

# Ivan Ilyin, Putin's Philosopher of Russian Fascism

*Ivan Ilyin provided a metaphysical and moral justification for political totalitarianism, which he expressed in practical outlines for a fascist state. Today, his ideas have been revived and celebrated by Vladimir Putin.*

Timothy Snyder, NYRB, March 16, 2018

*"The fact of the matter is that fascism is a redemptive excess of patriotic arbitrariness." —Ivan Ilyin, 1927*

*"My prayer is like a sword. And my sword is like a prayer." —Ivan Ilyin, 1927*

*"Politics is the art of identifying and neutralizing the enemy." —Ivan Ilyin, 1948*

The Russian looked Satan in the eye, put God on the psychoanalyst's couch, and understood that his nation could redeem the world. An agonized God told the Russian a story of failure. In the beginning was the Word, purity and perfection, and the Word was God. But then God made a youthful mistake. He created the world to complete himself, but instead soiled himself, and hid in shame. God's, not Adam's, was the original sin, the release of the imperfect. Once people were in the world, they apprehended facts and experienced feelings that could not be reassembled to what had been God's mind. Each individual thought or passion deepened the hold of Satan on the world.

And so the Russian, a philosopher, understood history as a disgrace. Nothing that had happened since creation was of significance. The world was a meaningless farrago of fragments. The more humans sought to understand it, the more sinful it became. Modern society, with its pluralism and its civil society, deepened the flaws of the world and kept God in his exile. God's one hope was that a righteous nation would follow a Leader into political totality, and thereby begin a repair of the world that might in turn redeem the divine. Because the unifying principle of the Word was the only good in the universe, any means that might bring about its return were justified.

Thus this Russian philosopher, whose name was Ivan Ilyin, came to imagine a Russian Christian fascism. Born in 1883, he finished a dissertation on God's worldly failure just before the Russian Revolution of 1917. Expelled from his homeland in 1922 by the Soviet power he despised, he embraced the cause of Benito Mussolini and completed an apology for political violence in 1925. In German and Swiss exile, he wrote in the 1920s and 1930s for White Russian exiles who had fled after defeat in the Russian civil war, and in the 1940s and 1950s for future Russians who would see the end of the Soviet power.

A tireless worker, Ilyin produced about twenty books in Russian, and another twenty in German. Some of his work has a rambling and commonsensical character, and it is easy to find tensions and contradictions. One current of thought that is coherent over the decades, however, is his metaphysical and moral justification for political totalitarianism, which he expressed in practical outlines for a fascist state. A crucial concept was "law" or "legal consciousness" (*pravosoznanie*). For the young Ilyin, writing before the Revolution, law embodied the hope that Russians would partake in a universal consciousness that would allow Russia to create a modern state. For the mature, counter-revolutionary Ilyin, a particular consciousness ("heart" or "soul," not "mind") permitted Russians to experience the arbitrary claims of power as law. Though he died forgotten, in 1954, Ilyin's work was revived after collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and guides the men who rule Russia today.

The Russian Federation of the early twenty-first century is a new country, formed in 1991 from the territory of the Russian republic of the Soviet Union. It is smaller than the old Russian Empire, and separated from it in time by the intervening seven decades of Soviet history. Yet the Russian Federation of today does resemble the Russian Empire of Ilyin's youth in one crucial respect: it has not established the rule of law as the

principle of government. The trajectory in Ilyin's understanding of law, from hopeful universalism to arbitrary nationalism, was followed in the discourse of Russian politicians, including Vladimir Putin. Because Ilyin found ways to present the failure of the rule of law as Russian virtue, Russian kleptocrats use his ideas to portray economic inequality as national innocence. In the last few years, Vladimir Putin has also used some of Ilyin's more specific ideas about geopolitics in his effort to translate the task of Russian politics from the pursuit of reform at home to the export of virtue abroad. By transforming international politics into a discussion of "spiritual threats," Ilyin's works have helped Russian elites to portray the Ukraine, Europe, and the United States as existential dangers to Russia.

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Ivan Ilyin was a philosopher who confronted Russian problems with German thinkers. This was typical of the time and place. He was child of the Silver Age, the late empire of the Romanov dynasty. His father was a Russian nobleman, his mother a German Protestant who had converted to Orthodoxy. As a student at Moscow between 1901 and 1906, Ilyin's real subject was philosophy, which meant the ethical thought of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). For the neo-Kantians, who then held sway in universities across Europe as well as in Russia, humans differed from the rest of creation by a capacity for reason that permitted meaningful choices. Humans could then freely submit to law, since they could grasp and accept its spirit.

Law was then the great object of desire of the Russian thinking classes. Russian students of law, perhaps more than their European colleagues, could see it as a source of political transformation. Law seemed to offer the antidote to the ancient Russian problem of *proizvol*, of arbitrary rule by autocratic tsars. Even as a hopeful young man, however, Ilyin struggled to see the Russian people as the creatures of reason Kant imagined. He waited expectantly for a grand revolt that would hasten the education of the Russian masses. When the Russo-Japanese War created conditions for a revolution in 1905, Ilyin defended the right to free assembly. With his girlfriend, Natalia Vokach, he translated a German anarchist pamphlet into Russian. The tsar was forced to concede a new constitution in 1906, which created a new Russian parliament. Though chosen in a way that guaranteed the power of the empire's landed classes, the parliament had the authority to legislate. The tsar dismissed parliament twice, and then illegally changed the electoral system to ensure that it was even more conservative. It was impossible to see the new constitution as having brought the rule of law to Russia.

Employed to teach law by the university in 1909, Ilyin published a beautiful article in both Russian (1910) and German (1912) on the conceptual differences between law and power. Yet how to make law functional in practice and resonant in life? Kant seemed to leave open a gap between the spirit of law and the reality of autocracy. G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831), however, offered hope by proposing that this and other painful tensions would be resolved by time. History, as a hopeful Ilyin read Hegel, was the gradual penetration of Spirit (*Geist*) into the world. Each age transcended the previous one and brought a crisis that promised the next one. The beastly masses will come to resemble the enlightened friends, ardors of daily life will yield to political order.

The philosopher who understands this message becomes the vehicle of Spirit, always a tempting prospect. Like other Russian intellectuals of his own and previous generations, the young Ilyin was drawn to Hegel, and in 1912 proclaimed a "Hegelian renaissance." Yet, just as the immense Russian peasantry had given him second thoughts about the ease of communicating law to Russian society, so his experience of modern urban life left him doubtful that historical change was only a matter of Spirit. He found Russians, even those of his own class and milieu in Moscow, to be disgustingly corporeal. In arguments about philosophy and politics in the 1910s, he accused his opponents of "sexual perversion."

In 1913, Ilyin worried that perversion was a national Russian syndrome, and proposed Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) as Russia's savior. In Ilyin's reading of Freud, civilization arose from a collective agreement to suppress basic drives. The individual paid a psychological price for sacrifice of his nature to culture. Only through long consultations on the couch of the psychoanalyst could unconscious experience surface into awareness. Psychoanalysis therefore offered a very different portrait of thought than did the Hegelian philosophy that Ilyin was then studying. Even as Ilyin was preparing his dissertation on Hegel, he offered himself as the pioneer of Russia's national psychotherapy, travelling with Natalia to Vienna in May 1914 for

sessions with Freud. Thus the outbreak of World War I found Ilyin in Vienna, the capital of the Habsburg monarchy, now one of Russia's enemies.

"My inner Germans," Ilyin wrote to a friend in 1915, "trouble me more than the outer Germans," the German and Habsburg realms making war against the Russian Empire. The "inner German" who helped Ilyin to master the others was the philosopher Edmund Husserl, with whom he had studied in Göttingen in 1911. Husserl (1859–1938), the founder of the school of thought known as phenomenology, tried to describe the method by which the philosopher thinks himself into the world. The philosopher sought to forget his own personality and prior assumptions, and tried to experience a subject on its own terms. As Ilyin put it, the philosopher must mentally possess (*perezhit'*) the object of inquiry until he attains self-evident and exhaustive clarity (*ochevidnost*).

Husserl's method was simplified by Ilyin into a "philosophical act" whereby the philosopher can still the universe and anything in it—other philosophers, the world, God— by stilling his own mind. Like an Orthodox believer contemplating an icon, Ilyin believed (in contrast to Husserl) that he could see a metaphysical reality through a physical one. As he wrote his dissertation about Hegel, he perceived the divine subject in a philosophical text, and fixed it in place. Hegel meant God when he wrote *Spirit*, concluded Ilyin, and Hegel was wrong to see motion in history. God could not realize himself in the world, since the substance of God was irreconcilably different from the substance of the world. Hegel could not show that every fact was connected to a principle, that every accident was part of a design, that every detail was part of a whole, and so on. God had initiated history and then been blocked from further influence.

Ilyin was quite typical of Russian intellectuals in his rapid and enthusiastic embrace of contradictory German ideas. In his dissertation he was able, thanks to his own very specific understanding of Husserl, to bring some order to his "inner Germans." Kant had suggested the initial problem for a Russian political thinker: how to establish the rule of law. Hegel had seemed to provide a solution, a Spirit advancing through history. Freud had redefined Russia's problem as sexual rather than spiritual. Husserl allowed Ilyin to transfer the responsibility for political failure and sexual unease to God. Philosophy meant the contemplation that allowed contact with God and began God's cure. The philosopher had taken control and all was in view: other philosophers, the world, God. Yet, even after contact was made with the divine, history continued, "the current of events" continued to flow.

Indeed, even as Ilyin contemplated God, men were killing and dying by the millions on battlefields across Europe. Ilyin was writing his dissertation as the Russian Empire gained and then lost territory on the Eastern Front of World War I. In February 1917, the tsarist regime was replaced by a new constitutional order. The new government tottered as it continued a costly war. That April, Germany sent Vladimir Lenin to Russia in a sealed train, and his Bolsheviks carried out a second revolution in November, promising land to peasants and peace to all. Ilyin was meanwhile trying to assemble the committee so he could defend his dissertation. By the time he did so, in 1918, the Bolsheviks were in power, their Red Army was fighting a civil war, and the Cheka was defending revolution through terror.

World War I gave revolutionaries their chance, and so opened the way for counter-revolutionaries as well. Throughout Europe, men of the far right saw the Bolshevik Revolution as a certain kind of opportunity; and the drama of revolution and counter-revolution was played out, with different outcomes, in Germany, Hungary, and Italy. Nowhere was the conflict so long, bloody, and passionate as in the lands of the former Russian Empire, where civil war lasted for years, brought famine and pogroms, and cost about as many lives as World War I itself. In Europe in general, but in Russia in particular, the terrible loss of life, the seemingly endless strife, and the fall of empire brought a certain plausibility to ideas that might otherwise have remained unknown or seemed irrelevant. Without the war, Leninism would likely be a footnote in the history of Marxist thought; without Lenin's revolution, Ilyin might not have drawn right-wing political conclusions from his dissertation.

Lenin and Ilyin did not know each other, but their encounter in revolution and counter-revolution was nevertheless uncanny. Lenin's patronymic was "Ilyich" and he wrote under the pseudonym "Ilyin," and the

real Ilyin reviewed some of that pseudonymous work. When Ilyin was arrested by the Cheka as an opponent of the revolution, Lenin intervened on his behalf as a gesture of respect for Ilyin's philosophical work. The intellectual interaction between the two men, which began in 1917 and continues in Russia today, began from a common appreciation of Hegel's promise of totality. Both men interpreted Hegel in radical ways, agreeing with one another on important points such as the need to destroy the middle classes, disagreeing about the final form of the classless community.

Lenin accepted with Hegel that history was a story of progress through conflict. As a Marxist, he believed that the conflict was between social classes: the bourgeoisie that owned property and the proletariat that enabled profits. Lenin added to Marxism the proposal that the working class, though formed by capitalism and destined to seize its achievements, needed guidance from a disciplined party that understood the rules of history. In 1917, Lenin went so far as to claim that the people who knew the rules of history also knew when to break them— by beginning a socialist revolution in the Russian Empire, where capitalism was weak and the working class tiny. Yet Lenin never doubted that there was a good human nature, trapped by historical conditions, and therefore subject to release by historical action.

Marxists such as Lenin were atheists. They thought that by Spirit, Hegel meant God or some other theological notion, and replaced Spirit with society. Ilyin was not a typical Christian, but he believed in God. Ilyin agreed with Marxists that Hegel meant God, and argued that Hegel's God had created a ruined world. For Marxists, private property served the function of an original sin, and its dissolution would release the good in man. For Ilyin, God's act of creation was itself the original sin. There was never a good moment in history, and no intrinsic good in humans. The Marxists were right to hate the middle classes, and indeed did not hate them enough. Middle-class "civil society" entrenches plural interests that confound hopes for an "overpowering national organization" that God needs. Because the middle classes block God, they must be swept away by a classless national community. But there is no historical tendency, no historical group, that will perform this labor. The grand transformation from Satanic individuality to divine totality must begin somewhere beyond history.

**According to Ilyin, liberation would arise not from understanding history, but from eliminating it. Since the earthly was corrupt and the divine unattainable, political rescue would come from the realm of fiction. In 1917, Ilyin was still hopeful that Russia might become a state ruled by law. Lenin's revolution ensured that Ilyin henceforth regarded his own philosophical ideas as political. Bolshevism had proven that God's world was as flawed as Ilyin had maintained. What Ilyin would call "the abyss of atheism" of the new regime was the final confirmation of the flaws of world, and of the power of modern ideas to reinforce them.**

After he departed Russia, Ilyin would maintain that humanity needed heroes, outsized characters from beyond history, capable of willing themselves to power. In his dissertation, this politics was implicit in the longing for a missing totality and the suggestion that the nation might begin its restoration. It was an ideology awaiting a form and a name.

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Ilyin left Russia in 1922, the year the Soviet Union was founded. His imagination was soon captured by Benito Mussolini's March on Rome, the coup d'état that brought the world's first fascist regime. Ilyin was convinced that bold gestures by bold men could begin to undo the flawed character of existence. He visited Italy and published admiring articles about *Il Duce* while he was writing his book, *On the Use of Violence to Resist Evil* (1925). If Ilyin's dissertation had laid groundwork for a metaphysical defense of fascism, this book was a justification of an emerging system. The dissertation described the lost totality unleashed by an unwitting God; second book explained the limits of the teachings of God's Son. Having understood the trauma of God, Ilyin now "looked Satan in the eye."

Thus famous teachings of Jesus, as rendered in the Gospel of Mark, take on unexpected meanings in Ilyin's interpretations. "Judge not," says Jesus, "that ye not be judged." That famous appeal to reflection continues:

For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the

beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam *is* in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

For Ilyin, these were the words of a failed God with a doomed Son. In fact, a righteous man did not reflect upon his own deeds or attempt to see the perspective of another; he contemplated, recognized absolute good and evil, and named the enemies to be destroyed. The proper interpretation of the "judge not" passage was that every day was judgment day, and that men would be judged for not killing God's enemies when they had the chance. In God's absence, Ilyin determined who those enemies were.

Perhaps Jesus' most remembered commandment is to love one's enemy, from the Gospel of Matthew: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." Ilyin maintained that the opposite was meant. Properly understood, love meant totality. It did not matter whether one individual tries to love another individual. The individual only loved if he was totally subsumed in the community. To be immersed in such love was to struggle "against the enemies of the divine order on earth." Christianity actually meant the call of the right-seeing philosopher to apply decisive violence in the name of love. Anyone who failed to accept this logic was himself an agent of Satan: "He who opposes the chivalrous struggle against the devil is himself the devil."

Thus theology becomes politics. The democracies did not oppose Bolshevism, but enabled it, and must be destroyed. The only way to prevent the spread of evil was to crush middle classes, eradicate their civil society, and transform their individualist and universalist understanding of law into a consciousness of national submission. Bolshevism was no antidote to the disease of the middle classes, but rather the full irruption of their disease. Soviet and European governments must be swept away by violent coups d'état.

Ilyin used the word *Spirit (Dukh)* to describe the inspiration of fascists. The fascist seizure of power, he wrote, was an "act of salvation." The fascist is the true redeemer, since he grasps that it is the enemy who must be sacrificed. Ilyin took from Mussolini the concept of a "chivalrous sacrifice" that fascists make in the blood of others. (Speaking of the Holocaust in 1943, Heinrich Himmler would praise his SS-men in just these terms.)

Ilyin understood his role as a Russian intellectual as the propagation of fascist ideas in a particular Russian idiom. In a poem in the first number of a journal he edited between 1927 and 1930, he provided the appropriate lapidary motto: "My prayer is like a sword. And my sword is like a prayer." Ilyin dedicated his huge 1925 book *On the Use of Violence to Resist Evil* to the Whites, the men who had resisted the Bolshevik Revolution. It was meant as a guide to their future.

What seemed to trouble Ilyin most was that Italians and not Russians had invented fascism: "Why did the Italians succeed where we failed?" Writing of the future of Russian fascism in 1927, he tried to establish Russian primacy by considering the White resistance to the Bolsheviks as the pre-history of the fascist movement as a whole. The White movement had also been "deeper and broader" than fascism because it had preserved a connection to religion and the need for totality. Ilyin proclaimed to "my White brothers, the fascists" that a minority must seize power in Russia. The time would come. The "White Spirit" was eternal.

Ilyin's proclamation of a fascist future for Russia in the 1920s was the absolute negation of his hopes in the 1910s that Russia might become a rule-of-law state. "The fact of the matter," wrote Ilyin, "is that fascism is a redemptive excess of patriotic arbitrariness." Arbitrariness (*proizvol*), a central concept in all modern Russian political discussions, was the bugbear of all Russian reformers seeking improvement through law. Now *proizvol* was patriotic. The word for "redemptive" (*spasytel'nii*), is another central Russian concept. It is the adjective Russian Orthodox Christians might apply to the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary, the death of the One for the salvation of the many. Ilyin uses it to mean the murder of outsiders so that the nation could undertake a project of total politics that might later redeem a lost God.

In one sentence, two universal concepts, law and Christianity, are undone. A spirit of lawlessness replaces the spirit of the law; a spirit of murder replaces a spirit of mercy.

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Although Ilyin was inspired by fascist Italy, his home as a political refugee between 1922 and 1938 was Germany. As an employee of the Russian Scholarly Institute (*Russisches Wissenschaftliches Institut*), he was an academic civil servant. It was from Berlin that he observed the succession struggle after Lenin's death that brought Joseph Stalin to power. He then followed Stalin's attempt to transform the political victory of the Bolsheviks into a social revolution. In 1933, Ilyin published a long book, in German, on the famine brought by the collectivization of Soviet agriculture.

Writing in Russian for Russian émigrés, Ilyin was quick to praise Hitler's seizure of power in 1933. Hitler did well, in Ilyin's opinion, to have the rule of law suspended after the Reichstag Fire of February 1933. Ilyin presented Hitler, like Mussolini, as a Leader from beyond history whose mission was entirely defensive. "A reaction to Bolshevism had to come," wrote Ilyin, "and it came." European civilization had been sentenced to death, but "so long as Mussolini is leading Italy and Hitler is leading Germany, European culture has a stay of execution." Nazis embodied a "Spirit" (*Dukh*) that Russians must share.

According to Ilyin, Nazis were right to boycott Jewish businesses and blame Jews as a collectivity for the evils that had befallen Germany. Above all, Ilyin wanted to persuade Russians and other Europeans that Hitler was right to treat Jews as agents of Bolshevism. This "Judeobolshevik" idea, as Ilyin understood, was the ideological connection between the Whites and the Nazis. The claim that Jews were Bolsheviks and Bolsheviks were Jews was White propaganda during the Russian Civil War. Of course, most communists were not Jews, and the overwhelming majority of Jews had nothing to do with communism. The conflation of the two groups was not an error or an exaggeration, but rather a transformation of traditional religious prejudices into instruments of national unity. Judeobolshevism appealed to the superstitious belief of Orthodox Christian peasants that Jews guarded the border between the realms of good and evil. It shifted this conviction to modern politics, portraying revolution as hell and Jews as its gatekeepers. As in Ilyin's philosophy, God was weak, Satan was dominant, and the weapons of hell were modern ideas in the world.

**During and after the Russian Civil War, some of the Whites had fled to Germany as refugees. Some brought with them the foundational text of modern antisemitism, the fictional "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," and many others the conviction that a global Jewish conspiracy was responsible for their defeat. White Judeobolshevism, arriving in Germany in 1919 and 1920, completed the education of Adolf Hitler as an antisemite. Until that moment, Hitler had presented the enemy of Germany as Jewish capitalism. Once convinced that Jews were responsible for both capitalism and communism, Hitler could take the final step and conclude, as he did in *Mein Kampf*, that Jews were the source of all ideas that threatened the German people. In this important respect, Hitler was indeed a pupil of the Russian White movement. Ilyin, the main White ideologist, wanted the world to know that Hitler was right.**

As the 1930s passed, Ilyin began to doubt that Nazi Germany was advancing the cause of Russian fascism. This was natural, since Hitler regarded Russians as subhumans, and Germany supported European fascists only insofar as they were useful to the specific Nazi cause. Ilyin began to caution Russian Whites about Nazis, and came under suspicion from the German government. He lost his job and, in 1938, left Germany for Switzerland. He remained faithful, however, to his conviction that the White movement was anterior to Italian fascism and German National Socialism. In time, Russians would demonstrate a superior fascism.

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**From a safe Swiss vantage point near Zurich, Ilyin observed the outbreak of World War II. It was a confusing moment for both communists and their enemies, since the conflict began after the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany reached an agreement known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Its secret protocol, which divided East European territories between the two powers, was an alliance in all but name. In September 1939, both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union invaded Poland, their armies meeting in the middle. Ilyin believed that the Nazi-Soviet alliance would not last, since Stalin would betray Hitler. In 1941, the reverse took place, as the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union. Though Ilyin harbored reservations about the Nazis, he wrote of the German invasion of the USSR as a "judgment on Bolshevism." After the Soviet victory at Stalingrad in February 1943, when it became clear that Germany would likely lose the war, Ilyin changed**

his position again. Then, and in the years to follow, he would present the war as one of a series of Western attacks on Russian virtue.

Russian innocence was becoming one of Ilyin's great themes. As a concept, it completed Ilyin's fascist theory: **the world was corrupt; it needed redemption from a nation capable of total politics; that nation was unsoiled Russia.** As he aged, Ilyin dwelled on the Russian past, not as history, but as a cyclical myth of native virtue defended from external penetration. Russia was an immaculate empire, always under attack from all sides. **A small territory around Moscow became the Russian Empire, the largest country of all time, without ever attacking anyone. Even as it expanded, Russia was the victim, because Europeans did not understand the profound virtue it was defending by taking more land. In Ilyin's words, Russia has been subject to unceasing "continental blockade," and so its entire past was one of "self-defense." And so, "the Russian nation, since its full conversion to Christianity, can count nearly one thousand years of historical suffering."**

Although Ilyin wrote hundreds of tedious pages along these lines, he also made clear that it did not matter what had actually happened or what Russians actually did. That was meaningless history, those were mere facts. The truth about a nation, wrote Ilyin, was "pure and objective" regardless of the evidence, and the Russian truth was invisible and ineffable Godliness. Russia was not a country with individuals and institutions, even should it so appear, but an immortal living creature. "Russia is an organism of nature and the soul," it was a "living organism," a "living organic unity," and so on. **Ilyin wrote of "Ukrainians" within quotation marks, since in his view they were a part of the Russian organism. Ilyin was obsessed by the fear that people in the West would not understand this, and saw any mention of Ukraine as an attack on Russia. Because Russia is an organism, it "cannot be divided, only dissected."**

Ilyin's conception of Russia's political return to God required the abandonment not only of individuality and plurality, but also of humanity. The fascist language of organic unity, discredited by the war, remained central to Ilyin. In general, his thinking was not really altered by the war. He did not reject fascism, as did most of its prewar advocates, although he now did distinguish between what he regarded as better and worse forms of fascism. He did not partake in the general shift of European politics to the left, nor in the rehabilitation of democracy. Perhaps most importantly, he did not recognize that the age of European colonialism was passing. He saw Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal, then far-flung empires ruled by right-wing authoritarian regimes, as exemplary.

World War II was not a "judgment on Bolshevism," as Ilyin had imagined in 1941. Instead, the Red Army had emerged triumphant in 1945, Soviet borders had been extended west, and a new outer empire of replicate regimes had been established in Eastern Europe. The simple passage of time made it impossible to imagine in the 1940s, as Ilyin had in the 1920s, the members of the White emigration might someday return to power in Russia. Now he was writing their eulogies rather than their ideologies. What was needed instead was a blueprint for a post-Soviet Russia that would be legible in the future. Ilyin set about composing a number of constitutional proposals, as well as a shorter set of political essays. These last, published as *Our tasks (Nashi zadachi)*, began his intellectual revival in post-Soviet Russia.

These postwar recommendations bear an unmistakable resemblance to prewar fascist systems, and are consistent with the metaphysical and ethical legitimations of fascism present in Ilyin's major works. The "national dictator," predicted Ilyin, would spring from somewhere beyond history, from some fictional realm. This Leader (*Gosudar*) must be "sufficiently manly," like Mussolini. The note of fragile masculinity is hard to overlook. "Power comes all by itself," declared Ilyin, "to the strong man." People would bow before "the living organ of Russia." The Leader "hardens himself in just and manly service."

**In Ilyin's scheme, this Leader would be personally and totally responsible for every aspect of political life, as chief executive, chief legislator, chief justice, and commander of the military. His executive power is unlimited. Any "political selection" should take place "on a formally undemocratic basis." Democratic elections institutionalized the evil notion of individuality. "The principle of democracy," Ilyin wrote, "was the irresponsible human atom." Counting votes was to falsely accept "the mechanical and arithmetical understanding of politics." It followed that "we must reject blind faith in the number of votes and its**

**political significance.” Public voting with signed ballots will allow Russians to surrender their individuality. Elections were a ritual of submission of Russians before their Leader.**

The problem with prewar fascism, according to Ilyin, had been the one-party state. That was one party too many. Russia should be a zero-party state, in that no party should control the state or exercise any influence on the course of events. A party represents only a segment of society, and segmentation is what is to be avoided. Parties can exist, but only as traps for the ambitious or as elements of the ritual of electoral subservience. (Members of Putin’s party were sent the article that makes this point in 2014.) The same goes for civil society: it should exist as a simulacrum. Russians should be allowed to pursue hobbies and the like, but only within the framework of a total corporate structure that included all social organizations. The middle classes must be at the very bottom of the corporate structure, bearing the weight of the entire system. They are the producers and consumers of facts and feelings in a system where the purpose is to overcome factuality and sensuality.

“Freedom for Russia,” as Ilyin understood it (in a text selectively quoted by Putin in 2014), would not mean freedom for Russians as individuals, but rather freedom for Russians to understand themselves as parts of a whole. The political system must generate, as Ilyin clarified, “the organic-spiritual unity of the government with the people, and the people with the government.” The first step back toward the Word would be “the metaphysical identity of all people of the same nation.” The “the evil nature of the ‘sensual’” could be banished, and “the empirical variety of human beings” itself could be overcome.

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Russia today is a media-heavy authoritarian kleptocracy, not the religious totalitarian entity that Ilyin imagined. And yet, his concepts do help lift the obscurity from some of the more interesting aspects of Russian politics. Vladimir Putin, to take a very important example, is a post-Soviet politician who emerged from the realm of fiction. Since it is he who brought Ilyin’s ideas into high politics, his rise to power is part of Ilyin’s story as well.

Putin was an unknown when he was selected by post-Soviet Russia’s first president, Boris Yeltsin, to be prime minister in 1999. Putin was chosen by political casting call. Yeltsin’s intimates, carrying out what they called “Operation Successor,” asked themselves who the most popular character in Russian television was. Polling showed that this was the hero of a 1970s program, a Soviet spy who spoke German. This fit Putin, a former KGB officer who had served in East Germany. Right after he was appointed prime minister by Yeltsin in September 1999, Putin gained his reputation through a bloodier fiction. When apartment buildings in Russian cities began to explode, Putin blamed Muslims and began a war in Chechnya. Contemporary evidence suggests that the bombs might have been planted by Russia’s own security organization, the FSB. Putin was elected president in 2000, and served until 2008.

**In the early 2000s, Putin maintained that Russia could become some kind of rule-of-law state. Instead, he succeeded in bringing economic crime within the Russian state, transforming general corruption into official kleptocracy. Once the state became the center of crime, the rule of law became incoherent, inequality entrenched, and reform unthinkable. Another political story was needed. Because Putin’s victory over Russia’s oligarchs also meant control over their television stations, new media instruments were at hand. The Western trend towards infotainment was brought to its logical conclusion in Russia, generating an alternative reality meant to generate faith in Russian virtue but cynicism about facts. This transformation was engineered by Vladislav Surkov, the genius of Russian propaganda. He oversaw a striking move toward the world as Ilyin imagined it, a dark and confusing realm given shape only by Russian innocence. With the financial and media resources under control, Putin needed only, in the nice Russian term, to add the “spiritual resource.” And so, beginning in 2005, Putin began to rehabilitate Ilyin as a Kremlin court philosopher.**

That year, Putin began to cite Ilyin in his addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, and arranged for the reinterment of Ilyin’s remains in Russia. Then Surkov began to cite Ilyin. The propagandist accepted Ilyin’s idea that “Russian culture is the contemplation of the whole,” and summarizes his own work as the creation of a narrative of an innocent Russia surrounded by permanent hostility. Surkov’s enmity

toward factuality is as deep as Ilyin's, and like Ilyin, he tends to find theological grounds for it. Dmitry Medvedev, the leader of Putin's political party, recommended Ilyin's books to Russia's youth. Ilyin began to figure in the speeches of the leaders of Russia's tame opposition parties, the communists and the (confusingly-named, extreme-right) Liberal Democrats. These last few years, Ilyin has been cited by the head of the constitutional court, by the foreign minister, and by patriarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church.

After a four-year intermission between 2008 and 2012, during which Putin served as prime minister and allowed Medvedev to be president, Putin returned to the highest office. If Putin came to power in 2000 as hero from the realm of fiction, he returned in 2012 as the destroyer of the rule of law. In a minor key, the Russia of Putin's time had repeated the drama of the Russia of Ilyin's time. The hopes of Russian liberals for a rule-of-law state were again disappointed. Ilyin, who had transformed that failure into fascism the first time around, now had his moment. His arguments helped Putin transform the failure of his first period in office, the inability to introduce of the rule of law, into the promise for a second period in office, the confirmation of Russian virtue. **If Russia could not become a rule-of-law state, it would seek to destroy neighbors that had succeeded in doing so or that aspired to do so. Echoing one of the most notorious proclamations of the Nazi legal thinker Carl Schmitt, Ilyin wrote that politics "is the art of identifying and neutralizing the enemy." In the second decade of the twenty-first century, Putin's promises were not about law in Russia, but about the defeat of a hyper-legal neighboring entity.**

The European Union, the largest economy in the world and Russia's most important economic partner, is grounded on the assumption that international legal agreements provide the basis for fruitful cooperation among rule-of-law states. In late 2011 and early 2012, Putin made public a new ideology, based in Ilyin, defining Russia in opposition to this model of Europe. In an article in *Izvestiia* on October 3, 2011, Putin announced a rival Eurasian Union that would unite states that had failed to establish the rule of law. In *Nezavisimaja Gazeta* on January 23, 2012, Putin, citing Ilyin, presented integration among states as a matter of virtue rather than achievement. The rule of law was not a universal aspiration, but part of an alien Western civilization; Russian culture, meanwhile, united Russia with post-Soviet states such as Ukraine. In a third article, in *Moskovskie Novosti* on February 27, 2012, Putin drew the political conclusions. Ilyin had imagined that "Russia as a spiritual organism served not only all the Orthodox nations and not only all of the nations of the Eurasian landmass, but all the nations of the world." Putin predicted that Eurasia would overcome the European Union and bring its members into a larger entity that would extend "from Lisbon to Vladivostok."

Putin's offensive against the rule of law began with the manner of his reaccession to the office of president of the Russian Federation. The foundation of any rule-of-law state is a principle of succession, the set of rules that allow one person to succeed another in office in a manner that confirms rather than destroys the system. The way that Putin returned to power in 2012 destroyed any possibility that such a principle could function in Russia in any foreseeable future. He assumed the office of president, with a parliamentary majority, thanks to presidential and parliamentary elections that were ostentatiously faked, during protests whose participants he condemned as foreign agents.

In depriving Russia of any accepted means by which he might be succeeded by someone else and the Russian parliament controlled by another party but his, Putin was following Ilyin's recommendation. Elections had become a ritual, and those who thought otherwise were portrayed by a formidable state media as traitors. Sitting in a radio station with the fascist writer Alexander Prokhanov as Russians protested electoral fraud, Putin mused about what Ivan Ilyin would have to say about the state of Russia. "Can we say," asked Putin rhetorically, "that our country has fully recovered and healed after the dramatic events that have occurred to us after the Soviet Union collapsed, and that we now have a strong, healthy state? No, of course she is still quite ill; but here we must recall Ivan Ilyin: 'Yes, our country is still sick, but we did not flee from the bed of our sick mother.'"

The fact that Putin cited Ilyin in this setting is very suggestive, and that he knew this phrase suggests extensive reading. Be that as it may, the way that he cited it seems strange. Ilyin was expelled from the Soviet Union by the Cheka—the institution that was the predecessor of Putin's employer, the KGB. For Ilyin, it was the foundation of the USSR, not its dissolution, that was the Russian sickness. As Ilyin told his Cheka

interrogator at the time: “I consider Soviet power to be an inevitable historical outcome of the great social and spiritual disease which has been growing in Russia for several centuries.” Ilyin thought that KGB officers (of whom Putin was one) should be forbidden from entering politics after the end of the Soviet Union. Ilyin dreamed his whole life of a Soviet collapse.

Putin’s reinterment of Ilyin’s remains was a mystical release from this contradiction. Ilyin had been expelled from Russia by the Soviet security service; his corpse was reburied alongside the remains of its victims. Putin had Ilyin’s corpse interred at a monastery where the NKVD, the heir to the Cheka and the predecessor of the KGB, had interred the ashes of thousands of Soviet citizens executed in the Great Terror. When Putin later visited the site to lay flowers on Ilyin’s grave, he was in the company of an Orthodox monk who saw the NKVD executioners as Russian patriots and therefore good men. At the time of the reburial, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church was a man who had previously served the KGB as an agent. After all, Ilyin’s justification for mass murder was the same as that of the Bolsheviks: the defense of an absolute good. As critics of his second book in the 1920s put it, Ilyin was a “Chekist for God.” He was reburied as such, with all possible honors conferred by the Chekists and by the men of God—and by the men of God who were Chekists, and by the Chekists who were men of God.

Ilyin was returned, body and soul, to the Russia he had been forced to leave. And that very return, in its inattention to contradiction, in its disregard of fact, was the purest expression of respect for his legacy. To be sure, Ilyin opposed the Soviet system. Yet, once the USSR ceased to exist in 1991, it was history—and the past, for Ilyin, was nothing but cognitive raw material for a literature of eternal virtue. Modifying Ilyin’s views about Russian innocence ever so slightly, Russian leaders could see the Soviet Union not as a foreign imposition upon Russia, as Ilyin had, but rather as Russia itself, and so virtuous despite appearances. Any faults of the Soviet system became necessary Russian reactions to the prior hostility of the West.

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Questions about the influence of ideas in politics are very difficult to answer, and it would be needlessly bold to make of Ilyin’s writings the pillar of the Russian system. For one thing, Ilyin’s vast body of work admits multiple interpretations. As with Martin Heidegger, another student of Husserl who supported Hitler, it is reasonable to ask how closely a man’s political support of fascism relates to a philosopher’s work. Within Russia itself, Ilyin is not the only native source of fascist ideas to be cited with approval by Vladimir Putin; Lev Gumilev is another. Contemporary Russian fascists who now rove through the public space, such as Aleksander Prokhanov and Aleksander Dugin, represent distinct traditions. It is Dugin, for example, who made the idea of “Eurasia” popular in Russia, and his references are German Nazis and postwar West European fascists. And yet, most often in the Russia of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is Ilyin’s ideas that to seem to satisfy political needs and to fill rhetorical gaps, to provide the “spiritual resource” for the kleptocratic state machine. In 2017, when the Russian state had so much difficulty commemorating the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Ilyin was advanced as its heroic opponent. In a television drama about the revolution, he decried the evil of promising social advancement to Russians.

Russian policies certainly recall Ilyin’s recommendations. Russia’s 2012 law on “foreign agents,” passed right after Putin’s return to the office of the presidency, well represents Ilyin’s attitude to civil society. Ilyin believed that Russia’s “White Spirit” should animate the fascists of Europe; since 2013, the Kremlin has provided financial and propaganda support to European parties of the populist and extreme right. The Russian campaign against the “decadence” of the European Union, initiated in 2013, is in accord with Ilyin’s worldview. Ilyin’s scholarly effort followed his personal projection of sexual anxiety to others. First, Ilyin called Russia homosexual, then underwent therapy with his girlfriend, then blamed God. Putin first submitted to years of shirtless fur-and-feather photoshoots, then divorced his wife, then blamed the European Union for Russian homosexuality. Ilyin sexualized what he experienced as foreign threats. Jazz, for example, was a plot to induce premature ejaculation. When Ukrainians began in late 2013 to assemble in favor of a European future for their country, the Russian media raised the specter of a “homodictatorship.”

The case for Ilyin’s influence is perhaps easiest to make with respect to Russia’s new orientation toward Ukraine. Ukraine, like the Russian Federation, is a new country, formed from the territory of a Soviet republic

in 1991. After Russia, it was the second-most populous republic of the Soviet Union, and it has a long border with Russia to the east and north as well as with European Union members to the west. For the first two decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian-Ukrainian relations were defined by both sides according to international law, with Russian lawyers always insistent on very traditional concepts such as sovereignty and territorial integrity. When Putin returned to power in 2012, legalism gave way to colonialism. Since 2012, Russian policy toward Ukraine has been made on the basis of first principles, and those principles have been Ilyin's. Putin's Eurasian Union, a plan he announced with the help of Ilyin's ideas, presupposed that Ukraine would join. Putin justified Russia's attempt to draw Ukraine towards Eurasia by Ilyin's "organic model" that made of Russia and Ukraine "one people."

**Ilyin's idea of a Russian organism including Ukraine clashed with the more prosaic Ukrainian notion of reforming the Ukrainian state. In Ukraine in 2013, the European Union was a subject of domestic political debate, and was generally popular. An association agreement between Ukraine and the European Union was seen as a way to address the major local problem, the weakness of the rule of law. Through threats and promises, Putin was able in November 2013 to induce the Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, not to sign the association agreement, which had already been negotiated. This brought young Ukrainians to the street to demonstrate in favor the agreement. When the Ukrainian government (urged on and assisted by Russia) used violence, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian citizens assembled in Kyiv's Independence Square. Their main postulate, as surveys showed at the time, was the rule of law. After a sniper massacre that left more than one hundred Ukrainians dead, Yanukovich fled to Russia. His main adviser, Paul Manafort, was next seen working as Donald Trump's campaign manager.**

By the time Yanukovich fled to Russia, Russian troops had already been mobilized for the invasion of Ukraine. As Russian troops entered Ukraine in February 2014, Russian civilizational rhetoric (of which Ilyin was a major source) captured the imagination of many Western observers. In the first half of 2014, the issues debated were whether or not Ukraine was or was not part of Russian culture, or whether Russian myths about the past were somehow a reason to invade a neighboring sovereign state. In accepting the way that Ilyin put the question, as a matter of civilization rather than law, Western observers missed the stakes of the conflict for Europe and the United States. Considering the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a clash of cultures was to render it distant and colorful and obscure; seeing it as an element of a larger assault on the rule of law would have been to realize that Western institutions were in peril. To accept the civilizational framing was also to overlook the basic issue of inequality. What pro-European Ukrainians wanted was to avoid Russian-style kleptocracy. What Putin needed was to demonstrate that such efforts were fruitless.

Ilyin's arguments were everywhere as Russian troops entered Ukraine multiple times in 2014. As soldiers received their mobilization orders for the invasion of the Ukraine's Crimean province in January 2014, all of Russia's high-ranking bureaucrats and regional governors were sent a copy of Ilyin's *Our Tasks*. After Russian troops occupied Crimea and the Russian parliament voted for annexation, Putin cited Ilyin again as justification. The Russian commander sent to oversee the second major movement of Russian troops into Ukraine, to the southeastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk in summer 2014, described the war's final goal in terms that Ilyin would have understood: "If the world were saved from demonic constructions such as the United States, it would be easier for everyone to live. And one of these days it will happen."

Anyone following Russian politics [could see in early 2016](#) that the Russian elite preferred Donald Trump to become the Republican nominee for president and then to defeat Hillary Clinton in the general election. In the spring of that year, Russian military intelligence was boasting of an effort to help Trump win. In the Russian assault on American democracy that followed, the main weapon was falsehood. Donald Trump is another masculinity-challenged kleptocrat from the realm of fiction, in his case that of reality television. His campaign was helped by the elaborate untruths that Russia distributed about his opponent. In office, Trump imitates Putin in his pursuit of political post-truth: first filling the public sphere with lies, then blaming the institutions whose purpose is to seek facts, and finally rejoicing in the resulting confusion. Russian assistance to Trump weakened American trust in the institutions that Russia has been unable to build. Such trust was already in decline, thanks to America's own media culture and growing inequality.

Ilyin meant to be the prophet of our age, the post-Soviet age, and perhaps he is. His disbelief in this world allows politics to take place in a fictional one. He made of lawlessness a virtue so pure as to be invisible, and so absolute as to demand the destruction of the West. He shows us how fragile masculinity generates enemies, how perverted Christianity rejects Jesus, how economic inequality imitates innocence, and how fascist ideas flow into the postmodern. This is no longer just Russian philosophy. It is now American life.

*This is an expanded version of Timothy Snyder's essay "[God Is a Russian](#)" in the April 5, 2018 issue of The New York Review. Timothy Snyder is the Levin Professor of History at Yale, where he also serves as faculty adviser to the [Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies](#). Among his many books are: *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (2010), *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (2015), and, most recently, *On Malady: Lessons in Liberty from a Hospital Diary* (2020); a new graphic edition of his *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, illustrated by Nora Krug, is published in October 2021.*

<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/03/16/ivan-ilyin-putins-philosopher-of-russian-fascism/>