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German Lessons for the Russian World

The "Russian world" concept, actively promoted one way or another for at least ten years, has virtually become an official ideological doctrine since the annexation of Crimea. It certainly has a whiff of nationalism, and it is no coincidence that even the regime's staunchest supporters were swift to draw parallels between Vladimir Putin's "2014 model" and Hitler's "1938 model", comparing the seizure of the Ukrainian peninsula with the Austrian Anschluss.

In general, comparing Russia to Germany is not a new trend, and those engaged in this activity are looking for parallels to support often diametrically opposed statements, and sometimes they use them for pure propaganda. Historically, these two great European countries do have a lot in common. During the dawn of their statehoods, the "men of Rus" and the Germanic peoples tried to draw historical lines to identify themselves as parts of a formerly unified great proto-European empire. While Moscow proclaimed "for two Romes have fallen, a third stands, and a fourth there will not be", the German lands and their dependent territories identified themselves as nothing less than "the Holy Roman Empire". Both Rus and the German lands had no single centre: Westphalia, Bavaria and Prussia had been competing with each other for centuries just as successfully as Novgorod, Kiev and Moscow. Historically, both cultures were strongly predisposed to imperialism and colonialism: attacks by German tribes largely contributed to the collapse of the Roman

Empire, and the Russians destroyed the Mongol Empire a thousand years later. Both nations created powerful states which came into conflict with one another several times, the last being the most cruel and gory in world history. The two great nations also have many other features in common.

However, I would rather draw your attention not to the similarities, but the resultant differences. German culture spread very widely across Europe, and German became a lingua franca from Riga to Trieste, from Prague to Strasbourg, and from Hamburg to Bern. At the same time, unlike Russia – tightly controlled and always anxious about the outside world – the German nation (in its broadest sense) remained extremely decentralised and open. Nothing in Russian history could compare to Charles V (the grandson and heir of Maximilian I) who was elected King of the Germans, named Archduke of Austria, and then fought for Bavaria, Burgundy and Hungary to finally become Holy Roman Emperor. Yet first and foremost he was the King of Castile and Aragon, and only then the Austrian archduke and master of almost the whole of Europe; the emperor of a multinational empire, just like his grandfather before him. Similar things have occurred many times throughout German history, and while we know what kind of hierarchical relations existed between Moscow and Kiev in the 18th century, nothing like this could be said about Berlin and Vienna until the very end of the 19th century. In other words, one aspect in which the German nation differs from Russia is its institutionalised presence not in one, but several countries. The many German lands (which later united into one country), the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Switzerland have all been bearers of German culture for several centuries (at least linguistically, but in many respects also ethnically).

I would venture to suggest that this was the most natural state for such a great and remarkable nation. The proponents of "German world" values from Switzerland, Austria, Lotharingia, Bavaria, Prussia and Hesse had as many differences as the descendants of ancient Russians who settled on the Don River or the Neva Bay, Polatsk or Irkutsk, Kiev or the Ural mountains. I think one of Russia's tragedies is that a "Holy Byzantine empire of the Russian nation" – in which its inhabitants' cultural unity would be accompanied by a complex balance of power between rulers of different regions – has never been created in the vast territory sweeping from the Carpathians to Kamchatka.

Nevertheless, empires, be they absolutist or composite, are never eternal. Their fall inevitably heralds a boom in the most primitive forms of nationalism. Germany's defeat in the First World War, the secession of part of its empire's territory, and the collapse of Austro-Hungary triggered a strong reaction not only within the country, but also in Austria. The methods of the 1938 Anschluss were similar to those employed in the occupation of Crimea. Germany's subsequent defeat finally created a new political reality spread over several German states.

Something similar took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union, following its defeat in the Cold War. The "divided nation" issue was raised in Russia and former Soviet republics with significant Russian populations, but without learning any lessons from Germany's post-Second World War experience. The main focus was for Russia to "protect" Russian-speaking minorities, although I am not exactly sure whether the Russian-speaking communities in Belarus and Ukraine, for example, were actually in the minority when those countries became independent. In other words, after the collapse of the USSR, Moscow's political agenda, almost always aimed at reunification of the Eurasian political space, was flawed from the outset. It would be much more appropriate to promote a doctrine providing for the existence of multiple "Russian" states, not a single "Russian world". According to this concept, Belarus would be perceived like today's Austria: its sovereignty would be firmly guaranteed, while preserving its common cultural and historic ties with Russia. For example, Ukraine, with its diverse and multi-ethnic population, could easily become a political equivalent of Switzerland, with several official languages and elements of the *veche* (referendum-based) political culture inherent in Eastern Europe and Poland. Indeed, while German is spoken as an official language in Bern or Vienna, nobody there considers Berlin a threat or fears the "elder brother". In this respect, the "German world" (after the defeat and condemnation of the Nazi ideology, of course) is currently much more inclusive and less conflict-prone than the "Russian world" promoted by the Kremlin.

Starting from the 1990s, the Russian rulers' nationalistic tendencies prevented the implementation of another political project that would have radically changed the Russian Federation's present and future. I mean, of course, its relations with Europe. We all remember what the 1996 election campaign of Boris Yeltsin – one of the most democratic of democrats – hinged on, long before Vladimir Putin: creating a "Union State" with Belarus. Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin's Ukraine policies were designed to increase its dependence on

Russia and do everything possible to prevent it from turning towards the European Union. In my opinion, this strategy, built on the most primitive understanding of the "Russian world", was flawed from the very beginning. The correct goal should have been to "push" both these countries, which have significant ethnic and culturally Russian populations, towards Europe, and to provide the fullest support for their integration into the European political system. The ultimate goal being for one or two Russian countries to join the European Union, which would result in Russian becoming one of the EU's official languages, and a range of other benefits connected to this kind of integration paradigm.

Decentralising the "Russian world" after 1991 following the scenario for German decentralisation after 1945 (apart from creating an equivalent of the GDR) would have led to a completely new political reality, not only in the post-Soviet countries, but also inside Russia. Apart from "putting its foot" in Europe's door (close relations between citizens of the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Belarus are not a myth, which is why the latter two countries' shift towards Europe makes Russia's anti-European propaganda seem wholly inappropriate), Russia would also have furthered its federal traditions. Indeed, if several countries with dominant Russian cultures are able to exist, then the degree of independence and autonomy of Russia's regions might also change completely. If Russia had replicated the "German world" of the second half of the 20th century in Western areas of the former Soviet Union in the early 21st century, it would be much more European by now, with a federative system to replace the outdated imperial one.

Unfortunately, none of the above took place. Suffering from its lost-empire and divided-nation complexes, Russia instead started trying to "gather the Russian lands" using the same primitive methods Germany employed in the 1930s. I think such attempts are doomed to failure, because people who are unable to learn from history simply cannot be good politicians. We can only regret that supporters of the "Russian world" are in fact mercilessly taking away a real chance for the world to become more Russian, in the *true* sense of the word…

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