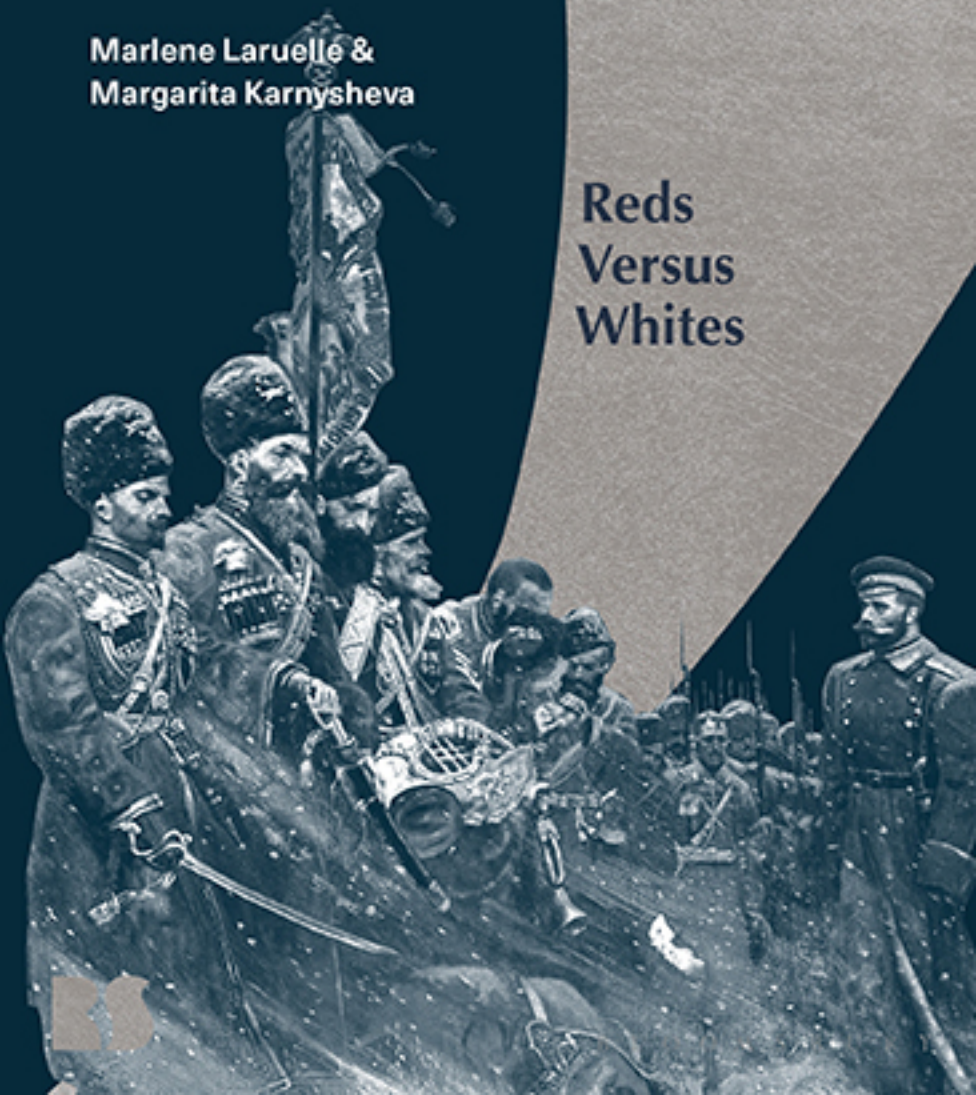


Russian Shorts

Memory Politics and the Russian Civil War

Marlene Laruelle &
Margarita Karnysheva

Reds
Versus
Whites



MEMORY POLITICS AND THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR

Russian Shorts

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REDS VERSUS WHITES

Marlene Laruelle and Margarita Karnysheva

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Cover image: Painting of Nicholas II of Russia bidding farewell to his troops.

By Pavel Ryzhenko. Dated 1916 (© Photo 12/Alamy Stock Photo)

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2005, Russian President Vladimir Putin participated in a highly symbolic commemoration at the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow: the reburial of the White General Anton Denikin (1872–1947), one of the key figures of the Russian Civil War that divided “Reds” (those who favored the new Bolshevik power) and “Whites” (those who defended the tsarist regime or the Provisional Government).¹ Denikin’s daughter, Marina Denikina, handed her father’s saber to Putin, an emblematic gesture that was interpreted, after more than seventy years of divide, as a sign of reconciliation between Reds and Whites under a new, uncontested leader. The journey of Denikin’s remains—accompanied by his spouse’s remains as well as the remains of a famous émigré thinker, Ivan Ilyin, and his spouse—was epic: Denikin was previously buried in a Cossack cemetery in New Jersey, his wife in Paris, and the Ilyins in Switzerland, so three different jurisdictions were involved in the logistics of this collective reburial.

The choice of the Donskoy Monastery was not a coincidence. Several families of the upper echelons of the aristocracy had chosen it for their burial vaults, and no Soviet figures were buried in the old necropolis, giving the monastery the image of a place embodying the old, prerevolutionary Russia, and protected from the shadow of Communism. That explains why the Nobel Laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn explicitly asked to be buried there. Delegations from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) Abroad, the Moscow Patriarchate, and various Russian embassies participated in this grand return of Denikin and Ilyin to the homeland and the laying of the first stone of a monument to national reconciliation between Reds and Whites.²

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The way the Russian state has been managing the memory of the White movement is key to understanding how the new Russia has dealt with the tangled memories bequeathed by Soviet historical narratives. It offers a window into an alternative history of the century, or at least one that advances a new interpretation of the post-Stalinist Soviet Union and post-communist Russia. The issue of the Whites' rehabilitation is much more than a purely judicial debate: it is rooted in the cultural rediscovery of a long-forbidden past and the crafting of a new set of shared values in relation to Russia's international prestige in the nineteenth century, the revival of Orthodoxy as a cornerstone of the country's cultural identity, and the Europeanization of Russia's history through the reclamation of the legacy of interwar emigration. Rising nostalgia for the Whites could be paralleled, with some caveats, with the US case of the "lost cause" of the Confederacy: the Whites represent the myth of an antebellum Russia, celebrated for its old-fashioned way of life, nobility, chivalry, and patriotic sense of duties, which would have disappeared under the attacks of the modernity embodied by the Bolsheviks and the Soviet Union.

For seventy years, the Soviet narrative about the Civil War saw in the Whites the quintessence of the enemy: the Whites were accused of betraying the motherland by welcoming foreign interference, and having committed numerous acts of violence against civilians, robberies, punitive expeditions, extrajudicial executions, and pogroms. History is proverbially written by the winners. But over time, the voices of the defeated can also be heard and sometimes even restored. That seems to be happening in today's Russia, albeit with caveats and limitations.

On August 22, 1991, Russian President Boris Yeltsin adopted for the new Russia the white, blue, and red flag that was used by the tsarist regime since the end of the nineteenth century—in parallel with the imperial, black, yellow, and white flag—and then by the Provisional Government of 1917. Coming after the failed communist putsch that accelerated the collapse of the Soviet regime, this gesture was interpreted by many as the direct reconnection of the new Russia with its pre-Soviet past. During the tumultuous 1990s, several White historical figures, military heroes, and thinkers were reintegrated

into the national pantheon, and Romanov heirs were welcomed with honors by the Russian establishment. Both far-right groups and pro-Western liberals used references to the Whites—respectively as symbols of Russia’s autocratic traditions or of its liberal experiment—to compete with their main opponent: the Communist Party of the Russian Federation.

This process has continued after Yeltsin left office. Three years after the reburial of Anton Denikin in presence of Vladimir Putin, the blockbuster *Admiral* (2008), celebrating Admiral Alexander Kolchak (1874–1920), executed by the Bolsheviks in 1920, was awarded six MTV Russia Movie Awards and confirmed the powerful romanticism of the White officers’ image. This White rehabilitation goes hand in hand with the crafting of a new, more positive vision of tsarism or at least of the last tsar, Nicholas II. In 2017, for the centenary of the February and October revolutions, more than 100,000 people attended a religious ceremony in Yekaterinburg that mourned the imperial family. In surveys conducted by the Levada Center during that same year, the last Romanov became the most popular historical figure of the first half of the twentieth century before Soviet leaders.

Yet the reconciliation between a White and Red memory on the twentieth century remains a road paved with legal ambiguities, political use and abuse, and cultural tensions. The Russian authorities have demonstrated the desire to come to terms with these memory wars and gradually reintegrate the White movement and the last years of prerevolutionary Russia into a broader vision of the country’s history. But the consensus is far from easy. Adhering to the Soviet perspective, some continue to refuse a restoration of the Whites’ status. Collusion with Western powers, with the ultimate goal of weakening Russia, remains one of the hallmarks of language used by the Kremlin to delegitimize its opponents today. White collaboration with the British Empire, France, the United States, and Japan therefore cast a dark shadow on the movement, accentuated by the support offered by parts of the Whites to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union two decades later. A reverse perspective favors the unequivocal restoration of the Whites, supporting calls for the return to the prerevolutionary monarchy or justifying the minority

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who sympathized with Nazi Germany because they saw it as the only force able to destroy Communism.

Reconciliation is never an easy process: what are the boundaries of that which can be rehabilitated? The reintegration of the émigré cultural legacy into Russia's pantheon does not necessarily justify the Whites' military actions. Nostalgia for the Russian nobility and its rich cultural life does not entail support for the political cause of monarchy. In the case of Russia, the Civil War now belongs to history—there are no more surviving figures able to remember it, and few people can refer to it by family genealogy—but it remains a sensitive topic for several reasons. First, the Civil War had international repercussions: the Soviet Union, born out of it, promoted a powerful and messianic ideological message that shaped the international system for seven decades. Second, the war had a demographic impact: not only did millions of civilians die, but at least 1.5 million people emigrated from Russia, mostly to Europe (to a lesser extent, China). Third, today Russia remains contested by the international community, especially since its war with Ukraine in 2014. Its policies are thus immediately ideologically colored: if Russia continues to promote a Red narrative, it is accused of still being a communist or Stalinist country; if it reinstates a White stance, it is accused of nurturing nostalgia for tsarism, monarchy, and sometimes fascism.

The issue of a rehabilitation of the Whites is highly politicized, as it directly overlaps with the broader question of judging the Soviet regime for its own state violence against its citizens. Unlike those in Central European countries, the authorities in Russia have systematically refused to question the legality of the Soviet regime. As the USSR's successor state, the Russian Federation fulfills all of its international obligations, but it does not recognize any moral responsibility for or legal obligation to address crimes committed by the Soviet authorities. The only exception is the 1991 Law on Victims of Political Repressions, which acknowledges that some Soviet legal decisions were wrongful and therefore that convicts were victims of political repressions. That is not a small exception: the Law has examined the cases of about 6 million Soviet citizens and judicially

restored the status of about 4 million of them—besides it, millions of people have been rehabilitated by the Soviet authorities themselves in the 1950s and 1960s. That exception aside, however, Russia did not have any other mechanisms for judging Soviet crimes, especially those committed in territories that are now abroad, and it also refused lustration: victims of the Soviet regime can submit claims to be rehabilitated and receive symbolic compensation, but no perpetrator can be judged or even identified.

Debates on the issue of the legal rehabilitation of the White movement thus have direct implications for the way the Soviet regime is confronted. It is possible to view the Whites as victims of a communist regime that is still awaiting its own “Nuremberg Trials”—that is, the narrative coming from the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine—in which case they should be systematically pardoned. An alternative interpretation suggests that the Whites were co-actors of a Civil War in which crimes were committed on both sides. In that case, the Whites are guilty of at least some of the crimes for which the Soviet regime convicted them, but the Reds should be judged, too. A third interpretation excuses violence committed by the Reds as the only possible answer to the Whites’ betrayal of the nation, therefore preserving the legal status quo inherited from Soviet time.

The Russian government, the presidential administration, and Vladimir Putin himself have had to navigate this uneasy memory field and satisfy both sides. A continuation of the Soviet policy of obliterating the White past is impossible: the rich cultural legacy of the Russian émigré realm would be excluded from the national pantheon. By silencing the White past, Moscow would also hamper the ongoing memorialization process of the First World War visible all across Europe. During Soviet times, emphasis on the revolutionary moment of 1917 marginalized the importance of Russia’s participation in the first major world conflict. But since the early 2010s, the Kremlin has attempted to integrate Russia into European commemorations for the centenary of the war in 2014–18. Yet the majority of Russian heroes of the First World War were also those who would become the White opposition to the Bolsheviks a few years later. As Putin solemnly declared when unveiling Russia’s first major First World War

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monument on Poklonnaya Gora, the Second World War memorial in Moscow's suburbs, in August 2014:

The Russian army's great values and the heroic experience of the generation who fought in World War I played a big part in our people's spiritual and moral upsurge at that moment. This was a generation that was fated to go through not just the difficult trials of the first global world war, but also the revolutionary upheaval and fratricidal Civil War that split our country and changed its destiny.³

The revision of the White movement thus intimately dialogues with the rediscovery of the First World War in Russia's memory, and even more with the sacredness of the Second World War—called the Great Patriotic War—in Russian public opinion. The position adopted by White leaders during the 1939/1941–5 conflict, either in support of the Soviet Union or against it, has been a key factor in deciding their potential posthumous restoration.

Avoidance of the ideological polarization of the Yeltsin decade also continues to drive the memory policy of the Putin regime, with the goal of promoting a political status quo. The Russian government therefore postures itself as a centrist and moderate force that refuses all “extremes,” whether a pro-Western liberalism associated with the state's collapse, with historical references to the Provisional Government; a crude nostalgia for the Soviet regime, as advanced by the communists (as Putin declared, “Whoever does not miss the Soviet Union has no heart. Whoever wants it back has no brain”); or a return to prerevolutionary tsarism, as proposed by some nationalist and conservative groups. The regime considers these three options dangerous for the survival of Russia as a state and a nation, a position that pushes it to advance a nuanced and cautious memory policy toward the twentieth century.

Yet several segments of society do not hide their readiness to boost their pro- or anti-White rehabilitation agendas and engage more intensely in the field of memory wars. The White past can be instrumentalized in a dual way. For those who refer to the

Provisional Government as Russia's short experience of a pluralistic regime, the White past can be associated with liberalism and a pro-Western viewpoint. It can also represent tsarism, autocracy, and Orthodoxy for those who refer to the empire's restoration. While the first interpretation was well developed during the perestroika years and in the early 1990s, it has almost disappeared today, letting the second reading dominate the memory reconstruction of the White movement.

How does the Russian public receive these efforts to reconcile memory? While not passionate by historical accounts, the public seems to support certain forms of restoration of the White movement. In 2017 and 2018, for the centenaries of the 1917 revolutions and of the imperial family's execution, several polls were conducted by the survey company VTsIOM to capture popular perceptions of these watershed moments in national history. As we saw, Nicholas II became the most popular Russian historical figure of the first half of the twentieth century: obtaining 54 percent of sympathizers' votes, the last Romanov emperor was followed by Stalin (51 percent) and Vladimir Lenin (49 percent). The two leading figures of the White movement, Alexander Kolchak and Anton Denikin, each collected about one third of the vote.⁴ This paradoxical combination of tsarist personalities and Soviet leaders confirms the extent to which memory issues in Russia inspire a plurality of opinions. It also shows both state and popular willingness to construct a unified national pantheon that goes beyond political ruptures and ideological divisions.

Respondents judged the first and foremost reason for the outbreak of Civil War to be foreign interference (35 percent)—a revealing sign of the Putin regime's "present-ization" of history. That number is almost equal to the percentage of votes obtained by Bolshevik politics (34 percent), while the White opposition is rarely granted responsibility for the war (9 percent). More importantly, when asked about the side on which people would enlist, one third of respondents answered that it does not matter anymore today, and another third that both sides were right in their own way. Only one third had a clear-cut opinion: 16 percent would have sided with the Reds and 7 percent with the Whites, an imbalance particularly visible among older generations

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(21 percent in favor of the Reds versus 5 percent in support of the Whites among those more than forty-five years old). Younger people were more equally divided (10 percent versus 11 percent), showing a global trend of lower support for the Reds and higher support for the Whites.⁵

Even if Nicholas II and White officers like Denikin or Kolchak are popular characters in today's Russia, the public remains largely uninterested by the Civil War *per se*. A Levada Center poll conducted in 2017 unsurprisingly found that the public is most interested in the Great Patriotic War (at 38 percent), followed by the epochs of Peter the Great (31 percent) and medieval Kievan Rus' (28 percent). The February Revolution and fall of tsarism, meanwhile, ranked only seventh on the list, with a modest 13 percent. In another Levada Center survey about the most important event of the twentieth century, the murder of Nicholas II and his family received just 13 percent of the vote, compared to 36 percent for the October Revolution and more than 70 percent for the Great Patriotic War. If around 60 percent of Russians consider the execution of the Romanov family by the Bolsheviks in 1918 "a heinous, unjustified crime," almost half also state that Nicholas II had to be punished for his mistakes, a stance broadly in line with the traditional Soviet reading of the February Revolution. The rise in popularity of the last tsar, as captured by the surveys, does not imply support for a potential restoration of the monarchy. VTsIOM surveys suggest that opposition to the monarchy is even on the uptick: in 2006, 11 percent of respondents supported monarchical restoration, while 82 percent opposed it; by 2017, support had declined to 8 percent and opposition had risen to 88 percent.⁶

The hesitant process of a White rehabilitation in today's Russia has been noticed by many observers, but never studied as such.⁷ The majority of Russian-speaking publications engaging with the issue either are biased in favor of White rehabilitation or advance an anti-White stance. This book leads the reader through this delicate memory process by highlighting the profound political and cultural transformations that have taken place in Russia over the past three decades. It addresses the debates over the memory both of the White movement *per se* and of prerevolutionary Russia—a term we use for

early twentieth-century Russia under Nicholas II. The first chapter is dedicated to the rehabilitation of the image of the Whites during the late Soviet period. The second chapter addresses the White Renaissance of the 1990s and early 2000s, which was marked by cultural rediscovery but the failure of judicial restoration. The book then explores the White memory activism in favor of tsarism that is growing today, especially sponsored by some segments of the Orthodox realm, both inside and outside the ROC, before delving into the state's efforts to foster national reconciliation and balance radical ideological divides between proponents of the Whites and Reds.⁸

CHAPTER 1

THE WHITE OFFICER: HISTORICAL ROMANTICISM IN SOVIET CULTURE

In 1980–81, Soviet viewers were enjoying the blockbuster mini-series, *State Border*, which was devoted to the history of the Soviet border troops. Displaying the courage of border guards at the edges of the country, from Western Ukraine to Central Asia and the Far East, the series was awarded the KGB prize for showing the work of law enforcement agencies in an epic way. The first episode, set during the October Revolution, depicts the story of a young tsarist officer who rallies the Bolshevik regime in the name of patriotism. Interestingly, the hero's main mission is to educate the Bolsheviks, presented as dangerous utopian internationalists, ready to make peace with Germany, and who do not believe in the need for the country to secure its borders. In contrast to them, the White hero appears as a genuine patriot concerned for the future of Russia: he regularly mentions the fact that he is Russian (*russkii*) and therefore serves his country whatever its political regime. He will succeed in transforming the Bolsheviks into authentic *étatists* and instilling in them the notion of a strong state (*gosudarstvennichestvo*). Not only did the first episode of the series highlight the Whites as Russia's real patriots against unpatriotic Bolsheviks, but it also showed an Orthodox wedding (mentions of religion were infrequent in Soviet cinema) and openly discussed the killing of the imperial family (a very rare topic at the time). And indeed, the film's scriptwriter was none other than a certain Gely Ryabov, who discovered the remains of Nicholas II's family the year before.

As one can guess from that vignette, nostalgia for the White movement in today's Russia did not appear from scratch after the collapse of the Soviet Union: it has deep roots in the Soviet culture of

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the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, contrary to a simplistic vision in which the Soviet Union purely and simply eradicated memory of its prerevolutionary past, many cultural niches kept some traces of that history: obviously the Orthodox dissidence, whose ideological principles were anchored into prerevolutionary Russia, but also more official circles that were nostalgic of the autocracy or worried about the preservation of everything Russian, supposedly submerged by the Soviet federal construction. More broadly, Soviet cinema and music gradually reintroduced topics inspired by the prerevolutionary and the Civil War periods, nurturing in the wider Soviet audience the romanticized image of the White officer as a Russian patriot who deserved as much respect as his Bolshevik opponent.

The Russian Civil War

The Civil War devastated Russia from 1918 to 1921. In November (or October, according to the Julian calendar) 1917, the Bolsheviks seized power and overthrew the Provisional Government. The latter was born out of the February Revolution, which removed the last tsar Nicholas II from power and put an end to three centuries of Romanov dynastic continuity. Working in a chaotic environment, the weak Provisional Government under Alexander Kerensky's leadership was unable to make decisive policy decisions—it proclaimed a Russian republic only in September 1917, a few weeks before its collapse—and could not stop the disorganization of the Russian army, gradually losing ground against Germany and its allies. Lacking popular legitimacy, Kerensky was challenged both by conservatives who wanted the empire to be restored and by revolutionary groups who called for a workers' and peasants' revolution.¹

The Bolshevik Revolution catapulted the country into a multilayered civil war that not only pitted Whites against Reds but also featured many pro-independence movements among the empire's ethnic minorities. The war ultimately killed around 7–8 million people, most of whom were civilians. The imperial family was clandestinely executed in Yekaterinburg in July 1918, as the Bolshevik

authorities were afraid that advancing White armies could take back the city and rescue the fallen emperor. But the White armies were progressively defeated: first those led by Anton Denikin in Southern Russia and Ukraine and those led by Admiral Alexander Kolchak in Siberia in 1919. A second segment of the Civil War symbolically ended in November 1920 with the epic “Russian exodus”—the White troops led by Pyotr Wrangel (1878–1929), defeated by the Red Army, evacuated from Crimea about 150,000 people, sailing to Constantinople. Resistance to the Bolsheviks persisted in Siberia and the Far East for one more year while, in Central Asia, violence episodically continued until the end of the 1920s.²

Why did the Whites lose the Civil War? Historians attribute it to the confluence of several factors. The Reds were numerically superior, had higher quality leadership and unified strategies, controlled the two capital cities and the main heartland territories, and featured a more attractive political program. The Whites were less numerous and divided geographically, unable to merge their armies, combative on different fronts, North, South, and Siberia, and sometimes competitive with each other. They lacked a clear political program: although united



Figure 1 The dogs of the Entente: Denikin, Kolchak, Yudenich, 1919.
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by their desire to overthrow the Bolsheviks, they were divided on almost everything else. Some favored the restoration of tsarism, while others defended the republican model embodied by the Provisional Government. The Whites alienated both a large part of rural population by refusing to give land to peasants and ethnic minorities by denying them the right to self-determination and promoting a Russian-centric perspective on the empire. Moreover, they allied with external forces and contributed to the massive foreign intervention of European powers, the United States, and Japan on Russian territory to rescue the failing regime (see Figure 1).

An Increasingly Diversified Soviet Society

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet regime interpreted the White movement as the embodiment of everything it rejected ideologically and as its central political enemy, ready to put the Revolution down. The memory of the Civil War was still vivid, with many Bolshevik leaders recalling their years of battles against White opponents. Abroad, Russian émigrés were politically active, trying to reenter the country to continue the struggle on the Soviet territory itself and inviting European countries to keep their original anti-Soviet stance and not recognize the legality of the new state. The main émigré association, the National Alliance of Russian Solidarists (NTS), born in 1931 as the youth branch of White General Pyotr Wrangel's Russian All-Military Union (ROVS), promoted a muscular ideology inspired by Italian fascism and theories of the "Third Way."³ In the 1930s and during the war, some segments of the Russian émigré population supported Nazi Germany, which confirmed the Soviet leadership's belief in the White movement's alliance with a mortal enemy of the Soviet Union—fascism.⁴

During the second half of the century, the political salience of the Russian émigré movement diminished. Many White leaders had passed away, and dreams about a military invasion of the Soviet Union faded. Émigré associations continued to promote their anti-Soviet agenda, joining various anti-communist initiatives and participating in Cold War-era ideological fronts. Beginning in the 1960s, the NTS

also focused on establishing contacts with Soviet dissidents and feeding them forbidden literature. Its magazine *Grani* invited Soviet writers to publish their banned literary work and helped structure *samizdat* (publications circulating in the Soviet underground) and *tamizdat* (publications abroad imported clandestinely to the Soviet Union) further by transporting underground newspapers, articles, and books back and forth. One of the organization's chairmen, Vladimir Poremsky, reported that, in the late 1970s, the NTS leadership was happy to see emergent circles of like-minded individuals "search[ing] for the future, tied not only to abstract theories of freedom and human rights, but to ideas rooted in the way of life, history, and traditions of the Russian people" in the Soviet Union.⁵

But even if Russian émigré associations were still active, the status acquired by the Soviet Union after its 1945 victory against Nazi Germany gave the country a legitimacy that it had never obtained during the interwar period. Even the most radical émigré groups could not deny that the USSR had not only returned its borders to those of imperial Russia, but had also expanded its influence in Central Europe and in Asia, thus acting like the empire so many émigrés longed for. The widespread impression of the USSR as a normalized country transformed by the war experience caused several tens of thousands of former émigrés to return home voluntarily. The Allies also forcibly repatriated to the Soviet Union about 2 million Soviet citizens who found themselves in Allies-occupied territories.⁶ All of them brought with them their personal or familial memory of the interwar and war periods in Europe, and therefore some components of White culture. At home, meanwhile, three historical turning points gradually created a space for a future rehabilitation of the Whites.

The first—and earliest—turning point was the so-called Great Turn, when Stalin decided in 1929 to abandon the New Economic Policy in favor of radical collectivization and industrialization. By initiating such changes, the Soviet Union followed a more classic great power model that will later help a partial cultural reconciliation with the Whites. After the internationalist policies of the Bolshevik regime and Lenin's scathing assessment of "Great Russian chauvinism," Stalin, then fighting with Trotsky and the old Bolsheviks, revived a

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more traditional form of Russian nationalism.⁷ Russian history was rewritten in a more conventional way: in 1934, historical arguments were revised by official historiography in favor of the tsarist empire; in 1937, the 125th anniversary of the Battle of Borodino against Napoleon was celebrated as a victory of Russian patriotism; and in 1939, Sergei Eisenstein screened his famed film paying tribute to Alexander Nevsky and his victory against the Teutonic Knights, who embodied a timeless Western enemy. Stalinism culture thus reconciled with many features of the former empire that émigrés idealized too.

The second turning point was the Second World War, a transformative event for Soviet society as well as for the regime itself: the Soviet Union was fighting not only for proletarian internationalism but for its own survival against a foreign enemy. Advised by Russian émigrés, the Nazis tried to instrumentalize the population's outrage regarding the persecution of religious organizations and forced collectivization by presenting their invasion of the USSR as a kind of Christian crusade against the godless Bolsheviks.⁸ After its first defeats, the desperate Soviet regime sought to reinstate classic patriotism and rehabilitate the ROC (as well as Islam) in the hope of motivating Soviet citizens to fight for their homeland. In 1942, Stalin restored the Moscow Patriarchate, which had been suspended in 1925, and allowed for the revitalization of religious life throughout the country.⁹ The Orthodox Church suddenly found itself a welcome companion in the highest reaches of power, offering prayers for victory during state ceremonies, even pleading for Stalin's health, and boosting patriotic feelings in the Red Army and throughout the population.

The war also reinforced the patriotic cultural production that had been launched a decade before: several movies celebrating Russia's main historical victories and figures such as *Suvorov* (1941), *Bogdan Khmelnitsky* (1941), *Kutuzov* (1943), and *Ivan the Terrible* (1945), were shot. Stalin also authorized the rediscovery of Slavophile thinkers, and previously criticized writers such as Fyodor Dostoevsky got entirely rehabilitated.¹⁰ The war, in other words, reintroduced to the Soviet

Union many of the classic Russian authors, heroes, and ideas Russian émigrés had embraced.

The third turning point was Stalin's death in 1953 and subsequent destalinization. The power struggle among Nikita Khrushchev, Lavrenty Beria, and Georgy Malenkov, followed by the former's famous destalinization speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, opened the door for the expression of a greater plurality of opinions at the official level. Legally, the Soviet state revoked Article 58-1, which had been used to punish counter-revolutionary activities, in 1961.¹¹ The Thaw that followed destalinization divided those taking advantage of the changes and pushing for more plurality—the “cosmopolitans,” who were sometimes liberal, sometimes socialist and/or Leninist—and those refusing to accept the changes—the more conservative, nationalist, and Stalinist factions. Khrushchev's decision to return to Leninism, seen as the embodiment of authentic revolutionary spirit before Stalin's “perversion” of Marxism-Leninism, contributed to the reframing of the memory of the Revolution and Civil War.

Post-Stalinist changes affected not only the political and cultural elite but the Soviet society as a whole.¹² The release of millions of camp prisoners compelled society to reflect upon the regime and brought home millions of people. For a small portion of them, the cult of prerevolutionary Russia and the Orthodox Church had been intrinsic elements of penitentiary counterculture. Indeed, a large number of post-1945 political prisoners had been jailed (rightly or wrongly) for cooperation with the fascist enemy during the war, for surrendering to German troops, or for living in Nazi-occupied territories. Prisons thus preserved the memory of Nazi slogans, the collaborationist Vlasov army, and the White past longer than the rest of Soviet society did. Many *zeks*—the colloquial term used to describe Gulag prisoners—proclaimed themselves as either monarchists, fascists, or capitalists in order to demonstrate their rejection of the Soviet system. Representations of Hitler, Nazi uniforms, and SS helmets, as well as slogans about Jews' domination of Russia, were numerous among convicts' tattoos, a key component of the criminal body language.

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Orthodox crosses, churches, Nicholas II, and famous White officers were even more frequently represented.¹³

The gradual liberalization of the Soviet regime created many “holes” in the official policy of censorship through which non-conformist views could be expressed. Forbidden books that were considered politically subversive could suddenly be accessed, and some members of the cultural elite were allowed to enter the *Spetskhran*, or “special collection” of prohibited books, at the Lenin State Library. The first trips abroad also permitted a rediscovery of Western literature, and the growing number of foreigners visiting and living in the Soviet Union helped circulate émigré literary products.

Last but not least, in the 1950s and 1960s, many Soviet citizens could still remember their youth in prerevolutionary Russia and transmit memory of it to their children. Some were from former aristocratic families, some from the bourgeois middle classes. All were often nicknamed “has been” or “former” (*byvshie*), a metaphor of their “non-proletarian” origins. The Orthodox Church constituted another node of figures oriented around the prerevolutionary era.¹⁴ Several of the postwar clergy were indeed formed by prerevolutionary figures, many of whom were members of the far-right, antisemitic, and pro-tsarist movement Union of the Russian People, better known as the Black Hundreds. Patriarch Alexy I (1945–70) was, for instance, a former member of the Union, and Patriarch Alexy II (1990–2008) spent his childhood in interwar Estonia, bringing back with him Russian émigré culture. As we can see from this brief overview, post-Stalinist Soviet Union was gradually becoming a more diverse society, hosting different ideological groups.

Monarchism and Orthodoxy among Dissidents

The liberalization of the Soviet Union gave birth to a diversified dissident scene that exhibited the full spectrum of ideological beliefs—leftists, anarcho-syndicalists, Trotskyists, liberals, proponents of the Provisional government, nostalgic for monarchism, and admirers of fascism and Nazi Germany were all present.¹⁵

Memory of the White past and of prerevolutionary Russia constituted the cornerstone of the Orthodox dissidence, which focused on denouncing the persecution of faith by the Soviet regime. At the vanguard of this tsarist rehabilitation was the All-Russian Social-Christian Union of People's Liberation (VSKhON). The most important dissident organization of the 1960s, VSKhON was composed of many young intelligentsia figures, among them several so-called *byvshie* who were often socialized at Leningrad State University. The VSKhON sought to create a Social-Christian ideology based on a form of Orthodox fundamentalism, calling for the creation of an anti-communist movement that would lead a clandestine war against the godless regime. The VSKhON's ideology reproduced many aspects of the banned philosophical principles of reactionary émigré thinker Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954), who insisted on the inevitability of the collapse of the communist state and its replacement by a Christian system.¹⁶

Another monarchist group emerged in the dissidence of the 1970s around the underground journal *Veche* (Assembly) thanks to Vladimir Osipov (1938), who was already known for reviving the poetry readings at Mayakovsky Square in the 1960s. *Veche* promoted a so-called Russophile ideology that rehabilitated Slavophiles and Silver Age philosophers.¹⁷ It grouped people who had been previously socialized in VSKhON, such as nationalist writer Leonid Borodin as well as some dissident priests, such as Dmitrii Dudko. It also included members of the Catacomb Church, or Russian True Orthodox Church, who refused to accept the submission of the Moscow Patriarchate to the Soviet authorities and preserved links to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR), a bastion of the White and prerevolutionary past. Among the Moscow Patriarchate, the disciples of Metropolitan Yoann Snychev (1927–95)—a figure known for his reactionary, monarchist, and antisemitic views—also formed a radical conservative branch. By the end of the 1960s, Soviet society began to see growing organizations and individuals who pushed for a rehabilitation of White émigré ideas.

Inside State Structures: The “Russian Party”

More compelling was the gradual rehabilitation of the White past inside state structures and the Communist Party by a group that had emerged in the 1950s but that was only formalized in the 1970s as the “Russian Party” (*russkaia partiia*).¹⁸ The Russian Party developed on the basis of virulent antisemitism, generalized xenophobia, and the idea of ethnic Russians as victims of the Soviet regime. The group aimed to protect what they saw as an ethnic Russian identity endangered by the federal construction.¹⁹ They called for the revalorization of Russian cultural elements against Bolshevik internationalism and Khrushchev’s rhetoric of “friendship between peoples.” They sought to create an ethnic Russian national republic inside the federal structure that would allow Russians to have their own institutions, such as a Russian Communist Party.

Inside the Russian Party, one can identify two broad tendencies that supported the rehabilitation of the White past: (i) that which vehemently rejected everything related to socialism and the Soviet experience and supported the revival of the prerevolutionary past and (ii) that which integrated elements of nineteenth-century Russian nationalism into its interpretation of Leninism and Stalinism.

The most fervent antisemitic members of the Russian Party could rely on late Stalinist policies. After the 1940s, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had in its middle a strong antisemitic group that considered Jews as the main enemy of both Stalinism and ethnic Russians. This official antisemitism reached its apogee during the infamous “Doctors’ Plot” and came to an end only with Stalin’s death in 1953. Thereafter, the Soviet administration developed contradictory policies of discrimination with respect to the “suitability” of those identified as Jews in high-level government offices and in intellectual life: tacit antisemitism was practiced by those in charge of college admissions, especially to universities and departments that opened the way to government careers. The tensions between “Russians” and “Jews” were in fact the translation of a sharp political debate that had emerged inside the state apparatus between those supportive of a Stalinist status quo and those who sought

the return to original Leninism or the liberal reformation of the communist system.

These tensions were also embedded in Soviet foreign policy, which denounced Zionism as a new form of imperialism. In the 1960s–70s, the Soviet pseudo-discipline of “Zionology” emerged, both strongly anti-Zionist and antisemitic.²⁰ The Zionology school reinterpreted the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and its world Jewish conspiracy themes, denouncing Israel as a product of capitalism and a new Nazism. It partially rehabilitated the prerevolutionary and White past by positively evoking the Black Hundreds. A glimpse into its mindset can be seen through the writings of the nationalist literary critic Vadim Kozhinov (1930–2001), whose book *Truth about the Black Hundreds* was published posthumously in 2006. Kozhinov argues that the Black Hundreds played a major role in all manifestations of Russian national defense, from the Battle of Kulikovo in 1380, when the Golden Horde was defeated, to the heroic actions of Minin and Pozharsky in 1612 during the Polish-Lithuanian siege of Moscow. In his view, the Black Hundreds should not be limited to a precise time of history but rather should be understood as a genealogy of conservative defenders of Russian values against all categories of enemies, from the Mongols to the communists.²¹

A second group inside the Russian Party was more interested in broadly rehabilitating the tsarist past and classic symbols of Russian identity and culture and reinvigorating Russian national elements into Soviet policies and doctrines. One prominent example from the 1960s was the “village prose” movement, which idealized a form of peasant life that was on the verge of disappearing.²² Khrushchev’s declarations on the birth of the Soviet nation (which came to stand for the demise of the federal structure and the “mixing” of nationalities), the renewal of atheist campaigns (the “reeducation” of religious believers, over-taxation of religious communities, etc.), and an agricultural policy that led to the liquidation of thousands of supposedly unproductive villages set off an alarm in right-wing intellectual circles. Vladimir Soloukhin (1924–97) wrote, for instance, his best novels—*Vladimir Villages* (1958), *The Coltsfoot* (1966), *Letters from the Russian Museum* (1967), and *Black Panels* (1968)—based on this cult of dying Russian peasant culture.

Concerned about all aspects of the preservation of the national patrimony, Russian nationalists played a critical role in the birth of the first environmental movement in the Soviet Union, at that time unified against the installation of a cellulose factory on Lake Baikal, which opened in 1966. Such ecological concerns were quickly appropriated and monopolized by conservative writers such as Vladimir Chivilikhin (1928–84) who, in writing *The Clear Eye of Siberia* (1963), sought to discredit Khrushchev's reforms and, more generally, the regime's obsession with industrialization and the domination of nature in order to encourage a return to prerevolutionary values, presented as more respectful of the natural environment. The soil was planted for White guardsmen to reenter Russia.

Playing the White Guard

Nostalgia for the White past gradually became a fashionable rallying-around-the-flag gesture for many nationalist-minded figures: evocations of the White Guard were a sign of belonging to a kind of counterculture inside official structures. In the early 1950s, even before Stalin's death, the philosophy and aesthetics of the Silver Age became popular among university students in Moscow. The Leningrad University History Department's class of 1950, to which not one Jewish student was admitted, was informally called "the White Guard Class," a sign that the prerevolutionary past had not been forgotten, even during Stalin's time.²³ As soon as destalinization began, some young elites, especially students, took an even more avid interest in neo-Slavophilism, with icons and books written by White leaders becoming trendy on the black market. Several of Moscow's and Leningrad's literature and language institutes hosted these nationalist-minded young people, many of whom were children of *byvshie*.

Several big names from the Soviet literary and essayist world did not hide their admiration for the prerevolutionary era and the White past. Vadim Kozhinov, the essayist and a supposed descendant of a monarchist family, stressed, for instance, that he always "maintained a pro-White stance," made General Kornilov and Admiral Kolchak his

idols, and even “went to give a bow to Kolchak’s lover, Anna Timireva.”²⁴ Sergey Semanov (1934–2011)—chief editor of the legal journal *Man and the Law* (*Chelovek i zakon*), one of the leading figures of the Russian Party, and authorized to write on White-related topics—cultivated the memory of his mother, who had served in prerevolutionary aristocratic families.²⁵ Vladimir Soloukhin went even further by wearing a ring with Nicholas II’s portrait.²⁶ In 1968, for the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of the tsar’s family, art critique Vladimir Desyatnikov (1931) decided to take a pilgrimage to Sverdlovsk (formerly Yekaterinburg), the place of Nicholas II’s assassination. He was even able to secure travel funding from the Communist Youth, or Komsomol, officially in order to conduct fieldwork on the Cossack Yermak conquest of Irtysh. Instead, he engaged in a pilgrimage to a site that captured prerevolutionary values. Andrey Golitsyn (1932), a famous artist and book illustrator descendant of the Golitsyn aristocratic family, remained a fervent monarchist too and planted a black, yellow, and white Russian imperial flag over his dacha summer house.²⁷

Another enthusiastic fan of the Whites was the nationalist, antisemitic, and monarchist painter Ilya Glazunov (1930–2016), also partly descendant from nobility.²⁸ In 1965–6, he published a long article, “The Road Leading to You,” in the Komsomol journal *Young Guard* (*Molodaia gvardiia*) in which he overtly sought to redeem Orthodoxy and aspects of the prerevolutionary period, including the Black Hundreds. Deputy chief editor of *Young Guard* and chairman of the Union of Writers of Russia Valerii Ganichev (1933–2018), himself a central figure in the Russian Party, reported that Glazunov was spreading “many useful books” that were forbidden by the Soviet regime, including those about the “losses and tragedies of the Russian people and culprits of the tragedies,” such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Ganichev stated that members of Glazunov’s circle passionately cultivated the memory of the White movement.

I recall how Vadim Kozhinov and Sergey Semanov, while going by plane from Tbilisi to Moscow, stood up on their chairs somewhere over Krasnodar and announced: “We ask you all to stand up because we are flying over the land where Lavr Kornilov died like

a hero!” And everybody, even Secretary of the Young Communist League Kamshalov, stood up.²⁹

Ilya Glazunov was personally linked to the Whites: his émigré uncle Boris Glazunov was a close friend of many NTS leaders. In his memoirs *Russia Crucified*, Ilya Glazunov recalled how in 1968, while on a trip to Paris (during which he painted a portrait of future National Front founder Jean-Marie Le Pen), he first met Nikolai Rutchenko (Rutych), an active NTS member who had deserted the Red Army to serve in the Nazi political police. Rutchenko helped him develop contacts with the NTS and become one of the White organization’s couriers to Soviet dissidents. Glazunov brought back Rutchenko’s anti-Soviet book, *The CPSU in Power: Essays on the History of the Communist Party, 1917–1957*, which had been published by the NTS publishing house Posev. And it was Rutchenko who introduced Glazunov to the writings of Ivan Ilyin, a cult figure among the NTS founding fathers whose works Posev published and clandestinely distributed in Soviet Russia. Glazunov stated that he was fascinated with Ilyin’s article “On Resistance to Evil by Force” and took detailed notes from it because he feared carrying it home would result in its confiscation. *Russia Crucified*’s discursive line almost entirely reproduces the NTS reading of history, including the most clichéd aspects such as Lenin’s sealed train funded by Germany; the Bolshevik leadership as hidden Jews, supported by Americans and Germans to destroy Russia; and a tribute to General Vlasov, who defected to the Nazis.³⁰

Soloukhin portrayed Glazunov and his wife Liza as the Burenin couple in his antisemitic novel *The Last Step: Confession of Your Contemporary* (written in 1976, published in 1995) and declared that the Glazunovs tried to brainwash him using NTS propaganda materials.³¹ Up until his death, Glazunov strongly believed that the Bolshevik Revolution was a Judeo-Masonic conspiracy against imperial Russia and that the murder of Nicholas II and his family was a ritualistic killing committed by Jews, views he surreptitiously included into his art works. The writer and scenarist Gely Ryabov (1932–2015), who discovered the remains of Nicholas II and his family in 1979, recalled his meeting with Vladimir Soloukhin and Ilya Glazunov in 1989. Both refused to acknowledge the authenticity

of the remains and strongly believed the story of an alleged witness of the Bolshevik leadership meeting, who claimed that Trotsky burned the emperor's severed head, brought from Yekaterinburg, in a stove.³²

Yet the real hero of late Soviet fans of the White Guards was Vasily Shulgin (1878–1976), a living embodiment of the White past and émigré culture. A monarchist with fierce convictions, Shulgin supported the Provisional Government in the hope that it could restore strong power in Russia. After the Bolshevik revolution, he emigrated to Europe and there played a key role in structuring White émigré political life.³³ Arrested by Soviet troops in Yugoslavia in 1945 and repatriated to the Soviet Union, he spent a few years in prison, was granted amnesty in 1956, and then authorized to reside in the small city of Vladimir. He was gradually employed by the Soviet regime as the main face of the emigration's reconciliation with the motherland. In 1962, Khrushchev even invited him to attend the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party—a unique gesture toward the émigré movement that was never again repeated. In the 1970s, a real cult of personality arose around Shulgin. Many Russian nationalist figures visited him in Vladimir, undertaking for some days, sometimes several weeks, a form of pilgrimage devoted to prerevolutionary Russia and the White movement. Pilgrims included, among others, the cellist and composer Mstislav Rostropovich (1927–2007) and famous writer and future Nobel Laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008). Glazunov, who painted Shulgin's portrait, also welcomed him in his Moscow apartment. Under its rigid Marxist–Leninist facade, the Soviet regime was thus nurturing a broader ideological plurality in which the memory of the White cause was gradually recognized.

The Image of the White Officer in Soviet Culture

While a subculture of White nostalgia emerged inside official structures, a wider rehabilitation of the White past was conducted through cinema and music. The authorities' promotion of popular movies, specifically those that advanced Soviet values in a less propagandistic and more entertaining way, gradually allowed a discrete rehabilitation of the prerevolutionary past on the basis of

the glamorized figure of the White officer. As we mentioned earlier, Khrushchev's destalinization meant a return to Leninism and renewed focus on the revolutionary period and Civil War. In movie production, two films epitomized the relaunched imagery of the Civil War: *The Forty-One* (1956) portrays the tragic and unexpected love story between a female Red Army sniper and a White officer, while *And Quiet Flows the Don* (1957), based on the famous novel by Mikhail Sholokhov, depicts a hero torn between the Reds and Whites. Both films did much to shatter the previous propagandistic image of the Whites as antagonists and the Reds as heroes.

In 1963, Mosfilm, the state agency for cinema, decided to screen *The Verdict of History*, a three-episode film halfway between fiction and documentary that was based on a long interview with Vasily Shulgin. Its goal was to show the reconciliation of a famous White figure with the Soviet regime and therefore justify the victory of the latter. But Shulgin's charisma and conviction turned the film the other way, allowing him to publicly proclaim his support for monarchism, depict with pathos the Whites' courage during the Civil War, and excuse Vlasov's betrayal of the motherland. In short, the film created an unexpected reverse effect. Released to the public in 1967, after censors made cuts, it was screened only in theaters for an already-cultivated elite and did not reach a broad audience.³⁴

Shulgin became such a popular figure that he was invited to consult on another film, *Operation Trust* (1967). The film depicted the life of White émigré terrorist Maria Zakharchenko-Shultz, a ROVS member who shot herself dead when she walked into an OGPU (the precursor of the KGB) ambush. Shulgin was himself a ROVS agent, crossed Soviet borders in the mid-1920s, and was personally acquainted with Zakharchenko-Shultz. Here, too, the former émigré managed to convince the film director that Maria Zakharchenko was a woman of courage and determination: in the film, her last sentence before committing suicide "No! Look how we die for Faith, Tsar, and Fatherland!" was so powerful that it had to be censored.³⁵

The trend of White rehabilitation accelerated with so-called Easterns, or *Osterns*, the Soviet version of American Western films, which were usually set in the deserts of Central Asia and the Siberian

taiga in order to depict epic moments of the Civil War. Ostern blockbusters included *The Elusive Avengers* (1966) and its two sequels (1968 and 1971), in addition to *White Sun of the Desert* (1970), *Dauria* (1971), *At Home among Strangers* (1974), and *The Bodyguard* (1979). In these films, the White officer is portrayed as an implicit hero. He is a man of character and courage; cultivated and well-mannered; loyal to his values, his spouse, and friends; a patriot; while the Reds are portrayed as more proletarian, vulgar, violent, and even sometimes criminals. As Nikolai Mitrokhin explains, this image of a refined White officer could only echo the self-representation of Soviet middle classes in search for culture and civility, and the expectations of reconnecting with some “bourgeois” social stratification.³⁶ The glamorization of the White officer was also rooted in the broader romanticization of prerevolutionary Russia, its regional features (often Siberia and the southern steppes), and its advanced culture. Even if not stated explicitly, the political message coming from this cinematographic representation was that being Red or White was not an ideological choice between good and bad, but a moral choice made by individuals torn between different loyalties who all, in their own way, were fervent patriots of Mother Russia.

Members of the Mikhalkov family comprise some of the main figures embodying this cinematographic rehabilitation. Nikita Mikhalkov (1945) has been one of the leading architects of the glamorization of the White past in Soviet and Russian cinema. His first feature film, also the first White Eastern, *At Home among Strangers* (1974), saw him play the main White officer, of Cossack origin. He had enough support inside state structures to win his fight against censors and get the film approved. He then renewed the experiment with *A Slave of Love* (1976). Also set during the Revolution, the film ended with the heroine shouting to the Reds: “Sirs, you are monsters. You will be cursed by your own country”—here, too, an impressive critique of the Bolsheviks that was able to circumvent censorship.

Mikhalkov came from an aristocratic family very close to Stalin—his father, Sergey Mikhalkov, wrote the lyrics of the Soviet hymn and was one of the most famous Soviet children’s writers. Nikita’s exalted vision of the White past has been anchored not only in his own

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aristocratic descent, but also in his broader family circles: his first wife, Anastasiya Vertinskaya, was the daughter of Alexander Vertinsky, a renowned Russian singer who emigrated to Europe during the Civil War. Vertinsky was authorized to come back to the Soviet Union in 1943 as a symbol of the emigration's reconciliation with the Soviet regime and was even awarded the Stalin Prize in 1951. Mikhalkov was thus introduced early to émigré culture and memory—which he activated first in the Brezhnev period and continued to cultivate well into the Putin era.³⁷

The romanticization of the Civil War went hand in hand with a greater attraction to historical musical films (*operetta*) based on Russia's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history. This genre allowed Soviet citizens to reconnect with Russia's European past (fights against Napoleon's army or the Habsburg's Empire) through attractive stories of love and adventure, historical costumes, exotic landscapes, and variety music.³⁸ The figure of the hussar—the light-cavalry soldier present in almost all European armies and modeled on the fifteenth-century Hungarian light-horse corps—ready to die for the tsar and the homeland, became one of the most popular characters of Soviet culture: young people played hussars and, to the great displeasure of the authorities, began calling themselves “Sir” (*gospodin*) rather than “Comrade” (*tovarishch*).

From the end of the 1970s to the early 1980s, the cinematographic rehabilitation of the Whites as authentic patriots became mainstream. After the mini-series *State Border*, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, several detective films set during the Revolution and the Civil War were screened. Some of them also mentioned the killing of the imperial family. At the same time, clandestine audio recordings of pro-White émigrés songs were spreading throughout the country, the most famous being those about Poruchik Golitsyn. Several legendary bards adapted the adventures of Poruchik Golitsyn into music, encapsulating the most widespread musical nostalgia for White officer culture in the 1970s–1980s.³⁹ What had once been underground now came out into the open: Soviet citizens could easily watch, read, or hear about the Whites and their devotion to the homeland.

The Ambivalent Attitudes of the Soviet Authorities

In 1958, Boris Pasternak's negative views of the Bolshevik Revolution and his sympathy for the White movement and Nicholas II fueled the Soviet campaign against awarding him the Nobel Prize for *Doctor Zhivago* (1957). The Soviet leadership's attitude toward the novel was reflected in Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmitry Shepilov's report to the Central Committee of Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which suggested that Pasternak

s[aw] revolutionary events through the eyes of our enemies ... Depicting the epoch of the Revolution and the Civil War, the author is desperate to stress its meaningless cruelty and barbarity. (...) And, of course, his sympathies are on the side of the enemy, the newly-admitted young soldiers of the White Army, whose brave attacks are depicted with tenderness and love. (...) The Revolution and democracy are unfavorably contrasted not only with the White officers, but even with the Emperor of All-Russia, about whom the author talks with compassion and adoration.⁴⁰

But this position already began to shift in the 1960s, shaped by the constant indecision of the Communist Party apparatus and state toward the Russian Party. Some members of the Politburo wanted to ban its members from publishing, while others thought that these conservative writers were a good weapon against the "Westernizers" (*zapadniki*) and the socialists, who were judged to be much more dangerous. That is how, in 1966, Mikhail Bulgakov's formerly banned novel, *White Guard*, depicting the different camps of the Civil War, was authorized to be released in the literary journal *Russia (Rossiia)*. Two years later, *Young Guard* published Mikhail Lobanov's "Enlightened Philistinism," which attacked liberals as the "demoralizers of the national spirit." By the end of the 1960s, a subdued but perceptible opposition had been established between the conservative Stalinists, represented by the journal *October (Oktiabr)* and the tsarist nostalgists associated with *Young Guard*, *Russia*, and

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Our Contemporary (*Nash sovremennik*) who unhesitatingly criticized the Soviet experiment and endorsed Slavophilism.⁴¹

Historian of the Russian Party Nikolay Mitrokhin notes that between the late 1960s and early 1970s, “no substantial punitive KGB actions against the Russian Party have been seen,” and if the repressions against the Russian nationalists had taken place, they were “applied very parsimoniously.” Because of these intentionally inadequate measures, the Russian Party “entered the stage of organizational formation as an independent political and public force.” Although it lost the war for real political influence, it succeeded in seizing “solid positions in the literary and publishing community.”⁴² Yet this alliance between the Soviet authorities and Russian nationalist circles should not conceal the existence of numerous conflicts, which resulted in the episodic censorship of many prominent artists.

During the 1970s, Brezhnev decided to use the confusion between Russian nationalism and Soviet patriotism as a tool to fight against the rising nationalist sentiment in the federal republics. The Russian Party then enjoyed the protection of KGB Chairmen Aleksander Shelepin and Vladimir Semichastnyi, Politburo member and Chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet Dmitry Poliansky, top Soviet ideologist Mikhail Suslov’s aide Vladimir Vorontsov, and of several Poliburo members and other high-ranking party officials. The Central Committee of the Komsomol (VLKSM) and the USSR Writers’ Union became the Russian Party’s main umbrella institutions. In the second half of the 1970s, then-Minister of Internal Affairs Nikolay Shchelokov also assisted the investigative group studying the circumstances of the murder of Nicholas II and his family.⁴³ Various nationalist associations motivated by the protection of the Russian cultural legacy, such as the Moscow city club Rodina, the Russian Club, and the All-Russian Society for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments (VOOPIK), progressively secured state support and funding.⁴⁴ They launched the first historical reenactment clubs, as well as the first search brigades to recover the remains of fallen Soviet soldiers.

By the late 1970s, the Russian Party had largely become ideologically independent, further challenging the established Soviet ideology.⁴⁵ The

main village prose writers—Viktor Astafiev, Fyodor Abramov, Vladimir Ovechkin, Valentin Rasputin, and Vasily Belov—were awarded the most prestigious Soviet prizes, ensuring that each of their works would be published in several million copies.⁴⁶ The KGB reported that people secretly came to pray and light candles in front of the Ipatyev House in Sverdlovsk, where Nicholas II's family had been executed. Worried about a growing underground cult of the last tsar and possible connection to the ROCOR, which was preparing the tsar's canonization, the Soviet authorities issued a secret resolution to demolish the house.⁴⁷ In 1978, Soviet cultural life was marked by Glazunov's massive exhibition of more than 400 of his works, which attracted 600,000 visitors to Moscow and 1 million to Leningrad.⁴⁸ Two years later, the painter received the distinguished title of people's artist of the USSR, a sign that openly monarchist references were no more considered as anti-Soviet.

On the international scene, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union peaked again, fueled by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Ronald Reagan's arrival to power in Washington with a very pronounced anti-Soviet agenda, and new tensions in Europe (the Polish crisis of 1981 and the missile crisis in 1982). Eventually, in spring 1981, the KGB decided to crack down on the anti-Soviet activities of the "part of the academic and artistic intelligentsia related to the Western secret services and mass media via the Russian émigré organizations." Yuri Andropov addressed the Central Committee with a report explaining the situation about this growing "Russophile" movement:

Recently in Moscow and other cities a new trend manifested itself among the part of the academic and artistic intelligentsia that call themselves *rusisty* (students in Russian studies). Under slogans of protection of Russian national traditions, they are basically engaged in active anti-Soviet work that is enthusiastically provoked and encouraged by foreign ideological centers, anti-Soviet émigré organizations, and bourgeois mass media. Enemy secret services view them as a convenient opportunity for their subversive penetration into Soviet society. Official representatives of capitalist states pay serious attention to these circles. In

particular, the embassies of the United States, Italy, Federal Republic of Germany, and Canada. The diplomatic staff seek contacts with the so-called *rusisty* to obtain intelligence and meet people whom they can use for their hostile activities.⁴⁹

The then-KGB chairman launched a virulent campaign of critique against the journals, publishing houses, and institutions that allowed such ideas to circulate. He attacked, for instance, *Volga*, a journal which had published a violently anti-communist essay by Mikhail Lobanov (cited above) revealingly entitled “Liberation” (1982). Sergey Semanov was also sacked and suddenly removed from the editorial board of the journal *Man and the Law*. Andropov called him a “Russian anti-Soviet element” and threatened to exclude him from the Communist Party.

But the Soviet authorities could not turn back time: a whole realm of Russian nationalists were now bold enough to express their feelings without even trying to integrate them into a Marxist–Leninist framework. VOOPK and the Rodina Club gave birth to Pamyat (‘memory’ in Russian), the main nationalist hub and cadres school of the 1980s that would later deeply mold the far-right landscape during perestroika and the first years of independent Russia. In 1988, VOOPK attempted to install a monument to St. Sergius of Radonezh in the small village of Gorodok (now Radonezh) to celebrate the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kulikovo which saw the Moscow principality’s victory against the Mongol Empire. The monument was built by Vyacheslav Klykov, not only a recipient of the USSR State Prize in arts but also a member of Pamyat. It was judged to be so controversial that it took more than one year for the association to negotiate with the authorities and receive authorization to erect it.⁵⁰ Well before Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies of perestroika and glasnost opened gaping divisions, Soviet politics and Soviet culture were already witnessing ideological polarization.

Historical romanticism played a critical role in late Soviet culture: as movies and music exalted Russia's prerevolutionary past, the hussar and the White officer gradually became key figures of Soviet popular culture without being seen as contradictory to the official ideology of the regime. The ability of Soviet culture to integrate the prerevolutionary past with the Soviet construction in one unified experiment is not unique: in France, the continuity between monarchy and the republic beyond the 1789 Revolution is also perceived as an expression of the permanency of the nation and the state. For the majority of the population, this White historical romanticism was a cultural fashion that did not affect judgments on the legitimacy of the Soviet political system. Yet for the political and cultural elite, a White stance was an ideological statement, with a subtext—readable by insiders—that denounced atheism and Marxism–Leninism to different degrees. The history of the Soviet Union after Stalin is one that has to be understood through one of its key cultural shifts: the Whites as foundational enemies of the Soviet state were partially rehabilitated as heroes, embodying patriotism for Russia.

CHAPTER 2

WHITE RENAISSANCE: CULTURAL REDISCOVERY WITHOUT JUDICIAL REHABILITATION

Eighty years after the last tsar and his family were executed in Yekaterinburg, a weak and already sick Boris Yeltsin was waiting for the ROC to recognize the imperial family's remains and participate in the reburial ceremony in vain. The Church disputed the authenticity of the discovery and abstained from joining. After much hesitation, the Russian president attended the historical event, accompanied by several members of his government, including Boris Nemtsov (1959–2015), his prime minister, then in charge of the reburial ceremony, and members of the Romanov family. Yeltsin declared solemnly:

By burying the remains of innocent victims we want to expiate the sins of our ancestors. Guilty are those who committed this heinous crime, and those who have been justifying it for decades, all of us. [...] Many glorious pages of Russian history are linked with the Romanovs. But also connected with their name is one of the most bitter lessons—that any attempts to change life by violence are doomed. [...] We must finish this century, which has become the century of blood and lawlessness for Russia, with repentance and reconciliation, irrespective of political and religious views and ethnic origin.¹

Yeltsin's statement summarizes well the atmosphere of that time, announcing what would be Vladimir Putin's stance a few years later: a critique of revolutionary violence, accused of resulting in a series of catastrophic events for Russia, and the need for the national reconciliation of Reds and Whites in order to move the country beyond ideological differences.

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As one can guess, the perestroika years, which opened with Mikhail Gorbachev becoming general secretary in 1985, dramatically changed the context in which memory of the White movement could be expressed. The process of reinstating anti-Bolshevik figures within Soviet culture prior to 1985 took place fitfully; afterward it exploded. The revival of the ROC, the rewriting of the “blank spots” of Soviet history, the publication of previously banned books, the release of “shelved” movies, the law on rehabilitating the victims of political repressions, and virulent political fights about newly acquired political freedoms—all key components of the Gorbachev years—made the prerevolutionary and White pasts an integral part of Russia’s public life. After the Soviet collapse, both nationalists and liberals (at that time the latter were calling themselves democrats) made use of narratives inspired by the White cause to fight against their main opponent, the then-powerful Communist Party of the Russian Federation led by Gennady Zyuganov. While the judicial rehabilitation of White leadership did not succeed, other, non-legal, mechanisms reintegrated the legacies of the prerevolutionary period and emigration into post-Soviet Russian culture.

Perestroika and the Rediscovery of a Forbidden Past

The Church Revival as a Precedent for White Rebirth

As one of the first symbolic measures of perestroika, the Soviet regime decided to soften its atheist legislation and recognize religious freedom. The interest in religion and semi-secret baptisms, even among Communist Party’s members, had become rather common by then. In spring 1988, the Kremlin offered full support to celebrations of the millennium of the Christianization of Russia, commemorating the baptism of Prince Vladimir of Kiev in 988. Originally intended to be purely a Church affair, the celebration was transformed into a national event when Mikhail Gorbachev gave it state backing, marking a turning point of perestroika and a major shift in Soviet religious policy. In 1990, the law “On Religious Freedom” and the policy of

transferring some religious edifices back to religious communities definitively transformed the domestic religious landscape.²

This decision had far-reaching consequences that Gorbachev's team of reformists could not have fully anticipated. The Church's recognition gave new impetus to the Moscow Patriarchate's desire to recover its lost prestige and memory of its political repression. It also accelerated the renewal of contacts with the ROCOR, seen as part of the *détente* policy that both sides sought. The Moscow Patriarchate invited the ROCOR to join the 1988 millennium commemoration, but the latter declined the invitation. It insisted that the ROC, which cooperated with a godless regime, first repent of its apostasy and canonize Nicholas II and the imperial family—something the Moscow Patriarchate was not ready to accept at that time. The ROCOR had already decided to unilaterally canonize the whole imperial family in 1981 and to launch a process of mass canonization of those persecuted for their faith in Soviet Union, which the ROC would later replicate.

Despite a deep and continuing disagreement about the extent to which the Moscow Patriarchate needed to repent of its collaboration with the Soviet regime, the ROCOR took full advantage of the historical opportunity to enter Soviet Russia. Targeting a readership thirsty for new material, it published numerous books and articles on Orthodoxy's leading role in prerevolutionary Russian nation- and state-building and on the ROCOR's role as the guardian not only of authentic Russian spirituality and culture, but also of the Russian monarchy. It also sponsored a wave of publications about the collaboration of ROC figures with the KGB. Its reproductions of the *Icon of New Martyrs of Russia Who Suffered Death for Christ* (painted in 1981 for the Holy Epiphany Church in Boston), representing the imperial family accompanied by several ranks of religious figures martyred by the Soviet regime, were also in high demand during perestroika.³

The influx of information on Russians émigrés and their views appeared simultaneously with Gorbachev's decision to open archives and authorize the rewriting of some chapters of twentieth-century history. This double move resulted in a radical change in the Soviet historical narrative and paved the way to an impressively

quick reemergence of a White version of history. At the All-Soviet Union Academic Symposium in Kazan in February 1987, Nikolai P. Eroshkin, a professor at the Moscow State Historic-Archival Institute, declared that lack of coverage of the operations and movements of the Whites in Soviet historical studies was problematic.⁴ A month later, documents of the Russian Historical Archives that had been transferred from Prague to the Central State Archives of the October Revolution (now the State Archives of the Russian Federation (GARF)) were declassified and, two years later, were put into separate storage for “White Guard and Émigré Collections.” The White forces had returned home, even if they now lived in archival files.

In 1988, trying to secure the good graces of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Soviet regime issued a resolution, “On Further Steps in the Humanitarian Area,” which included instructions for the reconsideration of those who were convicted for anti-Soviet activity and propaganda. The softening of censorship, which was officially abolished in 1990 but gradually relaxed earlier, allowed for the republication of banned literature. The Politburo authorized first the philosophers of the Silver Age—Vladimir Soloviev, Semyon Frank, Pavel Florensky, Nikolay Lossky, Nikolay Berdiaev, Vasily Rozanov, etc.—to be reprinted, a move that was the prelude to the rediscovery of émigré literature. All of the previously forbidden major names of Russian literature were then authorized for publication.⁵

Epitomizing that trend, in 1990 the Paris-based émigré publisher YMCA Press, close to NTS, was allowed to organize an exhibition of émigré books at the Moscow Library of Foreign Literature, giving unheard-of access to previously prohibited White figures and narratives.⁶ Leonid Reshetnikov (1947), a senior Foreign Intelligence Service official connected to the Russian Party, published in 1990 the first-ever biographical article on Ivan Solonevich (1891–1953), a supporter of the Whites, known for his argument, which held monarchy as the only viable and historically justified political system for Russia. But it is Ivan Ilyin who attracted the most interest, because he inspired both the NTS movement and Alexander Solzhenitsyn himself and was one of the most anti-Soviet émigré writers.⁷ Several

articles devoted to his political philosophy were published already in 1991, his works in ten volumes were reprinted in 1993, followed by several conferences and a documentary film. Émigré historian Sergey Melgunov (1879–1956) joined this crowd of new popular authors. Some of his books such as *The Red Terror*, *The Fate of Nicholas II after His Overthrow* and *The Tragedy of Admiral Kolchak*, which all cast Soviet figures as villains and Whites as heroes, were among the most widely published and widely read in the early 1990s. They contributed to the rapid circulation of the émigré reading of history, which featured such themes as Lenin as a German spy, the genuine patriotism of the White army leaders, the October Revolution as a *coup*, and prerevolutionary Russia as an empire on its way to unprecedented growth and modernization.

The rediscovery of the prerevolutionary past was exemplified by a new attraction to Nicholas II's Prime Minister Petr Stolypin (1862–1911), a symbol of Russian capitalism at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1991, mathematician Ivan Kovalchenko, one of the founders of the Soviet quantitative school, modeled three paths of development that Russia could have taken had the October Revolution not occurred.⁸ His work contributed to a new trend of alternative history spreading the idea that prerevolutionary Russia could have successfully developed and joined the concert of European nations.

During the first few months after the Soviet collapse, Stanislav Govorukhin's film *The Russia That We Lost* (1992), which celebrated prerevolutionary Russia, confirmed the new fascination with the early twentieth century and with Stolypin's figure. A year later, Gely Ryabov adapted his novel *White Horse* (1993) into a ten-episode television series depicting the Civil War, the killing of the Romanovs, and the heroics of Admiral Kolchak, one of the central White leaders who declared himself Supreme Leader of Russia in 1918. The film begins with a biblical message about St. George killing the dragon, intended as a metaphor for the White armies, protected by St. George, killing the dragon of Bolshevism. As the publishing market liberalized, some new textbooks based on the Russian emigration narrative also rehabilitated the tsarist past in an unequivocally positive manner and were very critical of the Soviet period, such as

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Igor Dolutsky's *History of the Fatherland in the Twentieth Century*, approved by the Ministry of Education in 1994.⁹

The promotion of a White narrative was also at the core of the activities of several military history associations as well as historical reenactment clubs, which were able to publicly showcase their fascination with Civil War history and White army leaders for the first time. The military history association "The Volunteer Corps" set up, for instance, a memorial plaque with the following engraved inscription: "To the warriors of the Russian All-Military Union, Russian Protective Corps, the Cossack Camp, and the Cossacks of the 15th Corps who have fallen for Faith and Fatherland" (all were fighting on the side of the Wehrmacht) on the territory of Moscow's All-Saints Church.¹⁰ Military history groups were followed by Cossack organizations mushrooming all over Russia, especially in the southern regions—Krasnodar, Rostov-on-the-Don, the territory up to the Urals, and Siberia. Cossacks appeared publicly with their own set of claims: they asked for the restitution of Cossack land and property confiscated by the Bolsheviks, the recognition of a Cossack ethnicity, and local autonomy in the form of a Cossack republic. For all of these newly born neo-Cossack organizations, the White émigrés were the legitimate guardians of their traditions of self-administration and of a Russian Orthodox culture that the communists had brutally destroyed.¹¹

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Prophet of a Bygone Russia

The relegitimization of the prerevolutionary past was encapsulated by Nobel Laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn in his two pamphlets, *Rebuilding Russia* (1990) and *The Russian Question at the End of the Twentieth Century* (1994). His final multivolume epic, the *Red Wheel* (1974–91) was also instrumental in rehabilitating the image of late prerevolutionary Russia, especially Stolypin's reforms. Solzhenitsyn himself played a major part in the repatriation of lost ideas: exiled in 1974, he returned to Russia in 1994 and remained until his death in 2008.

For Solzhenitsyn, late imperial Russia succeeded in an endogenous modernization that, if not interrupted by both the 1917 Revolutions,

would have combined the pursuit of an autocratic regime in which the tsar embodies the nation with elements of modernity and strong local self-government, the *zemstvo* Assembly.¹² At the same time, the writer denounced the Romanovs as a Europeanized dynasty whose expansionism and acceptance of multinationalism contributed to the creation of an empire that exhausted the “authentic” Russia. Referring to Ilyin, Solzhenitsyn declared that the spiritual life of a nation was more important than the size of its territory. He called upon Russia to abstain from imperial or messianic missions and refocus on its culture from the early seventeenth century, a time that Solzhenitsyn believed contained more organic national values. He thus remained critical of the limits of tsarism, its inability to halt serfdom earlier, its repressions, and its blind foreign policy. Yet he never stopped to condemn the February and October Revolutions, instead drawing parallels with the French Revolution: in 1993, at the 200th anniversary of the French anti-revolutionary Vendée Uprising, he celebrated the White forces and Cossacks who resisted against the Bolsheviks.¹³

In his two manifestos, Solzhenitsyn fostered a clear political program for the new Russia: get rid of the southern republics that exploited Russia’s financial and human resources through the Soviet federal construction and create a new Eastern Slavic state, or at least a federation that would bring together Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and northern Kazakhstan. Although he recognized the Soviet Union’s mistreatment of Ukrainians, he still believed that Ukraine could not be cut from the body of the historical Kievan Rus’ polity and should therefore remain associated with Russia. Domestically, the writer wanted a new political system with a strong presidential regime, a *zemstvo* Assembly, and an ideology inspired by Orthodoxy. He believed that Russia’s future was in its provinces, seen as the last territories uncorrupted by Western values; a form of Swiss-inspired local democracy; and a conservative values system. He also called for the relaunching of Russia’s exhausted demography by promoting large families and wished to offer protection to the 25 million Russians who found themselves abroad after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Solzhenitsyn’s return to Russia in 1994 after two decades in emigration was not an easy one: the prophet received symbolic

recognition but no popular support. His prime-time biweekly talk show came to a rapid end because of a lack of viewership, and the *Red Wheel* was a commercial flop. Disillusioned with post-Soviet Russia, Solzhenitsyn denounced the oligarchic and corrupt Yeltsin government that he thought had made Russia a slave to the West's dictates and prevented the country from reconnecting with itself. While his vehement criticism alienated liberals, his ethnonationalism—he defended ethnic Russians against Russia's imperial traditions—made him the scapegoat of all Soviet nostalgics and Eurasianist groups. Yet in the 2000s, the writer became less critical of the authorities. In October 2000, only six months after taking office, Vladimir Putin made a highly publicized visit to him during which the two men expressed agreement on almost all issues. In 2006, Solzhenitsyn praised Putin for rebuilding Russia's state and great power status and, for the first time after several refusals, accepted a state prize for his work.

Despite a lack of popular recognition, the writer was able to build on his prestige to create the House of Russia Abroad, which hosts a unique collection of émigré literature and archives. At its opening, the future Patriarch Kirill, then Metropolitan, solemnly recognized the major role of emigration in Russian life:

Russian emigration had the spiritual and intellectual potential through which wonderful publications, mostly from YMCA Press, could enter into our contemporary life, into our political and social thinking [...] Today the émigré population has the possibility to enter Russia with its intellectual and spiritual legacy. And it is very important that Russian émigrés play a positive role in these processes, in finding solutions for the problems our society faces today.¹⁴

Since its creation, the House has actively participated in rehabilitating White figures. It has been working especially hard to endorse Kolchak, who Solzhenitsyn considered one of Russia's main heroic figures—during his first meeting with Putin, the writer pleaded vehemently for Kolchak's rehabilitation.¹⁵ In 2019, the House even purchased Kolchak's letters in order for them to be repatriated to Russia and

presented at a big exhibition for the centennial anniversary of the Admiral's death in 2020.¹⁶

The White Narrative as a Tool for Political Battles

This rediscovery of the White era and more broadly the prerevolutionary past not only impacted the cultural realm but also penetrated political debates. Two groups advanced a White historical narrative with an unequivocal political agenda: the most radical nationalist associations and some of the liberal democrats who supported Boris Yeltsin. Despite their ideological opposition, both groups were united in fighting against all those who wanted to bring back the Soviet status quo: the first wanted to stop reforms, the second to accelerate them. Long dead, White forces nevertheless were employed once more in combat, this time to shape the new Russia.

Among the most radical nationalist groups, Dmitry Vasilyev's (1945–2003) National-Patriotic Front Pamyat and its many smaller offshoots reproduced the most extreme White literature, which demonized the Bolsheviks as a tool of an international Judeo-Masonic conspiracy against Russia. More moderate groups mostly emphasized the need for Orthodoxy to become Russia's culture backbone against decades of state atheism. Active among those moderate groups were the Union for Christian Revival, which was led by former dissident Vladimir Osipov and called for a constitutional monarchy, and the Russian Christian Democratic Movement, led by Viktor Aksyuchits (1949). Both political programs were largely inspired by different combinations of Solzhenitsyn's principles and NTS narratives.¹⁷

White worldviews were also operationalized in the liberal democratic camp to discredit those opposed to Gorbachev's reforms and then to Yeltsin's moves in dismantling the Union. First, White narratives provided public relations support for perestroika reforms. Alexander Yakovlev (1923–2005), one of Gorbachev's main reformers, replaced the heads of the most influential Soviet print media with new editors charged with promoting anti-communist historical topics. Among the most debated topics were Stalinist oppression and the



Figure 2 Nationalists carry the black-yellow-white flags of the Russian Empire as they take part in anti-Putin rally in Moscow on June 12, 2012. © AFP Photo/Andrey Smirnov/Getty Images.

failed economic situation, but one could also find discussions on the violent execution of the Romanov family, the labeling of the Bolshevik actions during the Civil War as Red Terror, the reassessment of Vlasov's collaborationism, and more.¹⁸

But as Gorbachev's reforms plunged the country into chaos, White narratives were gradually captured by those who considered the reforms to be too hesitant and wanted to get rid of the whole Soviet system. This was the case, for instance, of the anti-communist "Interregional Deputies Group," formed in 1989 at the Congress of the USSR Supreme Soviet by Academician Andrey Sakharov (1921–89), Rector of the Moscow State Historic-Archival Institute Yury Afanasyev (1934–2015), future Mayor of Moscow Gavriil Popov (1936), and future Russian President Boris Yeltsin. According to them, the "revival of Russia," although not yet expressed as such by Solzhenitsyn, was possible only through the destruction of the Soviet federal construction and the country's reconnection to its prerevolutionary past and White era. This notion of "revival" dominated the Interregional Group's ideology, as well as that of the deputies of the first Congress of the Russian Federation (RSFSR) in 1990.

The NTS continues to proclaim proudly that it directly inspired the opposition to the Soviet regime and therefore contributed to its collapse. While this is obviously a self-serving statement, it nonetheless remains partly true. During a crowded meeting in 1988 at the Lokomotiv Stadium in Leningrad, NTS members released the tricolor flag of the Provisional Government for the first time in decades. That same year, the NTS was able to distribute its political program, *The Road to Future Russia*, which expounded the basic principles of a transition to a democratic system and market economy.¹⁹ This program inspired several groups such as Aksyuchits' and Osipov's parties, Ogorodnikov's Christian Democratic Union, the International Society for Human Rights, as well as the Memorial Society. The Interregional Deputies Group also borrowed directly from the NTS: although Sakharov had always indicated that he was not supportive of the NTS ideological program,²⁰ Afanasyev and Popov positioned themselves as fervent proponents of it.

In 1990, the NTS publishing house, Posev, organized a presentation of authors who had been published in *Grani* such as Bella Akhmadulina, Leonid Borodin, Bulat Okudzhava, and Vladimir Soloukhin.²¹ At the same time, 50,000 copies of the *Posev* journal, printed in Riga, were delivered in Moscow, Leningrad, and other big Russian cities. In the late 2000s, reflecting on these years of transformations, *Posev* editor-in-chief Yury Tsurganov drew parallels between NTS leader Boris Pushkarev's 1959 prediction of a step-by-step overthrow of the communist regime and the strikingly similar way in which the Soviet system collapsed in 1990–1. As he formulated, a new generation of party functionaries “gradually pushed aside the more conservative groups and cleared the road for the forces standing entirely beyond the reach of communist symbols.”²² This new generation, of course, mobilized the Whites to enact its plan.

The Unsuccessful Comeback of Monarchism

In connection with the renaissance of the White past, monarchism returned to fashion during the last years of perestroika. The

rediscovery of tsarism was epitomized in 1990 with the first interview of pretender to the throne Vladimir Kirillovich Romanov (1917–92), published in *Ogoniok* (*Little Spark*).²³ Monarchist proponents rapidly co-opted many mainstream patriotic journals and newspapers such as *Moscow* (*Moskva*), *Our Contemporary*, and *Literary Russia* (*Literaturnaia Rossiia*). Yet they did not gather any massive popular support: the rediscovery of the monarchist past did not impact the Russian public's overwhelming support for a republican system.

Since Soviet times, the tiny group of supporters of a monarchist restoration in Russia have been divided into two main clans: the “legitimists” and the “assemblyists” (*soborniki*). The former defend the Romanov dynasty's right to the throne, a stance that places them in opposition to the assemblyists. The latter demand that a new monarch be elected by universal vote, as was done in 1613 at the end of the Times of Troubles, when the first Romanov was elected by the Assembly of the Land (*zemskii sobor*). The assemblyists also envision electing a representative from another dynasty. The legitimists are those who claim to be directly descended from Nicholas II's cousin Kirill Vladimirovich. The heads of the Russian Imperial House today are the daughter of Grand Duke Vladimir Kirillovich, Grand Duchess Maria Vladimirovna (1953), and her son, Tsarevich, and Grand Duke Georgii of Russia (1981). They assert that the Romanovs remain the only legitimate holders of the throne and seek judicial rehabilitation to address what they interpret as an illegal overthrow. They compete with another branch of the family, the Romanov Family Association, which recognizes Princess Olga Andreevna as a legitimate descendant of Emperor Nicholas I. This second group defends the position that the Provisional Government legally removed the Romanov family in early 1917 and do not claim any restitution. They are supported by the Higher Monarchist Council, created in exile in the early 1920s and now based in Montreal, Canada.²⁴

The Russian Imperial House has regularly declared that it does not call for regime change nor the restoration of the monarchy. Instead, it asks the Russian government to legally recognize the Imperial House as a victim of the Bolshevik regime and to establish its rights as a historical institution. These rights would not result in

political privileges nor in the restitution of property confiscated by the Provisional Government. Yet once they are recognized, Imperial House members could engage in charitable activities, promote historical commemorations, cooperate with the Orthodox Church, and serve as “goodwill ambassadors” advancing Moscow’s diplomatic agenda on the international stage.²⁵

Liberals in the new political landscape of the 1990s saw the Imperial House as a useful tool for discrediting the Soviet past and therefore their communist opponents. Anatoli Sobchak (1937–2000), the then-mayor of St. Petersburg and patron of Vladimir Putin, invited the Imperial House members to visit the former capital as early as November 1991, one month before the official disappearance of the Soviet Union.²⁶ A few months later, in February 1992, Boris Yeltsin met Grand Duke Vladimir at the Russian embassy in Paris and offered Russian citizenship to all members of the House. Upon the death of the Grand Duke, Sobchak and Yeltsin organized his burial in St. Petersburg, although it did not take place at the Romanov family mausoleum. Still, the ceremony represented a radical shift: a member of the Russian royal family was given a state funeral.

Yeltsin did not hesitate to play the monarchist card when it suited him—an irony of history, knowing that he was the Communist Party head of Sverdlovsk responsible for destroying the Ipatiyev House. The Kremlin public relations team tested the attitude of the Russian public toward the monarchy, modeling the president as a neo-monarch. Several people around him even mentioned the possibility of a symbolic return of a Romanov to the throne to compensate for the weakness of the regime. In 1997, the nomination of Deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov for the position of Head of the State Commission for the Reburial of the Emperor Nicholas II and His Family (which existed since 1993) was also a telling argument for this new “political technology.” Nemtsov even declared boldly: “Yeltsin is a natural Russian Tsar. With his recklessness, temper, determination and courage, sometimes, his rare shyness. But, unlike the evil Russian tsars, Yeltsin is kind and forgiving.”²⁷ This kind of narratives will be replicated by some ideological entrepreneurs around Vladimir Putin two decades later.

Lost Battles for Judicial Rehabilitation

Vivid Debates about the 1991 Law on Rehabilitation

The reformist team around Gorbachev was convinced of the need to revisit the sensitive issue of transitional justice and rehabilitate victims of Stalinism in order to reconcile the competing memories over the past. Prepared and discussed since 1989, these attempts resulted in the 1991 Law “On the Rehabilitation of the Victims of Political Repressions,” which declared illegal some Soviet court judgments that had been conducted without proper trials and subsequently paved the way for those decisions to be reversed. Since then, amended sixteen times, the law has examined the cases of about 6 million Soviet citizens and has granted amnesty to about 4 million people.²⁸ Yet it explicitly excludes those who were sentenced for “committing crimes against the Motherland and the Soviet people during the Great Patriotic War,” and those guilty of acts of treason and crimes against humanity—a category that includes many White representatives, accused of counter-revolutionary activities.

Since the law was promulgated, its opponents have advanced several arguments. The most radical faction argues that the Whites do not need to be formally granted amnesty, as the Soviet Union was an illegitimate state based on a *coup* and therefore its judicial decisions had no power in the first place. This is a position cultivated, for instance, by eccentric far-right politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (1946) and by institutions directly representing the memory of the Whites, such as the NTS and ROVS.²⁹ A second group only highlights the legal irregularities of Soviet extrajudicial institutions such as the Revolutionary Tribunals (Revolutionary Martial Courts), rather than those of the whole Soviet judicial system. That group considers that those sentenced by such extrajudicial institutions should be automatically granted amnesty. This is the position, for instance, often expressed by Solzhenitsyn’s House of Russia Abroad. This line is also defended by some of General Vlasov’s proponents, who state that Vlasov was sentenced by the Politburo of the Communist Party, not by the Soviet Supreme Court. Since the Constitutional Court of

the Russian Federation ruled to overturn all judgments delivered by organizations affiliated with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1992, rehabilitation should automatically be granted.

A third and more moderate position asserts that the violence of the Civil War was committed equally by both Whites and Reds. According to this worldview, the Reds should also be held accountable for revolts, robberies, the killing of civilians, punitive expeditions, extrajudicial executions, and pogroms. The Whites should thus at least be absolved of the derogatory label of “traitors of the nation” (*izmenniki rodiny*), as both sides fought patriotically in the name of the motherland.³⁰ A fourth group focuses mostly on the perceived unlawfulness of the Yalta Agreement’s article that allowed for the repatriation of Soviet citizens from the territories formerly under Allied occupation. Members of that group proclaim that those who emigrated during the Civil War were never Soviet citizens—some had even received European countries’ citizenship—and, as such, should not have been subject to the treaty.

Conflicting interpretations of the 1991 Law reemerge at regular intervals. In 2006, then-Deputy Speaker of Parliament Vladimir Zhirinovskiy submitted before the Duma a draft bill “On the Rehabilitation of Participants of the White Movement.” The bill was meant to correct the perceived errors of the 1991 Law and bring it “into conformity with the Code of Criminal Procedure of the Russian Federation.” It declared that those who opposed the Soviet Union during the war and those who were accused of acts of treason and crimes against humanity should not be excluded from the law and should instead be authorized to submit claims for amnesty.

The parliamentary debates brought confrontational historical visions out in the open, thus illustrating how the White émigrés and the ideas they represent continue to rankle in Russia. Zhirinovskiy presented the Bolshevik Revolution as an unlawful takeover that Lenin and Trotsky had organized by order of the German and US secret services. When the parliamentary majority defeated his bill, he violently declared that the Russian administration refused to admit that “the October coup was a crime” and that it was not only the Whites who had “robbed, killed, raped, and deposed unconstitutionally,” but the Bolsheviks,

too. Andrey Savelyev, a representative of the far-right Rodina faction and himself a fervent monarchist, explained that the iconic White movement leaders were in fact cowardly and treacherous *fevralisty* (supporters of the February Revolution) who had violated their oath to Tsar Nicholas II. He suggested that the only true form of restitution would be to “reconnect with the history we had before 1917” and “establish a memorial status for the Russian Imperial House.” As expected, Zyuganov’s Communist Party energetically lobbied against the bill, criticizing this new revisionism and claiming that the Civil War had ended eighty years ago and that the issue was now closed. Representatives of the presidential party United Russia were less emotional and maintained a strictly legalistic approach, arguing that the 1991 Law follows international practices by excluding those who committed terrorist attacks and participated in subversive activities and crimes against humanity.³¹

White Leaders outside of the Scope of Judicial Rehabilitation

Few White leaders can be granted amnesty: the majority of them were condemned in Soviet times on the basis of excluded categories of the 1991 Law on Rehabilitation. Yet several organizations—mostly Solzhenitsyn’s House of Russia Abroad, the Russian Nobility Assembly, ROVS, the Russian Imperial Union-Orden (RIS-O), the NTS, and Cossack organizations—have regularly submitted claims in the hope that the Russian judicial system would favorably revise its rulings.

The case of Admiral Alexander Kolchak, who was sentenced to death and executed by the Bolsheviks in 1920, has been especially debated. In the second half of the 1990s, General Prosecutor Yury Skuratov and Chief of the Headquarters of the Armed Forces Anatoly Kvashnin communicated publicly their support for Kolchak amnesty. The Transbaikal Military District Court ruled that Kolchak’s death warrant was valid, yet the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation believed that the final judgment should be revisited due to gross violations of Kolchak’s right to an attorney. The Military

Collegium of the Supreme Court had to take the final arbitration and deemed that the death warrant was legitimate in regard to Kolchak's crimes against civilian populations. In 2007, the polemics revived: the Omsk District Office of Public Prosecution refused a new claim on the grounds that Kolchak's military regime committed unforgivable crimes against the Soviet people. In 2016, the Member of Parliament of St. Petersburg Vitaly Milonov initiated a similar petition that was also denied.³²

While the most debated and publicized, Kolchak's case is far from unique. Legal claims have been numerous, especially for historical figures representing the White forces in Siberia. Cossack General Grigory Semyonov (1890–1946), his Buriat aide, Urzhin Garmaev (1888–1947), as well as the controversial Baron Roman von Ungern von Sternberg (1885–1921) have been the main focus of these posthumous amnesty battles. In 1994, the Society of the Transbaikalian Cossack Army appealed for amnesty for Semyonov, who was arrested by the Soviet NKVD (the predecessor of the KGB) in the Chinese



Figure 3 Remains of White Army General Vladimir Kappel arrive in Moscow. © ITAR-TASS News Agency/Alamy Stock Photo.

city of Dalian and executed in Moscow. The Military Collegium of the Supreme Court dismissed the charge of anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation but maintained that Semyonov was guilty of espionage, subversion, and terrorism. In 2008, the Russian Supreme Court confirmed Semyonov's crimes, therefore excluding him from any rehabilitation.³³

Arrested by the Red Army in Manchuria in 1945 and sentenced to death, Urzhin Garmaev's fate evolved in a different direction. He has been one of the only White officers so far to be granted full amnesty by the Chief Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation, likely because his case was submitted very early in 1992 and processed very chaotically. Amnesty was granted, but memory wars over interpreting his actions did not stop: the polemics revived in 2015, when the Buriat Drama Theater in Ulan-Ude staged a play depicting the difficult fate of White Buriat émigrés in northern China, including Garmaev. This victimization infuriated many people, who criticized the celebration of a "Japanese agent" who wanted to dismember Russia.³⁴

The case of Baron Ungern von Sternberg has been more straightforward so far. An eccentric personality who fought on the side of the White army, who is often portrayed as having converted to Buddhism to decry the bankruptcy of Western civilization, and who developed a theory of the revival of the Mongol Empire, he was arrested and executed by the Red Army in 1921.³⁵ Legal proceedings in his favor did not succeed: the Novosibirsk Court of Justice denied him amnesty in 1998, instead endorsing the Soviet judgment of crimes against civilians. While their patriotism and commitment to Russia have been lauded on screen and in print for decades now, legally the White leaders remain criminals.

The same is true of other historical villains. Another law, that on the "On Rehabilitation of Cossacks" (1992), has also raised many controversies. Several Cossack groups called for recognition of the unlawfulness of the repatriation by Allies of Cossacks who collaborated with Nazi Germany, asserting that they were never Soviet citizens. Under pressure of some Cossack groups, in 1997, Russia's Chief Prosecutor's Office first granted amnesty to SS General and Commander of the 15th SS Cossack Cavalry Brigade Helmut von Pannwitz (1898–1947). Of Prussian origin, Von Pannwitz

surrendered to the Red Army and was executed in Moscow along with his aides Petr Krasnov and Andrey Shkuro. But the decision to grant him amnesty outraged the public and the Prosecutor's Office had to reverse its judgment. Krasnov and Shkuro were also refused amnesty. So far, all of the Cossack leaders who collaborated with Nazi Germany and its allies during the war have been refused any form of rehabilitation.³⁶

As one can imagine, attempts to grant Vlasov amnesty have also failed. As the most famous case of a Red Army general who defected to Nazi Germany, Vlasov does not belong in itself to the White movement. But because his Russian Liberation Army has been largely re-appropriated by NTS after war, his image remains associated in the mind of public opinion to the genealogy of anti-Soviet White movements.³⁷ Support for Vlasov thus stems from organizations with a clear pro-White agenda, which see positively everything opposing the Soviet Union and especially Stalin. In 2001, for instance, the small "For Faith and Fatherland" monarchist movement submitted a claim to the Main Military Procuracy asking for a revision of Vlasov's death sentence, stating, "Vlasov was a patriot who spent much time reevaluating his service in the Red Army and the essence of Stalin's regime before agreeing to collaborate with the Germans." The Military Procuracy concluded that he had been proven guilty, was justly sentenced, and therefore closed the case.³⁸

Some other proponents of Vlasov decided to base their arguments not on the law but on moral principles. Former Moscow Mayor Gavriil Popov, now dean of the small Moscow International University, offered one of the most straightforward claims in favor of NTS ideology and amnesty for Vlasov. In his book, *Summoning the Spirit of General Vlasov* (2007), he declared that Vlasov did not betray Russia but, on the contrary, embodied an anti-Stalinist vision of Russia that would shape the future of the country and that Vlasov, as a result, should be granted amnesty.³⁹ Archpriest and professor at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy Grigory Mitrofanov also defended the Vlasov movement as genuine Christian resistance against an atheist regime. Mitrofanov articulated his view during a religious service on August 1, 2006, for the 60th anniversary of Vlasov's execution, and then

developed his theses further in *Tragedy of Russia. Forbidden Topics of the Twentieth-Century History in Church Sermons* (2009).⁴⁰ The book sparked fierce debates: the ROCOR Council of Bishops sided with the author but the Federation Council (the Russian Senate) immediately took a new public stance against any attempt at rehabilitating Vlasov.

In the 2010s, the debates moved from the courts to the field of historiography, with sharply contrasting perspectives around the reasons for Vlasov's defection to Nazi Germany: had he defected for ideological reasons to fight against Stalinism, out of pure opportunism as a Nazi "puppet," or because, as a prisoner of war, he knew that he would be deported and sent to Gulag if recaptured by Soviet troops? In 2015, the Russian State Archives, under the supervision of Director Andrey Artizov, published a unique three-volume archival study documenting the complex history of the Vlasov movement. Artizov himself supported the official position, which views Vlasov as a typical product of Nazi actions in occupied territories (and insists that Goebbels, Himmler, Goering, and Ribbentrop all met with Vlasov) and tried to downplay the interpretation of Vlasov's defection as a response to Stalinism.⁴¹

The arguments came to a head in 2016–17 with Kirill Aleksandrov's Ph.D. dissertation at the St. Petersburg Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Aleksandrov, known for being a sympathizer of the NTS, justified Vlasov's actions as an example of social protest against Stalinist violence. In his main book, *Russian Soldiers of the Wehrmacht: Heroes or Traitors?*, he insists that the Vlasovites had won the support of the population and fought for Russia's statehood and national identity. His dissertation on Vlasov's officer corps was validated by the defense committee but critiqued by historians and veterans' associations. Artizov requested that a new committee conduct a second review of the dissertation in the hope of debunking Aleksandrov's argument. That hope was fulfilled, and Aleksandrov was ultimately refused the title of "Doctor of History."⁴² But the debates about Vlasov memory are not likely to stop: in 2019, NTS historical figure Mikhail Nazarov (1948) protested the Victory Day celebrations on May 9, which he believed wrongly and falsely

commemorated an antinational regime, while the real patriots of Russia, the Vlasovites, fought on the opposite side.⁴³

Although the Russian judicial system refused to grant amnesty to White officers and collaborationists, it rehabilitated the Imperial House of Romanov—yet with some caveats. In 2008, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation recognized Nicholas II and his family as victims and, a year later, it gave other members of the family the same status.⁴⁴ However, the state position remains nuanced: officially, the Bolsheviks did not persecute the Romanovs for their political views, and the ceremonial reburial of 1998 (see below) already granted amnesty to the family. Comforted by its first success, the House submitted an official request in 2010 for an investigation into the murder of the tsar's family in order to identify and retroactively condemn the perpetrators. This time, the Russian justice system steadily denied the request. The General Prosecutor concluded that too much time had elapsed since the crime and that those responsible had already died: legally, the killing of the family cannot be considered as a political persecution but instead a common crime on which the statute of limitations had expired. In 2017, a group of Orthodox figures made the same demand, again unsuccessfully. These judicial positions are in tune with Russia's broader legal stance on the Soviet period: requests for the status of victims of political repression are widely accepted, but prosecuting those responsible for repression is not allowed. One may commemorate victims but not sue perpetrators.

Beyond Justice, the Religious Rehabilitation: Nicholas II Canonization

The Russian state has thus far remained cautious and conservative when legally amnestying anyone related to the prerevolutionary and White pasts. But it approves other forms of recognition that do not result in judicial consequences—most famously, it permitted and even supported the religious rehabilitation of the imperial family.

In 1979, the remains of the family were found by amateur enthusiasts, among them Gely Ryabov, who kept the discovery secret

until late perestroika. In 1989, Orthodox believers were authorized to publicly pray on the site of the Ipatyev House for the first time, and they installed a wooden cross there—destroyed the next day.⁴⁵ In June 1991, five remains were exhumed and sent for forensic examination by the Russian government, without close coordination with the Church. Once the bodies' identities had been confirmed by a special commission led by Boris Nemtsov, President Yeltsin decided in 1998 to bury the tsar, his spouse, and three of their children in the crypt of St. Peter and Paul Cathedral, the resting place of all of the Romanovs. But the Patriarchate, which felt marginalized during the investigation, refused to recognize the remains, forbade its high-level authorities from attending the ceremony, and asked that the remains—simply named the “Yekaterinburg remains”—be buried as victims of the Revolution, not as the imperial family. President Yeltsin initially declined to attend the burial ceremony out of respect for the Church but then changed his mind.⁴⁶

After refusing to acknowledge the remains, the Moscow Patriarchate suddenly announced the canonization of the family in 2000. This decision was motivated by its hope to obtain a canonic reconciliation with ROCOR (finalized in 2007); the canonization of the imperial family as an act of repentance for the Patriarchate's decades of collaboration with the Soviet regime was seen as a major step in reconciling the divergent memories of the two churches. The Russian media insisted that by this decision, the Church was legitimizing monarchist principles, yet the Patriarchate was careful to avoid politicization. It stated that Nicholas II was recognized not as a martyr but as a passion-sufferer (*strastoterpets*)—a lower status of holiness—and that he was canonized neither for his political activities nor for his ideological convictions, but as a private citizen. The ROCOR criticized the Moscow Patriarchate's hesitant decision and denounced its refusal to call for national penitence for murdering the imperial family and cooperating with a godless regime.⁴⁷

In 2007, the discovery of the remains of the two missing children, Prince Alexei and Grand Duchess Maria, reopened the contentious debate over the imperial family's remains and produced new forensic investigations. The Patriarchate once again refused to recognize the

DNA results and even insisted on exhuming the bodies of Nicholas II and his spouse for additional testing, which confirmed their identities. It also created its own investigative committee. As the centennial of the execution approached in July 2018, the Russian government arguably hoped that the Patriarchate would finally agree to formally recognize the remains as those of the imperial family in order to bury the last two children and close that chapter of history. But a few days prior to the centennial, these hopes were dashed when the Patriarchate's spokesman declared that the Church would not recognize the authenticity of the remains in time for the celebration. Putin decided not to emulate Yeltsin's defiance of the Church and instead canceled official ceremonies planned for that day.

The Moscow Patriarchate continues to abide by its original decision, even if disputing the authenticity of the remains in the face of scientific evidence puts the ecclesiastic hierarchy in an uneasy position. But authenticating them would constitute an admission that the Church has been wrong since the 1990s when the liberal Yeltsin government was right. Such a decision would also have more concrete consequences. For instance, the Ganina Yama monastery complex would lose its religious standing if the Patriarchate were to admit that the imperial family's remains have in fact been buried in another place, Porosyonkov Log. The Church would also have to face its most conservative segments, which have continued to cultivate conspiracy theories about the murder, suggesting, for instance, the possibility of a—implicitly Jewish—“ritual murder.”⁴⁸ In this process of religious rehabilitation, the Russian state has thus been more supportive to celebrate the imperial family's remains—a symbolic gesture with no legal consequences—than has the Church itself.

* * * * *

The White Renaissance and, more broadly, the imperial past, molded a large part of Russia's political and cultural life of the early 1990s. Politically, the enthusiastic rediscovery of the forbidden or unknown helped structure both the far right's rise and the liberals' reconnection to the pre-Soviet past against a common communist enemy. The

Memory Politics and the Russian Civil War

Whites can be interpreted both as a symbol of tsarism, autocracy, and Orthodoxy for the nationalists (see Figure 2) and as a symbol of a liberal, pro-Western Provisional Government for the liberals. Culturally, Russian first-wave emigration's major contribution to the national pantheon has been reintegrated and revalued. In the judicial field, since the 1991 Law on Rehabilitation, the Russian state's position on the legal restoration of the Whites has remained consistent: it avoids legal moves that could have unexpected repercussions and destabilize a judicial system that was inherited from the Soviet period.

Those who collaborated with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union have found themselves automatically excluded from reintegration into the national pantheon—all the more so since the 1945 victory has been effectively used by the Kremlin as the central unifying and nation-building moment. Those who the Soviet regime accused of counter-revolutionary activities during the Civil War and sentenced to death are also excluded from legal rehabilitation but are not necessarily left out of more subtle forms of cultural restoration since even in Soviet times the prerevolutionary and, in part, White era were not excluded from the cultural/art/literature realm. Those who emigrated and therefore were not tried by the Soviet regime have met with more luck, as their symbolic reintegration into the nation's memory does not necessitate the recusal of Soviet judicial decisions (see Figure 3). Regarding the Romanov family, the state's position is also clearly formulated: the family has been granted amnesty, has been reburied with state honors, but cannot claim any other status. Some conflicts over memory have thus ended, while a few—including how to judge the last tsar and his family—remain open battles.

CHAPTER 3

WHITE MEMORY ACTIVISM AROUND THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

In 2017, for the 100th anniversary of the February and October Revolutions, the ROC consecrated a new building in downtown Moscow, the Church of the New Martyrs and Confessors, which commemorates the suffering of the Orthodox believers persecuted by the Soviet state. Metropolitan of Pskov and Porkhov Tikhon (Shevkunov), a prominent cleric who pushes for the Church and the state structures to embrace a more ideological agenda and was the driving force behind the project, declared:

Reconciling Denikin, Kolchak, and Trotsky is not in our decision realm. I do not think such an artificial peace can exist. But the reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church and the so-called White Russian Church that took place ten years ago is a very significant landmark. The descendants of those who emigrated and those who stayed in Soviet Russia should work together to build our motherland, our country. This is the right kind of reconciliation, a reconciliation that truly makes sense.¹

And indeed the Church leaves the decision of an official reconciliation in the Reds and Whites dispute to the political authorities. But the ecclesiastic institution vocally retains its own vision of a religious reconciliation and some of its clerics advance an alternative, anti-Soviet history of the twentieth century in which tsarist symbols and White forces are celebrated.

The Patriarchate's main priority remains the reconstruction of churches and monasteries and the reassertion of its presence in urban and rural landscapes. Patriarch Kirill declared in 2017 that the country now hosts 36,000 churches and 944 monasteries.² But the Church is

also interested in engaging in memory policy. Although the state and the Patriarchate work in parallel to push Russian society in a more patriotic direction and advocate for so-called conservative values, they are divided in some of their historical policy. Within the Church itself, several subcultures with diverging interpretations of history compete too. Yet one can identify three core unified components of the Moscow Patriarchate's memory activism: the remembrance of religious victims of the Soviet regime, including the progressive capture of secular commemorations related to Stalinist violence; the promotion of a popular cult of Nicholas II and the imperial family; and the development—sometimes implicitly, sometimes more explicitly—of a vision of tsarism as Russia's "natural" political regime. All three reanimate people and ideas associated with the White forces.

The Church's New Martyrdom Remembrance Policy

As the core of its official memory policy, the Church promotes remembrance of the victims of Soviet repressions especially clerics who were persecuted for their faith, known as the New Martyrs and Confessors (*novomucheniki i ispovedniki*).³ This New Martyrdom policy has roots in the Church's past: theologically, the Church has celebrated those who die as martyrs (or "passion-bearers") for their faith, itself a central element of Christianity since the time of the Roman Empire. Historically, the Church reemerged as an institution on Russia's public stage during perestroika, sparking a moment of intense discussion about the "blank spots" of history and public rediscovery of the role of state violence and mass repressions in Soviet history. Strategically, canonization of the New Martyrs and Confessors was a prerequisite for reunification with the ROCOR, which has glorified them since the early 1980s. The New Martyrdom policy is thus a self-serving strategy that allows the ROC, which has delegitimized itself in the eyes of the ROCOR and the most radical factions by compromising with the Soviet regime, to put itself at the core of a new creed that is based on victimhood. Morally, the Church preaches redemption and repentance for Soviet atheism, using the

martyrs as exemplars who point the way to a renewed sense of order and moral values.⁴

Worship of non-canonized saints is a long-standing tradition in Russia. Requests for canonization come from very different actors whom the Moscow Patriarchate does not control and therefore relates to uneasily. In the early 2000s, for instance, it had to review and reject the proposals of some priests to canonize Ivan the Terrible and Grigory Rasputin. It must also react to the regular emergence of claims about Stalin's sanctity. In 2008, the hegumen of a St. Petersburg church exhibited an icon featuring the *staritsa* Matrona (a religious figure from the first half of the twentieth century) and Stalin and proclaimed that the Soviet leader protected religion and defended Russia against Nazi invasion thanks to his faith. In 2015, a small parish blessed and exhibited a new icon, "The Great-Power Virgin Mary," on a tank for a local May 9 military parade. The icon had been commissioned by nationalist groups and portrayed Stalin as a holy figure. The Patriarchate reacted vehemently in both cases, criticizing the idea of Stalin as a protector of Orthodoxy—a narrative that contradicts the Church's policy of sanctifying the victims of Soviet repressions.⁵

In opposition to these decentralized claims, the Church has initiated the New Martyrdom policy as a top-down process at the higher levels of its administration.⁶ It launched the Synodal Commission for the Canonization of Saints as early as the time of perestroika. In 1989, the commission canonized Patriarch Tikhon, who had tried to find a way for the Church to survive under the first years of the Bolshevik regime. But it is really since 2000 that the ROC's Council of Bishops has made the *novomucheniki* (including the tsar's family) the cornerstone of its memory policy. Between 1989 and 2011, the commission canonized about 1,800 people, 95 percent of whom as New Martyrs and Confessors, representing the largest wave of canonization in Church history. It included those who were victims of the early Bolshevik repressions against religion in the 1920s, those who were repressed during the Great Purges of 1937–8, and some dissident figures from the second half of the century.⁷ This has contributed to the development of a new genealogy of saints, the majority of whom

are directly or indirectly related to the prerevolutionary past, White emigration, and the underground Church, therefore crafting, at least partly, an alternative, anti-Soviet history of the twentieth century.

There are multiple criteria for sainthood. The Church differentiates between categories of saints (apostles, martyrs, ascetics, saintly prelates, and lay saints) by considering their actions during their life, the way they died, whether they worked miracles, the degree to which they are venerated, among other criteria. In 2013, thirty-six saints suddenly disappeared from the Church calendar, sparking debates about their possible “decanonization.” Although that decanonization never officially occurred, the Patriarchate recognized some problems with the sainthood investigations (mostly the non-veracity of archival documents), which created a massive controversy in regard to the criteria for canonization.⁸ Today, the Synodal Commission for the Canonization of Saints continues to identify potential candidates for sainthood based on archival documents but has slowed down the process. It has also become more willing to let provincial dioceses take the initiative to find candidates; before, new martyrs were mostly proposed by the Moscow Diocese. Hegumen Damaskin Orlovsky (1949), who began collecting oral histories about repressed Orthodox priests and especially those linked to the White past in the 1970s, is presently the driving force behind the Church’s New Martyrdom project.

The Moscow Patriarchate remains very active in the popularization of new martyrs through icon paintings, hagiographies, specific liturgical services, and new pilgrimages to sites where martyrdom occurred. It instituted two new religious days: February 7 (January 25 on the old calendar) became the Day of New Martyrs and Confessors of the Russian Church, and the fourth Saturday after Easter became the Day for the New Martyrs of Butovo (the site of a mass execution during the 1937–8 purges, one where numerous priests and other religious figures died). Several new initiatives have been launched recently. Those include the creation of five reliquaries containing the relics of the *novomucheniki*, which have been sent to circulate among the country’s dioceses for religious processions linked to the centenary of the Russian Revolution in 2017. However, this effort to popularize



Figure 4 Icon, Nikolai II and family, and other martyrs, canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in exile. © Chronicle/Alamy Stock Photo.

new martyrs has not lived up to expectations: the veneration of new martyrs has not taken root among the population and the Patriarchate can often do nothing more than name new churches after new martyrs in the hope that they will progressively integrate into believers' everyday lives. With the exception of some parishes, this alternative memory of the twentieth century does not dominate the Church's everyday culture, especially not among lay citizens.

The Patriarchate's New Martyrdom policy is ambiguous toward the Soviet past. On one hand, the Church's stewardship over many sites

of repression has endowed it by the state with the legitimacy to deal with that past. Its emphasis on Stalinist repression cuts against the grain of a state narrative that considers state violence as a regrettable moment in Soviet history but also excuses it as the price to pay for Soviet great power status and victory in the Second World War.⁹ Yet the New Martyrdom policy avoids pointing fingers at individuals or the state. Through the policy, the Church advances an agenda to purify people of their sins and sacralize victims of the repressions by stating that their suffering was not in vain: a new Russia and the new Church have been reborn from the ashes through this martyrdom. The Church thus does not explicitly condemn violence but accepts it passively as a necessary path toward redemption. The erection of many new churches in the buildings of former security apparatuses, buildings that themselves were confiscated religious edifices, symbolically intertwines the Church and security organs, victims and perpetrators.¹⁰ These connections are also reflected in the recent decision to erect one of the world's biggest Orthodox cathedrals in the Patriot Military Park in Moscow's suburbs, nicknamed "Shoigu's cathedral," after the Russian defense minister.¹¹

Nicholas II as a New Icon of Prerevolutionary Russia

Under this New Martyrdom policy, the shadow of Nicholas II extends far beyond the debate about recognition of the imperial family's remains. The last tsar became a cult figure for a part of the religious community well before he was canonized by the Church.¹² Icons of the imperial family are now prominently displayed in those churches that are the most popular among pilgrim tourists. One of Nicholas II's icons is said to have flowed with myrrh and to have emitted a sweet smell. The Tsar's Days, the yearly commemorative procession from Yekaterinburg to Ganina Yama, has grown from a few dozen people in 1992 to 100,000 participants in the centenary commemoration of July 2018.¹³ Although the 2017 procession was widely retransmitted on Russian TV channels, the commemoration in 2018 was overshadowed by the FIFA World Cup and the Helsinki Summit meeting between Trump and Putin.

While state authorities have not devoted specific attention to Nicholas II, the Church has erected statues of him.¹⁴ The first appeared in 1996 in the small village of Taininsky in Moscow's suburbs. It celebrated Nicholas II as a tsar and martyr but was vandalized a year later and restored in 2000. Since then, statues have proliferated in St. Petersburg, in the Yaroslavl region, in Pavlovsk, in Vladivostok and in Kursk, mostly on church territory (see Figure 4). In 2018, the first church devoted to the imperial family was consecrated in a Moscow suburb. For fervent believers in the sacredness of the tsar—or *tsarebozhniki* in Russian—the political issues related to monarchism do not matter. Nicholas II's elevation to the status of saint glosses over his record as a ruler, replacing the hated "Bloody Nicholas" of Soviet era—a nickname resulting from his repression of a peaceful worker procession in January 1905—with a mythical figure in the present. The tsar is now framed by the ROC and some believers as a redemptive figure in Russia's tumultuous history: hagiographical works paint him as a devoted husband and father, a patriot, and a fervent believer. His lack of resistance to his own murder makes him a symbol of Russia's sin of seventy years of atheism—and therefore of collective redemption today.

The cult of Nicholas II does not limit itself to the religious community—it reaches the public far beyond the limited circle of active believers. Portraits of the tsar now serve as a metaphor for prerevolutionary Russia that is used to sell restored prerevolutionary trademarks. Depictions of the imperial family as an ordinary bourgeois family of the early twentieth century have also become common. The proliferation of photographs, films, and series that show the tsar's supposed idyllic family life—with a loving wife, nice daughters, and a fragile, hemophiliac heir—exhibits the virtues not only of domestic harmony, but also of a bygone past. In 2017, the Patriarchate launched Operation "Words on Love," displaying 300 billboards in Moscow streets that featured excerpts from the correspondence of Nicholas II and Alexandra on love and family values. As the centenary of the execution approached in 2018, this effort was renewed in several big Russian cities. According to the Church, the goal of this advertising campaign was to strengthen family values in society and, indirectly, to cultivate the image of the imperial family as an example to follow.¹⁵

In 2017, Orthodox activists were able to make their voices heard in defense of Nicholas II as a holy figure as never before. Controversy arose in response to Aleksey Uchitel's wide-publicized film *Matilda*, which depicts the (well-documented) love story between the young Nicholas II, still only a tsarevich at that time and not married yet, and ballerina Mathilde Kschessinska. Because it gives the impression of an adultery story, several Church figures argued that the film was blasphemous and called on believers to pray that it be banned, even if the Patriarchate itself did not make any official statements. Several Orthodox movements, including the Orthodox paramilitary group Sorok Sorokov—a name based on an old Russian saying that Moscow has “forty times forty” churches—, organized prayer sit-ins in the streets near theaters that were showing the film. Those movements brought together around 10,000 people, united in denouncing the sacrilegious movie. Defenders of Nicholas II also responded by producing a counter-documentary film *The Slandered Sovereign*, in which several contemporary religious and cultural figures made their devotion to the last tsar public by restoring Nicholas II's image.¹⁶

Even more unexpected was the rise of an extremist form of Orthodoxy—not related to the Church itself, and often opposed to it—that was ready to commit violence to defend Nicholas II's sainthood. A henceforth unknown group calling itself “Christian State-Holy Russia” threatened to commit violent acts if the film was released. It threw petrol bombs at the building that housed the studio of film director Aleksey Uchitel and also torched cars near Moscow, where flyers displayed the slogan “Burn for Matilda.” In Yekaterinburg, a man was arrested after he crashed his Jeep into a theater that was showing the film. The leader of Christian State-Holy Russia, Alexander Kalinin, stated that the group may have organized several bomb threats that resulted in the evacuation of schools and commercial malls.¹⁷

Faced with the violence of the *Matilda* crisis, the Russian authorities took an ambivalent stance. They were compelled to navigate between punishing street violence and avoiding offending the Church. Muslim authorities took the blasphemy charge very seriously and were more repressive than many Russian regional

authorities. The republic of Tatarstan forbade the film from public theaters but not private ones.¹⁸ Local authorities in Chechnya and Dagestan, with the support of Moscow's main mufti, Albir Krganov, asked that the film be banned from their republics and called for a replacement movie that would show the last tsar in a better light.¹⁹ However, at the federal level, the Procuracy did not find the film to be offensive to religious belief, confirming the secular nature of law enforcement and its—sometimes—insensitivity to Orthodox lobbying. Then-Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky refused to ban the film, despite being known for his censorship of culture. Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, denounced the "extremists" who were threatening the film and labeled their actions "unacceptable." At the same time, he asked for "mutual accountability," saying that the "artists must explain that they had no intention of insulting the feelings of others."²⁰ The authorities have thus tried to keep an equilibrium between supporting conservative forces asking for a rigid interpretation of the blasphemy law of 2013 and the traditional secular values of state institutions.

The Church's Ideological Plurality toward History

Beyond this New Martyrdom policy and the veneration of Nicholas II, the ROC is far from an ideologically unified entity. Schematically, its conservative mainstream is surrounded by several peripheral liberal, reactionary, and fundamentalist subcultures.²¹ The multiplicity of actors inside the Church produces a large polyphony of voices, each with its own version of memory.

The Church's mainstream embraces Soviet culture and supports the Patriarchate's rapprochement with the state. This mainstream includes many of the Church's neophytes as well as those who were ordained as priests over the last two decades and the many Orthodox members of the Communist Party. The more radical reactionary subculture, which is concentrated in several dozen large parishes located mostly in Moscow and St. Petersburg, pushes on the contrary for an agenda of rehabilitating the prerevolutionary past and opposing the state's still "Red" interpretation of Russia's twentieth-century

history. This subculture also cultivates continuity with the ROCOR, the underground church of the 1930s–50s, and churchmen who served time in the Gulag.²² A smaller minority strand, sometimes labeled “Orthodox Stalinism,” offers a combination of Orthodox fundamentalism and a cult of strong power (whether it be that of Ivan the Terrible or Stalin). It exalts a Holy Russia with communist coloration and criticizes the Moscow Patriarchate and the Kremlin for being ideologically weak. The liberal parishes, not numerous, try to develop in this unfavorable environment.

In the post-Soviet period, the conservative factions progressively took over the Patriarchate, obtaining concessions from Patriarch Alexy II. The latter did not belong to the fundamentalist wing, but he was concerned that some segments might secede and request to join the ROCOR, which was more nationalist and conservative in its outlook.²³ Alexy was also more sensitive to the legitimacy of ROCOR: he himself was from an émigré family and his main spiritual guide served in Vlasov’s army.²⁴ Since 2008, the new Patriarch, Kirill—formerly Alexy II’s second-in-command in charge of the Church’s Department of Foreign Relations—has been changing the Patriarchate’s narrative. He contends that Russia “had already paid for its griefs” and should now avoid “the syndrome of historical masochism,”²⁵ a discursive line that has put him in conflict with the ROCOR. Yet he let a more ideologically engaged lobby emerge that aimed to restore the prerevolutionary past.

Except on the Soviet period, the Moscow Patriarchate fully backs the state’s memory policy, and does everything it can to associate itself with state-sponsored historical commemorations by sending official representatives to speak publicly and, when possible, by blessing the event, location, newly erected statues, or graves.²⁶ This contributes to a progressive religious “colorization” of Russia’s historical policy. The most direct religious references include the growing use of the term “Holy Russia” by both secular and religious figures and the establishment of a new commemoration day, July 28, for the Baptism of Rus’. This event is honored in a highly symbolic way since the annexation of Crimea, given that the Russian government has emphasized the—poorly documented—fact of Prince Vladimir’s

baptism in 988, which is supposed to have happened in Chersonesus. The Patriarchate also supports the notion of Russia as a distinct civilization in its own right and as a besieged fortress—a *Katekhon*, in Byzantine theology²⁷—against the decadent and intrusive West.

The Patriarchate also endorses the construction of a state-centric national pantheon. That includes new monuments to figures already celebrated by Soviet historiography, such as Alexander Nevsky (victorious against the Teutonic Knights) and Dmitri Donskoy (victorious against the Mongol Empire), and the dedication of a newly erected statue to Prince Vladimir in 2016. Effigies of Kirill and Methodius, the Greek founders of the Slavonic script and literature, are additionally part of this construction. In all of these cases, the commemorated figures are secular heroes representing Russia's history, and simultaneously religious figures.²⁸ In the same vein of blending secular events with religious meaning, the Moscow Patriarchate tries to associate itself closely with all Great Patriotic War-related commemorations—May 9 Victory Day, Leningrad blockade, and the Battle of Kursk.²⁹ The Great Patriotic War memorials and the search brigades that look for the still unburied remains of those who fell during the war are increasingly given a religious color. The Moscow Patriarchate's success in coopting these events is mixed: depending on the personal connections of local authorities to the organizers of state memorials, the Church can find itself officially associated with those events or see its overtures rejected in the name of the secularism of state structures.

Although he sides overall with state historical policy, Patriarch Kirill has delegated part of the Church's ideological initiatives to several influential figures who exhibit a more reactionary viewpoint and do not hesitate to position themselves against the state's memory agenda. This is the case, for instance, of Metropolitan Tikhon, a prominent figure who leads the reactionary, pro-monarchist and pro-White lobby inside the Church. A best-selling writer, Tikhon is often presented as Putin's personal confessor—something neither man has confirmed, although rumor has it that they meet often. Tikhon emerged from Orthodox fundamentalist circles. He supported the movement against electronic barcodes in the late 1990s³⁰ before

he came around to some of the Patriarchate's view. He now exerts a high level of institutional influence: not only is he close to Putin himself, but he is also secretary of the Patriarch's Council for Culture, a member of the Presidential Council for Culture, a member of the Supreme Council of the Church, and was for long the head of the Sretensky Monastery.³¹

The monastery's proximity to the Lubyanka, the headquarters of the former KGB and of today's FSB (Federal Security Service), is often interpreted as an indication of close personal and ideological proximity between the government and the Church: many high-ranking FSB officers go to confession at the monastery. The monastery also hosts one of Russia's largest publishing houses, which produces liturgical texts as well as secular books related to religious culture, and manages the site pravoslavie.ru, with about 7 million visitors per month. Offering a mainstream vision of the Church teaching, rather than a specifically conservative viewpoint, pravoslavie.ru is the ROC's most popular internet portal.³² Tikhon has never hidden his commitment to monarchism, even if he recognizes that Russian society is not yet ready for it: "Monarchy is the ideal condition, natural for Russia. Monarchy is natural to us, but I think it is totally wrong to speak about the renaissance of monarchy now ... One must elevate oneself and live until the special monarchic consciousness emerges."³³ Although Tikhon reputedly aims to become Kirill's successor, his reactionary agenda still competes with Kirill's more mainstream conservative stance.

Monarchist Orthodoxy outside the Church

A loose network of civil society groups that explicitly promote a return to monarchism also develops outside the Church itself. Those groups do not depend on the Patriarchate institutionally but operate in parallel with it. The Synodal Department for Relations between the Church, society, and media acts as a transmission belt between the ecclesiastic institution and this Orthodox civil society. These groups are disinterested in the theological and liturgical side of religion and instead advance a more ideological agenda that is often very critical

toward the Church.³⁴ As steady critics of secularism, they want Orthodoxy to acquire the official status of state religion and push the regime toward a revival of tsarist autocracy. These groups come in three types: the most apocalyptic groups venerate figures such as Ivan the Terrible or the medieval autocratic regime; more classically monarchist groups focus on nineteenth-century emperors, Nicholas II, and the Black Hundreds movement; and the modernists, unified around the “Russian doctrine,” promote a monarchism that they claim is better adapted to today’s conditions.

The apocalyptic groups have adopted a radical reading of Orthodoxy, endorsing an eschatological vision of the world. These groups include the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods and the “Divine Will” movement, which have become the main sources of the Orthodox radicalism that unites laypeople and members of the clergy behind reactionary autocratic claims. The Union of Bearers of Orthodox Banners, led by Leonid Simonovich-Nikshich, is another such group. It combines extreme Orthodox ideology with racist theories inspired by the US White Power movement; the movement’s slogan is “Orthodoxy or death!” and its members wear pointed black hats inspired by *Oprichniki*—the private guard of Ivan the Terrible. As heirs of Pamyat, these groups exhibit their support for the assemblyists and look with disdain at the Romanovs, whom they view as too Europeanized and as responsible for Russia’s collapse in 1917.³⁵

The second group advances a more classic monarchist and pro-Romanov line that takes the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as its point of reference. The main purveyor of this ideology is the news portal Russian Popular Line, which has borrowed its slogan, “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality,” directly from the official doctrine of Nicholas I (1825–55). Its editor-in-chief, Anatoly Stepanov (1961), a disciple of Metropolitan Yoann Snychev, has published many works devoted to the Black Hundreds and major monarchist figures of the early twentieth century.³⁶ The Russian Popular Line is associated with several pro-Romanov associations, such as the Assembly Nobility, which brings together descendants of aristocratic families and regularly organizes cultural, historical, and genealogical events. Several smaller groups orbit the Russian Popular



Figure 5 A ceremony to unveil a monument to Emperor Nicholas II of Russia in Vladivostok's Pokrovsky Park, near the Cathedral of the Intercession, on December 18, 2016. The unveiling of the monument marks the 125th anniversary of Nicholas II's visit to the city. © ITAR-TASS News Agency/Alamy Stock Photo.

Line, including “For Faith and Fatherland,” the Russian Imperial Movement, the Union of the Russian People, and the Black Hundreds. Among this Orthodox civil society, they constitute the main forces behind a blunt rehabilitation of Nicholas II and celebration of the White cause.

A third, more sophisticated group sprung up in the mid-2000s, centered on the Center for Dynamic Conservatism. Its programmatic text, *Serge's Project*, refers to one of Russia's most popular saints, Sergius of Radonezh, who was famous for blessing Dmitri Donskoy before his battle against the Mongols in 1380. *Serge's Project*, also known as the “Russian Doctrine,” presents itself as a first attempt to create a modern autocracy for Russia without referring to the Romanov dynasty. It does not openly call for a monarchist regime but unambiguously states its preference for a conservative and authoritarian regime led by a paternalistic and holy figure, such as a tsar. According to its proponents, conservatism should be interpreted

not as a reactionary or backward-looking doctrine but as a dynamic movement that calls for a new domestic and international political order based on traditional values.³⁷ The Russian Doctrine received significant support from the Moscow Patriarchate, particularly from the Danilov monastery, known for its conservative positions. The Center for Dynamic Conservatism was led by Vitaly Averyanov (1973), one of the best-known advocates of political Orthodoxy, chief editor of pravoslavie.ru, as well as a member of the Writers' Union and several ROC councils. In 2012, the Center merged with the Izborsky Club, launched by the well-known nationalist publicist Aleksandr Prokhanov, and partly lost its identity, as the Club's stance was more openly pro-Soviet than monarchist.³⁸

After the first attempts, at the end of perestroika and in the early years of post-Soviet Russia, to build a monarchist party with its own (albeit limited) constituency, the project was relaunched more actively in the early 2010s. In 2011, several small far-right groups inspired by political Orthodoxy held the inaugural congress of a new Monarchist Party. Alexander Dugin's International Eurasianist Movement and Vladimir Osipov's Christian Revival attended the event. The party elected as its head Dmitry Merkulov, an active member of several pro-monarchist groups, such as the Union of the Russian People and the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods.³⁹ In 2012, another, stranger monarchist party, based near Yekaterinburg, was founded by Anton Bakov, a businessman who was behind several attempts in the 1990s to proclaim a Ural republic and had managed to become a Duma MP for a few years in the 2000s. His party supported a constitutional monarchy and backed the claim of the German Prince Karl Emich of Leiningen as the successor of the Romanovs. Bakov seems to use his wealth to support his weird utopia of a micronation, the "Russian Empire." He has attempted to buy various plots of land abroad—first in Montenegro, then on a Pacific island, and most recently in Gambia—to launch a Vatican-style offshore Russian Imperial See.⁴⁰ These attempts at building a monarchist force in Russia have all failed. As we will see later, only those ideological actors with powerful patrons inside the Kremlin's circles can hope to advance a monarchist agenda with greater resonance.

Implicit and Explicit Nostalgia for Tsarism

Although the Patriarchate maintains that it does not prefer any particular type of political regime, its *Fundamentals of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church* issued in 2000 pleads for a political regime grounded in Orthodoxy.⁴¹ The *Fundamentals* stipulate that the Patriarchate must recognize the separation of state and Church, yet display open sympathy for monarchy and theocracy, which the Church considers superior forms of polity since they guarantee the symphony of spiritual and temporal powers. Within the Church, many consider today's republican system to be the best guarantee of the Church's autonomy in spiritual matters and criticize the dissolution of the Patriarchate by Peter the Great and the submission of the Church to the Romanov dynasty for three centuries. However, a powerful opposing lobby seeks to activate nostalgia for the prerevolutionary era and White forces.

Those within the Patriarchate who do support monarchy refer mostly to a Slavophile interpretation of autocracy. Even Patriarch Kirill celebrates the harmony between tsar, patriarch, and people in Muscovite Rus', insisting on the regime's democratic aspect as well as on the notion of rule-of-law autocracy. The divine nature of tsarist rule—the ruler is an “impersonator” of Christ, as in the Byzantine Empire—thus merges with the concept of popular sovereignty. Some important Church figures, such as the late Vsevolod Chaplin, who was in charge of the Synodal Department for the Interaction of Church and Society until 2015, have plainly called for the establishment of a monarchist party.⁴²

The Moscow Patriarchate has recently made its position on tsarism more explicit by investing in historical theme parks, which have become a new and trendy niche for popularizing history.⁴³ Under Tikhon's leadership, the Patriarchate Council for Culture launched the historical park megaproject “Russia—My History” (*Rossiiia—moia istoriia*). The project was initiated in 2013 and is now hosted at the trade show and amusement park VDNKh: comprising over 28,000 m², the park encompasses 900 multimedia offerings, 11 cinema rooms, and 20 interactive 3D historical reconstructions. The idea was

supported by the Moscow municipality, which has been very close to the Church since the term of former mayor, Yuri Luzhkov. The project was partly funded by direct federal subsidies and big corporations such as Norilsk Nickel and several subsidiaries of Gazprom. It has also received support from the presidential administration: Putin, Dmitry Medvedev, and senior officials met on several occasions with Tikhon or other orchestrators of the project.

The park's designers took their inspiration from multimedia technologies, combining many visual elements—photos, videos, and animations—with infographics and short texts. The exhibitions thus aim to produce not the research-based work of conventional museums but a more popular project that is designed to attract larger audiences. Over the years, facing pressure from the historical community, the project has corrected some of its most controversial and false historical statements, but it continues to present a very biased and non-academically validated version of history, particularly in dealing with the revolutionary era. Yet the exhibition has been a political and commercial success thanks to its unique combination of a conservative reading of Russian history with an ultra-modern medium of transmission. At the end of 2016, the Ministry of Education and Science recommended the exhibition to school pupils as part of their history classes, to students at higher education institutions, and to future teachers of history enrolled in pedagogical institutes, thus displaying the effectiveness of the Church's lobbying strategy.⁴⁴ By late 2019, another twenty parks were opened in major cities all across Russia.

The historical park is promoted as a “living textbook”: visitors travel through three exhibition halls that are devoted to Russia's first dynasty (the Rurikids), the Romanovs, and Soviet history, respectively. The most ideological of the three, the Romanov section takes a straightforward monarchist stance, systematically presenting the Russian tsars as wise heads of state. Any attempt to question their autocratic power is condemned as a plot concocted by Russia's enemies, both external and internal. Every revolutionary movement, including that of the Decembrists, is depicted as a masonic-inspired conspiracy. The huge area devoted to the 1914–22 period is particularly visually powerful.

Three documentary films propagate the Church's reading of 1917.⁴⁵ They suggest that, under Nicholas II, the Russian Empire had been economically, politically, and culturally on its way to a flourishing future when it was destroyed by a combination of external and internal forces. Moreover, it says, the seeds of evil were sown with the Revolution of 1905 and the transformation of the autocracy into a parliamentary monarchy. One film denounces the "weakening of state censorship that allowed liberals to de-sacralize the tsar." The February Revolution was prepared with the help of "foreign and domestic capital"—specifically, that of Great Britain. Another documentary on the 1917 *coup* heaps accusations on the liberals: "The Romanov throne did not collapse due to the coup of Soviet and terrorist-revolutionaries but because of that of aristocratic families, the court nobility, bankers, publishers, lawyers, professors, and other civil society organizations." In this context, claims the third documentary film, the February Revolution is the first "color revolution" in Russia's history and foreruns the Orange Revolution, Euromaidan, and the Arab Springs.

By stating that the Russian Empire was destroyed by its own elites, the Church frames the February Revolution as a symbol of liberal values and Western-oriented worldviews and as the real evil that annihilated Russia. February is associated with national tragedy; the collapse of the tsarist regime was the starting point of that drama and the Bolshevik Revolution another dreadful step. Lenin, presented as a puppet in the hands of Germany, becomes almost secondary; his team is framed as a group of weak revolutionaries with little popular support. It is therefore not Soviet Russia but the West, not Bolshevism but liberalism, that is responsible for the fall of tsarism. This ideological "trick" allows the exhibition to avoid being too confrontational toward the state-sponsored valorization of the Soviet Union. It also confirms the presentism of the Church's historical policy: today's enemy is liberalism, more so than Soviet nostalgia, or even Communism. Here again the White forces and tsarism are mobilized for political battles in the present.

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The Church has grown in stature throughout the 2000s and 2010s, using its symbolic capital to increase its stranglehold over Russian society and becoming an unavoidable actor in the realm of memory politics. By promoting an alternative, anti-Soviet history of the twentieth century that is centered on the New Martyrs and the cult of Nicholas II, the Patriarchate's interpretation contradicts the state narrative. Nonetheless, in many other respects it does mesh with a state pantheon that stresses Russia's greatness, historical continuity, and spatial immensity. This makes the Church merely a "fellow traveler" of the state, rather than its inspiration or cornerstone. However, the new memory activism developed around the Church these last years and the increasing number of references to tsarism could potentially challenge the state's nuanced historical policy. While both the authorities and the Russian public opinion feel comfortable with a light version of Soviet nostalgia that has been adapted to modern times, the emergence of reactionary lobbies that call for a plain rehabilitation of the prerevolutionary and White pasts accentuates an ideological polarization that the regime has always tried to avoid.

CHAPTER 4

THE RUSSIAN STATE'S SEARCH FOR NATIONAL RECONCILIATION

The reconciliation between Reds and Whites should have been embodied in stone for the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution. The authorities were indeed planning to consecrate a Monument to Reconciliation (*pamiatnik primireniia*), on November 4, 2017, for the Day of National Unity. The monument was originally meant to be installed in Kerch—a highly symbolic place where a newly built bridge connects Crimea to the rest of Russia—and then in Sevastopol. It would have encapsulated two powerful symbols: the “reintegration of the Crimean peninsula into the motherland,” as the annexation is presented in Russia, and the end of one segment of the Civil War in November 1920, when the White Armies under Wrangel’s leadership evacuated Crimea via the Black Sea.¹ But it was not ready in time to be inaugurated—a failure revealing the difficulties at moving forward with such a symbolic gesture. National reconciliation between Reds and Whites thus still awaits its recognition in stone, postponed for the centenary of the evacuation in November 2020.²

The Church has been endorsing, sometimes quite plainly, Romanov nostalgia and a White-inspired vision of Russia’s history. In contrast, the Russian state has remained much more cautious, for several reasons. First, the Putin regime fiercely criticizes the 1990s, when ideological fights could endanger the country, and believes in political stability—this is, of course, a self-serving position that favors the regime’s own status quo. Second, it does not want to take a too-rigid ideological position that would limit its own transformations. Far from an immobile structure, the Putin system has significantly evolved over the last two decades, showing an impressive capacity to adapt to new contexts and take on new challenging geopolitical

environments. To keep this ideological plasticity, the Kremlin needs to allow a large plurality of opinions in which Reds and Whites are welcome to express themselves. The disappearance of the Communist Party as significant opposition also helped the regime move away from using White ideology as a counter-narrative and rebalanced the state position in favor of a more pro-Soviet line that espouses Russia's reassertion as a great power. Led by the quest for national reconciliation, the authorities thus advance an agnostic position toward Reds and Whites, but they cannot prevent polarizing memory wars between both factions.

The State's Agnostic Consensus: Neither Red, nor White

Faced with enormous societal changes since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian authorities have always been concerned about the lack of a unified national narrative that could prevent ideological conflicts. Since Soviet narratives were dismantled, the Kremlin has worked to create a new state identity and rebuild a national discourse that makes sense of Russia's historical continuity while leaving room for a plurality of interpretations. Three core principles form the basis of this new national construction. First, Russia's continuity (*preemstvennost'*) over time, following the country's Christianization by Vladimir in the ninth century, is stressed by the slogan of the country's "1,000-year history." Whatever changes there may be to the political regime and territorial borders, there is one—and only one—Russia. This notion is particularly important for managing memory of the twentieth century and the difficult historical junctures of 1917 and 1991.³

Second, the nation's historical pantheon is organized to be as inclusive as possible. As long as Russia's continuity in its different political and territorial embodiments is respected, almost all hierarchies within the pantheon are accepted. At the top of the hierarchy reigns the Great Patriotic War. The nation's foundational myth since the 1970s, the war has been reinstated as the focus of post-Soviet Russia's historical commemorations. Then come several

dozen events and figures, all of which are accorded more or less similar importance. Citizens can be nostalgic for the Soviet Union or for the tsarist empire; they can regard Alexander Nevsky, Peter the Great, Nicholas II, Lenin, Stalin, Gagarin, or Putin himself as the most important hero of national history. The pantheon is given life through massive state-funded historical commemorations and reenactments; rehabilitation of architectural heritage; generous subsidies for historical films and mini-series; and, more recently, historical parks. This catch-all historical policy is well reflected in the country's monuments policy: in 2016–17, Russia erected statues of Prince Vladimir the Great, who christianized Kievan Rus'; the infamous Ivan the Terrible; as well as an "Alley of Rulers" that includes busts of all the country's leaders, from Ryurik, the supposed founder of the first Russian state, to Lenin and Stalin, as well as the head of the Provisional Government, Alexander Kerensky.

Third, the pantheon is state-centric: everything that built Russia as a state is valued, while everything that weakened it is denigrated. As such, Stalin is judged positively for having strengthened the country, despite the price of repressions, while revolutions—in particular, those of 1917—and the fall of the Soviet Union are seen as negative because they caused the collapse of the state. That is why, guided by a state-centric logic, Putin chooses to celebrate state-builders and state-consolidators such as Nicholas I and Alexander III, rather than the weak Nicholas II, who suffered defeat after defeat during the war, failed to rescue the regime, and died a martyr. Sentimentality and expiation provide good nutriment for the Church, not for the state. The state national pantheon thus remains rooted in a very secular definition of power that is impermeable to the religious logic promoted by the Church.

The Russian authorities have been searching for the right narrative about the 1917 Revolutions for three decades. In 1993, Boris Yeltsin described the October Revolution as a catastrophe for young democratic Russia, claiming that it had diverted the country from its European path of development.⁴ This radical critique of the Bolshevik Revolution as a wrong turn in Russian history rapidly softened with the failure of liberal reforms. In competition with popular Communist

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Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, a weakened Yeltsin decided in 1996 to promote a more consensual reading of this historic turn by renaming November 7 the Day of Concord and Reconciliation. This compromise, which kept the date of the revolution a holiday while dissociating it from its communist content, offered a new way forward that emphasized reconciliation between the Reds and Whites. This vision was shared by many other political actors of that time, including General Aleksandr Lebed (1950–2002), who proposed the simultaneous reburial of Nicholas II and Vladimir Lenin as a symbol of the nation's reconciliation with its controversial past.⁵

However, this compromise did not succeed in reconciling contradictory readings of the Bolshevik Revolution. With Vladimir Putin's arrival to power in 2000, the authorities moved to rehabilitate elements of the Soviet past while remaining ambivalent toward the Revolution itself.⁶ They dismissed November 7 in favor of a new holiday, the Day of National Unity, on November 4, which commemorates Russia's victory in 1612 over the Poles, the end of the Time of Troubles, and the arrival of the Romanov dynasty. After the color revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), the Putin regime increasingly positioned itself as counter-revolutionary, insisting on the need for Russia to avoid any kind of abrupt transformations. In 2005, Boris Gryzlov, then chair of the State Duma and leader of the presidential party United Russia, noted the counter-revolutionary nature of the Kremlin's ideology and its promotion of conservative values:

Social conservatism relies on the middle class and takes action in benefit of that class, defending the interests of those who have no need for any sort of revolution, whether financial, economic, cultural, political, orange [the color revolutions, *ML and MK*], red [communist], brown [fascist], or blue [homosexual].⁷

This conservative positioning shifted interpretations of the Bolshevik Revolution: whereas the main issue under Yeltsin was the reconciliation of the Reds and Whites, the core problem under Putin became valorizing the positive aspects of the Soviet Union without glorifying its founding revolutionary act. The Russian president

has indeed repeatedly emphasized the continuity of Russia's history beyond political changes, as well as the need for national reconciliation (*natsional'noe primirenie*), when speaking about the 1917 Revolutions and the collapse of the empire.

Under Putin, the Russian authorities have been quite consistent in their historical policy toward the Bolshevik Revolution. They have refused, for instance, to withdraw Lenin's body from the Red Square Mausoleum, despite the persistent controversy that surrounds it.⁸ However, Lenin is no longer officially celebrated and about 1,000 of his monuments have been pulled down across the country.⁹ The Russian president's official line has been very critical of the Soviet Union's founding father: Putin has stated on several occasions that the Bolsheviks betrayed the nation by signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the German enemy and losing large portions of Russian territory. In 2014, visiting the Seliger camp, which brings together patriotic youth movements, he declared that the "Bolsheviks wished to see their Fatherland defeated," adding that "this was a complete betrayal of national interests."¹⁰ In 2016, once again asked his opinion of Lenin, Putin accused the revolutionary of "having put a bomb under the building named Russia, and it collapsed."¹¹ But these repeated negative assessments of Bolsheviks do not weigh enough to convince the authorities to remove Lenin from the Red Square Mausoleum. The echo that this symbolic gesture would have, both domestically and internationally, is considered too costly compared to a more low-tune policy of keeping things as they are.

Indeed, at the same time, Putin has been rehabilitating the image of the Soviet Union as a great power, as exemplified by his famous 2005 line, "The breakup of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century." He has regularly made positive statements about many components of Soviet ideology and culture. He has also tried to reconcile the Soviet past with Orthodoxy, stating that "communist ideology is very similar to Christianity," and that the *Moral Code of the Builder of Communism*, a set of twelve commandments that had been promoted by the Communist Party in 1961, was a "primitive excerpt from the Bible."¹² Here again, the revolutionary act itself, deemed negative, is dissociated from post-

revolutionary Soviet culture and ideology, which are positively appraised: the first destroyed the state, the second rebuilt it.

The regime's position is even nuanced toward Stalinism. Stalin's crimes are not silenced but "contextualized": although the regime recognizes that the Soviet leader committed terrible mass violence, that violence was mostly "excused" by the need to quickly industrialize and modernize a backward country and prepare it for war against Nazi Germany. The victims of Stalinism can therefore be mourned, so long as this process does not require a legislative act that defines Stalinism as a crime, apologies by the state, truth or reconciliation commissions, or a policy of naming—much less punishing—the executioners.¹³ Over the past few years, under the growing influence of the Church, the state has even made new symbolic gestures, such as the opening of the Wall of Grief in 2016, that are devoted to the memory of political repressions. Yet this remembrance is focused on mourning the victims, not on naming the structural reasons for state violence.¹⁴

The state policy toward the Romanovs has been consistent, too. It celebrates the dynasty as part of Russia's history and statehood and as a time of prestige and expansion for the empire. As part of that position, the authorities have supported the reburial of Nicholas II and his family, as well as the legal restoration of their status. The authorities have also accepted the registration of the Imperial House's Chancellery as a non-profit organization that works as the informal embassy of the imperial family.¹⁵ They have made other symbolic gestures toward cultural recognition. In 2006, for example, Putin attended the reburial in St. Petersburg of Nicholas II's mother, Empress Maria Fiodorovna, who died in exile in Denmark. In 2018, the head of the Imperial House Maria Vladimirovna attended the tenth anniversary of the death of Patriarch Alexy II while her son went to a concert commemorating Nicholas II's birth.¹⁶ But past that symbolic stage, the authorities are not keen to give the Romanov heirs any specific status and are even less eager to recognize the tsarist regime as legitimate.

On several occasions, Putin has indeed mocked those who seek a return to monarchism. Half-joking, he has commented on his

reluctance to live in prerevolutionary Russia, where his ancestors worked as serfs—openly criticizing all those who romanticize tsarism.¹⁷ In 2017, Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, reacted to the declaration of the head of the Crimean Republic, Sergey Aksenov, about the need to restore monarchism. Peskov explained: "Putin regards this idea without any optimism. He has been asked the same question several times these last years [...] and very coldly relates to these discussions."¹⁸ A few days later, Putin himself declared that "thank God we do not have a monarchy, but a republic."¹⁹

Balancing Act: The Centenary of the 1917 Revolution

Having to permanently balance between the Reds and Whites, the presidential administration saw the centenary of the 1917 Revolutions as a real headache.²⁰ The strong divisive aspect of both revolutions indeed runs counter to the inclusiveness and flexibility of the Kremlin's memory politics. The authorities therefore found themselves compelled to find an equilibrium between downgrading the event because of its divisiveness, on the one hand, and commemorating it in the name of reconciling those very divisions, on the other.

Asked about the state's quasi-silence about the event, Dmitry Peskov flatly responded, "And in relation to what would it be necessary to celebrate?"²¹ That unambiguous statement suggested that, from the Kremlin's perspective, there was nothing to cheer. Sergey Naryshkin, director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service as well as of the Russian Historical Society, which was in charge of organizing the commemorative events, expanded on this. He indicated that the Russian state would "note" the event, not "celebrate" it.²² Pavel Zenkovich, head of the presidential administration's Department for Social Projects, stated disingenuously that the date would be commemorated "exclusively as a historical date" and would not be "politicized."²³

At the same time, the state could not completely ignore the centenary. To deal with the commemoration, the authorities developed several parallel strategies. They diminished the meaning of the event

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to avoid taking a clear stance on it; outsourced commemorative events to other institutions, with no pre-planned grand design; developed a reconciliatory narrative about the Whites and the Reds; and allowed other actors to take the floor and promote contradictory readings of the 1917 events.

By 2015, then-Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had already made two notable suggestions about how the centenary should be commemorated. In his *Theses on the National Reconciliation of Russia*, Medinsky advanced five points that he believed should mold the perception of the centenary: recognition of the continuity of Russian history from the tsarist empire to the Soviet Union and today's Russian Federation, recognition of the trauma of social divisions born from the Civil War, respect for both Reds and Whites and recognition that both camps were animated by genuine patriotism, criticism of the ideology of revolutionary terror, and condemnation of external powers' decision to get involved in Russia's internal conflicts.²⁴ Lavrov, too, expressed concern about the risk that the commemoration posed—specifically, that it could provide an opportunity for the circulation, particularly abroad, of disinformation about Russia—and pushed for the revolutions to be commemorated as a moment that, while internal to the country, nevertheless resonated internationally.²⁵

These two positions advanced a relatively positive view of the October Revolution as one of the major events of the twentieth century, refusing to see it as a national catastrophe and impasse for Russia, in contrast to Yeltsin's vision. But Medinsky and Lavrov simultaneously deplored the nation's bloody division along ideological lines, criticizing the violence committed on both sides and condemning foreign interference in domestic affairs—a narrative that, from the regime's perspective, might well be applied to Russia's current situation. This presentism was boldly highlighted by Sergey Naryshkin, who noted:

A jubilee of this kind ... is necessary not for celebrating events, nor for festivities, but above all for rethinking deeply the events of the previous century. And, more importantly, for formulating

the main lessons not only for our country, but for the world ... the value of unity, of civic consensus, the ability of society to compromise and to not permit the extreme division of society in the form of civil war.²⁶

Naryshkin also explicitly stated the significance of the 1917 Revolutions for contemporary Russia, pointing to the “import of so-called revolutionary know-how and color revolutions” that “always bring with them blood, [the] death of citizens, destruction, and calamities for the countries that fall victim to such experiments.”²⁷

Putin took his time pondering which direction to take, and his indecision suggests the difficulty of taking a stance on such a thorny issue. In an address before the Duma on December 1, 2016, he stated, “The forthcoming year of 2017 is the year of the centenary of the February and October Revolutions. It is a weighty reason to look again at the causes and the very essence of revolution in Russia.”²⁸ He added that there was underlying political value in viewing this historical event in the light of the present: by doing that, Russia could celebrate the “reconciliation and strengthening of the societal, political and civic consensus that we have been able to reach today.”²⁹ A few days later, in another address, the president expressed this sentiment in a more straightforward manner: “When we celebrate the centenary of the revolution of 1917 next year, we should aim for reconciliation, for rapprochement, not for division, not for the inflammation of passion.”³⁰ It was not until December 19 that these statements were formalized in a presidential decree that instructed the Russian Historical Society to hurriedly organize events for the following year. The institution affirmed that its main objective was to offer a balanced perspective and, as Medinsky stated, to create a “platform for national reconciliation.”

The final outcome of the Kremlin’s prevarications was that the head of state remained silent about the centenary, making no public declaration or address to the nation as part of the commemorations of either the February or October Revolutions. On November 7, 2017, the authorities limited themselves to a military parade on Red Square, but this commemorated not the Bolshevik Revolution but the

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heroic events of November 7, 1941, when several thousands of Soviet soldiers were sent to the Moscow front to rescue the capital from potential occupation by the Nazis. The parade was accompanied by historical reenactments of Moscow's resistance against the Polish-Lithuanian *Rzeczpospolita* in 1612 and the epic battles against Napoleon in 1812. The Bolshevik Revolution was therefore entirely absent from the only official event of the day. Moreover, only the mayor of Moscow, Sergey Sobyannin, was in charge of representing the Russian state at the parade, conferring on the event a modest, almost municipal meaning.

The list of events sponsored by the presidential administration for the centennial commemoration offers a more complex view of how official institutions celebrated the date.³¹ The representativeness of the list is certainly questionable, given that the Russian Historical Society only had a few weeks to prepare for the jubilee; it likely appropriated activities that had already been programmed. The 118-item list includes exhibitions, conferences, publications, and video and cinema productions. Some discursive lines appear more visibly there than in Putin's speeches. Almost all of the events or publications are devoted to the October Revolution, while the February Revolution is neglected, with fewer than a dozen offerings. Central themes of the February Revolution include the collapse of tsarism, the abdication of Nicholas II, and the issue of the Romanov family's remains. The Civil War is largely absent: the only representatives for the period are one event focused on "the Civil War as a national tragedy," a series of interviews of descendants of Reds and Whites, and a publication on Kolchak. The Provisional Government fared the worst, with only a single event devoted to Kerensky.

The list reflects the official narrative about the events of 1917, but also the problems those events and the subsequent civil war still pose to the Russian state. The Provisional Government, deemed responsible for the collapse of state structures and seen as liberal and pro-Western, is totally ignored; the Civil War is only briefly mentioned so as not to insist on the divisive nature of the two Revolutions; the White interpretation, which favors tsarism, occupies a modest place;

and the more traditional, Soviet-inspired narrative about the October Revolution dominates. Although the latter is positive when describing Russia's role in shaping world history, the country's great power status, and Soviet industrial, literary, scientific, and cultural achievements, the narrative is neutral toward the ideological roots of the Revolution, state violence, and everything related to the communist doctrinal legacy. Yet the dominance of October in the list of state-sponsored commemorative activities reveals not so much an exaltation of the constructive role played by the Bolshevik Revolution, but more an ideological inertia that leads institutions (museums and archives) to reproduce Soviet habits—obviously with some alterations, such as greater criticism of the violence committed in the name of the revolution and the absence of any reference to Marxism–Leninism.

Champions of the White Cause in Putin's Inner Circles

Despite the Russian state's official reluctance to position itself on the Red-White ideological spectrum, a more complex scene emerges throughout the patronage networks that exist around the Kremlin. The latter bridges several ideological ecosystems, each of which is related to Putin in one way or another and consists of specific institutions, funders, patrons, entrepreneurs, and media platforms, all with identifiable ideological orientations. A pro-White ecosystem has emerged among them that promotes the unambiguous restoration of White memory. It also nurtures the trope of monarchism either in the form of a literal return to tsarism or as a metaphor for a more autocratic Putin regime—a form of presidential monarchism.

Some members of Putin's inner circles, particularly Vladimir Yakunin, have long supported the White cause. Yakunin (1948) served as head of Russian Railways from 2003 until he was dismissed in 2015. He has been close to Putin since the early 1990s and remains one of the Kremlin's means of communicating with the Patriarchate.³² Dubbed the "Orthodox Chekist" because of his KGB past and devout Orthodox convictions, Yakunin runs the St. Andrew Foundation (or Andrei Protocletos), one of the largest—and also one

of the richest—Russian Orthodox foundations. It finances multiple projects, including restorations of churches and monasteries, the return of Orthodox relics to Russian soil, cultural exchange programs with the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, and celebrations of the reconciliation between the Patriarchate and the ROCOR. It also sponsors campaigns to promote traditional family values and monuments dedicated to Russian history in Europe—for example, it funded a monument in Gallipoli, Turkey, that commemorates the Wrangel Army, which had arrived there at the end of the Civil War. The Foundation also hosts a slate of patriotic programs designed to keep the nationalist flame burning in the hearts of the younger generation.

Yakunin's St Andrew foundation has played a crucial role in defending Russia's interests abroad—for instance, in France, it lobbied on behalf of Moscow for the construction of Europe's largest Orthodox cathedral, erected in 2016.³³ It has also worked to rally émigré circles behind the Putin regime. In 2010, it organized a cruise for Russian émigrés that set out from the Mediterranean and headed to the Black Sea, reversing the journey of White exiles at the end of the Civil War. While those most loyal to the Romanovs refused to participate, instead demanding the restitution of their property and the removal of Lenin from the Red Square Mausoleum, many others supported this symbolic rapprochement with the Kremlin.³⁴

Since 2014, the new apostle of Putin-style monarchism has been Konstantin Malofeev (1974), a young oligarch who leads Marshall Capital Partners, an investment fund specializing in the telecommunications market.³⁵ Inspired by Metropolitan Yoann Snychev, Malofeev has been a leading supporter of the most radical tendencies of the Moscow Patriarchate and cooperates closely with Tikhon. Using funds raised by Marshall Capital, he founded the Philanthropic Fund of St. Basil the Great, which boasts programs that advocate for family values (anti-abortion groups, assistance to former convicts and single mothers, among others), provide religious education, and offer assistance to Orthodox churches and monasteries. In 2014, Malofeev entered the media spotlight as the main funder of both Crimea annexation and the Donbas insurgency and as one

of the leaders of the Novorossiia project, which supported the idea that eastern Ukrainian territories were supposed to join Russia as a reaction to the Euromaidan Revolution. He also launched the first monarchist television channel, Tsargrad—after the old Russian name for Constantinople—inspired, as he himself asserted, by Fox News. Tsargrad was able to secure about 13 million regular viewers as a cable channel on the NTV network but was demoted from cable to the internet in 2017.

Malofeev proudly states his monarchist convictions and has funded several meetings at which the European and Russian far right have become acquainted with one another and with monarchist circles. He made headlines by helping French far-right politician Philippe de Villiers—a fellow monarchist—launch a project focused on building “Vendéan-style” historical parks in Crimea and in Moscow.³⁶ During the Ukrainian crisis, one of Malofeev’s closest allies, Paris-based Prince Dmitry Shakhovskoy, launched the “Russian Bridge” initiative, a petition of solidarity with Russia aimed at defending Moscow’s position in the Ukrainian crisis that gathered the signatures of more than a hundred descendants of the Russian aristocracy, including the Tolstoys, the Pushkins, and the Sheremetievs.³⁷

Malofeev is active not only in Europe but also at home. In 2006, he opened the St. Vasily the Great Gymnasium, a private boarding institution in the Moscow suburbs that can accommodate up to 400 pupils. Students pay about 600,000 RUB/year, which is the average price for a private school in the Russian capital. The gymnasium claims that it is forming a new Russian elite and instilling monarchist values in students. It is led by Zurab Chavchavadze, a close associate of Malofeev and representative of the Georgian aristocracy. Coming from a White family who returned from abroad to the Soviet Union in 1947, Chavchavadze is working to revive a monarchist International in Europe. The gymnasium fosters a tsarist atmosphere by holding traditional balls and hanging portraits of the imperial and major aristocratic families on the walls. It reproduces the tsarist education program, with daily prayers in Slavonic and classes on Orthodoxy, Latin, calligraphy, and traditional etiquette.³⁸ Malofeev is also suspected to have played an important role in the anti-*Matilda* protests.

In 2016, Malofeev inaugurated the Twoheaded Eagle, an association for historical enlightenment that, in fact, seems to act as a political party with a clear objective: “the transformation of Russia into a full monarchy ... by constitutional means.”³⁹ Malofeev boldly invites his country to return to absolute monarchy (as had existed before the creation of the first Duma in 1905), rather than to the constitutional monarchy that functioned between 1905 and February 1917. He publicly endorsed Putin’s presidential candidacy but stated, “I hope these [2018] elections will be the last ones and that, around 2024, Russia will restore our traditional, monarchist form of government.”⁴⁰

Malofeev recognizes the existence of different constituencies inside the movement—some are in favor of the Romanovs, others are open to the idea of another dynasty—but does not seem to belong to any of them. He is not close to the Romanov Imperial House and is not known to have courted other aristocratic figures who could potentially claim Russia’s throne. He belongs, in fact, to a third group: the “Putinists,” who hope that Vladimir Putin will declare himself a monarch or will restore the autocratic regime under a presidential system. Malofeev has professed, for instance, that “Putin would be a wonderful monarch, he proves it to us every day.”⁴¹ He has advanced the same enthusiasm for Stalin: “Beginning in 1943, Stalin began to behave not as a revolutionary, building a world International, but as a sovereign, Russian tsar. After the war we received a Soviet empire, in many respects a continuation of the Russian Empire. [...] All of the good that Stalin brought was the result of his attempts to play the role of monarch.”⁴²

In 2017, the Twoheaded Eagle’s conference brought together about 150 participants, among them several high-level officials such as the governor of Belgorod, Evgeny Savchenko, as well as several members of the Federation Council and the Duma. The association cooperates closely with both the Moscow Patriarchate and the ROCOR and also features Alexander Boroday, one of the main “polit-technologists” of Donbas secessionism. Yet the Twoheaded Eagle has not succeeded in attracting the monarchist Who’s Who of Russia: the Russian National Line, for instance, was not invited, a fact noted bitterly by its chief editor, Anatoly Stepanov.⁴³

The association elected two vice presidents who personify the two niches targeted by the movement. The first is the Franco-Russian Prince Alexandre Troubetzkoy, heir of the prestigious eponymous family and member of several associations that seek to restore the status of White émigrés. Troubetzkoy gives the Eagle its aristocratic legitimacy and acts as a liaison with the émigré world and European aristocratic jet set. The second is the previously mentioned Lieutenant General Leonid Reshetnikov, who represents the security services' world. Director of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISI), the SVR think tank, he oriented it toward a pro-White stance for almost a decade until he was dismissed from his post in 2017.⁴⁴

Since the war with Ukraine began in 2014, a new tsarist muse has emerged in Russia: Natalya Poklonskaya (1980). A former prosecutor general of the Republic of Crimea and now a Russian Duma MP, Poklonskaya has become an iconic political star.⁴⁵ Her resignation from Ukrainian state service a few days before the annexation of Crimea made her a rare female hero to nationalist-minded groups. Since then, everything she has said has generated buzz on social media. In 2014, she was the fifth most searched-for person on the internet in Russia, and she has inspired dozens of fan-created anime-style *moe*—a Japanese term to describe affection for fictional characters—images.

In 2017, by then a Duma member, she took the lead on the campaign against *Matilda*. She called for the film to be outlawed because, she claimed, it contravened the law on offending religious belief, and she stated that she had collected 100,000 signatures against it. Since becoming a prosecutor in Crimea, she has demonstrated her devotion to the memory of Nicholas II and has even declared that one of his statues cried—a sign of sanctity in Christianity. She was for a time part of a groupuscule, the Russian Orthodox National-Monarchist Movement, focused on the cult of the last emperor. In what was probably her most symbolic gesture, she marched in the Immortal Regiment demonstration on May 9, 2017, with a portrait of Nicholas II. At an event where Russian citizens parade with a photo of a family member who participated in the Great Patriotic War, Poklonskaya's gesture was an audacious metaphor of tsarism as the core of Russia's heritage and Nicholas II as the father of the Russian people (see Figure 6).⁴⁶



Figure 6 Russian State Duma member Natalia Poklonskaya takes part in a religious procession commemorating Nicholas II, the last emperor of Russia, and his family from the Church of All Saints in Yekaterinburg to the Ganina Yama Monastery in the Sverdlovsk Region. The procession is held as part of the Tsar Days Orthodox Culture Festival. © ITAR-TASS News Agency/Alamy Stock Photo.

The Donbas insurgency also played a crucial role in refurbishing both a monarchist credo and the cult of White officers. For instance, the most famous warlord, Igor Strelkov (1970), has role-played as a White officer in historical reenactment clubs for decades. Strelkov entered the State Historic-Archival Institute in 1987, at a time when its rector, Yuri Afanasyev, inspired by the NTS narrative, was enjoying tremendous popularity. Two years later, Strelkov became a member of the military history club Markovtsy, which specializes in reenactments of the operations of White General Sergey Markov (1878–1918) and the First Infantry Division of the White Volunteer Army. During the first months of the Donbas insurgency, when Strelkov's prestige was at its peak, his battalions were operating in the same region where those of his idol Sergey Markov had been fighting during the Civil War.⁴⁷

Mikhalkov's Touch: General Denikin and Ivan Ilyin

In this group of pro-White figures, world-renowned film director Nikita Mikhalkov occupies a unique and privileged space. As we saw, he was the first filmmaker to promote openly the image of the White officer, already in the 1970s. Close to Putin and endowed with unique social capital because of his family's decades-long contribution to Russian cultural life, Mikhalkov is one of the driving engines of White restoration. As president of the Russian Culture Fund, he initiated the campaign "Act of National Reconciliation and Unity." The campaign culminated in 2005 with the reburial of White General Anton Denikin, Denikin's wife, as well as émigré thinker Ivan Ilyin and his spouse on the territory of the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow. They joined another émigré writer, Ivan Shmelyov (1873–1950), who had been buried there since 2000. Shmelyov was famous for his idyllic recreations of the prerevolutionary past and his exaltation of the White resistance as depicted, for instance, in *The Sun of the Dead* (1927).

After producing *The Barber of Siberia* (1998), which won the Russian State Prize, Mikhalkov produced a number of patriotic films, such as *Sunstroke* (2014), that express his nostalgia for the White past.⁴⁸ A member of the Presidium of the monarchist Russian National Council, he published the *Manifesto of Enlightened Conservatism* (2010), which celebrates "Holy Russia" and presents the Soviet Union as "a Great Russia without a Holy Rus." Without calling openly for a return to monarchy, the work laments the fall of the Romanovs, speaks of monarchism's place in Russian conservative ideology (alongside its religious, Soviet, and liberal components), and lists "imperial norms, principles, and mechanisms of state structure" as key elements of "enlightened conservatism."⁴⁹

Mikhalkov has used his family's connection to the White émigrés, as well as its artistic skills and access to power circles, to develop a whole series of documentary films, *The Russian Choice*, which nurtures the image of the Whites as Russia's most genuine patriots who fought against a bloody and cosmopolitan Bolshevik regime.⁵⁰ Mikhalkov later produced a film devoted to Ivan Ilyin, presenting him

as a major philosopher who should inspire today's Russia. Since then, Mikhalkov has regularly invoked the image of Ilyin to bolster Putin's legitimacy—he did so, for example, in his 150-minute television documentary that aired in 2015 to celebrate Putin's fifteen years as Russia's leader.⁵¹

In his documentaries, Mikhalkov suggested that Russia needed to reconcile with its White past by bringing back the remains of major White heroes to national soil. He devoted a lot of his influence to making that happen and focused on Anton Denikin and Ivan Ilyin as the main representatives of the White culture, both militarily and culturally. Denikin's daughter, Marina Denikina (1919–2005), was proposed the repatriation of her father's remains as early as 2001, just after Putin's arrival to power. In 2003, during his trip to New York, the Russian president, accompanied by both Tikhon and Igor Shchegolev, Malofeev's mentor, began negotiating the return of Denikin's remains with Metropolitan Laurus, the main ROCOR prelate. The director of presidential programs at the Russian Culture Fund, Elena Chavchavadze (1947)—Zurab Chavchavadze's spouse—led the initiative. Following Mikhalkov's path, she produced several television series that sought to restore the image of the White émigrés and Romanov emperors. With the support of oligarch Viktor Vekselberg, the fund was also able to return Ilyin's archives from Michigan State University to Moscow State University.⁵² The emblematic act of Denikins' and Ilyin's reburial was seen as the culmination of post-Soviet Russia's reconciliation with its White past. But in his speech, the Russian president did not miss the chance to offer a more contemporary reading of the event: he highlighted that one of the main principles of Denikin's politics was preventing the territorial dismemberment of Russia, especially the separation of Russia and Ukraine—a timely evocation a few months after the Orange Revolution in Kyiv.

In 2007, the remains of White General Vladimir Kappel (1898–1920), who had died while trying to rescue Admiral Kolchak from his Siberian prison, were repatriated and buried near those of Denikin and Ilyin. In contrast to the latter's reburials, Kappel's took place with less honor and without the presence of Vladimir Putin.



Figure 7 Graves of Russian military leader Anton Denikin and his wife Xenia Denikina, Russian military leader Vladimir Kappel and Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin and his wife Nalalia Ilyina (left to right) at the cemetery of the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow, Russia. © Vladimir Pomortzeff/Alamy Stock Photo.

Discovered in Kharbin, his remains were transported from China to Moscow with the help of Cossack organizations and the Church. The remains were welcomed by Dmitry Smirnov (1951), head of the Patriarchate Commission for Family Affairs and the Defense of Motherhood and Childhood, whose grandfather was a White officer. The reburial ceremony was attended by some MPs, the vice chairman of the Council of the Federation, and representatives of the Defense Ministry's Center for Military Memory.⁵³

Both Denikin and Kappel received official honors from the Russian state because they died without being sentenced by the Soviet judicial system, unlike the majority of other White officers, especially Kolchak, who would have first needed to be formally pardoned. General Wrangel could hope for the same fate as Denikin, as he died after emigrating to Brussels without being condemned by Soviet courts. But when the Fund for the Memory of Victims of Political Repressions proposed to repatriate his remains, currently buried in

Serbia, his family refused. His grandson declared that Wrangel would have preferred to stay with his troops than to come back to a Russia in which not all White officers have been pardoned.⁵⁴

The concluding phase of this national reconciliation occurred in 2009 with the inauguration of a modest memorial to White soldiers on the territory of the Donskoy Monastery, to replace a chapel that was never built (see Figure 7). Putin inaugurated it by depositing some flowers on the Denikins', the Ilyins', and Kappel's graves, while also visiting those of Ivan Shmelyov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn.⁵⁵

The prominence of Ivan Ilyin in this restoration of White status has generated numerous discussions about Putin's supposed allegiance to the Whites. Many Western pundits and Russian experts claim that Putin's vision of Russia came from Ilyin⁵⁶; however, any direct connection between the two remains to be traced. Putin has quoted Ilyin on five occasions but has referred to other important figures of the Russian intellectual pantheon more often. His grey cardinal, Vladislav Surkov, also quoted Ilyin twice in 2006 while promoting his notion of sovereign democracy. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has done likewise. The presidential administration under Vyacheslav Volodin was also said to have distributed Ilyin's main work, *Our Tasks*, to regional governors and senior members of United Russia in early 2014.

Nonetheless, the claim that Ilyin's philosophy directly inspired the Kremlin's ideology still awaits verification. Authoritarianism, state supremacy over individual rights, and Russia as a separate civilization are the most common political tropes about Russia and cannot be identified as directly inspired by Ilyin. Moreover, Ilyin's quotes, as selected by Russian officials, reproduce the most conventional framing about Russia, its culture, and the role of the state.⁵⁷ None of them are related to Ilyin's most controversial statements about Jews, Mussolini's Italy, or Nazi Germany, nor his strong anti-Sovietism. His hatred for the Bolsheviks led him to argue that a real patriot would fight on the side of the United States in the event of a war between the country and the Soviet Union—a statement that makes obviously no sense for the Kremlin. These facts help explain why Ilyin can be quoted but not be elevated to the rank of an official thinker: rehabilitating his writing

as a whole would mean embracing too many ideological components with which the Kremlin cannot agree. If the conservative thinker has indeed been held up as the ideological inspiration of the pro-Orthodox and pro-White faction led by Mikhalkov, the presidential administration, as well as Putin himself, has built a much more plural pantheon of ideological references in which the Whites are only one component among myriad others.⁵⁸

Grassroots Memory Battles

The Russian state maintains a balanced memory policy—it cautiously avoids reopening ideological wars and straightforwardly pardoning the Whites. However, at the grassroots level, memory activism is intense. The state's efforts to achieve national reconciliation have not eliminated powerful fights between the two factions, as demonstrated by the recurrent vandalization of plaques and the legal fights over new monuments honoring the Whites. Those grassroots struggles dominate in three regions: Moscow and St. Petersburg, which act as windows to political activism for the whole country; the southern regions of Russia, including White Civil War bastions such as Rostov-on-the-Don and Krasnodar; and Siberia, another region that witnessed strong resistance against the Bolsheviks.

The first monument devoted to national reconciliation between the Reds and Whites was built on the basis of a private initiative in 1997 on the territory of a local Moscow school, with a stone representing both the hat of White officers and the *budionovka*, the revolutionary hat of the Bolsheviks.⁵⁹ In 2005, a new monument to national reconciliation was erected in Novocherkassk, in the Rostov region. The monument celebrated all of the Cossack communities, regardless of whether they had rallied with the Whites or the Reds. More recently, the conservative think tank Izborsky Club called for new reconciliatory measures: its founder and chief editor, Alexander Prokhanov, solemnly declared, "It is necessary to create a state in which, as Putin has said, one can live as a Red commissar or as a White officer."⁶⁰ He thus proposed a monument in which the images of a Red

commissar and White officer would join forces under the protective figure of the motherland. The Izborsky Club even referenced the American Civil War experience, noting that the North-South reconciliation in the United States did not have to be complete in order to be successful; two narratives, Unionist and Confederate, have continued to coexist, but the country is unified by the meta-narrative of American values—a model for Russia to replicate.⁶¹

Although Denikin received Putin's official honors, Admiral Kolchak, the "supreme ruler of Russia" from 1918 to 1920, remains the main cult figure for supporters of the White cause.⁶² In interwar émigré culture, his feats inspired the "Kolchak-like" (*Kolchakiada*) literary style, represented, for instance, in Sergey Melgunov's novels. And indeed, as a polar explorer and oceanologist, Navy officer committed to the motherland, and hero of the Russo-Japanese War and the First World War, the admiral has easily earned admiration. Involved in a long love story, as evidenced by his passionate correspondence with his subordinate's wife, Anna Timireva, he also appears as a romantic figure. Even his death in Siberia and the absence of a grave—a firing squad team supposedly threw his body into an ice hole on the Angara River—add to the mystery. The immense success of the film *Admiral* (2008) engendered a new wave of mythologization of Kolchak. The film was later transformed into a television series, glamorizing the White officer further as a tragic hero, an epic patriot, and a romantic lover.

As early as 1987, members of an expedition organized by the Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute at the USSR Academy of Sciences installed a memorial cross in remembrance of Kolchak on Bennett Island in the East Siberian Sea. Kolchak was indeed a renowned polar explorer who had visited the region in 1903. Yet, in a state that was still atheist, the symbol of the cross was seen as a marker of sympathy for White Russia. In 1993, several famous writers, including Dmitry Likhachev, and representatives of the Soviet Navy petitioned the municipality of St. Petersburg for a commemorative plaque in Kolchak's name on the front of the Naval Academy. Although the Russian Black Sea Navy Command refused to name a battleship after him, two river boats and a sea trawler bear his name today. The



Figure 8 Monument to Admiral Kolchak in Irkutsk, Russia. © Adwo/Alamy Stock Photo.

memorialization process continued into the 2000s: alpinists named a peak in the Caucasus Mountains after Kolchak. His name was also given to an island in the Kara Sea, and members of Krasnoyarsk military history clubs organized a bicycle race in memory of his Army's 1,243-mile Great Siberian Ice March.

Despite, or because of this cult, vivid struggles over monuments or commemorative plaques dedicated to Kolchak regularly shake public opinion.⁶³ In 2004, a massive five-meter-high copper statue, erected in Irkutsk on the bank of the Angara River, became the subject of

controversy: the local Communist Party filed a suit demanding that the monument be torn down, but its claim was dismissed and the copper statue is still in place today (see Figure 8). In 2008, a commemorative plaque on one of Moscow's central streets was rapidly vandalized. Another plaque, hung on the wall of the house where Kolchak had lived in St. Petersburg, met the same fate. A leftist group won a lawsuit to dismantle it, accusing Kolchak of being responsible for the Allies' intervention in Siberia. On the other side, Kolchak supporters tried to petition the authorities, denouncing acts of vandalism by "neo-Bolshevik groups" as part of a new civil war. Solzhenitsyn's Russia Abroad House published a declaration designating the opponents of Kolchak's commemoration as "destructive radical Left forces." Another commemorative plaque was erected in Yekaterinburg after a previous one had been destroyed. A new commemorative project is at work in Omsk, one of the historical capitals of the White movement. As the most symbolic figure of the White struggle for rehabilitation, Kolchak's posthumous destiny will likely continue to be one of the most contested in the Reds and Whites battles.

Wrangel did not benefit from the same romantic aura as Kolchak, but he has remained celebrated for organizing the evacuation of White troops and their families from Crimea in November 1920. A plaque was dedicated to him in Kaliningrad, where he fought during the First World War. In 2016, two years after Crimea's annexation, he received his highest recognition so far: a stele (a stone slab) devoted to him was erected in Kerch on church territory. Even though the event was privately funded, the First Deputy Minister of Culture attended the ceremony, giving it some official recognition.⁶⁴ Wrangel's house in Rostov-on-the-Don is also currently under renovation to host a museum of the White movement. In 2017, the ROVS, which had been created by Wrangel in 1924 and is now a small far-right anti-Soviet movement, launched the Wrangel Award for the best literary or artistic work "celebrating the memory of White heroes and spreading the White Idea."⁶⁵

Other, less-known White figures received some recognition, too. Sergey Markov saw a monument erected in his memory in the Rostov region in 2003.⁶⁶ A decade later, it was Lavr Kornilov's (1870–1918)

turn. Kornilov had died fighting against the Bolsheviks in defense of Yekaterinodar. He received his monument in today's Krasnodar at the initiative of local Cossacks, but with the support of municipal authorities.⁶⁷ It was once again easy to secure authorization for such monuments: both Markov and Kornilov died in combat and were therefore never condemned by the Soviet judicial system. Grigory Semyonov, on the contrary, was refused a monument devoted to his memory in his native village—the initiative was successfully countered by the Council of WWII Veterans of the Transbaikal Kray, which defends a pro-Soviet viewpoint.⁶⁸

Not surprisingly, segments of the Church continue to position themselves at the forefront of these memory struggles. The Novospassky Monastery in downtown Moscow, for instance, opened the Center for the Memory of the White Movement in 2016. It is funded by the Union of the Descendants of Gallipoli, the international association for family members of Wrangel's Army who evacuated Russia in 1920.⁶⁹ Other institutions support this memory struggle, such as Mikhail Nazarov's Union of Russian People—the successor of the Black Hundreds—and the previously mentioned ROVS. Since its official return to Russia in 1996, ROVS faced a schism between those who called for reconciliation with the new Russia and those who wanted to continue the fight until the White movement was fully and completely restored. Today's ROVS persists in condemning the Kremlin as an antinational regime led by "Red Chekists." The movement was engaged in the Donbas insurgency under Strelkov's leadership and leads the fight for White restoration in many regions. Malofeev's Twoheaded Eagle also promotes the White cause: in 2018, it succeeded in debaptizing a street in Vladikavkaz that had been named after Petr Voykov, a Bolshevik commissar suspected of having organized the imperial family's murder.⁷⁰

To this list of memory actors defending the White cause should be added several Cossack organizations, both in Russia and among émigré communities. ROCOR's bishop of Geneva and Eastern Europe, Michael (Donskoff), himself a descendant of a Cossack émigré, for instance, regularly asserts that Putin's Russia, as a Chekist state, has no legal rights to grant amnesty to the Whites.⁷¹ At home, another key

figure of White Cossack activism is Vladimir Melikhov, a rich patron who has been working for decades to restore the legitimacy of the anti-Soviet Cossacks, including those who cooperated with Nazi Germany.⁷² He established two private museums of Cossack history and closely cooperated with ROCOR to erect the Church of Royal Passion-bearers in his large manor, which now functions as a ROCOR informal embassy in Russia. A former member of Pamyat, Melikhov does not hide his political beliefs and has participated in the reactivation of the Union of Russian People, heir of the Black Hundred. In his other estate in the Rostov region, he built a memorial complex dedicated to the White Don Cossacks. The complex's museum denounces the "Judeo-Bolsheviks" for committing genocide during the Civil War. Melikhov himself justified collaboration, explaining that White émigré leaders could only place their hope in Hitler to restore the real Russia. The Communist Party tried to have his museum closed by the authorities, and he himself accused Culture Minister Medinsky, known for having a pro-Soviet stance, of persecuting him.

In the historical community, the White cause has been vehemently endorsed by Andrey Zubov, formerly a professor at MGIMO (the Moscow State Institute of International Relations), a member of several Synodal Commissions, and one of the authors of the Moscow Patriarchate's *Fundaments*. In 2009, Zubov supervised the publication of a two-volume *History of Twentieth-Century Russia*, a compilation of over 2,000 pages that involved about forty contributing authors. The work's fourth edition was released in 2016. Originally, Alexander Solzhenitsyn was part of the editorial board. The Nobel Laureate later retracted his support for the project, but it continues to be known as the "Solzhenitsynian" version of Russian history. It reproduces many aspects of White historiography and is sympathetic toward all those who collaborated with Nazi Germany in order to defeat Stalinism.⁷³ As we saw, proponents of the White cause will likely continue to fight for recognition both in the memory and in the historiographical fields, but their prospects for a large victory remain limited in the current political context.

The Russian state's strategy for dealing with memory issues combines the agnostic posture of the state organs themselves with the acceptance of a plurality of opinions toward Reds and Whites. The Communist Party and different components of the Left, from Sergey Udaltsov's Left Front to Eduard Limonov's National Bolsheviks, continue to defend the Red viewpoint. The latter is also largely shared by the constituencies related, one way or another, to the Ministry of Defense, the security services and law enforcement agencies, and the military-industrial complex. The White cause is championed by key figures such as Yakunin, Malofeev, Tikhon, and Mikhalkov, as well as many far-right movements and small groups of Orthodox activists inside and outside the Patriarchate structure. The presidential administration and Putin himself are thus faced with constant tension between their state-building projects, aimed at unifying and pacifying Russia's memories, on the one hand, and the autonomy of ideological entrepreneurs, on the other. This equilibrium has been at the core of "Putinism" and its *ad hoc* ideological construction for years, but its future remains uncertain. What is sure is that a century after the Civil War ended, Reds and Whites continue to fight in Russia's political system.

CONCLUSION

Memory is a selective process: some components are highlighted, others are obscured, and some are totally silenced. The painful process of Russian post-Civil War reconciliation tends to leave a bitter taste in the mouths of all sides—reconciliatory agreements are never enough or are too much, depending on the perspective. In theory, the Russian case should be simpler, as the process of reconciliation is occurring more than eight decades after the end of the conflict. This, however, is not the case.

The Russian public seems ready for reconciliation, but in an agnostic way. First, it believes that these century-old fights do not matter as much anymore and that both sides of the conflict were right in their own ways. Second, White rehabilitation is welcome if it can integrate the current national pantheon without challenging it. The public appreciates the incorporation of the romanticized image of White officers, now seen as genuine patriots, into the largely Soviet-inspired vision of the twentieth century. It also longs for the tragic fate and thriving culture of the *émigré* movement in interwar Europe. But Russian public opinion does not endorse a straightforward restoration of tsarism or the Provisional Government, which would deny the Soviet Union's global legitimacy. In this consensual vision of Russia's historical continuity, the White past can be a source of nostalgia, but not a political project for the country.

Among some segments of society and parts of the elite, the possibility of reconciliation between Whites and Reds creates much more polarized postures. Proponents of the Whites refuse to contend with cultural reintegration without legal rehabilitation. They call for the implementation of the logical outcomes of the—so far failed—rehabilitation, such as the right to denounce the Soviet regime as

criminal and a potential return to monarchy. This bold position raises hostile reactions from the public opinion, which seeks ideological stability and neutrality; from Russian state organs, which are reluctant to revise Soviet justice; and from the mainstream political elite, which has no interest in opening the Pandora's box of discussing the supposed illegality of the Soviet regime, especially in a very degrading international context.

On the other side, some politicians and memory activists want to preserve the Soviet reading of the Whites as traitors of the nation: this interpretation of history not only protects the current regime against the accusation that it is the heir of Soviet security structures, but it also guards today's Russia from aggressive memory policies, originating in Central and Eastern Europe, that equate Communism with Nazism. For the Kremlin, the Whites also offer a usable past to warn against foreign interference: the reliance of today's liberals on the West to advance their cause parallels the Whites' search for the support of European powers. The posthumous image of the Whites can therefore be used to promote two contradictory ideologies, tsarism or liberalism, depending on the circumstances and the actors.

One can decipher at least three levels of rehabilitation of the White movement. First, the prestige and cultural legacy of Russian emigration abroad have indeed been re-appropriated as part of the national pantheon and celebrated as an integral component of Russia's heritage. The idea of "closing the Soviet parenthesis" and pacifying contradictory memories has succeeded: intellectual and cultural production in today's Russia has fully reintegrated the Civil War and interwar emigration. This policy is inscribed in a broader strategy of framing Russia as part of Europe: the Putin regime has been working hard to revive the image of Russia as the real Europe showing the way to a decadent Western Europe that has forgotten its cultural and religious roots. In that context, Russia's membership in European civilization would secure its ability to influence the affairs of the continent. This Europeanization of Russia's memory thus fosters a cultural rehabilitation of the Whites as Russia's legitimate place in Europe: by honoring Anton Denikin as well as émigré figures such as

Ivan Ilyin, the Kremlin hopes to celebrate Russia's European destiny at a time when it is incredibly challenged on the ground.

The second level of this restoration comprises the most difficult cases of White figures: those who have been condemned by the Soviet regime. Their posthumous destinies remain uncertain. Unlike Denikin, they died before reaching Europe and are therefore not associated with the prestigious heritage of the emigration. The Russian authorities are also reluctant to pardon them as it means revoking the original Soviet judicial decision. Yet these figures tend to be rehabilitated culturally. This is best epitomized by Alexander Kolchak: although he has not been legally pardoned, he has become the object of growing enthusiasm among the pro-White groups and benefits from a genuine popular cult, especially through movies.

In a third category stand all those whose status cannot be restored legally or culturally. This includes all those who collaborated with Axis powers and found themselves on the anti-Soviet side during the Great Patriotic War. White officers and Red commissars can fight alongside each other, but both must fight against the Nazis. The strong consensus in respect of the role of the Soviet Union in achieving victory in 1945 does not permit positive judgments for the Soviet Union's enemies, except from small far-right groups that do not enjoy popular backing.

Nostalgia is a classic phenomenon in countries facing rapid changes in values and habits. In Russia, this nostalgia is mostly related to the late Soviet period (the Brezhnev decades), but it also reaches the early twentieth century and the Civil War years. In that respect, Russian public opinion is not much different from its counterparts across Europe, where there is a similar fashion for the Belle Époque, a time of cultural and social development and optimism that starkly contrasted the mass violence of the rest of the century. The murder of the imperial family under murky circumstances has also helped create an aura of mushy sentimentality around the last Romanovs. As occurred in France with the execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, the act of regicide symbolically embodied collective sin and, for those who regretted it, the issue of collective redemption.

Yet nostalgia for the tsar and regret for his murder do not generate popular support for a monarchist project: the tsar may be welcome as a cultural symbol of a mythical antebellum Russia, but he is not endowed with political legitimacy and has to share the sympathy of the Russian public with the Soviet leaders who executed him.

By advocating for the consolidation of Russia's history beyond ideological lines of divide, the regime has been able to maintain a precarious balance between competing memorial projects. From the Kremlin's perspective, the nation-building aspect of this balancing game is critical: just as France and, partly, the United States have been able to overcome past ideological divisions of revolution and Civil War, Russia should be able to advance a unified historical narrative, too.

All memory sides are thus given room—albeit unequally—in a hierarchical pyramid that continues to have at its height the post-1945 Soviet Union. In this pyramid, both Whites and Bolsheviks can be viewed as genuine patriots or as traitors to the motherland depending on the perspective. Both flirted with foreign interventionism, even if in popular memory Western interference during the Civil War weighs more on the Whites than on the Bolsheviks. Both are received into the national pantheon as long as they do not challenge the predominance of the post-1945 Soviet Union. A pro-White stance is accepted when it denounces the Bolsheviks as unpatriotic internationalists and dangerous revolutionaries, but it is refused if it questions the Soviet Union in its entirety. A bold pro-Bolshevik viewpoint is also vividly recused, as seen in Putin's unambiguous statements about Lenin, and is accepted only if it recognizes that the Bolsheviks' original mistakes were rapidly repaired by a consolidated Soviet state.

These distinctions that bypass traditional ideological junctures are crucial for capturing Putin's own position on these watershed moments in national history. The Russian president seems to appreciate Stolypin's reformation of the imperial system and his crush on the 1905 Revolution, as well as Russia's prospects for development during the early twentieth century but dislikes a tsarist regime that was unable to reform itself and a weak Nicholas II who led his country to defeat and partition. He admires White officers' adherence to their patriotic duties during the Civil War against Bolshevik revolutionaries, ready

to sacrifice their country for an internationalist utopia. But he cannot defend the late White movement abroad, misguided by its hatred of Communism to the point where it could not see the Soviet Union as a new, powerful Russia. This nuanced “point and counterpoint” posture is thus critical of the late tsarist regime, the Provisional Government, and the Bolsheviks’ first years: all failed at securing a strong Russian state. It is also divided in its interpretation of the Whites: they are both glamorous patriots during the Civil War one can refer to and lost souls once they emigrated abroad. This subtle division is critical to understanding how the Whites can be both pardoned for fighting against revolutionary Bolsheviks and criticized as émigrés for opposing Soviet leaders’ reconsolidation of the state after destructive revolutionary episodes.

The growing autonomy of some memory entrepreneurs challenges the long-term sustainability of this state-backed equilibrium. If the Putin regime’s legitimacy weakens among elites, ideological entrepreneurs of all sorts could potentially find themselves empowered and ready to break the established norms of the memory consensus to push their own agenda in a more radical manner. While the Red reading of history seems to be fading progressively among elites and members of the public, the White narrative undoubtedly drives memory activism. Some segments of the Orthodox civil society, both inside and outside the Church itself, have been particularly active in recent years. The Church’s memory initiatives have become more visible, and its nostalgia for tsarism and the White movement more explicit, even while the institution keeps channels of cooperation with the state and its Soviet nostalgia wide open. Yet that influence could trigger backlash too. The Moscow Patriarchate remains contested by part of the Russian public opinion. This is especially true for the urban middle classes who may respect the Church for its symbolic embodiment of Russian identity but cannot accommodate its intrusions into private life and mores. As the Church more frequently takes bold stances on memory issues and public values, it tends to accentuate the society’s polarization.

Russian state structures remain in general friendlier to the Red narrative, both due to bureaucratic inertia and because a pro-

Soviet line fits easily with Russia's reassertion as a great power. Yet this pro-Soviet posture is nuanced, as the state refuses to celebrate the revolutionary conditions in which the Soviet Union was born and accommodates it only in its later statements, once a strong and unified state. In contrast to state structures, champions of the Whites proliferate around the Church and in some of Putin's inner circles. Some emphasize the tsarist regime and the last tsar, Nicholas II, as figures who can redeem Russia's sins. Others stress the importance of the Civil War period, its military feats, and the emigration's cultural and political legacy. Some, mostly within the Church, are genuinely convinced that monarchy is the natural political state of Russia and focus either on the Romanovs or on other potential dynasties. Others use White rehabilitation as an ideological tool to advocate for an autocratic regime. In that case, the metaphor of tsarism does not necessarily reveal monarchist convictions but accommodate any lifelong authoritarian presidential regime: as Malofeev has explicitly stated, Putin should be the new tsar.

While friendlier to the Red narrative, the Putin regime's need for stability and its fear of popular dissatisfaction indirectly foster the rehabilitation of tsarism. This position has been encapsulated by the film *Union of Salvation*, a supposed blockbuster released in late 2019 depicting the Decembrist riots of 1825—an uprising by Russian officers who demanded liberal reforms against the new tsar, Nicholas I. The movie displays the Decembrists as ideologically inconsistent and weak, if not psychologically unstable, because they dare to question the tsar's legitimacy. It concludes by depicting their dangerous attitude, which paved the way for the left-wing terrorism that would shake the Russian Empire in the last third of the nineteenth century, up to the 1905 and 1917 Revolutions. The storyline should be read as a metaphor to the dangers of street uprisings and the need for a political status quo. The idea for the movie was indeed born during the anti-Putin protests in the winter of 2011–12, when Konstantin Ernst, the CEO of Channel One Russia and a key figure in the on-screen adaptation of the Putin regime's ideology, compared the protests with the 1825 riots.¹ By defending a statist position at any cost, even against progressist movements that have been celebrated

in Russian history for a century, the Putin regime risks positioning itself in favor of groups that are much more reactionary than what it stands for and contributes to legitimizing those seeing in tsarism a future for Russia.

It remains to be seen how all these different actors will play their cards in the forthcoming years, when the question of Putin's post-2024 status will become the main node of political life and ideological readjustments. One could forecast aggravated tensions between Red and White coalitions, but it is difficult to think that those tensions could become a decisive line of divide: the Russian population seems to have passed the peak of its nostalgia for the Soviet Union, and it is unlikely that the Church can secure a majority consensus around its divisive memory policies. If the liberals become more influential, today's Reds and Whites could find themselves closer than they imagine, united by a belief in a strong authoritarian state—whatever its ideological color—that can stand against what they perceive as the risk of a new weakened Russia. Whatever the future of the regime holds, the post-Civil War reconciliation and the interpretation of Nicholas II's era and the White past will continue to shape the political and cultural memory of Russia today.

NOTES

Introduction

- 1 The term “Whites” refers to the use of the white color by royalists during the French Revolution, which was replicated to identify the monarchist faction during the Russian Civil War, while the Bolsheviks used the red color of Communism.
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Chapter 1

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