

Herfried Münkler

WORLD IN TURMOIL – The Order of Powers in the 21st Century

Welt in Aufruhr

- A sharp geopolitical analysis on the emerging developments, fractures and transformations we are currently facing.
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How will the world order of the 21st century look like?

Since the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has become clear that the existing order has come to an end. How will the world reorganize itself, and what will it look like in the 21st century?

Enforcing a world order based on values and norms exceeds the capabilities of the West. The United States, once considered the "world police," is retreating despite international engagements; the United Nations, which was also expected to play this role, is hindered by self-blockades. And Europeans are simply not capable of guarding a world order. This creates a precarious and risky situation.

In this thought-provoking geopolitical analysis, Herfried Münkler reveals where the future conflict lines will be drawn. There is much to suggest that a new system of regional spheres of influence will emerge, dominated by five major powers. What are the dangers and opportunities of this new order? Will it be a balanced power equilibrium or chaos? And how should Europe and Germany behave in the expected global conflicts? This is an exciting and groundbreaking outlook on power constellations in the 21st century.

Herfried Münkler, born in 1951, is a professor of political science at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Many of his books are considered seminal works, such as *Die Deutschen und ihre Mythen* (2009), which won the Leipzig Book Fair Prize, as well as *Der große Krieg* (2013), *Die neuen Deutschen* (2016), *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg* (2017) and *Marx, Wagner, Nietzsche* (2021). They all spent months on the *Spiegel* bestseller list. Herfried Münkler has received many awards, including the Science prize of the Aby Warburg Foundation and the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Fellowship.

Herfried Münkler

The World in turmoil: The Geopolitical Order in the 21st Century

English sample translation by Brian Poole

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INTRODUCTION: On the Transformation of the World Order

The last few decades have been marked by profound and momentous changes in global political constellations. For more than forty years, the world order had seemed to be cast in concrete—at least if, like the Germans, you primarily had in mind the bipolarity of East and West, including its socio-political and values-based underpinnings. However, those who take a closer look, broadening their view to include the global South, recognise that there have also been a number of disruptive developments in the period between the Second World War and the collapse of the Soviet empire, such as the end of the European colonial empires. Although some of these empires had already faltered during World War II, the vast majority of political actors assumed at the end of the war that they would continue to play an important role in world politics.

When Winston Churchill gave his famous speech in Zurich in 1946, calling for the unification of (Western) Europe, he didn't think that Great Britain would be part of this united Europe; rather, he viewed the British Empire as an independent actor on the world's political stage, where three great powers held the leading roles: the USA, the Soviet Union, and the British Empire. A united Europe, such as Churchill demanded, was to serve as a defensive bulwark vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. He could not imagine that his own Empire would soon cease to exist. Later, Churchill's Zurich speech was recast within the prehistory of the European project; indeed, it's sometimes even referred to as its starting signal. And thus, today, the deep rift that has taken place in the development of world politics by comparison with Churchill's design for the post-war world order has been unceremoniously narrated out of existence. The rift itself has been turned into a glossed-over narrative of progress, with Churchill as the visionary.

You have to bear Churchill's example in mind if you want to understand why the recent historical changes have been referred to as a "world disorder." This perception is characteristic for those in whose imagination the world *order* was based on the East-West antagonism and in whose focus of attention there was little else in world politics. In fact, however, the bipolar order of the Global North was the great obstacle to change, and it set up a structure of global constellations that also encompassed the South of the globe. Against the dominance of the Global North, the "non-aligned" nations had very little say. The cold war "ice age"—a term often used for this period—had a multifaceted meaning: Not only were relations between the two sides frosty to icy,

but also the forces aimed at change were frozen in the East to prevent them from making themselves felt politically. Each “thaw” was therefore followed by a new “ice age” in accordance with the imperatives of the bipolar order. The more the forces of change made themselves felt, the frostier the political climate in the Eastern Bloc became. Until Gorbachev’s reforms, this was a quasi-predictable political thermal.

But it has changed fundamentally since the end of the East–West conflict. The Soviet Union—which was the conservative or, more precisely, the conserving pole of the world order—disintegrated, although in retrospect it is striking how unspectacular the end of this previously central actor in world politics was. All of a sudden, the Soviet Union was no longer there, leaving many in the West thinking they were witnessing the dawn of a new carefree era. At the end of the 20th century, the fall of the empire Lenin created was offset by the rapid rise of China, which had been initially relatively inconspicuous and was often accompanied, in the West, by the expectation that, with the partial introduction of a capitalist market economy in the “Middle Kingdom,” the one-party rule of the communists would also disappear and a democratic rule of law would take its place. The world, it was believed, was no longer divided—neither in terms of power politics, nor in ideology—but was growing together, and the United Nations, which until then had been paralyzed by the East-West antagonism, would play a central role in mastering humanity’s tasks.

The “horizon of expectation” (Koselleck) that until recently was still dominant is the second reason why the current geopolitical constellations appear to us to be a “world *disorder*.” That horizon of expectations has already disappeared, and one should not assume that it will reappear in the foreseeable future. Instead, China has become the new antithesis of the United States, and the idea that the end of bipolarity will lead to a global implementation of the Western political and economic model has dissolved into nothing. Whether this notion was ever realistic, or whether it was a massive self-deception from the outset, may remain an open question here. In any case, for more than two decades the overwhelming idea has been that a world order based not on confrontation but on cooperation could emerge—one in which wars between countries would become historically obsolete.

For a brief interlude, there was much talk of a “unipolar moment” that had been bestowed upon the United States, opening up the chance for the “only remaining superpower” to become the “guardian” of a global order—an order that would not be fundamentally characterized by enmities and antagonisms, and thus by confrontation and the compulsion to take sides, but in which the hitherto merely rhetorical formula of humanity and the challenges it faces would acquire

a political structure. Yet these hopes, too, proved futile. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—another disruptive event—the USA managed to lure itself into enforcing, where necessary, the widely predicted development of democracy and market-based capitalism upon the Arab-Muslim world in an attempt to overcome the obstructions to that development that had been observed since the end of the Second World War. They failed across the board. The Americans soon found themselves militarily bogged down in the Arab-Muslim world; moreover, they also lost their global political reputation. Reputation, however, is one of the most important currencies in international politics. What the American political scientist Joseph Nye called “soft power” is essentially based on reputation. Compared to “hard power,” it is much more cost-effective and thus represents the prerequisite for attaining global influence without the risk of exhausting a world leader’s material resources. While gambling away its reputation, the US discovered that it was becoming increasingly costly to avail itself of the “unipolar moment”—until it was unaffordable.

Already under US President Barack Obama, the project of a unipolar world order had been buried, and this was followed by the admission that the USA was no longer capable of simultaneously projecting a balance of power into both the Atlantic and Pacific regions. Although this admission is not to be equated with the collapse of the Soviet Union in terms of its global political significance, it nevertheless symbolises the eroded power of the other pole of the formerly bipolar order. Two decades after the end of the bipolar world, the erosion of the unipolar order began.

Meanwhile, for the United States, China has emerged as a serious competitor harbouring global ambitions. China has become extremely assertive and energetic, and this has given rise to a new blueprint of a world order; some have even already claimed that the American era will be followed by a Chinese one. Furthermore, a politically self-sustaining Soviet Union—until 1989/90, the West’s antithesis in a world order based on stability—has been replaced by a revisionist Russia that questions the territorial sovereignty of some of its neighbouring states; its aim is not preservation but change. As a result, the idea that “peace can be made with fewer and fewer weapons” has crumbled—washed away like castles in the sand.

Meanwhile, the European Union is looking for its role among the emerging world powers. What was once said of the Federal Republic of Germany applies now to the EU: economically a giant, politically a dwarf. After the end of the East–West conflict, the Europeans—and by no means only the Germans—were convinced that the future belonged to their project of creating peace essentially through economics. The various centres of power Europe had at its disposal

found this quite accommodating. Presumably, one of the reasons why Europe held on to this idea for so long was that it dovetailed with an ethically compelling design for a world order yielding a prominent position for the Europeans, a position whose assertion did not incur any great costs and was largely politically risk-free. Recently, however, the Europeans are rushing to overcome the military deficits that they themselves have created. The question is whether Europe or the European Union will be a relevant actor or a *quantité négligeable* in the emerging world order.

In view of this development, many are now talking about the world *disorder*. This sounds alarmist: It has a consistently nervous undertone to it and signals that it's high time to get out of this state of affairs, but without actually saying how this is to be achieved. The mood in German society—at first merely concerned but since 24 February 2022 positively agitated—has absorbed these worrying developments. The disorder we are talking about is measured against the idea of a peaceful world order optimally characterised by the rule of law and the spread of global prosperity. And against this yardstick, we're indeed in a great mess. However, the ideas developed below run in a different direction: According to my basic thesis, we are dealing with a change in the world order such as has actually taken place again and again in the past over longer periods of time and has merely been accelerating since the 20th century. Thus, what used to be observable only in fast motion is now taking place in real time before our very eyes. This is disconcerting. A chronic symptom of the modern world and its global order is repeating itself, namely, the all-embracing acceleration of change that has been described at times as progress, or as an approach to history's normatively depicted goal, but is now perceived as lying on the edge of an abyss. One might therefore conclude that the narrative of progress dominating the theory of international relations in recent decades has acted as a powerful sedative, recasting the accelerating changes as the realisation of a grand peace project. Have we, in the past, merely glossed over such developments while failing to prepare for the challenges that are quite foreseeable? Have Europeans in particular fallen into the trap of global political complacency?

(...)

The Russian Narrative

From the outset, Russia's own manner of affirming itself was more complex and at the same time extremely ambivalent. The construction of Russian identity has always been about both the demarcation from but also the connection with Europe, and thus about the position that Russia claims for itself in the European and world order. Early on, the idea of Russia's political and cultural backwardness vis-à-vis Western Europe played a role, from which two identity narratives emerged: on the one hand, that of catching up through emulation, in which "the West"—first Western Europe, later also the USA—was the role model Russians had to catch up with,¹ and, on the other hand, the defiantly proud insistence upon Russia's own identity, which does not need to align itself following Western patterns.² The latter identity was usually associated with the idea of Western decadence; Europe's economic and technological superiority and its urban culture was diagnosed as a moral decline. Against this Europe, the Slavophile narrative juxtaposed the image of the Russian peasant in his original morality and that of the village as a community based on solidarity. Moral decadence was the price the West had paid for its economic superiority and cultural progress. The decadence narrative, on the other hand, revolved around the idea that, having paid this price, the West had forfeited any claim to determine the world order. The West could not and should not be the world's order-creating and order-guaranteeing power. That would inevitably lead to the abyss.

Russia thus became the "saviour" of the world and its order, a *katechon* holding back, though not preventing, the inevitable doomsday. The role of this inner Russian struggle between two narratives—that of the West's exemplary character and that of its moral depravity—in the formation of an obligatory national identity remained an open question in the literal sense, especially in situations of political and social upheaval; and the various answers to this question have torn Russian society apart time and again. This was also the case after 1989/91, following the dissolution of the outer empire and the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the project of a socio-economic perestroika or restructuring of Soviet society, already in the Gorbachev era, but especially under Yeltsin, was increasingly aligned with Western economic models, only to be switched back to Russia's independence from the West after Putin took office.

¹ Russia's notorious backwardness, which is evident particularly in its technological dependence, is the guiding thesis behind Manfred Hildermeier's sketch of Russian history under the title *Die rückständige Großmacht (The Backward Superpower)*, Munich, 2022.

² On the history of Russia's self-orientation and the narrative of its religious, historical, and philosophical independence, cf. Boris Groys, *Die Erfindung Rußlands*, Munich, 1995, passim, esp. pp. 7–18.

The end point of this ultimately depressing search for identity reappears in the threats of annihilation constantly voiced, since the Ukraine war, by Russian politicians and journalists who, interpreted psychologically, want to rid themselves of the problem of “Europe” by trying to erase it as a model or as a challenge to their own self-understanding. According to their unbridled declarations, Europe will be conquered or destroyed and an empire will be built that extends from the Irish Sea to the Pacific. This is ultimately also a reaction to the permanent brain drain towards the West that Russia has again exposed itself to; top scientists as well as highly skilled and well-educated people are leaving the country and moving West, taking up residence in the USA or in Western Europe. Moreover, the rich and wealthy members of Russian society—and by no means only the oligarchs, although they’re the biggest spenders—buy prestigious estates and yachts in the West and shell out lots of money there, which leads to a money drain in addition to the brain drain. Russia is constantly losing intellectual capital and monetary resources to the West.

Europe’s exemplary character was a construction resulting from the notorious experiences of inferiority—experiences that could not remain without consequence for the claim to participate in the creation of a world order. Reacting to it, Russian intellectuals who strove to emphasize their own state and its culture had basically two options at their disposal. On the one hand, they could refer to a transfer of legitimacy that had taken place from Rome via Constantinople to Moscow as the “Third Rome.” The division of the Roman Empire into a western and an eastern half could thereafter be transposed onto modern Europe, whereupon, in contrast to the West as a power in the East, Russia could be attested an equal, if not primary, position in Europe. On the other hand, Russian intellectuals could assert a separate Slavic or Mongolian identity in opposition to European culture in order to derive a competitive claim to shaping the world order.

The first of these options dates back to the monk Philotheus (or Filofei) of Pskov, who died in the 16th century. In the nineteenth century, the formula of Moscow as the “Third Rome”³—a narrative that can be found again today, for example, in the ultra-nationalist thinker Alexander Dugin as the justification for Russia’s claim to be a world power.⁴ The second “option” was outlined in the 19th century in the controversies between “Westerners” and “Slavophiles.”⁵ Europe

³ See Wilhelm Lettenbauer, *Moskau, das dritte Rom*, Munich, 1961; Illya Kozyrev, *Moskau – das dritte Rom: Eine politische Theorie mit ihren Auswirkungen auf die Identität der Russen und die russische Politik*, Göttingen 2011.

⁴ See John B. Dunlop, “Aleksandr Dugin’s Foundations of Geopolitics,” in: *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Volume 12, Issue 1, 2004, pp. 41–58, also available at: <https://tec.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/aleksandr-dugins-foundations-geopolitics> [accessed on 19 Sept. 2023].

⁵ See Jutta Scherrer, “Politische Ideen im vorrevolutionären und revolutionären Rußland,” in: *Pipers Handbuch der politischen Ideen*, edited by Iring Fetscher and Herfried Münkler, Vol. 5, Munich, 1987, pp. 203–281, here pp. 208–218

was conceived by the Slavophiles as the home to the “tired bourgeois cultures of the West” who relied on the savage, primitive, and exotic elements of Russia for its own renewal.⁶ Russia thus presented itself as the rejuvenating and revitalizing cure that the European West needed if it wanted to have a future. One can interpret such notions as a relativisation of the economic and technological superiority of the West, which was opposed by Russian peasants known for their atavism, primitive lifestyle, and deep faith. These notions offered an early variant of the discourse of decadence that has, once again, come to shape the official Russian view of Europe for the past several years: Russian authors ascribe to the East, and especially to the spirituality of Russia, the role of saving the world from Western materialism.⁷

Both “options” to the experience of backwardness belong to imperial discourse and not to national discourse; the first is the claim of legitimacy through the transfer of sacredness,⁸ the second is an imperial mission that focuses not on improving the world, but on saving it. These answers to the question of Russia’s role in global politics give rise to a plethora of new questions: for example, the question whether Russia, with this fixation of its political identity on an imperial task, had not been overwhelmed in the past and had missed or gambled away its national genesis—a path to the formation of a self-contained national self-consciousness—and whether Russia is now doing so again.⁹ In addition to the theories of Johann Gottfried Herder, who had assigned the Slavic peoples both a political but also, above all, a cultural place in the European family of nations alongside the Romance and Germanic peoples, thus contributing significantly to the admission of the Slavs into the European family of nations,¹⁰ it could also be argued that the philosophy of history embracing the interplay between decadence and revitalisation that is currently prevalent in Russia is merely an adoption of Oswald Spengler’s theory of cycles,¹¹ so that,

and p. 228–232; furthermore, see Alexander von Schelting, *Rußland und Europa im russischen Geschichtsdenken: Auf der Suche nach der historischen Identität* [1948], Ostfildern vor Stuttgart 1997, pp. 75–219.

⁶ At least according to Sergei Diaghilev, the impresario of the Ballets Russes; see Orlando Figes, *Natasha’s Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, New York, 2002, p. 270.

⁷ See Jutta Scherer, *Kulturologie: Rußland auf der Suche nach einer zivilisatorischen Identität*, Göttingen, 2003, pp. 127–151.

⁸ See Herfried Münkler, “Translation, Filiation und Analogiebildung: Politische Legitimation und strategische Reflexion im Spiegel vergangener Imperien,” in: Münkler and Hausteiner (eds.), *Die Legitimation von Imperien*, Frankfurt am Main, 2012, pp. 34–69.

⁹ Geoffrey Hosking explores this theme in his account of the history of *Russia: People and Empire 1552–1917* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), where he interprets the conflict between the nation and the empire as a pattern that has blocked Russia’s development; for a similar investigation of the “empire’s curse,” see Martin Schulze Wessel, *Der Fluch des Imperiums* (Munich, 2023).

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, “German Romanticism in Petersburg and Moscow,” in his *Russian Thinkers* (London, 1978) p. 136 ff., and his *The Roots of Romanticism* (2nd ed., Princeton, 1999) particularly pp. 107–136.

¹¹ Spengler’s remarks about Russia and “Russianness”, like so much of his work, are not coherent. On the one hand, he writes in *The Decline of the West* that Russians reject the Western construction of the “I”: “Now this, precisely this, the genuine Russian regards as contemptible vainglory. The Russian soul, will-less, having the limitless *plane* as its

in both cases, Russian consciousness is indebted to the writings of Western thinkers. The Russian-German philosopher Boris Groys has sharpened this idea to the effect that Russia is constantly reinventing itself by “adopting, appropriating, and transforming oppositional, alternative currents of Western culture [...], which it then turns against the West.”¹²

The dilemma of Russian narratives that switch back and forth between national and imperial narratives can be seen in the historical distortion spread by Putin himself about Russia’s relationship to Ukraine or about the affiliation of the derogatorily named “Little Russians” to “Great Russia.” By annexing the Crimea and providing military support for the separatist areas in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, Putin had invoked the right of peoples to self-determination and Russia’s obligation to protect Russian minorities in Ukraine.¹³ However, Putin’s claim to protect Russian minorities contradicted what he himself had stated in September 2013, half a year prior to the annexation, in a speech at the Valdai International Discussion Club about Ukraine belonging to the “Russian world.” Here he described Russians and Ukrainians as *one* people: “We have common traditions, a common mentality, a common history, and a common culture. We have very similar languages. In that respect, I want to repeat again, we are one people. Of course, the Ukrainian people, the Ukrainian culture, and the Ukrainian language have wonderful features that make up the identity of the Ukrainian nation. And we not only respect it but, moreover, I,

prime symbol, seeks to grow up—serving, anonymous, self-oblivious—in the brother world of the plane. To take ‘I’ as the starting point of relations with the neighbour, to elevate ‘I’ morally through ‘I’s’ love of near and dear, to repent for ‘I’s’ own sake, are to him traits of Western vanity as presumptuous as is the upthrusting challenge to heaven of our cathedrals that he compares with his plane church roof and its sprinkling of cupolas.” (Vol. 1, New York, 1926, p. 309) But then elsewhere: “The primitive tsarism of Moscow is the only form that is still in keeping with Russianness today, but it was falsified in Petersburg into the dynastic form of Western Europe. The march to the Holy South, to Byzantium and Jerusalem, which lay deep in all orthodox souls, was transformed into a worldly diplomacy with a view to the West. The fire of Moscow, the magnificently symbolic act of an indigenous people, from which the Maccabean hatred of everything foreign and foreign-believing speaks, is followed by Alexander’s entry into Paris, the holy alliance and the position in the concert of the Western great powers. A peoplehood whose destiny was to live without history for generations to come was forced into an artificial and false history, the spirit of which could not be grasped by primitive Russianness” (Vol. 2, New York, 1928, p. 193). On Spengler’s image of Russia, see also Alexander Demandt, “Spengler und Groeger: The Future of Russianness,” in his *Untergänge des Abendlandes. Studien zu Oswald Spengler*, Köln, Weimar, Wien, 2017, pp. 117–122; on the idea of decadence in Spengler and its applicability to the present conditions, cf. Wolfgang Krebs, *Die imperiale Endzeit: Oswald Spengler und die Zukunft der abendländischen Zivilisation*, Berlin, 2008 pp. 162–193.

¹² See Groys, *Die Erfindung Rußlands*, p. 8.

¹³ The peoples’ right to self-determination played a role in the referendum in Crimea, when a majority of Crimeans voted in favour of joining Russia *after* the invasion of Russian troops and in the presence of Russian soldiers at the polling stations. The annexation, the Russians argued, was necessary to protect the Russian minority following the Ukrainian parliament’s declaration of the Ukrainian language as the only official language of the country, admittedly only for a limited time. For details see Gwendolyn Sasse, *Der Krieg gegen die Ukraine: Hintergründe, Ereignisse, Folgen*, Munich, 2022, pp. 69–81. The currently observable regression of Russian in Ukraine, both as a language and as a culture, is a consequence of Putin’s war of aggression.

for one, really love it, I like all of it. It is part of our greater Russian, or Russian-Ukrainian, world.”¹⁴

If this had been meant seriously and had been a binding position for Russian politics, then a few months later there would have been no need for military intervention to protect Russian minorities in eastern Ukraine. What happened in between was the Euromaidan, the massive protests in Kiev and other major cities in the country against the anti-EU policies of the then President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, and his hasty flight to Russia after it became clear that an overwhelming majority of the Ukrainian population preferred rapprochement with the European Union and the West as a whole rather than close ties with Russia. The Maidan protests, which erupted after Yanukovich refused to sign the framework agreement with the EU, showed that the identity narrative of Ukraine’s belonging to Europe had a stronger impact than that of its belonging to the “Russian world.” Putin’s recourse to the national narrative, according to which “Great” and “Small” Russians are *one* people, thus became the legitimation for regarding the Ukraine as the Kremlin’s own sphere of influence and for denying to grant it an independent policy. This narrative was not a political commitment to Ukraine, but pure ideology. The Kremlin, however, did not want to admit this and therefore claimed that the Maidan revolt against Yanukovich was a coup staged by the West.

When Putin spoke of the Russians as “one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders”¹⁵ as a justification for the annexation of Crimea and for supporting the separatist areas in the Donbas, he was using the nationalist narrative. While doing so, he equated the annexation of Crimea with German reunification and appealed for sympathy in the West, especially among the Germans, whom he implored not to see the Russian annexation of Crimea as a violation of international law.¹⁶ At the same time, by repeatedly using the term “Novorossiya,” which harkens back to Catherine II, he implicitly laid claim not merely to the Donbas, but to the whole of southern Ukraine, including Odessa, which was to become the property of Russia. Those listening closely would know that, under such circumstances, Ukraine would only be left, at best, with its Western flank as an independent state. At the same time,

¹⁴ The text is cited in: Kappeler, *Ungleiche Brüder*, pp. 215–216; the English version Kappeler quotes (and is used here) has been posted on the Kremlin’s website: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243> [accessed on 19 Sept. 2023].

¹⁵ Vladimir Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” 18 March 2014, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603> [accessed on 19 Sept. 2023].

¹⁶ For that reason, Andreas Kappeler notes that Putin’s “ethno-nationalist argumentation” is “reminiscent of the revanchist policies of Germany and other powers in the interbellum era” (*ibid.*, p. 224).

however, Putin also assured: “we are not simply close neighbours but, as I have said many times already, we are one people. [...] and we cannot live without each other.”¹⁷ With these words, he inscribed the national narrative into the imperial narrative: The claim that Russians and Ukrainians were one people became the justification for a war of aggression that belied everything Putin had previously said about the cultural ties and common traditions of both peoples, and the contradiction became eminently clear with the destruction of Ukrainian cultural assets in the war since the end of February 2022 and the unbridled (also sexual) violence against the Ukrainian population in the Ukrainian territories occupied by the Russian military.

The war against Ukraine, the war in Ukraine, has become a disaster for Russia (not only for Putin and his regime) in its arduous and contradiction-ridden search for a new identity narrative. And the claim to a global political role upon which the narrative was based has suffered the same debacle. The “Russian idea” that had been reconstructed after the collapse of the Soviet Union from the debates within the emigrant circles during the 1920s: Putin has reduced it all to a question of power or violence, leaving nothing but a waste of paper where once the question of values had been the focus. While living in Berlin and Paris, Nikolai Berdyaev, the exiled Russian philosopher of religion and history, developed the “Russian idea” as an alternative to the future of communism and its Bolshevik practice. Berdyaev regarded the Marxist foundation of the Bolshevik visions of the future as a forced continuation of Russia’s orientation towards the Western model. Having studied the debates of Russian intellectuals in the 19th century—especially those between Westerners and Slavophiles—Berdyaev began his monograph with the premise: “What will interest me in the following pages is not so much the question: what has Russia been from the empirical point of view, as the question: what was the thought of the Creator about Russia, and my concern will be to arrive at a picture of the Russian people which can be grasped by the mind, to arrive at the ‘idea’ of it.”¹⁸ In the 1990s, the “Russian idea” became the answer to the question of Russia’s political identity and imperial mission.

Berdyaev’s exposition of the “Russian idea” amounts to a grand synthesis in which East and West, the universal and the particular, are connected, which for him also answered the question of the intention that “the Creator” had for Russia and the Russians. In the “Russian idea,” according to Berdyaev’s analysis, all the contradictions and one-sidedness of the West are sublated—“aufgehoben,” in the Hegelian sense—and combined into a whole. This, however, only

¹⁷ Vladimir Putin’s speech on the occasion of the annexation of Crimea, cited again here, is available on the Kremlin’s website at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603> [accessed 17 September 2023].

¹⁸ Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, New York, 1948, p. 1.

becomes visible from the end of history, which is why Russia cannot be grasped with the mind, but must be believed in. Dostoevsky and Soloviev are closest to Berdyaev in this respect, and so he writes, citing the two: “Russia is the great East–West; it is a whole immense world and, in its people, vast powers are confined. The Russian people are a people of the future; they will decide questions which the West has not yet the strength to decide, which it does not even pose in their full depth. But this consciousness is always accompanied by a pessimistic sense of Russian sin and of Russian darkness. Sometimes there is the feeling that Russia is falling into an abyss...”¹⁹ When Berdyaev wrote this, it was an émigré’s desperate struggle against the political reality of the Soviet Union and, at the same time, an expression of the émigré’s refusal to become a citizen of Western Europe. It was to be an idea that was widely taken up in Russia in the 1990s and interpreted as a salvation from the “senselessness” of the post-Soviet world.

With perestroika, the Soviet variant of Marxism, which assumed an unrestricted dominance of material relations over their ideological reflections, had fallen into a deep crisis. And with the crumbling of communism’s social order and the increasing orientation towards Western economic models, the feeling of Russia’s structural backwardness once again became a challenge to the political self-confidence of many Russians. After dispensing with Marxist social periodization, in which a socialist society always ranked *ahead of* a capitalist society and embodied the future, Russia’s developmental lag behind the West was once again on the agenda. An answer to this gap had to be found urgently if Russia wanted to assert any claim to helping shape the world order—at least if this claim was to go beyond the reference to nuclear weapons and delivery systems already in Russian hands. The question, therefore, was whether Russia could derive a mission for its imperial demands, or whether it ought to be content with invoking the history of the Soviet Union and Tsarist Russia. Unmistakably, the symbolism of the tsars was taken up again, from the double-headed eagle, which was adopted in filiation to the Byzantine Empire ruled by the Palaiologian dynasty, to the uniforms of the tsarist army, which are worn by the soldiers on duty at the Kremlin on official and ceremonial occasions. The symbolism of the past has become a proxy for the claim to a role in shaping world politics.

In order to find a response to this challenge, the theories of Eurasianism that emerged in the 1920s along with other constructions of a separate Russian culture between East and West were received and, as the Russian historian Jutta Scherrer believes, recycled in a philosophically

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 71; the second part of the quote refers to the situation in Russia under Bolshevik rule.

and literarily unsophisticated manner.²⁰ On the one hand, neo-Eurasianism simply ennoble geopolitical statements to the status of political and cultural arguments, and thus the claim to a leading role in world politics is derived from the sheer size of Russia's territory; on the other hand, the cultural theories (in Russia, the collective term "culturology" has become established for this) are primarily concerned with Russia's mediating role between East and West and the politically inclusionary position the country acquires as a result. Russia, according to this interpretation, belongs neither to the West nor to the East, understood as a Tatar steppe, but is rather an independent civilization which, due to its power to assimilate and integrate opposites, is purportedly destined to play a prominent role in the future world order. This interpretation has been stylized into Russia's Eurasian mission in opposition to the United States' alleged or actual claim to world domination.²¹

This combination of neo-Eurasianism and culturology yields a justification for a resurrected Russian empire that is, according to Scherrer, "connected neither to a narrow nationalism nor to an aggressive imperialism," thus distinguishing itself fundamentally from the previous imperial formations, those of the USA included. "Such an empire politically embodies the national diversity of Eurasia and internationally a 'postmodernism' whose conservative, religious, and ascetic values are superior to the ideals of progress in the West."²² By linking eschatology and geopolitics, Russia becomes a sacred actor leading the world to a different destiny than that of the materialistic increase in prosperity, which is the only thing the West purportedly has to offer.

Anti-materialism and a specifically Russian spirituality, which has its institutional housing in the Orthodox Church, are ideas that go back a long way in Russian intellectual history and can already be found in Dostoevsky's political essays, certainly in connection with the claim to an imperial supremacy that Dostoevsky asserts over Europe. In the short essay "Something on Political Questions" he predicts that "the great powers in Europe will be destroyed for one very simple reason: they will all be rendered impotent and undermined by the unsatisfied democratic aspirations of an immense part of their own lower-class subjects—their proletariat and their paupers. This simply cannot happen in Russia: our people are content [...] And therefore there

²⁰ Scherrer, *Kulturologie*, S. 127–151.

²¹ Scherrer, *Kulturologie*, p. 138.

²² Scherrer, *Kulturologie*, p. 139.

will remain but one colossus on the continent of Europe-Russia. [...] The future of Europe belongs to Russia.”²³

The first step in this direction, Dostoevsky predicts, will consist “in the uniting of all of Slavdom, so to say, under the wing of Russia,” and the second step will be the inclusion of Constantinople in the Russian Empire: “Constantinople must, sooner or later, be ours ...”²⁴ However, both goals are not to be pursued by military force and warlike conquest; rather, both objectives will be bestowed upon Russia—of their own accord, as it were—in the wake of the decline of Europe and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Russia just needs to be patient; soon it will be the universal heir to a Europe that is doomed owing to its own internal conflicts. The idea of Russian domination in and over Europe is thus by no means new; it dates back to the 19th century. In Dostoevsky’s case, and still today, the idea is rooted in a sense of resentment. The imperial mission that Dostoevsky attributes to the Russians is that of a servant of all humanity. He does not say what this service consists of.

As is well known, things turned out quite differently than Dostoevsky expected: Nowhere else in Europe was the revolutionary overthrow as radical and violent as in Russia, and the close ties between the people and the tsar, which Dostoevsky repeatedly invoked, proved to be extremely fragile at the end of the First World War. From the perspective of the 1990s, following Dostoevsky’s logic, the end of the tsarist empire and the era of Bolshevism in Russia could be seen as a detour for which the “westerniser Lenin” and his followers were responsible. Now, however, the legacy of old Russia is once again being taken up in order to bring Dostoevsky’s prophecy to fruition.

Thus, in a sense, in his essay on *The Russian Question at the End of the 20th Century* Alexander Solzhenitsyn followed Dostoevsky’s lead. His work takes the Russian history of the 18th and 19th centuries to task for its policy of interfering in European affairs, and he laments Russia’s entanglement in inner-European trade, calling for Russia to retreat into itself and to exercise self-moderation when using political power. After centuries of excessive expectations, Russia’s search for an identity should now be determined beyond imperialism and at a distance from politics. According to this view, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which had expanded far into Central Europe, was not a loss, but rather offered the opportunity for a long period of self-reflection, in which the Russians would be at one with themselves again, after an imperial history that had led

²³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer’s Diary* (Volume 1, 1873–1876), translated and annotated by Kenneth Lantz, Evanston, 1993, p. 452 (translation modified).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 527.

to so much bloodshed in the (Russian) centre, which was largely to the benefit of the (non-Russian) periphery.²⁵ Yet Solzhenitsyn considered Russian expansion necessary and justified only in one area: the domination of the Black Sea, which he claimed was “vital” for Russia.²⁶ However, from the basic thrust of his considerations, it can be assumed that Solzhenitsyn would have rejected a violent conquest of this space such as Putin began from 2014 onwards. For Solzhenitsyn, the question of how else a Ukraine that is striving towards the West, towards Europe, could be returned to Russia remains open.

These considerations could have turned into a thoroughly appealing mission for a renewed Russian empire if the development had only been politically undisturbed. After all, the multi-ethnicity of the “Russian Federation”²⁷ would have offered a solution to the problems of stability in areas in which the various settlements do not allow for a congruence of ethnicity or nation and statehood, or in areas where the ethnic groups are too small and too weak to form their own statehood. However, in the two Chechen wars, and especially in the second, in which Russia, now ruled by Vladimir Putin, brutally suppressed any resistance that invoked its own traditional religious identity,²⁸ this idea of Russia as a power of integration and peaceful coexistence was already called into question, and the acts of war against Ukraine in 2014 as well as Russia’s war of annihilation against its southwestern neighbour since 24 February 2022 turned into a political disaster for Russia’s neo-imperial mission in its Eurasian and culturological variant. Even the brutal actions of the Russian military while intervening in the Syrian civil war hardly suggest that the Russian government intends to orient itself towards the idea of a peaceful integration of differences and opponents. Putin has literally destroyed the mission of the empire he is striving for in his attempt to rebuild it. As a result, he is left with only an expansionist imperial narrative and the brutal practice of subjugation.

²⁵ Solschenitsyn, *The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century*, New York, 1995, pp. 80 ff.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27, 47.

²⁷ The German rendering here of the Российская Федерация is untranslatable. The German neologism “rusländisch” (based on the Russian российский) emphasizes citizenship regardless of ethnicity, whereas the German term “russisch” (based on the Russian русский) suggests ethnicity. English has no equivalent pair of terms.

²⁸ See the reports on the violence unleashed in both Chechen wars published in Juan Goytisolo, *Landschaften eines Krieges*, Frankfurt, 1995, and in Florian Hassel (Ed.), *Der Krieg im Schatten: Rußland und Tschetschenien*, Frankfurt am Main, 2003.

The U.S. Narrative

But (so the oft repeated objection) is the United States in a better position after the failure of its military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq and the two major moral stains on its fight against terrorism, the Guantanamo Bay detention camp in Cuba and the Abu Ghraib torture centre in Iraq? Here, too, the imperial mission has been contradicted by practical politics. Initially, the global spread of democratic participation, individual freedom, and material prosperity was the central narrative of the American imperial mission, and the spread of these three promises was not to be carried out using *hard power*—massive political pressure and potentially even military force—but with *soft power*, i.e., with cultural or ideological power that was supported by Hollywood movies and the attraction of the American way of life. The use of military force was to be consistently limited to those cases in which the United States or one of its allies had been attacked, as was the case during World War II, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, or in Vietnam, when the US-held regime of the South Vietnamese dictator Ngo Dinh Diem was attacked from the north of the divided country, or in the attack of September 11, 2001, when the American mainland was targeted by Islamist terrorists. But then, with its interventions from Panama to Afghanistan and Iraq, the US overstretched the concept of defence to such an extent that it became an arbitrary justification for military intervention around the world. The operational actions of the USA during George W. Bush's presidency were thus at odds with the nation's imperial mission.

It was and is the fear of decline—of economic and political decline—that dominates the narrative of the global political role of the United States: the search for an answer to the question of how to maintain its place at the top of the powers with global influence. This is a structurally different challenge than in the case of Russia, where it is a question of how to counter the fear of being “eternally” backward and second-rate. (...)