

Russian Strategic Culture in Retrospect

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Abstract

The article analyzes the transformation of Russian strategic culture over the past 100 years. The authors believe that, during this period, Russia veered away from the strategic goal-setting practices that its elite had

implemented previously. Since the end of the 18th century, Russia was an integral part of the Concert of Europe, and its ruling circles absorbed the European ideas of peace, language of diplomacy, and approaches to military planning. The 1917 revolution brought to power people who had a fundamentally different political experience and pursued other goals in the international arena. Soviet power essentially “reinvented” the strategic culture of the Russian state, adopting (but on a completely different basis) some *Realpolitik* aspects of foreign policy thinking. The Second World War became the central event that imbued Soviet strategic culture with a great-power attitude. The crisis of Soviet ideology in the second half of the 20th century seriously affected the strategic thinking of the elites, provoking its decline. The article concludes that some key categories of Soviet strategic culture still affect the strategic culture of modern Russian elites.

Keywords: strategic culture, empire, Soviet Union, World War II, Cold War.

For most of the 20th century, strategy was the unspoken intellectual domain of the military. Military scientists only grudgingly admitted strangers into the realm of their exclusively professional interests. When formal restrictions vanished along with the Iron Curtain, Russian international relations experts and political scientists by inertia continued to treat this subject with prejudice. However, international instability and a wide range of mounting military threats eventually broke the mold.

Today, the interest of political science in military matters is stronger than ever before. Internationally, there are a great many academic definitions of strategy. Some can be lengthy, dry, and normative; others, on the contrary, are laconic, figurative, and aphoristic (Krivopalov, 2023). But regardless of how many views on the essence, goals, and objectives of strategy compete with each other, or how many witty definitions it receives, strategy’s place will always be alongside politics (Finney, 2020). It begins and ends where politics seeks to achieve goals by military means, and in this sense, it serves as a universal translator converting often abstract foreign policy imperatives into the language of practical military solutions. At the same time, strategy is not so much about war

as about the art of using state power properly in order to gain the desired foreign policy position. Therefore, strategy and war relate to each other in much the same way foreign policy and diplomacy do. But although very close in meaning, these phenomena are not completely identical.

Strategic culture is not synonymous with strategy. It is the context in which strategy's main elements—ideas about peace, security, foreign policy, armed force, war, and alliances—are formulated. Strategic culture is embodied in political decisions that serve as a yardstick with which to measure the talent of those few people who lead their states in the international arena. In the modern era, strategic culture emerged and matured within the triad of the supreme executive, the military, and the foreign service.

As is commonly believed, the term 'strategic culture' was first proposed by a RAND Corporation employee, Professor Jack Snyder, in 1977 (Snyder, 1977) and remains quite usable and popular up to this day (Alekseeva, 2012; Belozarov, 2022; Gray, 2007; Istomin, 2018; Katzenstein, 1996; Kokoshin, 2003; Lieven, 2002; Tsymbursky, 2007), but it obviously lacks a clear and substantive definition in Russian academic science. Strategy is unfathomable out of context. It is honed through systematic reflections on military-political history (Svechin, 1927, p. 23). Without these points of reference, study usually becomes empty theorization. At the same time, the epic manifestations of strategic culture often encourage researchers to view it as a concentrated expression of historical experience dating back to the origins of statehood (Bordachev, 2022). It should be borne in mind that the emphasis on historicism can mislead a researcher of strategic culture: not every historical period is really important for understanding a modern state. As a British researcher once observed, "obsessive digging for deep roots is an activity more suited to landscape gardeners than historians" (Henshall, 2013, p. 62).

To highlight some unique features of Russian strategic culture, well-thought-out criteria are needed for distinguishing its stages and comparing its basic categories. The authors of this article have no intention of tackling such an ambitious task. Our hypothesis—stated, more than substantiated in detail—is that Russian strategic culture has

undergone a tremendously deep transformation over the past 100 years, and the trends that emerged in it during this period continue to affect the nature of foreign policy decisions to this day. This seems to provide grounds for designating the 20th century as a separate research area.

Since the format of this article does not permit studying the genesis of Russian strategic culture in its entirety, the authors focus on just one, but probably key, aspect—a change in the views of the top political elites, primarily state leaders. Although this approach is open to criticism, it seems justified due to the invariably centralized and closed nature of foreign policy and strategic planning in the Soviet Union and now Russia.

POLITICS IN LIEU OF STRATEGY

In the 19th century, Russia was a systemic European player, and its strategic culture was in tune with pan-European standards (Degoev, 2004, p. 111). But the “short 20th century” fundamentally changed the state of affairs. The triumph of messianic ideologies put Russia and the West on the opposite sides of historical barricades for a long time. This watershed affected basic questions of society and the state, and was no longer limited, as before, to the nuances of competition methods. The Bolsheviks, who came to power in 1917, advocated very specific ideological and value principles. Their connection with the previous cultural tradition was limited and, in terms of the continuity of military-political elites, virtually nonexistent. Their selected foreign policy contrasted starkly with all previous practices. This contrast was expressed in their assessment of the military-political situation and their selection of goals. The dogmatism of messianic ideology, which offered a holistic picture of the world, created strong distorting effects. The gap in the worldview between Joseph Stalin and Winston Churchill was substantially greater than between Emperor Nicholas I and Lord Palmerston just a century earlier.

Historiography has long overcome the obviously mechanistic view of Soviet foreign policy as either world-revolutionary-ideological or governed by *Realpolitik* (Steiner, 2005, pp. 131-175). In fact, both approaches resulted from a specific view of the world as an arena of uncompromising and existential confrontation between two systems. This generated the belief that long-term coexistence with the future adversary was impossible, and

trust-building cooperation, even more so. The architecture of international institutions, created after World War I, was initially viewed by the Bolsheviks as a Potemkin village built to fool the masses. Participation in the institutions was considered not only senseless but also harmful, as it legitimized the global socio-political order being imposed by the capitalist West. The only natural relations with the West were either direct confrontation on the battlefield, or indirect confrontation through support of revolution in the West and cultivation of “inter-imperialist contradictions” (Ulam, 1968, pp. 12-30). According to Nathan Leites, this position, adopted by the subsequent generations of Soviet leaders, became their “operational code” (Leites, 1953, pp. 28, 429-441).

Naturally, in its pure form, this approach was never applied to the objective realities of international life. In fact, the first years after the revolution exposed the amazing tactical resourcefulness of Soviet foreign policy. Vladimir Lenin’s iron-clad dogmatism, if necessary, easily showed practical flexibility. The main motivation for the Bolsheviks’ pragmatism towards the West was their belief that a capitalist would always make a deal if promised an attractive profit. The entire complex assortment of European diplomatic goals and tasks was reduced to just one—pursuit of gain, literally and figuratively. As a result, the Bolsheviks believed that they could afford compromises because the “objective laws” of history would, one way or another, bring them victory in the long term.

There were practically no representatives of the old elite among the Bolshevik leaders, and the methods they used to retain power ultimately implied complete elimination of the defeated dominant class. The Russian Revolution’s break with former practices of rule had no analogues in modern history, at least in European civilization. Almost all career diplomats and military officers were barred from the new elite, and if they were engaged in solving certain problems, they had to act within strict limits that did not grant them a say in political decision-making. By the end of the 1930s, the few persons in the top echelons of power whose views did not match the dominant strategic outlook had been physically exterminated or forced into silence.

Mikhail Gelter, commenting on the common habit of comparing Lenin the tactician (successful) with Lenin the strategist (deadlocked),

noted that “opposing tactics and strategy is alien to Lenin’s consciousness”: for him, tactics are “the practical projection of key ideas and requirements onto the plane of their implementation outlined by current policy” (Gefter, 2017, p. 122). The wider the limits of the politically possible, the more contradictory concrete steps towards the main goal may look. Lenin’s strategy was continuous improvisation that enabled him to seize the historical moment, but it had nothing to do with short-lived pursuits. Each of the numerous turns in Soviet politics on the international stage was filled with inner meaning. The ability to understand the essence of these changes was what made Georgy Chicherin a talented operator of Lenin’s foreign policy.

Such a replacement of strategy with politics was possible only during a great historical “tide.” The end of the era of great upheaval—in communist jargon, “the stabilization of capitalism”—created a fundamentally new situation. Upon exiting the period of awaiting the world revolution, Bolshevik strategic culture had only one perspective—“no peace, no war,” i.e. a sense of the existing world order’s fragility and a constant readiness for a new phase of struggle.

STALIN: “MANEUVERING THE RESERVES”

As a new Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin had to comprehend this situation and turn “guerrilla” tactics in the international arena into something purposeful, sustainable, and methodical. Lenin’s narrative about the outside world was edited, streamlined, and canonized. What had previously been seen as an obvious reality determining a set of concrete responses—class struggle inside and outside capitalist countries, the collapse of empires, and foreboding of the world revolution—was rethought and theorized. Stalin approached foreign policy as a person with a basic religious education, making it part of a universal catechism and assuming the right to interpret the core ideological postulate of Soviet statehood—the possibility and inevitability of building communism—for many decades to come (Yurchak, 2014, pp. 50-52).

Lenin’s approach to foreign policy was similar to how a commander acts in the midst of an ongoing battle. According to Carl von Clausewitz, whom the Bolshevik leader always held in high esteem,

willpower, energy, and intuition are crucial, “the courage and talent of the commander and army plays into the realm of probability and chance” (Clausewitz, 1998, p. 58). But Stalin was different. He was more like a strategist observing the battlefield before a decisive battle. The initial disposition is clear to him; the enemy is obvious, it is unambiguously named, and its complete destruction is the only acceptable outcome of the battle. But everything else is hidden by the fog of war. But Stalin was reluctant to surrender to chance and did not want to take risks: the crucial bet had to be a winning one.

Stalin understood strategy as “the determination of the direction of the main blow of the proletariat at a given stage of the revolution, the elaboration of a corresponding plan for the disposition of the revolutionary forces (main and secondary reserves), and the fight to carry out this plan throughout the given stage of the revolution.” Of crucial importance was the second element—forces and reserves (considered identical) as well as a plan for their use. Stalin considered the plan’s effective implementation to be the essence of strategic leadership. Apart from “direct” reserves (the total power of the state, including its support by part of the people in potentially hostile countries), he also identified “indirect” reserves, such as “contradictions, conflicts and wars (the imperialist war, for instance) among the bourgeois states hostile to the proletarian state, which can be utilized by the proletariat in its offensive or in maneuvering in the event of a forced retreat” (Stalin, 1947, pp. 150-154).

The secret of successful strategic leadership, according to Stalin, is “concentration of the main forces of the revolution at the enemy’s most vulnerable spot at the decisive moment.” This view almost literally reproduced the basic principle of warfare formulated by Antoine-Henri Jomini, whose works were regularly reprinted under Stalin. The Soviet leader’s strategic preferences are clearly illustrated by the selection of books on military theory in his personal library. While the works of Heinrich Leer, a consistent follower of Jomini’s ideas, bear numerous notes made by Stalin, von Clausewitz’s book “On War” was practically untouched (Roberts, 2022, pp. 155-156). The dialectics of war described by the German thinker, who would be declared “outdated” in the USSR

after 1945, undoubtedly attracted Stalin less than the mathematically precise schemes for using force to guarantee victory on the battlefield proposed by the French general in Russian service. As for Jomini, maneuvering was the most important element of strategy for Stalin.

“Maneuvering the reserves” was carried out on the widest of fronts, with diplomacy considered only one of its tools. The difference between diplomacy (a means of resolving contradictions without the use of force) and strategy (the art of using force to achieve political results) had practically disappeared. “The ‘political leader’ and the ‘combat staff’ are one and the same for Stalin,” says Oleg Ken (Ken, 2004, p. 53). Soviet diplomats were mastering a special negotiation style: they outlined their position only in the most general terms, after which the initiative was passed over to the partners who were given the opportunity to prove the seriousness of their intentions by clearly stating their own obligations. Such “signaling” (Fitzpatrick, 2008, p. 36) allowed them to constantly maneuver, hide their own goals, avoid losing face from the rejection of their proposals, while, most importantly, always being able to make a choice.

Stalin raised Lenin’s “agility” in political affairs to a new level, making it a distinctive feature of his management style. Isaiah Berlin, who visited Moscow in 1945, talked about the specific nature of the “fluctuations in the general line” of the Bolsheviks. According to him, Stalin, in an attempt to avoid the natural fate of all revolutionary regimes since the French Revolution, invented “artificial dialectics”—a special way of governing by steering the middle course between the dialectical opposites of apathy and fanaticism. As soon as such a middle course is chartered, all that remains is conducting the policy so as to use force very carefully, just in time, and to the right extent, in order to move the political and public pendulum to the position necessary at a given moment (Berlin, 2001, p. 377). Historians later came to the same conclusions. Analyzing Stalin’s political language, Mikhail Vayskopf stated: “[Stalin’s] theoretical harshness, appealing to the basic sacred absolute...is directly proportional to the uncontrollable fluidity of his protean manifestations; extreme static matches extreme dynamic” (Vayskopf, 2001, p. 72).

This approach directly affected the Soviet Union's foreign policy in the interwar years. Its distinctive feature was the continuous preparation of fallback scenarios and the diversification of options: "Stalin was always prone to let matters drift, preferring to delay decision whilst events took their course and until the situation had clarified sufficiently to allow for a definitive judgement. This frequently left a vacuum which others could fill. It sometimes meant that standing debates were left unresolved, that contradictory policies could be pursued simultaneously and that decisions taken below could suddenly be reversed by unexpected intervention from above" (Haslam, 1983, p. 20).

This created two problems. The first one was encountered by its direct operators—diplomats. The principal duty of Maxim Litvinov, as People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, was to correctly interpret signals from above, and to adapt information coming from the outside to the peculiar worldview of the leader and his inner circle, which was not always possible (Vershinin, 2022). The second problem arose in dialogue with foreign partners, who perceived Soviet flexibility, which by no means annulled the basic ideological tenets of Moscow's foreign policy doctrine, as evidencing an unprincipled and cynical approach.

Stalinist strategic thinking determined Moscow's commitment to a special version of *Realpolitik*, in which a balance of power was pursued until the time came "to throw the decisive weight, the weight that can tip the scales, onto them" (Stalin, 1952, pp. 11-14). Stalin perceived the very idea of collective security as a purely utilitarian tool for implementing his own strategy of preparing for war, and he condemned as hypocrisy foreign partners' attempts to encourage Moscow to play by Western rules. What made the historical moment so peculiar, however, is that the Soviet strategic approach turned out to be objectively more consonant with the trends in European politics, which became fully manifest in 1933 (Jackson, 2015, pp. 241-242). Attempts by the "status quo powers" to close their eyes to this fact were at the core of the Soviet-Western misunderstanding, which reached its climax in 1938-1939.

Henry Kissinger's reference to Stalin as "the Richelieu of his period" (Kissinger, 1997, p. 287) is only partly justified. Before the start of

World War II, the Soviet leader probably did not think in terms of the Concert, a model of great-power interaction originating with the 17th-century chief minister of France. In Stalin's apocalyptic view of the world, there simply was no place for long-term and steady interaction between equal states, which were inevitably divided by existential class and inter-imperialist contradictions. This view began to change only as the USSR became a key member of the anti-Hitler coalition.

Over a period of four years, the Soviet leader had to go from being the garrison commander of a besieged fortress, to being the leader of a great power, who pursued its interests through dialogue with his counterparts. It was in dialogue with Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill that Stalin acquired a taste for collective solutions to global problems (Sogrin, 2013, pp. 81-84). The Americans won him over by their "business-like manners." As a result, Moscow supported Washington's key proposals regarding the post-war architecture of international relations, including the idea of a renovated supranational organization. Close interaction with the anti-Hitler coalition allies imbued Soviet strategic culture with a great-power attitude.

In 1945, Stalin became convinced that the best model of post-war order was a world "directory" (Obitchkina, 2019, p. 69), presented by Roosevelt as a "Four Policemen" plan. The ideological dimension of strategic culture did not disappear, but it had become part of the superpower's newfound sense of self. From that moment on, the USSR's borders and sphere of geopolitical influence defined not only the territory of the grandiose experiment to build socialism, but also a wide strategic foreground, the main defensive line of the "socialist homeland."

At the same time, Stalin accepted the American approach to a renewed system of international relations, partly because he considered its universalist nature secondary to its value as a mechanism for balancing power. Just like before the war, he viewed the value framework of global institutions as an element of the capitalist self-presentation that could be ignored, if only because capitalism had finally outlived itself. Isaiah Berlin, in 1945, expressed a thought that was paradoxical for a Western layman: the Russians had finally come to firmly believe that they truly knew in which direction the world was

moving and understood the motives for their former allies' actions better than the latter themselves did (Berlin, 2004, pp. 91-92).

TEST OF STRATEGIC IMPOTENCE

Two motifs lay behind the external manifestations of Stalinist strategic culture in 1945-1953. The first was an indomitable belief in the "objective laws of history," according to which the future of humankind had to be determined by the international communist movement. The second motif was more mundane. Despite rapidly deteriorating relations with the United States, the Soviet leader still had a free hand in international affairs. Needless to say, the United States had a huge logistical and partly military advantage throughout the entire Cold War. But there were important nuances in this picture of supposedly undeniable American superiority. Before the outbreak of the Korean War, American nuclear weapons essentially did not serve the role of strategic deterrent (Borowski, 1982). The Joint Chiefs of Staff had no shortage of blueprints, though. The best known in Russian literature is the notorious Operation Dropshot (Zolotarev, 2000, p. 393). However, for the most part, these proposals did not become military plans.

The blueprints did not contain accurate lists of reconnoitered targets, planned penetration routes to them, or coordinated flight missions for the hundreds of aircraft dispersed over dozens of airfields on several continents. The Strategic Air Command's actual plans on the eve of the Korean War, such as Emergency War Plan 1-49, were not so sinister (Kaplan, 1983, p. 44). It took years for nuclear weapons to go all the way from an engineering and laboratory experiment to a functional strategic deterrent. In 1950, the American Strategic Air Command was still in its initial formative period (Kozak, 2009, pp. 285-286, 308-309), and nuclear weapons were just making their way into Air Force flight and tactical training practices.

In response to a question from *Sunday Times* correspondent Alexander Werth, in September 1946, Stalin famously said: "I do not believe the atomic bomb to be as serious a force as certain politicians are inclined to think. Atomic bombs are intended for intimidating the weak-nerved, but they cannot decide the outcome of war, since atomic

bombs are by no means sufficient for this purpose” (Stalin, 2006, p. 389). This was not sheer bravado. With strong nerves one could, in fact, fight for the Soviet version of the future. In general, assertive foreign policy was not Stalin’s style: the leader always acted more carefully on the international stage than at home (Khlevnyuk, 2015, pp. 131-132). However, after victory in 1945, he saw a chance to raise the stakes in the great international game, a gambit that culminated in the Korean War—a peripheral conflict, exhausting for America, that ended in a draw.

Stalin left to his successors a key resource for winning the global confrontation—a stronger state, the gathering of which he considered the only achievement of the Russian tsars (Banac, 2003, p. 65). But his even more important legacy was the ideological imperative for the Soviet Union’s positioning in the world. Alexei Yurchak, analyzing the official political language that had been established with Stalin’s direct involvement in the 1930s-1940s, concluded that it could be changed only under the pen of a “senior editor” (such as Stalin), “a figure standing outside the ideological discourse and having a unique and indisputable knowledge of the canon of Marxist-Leninist truth” (Yurchak, 2014, p. 108). With such a figure gone, the system was doomed to automatically reproduce old narratives in the form of “authoritative discourse,” unable to adapt to new conditions.

It led away from the fatalistic view of international relations towards peaceful coexistence and arms reduction. However, Khrushchev had only the Stalinist “authoritative discourse” at hand to describe the desired new reality. Even during the period of de-Stalinization, when repressions were condemned, the leader’s foreign policy was not criticized. Khrushchev ignored the impossibility of simultaneously improving relations with the West and strengthening the Soviet Union’s global power. He had no strategic priorities, nor did he understand the fundamental inconsistency and incongruity of his stated goals. Meanwhile, the Americans corrected the mistakes they had made during the Korean War, with dire consequences for the USSR. Strategic nuclear deterrence was no longer a sham. The American nuclear arsenal had grown at least tenfold. The threat to turn the European part of Russia into a pile of “smoking radioactive ruins at the end of two hours”

could no longer be ignored (Rosenberg, 1981, pp. 3-38). Where Stalin had radiated detached confidence, Khrushchev had to bluff vigorously. His foreign policy returned to Leninist improvisations and began to replace strategy. But what worked when international relations were in the doldrums was doomed to failure during systemic confrontation.

While an ideological view of the world remained a matter of faith for Khrushchev, his successors were stuck with an increasingly obsolete “authoritative discourse” —it did not correlate with the objective global developments. Ideology finally turned into a form without content. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the military-strategic invincibility of the USSR was finally effectively guaranteed, despondency and apathy rapidly spread in the Soviet political elite. Leonid Brezhnev and his inner circle focused on threats and challenges that Stalin, Molotov, and Khrushchev would likely have just ignored. Losing guidelines for strategic planning, the Soviet military-political leadership prioritized just one task, stemming from the personal experience of its members and so obvious that it raised no doubts—preventing the “1941 scenario.”

Brezhnev was generally known for his strategic pragmatism, but behind it was mechanistic logic (Aleksandrov-Agentov, 1994, p. 249). Soviet strategic thinking was deeply dualistic. In critical situations, it was weighed down by a conflict between military-technical strength and strategic expediency. At the peak of the nuclear missile standoff, when mutual vulnerability became the basis of strategic stability, the USSR rejected vulnerability to nuclear attack as a political and strategic premise (Gray, 2007, p. 213). Mutually-assured destruction was considered a passive form of opposition, and passivity was rejected by Soviet strategic culture as a reproachful reminder of June 1941. The “frightened generation” was psychologically unable to see vulnerability as a source of strategic stability (Hines, 1995, pp. 30, 42).

The balance of military potential did not seem static to the Soviet leadership. At any given moment, one side must be either overtaking the other, or planning to overtake it. Regardless of its military-technical successes, the Soviet Union was convinced that the achieved strategic balance was unstable. The USSR did not believe in equilibrium, since only assured superiority (for Moscow, practically unattainable

economically and technologically) could be stable (Hines, 1995, pp. 11-12, 24). Mikhail Smirnyukov, a long-term chief administrator of the Soviet Council of Ministers, recalls how international affairs were discussed at the Politburo under Brezhnev: “[Andrei Gromyko] pronounced any textbook maxim with the air of an oracle: If we do this, then this and that will happen, but if we do not, it will not happen. They listened to him open-mouthed, especially when he spoke about the American threat and our lagging behind in defense. After that, Ustinov always began to explain how many and what types of weapons he needed to catch up and outmatch the overseas rascals” (Zhirnov, 2011).

A meeting in Yalta in July 1969 was one of the most important episodes in the genesis of Brezhnev’s strategic course. It began as a scientific and technical dispute over which of two promising missile systems to select for mass production. The participants, who represented the military, industrial, scientific, and government circles, had to choose between proposals made by the Mikhail Yangel and Vladimir Chelomey design bureaus. Yangel’s silo-based and effectively protected system was a retaliatory strike weapon. Chelomey, in contrast, offered a first strike weapon (Hines, 1995, p. 216). No one, including Brezhnev, was prepared to see the scientific and technical discussion develop into a strategic one. So, the USSR was unable to decide what its nuclear strategy should be based on: preventive or retaliatory strike capability. As a result, both systems were put into mass production at the same time. The striving for unconditional security turned into an intrusive political imperative, triggering the degradation of strategic planning, which lost its sense of systemic complexity.

The loss of strategic initiative in the Cold War was as dangerous as in a hot war. Stripped of the ideological armor of civil religion, the Soviet version of *Realpolitik* was losing ground. The firmer the guarantees of strategic invincibility, the stronger were the doubts about the situation’s stability. Destructive trends increased with time. Soviet reactions to the U.S. Strategic Defense Initiative, and particularly to the deployment of American medium-range ballistic missiles in Western Europe, were extremely nervous. The SDI put so much psychological pressure on the Soviet leadership that Mikhail Gorbachev, who had come to power by

that time, sought to condition arms cuts on the program's termination. The quality of Gorbachev's decisions was hardly worse than that of the Brezhnev generation, but this was no longer enough amid an ongoing acute internal crisis. Gorbachev was looking for ways to reduce the military-strategic pressure that was deforming the economy, but to no avail. The chosen path, of unilateral concessions, again showed that the Soviet experiment was historically doomed.

ELEMENTS OF MODERN RUSSIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

The 1991 fracture almost ended the history of Russian strategic culture, as its bearer had disappeared. Gleb Pavlovsky noted quite accurately that, "when the Russian Federation emerged, there reigned an ideal vacuum of new ideas" (Pavlovsky, 2019, p. 16). The collapse of the Soviet-era "framework" of political life, in which the external agenda had prevailed, opened up broad opportunities for rethinking the country's place in the world. The expression "young Russia" was not a euphemism: one-seventh of the world's land turned into a construction site for building new statehood, the parameters of which remained open for some time.

Boris Yeltsin's role in selecting the new state's design must, obviously, be studied in detail in the future. But some important things are already visible. First of all, the first president should be credited for "reinventing" the model of Russia's international positioning: as a great power, now with the prefix "democratic" (Trenin, 2006, p. 70). As far as international relations were concerned, this meant no more than a break with communist ideology, which was seen as a key factor in the collapse of the USSR. Yeltsin likely had no idea of transforming Russia into a "second league" player. The former leader of the democratic opposition, who viewed it more as an instrument for attaining power than as a collection of potential thought-leaders, very quickly came to feel like the new master of the country, friendly with the U.S. president and German chancellor, and managing world affairs even in the midst of the 1993 constitutional crisis that threatened him with the loss of power (Yeltsin, 2008, p. 17).

The paradox of the post-1991 period is that the dismantling of the ideological framework of Soviet statehood and the rejection of

“authoritative discourse” unexpectedly helped to eliminate the vices that had haunted the strategic thinking of the late Soviet elite. Most importantly, gone were the self-doubt and constant uncertainty about basic dogma, which had eroded the Soviet leaders’ will. The end of the Communist Party’s monopoly on power, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself, were perceived by the Russian leadership as a voluntary historical step taken in the interest of all humankind. Moscow believed that this alone secured it a place among the great powers. Russia had not only returned to the “highway of civilization,” but was at its forefront. Although Yeltsin’s foreign policy behavior was quite contradictory in the early 1990s, he was confident that history was on his side.

At the same time, the Kremlin’s great-power attitude remained unchanged. In the first edition of “The President’s Notes” published in 1994, Yeltsin frankly wrote: “Yeltsin’s Russia took the Soviets’ place in world politics, having inherited the entire dramatic history of the USSR, starting from 1917, not to mention the legacy of the Russian Empire, which we also feel very clearly” (Yeltsin, 2008, p. 161). This attitude was obviously at odds with the Foreign Ministry’s goal of making Russia a “second Canada” (Kokh and Aven, 2011). As Alexei Pushkov, who was in the thick of things at the Foreign Ministry at that time, recalls, Andrei Kozyrev, appointed as foreign minister in 1990, was tasked less with a political mission, and more with a PR campaign to “garner maximum support for Yeltsin in the West” (Pushkov, 2018, p. 71). But this campaign quickly lost steam, leaving Russian diplomacy unsure of what to do next.

The Russian leadership inherited from the Soviet elite, of which it had been a part, a traditional view of national security based on the spheres of influence and balance of power (Götz and Staun, 2022, pp. 482-497). But it probably believed that the old “imperial” policy would simply become irrelevant, and Moscow would solve all security issues in dialogue with new partners on the basis of a set of common values, provided that they recognized Russia’s decisive contribution to overcoming bloc confrontation. The question of how realistic this calculus was requires a separate analysis, but it is worth noting that there were probably no alternatives. The foreign policy discourse of

the Russian liberal intelligentsia, which dominated public opinion in the first half of the 1990s, was so emasculated in terms of basic strategic planning that it could hardly serve as a guide to action. If Yeltsin ever took it seriously, he became increasingly skeptical of the Western partners after 1992 (Tsygankov, 2008, pp. 86-87).

As modern Ukraine has demonstrated, catastrophe often follows when a country overestimates its own importance in world affairs and tries to dictate its own agenda to stronger players. And yet the Russian elite's worldview, however bizarre it might have seemed to outsiders, became a factor in international politics. As Anatoly Adamishin, who worked as Andrei Kozyrev's deputy in the early 1990s, emphasizes, "even in a weakened state, Russia could claim to be more than just a junior partner of the United States" (Adamishin, 2016, p. 230). Having cast off the late-Soviet inferiority complex, Moscow sought membership in the club of world leaders, fully confident that it had the right to be there. Its great-power ambitions could be accepted or flatly rejected, but not ignored. In the latter case, the Russian leadership would sooner or later realize that the very option of dialogue with the West was futile, which made it reassess the dismantling of the USSR and socialist camp.

In this sense, the description of the Soviet Union's collapse as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe" signified an important shift in strategic thinking. As the opportunities for strengthening Russia's international position via dialogue with the West waned, 1991 was increasingly regarded negatively. An enduring dominant symbol, it now dictated different—revisionist—goals. The incongruence of U.S. and allied policies with Russian expectations was interpreted as a sign of the West's deviousness and hypocrisy, although this was hardly justified from the Western point of view.

The West had accepted the concept of spheres of influence, considered a dangerous anachronism as early as the 1920s, only because of the triumphal Soviet victory in World War II, and had scrapped the concept at the first opportunity. The model of global development based on common values, norms, and institutions logically implied the gradual overcoming of the conflictual nature of international relations, and the abolition of strategic planning as a tool to regulate them. Russia's

continued adherence to the traditional concept of security, which Moscow viewed as structuring the entire architecture of international institutions, was seen in the West as nothing more than a relic and (later) as a manifestation of political cynicism that destroyed the very possibility of trust-based dialogue (Sushentsov, 2020; Trenin, 2020). Just like on the eve of World War II, the growing mutual suspicions of hypocrisy and cynicism brought Russian-Western relations to a standstill.

* * *

In 1946, when bidding his final farewell to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Kuznetsky Bridge, former People's Commissar Litvinov, who openly resented Stalin and no longer cared much about his own future, scandalously told U.S. journalist Richard C. Hottelet that the Soviet leadership preached an "obsolete security concept" based on the imperative of expanding its territorial control, which in the future could lead to a direct clash with the United States and its allies (Zubok, 2011, p. 55). Today, both in Russia and in the West, one can hear similar statements, accompanied by the constantly repeated mantra about Russia's internal weakness as the source of its "aggressiveness" (Baunov, 2020; German, 2020). However, both Litvinov (primarily when he was a people's commissar in the interwar years) and contemporary observers overlook the fact that Russian strategic culture, fostered in the 20th century, tends to absorb as much as possible the "paradoxical logic" of strategy (Luttwak, 2012, pp. 15-16).

This orientation has a number of drawbacks that are mainly felt during periods of sustainable peaceful development. However, it proves quite effective at moments of decisive conflict. Statesmen guided by this logic can make mistakes, but typically gain an advantage over those who try as long as possible to "do business as usual," averting their eyes from the ongoing global changes and clinging to comfortable "normality." Since humanity is obviously not going to live in peace with itself in the foreseeable future, war, as Alexis de Tocqueville noted, will remain "a necessary corrective to certain inveterate diseases" (Tocqueville, 1992, p. 469) of modern society, and strategy will continue to determine the nature of relations between states.

Russian strategic culture does not need a radical overhaul. Rather, the 20th century suggests that the Achilles' heel of Russian strategy has been the desire to simplify it and to define strategic goals on the basis of political ones. Politics is closely linked to strategy, but they speak different languages. Germany owed its greatness in the 19th century to two outstanding statesmen—Otto von Bismarck and Helmuth von Moltke—who had developed an effective model of “division of labor” for the implementation of an ambitious foreign policy. The Russian tradition of centralizing political decisions has repeatedly prevented its absorption, causing severe crises that have sometimes threatened the very existence of the country. Both politicians and experts must consider this.

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