

Russia: Are Putin's views fascist?

Saturday 5 November 2022, by [MIROVALEV Mansur](#) (Date first published: 26 October 2022).

The Russian leader often evokes Ivan Ilyin, a philosopher who praised Mussolini and Hitler, but analysts are divided on Putin's own ideology.

The Kremlin's master concluded one of his most fateful addresses with a quote from a philosopher barely known outside Russia.

"I'd like to end my speech with the words of a true Russian patriot, Ivan Alexandrovich Ilyin, 'If I consider Russia my motherland, it means that I love, contemplate and think the Russian way, I sing and speak Russian'," Russian President Vladimir Putin told politicians on September 30.

The quote seemed to befit the occasion - Putin was announcing the annexation of four Ukrainian regions as an effort to consolidate Russians around his faltering war.

For years, Putin has been quoting, lionising and promoting Ilyin, who was born in tsarist Russia in 1883 and died in post-WWII Switzerland in 1954.

But he failed to mention Ilyin's political preferences and ideological trajectory.

Some scholars point out that Ilyin's works influenced Putin's push to transform Russia's post-perestroika flawed yet functioning democracy into a bellwether of militant neoconservatism that started this century's bloodiest war in Europe.

"There is a fair amount of evidence that Putin admires Ilyin's work and ideas," Yoshiko Herrera, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who studied Ilyin's works and their influence on the Kremlin's current narrative, told Al Jazeera.

"There are various strands in Ilyin's work that might be attractive to Putin, namely the emphasis on a strong state, autocracy and Russian nationalism," she said.

And Ilyin's rejection of the very idea of Ukraine's statehood and independence, political or cultural, helps Putin justify the continuing war.

"Something relevant for recent years is Ilyin's anti-Ukrainian views ... because the denial of Ukrainian nationhood and sovereignty is the key idea underpinning Putin's war on Ukraine," she said.

'Healthy' fascism

A century ago, in 1922, a Bolshevik trial sentenced Ilyin, a vehemently anti-Communist scholar of German philosophy, to death.

The sentence followed six arrests - but was cancelled by Soviet founder Vladimir Lenin, who was familiar with Ilyin's book on philosopher Georg Hegel, which is still seen as groundbreaking.

Ilyin found himself on board the “philosopher’s ship” that left Russia with 140 expelled intellectuals. Like tens of thousands of Russian emigres, he settled in Berlin.

He rose to become an outspoken ideologue of the monarchist White Movement – a loose grouping of anti-Communist forces whose main mouthpiece, *The Bell* magazine, he edited.

After a 1925 trip to Italy, Ilyin championed Benito Mussolini’s fascist ideology – calling it “a healthy phenomenon during the advance of leftist chaos”.

Ilyin even envied the fact that Italians, not Russians, invented fascism that would soon inspire German Nazis.

“Ilyin was utterly sad that the ideas of fascism were born not in Russia or among White Russian emigres, where he thought they were natural,” author Sergei Tarshevsky wrote in July in a column for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

In 1933, Ilyin hailed Adolf Hitler’s rise to power which prevented the transformation of Germany into a pro-Soviet Communist state.

“What has Hitler done? He stopped the process of Bolshevization of Germany and did a greatest favor to all of Europe,” Ilyin wrote.

And although Ilyin had a falling out with the Nazis and moved to Switzerland, his belief in fascism remained unshattered.

“Italian fascism expressed in its own, Roman way the things that Russia had for centuries been standing on,” he wrote in 1948.

Even in the smouldering ruins of post-WWII Europe, Ilyin considered the amended ideology of fascism – with the addition of Orthodox Christian religiosity – the only right ideology for Russia after the (hypothetical at the time) fall of Communism.

Ilyin postulated that post-Communist Russia should be ruled by an omnipotent, idolised leader at the helm of a highly centralised state, where elections are nothing but a ritual confirming the public loyalty to the leader.

The actual voting results did not matter, according to Ilyin.

“We must reject blind faith in the number of votes and its political significance,” he wrote.

He seemed to be describing the Stalinist USSR – or perhaps today’s Russia.

Ilyin’s views starkly contradicted the official narrative in the Soviet Union, where the 1941–45 invasion of Nazi Germany and its allies killed 27 million people.

More than three decades after the Soviet collapse, Moscow’s “victory over Nazism” [remains Russia’s](#) main ideologem.

But it does not prevent Putin from reading a Nazi sympathiser.

Putin’s praise

“You know, I didn’t want to say that it was only Ivan Ilyin,” Putin told a 2021 political forum in response to a question about the thinkers who influenced him.

“But I read Ilyin, I still do, from time to time. His book is on my shelf,” he said.

Putin reportedly became a fan of Ilyin’s works in the early 1980s, when he served as a mid-level KGB spy in pro-Soviet East Germany.

The Soviets banned the writings of Ilyin and other Russian emigres, and an average Soviet citizen could end up in jail for years for merely owning a copy.

KGB officers were allowed to read banned works, but Putin’s interest in Ilyin was far from mainstream among his colleagues.

“Most of the banned works we were reading were pro-democratic,” Gennady Gudkov, an exiled opposition leader and former officer with the KGB and its main Russian successor, the Federal Security Service, told Al Jazeera.

Ilyin was by far not the only figure whose works influenced Putin.

“I think a person can find extreme views among Ilyin’s works and you could connect some of Ilyin’s writings to Putin, but I’m not sure that I think Putin is influenced per se by Ilyin, or whether Putin uses Ilyin to bolster some of his own dictatorial fantasies,” Herrera said.

Putin likes to quote thinkers from Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy to Abraham Lincoln.

He often refers to Pyotr Stolypin, a tsarist prime minister who conducted sweeping economic reforms at the time of Ilyin’s youth – and never hesitated to use violence to suppress the revolutionary movement in Russia.

Putin also believes in the unorthodox theories of historian Lev Gumilev, who claimed that civilisations rise and fall because of “bio-cosmic” mutations.

But in today’s Russia, while they are seen as outspoken figures, Ilyin is more obscure.

In 2005, when his second presidential term had just begun, Putin arranged to reinter Ilyin’s remnants.

They were reburied at the cemetery of Moscow’s ancient Sretensky Monastery, near the Red Square’s mausoleum, where Lenin’s mummy is still displayed.

A year later, Putin had Ilyin’s entire archive, including manuscripts and diaries, transferred to Russia from the United States.

In 2009, Putin laid a bouquet of vermilion roses on the new, granite tombstone on Ilyin’s grave that he had personally paid for.

The Russian president was accompanied by his reported confessor, Archimandrite Tikhon, an ultranationalist monarchist who lobbied for the decriminalisation of domestic violence.

Both were drenched in the rain, but didn’t rush to leave.

“Despite a heavy rain, Putin spent a long time telling Tikhon about the thinker he reveres,” one news report said of the ceremony.

Thanks to Putin, Ilyin became “fashionable” in the halls of political and spiritual power.

In 2007, future president and premier Dmitri Medvedev wrote a preface to the reprint of two works by Ilyin.

All 10,000 copies were donated to libraries throughout Russia.

The reprint didn't include Ilyin's works on fascism.

Moscow Patriarch Kirill, foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and former chief ideologue Vladislav Surkov have often quoted Ilyin in their speeches and writings.

Oscar-winning filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov made a 45-minute-long documentary about Ilyin that repeatedly aired on Kremlin-controlled television networks.

"He was a prophet philosopher," Mikhalkov said in the documentary. "He prophesied the USSR's future after World War II, when Bolshevism will have fallen, with tragic precision."

In 2014, the Kremlin instructed key officials and members of the ruling United Russia party to read Ilyin's work titled *Our Tasks*, the *Kommersant* daily reported.

"All [the Kremlin's] efforts in the past 15 years were focused on giving a very dubious historic figure an image of a 'truly Russian philosopher,' an exemplary statesman and a true Russian patriot," editor and political analyst Anton Barbashin wrote in 2018.

Checking the criteria

Putin was increasingly guided by Ilyin's political ideas when reshaping Russia's political landscape - and biting off parts of Ukraine, according to a renowned US expert on totalitarian ideologies.

"Mr Putin has relied on Ilyin's authority at every turning point in Russian politics - from his return to power in 2012 to the decision to intervene in Ukraine in 2013 and the annexation of Ukrainian territory in 2014," Timothy Snyder, a history professor at Yale University, wrote in 2016.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin uses the term "fascism" to lambast Russia's enemies, imaginary or real.

Kremlin-controlled media demonises Ukraine as an evil fascist nation or Nazi stronghold that cold-bloodedly conducts a "genocide" of Russian-speaking Ukrainians.

Shortly after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine began, Yale's Snyder published an essay titled, *We Should Say It. Russia Is Fascist*.

The nation Putin has been ruling for 22 years checks most of the criteria historians apply to fascism, Snyder claimed.

"It has a cult around a single leader, Vladimir Putin. It has a cult of the dead, organised around World War II. It has a myth of a past golden age of imperial greatness, to be restored by a war of healing violence - the murderous war on Ukraine," he said.

"A time traveller from the 1930s would have no difficulty identifying the Putin regime as fascist," he said.

Some scholars disagree.

"Snyder is wrong," Nikolay Mitrokhin, a Russia researcher with Germany's Bremen University, told Al Jazeera.

Russia doesn't meet the criteria of a fascist state - there is no ideological party, no hysterical cult of the leader, and no revolutionary new regime juxtaposed to the old one.

Instead, in Russia, "there is an aggressive, imperialist, authoritarian state with a ruling junta", Mitrokhin said.

Some observers, however, already compare Russia's economy with fascist Italy's.

Both attempted to launch a quasi-state capitalism, placed their economic bets on large companies, elevated the state's role in the distribution of resources, and relied on "buying" electoral loyalty with social and infrastructure projects, Kyiv-based analyst Aleksey Kushch said.

"This is an original Russian neo-fascism," he told Al Jazeera.

'He stole our ideology'

Putin's tilt towards neoconservative nationalism became apparent in 2012.

It followed the largest protests in Russia's post-Soviet history, when hundreds of thousands rallied to protest against a rigged parliamentary vote and Putin's return to the Kremlin for a third presidency.

The pivot became obvious after the 2014 annexation of Crimea as the Kremlin incorporated elements of the far-right agenda and began forging a militantly anti-Western, isolationist ideology.

"The nationalist rhetoric has always been present in the Kremlin's political discourse, but of course, it has become more swaggering, insolent, bold after Crimea," Andrei Kolesnikov of the Moscow Carnegie Center, a think-tank, [told Al Jazeera](#) in 2015.

Seasoned Russian nationalists call it appropriation - amid a crackdown on dozens of domestic far-right groups that mushroomed in the early 2000s.

"The Russian government raises the banner with the ideas we had been fighting for until 2014," Rex, who is among a group of fugitive Russian far-right nationalists who have [joined the Ukrainian military](#), told Al Jazeera.

An outspoken Russian intellectual sees the Kremlin's current ideology as fascist and sees it as an epitome of moral degradation of the entire society.

"Fascism is not an ideological, but moral development. This is the case of resentment, or slave mentality, when people consider themselves offended, morally inadequate for a long time, and begin to revenge the entire world based on this [resentment]," writer and poet Dmitry Bykov told Radio Liberty in April.

But Putin's apparent adherence to the fascist ideology may not be just verbal.

The atrocities allegedly committed by Russian troops in Ukraine resemble the tactics of "total war" and genocide Hitler prescribed to his troops and allies.

Several times over the past eight months, Putin has ordered the indiscriminate bombing of residential areas - from Kyiv to Kharkiv to Mariupol.

Looking ahead, the destruction of key infrastructure sites will interrupt heating and power supply to millions of Ukrainians ahead of a cold winter.

And as Russian forces keep losing ground in Ukraine, some Kremlin figures describe the war as an existential confrontation with the collective West.

The West wants to “liquidate Russia as an independent, sovereign state,” Sergey Kirienko, former prime minister and current deputy head of the Kremlin’s administration, told the Itar Tass news agency on Sunday.

He seems to be echoing Ilyin - who wrote that in the case of Ukraine’s independence from Russia, the smaller neighbour “will become a source of civil and international wars for centuries”.

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