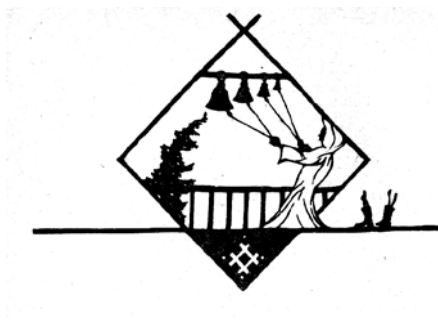


M – Messianism

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Hardly anyone will disagree that Russia has never been an exclusively pragmatic power, driven only by practical interests. The feeling of a certain mission and a lofty goal has always been Russia's inherent quality.

But historically and in the strict sense of the word the Russian state is not messianic. It has not formulated anything that might look like a political doctrine of divine predestination, which would excuse expansionism with God's providence (in contrast to the American Manifest Destiny). The Russian elite has never had the intention of employing political means to bring doomsday and second coming closer for the sake of the triumph of Truth, something which the American right-wing evangelists, who from time to time gain influence on foreign policy, are inclined to do. Unlike British colonialists, Russia has never been fascinated by a civilizational role, sometimes described as the white man's burden. Nor has it emanated any non-religious philosophical ideals for the world to absorb, something France did in modern times, and later the United States.

The Soviet period of Russian history was probably most messianic of all. Moscow then assumed the role of the propagandist and advocate of a holistic philosophical and political-economic doctrine on the global scale.

However, after decades of fulfilling this mission, its enthusiasm began to wane both in the elite and society. On the eve of the Soviet Union's demise an incredibly strong social and elitist demand for pragmatism emerged.

Whatever adjectives may be used today to describe the foreign policy of Boris Yeltsin and Andrei Kozyrev—naive or idealistic—it rested upon a precisely pragmatic groundwork. Any steps to get rid of the excessive and ideologically motivated foreign policy burden were interpreted as pragmatism, and not as idealism (in fact, this approach continued Gorbachev's "new thinking," which in practice was tantamount to dumping the burden of responsibility for the "Second World" that had overstrained the Soviet Union confronted with an internal crisis.)

In the longer term, pragmatism began to be considered not so much as a reduction of foreign policy interests as their expansion, but this time for the sake of applied interests, and not the achievement of abstract ideals. Although the concrete embodiment of pragmatic principles in Russia's foreign policy has changed dramatically over the past quarter of a century, firm commitment to pragmatism after the experience of Soviet messianism still remains.

Russia is not a messianic power by and large: it is not ready to kill others or sacrifice the lives of its own people in the name of abstract ideals and doctrines. Russia's understanding of its mission is different.

Russia is a state that was pieced together of many heterogeneous elements in a vast space. Its climates and natural conditions vary from region to region. It has been subjected to disastrous invasions. This state has always seen its mission in the ability *to be*, and to be not savage or barbarian. One interpretation of the mission is to become a developed part of the world, that is, of the West, and in this capacity to be admitted into some general system of political and social relations. Another interpretation of the mission boils down to being without (not to be confused with *against*) the West. This interpretation has another obligatory component—the idea that there are powerful forces inside and outside that constantly prevent Russia from fulfilling its duty and never miss an opportunity to undermine its capabilities.

Territorial expansion, participation in world affairs and a say in deciding the world's destiny—all are clear evidence of the ability to be and to be successful. The Russian elite, especially after Peter the Great, considered such

a program of action natural for the Russian state. And for such a tradition, dropping out from the group of frontrunners is a historical catastrophe; a place there must be retained at any cost and by all means, be it peace or war. It is no accident that countering the risk of being rolled back into the second, or even third echelon of international politics, was proclaimed as the focal point of Vladimir Putin's presidency in his fundamental article "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium," published the day before he became acting head of state after Boris Yeltsin's early resignation.

How much the feeling of sovereignty has spread to the whole nation still remains to be seen. Apparently, the public attitude to this issue can oscillate widely. But there have always been those who advocated concentrating on the domestic situation, reducing the burden of involvement in world affairs, or even turning the back on them altogether. Great Russian authors provided many bright examples of such thoughts. Even in his *Sevastopol Sketches* Leo Tolstoy drew attention to how alien to the Russian peasants the war was; and later he was very sarcastic in describing geopolitical and military campaigns (*The Tale of Ivan the Fool and His Two Brothers ...*) and even slammed war as a "harmful institution," putting it on a par with slavery and prostitution (in the essay *What Then Must We Do?*). Or take Alexander Solzhenitsyn's manifesto *Rebuilding Russia*: "To a large extent the awakening Russian national identity remains unable to rid itself of sovereign space mentality, of imperial dope. (...) This is the most harmful distortion of our consciousness: 'But we are a large country, and they always turn an attentive ear to us.' (...) Japan managed to reconcile itself with this, to abandon both the international mission and lucrative political adventures to instantly burst into blossom. Now we have to make a stark choice: between the Empire, which destroys primarily ourselves, and the spiritual and bodily salvation of our own people."

The debate about the way in which Russia should exist will continue. It is a long tradition. But the powerful desire to exist in spite of endless obstacles (to be oneself, and not a space recognized as barbaric) has become Russia's mission. Over the centuries of serving this mission the country has also acquired a certain messianic feature. It is not that Russia wants to remake the world in accordance with any particular template. It is the belief that the world is better with Russia than without it.