenge would break a new circle of violence?

Postwar periods are intellectually productive: they create ideas that feed the next generations, though they do not prevent these new generations from starting another war.¹ Postwar periods are good for investors and architects but also for philosophers and historians: shaken by the war, the world must be rebuilt, rebooted and re-anchored all over again. Teaching in Königsberg when the Russian Empire annexed the city for the first time, Immanuel Kant produced his Critiques of human reason after foreign troops had left his land. Throughout his life, Kant was committed to working towards Perpetual Peace, but Russia refuted his project; few places on the earth have been as distant from peace as Kaliningrad.² In 1921 in Strasbourg, another city in the process of changing hands, Marc Bloch discovered the lethal power of lies: “Items of false news . . . have filled the life of humanity . . . False news reports! . . . in every country, at the front as in the rear, we saw them being born and proliferating . . . The old German proverb is relevant: ‘When war enters the land, then there are lies like sand.’”³

In a desert of lies there are wells of truth that create oases of peace, unless the sand recaptures them. We are the animated pieces of that sand and that water, and the choice between them is ours. This is the story we live in.

Modernity in the Anthropocene

Before and during the Russo-Ukrainian War that began in 2014, modernity was as big an issue for Russia as agency was for Ukraine. A harbinger of progress – this was how its sympathizers thought about the Soviet Union, and Putin’s Russia wished to be its heir. In 1992, Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish-born sociologist who saw it all, wrote that “communism was modernity’s most devout, vigorous and gallant champion . . . It was under communist, not capitalist, auspices that the audacious dream of modernity . . . was pushed to its radical limits: grand designs, unlimited social engineering, huge and bulky technology, total transformation of nature.”¹ In this conglomeration of steel, oil and gunpowder, there was very little place for men and women. The all-powerful state subordinated both people and nature to a turbocharged modernity that looked increasingly stagnant, even obsolete, with every passing decade. This was *paleomodernity*, and the Soviet Union was its most vigorous champion.

Argument

Putin's war was a "special operation" against the Ukrainian people, their statehood and culture. It was also a broader operation against the modern world of climate awareness, energy transition and digital labor.

Any concept of modernity comprises descriptive and normative components. The Anthropocene has accelerated their fusion. A new type of modernity – reflexive, sustainable, decentralized – would help us to survive the Anthropocene.² Negotiated between the planet and its humans, the new order is very different from the previous types of modernity, such as Max Weber's bureaucratized modernity of the late nineteenth century, or the paleomodernity of the early twentieth. I call it *gaiamodernity*, deriving the name from Gaia, the planetary system of life and matter that includes us all.³ Paleomodernity defined progress in terms of the expanding use of nature: the more resources were used and the more energy consumed, the higher was a civilization. For *gaiamodernity*, in contrast, the further advancement of humanity requires less energy used and less matter consumed per every new unit of work and pleasure. The two types of modernity present opposite relations between nature and progress.

Gaia's time is infinite, but it changes with history because we do. In its new condition, humanity will have to overcome the global pollution and corruption that were created by paleomodernity. It will have to abstain from burning fossils and forget about fetishes such as growth. It will have to develop immunities to natural threats. Small is beautiful in this era, whether it is a matter of vehicles, computers or weapons. But this modernity also affirms the vitality of the state, which only grows bigger when faced with natural challenges. We cannot respond to these challenges without the state, and our politics is vital for Gaia.

Unlike the premodern Leviathan, a hypermasculine monster who frightens his people into behaving and producing,

the modern state is a part of Gaia: a feminine organism that includes nature and humans in one mammoth body, benevolent but unforgiving. While the purpose of the Leviathan was to halt history for the sake of the ruler, Gaia lives and changes with us, and our history is one. Our society is still a *risk society*, but our state is developing into the new *state of nature*.⁴

Gaiamodernity is real, but not quite; it is also utopian. This modernity is utilitarian, provided that it includes the elements of nature *and* people in its calculus. It is democratic: experts represent nature, but judgment is left up to the people. Most importantly, it is reflexive. Having failed in so many other tasks, we contribute our reflexivity to the life of Gaia.

A taste instead of a plan

Gaiamodernity is both a permanent revolution and a world revolution. Unlike Trotsky, who coined these terms, our leaders have no time for trials and errors. Is this why they are so hesitant to do anything?

Gaiamodernity develops a certain taste, a system of aesthetic preferences, that is very different to that of paleomodernity. Imagine Greta Thunberg conversing with Donald Trump, or Putin talking to Zelensky, both sides harboring an intense repulsion towards the other. While two regimes of modernity meet routinely in the public space, their mutual aversion takes first an aesthetic and only later a political form. Ironically, cultural factors are more consequential in authoritarianism than in democracy. In democratic governance, political choices follow economic and ecological realities, as the people articulate them in their debates and elections. With authoritarians at the helm, it is their idiosyncratic preferences – aesthetic tastes, cultural and sexual prejudices, historical views and ethnic stereotypes – that shape social structuration and dictate the policies of the realm.

With its need for natural resources such as fossil fuel and metal ores, paleomodernity was based on resource colonization, settler imperialism and war capitalism. Valuable resources were always located far away from population centers – this was what made them valuable. New lands had to be occupied, annexed and colonized. The people already living in them were abused, resettled or killed, and new “productive” – or rather, extractive – populations were settled in their place. Seeking raw materials as the basis for its economy and society, paleomodernity had two historical forms, external and internal. The former was created by overseas colonization; the latter was specific to large territorial empires, of which Russia was a perfect example. Internal and external colonization turned into one another with every occupation and annexation, and with every imperial collapse. What was external became internal, and vice versa; the key processes – racism, genocide, exploitation, creolization – were the same.⁵

Gaiamodernity turns the legacy of paleomodernity on its head. Progress should be green and safe, sustainable and decentralized. Using renewable energy, autonomous *prosumers* will abolish their feudal dependency on distant deserts and marshes. The new modernity will eschew the transportation routes that were the darlings of paleomodernity. With no pipelines or tankers to feed us there will be fewer pirates and terrorists to harm us, and fewer security experts to exercise control over us. This utopian modernity will differentiate between public goods and public bads, which were stuck together in paleomodern society. Cherishing anthropological diversity – racial, sexual and intellectual – the new modernity will abhor monopolies and oligarchies. It will digitalize education and entertainment, saving materials and emissions by going online. Gaiamodernity will be cosmopolitan: it will not profit from globalization but will work for the good of everyone because, as in certain Gnostic heresies, either all will be saved or all will perish. Gaiamodernity is a utopia in the

making. We are living through its birth pangs, and history is accelerating.

But there are many who wish to protect their old habits and treasure, and they have launched their counter-offensives. The Russian invasion of Ukraine was one of these. The growing awareness of climate change and social inequality was the real threat to Putin's oil-fed officialdom. This mixed group of "oiligarchs" and bureaucrats perceived the advance of history as an existential threat: it would damage the oil and gas trade, depriving Russia of its main source of income; it would rob Russia of the unique advantages it would supposedly gain from climate change; and it would introduce "unpredictability" into the established, and highly unequal, social and gender order.

The Russian state confronted modernity by drilling for oil and gas, occupying foreign countries, accumulating gold, subsidizing far-right movements around the world, and destroying Ukraine. Its politics was not inertial but the opposite – active, even proactive, determination. Russia's demodernization was an intentional activity, a mode of structuration that was freely chosen by the Russian elite and imposed upon the broader population, and subsequently upon the global arena.⁶ Russia had some allies in this venture, but the project of reversing modernity was its own "special operation": stopmodernism.

Demonstrating an unexpected focus and creativity, the Kremlin used various strategies to resist and reverse gaimodernity, from climate denialism to electoral interference to war. There was no secret, long-term plan that coordinated these efforts in advance. Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration provides a better perspective: agency creates structures that modify the opportunities for a new action, and this action changes the underlying structures that open or close the new opportunities.⁷ Instead of a master plan for future change, the ruling group had preferences that defined its choices at every step: *a taste rather than a plan*.

Russia's all-out war against Ukraine and the world turned its slow, hesitant demodernization into a disruptive campaign against modernity. Prepared in secrecy but known to the American and British intelligence services, the invasion shocked the vast majority of Russian, Ukrainian and European intellectuals. Even in January 2022, my friends and colleagues both in Russia and Ukraine considered the chances of invasion negligible, and the very idea laughable. Nobody expected this war to happen, wrote Masha Gessen, who visited both Moscow and Kyiv on the eve of the invasion: "The prospect of war was literally unbelievable. It continued to be unimaginable, unthinkable even after it began."⁸ But the invasion did happen. Different people live in different worlds, each of them integrated by various forces of cohesion – psychological, aesthetic and political. These worlds clash with the outbreak of a war – a shock for some, a triumph for others, and hard work for everyone who must restructure their subjective lifeworlds.

Starting the war was a deliberate decision of a kind that Carl Schmitt, the Kremlin's half-acknowledged guide in political theory, deemed essential for political practice. The war did not follow from any rational calculus that existed in the past, and it changed the grounds for all such calculations in the future. The actions of certain people and institutions defined the life, work or death of millions of other people.⁹ This is structuration in practice. Agents create structures that shape new actions, and these agents themselves change in the process. They may or may not have a plan; and if they have one they may not follow it. But in making such decisions, agents follow their tastes, which stabilize with each decision. In this way, aesthetic and cultural preferences enter the political realm, shape economic relations and drive history.

Trust

Modern nations evolve in a delicate balance between civil society and the state.¹⁰ There is a subjective mood that holds them together: trust. It is a feeling, a sentiment, that underlies structural formations. As German sociologist Niklas Luhmann aptly remarked: “A complete absence of trust would prevent [one] even getting up in the morning.”¹¹ Both before and during the war, millions of Russians had this feeling that spoiled their mornings, and evenings as well. An absence of trust destroys an individual; when it affects many people, it destroys their society. Breakdowns of trust are abrupt and catastrophic, and they are known as revolutions.

Trust can be imposed by an all-powerful state: historians of Russia speak of forced or imitated trust.¹² But if this state is in decline, your only choice is between silence and protest. Real change can take decades, and nothing but corruption and emissions would be produced during this period. “The expectation of catastrophes undermines trust,” wrote Ulrich Beck.¹³

For paleomodernity, the main example of trust was credit: multiple borrowers were equally related to a lender, and mutual trust was about individual responsibility. For gaimodernity, trust is about sorted garbage, clean water and a peaceful country. People can only achieve this together, through their coordinated efforts. It is a collective responsibility that involves the authorities as well as citizens. Dealing with pollution, pandemic, or dictatorship, people again live in the state of nature as if they were in Hobbes’s old fantasy, but this time it is really about the state *and* nature.

Our situation is close to that of new wilderness, in which trust is dispersed and selective. Trust your friends and test them; hate your enemies. Remember postmodernism, in which all cultural things were said to be equal? It was a lie – the real threat is stopmodernism. But its features are not yet clear, or at least they were not clear before the war. This is the time for

a new reflexivity. No more blind trust: the risks are calculable, as are the countermeasures. Trust your neighbor not to pollute your air, or spread the virus any more than is inevitable; but always check just in case. And trust your authorities in the same way. It is their duty to protect you. If they produce more emissions rather than less, then they should go. This is the time for a new moral autonomy. Trust yourself, and you will get up in the morning.

To survive the Anthropocene we have to trust the experts. We live in a world of probabilities that we cannot perceive. It is the experts who tell us about climate change, viruses, pollution and other challenges. Rarely can we test their data, but we are eager to discuss their conclusions and recommendations. This is how the public sphere, a crucial mechanism of gaimodernity, works. Distrust splits the public sphere into fragments that refuse to communicate with one another. It creates a cultural gap between the commoners on the one hand, and the experts and authorities on the other. Commoners do not trust them and do not comply; sabotage, the weapon of last resort, is not as weak as it seems. In many situations, distrust works as a self-fulfilling prophecy. You feel that sorting your rubbish isn't worthwhile, so you don't do it. The unsorted garbage ends up in the same place as the sorted, confirming your indifference to the issue. If you do not get a job the world will not end either. You may get sick or die, but only the experts will know why.

This cultural gap between the elite and the commoners never stays empty. The folk fill it with immaterial subtleties – popular culture (Mikhail Bakhtin), hidden transcripts (James Scott) or conspiracy theories, as we now call them. If the experts are too distant, the elite too arrogant, and the gap too great, conspiracy theories tend to materialize in a self-fulfilling manner. Russia's corruption, inequality and bad governance converged in the destruction of social trust.¹⁴ Tragically, this effect reached a climax at exactly the point when trust was more important

than ever: on the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic, in the context of the global decarbonization, and during the undeclared war.

Putinism in Eurasia

Putin's aim was to restore the Soviet-style paleomodernity – the reign of oil, steel and smoke, the majesty of military power, the coerced unity of the people. The Soviet Union based its power and glory on socialism – an ideal of brotherhood and the equality of all. Although it failed to materialize, this ideal was relatively effective in containing corruption. Putin and his people wished to combine the Soviet allure with post-Soviet graft. Their reenactment of paleomodernity merged legacies from the Soviet era – resource waste, cynicism and distrust – with the radical novelty of massive and ever-increasing inequality. Ulrich Beck wrote that “social inequalities and climate change are two sides of the same coin”;¹⁵ resistance to them also had one and the same origin. Confronting these two major challenges – climate and inequality – the Kremlin sang to the tune of libertarian, denialist conservatism. Imitating or reinventing this ideology, the Russian rulers supported far-right movements around the world.

Russia's environmental problems were immense. The Global North and the Arctic proved to be even more vulnerable to climate change than the South. In 1991, permafrost covered two thirds of the Russian territory, but has been in retreat ever since. Cities, pipelines and railways sat on this melting land.¹⁶ Collapsing randomly, the permafrost released enormous amounts of methane, which accelerated global warming. In 2021, almost twenty million hectares of Siberian forest were destroyed by wildfires; it was Russia's most destructive wildfire season ever. From the tundra to the taiga, Siberian ecosystems were changing from being carbon sinks to being active emitters. In terms of its vulnerability to climate crisis, Russia was

comparable to Canada and Alaska; but only in Russia did major cities such as Yakutsk and Norilsk sit on melting permafrost.

The war and sanctions of 2022 increased the flaring of natural gas, a major source of pollution. Symbolic of the excess characteristic of the oil and gas trade, the flaring was ubiquitous: since it was difficult to shut down gas wells or preserve the gas, the only way to get rid of the excess was to burn it off into the air. The less gas the Russian corporations were able to sell the more they flared on the spot or somewhere along the line. In August 2022, just one Russian compressor station near the Finnish border was burning ten million dollars worth of Siberian gas every day.¹⁷ In the way of nemesis, this added to the local pollution around St. Petersburg, Putin's native city, before it contributed to global emissions.

Watching the Siberian fires, the retreat of the permafrost and the massive release of methane, Putinism blessed Russia's role as an energy empire. Insisting that oil and gas exports were essential for the national economy, experts speculated on the possible benefits of climate change for Russia.¹⁸ As a northern country with an unstable agriculture, would it not be better for the country to be a little warmer? Wouldn't the opening of the Northern Sea Route to China realize the ancient dreams of Ivan the Terrible? Along with climate denialism, other components of Putinism included cultural conservatism, homophobia, economic inequality and graft. They were all connected.¹⁹ In July 2022, Putin explained the energy transition underway in European countries by their "love of non-traditional relations," a Russian euphemism for homosexuality; here, climate denialism merged smoothly with homophobia.²⁰ Machismo was a persistent feature of Putin's speeches; in August that year, he said that only masculinity could protect the governments of the world from the designs of American imperialism.²¹

Putinism emphasized its continuity with Soviet-style socialism, but it could not combine its libertarian policies with any version of left ideology. Perceptive scholars saw that Putinism

was moving towards fascism, but social disparities prevented its development into a mass movement.²² If Putinism had an ideology it was imperialism in its special form of revanchism. Although nationalist at its core, Putinism was also an international movement; from its financial and political base in Russia, it spread around the world. Before the war, Putin and his people maintained a balance between their ultra-conservative message and their revisionist stance, which was digestible only for their Russian supporters. The war demonstrated the fragility of this alliance. Post-Soviet revanchism meant nothing to Putin's international allies. Even the US Republican Party, a loyal partner of Moscow for decades, condemned the invasion in Ukraine.

Economically, Putinism focused on Russia's energy exports. The Kremlin was the main beneficiary of supply chains that started in the Siberian marshes and ended in European and Asian fuel tanks, boilers and air-conditioners. In the era of climate crisis and inequality concerns, the Kremlin wished to conceal both its dependency on fossil trade and the damage it was doing to the planet. The Russian government produced three responses to the growing awareness of climate change: denial, deception and military preparations.

Denial

Three decades of boom and bust in post-Soviet Russia coincided with its long and tortured cognizance of the climate crisis. The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, giving life to fifteen independent states, Russia and Ukraine among them. In 1992, the United Nations adopted its Convention on Climate Change, which acknowledged "dangerous human interference with the climate system." That year, Putin was working in St. Petersburg, where he controlled foreign trade and got his first taste of corruption. Adopted in 1997, the Kyoto Protocol created the first

international mechanism for controlling emissions. In 1998, miners' strikes and a financial crisis brought Russia to default; in the midst of this turmoil, Putin was appointed head of the Federal Security Service, his powerbase for decades to come. In 2000, Paul Crutzen, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist, coined the concept of the Anthropocene, and Putin became Russia's president. In 2004, Rex Tillerson, an engineer from Texas who specialized in Russian oil, became the head of ExxonMobil. That same year, the Orange Revolution started in Kyiv. In 2005, ExxonMobil and the Koch brothers launched a massive campaign of climate denial in the American media. In 2008, Putin swapped roles with his adjutant Dmitry Medvedev, who formulated a vague program of modernization. In 2012, Putin returned to the Kremlin amid protests in Moscow. Between 2009 and 2011, "Climategate" attempted to discredit the scientific research on climate change. In 2014, the Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv paved the way for the European development of Ukraine. That year, Putin occupied and annexed Crimea. In 2015, the Paris Climate Agreement was struck. Supported by Putin, Donald Trump became President of the United States in 2016 and appointed Rex Tillerson as his Secretary of State. The US withdrew from the Paris Treaty in 2017. The global Covid-19 pandemic began in China in December 2019, with Russia suffering the highest excess mortality worldwide. In 2020, the EU adopted the European Green Deal, an ambitious program for halving its emissions. In 2022, Russia ramped up its war against Ukraine.

The burning of fossil fuels created the CO₂ emissions that led to climate crisis. The truth was as simple as that, but there were vested interests in denying it. Russia was a major exporter of oil, gas and coal. Climate awareness threatened its existential interests, as Putin's experts well understood. A great source for studying Russia's climate denialism are the writings of Andrei Illarionov, economic advisor to President Putin from 2000 to 2005, and later a senior fellow at the Cato Institute,

Washington DC. Having written volumes of analytics that denied the manmade character of climate change, Illarionov stated in 2004 that the Kyoto Protocol was something like an “international Gosplan” (referring to the USSR’s State Planning Committee), only much worse. In fact, he said, “the Kyoto Protocol is akin to the Gulag and Auschwitz.” What’s the connection? – Kyoto was “a treaty of death ... since its main goal is to stifle economic growth and economic activity in the countries that will accept the obligations of this protocol.”²³ Illarionov’s position was close to that of many in the Russian elite.

In 2009, the unknown hackers who initiated Climategate stole and published thousands of private emails in the hope of demonstrating that climate change was a scientific conspiracy. Two years later, a Russian server published yet another trove of 5,000 climate-related emails. These cyberattacks on climate science prefigured the larger operations that defined the politics of the following decade. Illarionov was later an avid supporter of Donald Trump. In 2021, he was fired from the Cato Institute because of his allegations that the attack on the US Capitol was a “trap” set by police. In multiple interviews, he denied Russia’s military preparations right up until the invasion of Ukraine. The Cato Institute, a libertarian thinktank financed by the Koch brothers, was an intellectual center of the global climate-denial movement. The father of these brothers, Fred Koch, was also the father of the Soviet oil-refining industry. Having invented new ways of cracking oil, Koch built fifteen refineries in the Soviet Union between 1929 and 1932. Before his eyes, his friends and associates were arrested and murdered during the Soviet terror.²⁴ Disenchanted like many other fellow-travelers, Koch turned into an avid enemy of the international left; I call it the Ayn Rand syndrome.²⁵ Eventually, Koch returned his business to the US, though he also helped to build refineries for Nazi Germany. His heirs, Charles and David Koch, the owners of the biggest petrochemical company in the US, ambivalently

supported Trump's candidacy in 2016. But their real interest was the fusion of libertarianism and climate denialism that was so characteristic of Putinism.

For the global efforts at climate action, Russia's denialism was a strategic obstacle. Euro-Atlantic leaders imagined decarbonization as a process of cooperation and shared sacrifice. Many of them also had doubts and fears regarding decarbonization. But only the beneficiaries of the oil and gas trade knew precisely how much they would lose if this trade were to cease. The truth was that sellers of carbon would suffer more than its buyers. For various reasons, state actors and climate activists underestimated this structural asymmetry. With some naivety, they thought that climate awareness would be equal at all nodes of the fossil trade. But Russia's absence from the climate deal turned the common cause into a zero-sum game.

Deception

In the 2010s, the climate crisis was developing rapidly. Heat waves, extreme weather events, fires and famines proved its existence to voters across the world. In Europe and other continents, democratic governments felt obliged to show their awareness of the crisis but largely failed to coordinate their actions. Drilling and petrochemical corporations spent billions on lobbying to block any meaningful decarbonization policies.

During this period, climate action took neoliberal forms which were amenable to the Russian rulers: as a big country with a low population density, Russia could gain from the new trading schemes. In 2009, the Russian government issued the Climate Doctrine, which acknowledged the manmade character of climate change. At the Copenhagen Climate Conference of that year, President Medvedev promised to increase Russian energy efficiency by 40 percent. But the conference ended in

chaos, and Medvedev's program of modernization was not fulfilled.

A real decarbonization has never been on the Kremlin agenda. The collapse of the USSR and the decline of Russia's economy had reduced emissions within its territory without any effort on the part of its rulers. In 2013, the Kremlin set a national target to reduce emissions to 75 percent of the 1990 rate; while this sounded ambitious, in fact Russia's emissions were already less than 70 percent of that rate.²⁶ The Russian rulers survived the deindustrialization of their country only by the increasing the volume of its carbon exports. Since the exported oil, gas and coal were burned in other countries, the resulting emissions were somebody else's problem. As Russian emissions would be seen to decrease while global emissions continued to rise, Europe, China and the rest of the world would have to pay emission transfers to Russia. But few wanted to pay twice for their fuel.

In 2015, Sergey Donskoy, minister of natural resources, estimated potential Russian losses from climate change at 1–2 percent of GDP per year.²⁷ However, the proportion of Russian GDP made up by the oil, gas and coal trades was much higher, at 15–25 percent a year. Unlike the rest of its GDP, which was the result of the hard work of Russian citizens and partially returned to them in salaries and pensions, the carbon revenue directly enriched the government. A real decarbonization program adopted by the European and global economies would eliminate these state profits – the source of the Kremlin's official expenditures as well as its subterranean corruption. In 2016, new hacks and leaks from Russia helped to elect Donald Trump, the climate denier in chief. In 2018, at the Katowice Climate Change Conference, Trump's America, Putin's Russia, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait blocked the adoption of a binding resolution.

Year after year, fossil fuels made up more than two-thirds of Russia's exports and funded more than half of its federal

budget. The lion's share of this funding came from Europe, which in 2021 bought three-quarters of Russia's gas exports and two-thirds of its oil exports. The money was crucial for the stability of Russia's currency, for its military spending, for maintaining the luxurious lifestyle of its elite, and for importing consumer goods for the general population. For the EU, Russian exports provided about 40 percent of its gas, about half of its coal and a quarter of its oil. The relationship was symbiotic, though Russia depended on it more than Europe. The EU's planned energy transition would mean a replacement of products extracted from nature with goods created by labor. This would result in a major reduction of Russian profits. Despite all the talk of modernization and diversification, there was no plan for substituting Russia's fossil fuel exports with any other source of revenue. And if there were hopes of cheating the planet through the EU Trading Emissions Scheme (2009), there would be no way around the EU Transborder Carbon Tax (2021).

Planned for implementation in 2026, the Carbon Tax would impact the cost of all high-carbon products, including steel, cement, aluminum and petrochemicals. Non-EU producers of these commodities would pay €75 per metric ton of emissions occurring during the production of them. The effect on Russian exports would be equivalent to an additional customs charge of 16 percent.²⁸ In April 2021, the EU declared its commitment to reducing emissions by half by 2030 and to zero by 2050. This would mean proportional reductions of oil and coal purchases. Gas, a cleaner fuel, would keep flowing for another decade. "You see what is happening in Europe. There is hysteria and confusion in the markets," said Putin in October 2021.²⁹ By this point, Russian war preparations were in full swing.

Normalization

“Russia is a normal country” was the slogan of a whole generation of Western experts. The Cold War had been settled, and academic interests switched to the Third World. The liberal left presented Russia as a decent partner and a reliable counterweight to the United States. A neoliberal idea of normalization colored studies in the history, sociology and politics of Russia: if an empirical work needed an ideological impetus, the notion of normalization provided it. A good example is an essay by two leading American scholars, an economist and a political scientist, “A Normal Country: Russia after Communism,” published in 2005, right after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.³⁰ I could cite hundreds of other examples. The normalization of Russia was a massive and high-profile endeavor, an intellectual equivalent of the Marshall Plan. For many observers, it was only Russia’s genocidal war with Ukraine that changed this understanding.

In 2012, the World Bank upgraded Russia to a high-income economy but reversed this decision two years later.³¹ Average Russian incomes had been falling since 2012, which happened in very few other countries. In terms of median incomes, Russia ranked 46th in 2021 – lower than Lebanon or Bulgaria. For that same year, the Harvard Atlas of Economic Complexity ranked Russia 51st, between India and Vietnam, and far lower than its geographic neighbors Finland and China.³² Health spending per capita was even worse: 104th place, on par with Nigeria and Uzbekistan. Predictably, Russia’s ranking for life expectancy was similar: 105th. Underspending on education was gruesome: though a richer country, Russia spent less per capita on education than Turkey, Mexico or Latvia. When measured on the portion of GDP spent on educational institutions, Russia ranked 125th.³³ Russia’s ranking on the Freedom of Press Index was pathetic from the outset (121st in 2002), and has only got worse since. It ranked 148th in 2020,

between Palestine and Burma, and 158th in 2022, alongside Afghanistan.³⁴

Ecologically, Russia was the fourth greatest polluter in the world; China topped the list but Russian emissions per capita were much higher.³⁵ Russia's ecological problems – smog in the capital and garbage in the countryside – stuck in the mind of anyone who had visited the country. Siberia had been extensively logged and ravaged by fires. Flaring gas torches and methane leaks created massive emissions. The biggest protest Russia saw during the 2010s was sparked by a plan to ship millions of tons of residential waste from Moscow to the pine forests of the Archangelsk region.

It was no wonder, then, that Russians were so unhappy: in 2020, one global happiness index placed Russia 78th, between the silent Turkmenistan and the protesting Hong Kong.³⁶ Russia was among those countries with the highest rates of suicide, fatal road accidents and industrial accidents. All these contributed to Russia's pathetic performance in population growth, which reflects rates of fertility, health and migration: 178th, very close to the bottom.³⁷ Finally, in the World Bank rating of political stability, Russia ranked 147th in 2020, between Belarus and Papua New Guinea.³⁸ More recent estimates are not available, but my guess is that they would be off the chart.

How was it possible that the well-educated people of this rich country were so poor and unfree? Where did Russian money come from and where did it vanish to? Why did such an enormous country with a long history and famous technological advances make its people so unhappy and unhealthy? The answer is simple: the Russian state. It was huge, archaic and very expensive (see Chapter 3). Moreover, it did not rely on the people but was wholly dependent on the exploitation of natural resources, and mostly one type of them: fossil fuels. Competing with the United States and Saudi Arabia, Russia belonged to the *troika* that led the world in oil extraction.

Russia was also the biggest exporter of natural gas worldwide, and the sixth largest producer of coal, after China and others. If one summed up all these carbon calories, Russia would top the world rankings. But while the US and China consumed the majority of their fossil fuels domestically, Russia was the world's leading exporter of energy. Taking into account wherever its fossil fuels were delivered and burned, Russia was responsible for more emissions than any other country in the world except the US.³⁹ As a result, by selling as much oil and gas as Saudi Arabia and Qatar *combined*, Russia was a very rich country indeed.

Russia's military expenditure between 2000 and 2020 exceeded a trillion dollars.⁴⁰ This was an enormous sum of money, but it represented a minor portion of Russia's oil and gas profits. Taken together, the country's military, security and law-enforcement costs were equal to a third of federal expenditure; in addition, one fifth of the budget remained secret, which was unparalleled in modern economies.⁴¹ During these two decades, Russia's military budget increased by a factor of seven, compared to a factor of two in Germany and 2.5 in the United States. At the start of its invasion of Ukraine, Russia spent about one billion dollars a day on its war effort, depleting its annual military budget within a couple of months. The Russian economy was half the size of Germany's, despite the fact that its population was almost twice as big; but Russia's military budget was much higher than Germany's. With a population smaller than Brazil's, Russia had a much larger standing army. Though it had a GDP inferior to that of the US by a factor of seven, Russia nevertheless competed with the US for military predominance. Early twenty-first-century Russia was the most unequal, the most militarized and the most carbonized among the big countries of the world. Under Putin's rule, it became the most unpredictable of them all.

Saving money on social spending – health care, education, pensions and urban development – the Russian

rulers cultivated a mutual understanding with right-wing Republicans in the US, who were also dependent on oil money. In fact, however, Putin's overblown and aggressive state was the exact opposite of the Tea Party ideal. As a ruler, Putin was much closer to the pompous and erratic King George III than to the Boston protesters who threw tea chests into the sea. From King George to Putin, mercantilist dictators wished to see their treasuries enriched and their subjects impoverished.

For classical economics, it was the labor of citizens that constituted the source of a country's wealth. This idea was at the core of the labor theory of value, developed by Adam Smith and Karl Marx, and it continues to feature in contemporary economics textbooks. It was not true, however, that labor alone produced value. Imperial states such as England and Belgium derived enormous wealth and power from the natural resources they shipped from colonies both near and distant.⁴² But even in this imperial context, Russia was an anomaly. There, a combination of neomercantilism, internal colonization, libertarian taxes and uncontrolled corruption created one of the most unequal, top-heavy societies in history (see Chapter 4).

During three long post-Soviet decades, Russia had an excellent chance to reshape itself into a peaceful, law-abiding and hard-working country. But its massive security apparatus and corrupt, irrational bureaucracy mopped up the wealth produced from holes in the earth rather than by the work of the people. This greedy "elite" drew almost all of its lifeblood from the sale of fossil fuels, rendering the population redundant for its purposes. Sometimes, however, and particularly in times of crisis, this large and needy population became a nuisance, and potentially a danger. The crowds of protestors who took to the streets of Moscow in 2012 were as threatening to Putin and his regime as the Ukrainian troops of 2022, though the latter were much more deadly, albeit more distant.

The Russian attack on Ukraine was one battle in the larger war of the Anthropocene. Any war is a mega-polluter, and there should be no war in the age of climate crisis. Russian tanks and missiles were bringing an end not only to human lives but, potentially, to human life itself.

8

Defederating Russia

The Russian Empire disintegrated at the end of an imperialist war. The Soviet Union collapsed at the end of the Cold War. What would happen to the Russian Federation? The answer was obvious, even if it saddened many.

I am not calling for the collapse of the Russian Federation. I am predicting it, which is by no means the same thing. Even for people like me, who looked forward to Ukraine's total victory and to seeing Russia's rulers tried at an international court, it was not easy to admit that the Russo-Ukrainian War spelled the end of the country. The collapse of this composite state had long been feared, but the Russian rulers succeeded in freezing their domain for a while. Reflecting this central concern of the regime, the ruling party went by the name "United Russia." Navalny called it "the party of crooks and thieves," but the name these people chose for their party articulated their fear of disintegration and lack of other values. They had a chance: a favorable economic situation and a competent government could have staved off the collapse. Their failure was not the work of foreign peoples or governments; before the war, Western governments had been the best allies of a "United Russia."

The era of empires was long gone. Russia called itself a federation, like Germany or Switzerland, but it was behaving like an empire in decline. Federations are defined by the free accession and secession of their members; Brexit is a good example. In contrast to historic empires such as Austria-Hungary, the USSR had a constitutional mechanism permitting its dissolution. The principle of self-determination was adopted by the Bolsheviks in November 1917 and enshrined in the Soviet constitution. The same formula of self-determination became the founding principle of the League of Nations, and later of the United Nations. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, “the right of self-determination, including secession” disappeared from Russian constitutional texts. The principle, however, had not been forgotten.

Composite states and federations bring an added value to their peoples, a *federative premium*. Pursuing economy of scale and a politics of synergy, it is possible to keep this premium positive. This should be the central concern of any composite state, such as the European Union, the United Kingdom or Russia. In a parasitic petrostate that functions as a logistical hub for trading and redistributing its natural resources, the federative premium is negative (see Chapter 3). Political tradition, historical mythology or the imperial domination of one ethnicity over others can defer the collapse of this unproductive formation. Empires and federations develop in peace, consolidate in war and disintegrate after defeat. It would be better for them to remain pacifist like Switzerland, but they tend to be aggressive like Russia. In the way of nemesis, the wars they start are likely to be suicidal.

In describing this process, I prefer the term “defederation” to the more commonly used “decolonization,” because the former implies a transformation of all parts of the composite state while the latter applies only to colonies and doesn’t refer to the metropolitan core of the empire.¹ There was nothing predetermined in the process: if Russia had not invaded Ukraine

it would probably have deferred or avoided its defederation. But revanchism proved stronger than caution, and fetishism stronger than reason.

Russian imperialism

As an empire, Russia emerged on the international stage at the same time as the early Portuguese and Spanish empires, grew in competition with great terrestrial powers such as Austria and China, matured in a race with the British and French maritime empires, and outlived most of them. In the seventeenth century, Moscow colonized the Urals and Siberia. In the eighteenth century, it annexed the Baltic lands, the Crimea, parts of Poland, and Alaska. In the nineteenth century, it took Finland, the Caucasus, parts of the Balkans, and Central Asia. Externally aggressive, the Russian Empire was a threat to revolutionary France and enlightened Prussia, to British India and Spanish California. Internally oppressive, the Empire crushed a major mutiny in the Urals, sparked several revolts in Poland, unleashed a permanent rebellion in the Caucasus, and confronted violent revolutions in its capitals.

The Empire was deeply integrated in European politics. Russian soldiers took Berlin in 1760, Paris in 1814 and Budapest in 1848, but they did not do it alone; every time, the Russian Empire was part of an international coalition. Founded as a military capital, St. Petersburg was also a center of diplomacy. Famous diplomats served there – Joseph de Maistre, John Quincy Adams, Bismarck. . . After the victory over Napoleon, Russian diplomats created the Holy Alliance, a first attempt to integrate Europe by marrying military prowess to conservative ideology. Always a hyperactive player, the Russian Empire extended its Big Games to Central Asia, North America and the Middle East.

The closest historical analogy to the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022 is the Crimean War of 1853–56, which was lost by Russia. In his wartime dispatches to *The New-York Daily Tribune*, Karl Marx wrote that “a certain class of writers” attributed to the Emperor of Russia, Nicolas I, “extraordinary powers of mind, and especially of that far-reaching, comprehensive judgement which marks the really great statesman. It is difficult to see how such illusions could be derived.”² Russia was never as isolated in its fight against modernity as in these two wars. In both, the Russian army’s logistics were poor, its weapons obsolete, its morale low, and the generation gap between its soldiers and their political masters tremendous. In both, the anti-Russian coalition was stronger, though its aims were vague. In both, Russia’s disinformation split Western pundits. As Marx wrote, “a lot of reports, communications, etc., are nothing but ridiculous attempts on the part of the Russian agents to strike a wholesome terror into the Western world.”³ Both wars challenged the internal structure of the Russian imperial state, and both led to a swift transition of power from the fathers to the sons, or even the granddaughters. In both, ethnic issues were important but not decisive. Close to the end of the Crimean War, the British government discussed a plan for a “war of nations,” which would have involved supporting nationalist movements in the Caucasus and elsewhere so that the Russian Empire could be weakened and dismembered. The plan never came to fruition as the government in London fell, and Nicolas I died (or took his own life) at just the right time to not have to acknowledge his defeat. The new British government signed a toothless peace with the heir to the throne, Alexander II. He launched the Great Reforms of the 1860s – still the most successful attempt at modernizing Russia.

All Russian and Soviet incarnations of the ancient Muscovite state were imperialist, but their successes were not consistent. For every expansionist tsar or commissar like Catherine II or Putin, there was a leader who presided over the

contraction of the Empire's domains: Alexander II sold Alaska, Lenin withdrew from Finland and Ukraine, and Gorbachev gave away much more. None of them liked this part of the job, but I am not sure that matters. While imperial victories consolidated the conservatism of the state, military defeats led to reforms and revolutions. The Great Reforms followed defeat in the Crimean War; the revolution of 1905 followed defeat in the Russo-Japanese War; the two revolutions of 1917 responded to the catastrophe of World War I; and the dismembering of the Soviet Union in 1991 concluded the Cold War. The Soviet collapse led to the liberation of fifteen countries, including Ukraine and Russia. It was a great example of the peaceful transformation of an empire, and part of the success story of global decolonization. However, the Russian loss of territory was smaller than that experienced by the British or even the German empires when they lost their colonies. The large-scale violence that tends to accompany the end of empires was only deferred.

Revanchism

The word "Ukraine" means "the edge." Over the centuries, Ukraine's lands and peoples both absorbed Russian expansionism and limited it. A central target of Russia's colonizing efforts, Ukraine was forced to supply the Empire with its goods, services and cadres. While the Ukrainian Cossacks rebelled against Russian rule, the Ukrainian nobility participated in running the Empire, and Cossack strongmen were included in the imperial elite. Ruled from its distant corner, St. Petersburg, the Empire was ambitious and unstable. Its new Crusades to capture Istanbul, Jerusalem or Manchuria fueled Russia's military efforts up until World War I. With the Bolshevik revolution, the renamed empire lost some peripheric lands but preserved its core. The move of the capital to Moscow, the

creation of the Soviet Union and its victory in World War II gave new energies to imperial expansion. After the war, the Soviet Union annexed parts of Bukovina, Eastern Prussia, the Baltic countries and Tuva. Parts of Ukraine and Moldova, and parts of the Pacific coast, changed their status more than once. Throughout the twentieth century, the Russian borders shifted almost as often as the most unsettled parts of the global South.

In 1991, as a newly independent country, Russia adopted a new constitution and dismantled the old power structures. Like the metropolitan center of any collapsed empire, Moscow experienced massive problems, including the loss of traditional markets, the disruption of supply chains and the frustration of the elite. At that point of bifurcation, Russia had two strategic options. The first was postcolonial development, which would have seen Russia bid final farewell to the Soviet state in exactly the same way the Ukrainians or Estonians did. A revolution had taken place and the new Russian laws, leaders and institutions had nothing in common with their Soviet predecessors. In this narrative, Russia was a colony of the Soviet Union in the same way as Latvia or Uzbekistan were. But this new country, post-Soviet Russia, was still a composite state. There was no reason to expect that, left to themselves, the constituent parts of the former empire such as Chechnya, Tatarstan or the oil-rich parts of Western Siberia would maintain their loyalty to Moscow. Left to its postcolonial humbleness, Russia would need to accept further splits and secessions. Indeed, local protests and rebellions began immediately after 1991. The other option was a continuation of the imperial narrative in which the Russian state was the exclusive heir to the Soviet Union: the survivor of a "geopolitical catastrophe," as Putin put it, the target of a global conspiracy and a bulwark against the apocalypse. One option was a decolonization of Russia, the other a reconquest of the original Soviet space. The former would promise peace and prosperity, the latter war and revanchism.

The choice was soon made. Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000 with the promise of suppressing a major rebellion in the Caucasus. Two bloody and wasteful Chechen wars (1994–96 and 1999–2009) undermined the project of democracy-building in Russia. Putin pressed further, depriving the constituent parts of the Federation of their sovereign powers (2013) and invading Georgia (2008) and Crimea (2014). With every imperial endeavor, Putin consolidated his personal rule. A basic truth of imperialism is that external expansion and internal oppression are connected like two sides of a coin.

In 1993, Galina Starovoitova warned about the dangers of a “Weimar Russia” – defeated, revanchist and crumbling. As she put it, “the secession of smaller republics would be less problematic for Russia than any attempt to keep such lands by force.”⁴ Five years later, Starovoitova, a brilliant ethnographer and arguably the most successful female politician in post-Soviet Russia, was murdered by a political assassin.

The biggest country in the world, the Russian Federation was “the subaltern empire,” the “red mirror” of global troubles, a “failed state” on the brink of rupture.⁵ Reconquering the Caucasus and Crimea that had belonged to the Soviet Union, the new Russia increasingly identified with Soviet might and glory. Each step towards reconquering Ukraine was a major step towards restoring the Soviet Empire. Unlike classical imperialism, which sought new lands and adventures, Putinism was a revanchism – a less common but particularly toxic kind of imperialism.

On its enormous territory, populated rarely and unevenly, the Russian Federation was fragile. Its population density, nine persons per square kilometer, was comparable to that of Finland or Canada. In these vast northern countries, people congregate in a small number of habitable nooks, leaving other areas thinly settled.⁶ In the post-Soviet era of expensive transportation and relatively open borders, people toured

and traded in adjacent lands more than in national centers. The men and women of Königsberg (Kaliningrad) had better opportunities for studying, working or finding a partner in Poland or Germany than in central Russia. The same was true for the millions living in the agglomerations of Southern Siberia: they had better chances of getting on in life in China or Mongolia than in Russia. The Caucasus traded and prayed with Turkey, the White Sea coast traded with Norway, and St. Petersburg with Finland and northern Europe. Moscow was booming while the provinces were looking elsewhere. The very size of the country facilitated its disintegration.

In May 2022, during the third month of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the BBC Russian service produced an instructive study. Exploring data from eleven cemeteries with fresh military graves, the journalists identified more than 3,000 Russian soldiers killed in Ukraine and listed their hometowns. The results were stunning: the soldiers came from distant regions of Russia, and a majority of them were of non-Russian ethnicity. Dagestan suffered most of the losses, Buryatia ranked second, the Volgograd region third, followed by Bashkortostan and Southern Siberia. These were the poorest areas in the Russian Federation, plagued with high unemployment. The locals either volunteered to serve in the army or were unable to bribe their way out of obligatory service. Among the dead, there were only six (0.2 percent) from Moscow, even though the capital's residents accounted for 9 percent of Russia's population.⁷ Putin was wary of declaring general conscription, fearing it would lead to mass protests in the capital. Partial mobilization was declared only in September, and it confronted the demographic and healthcare problems that Russia had suffered for decades (see Chapter 6). No province lost more from the war than Donbas, which consisted of two Ukrainian regions that had been controlled by Russian-sponsored separatists since 2014: their men were conscripted, and women fled to Russia having no support there. As Bruno Latour wrote, "there are the

two pincer movements of the *land grab*: the one appropriates, the other excludes.”⁸

Towards the beginning of his reign, Putin was asked what had happened to the Russian submarine *Kursk*, which perished in the Arctic in August 2000. “It sank,” he said, with a cynical smile. The tautology of his response masked the shocking catastrophe. In trying to rescue the legacies of the Russian past – Orthodoxy, imperialism and Soviet collectivism – Putin wished to melt them into a new substance that could only be referred to as Putinism. But there was no melting pot for the task. It sank.

Ethnicity or politics?

The Russian economist Natalya Zubarevich spoke of the four belts of Russia: the first was made up of a dozen big cities, each with a population of more than a million; the second consisted of the decaying industrial belt of the Volga and the Urals; the third was the enormous agrarian heartland stretching from the Ukrainian border to the Pacific coast; and the fourth included the poor areas of the Caucasus and Southern Siberia, most of which were ethnically non-Russian.⁹ The government redistributed revenues, and all four belts were beneficiaries of the transfers that came from a small number of internal colonies – the oil-pumping and gas-trading regions at the center of the Eurasian continent. The biggest donors were two “autonomous districts” named after their indigenous populations that were largely extinct: the Khanty-Mansi District and the Yamalo-Nenets region – a vast land of empty marshes and migrating reindeers in Western Siberia. Another donor was Moscow, the official residence of many extractive corporations that were drilling and mining in Siberia but paying taxes in the capital. Nevertheless, the Khanty-Mansi delivered so much and consumed so little that this region contributed two times more to the Russian budget than Moscow.¹⁰

Tatarstan was another breadwinner in the post-Soviet empire. Settled on the banks of the Volga River, this booming community possessed its own oil fields and industrial facilities. Speaking in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan, in 1990, Boris Yeltsin offered the locals “as much sovereignty as you can swallow.” Tatarstan held a referendum, and the citizens voted for sovereignty. Many debates about the elusive meaning of this word followed. In 1992, Moscow and Kazan signed a treaty, and Tatarstan became a “state united with the Russian Federation.” However, its economic growth was faster than the rest of Russia’s, and in many respects it acted like an independent state.¹¹ On coming to power, Putin declared an end to this “parade of sovereignties.” In 2001, Tatarstan’s referendum was retrospectively declared unconstitutional. Having already lost billions of dollars to Moscow, Tatarstan had now lost its political autonomy as well.

In 2017 this attack on Tatar sovereignty, or what remained of it, resumed. This time the target was culture and language rights: Kazan lost its power to teach the Tatar language in local schools. The number of people who identified themselves as Tatars was decreasing with every new poll: many felt it safer to declare a Russian identity. But in contrast to Chechnya, Tatarstan retained a relative prosperity and peace. Moreover, its officials supported the war in Ukraine and recruited ethnic troops to fight there. Other “republics” such as Bashkortostan, Chuvashia and Chechnya also created ethnic battalions with ethnic commanders. In the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire had supported such formations, but the Soviet Union shunned the practice on the grounds that it would feed nationalist violence and lead to the risk of new internal conflicts. In March 2022, émigré Tatar activists published an appeal urging the people of Tatarstan to separate from Russia.¹² Eventually, the fate of the Russian Federation would be decided in Kazan and the other capitals of the Eurasian republics, rather than in Moscow.

From Karelia to Chukotka, self-identified Russians had a numerical majority in many ethnic regions of Russia. However, confrontations between Moscow and the provinces concerned social and environmental issues as well as language and cultural policies. In this maze, Russians and non-Russians had many overlapping interests. The Russo-Ukrainian War demonstrated that, in the modern world, it is not ethnicity or identity that define people's choices but politics. Before 2014, Ukraine was a land of ethnic peace like Tatarstan, but it was forced to fight for its freedom like Chechnya. Many of those who fought in the Ukrainian army in 2022 spoke better Russian than their Russian foes, and made better use of their Soviet-manufactured weapons. Unlike homogeneous Chechnya, which is culturally distant from Russia but lost its war against the overwhelming force of Russian weapons and money, heterogeneous and culturally similar Ukraine was able to confront Russia vigorously.

The mass migration of Russians, Ukrainians and many others to Europe, Israel and the United States showed that these people could quickly become responsible citizens. As the Soviet saying had it, in their homeland they "pretended to work while their employers pretended to pay." In the US, ethnic Russians boasted median incomes that were higher than those of Chinese, Italian or even Swiss migrants.¹³ One in four staff members at Israel's universities were native Russian speakers. The first generation of post-Soviet Russians who arrived in Israel surprised the locals with their right-wing views, but research showed that the voting preferences of the second generation were indistinguishable from those of the general population.¹⁴ Multiple waves of Russian emigrants, including those who fled Putin's war in 2022, were natural experiments in causality. It was the Russian state that made its citizens of any ethnicity unproductive and frustrated, not the other way around.

Indigenous rights

Various nations in the Russian territory had been impatient with Putin's state. In 2019 in Izhevsk, the capital of the Udmurt Republic, Albert Razin set himself alight in protest at the suppression of his native Udmurt language. A banner found next to his body read "If my language disappears tomorrow, I am ready to die today" – a quote from the Dagestan poet Rasul Gamzatov.¹⁵ Earlier, in 2013, Ivan Moseev, a leader of the Pomory (Seasiders), was arrested for "inciting hatred against Russians" and collaborating with the Norwegian intelligence services. Almost nine years later, the European Court in Strasbourg ruled against Russia, declaring Moseev the victim of an illegal verdict. The Pomory – an ethnic minority in the Russian North with a distinct identity and culture – spoke a dialect of the Russian language and had never experienced serfdom. Led by the Pomory, massive protests shook Shiyes, a village in the Arkhangelsk region, in 2018–20. This barely populated area had already been crisscrossed by eight gas and oil pipelines. Moscow planned to construct a monstrous landfill there, destroying the woods that the locals used for hunting and berry-picking. It would have been Europe's largest garbage dump, with waste delivered from Moscow, located 1,200 kilometers away.¹⁶ The mass protests, in which locals blocked the railway line with tents, lasted two years. The project was cancelled in 2020. It was the biggest victory of the Green movement in contemporary Russia.

During the 1990s, indigenous rights were included in the new Russian constitution. The Russian Federation accepted responsibility for the "defense of age-old environments of habitation and traditional ways of life" (Article 72). The American political philosopher Leif Wenar argued that respecting the rights of indigenous peoples was the only way out of the oil curse: if hydrocarbons are to be mined and burned at all, the profits should go to the locals, and especially to those who have

been discriminated against in previous periods.¹⁷ As Wenar observed, the constitutions of almost all nations proclaim that local mineral treasures belong to the people. This formula was present in the Soviet constitutions, but it never appeared in the constitution of the Russian Federation. The habitats of the Khanty, Mansi, Yakuts and other indigenous peoples of Northern Eurasia were circumscribed to facilitate the extraction of oil, gas, coal and diamonds. Drillers destroyed even the national parks that had been created for these peoples in the 1990s. In 2017, Russian oil workers beat up Sergei Kechimov, a Khanty herder and shaman who tried to defend the holy Lake Numto from their invasion. Citing four oil spills that threatened local fish and birds, Kechimov tried to sue the powerful oil and gas company Surgutneftegaz, but was unsuccessful. Federal legislation passed in December 2013 removed the protected status of lands on which indigenous people hunted, fished and herded.¹⁸ In 2019, Alexander Gabyshev, a Yakut shaman, set out for Moscow on foot, “to drive President Vladimir Putin out of the Kremlin”; he was arrested on the way and subjected to forced psychiatric treatment, a form of torture.¹⁹ Even before the war, Marjorie Balzer, an American anthropologist who spent years in Yakutia, Buryatia and Tuva, believed in the potential of their emancipatory movements.²⁰ Intense discontent had been growing in the major cities of Siberia.²¹ Booming industrial centers, they experienced a sharp decline when the military orders dried up, as had happened after the Cold War and as happened again after the Russo-Ukrainian War. In September 2022, mass anti-government protests occurred in Dagestan, against both conscription and the war itself.

Having visited St. Petersburg in 1839, in the wake of the Russian army’s brutal suppression of yet another Polish uprising, the French author the Marquis de Custine wrote that the Russian Empire was an “enormous prison, and only its emperor had the keys.” In 1914, Lenin called the Russian

Empire “a prison of nations.” This cyclical narrative was to be disrupted.

Bullitt’s attempt

A hundred years before the Russo-Ukrainian War, two revolutions and a bloody civil war plunged the Russian Empire into chaos. In March 1918, the Bolsheviks exited World War I, signing a separate peace treaty with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk, in which Russia pledged to supply oil, gold, timber and other commodities to Germany. The Allies were worried that the Germans would take over parts of Russia and seize resources in the Urals. To preempt this, Japan proposed to invade Russia before the German army did. Moving along the Trans-Siberian Railway, the Japanese troops would make their way up through Siberia to the Urals. The Americans opposed the plan. Nurturing a romantic affinity for Russia, Woodrow Wilson’s administration feared a stronger Japan. If Japan occupied Siberia, what guarantee would there be that its troops would ever leave? The future showed that Japan was indeed an unreliable ally of America.

Negotiations on the issue were led by Edward House, Wilson’s chief advisor on European politics during World War I and at the Paris Peace Conference. A Southerner who owned plantations and wrote novels, House was a permanent presence in Democratic administrations up until the eve of World War II. In 1918, Wilson and House diluted the Japanese invasion plan by limiting its force to 10,000 men. In the event, largely thanks to the US president and his advisor, the Japanese invasion never happened.²²

World War I ended a few months later. But chaos continued to reign in Russia. Wilson had led his country into war in order to establish a perpetual peace. The Versailles Peace Treaty reshaped Europe, but the fire continued to blaze in Russia.

The various combatants in the Russian Civil War sent their representatives to the Paris Peace Conference. Their reports contradicted one another on each and every point. To clarify the situation, Wilson dispatched a reconnaissance mission to Russia.

William Bullitt, a young diplomat and journalist, led the mission, which also included two spies and one poet. The delegation was received in Moscow by Lenin, who enchanted Bullitt; as it happened, the sympathy was reciprocal. It was April 1919, when the Bolsheviks were at their most vulnerable: retreating, they controlled the least territory of all the combatants in the Civil War. Bullitt drew up a plan for reconciling all the belligerents. The former Russian Empire would be divided into twenty-three parts; each combatant would get the territory it controlled at that moment. Finland, Ukraine and the Baltic countries had already been recognized by the international community. Southern Russia, the Urals, Siberia and Tatarstan would also become independent states. The Bolsheviks would be left with Moscow, Petrograd and eight provinces surrounding these cities. The project fit with Wilson's concept of the self-determination of peoples. In a similar way, the Balkan states were created on the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The arbiter would be a new international organization, the League of Nations, which would recognize the new independent states at a special conference in Oslo.

Lenin agreed to Bullitt's proposal and confirmed his participation in the planned conference. Now, Bullitt and House had only to convince the remaining combatants. But first the plan had to be approved by Woodrow Wilson. Bullitt rushed from Moscow to Paris, where House was preparing for a meeting with Wilson. The meeting never took place. The president was tired and had heart problems; probably he had his first stroke. But it is also possible that Wilson's hesitation was linked to his attitude towards Russia: he did not want to be responsible for its dismantlement.²³

For Bullitt, this was a severe disappointment, and he resigned. He later went on to testify against Wilson in the Senate. House was also upset. He proposed as an alternative that Russia should be divided into five parts, with Siberia independent and European Russia split. Wilson was not convinced, and the peace plan failed again. Bullitt later wrote a psychobiography of Wilson, co-authored with Sigmund Freud. In it, he claimed with bitterness that Wilson's rejection of the plan to split Russia was "the most important single decision that he made in Paris."²⁴ Indeed, Wilson saved Russia twice – the first time from Japanese invasion, and the second time from internal secession.

On December 23, 2021, Putin reiterated his suspicion of American intentions towards Russia. He recalled that "one of President Woodrow Wilson's advisors" had endorsed the partition of Russia into five parts, and cited an entry in House's personal diary from September 1918. The Russian president did not, however, thank his American counterpart for having preserved a united Russia.

Who needed this Federation?

Much had changed in Eurasia since the era of Wilson and Lenin. Russia's military and economic power had impressed its neighbors for decades. Two key factors ensured this might: nuclear weapons, which provided security, and fossil fuel exports, which generated the enormous revenues that stabilized the local currency and enriched the rulers.

Neither was produced by the living generations. Oil was not created by labor; some places had it but many others did not, which was why it was so expensive. Russia's nuclear weapons had been built by the fathers or grandfathers of those in power. Relying on their pipelines and inherited nuclear umbrella, the Russian leaders appropriated the nation's wealth without

lifting a finger. Embezzlement created record inequalities not seen even under the tsars. Two unearned privileges, wealth and security, shaped the elite that started the war. Well-paid propagandists assured the people that peace, tranquility and a stable currency were being secured through the hard work of this elite. The people believed this for as long as they had peace, tranquility and a stable currency. They thanked their leaders, and for a while it seemed as if these rulers would rule forever.

But for decades, nothing was produced in the Federation. The pipes continued to pump oil and the nuclear weapons continued to protect. The rulers got older and richer, and the people went on with their lives more or less without complaint. The Federation consisted of many regions, large and small, and they didn't complain either. Thanks to the oil, the money the elite received was convertible and could be used to buy nice cars or villas abroad. Thanks to the nuclear weapons, the Federation protected all its regions from their enemies and from each other. As long as there was peace and oil in the Federation, everyone could hope that this would always be the case. The oil would flow out through the pipes and the money would flow back in. The formidable weapons would continue to protect while remaining unused. There would be more and more villas and yachts to purchase overseas. And nothing too bad would happen to the ordinary folk.

The best-kept secret of the Federation was why its rulers decided to start their war. Explanations ranged from boredom to despair, realism to fetishism. More significant was the fact that the rulers had never waged such a war and were not expecting it to be a long and difficult endeavor. They did not know that during it their oil would no longer be purchased, that goods would stop flowing into the country, that people accustomed to having money would stop working if they were left unpaid. Confronting such difficulties, the rulers now had to decide whether to use their nuclear weapons.

On the one hand, if they were not used, the Federation would lose the war. There were many explanations for why they couldn't win without using these weapons: their commanders were incompetent, their missiles were imprecise, their soldiers were hungry. The fecklessness of the rulers was matched by the impotence of the people; both had been numbed by the constant flow of oil and the awesome power of their weapons. Now that the oil was no longer flowing, the weapons would have their say.

On the other hand, these ancient weapons of the ancestors had never been used. For decades they had sat in storage, their use-by dates extended many times. Of course, they had been tested, but over the months of war the rulers realized that drills were one thing and combat quite another. In short, using the nuclear weapons was a difficult decision to take. The Federation's rulers were not prepared to take it, or maybe their weapons were not in good shape. The soldiers fought to the bitter end until they lost the war.

Well, they lost and that's all there is to it. The rulers had to move on. But first they had to pay for the colossal damage they had done to their neighbor, and this used up all the reserves they had not already wasted. They were left with a lot of oil they couldn't sell and a lot of weapons they couldn't use. Discontent spread throughout the Federation.

The rulers' villas and yachts were gone. Their nuclear weapons had been feared only for as long as others thought they could be used against them. But since the Federation had lost its most important war without using its most important weapons, that meant it would never use them. And it would never sell oil again either: people abroad had somehow learned to live without oil. So who now needed this Federation?

Oil that could not be sold and weapons that could not be used turned the center of the country into an enormous warehouse for the dirtiest scum on earth. But in many other regions of the Federation, a new life began. Not immediately, but they

gradually learned how to earn their own living and defend themselves. Some traded in the scraps the Federation had left them, but each eventually came up with their own ways to prosper: some sold grain, others cars; some taught students and others invited tourists. Relieved of the combined curse of oil and weapons, these were beautiful countries.

It was the people who decided which countries emerged after the Federation broke up. Ethnic tensions played their role, but events were triggered by the exhaustion of the subsidies and protection the regions had received from Moscow. Some of them already had their borders and leaders in place, others did not. New borders and authorities were contested, and violence followed. But it could not be worse than what the Federation had unleashed with its nuclear threats, global blackmail and transcontinental famine.

The new states were diverse – some democratic, others authoritarian. Their bigger neighbors were their main partners in trade and security. New tensions and dilemmas emerged. Would China shift its focus from Taiwan to Siberia? Would Eastern Prussia be viable as an independent state or would it merge with one of its neighbors? How would the poor, overpopulated republics of the Caucasus sustain themselves? And how would the reparations to Ukraine be divided?

The Federation's dismemberment threw up an enormous number of legal, strategic and economic questions. Settling borders, rebuilding trade and negotiating security arrangements took decades. Dealing with the legacy of the heinous war and creating new statehoods did not happen immediately. But the peoples of the former Federation learned how to make their own way. History continued, and the international community took note of the changes.

A peace conference was held, modeled after the Paris Peace Conference of 1918–19. A new Eurasian Treaty completed the work begun at Versailles a century earlier. From Ukraine to Mongolia, the neighbors of the new countries mediated