

# Neo-Tsymburskian Cycles in the History of Russian-Western Relations

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## **Abstract**

At the cusp of the 20th and 21st centuries, a Russian philologist, later a political scientist focusing on geopolitical theory, Vadim Tsymbursky, developed a theory positing three 'strategic cycles' in Russian-Western relations beginning from 1726 and lasting to the late 20th century. Tsymbursky's theory and cycles are not configured regarding Russian (or Western) domestic politically-related developments. In this article the idea of Tsymbursky's theory of cycles is applied to Russian-Western relations, taking into account Russian domestic political developments; it defines four completed cycles and the beginning of a fifth one during the return to dominance of the 'security vigilance' culture under Russian President Vladimir Putin. This study attempts to demonstrate a confluence of Western powers' actions in their relations with Russia and its people, on the one hand, and Western influences on the internal Russian political struggle for power, on the other hand, all shaping the relational cycle in Russian-Western relations.

**Keywords:** Tsymbursky, historical cycles, Russia, West, Russian-Western relations, foreign relations, military, geopolitics.

### **TSYMBURSKY'S CYCLES THEORY**

According to Tsymbursky, the cycles in Russian-Western relations have consisted of five “moves” or stages. Move A sees Russia becoming a second-tier or “reserve” ally, the strategic rear for one of two or more European geopolitical contestants or groupings of states. Russia might change sides but remains in a secondary role. Move B results from failures in Russia’s European involvement, leading to an invasion of Russia by Western forces, threatening its sovereignty, even survival. Move B comes in one of two forms: (1) the invasion by a major Western power with hegemony in Europe that seeks to define or terminate Russia’s role in European politics, or (2) two or more sides in the European conflict extend the dispute into Russia, with each trying “to acquire its own allies and agents in (Russian) political and military circles.” Move C begins with Russians overcoming this “crisis” and going on the offensive. Striving to “catch the aggressor in his lair,” Russians cross through Eastern Europe to invade and seize or attempt to seize as a protectorate some territory of the European “Roman or Germanic states.” Russia then uses this in order to influence—“present its own project for”—Europe’s internal development. In Move D, the West consolidates its forces and pushes the Russians back to, or even behind, the Baltic-Black Sea line dividing it from its eastern Other. Russia’s political influence in Europe falls “catastrophically,” and a buffer zone isolates “Asiatic Russia” in the barbarian East where it “rightfully belongs.” The cycle-ending Move E is what Tsymbursky calls the “Eurasian intermedia” or Eurasian interval. Russia turns its energies east and south, the “enormous spaces from the Caspian Sea to the Pacific Ocean, encompassing both the entire classical heartland and Far Eastern Primorye.” It “builds itself in this large expanse outside of the Western world, though finding a certain correlation with this world.” But even in this period of retreat and isolation from the West, Russia continues referencing the West as its standard, even goal and destiny. The attention of Russia’s strategists in this period to the regions of the East and South offers opportunities for exerting indirect strategic pressure on Euro-Atlantic governments and societies. This phase ends when another opportunity arises for Russia to come forward as an ally of one of the Western powers contending for European supremacy, and a new five-

move cycle begins (Tsymbursky, 2016, pp. 73-77). Tsymbursky's three cycles entail the periods of 1726-1906, 1907-1939, and 1939-early 21st century (Tsymbursky, 2016, pp. 77-88). Cycle 1 stretches from the period after the Napoleonic Wars ending in 1906 after the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War. The second cycle extends from 1907 and the intensification of geopolitics that ended in World War I to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939. The third cycle encompassed the 1941-1945 Great Patriotic War through the 20th century's end to post-Soviet Russia.

### **THE DOMESTIC COMPONENT OF RUSSIAN-WESTERN RELATIONS' HISTORICAL-RELATIONAL CYCLES**

Tsymbursky's cycles regard only the strategic relationship between Russia and the West. Bringing in Russia's domestic affairs into the delineation of Russian-Western historical-relational cycles, my cycles naturally configure somewhat differently. In my most recent book, *The Russian Dilemma: Security, Vigilance, and Relations with the West from Ivan III to Putin*, I argued that there are shifts between more traditionalist periods, in which Russian political and strategic culture emphasize political solidarity, struggle against pluralism and dissent, more authoritarian systems of rule, and more experimental periods allowing for pluralism, system liberalization, and Westernization, and that these cycles approximate to a considerable degree but do not replicate the shifts between the cycles and their internal 'moves' or phases in relations with the West proposed by Tsymbursky (Hahn, 2021).

It is important that an examination of the development of Russia in relation to the West can take into account both Russians' complex processing of Western influences on, as well as Russia's processing of Western policies towards the Russian state, people, and culture. With the incorporation of the internal dynamics of relations with the West—including colluders with Western powers and other forms of Western influence inside Russia as well the perception of, and political reaction to these on the part of the leadership—any cycle contending to describe Russia's overall 'relationship' with the West must include these aspects of the relationship. Shifts from one orientation to another also depend

on whether Western actions respect or challenge Russians' sense of honor abroad and how they impact the struggle between competing schools of thought at home (Tsygankov, 2012, pp. 2-4, 264-265). The elite's interpretation of Russia's honor and thus its interests in any given period is a function of foreign actions' impact on Russian domestic cultural developments and political struggles in defining Russian honor, interests, and then policy. Russia's policy produces foreign responses, which in turn again re-shape Russia's honor and interest perceptions and policy, and the cycle begins anew (Tsygankov, 2012, pp. 222-224, 259). Russian elites have a fundamental requirement for the maintenance of Russia's honor abroad and their own at home: security from threats to the homeland emanating from abroad and political destabilization from within. This is not a unique state-society contract. What is unique is that over the centuries the main threat to both Russia's external security and internal stability, in fact, came and so began to be perceived in Russia as emanating from the West. Thus, we should be asking, among other questions, whether the Russian norm of honor might have developed in response to the Western offence of that honor by posing external and internal threats to its national sovereignty and cultural identity.

Russia's honor norm is also a direct function of the historical Western threat to its "ontological security." Mitzen defined ontological security as "security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 344; Steele, 2008). It refers to "the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time—as being rather than constantly changing—in order to realize a sense of agency" (Mitzen, 2006, p. 342). In other words, ontological security for states is the imperative to preserve the integrity of the country's national culture and identity since these form the prism through which the state will define its national interests and when the malleable undermine the state's purposefulness in foreign affairs. Zarakol focused on the desire to protect the integrity but also the continuity of the country's identity, highlighting the consequences of the stigma of not having one's identity affirmed by other states, perhaps being designated an uncivilized, backward, or rogue state for not fully adhering to Western-defined international and domestic norms. The "internalization of a

foreign worldview” could have a negative effect on a state’s ontological security: “the incorporation of the modern worldview created a rupture in the traditionally self-centered worldviews of agrarian empires and forced them to re-articulate their new state identities around the anxiety of ‘demonstrable’ inferiority and the goal of catching up to the West by following its ‘standards’” (Zarakol, 2011, p. 62). Russia’s complex, often catastrophic relations with the West or some Western states brought or heightened, respectively, concerns about not only the country’s military and political security but also its ontological security. As domestic unity, tranquility, and often stability might be ruptured by Westernization with encouragement from elements in the West, so too would the country’s sense of possessing an integral culture and self-identity.

The West has not only influenced Russia but sought to redefine Russia’s culture and identity in its own image, often purely for purposes of self-aggrandizement. When the West or elements within it have grown sufficiently powerful and frustrated with Russia’s efforts to become Western and submit to not just Western values, norms, and institutional practices but its geopolitical ambitions as well, Westerners have meddled and intervened politically and even militarily. Thus, Russia’s relations with its Other have gone through repeating cycles of emulative Westernization, Western intervention, Russian rebuff to the intervention, and Russia’s revival of traditional values, norms and practices with limited survival of elements borrowed from the more advanced, liberal Western cultural strains. Most importantly, this repeating cycle reinforces the Russian security norm of special vigilance against its Western foes, domestic Westernizers, and collusion between them, as it has been precisely one or more of these threats’ actualization that put Russian culture, identity, and sovereignty in danger.

During Westernizing and liberalizing displacements, security vigilance as a dominant cultural value or norm tends to become more recessive. Western ideas are no longer regarded as manifestations of dissent or opposition, since dislocation of some Russian values by European ones is encouraged by the regime and occurs with some regularity. Initially at least, the West welcomes the new policy, obviating the need for nudging, pressuring or intervening into Russia in order

to “civilize” it. The Russian regime’s desire to borrow from the West requires comity in relations with it. Therefore, anti-Western propaganda campaigns, witch hunts for colluders, and foreign policy tensions are unnecessary and inexpedient. But once the West intervenes politically or invades militarily, the security vigilance value is reactivated and returns as a dominant strain in Russia’s political and strategic cultures—a security vigilance norm or culture in and of itself. This strain maintains dominant status along with the return to more traditional domestic governance patterns and more contentious relations with the West until the next round of Westernizing displacement.

My four Russo-Western ‘relational cycles’ are: (I) 1505-1630 from Ivan III’s establishment of the Principality of Moscow, through the Time of Troubles to the establishment and consolidation of the Romanov dynasty in 1613-1630; (II) 1630-1825 from Mikhail I’s restorative recovery (1613-1630) to Nicholas I’s defeat of the Decembrist revolt and movement; (III) 1826-1922 from Nicholas I’s reign to the end of the Russian Civil War, marking the consolidation of Bolshevik rule); and (IV) from 1922 to approximately 2008.<sup>1</sup> With Putin’s third term

<sup>1</sup> A prologue to the first cycle, a pre-cycle, if you will, can be considered to have occurred during the ‘appanage’ period in Russia. In short, in this period, Russia was experiencing its first encounter with its potential constitutive Other, and that encounter was threatening Moscow’s efforts to keep Novgorod and Pskov in the Great Russian and Russian Orthodox folds. However, the period’s event pattern does not quite fit that of the later cycles. Westernization in Russia during these first encounters is not very significant and does not precede the Polish-Lithuanian military intervention into Russian politics. In addition, the Western intervention did not succeed at all in penetrating Russia, no less overturning its system. Fractured into a dozen or so principalities as a result the fall of Kievan Rus and the Mongol yoke but remaining politically and culturally close with various principalities, Novgorod, Moscow, Vladimir-Suzdal, and Tver were vying to become hegemon and restorer of a single Russian kingdom. The westernmost principalities, Novgorod and Pskov, were ethnically, linguistically and culturally Great Russian and Orthodox Christian not western Slavic, Polish, Lithuanian, Swedish, European, or Catholic, and they had long-standing ties to the other Russian principalities going back to Kievan Rus. By the late 14th–early 15th centuries, rising Moscow was becoming Poland-Lithuania’s chief competitor for control over the weaker Russian lands of Pskov, Novgorod, Smolensk, Tver, and Vladimir-Suzdal. In the late 14th century, Polish-Lithuanian King Algirdus backed a campaign in league with declining Russian Tver and Khan Mamai’s Mongol-Tatar Horde against Moscow and Novgorod. The campaign failed, but Algirdus did succeed in paring off some lesser Russian lands including Bryansk, northern Novgorod, and several others. At the same time, Novgorod, indeed Russia, experienced its first organized dissident movement with some roots in the West—the *strigolniki*. Its leaders’ assassination at the behest of establishment loyal clerics in 1375 occurred at the height of this war, waged albeit from both east and west against Russians.

(2012-2018) or the reincorporation of Crimea in 2014, a new cycle, Cycle V, in Russo-Western relations began.

I delineate four phases (moves) in each of the first four cycles in the history of Russian-Western relations. Phase 1 begins with the establishment or re-establishment of the traditional or a neo-traditional Russian system, including authoritarianism of one sort and degree or another, state patrimonialism, Russian traditional cultural values: Christian or some other communalist and universalist ‘orthodoxy,’ Russian exceptionalism in the form of messianism, and suspicion or antagonism towards the West. Phase 2 consists of a Westernization process, usually liberal, that challenges one or more aspect of the traditional Russian system. Phase 3 sees a Western military invasion or other operational measures—perceived by Russia as aggressive—in order to either further Russia’s Westernization process, subvert Russian stability and sovereignty, and/or seize, subsume or otherwise destroy Russia, the Russian nation, or Russian civilization. Phase 4 ends the cycle. Russian undertakes military counteroffensive and/or political and other countermeasures to defeat Western aggressive measures. Russia recovers, and its systems and ‘traditional,’ usually dominant security-vigilance strategic culture and patrimonial authoritarian political culture are restored and consolidated in the next cycle’s Phase 1. The “new” Russian authoritarian system is akin to, and to one extent or another shaped by the previous pre-liberalized, pre-Westernized traditionalist status quo.

The second variation of Tsymbursky’s Move B is most important, indeed pivotal, in particular regarding the anti-Russian Western powers’ attempt “to acquire their own allies and agents in (Russian) political and military circles” (Tsymbursky, 2016, p. 75). It is even more central to my cycles, given their greater inclusion of Russian domestic affairs and Western endeavors to shape them in the service of broader goals. Western attempts to acquire colluders can be confirmed for each of Tsymbursky’s strategic cycles. For example, in the first cycle (1726-1906), we find Napoleon supporting the Poles’ independence from St. Petersburg, and the Western powers in the Crimean War supporting the separation of the Caucasus from Russia. In the second cycle (1907-

1939), the Germans financially and otherwise backed the Bolsheviks in order to weaken or terminate Russia's role in World War I. In the third cycle, the West supported Soviet dissidents. In the post-Soviet period, there has been episodic support for Chechen separatists and pro-Western, pro-democracy opposition in Russia and its neighbors. These episodes of foreign antagonism and internal subversion reinforce cultural values learned from episodes reaching at least as far back as the beginning of the 17th century and the Vatican-inspired and Poland-organized effort to invade Russia, establish a puppet regime in Moscow, and Catholicize the country under False Dmitry. The ensuing, "rich" history of similar events has constructed and reinforced among Russians a leery or at least ambivalent attitude towards, and obsessive-compulsive focus on the West.

In my relational cycles too, Western actors are shown to have attempted 'to acquire their own allies and agents in Russia.' In three of four of my cycles, the West was able to acquire colluders to help in its efforts to undermine Russia's political stability, state sovereignty, territorial integrity and/or its very survival as a state and, in the case of the Nazi invasion, Russians and other Slavs as a 'race.' In the second cycle, although the West found no direct colluders, the Decembrists functioned as indirect or accidental colluders in attempting to begin a pro-democratic revolution from above by military putsch. Moreover, in each cycle's second Westernizing phase there is a decline in the dominance of the security norm of vigilance against external and internal threats emanating from the West into a recessive strand. This cultural strain is reactivated during the third and fourth phases. Its re-consolidation as a dominant strain marks Russia's return to traditionalism to be consolidated in the early stages of the next relational cycle.

In each of my four cycles, periods of Westernization in Russia are seen to be followed by military advancement against Russian territory either by direct or indirect invasion intended to transform fundamentally the Russian state and society or by expansion of a powerful military alliance to Russian borders in tandem with such demands for change in Russia and, as Tsymbursky phrased it,



Western attempts “to acquire their own allies and agents in (Russian) political and military circles” in order to facilitate that change. In each of the cycles, Western invasion or military encroachment plays a major, if not *the* major role in aborting Russian Westernizing and liberalizing reforms.

### **CYCLE I: 1505-1630**

**Cycle I** began from the ‘gathering in’ of numerous Russian principalities by the Grand Prince of Moscow, Ivan III or the Great, in the late 15th century. With a national culture only just emerging, the national security political and strategic values of vigilance against foreign military threats and domestic dissidents, respectively, are also just being formed, but their embryos lie in the growing aversion to the Catholic Church and Poles and the pre-*Smuta* destruction of religious dissidents like the *strigolniki*, Judaizers, and non-possessors. These earlier ontological security threats were a prelude to Cycle I, if not part of it, and were indirectly tied to external Western threats, having been born in, influenced by, or having come to Russia from the West, in particular Poland-Lithuania. These values become clear to see as a result of the *Smuta*’s Poles and False Dmitry as important symbols of the threat from the West in Russian culture in later periods of its history.

We can designate Muscovite Rus’ as it existed as of Ivan III’s death in 1505 as the beginning of Cycle I, with the formation by then of a *sui generis* Russian condition, emerging national culture rooted in Orthodox Christianity, and authoritarian state. Cycle I’s second phase begins with Godunov’s 1598-1603 Westernizing reforms. Those reforms are followed by the third phase with the Vatican-supported and Polish-organized invasion of Russia in 1604 by a mercenary Polish-Cossack force headed by the false pretender to the throne, the apparently murdered Dmitry Ivanovich, Tsar Ivan the Terrible’s son. False Dmitry gathers Russian, at first largely peasant support, then boyar support and marches to Moscow, taking the throne. This war, Dmitry’s assassination in 1606, and the emergence of new False Dmitry prolongs this period of direct foreign meddling and invasion, sparking civil war, social upheaval, and

famine—the *Smuta*. In the process, the Poles seize Moscow, as chaos and various Cossack bands rule the roost outside of Moscow. Cycle I's fourth phase begins in 1611 when Russians re-group, and the 1612 insurgency rises up, which eventually expels the Poles from Moscow and subdues the Cossack bands and later Polish expeditions by the 1620. A broad-based land assembly, *zemskii sobor*, elects Mikhail Romanov, the new Tsar, in 1613, establishing the Romanov dynasty and eventually bringing the end to Cycle I and the *Smuta*.

As a result of the *Smuta*, anti-Westernism and xenophobia, particularly focused on Poland and Poles, developed as part of the growing association between Western military threats and internal division, opposition, and dissent. Things Polish, including icons of the Time of Troubles, emerged as symbols of evil and vice. Marina Mniszech became a synonym for “witch,” and the Polish mazurek danced at the wedding of Dmitry and Marina in the Kremlin represented the “decadent foreigner” in Mikhail Glinka's opera *Life for the Tsar* set in the *Smuta* (Billington, 1970, p. 106). A firm belief emerged among Russian elites and over time in much of society as well in a deep connection between internal dissent and foreign threats became an important strain in Russia's political and strategic culture. Internal division and therefore opposition and dissent as well came to be seen as the handmaiden of foreign designs on the Russian state and had to be controlled. Klyuchevsky's quote, the most cited in Russian historiography regarding the *Smuta*, reflected and provided further cache to the message: “The *Smuta*, having fed on the antagonism of the land's social classes, was put to an end by a struggle of all the land with the alien forces which had been interfering in the internal strife” (Klyuchevsky, 1993, p. 310).

## **CYCLE II: 1630-1825**

Cycle II's first phase can be considered to have begun from Tsar Mikhail I's reign (1613-1645) or alternatively by circa 1630 when much of the pre-*Smuta* order had been restored. The second phase is a long period of deepening Westernization which begins under Mikhail's successor and son, Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, the ‘Quiet

Tsar.' He allowed a creeping Westernization to seep into Moscow, the Kremlin, his court, and even his family. This Westernization process is systematized, institutionalized, and coercively enforced by Alexei's son, Peter the Great, and continues through the reign of Catherine the Great in the late 18th century (which includes several Western involvements in Russian palace coups) and the first half of Alexander I's reign.

The reign of Peter the Great brings Russia and the West together in both foreign relations and Russia's internal development culturally, politically, administratively, socially, and economically. In foreign affairs, Peter the Great's foreign policy overturned the old European order in which Russia was an object—the target of Vatican, Polish and other Europeans' designs. Petrine and especially post-Petrine Russia was now a subject—a player and a major one—in European geopolitics beginning a repeating cycle of alliance followed by alienation in Western-Russian relations. Under Peter, Russia's relations with the West were already becoming an entangled web of contradictions and ambiguity. Many would begin counseling the strictest vigilance against the West and Westernization, questioning the advisability of borrowing in such large-scale fashion from your foreign foes.

Russia's first major diplomatic play in Europe—the creation of a European alliance to fight the main threat to Europe's Christian civilization at the time—was rejected by Europeans. Instead of a grand alliance against the Porte, Europeans sought to commandeer Russia for war against other Europeans. Paraphrasing Platonov: "Peter brought with him to Europe the idea of running the Turks out of Europe but returned from Europe with the idea of a struggle with Sweden for the Baltic Sea" (Platonov, 1993, p. 493). This presaged 'Move A' in Tsymbursky's cycles of Russo-Western strategic relations, in which one European force recruits Russia as a junior partner to fight other Europeans. It also might be a source of what Morozov concludes is a Russian tendency to divide good and bad, 'true' and 'false' Europes, differentiated in terms of Moscow's relations with European powers (Morozov, 2009, pp. 277-294, 375, 446-447).

For the first time in Russian history, we meet the curious contradiction in which Russia simultaneously is both Westernizing and at war with a Western power. Peter's travels to the West inspired his reforms but also his war against European power Sweden. Ironically, just as Peter was waging war against Sweden to some extent on behalf of other Western powers, he was adopting Sweden's organizational system of *kollegii* for administration in the Russian state in addition to other Western institutions such as the *burgmisterskie palaty*. Peter's war with Sweden contradicted his accommodation with Protestants at home, where his 'right hand' in religious affairs was Protestant-influenced Feofan Prokopovich, and the Holy Synod granted Orthodox Christians the right to marry Protestants (and Catholics). At the same time, as anti-Catholicism was growing, Peter allied with, and did the bidding of Catholic Poland against Sweden. From Peter forward some Russians favored power alliances with one or another Western faction. Others questioned whether Russia should ally with any European faction at all. Deep division over the menu of domestic and foreign policy choices would forever shape the structure of internal political action in Russia.

The Petrine, Russian Enlightenment century following Peter's death in 1725 is marked by expanding Westernization and growing Russian involvement in the European geopolitical game of conflict, alliances, and war. Consequently, Russia becomes the target of Western machinations to intervene and direct Russia's domestic politics through a mix of Westernizing influences and participation in Russian power struggles and palace coups. Weakening Western influence involved Western-Russian collusion, with Peter the Great's ontological 'collusion' having given way to outright collusion with Westerners by Russia's German and pro-German empresses. In the century after Peter's death, Western powers intervened in the court intrigues and found willing Russian takers during Anna Ioannovna's succession of Peter II in 1730 and provided subsidies and other assistance for three palace coups: Elizabeth I's succession of Ivan VI in 1742, Catherine the Great's coup that left her husband and Elizabeth's nephew Peter III dead; and Alexander I's coup that left his

father, Paul I, dead (Gordin, 1994, p. 320; Pavlenko, 2018, pp. 28-29).<sup>2</sup> The 18th century of guards' coups and Western collusion with the plotters, capped off by the guard officers-led Decembrist revolt, would lead to a revival of the security vigilance norm in strength under the Nicholaevan bureaucratic-police state.

Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 begins Cycle II's third phase, which lasts through Russia's expulsion of Napoleon's army from Russia and the Decembrist revolt by Russian officers, who had liberated Europe from Napoleon, smelled the free air in the West, and returned home as *de facto*, though certainly not actual, 'colluders' with the West—ontological colluders assisting not specific Western actors as agents but conduits of Western culture and systems threatening the Russian autocratic tradition. Cycle II's fourth phase sees Nicholas I's crushing the Decembrist revolt and the trial, exile and execution of the Decembrists. This was followed by a retrenchment against the Alexandrian Westernized liberalism and the re-consolidation of the traditionalist autocratic order, now symbolized by colluders such as Hetman Mazepa, who went over to the Swedes in the Great Northern

<sup>2</sup> Western involvement in Anna Ioannovna's succession of Peter II was limited to consultations but such talks involving a secret plan to change the nature of government would have been regarded as at least verging on treason. In this case, in a struggle to impose "conditions" or limits on Anna's powers in 1730, Russian constitutionalist aristocrats consulted on the Swedish constitution with Swedish diplomats and in one case appear to have done so in secret from the government. The leader of the constitutionalists, Prince Dmitry Golitsyn, who drafted not just conditions but several constitutions, was not shy about consulting Westerners in designing his reform program and relied particularly on advice from German Holsteinian Henrich von Fik (1679-1750/1), who was at the time serving the Russian government. A Swiss diplomat, however, had information and reported to his government that Fik was in contact with 28 Russian nobles "who desire freedom and are laying down the beginning of the repeal of autocracy" and not only gave advice but helped draft particulars of documents for both the creation of the Privy Council and limiting the autocracy (Gordin, 1994, pp. 136-139, 195-196). Both the Swedish and French were deeply involved in Elizabeth I's accession to the throne (Anisimov, 1998, pp. 206-209; Pekarsky, 2011; Platonov, 1993, pp. 558-561). Britain was involved considerably in Catherine the Great's coup that left her husband and Empress Elizabeth's nephew Peter III dead. Catherine utilized British subsidies specifically provided for the coup and kept the British ambassador to Petersburg, Sir Charles Williams, informed and misinformed on the progress of the planning. In August 1756, Catherine confided to Williams her desire to seize the throne from her husband Peter, six years before the event, writing that she was "busy with the formation, training, and recruitment of various kinds of facilitators for the event, the coming of which you desire" (Pavlenko, 2018, pp. 28-29). Britain was as deeply involved in Alexander I's coup that left his father, Emperor Paul I, dead (Kenney, 1977, pp. 205-206; Kenney, 1979, pp. 130-138; Sevastyanov, 2016, pp. 125-126; Mironenko, 2016, pp. 26-28; Platonov, 1993, pp. 645-646).

War, and Tsarevich Alexei, who turned to the Holy Roman Empire, the invading European Grand Army and its promoter of 'liberty, equality, and brotherhood' Napoleon, and the Decembrists all became eternal symbols of the Western external and internal threat that drives Russo-Western historical-relational cycles.

### **CYCLE III: 1826-1922**

In **Cycle III**, the legacy of Napoleon's invasion, Western influence on the Decembrists, and suspicions of Western involvement in their failed coup laid the foundation for worsening relations with much of the West. The cruelty of executions, lashings and exiles gives birth to Nicholas I's era of the gendarme state. Nicholas I reconstituted a neo-traditionalist Russia in the form of a modern bureaucratic police state of the kind Napoleon had pioneered and Russia's European allies, Prussia and Austria-Hungary, had adopted. Anti-Westernism and anti-liberalism were increasingly institutionalized in the new official state ideology, Official Nationality, based on the anti-liberal and anti-Western formula: Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality. Francophobia on the tsar's part and in the secret police accompanied the Official Nationality. The anti-Western retrenchment during his reign defined much of the cycle's first phase. Nicholas suspected that the Decembrists had been working with Western embassies in St. Petersburg and ordered investigators to pursue the question during the interrogations of the arrested coup plotters.

Revolution and reform were postponed in Nicholaevan Russia, but another war with Europeans was not. The Russian-led and -enforced Concert of Europe initially strengthened St. Petersburg's relations with the 'Other' of old traditionalist monarchical Europe, but Russia found itself increasingly alienated from the other 'Other,' the emerging new Europe represented by democratic-nationalist revolutions Russia was obliged to suppress under the Concert's Holy Alliance. Soon, the Holy Alliance became weakened and dissolved, and geopolitical competition intensified in Europe in which Russia was now a leading power. The Crimean War that resulted would prompt another phase of Russian Westernization under Nicholas I's son and successor, 'Tsar-Liberator'

Alexander II. Alexander's Westernization and liberalization under the Great Reforms, including the emancipation of the serfs, mark Cycle III's Phase 2. Westernization proceeds much more slowly under Alexander's successors Alexander III and Nicholas II. Westernization continues in separate, non-political spheres, above all, in industrial and state capitalist development and the socialist and anarchist radicalization of the intelligentsia, youth, and emerging working class. The European philosophical roots of Russian socialism and anarchism are striking. Cycle III's Phase 3, sees the West begin to protect and even support Russian revolutionaries in exile and at home. The onset of World War I, in sparking which Russia plays a secondary role compared with Germany and Austro-Hungary, marks the next Western military intervention into Russia. The German government's financing of Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks and the intervention by Western troops in Russia's Civil War continues the pattern of Westerners partnering with Russian colluders to undermine Russian sovereignty. Neither World War I, German support for the Bolsheviks and other radicals, nor the Western intervention in the Civil War were aimed at Russia's Westernization per se, but rather were the strategic goal of one or another Western party to the war to either terminate or prolong Russia's prosecution of the war. With the October coup and the Civil War's start, Cycle III's Phase 4 begins. The Bolshevik Red Army's march to victory over the Tsarist 'White' army and Lenin's consolidation of power against competing revolutionaries lead to a new anomalously autocratic 'status quo' under the steel-fisted rule of Soviet commissars of Cycle IV.

#### **CYCLE IV: 1922-2012**

**Cycle IV** begins with Stalin's gradual rise to power starting with his assumption of the general secretaryship in 1922 and recovery from the 1917 revolution and wars beginning with NEP in 1921. Russian traditionalism devolves into communist totalitarian overdrive. The Soviet era saw a vigorous resurgence to cultural dominance of security vigilance hyper-focused on Western external and internal threats as never before, after its decline into recession, beginning with the Tsar-

Liberator's Westernizing Great Reforms and ending in World War I to some degree, with Russia allied with the Entente. The commissars supplemented the security vigilance culture with class content and intensified and instrumentalized it to a degree unknown under the tsars in the form of mass prosecution, blatantly false charges against supposed colluders, and mass terror. An anomaly is an invasion from the West by Nazi Germany with no preceding liberalization. To the contrary, Hitler's Wehrmacht comes in the wake of Stalin's Great Terror—the apex of high Stalinism. Cycle IV's Phase 1 continues after 1945 with the full restoration of the Stalinist regime's sovereignty over the USSR and establishment of socialism in some East European countries, the onset of the Cold War with the West abroad, and an attempt to re-start terror at home, which is aborted by Stalin's death.

Cycle IV's Westernizing Phase 2 can be demarcated from Khrushchev's thaw evolving from political and cultural liberalization, which is rolled back, into the consumerization, embourgeoisement, and détente of the Brezhnev era. The robustness of the security vigilance value and its manifestation in policy declines in the post-Stalin era beginning with the thaw, but it remained a dominant strain of Soviet political and strategic culture as demonstrated by the persecution of Soviet dissidents until the *perestroika* era. Full-blown Westernization blossoms fully with Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*. Phase 2 intensified in 1986-1987 with the spread of *glasnost*, the rise of de-Stalinization, and minor economic and political reforms, all of which deepened with full-fledged *perestroika* in 1988-1991 and more so in the 1990s after the Soviet collapse. In this period, the security vigilance value collapsed into recession, fully abandoned by the top leadership and forgotten by most of the public in lieu of the old party-state *agitprop*. Cycle IV's Phase 2 lasts at most two decades, 1987-2008 approximately. Yeltsin's subsequent revolution from above in 1990-1991 through the mid-1990s marks the high point of Phase 2. Throughout this phase the West again found a host of domestic allies who pushed for greater reforms, nationalist separatism in the Baltic and other republics, all of this ending in institutional chaos and breakdown and the collapse of the Soviet regime and state. As Yeltsin's revolution from above began



to meet the challenges of political and especially economic transition in the early 1990s, the West offered little in the way of assistance and instead embarked on discussion and eventually implementation of the expansion of NATO, in violation of promises made to Gorbachev after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and during the process of German reunification that world history's most powerful military alliance would "not expand one inch" beyond reunified Germany.

Cycle IV's Phase 3 began not with military invasion, but other operational and/or aggressive action as perceived by Russia's elite: NATO expansion without Russia and against Russia's security preferences as well as aggressive Western policies targeting Russia's allies of Yugoslavia and then Serbia and its neighboring states beginning in the late 1990s. The 1997 inclusion of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary into NATO marks the beginning of my Phase 3 in Cycle IV. The bombing of Serbia in 1999 marks a more kinetic beginning of Phase 3 consistent with the purist Tsymbuskian cyclical model stipulating Western aggression against Russia or Russian interests. The onset of Phase 3 is perhaps symbolized by Primakov's turnaround over the Atlantic away from Moscow and back to Moscow in reaction to NATO's bombing of Serbia. Three waves of NATO expansion brought the American-led Western alliance right up to Russia's border with the Baltic states and envisioned the incorporation of Ukraine and Georgia as well. Prospects remained during Putin's first term and perhaps even during the 'interregnum' of Dmitry Medvedev's presidency for Russian-Western rapprochement and even a return to democratization domestically, but they were never realized. Thus, Cycle IV's Phase 4 begins with Russia's August 2008 rebuff of Georgia's bid to join NATO and invasion of Tbilisi's breakaway region of South Ossetia as part of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's effort to reunite Georgia and thus resolve its "stateness problem" or sovereignty conflict that was hindering its NATO bid. With its defeat of the Georgian army, Moscow had undertaken its first post-Soviet military response to NATO expansion in an effort to block any further Western encroachment along its borders. Phase 4, kicked off by the Georgian-Ossetian/Russian War, has continued with Russian efforts to block Ukraine's entry into

NATO and rollback the February 2014 ultranationalist Maidan putsch first by annexing Crimea, then by supporting the Donbass separatists, and finally by invading Ukraine in February 2022.

Cycle IV's Phase 4 overlaps the inauguration of a new cycle, Cycle V, in the history of Russian-Western relations and cycles.

### **CYCLE V: 2012-PRESENT**

**Cycle V's** Phase 1 was signaled by the reactivation of the Russian tradition of authoritarian rule and security vigilance in relation to the West in the so-called New Cold War implemented by Putin since his return to the Kremlin as president in May 2012. The invasion of Ukraine demonstrates that at the same time Cycle IV's Phase 4 is peaking and will soon reach an unknown dénouement. That dénouement is likely to consist of a full transition into Cycle V's Phase 1, with the consolidation of a less soft version of the Russian tradition of authoritarianism extant in the early period of internal retrenchment in Cycle IV, Phase 4. It also appears that Cycle V will see significant Russian isolation from the West—an isolation prepared for by Putin's 'pivot to Asia' and his creation of international structures without any connection to the West: the EES, the SCO, and BRICS—in addition to an increasingly close partnership verging on outright allied relations with the 21st century likely new superpower, China. Much will depend on the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian war now in full spate. The outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian war is difficult to predict. Possibilities range from a Ukrainian quagmire for the Kremlin, a Russian victory attaining all its goals (Ukraine's neutral status, the independence of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions from Ukraine, and denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine), a Russian defeat represented by the failure to achieve some or all of the goals of the special military operation, a European-wide Russian-NATO war, World War III, and thermonuclear war and annihilation. A quagmire could lead to the fall of Putin's system which could result in a further authoritarian retrenchment or Cycle V's Phase 2 and a new period of Westernization. A Russian victory would likely 'justify' the authoritarian retrenchment and Asian pivot, intensifying the dynamic

of global bifurcation in the New Cold War, pitting the West against the Rest—a Sino-Russian-led coalition of many of the Rest.

Questions that remain open are: (1) whether Putin's pushback in Ukraine will be as far as the New Cold War goes; or (2) whether a Western-backed war to once and for all transform Russia in the Western image or to destroy it will ensue; or (3) whether the confrontation generated by Cycle IV has gone as far as it needs to. Putin may have 'restored Russian sovereignty' and begun Cycle V, but another Westernization likely looms somewhere over the horizon. If history and Tsymburskian-type cycles of Russian-Western relations still hold some key to understanding those relations, then a new Westernizing Phase 2 in Cycle V will set in sooner or later.

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What is perhaps most striking about our cycles is the consistent way in which the transition from each cycle's second to third phase—from the Westernizing, liberalizing/democratizing second phase to the Western invasion/encroachment third phase—was characterized by Western action undermining a Russian Westernizing, liberalizing impulse. In Cycle I's Phase 2, the Westernizing, liberalizing Godunov began to tighten his rule and sink into paranoia and repression in response to rumors of a threat from Poland to his rule. After his death, the Poles indeed organized a regime change invasion by False Dmitry, ushering in the *Smuta*. In Cycle II, Alexander I's attempt to introduce constitutional rule in Russia was interrupted at least twice by Napoleon's wars and invasion of Russia. In Cycle III, the potential of a republican transition after the February Revolution under moderate Trudovik faction leader Alexander Kerensky was aborted by the combination of the ongoing German-inspired world war and German-sponsored radical revolutionary Vladimir Lenin. In Cycle IV, NATO expansion undermined Russia's pro-republican wing and the republicanizing regime under post-Soviet Russian President Boris Yeltsin. As a result of NATO expansion and NATO's bombing of Serbia, the inner circle of the already ailing Yeltsin searched for a successor among those wearing epaulettes, eventually settling on Vladimir Putin. Continued

NATO expansion during Putin's first term and the threat of more to come in Georgia and Ukraine doomed what was left of Russia's post-Soviet republican experiment by 2012, if not by 2008. This is the most revealing conclusion from applying Tsymburisky's cyclical approach to the history of Russian-Western relations in a way that emphasizes Russia's domestic transformations together with developments in Russian-Western relations.

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