

CHAPTER 2

Enemy Images in the Russian National Narrative

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Abstract

Historical contextualizing is essential to examining and understanding the forms of patriotism and applications of national narrative in contemporary Russia. An important aspect in the formation of collective identities are the perceptions of outer threat at any given time. In this chapter, certain aspects of the development of enemy images in Russia are briefly studied and contextualized, followed by an examination of their manifestations in the contemporary Russian politicization of history.

Keywords: Enemy images, nationalism, narrative, history politics

Introduction

In his book *Russia – the Story of War*, Gregory Carleton (2017, p. 219) points out the enthusiasm of contemporary Russian politicians for reminiscing over the nation's military history:

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National identity so defined assumes that history, at least for Russians, repeats itself, extending back for centuries through a pattern of confrontation in which the actors' names may change but not the primary action. It flattens differences, turning *sui generis* conflicts into a single, paradigmatic one that pits Russians against an implacable foe, where they are always the victims but never the vanquished. Victory always obtains, Russia always comes back. (*ibid.*, p. 219)

Understanding contemporary concepts, ideas and images of outer threat in Russia indeed calls for historical contextualizing. In this chapter, some basic premises, turning points and cases concerning the development of enemy images are examined in the context of the Russian national narrative and national (popular) historiography. The emphasis is on, on the one hand, continuums and, on the other, transitions; that is, it will be examined how certain imagery has been applied to depict new situations of a similar nature, and how it has been adjusted to give a context to new kinds of enmities at any given time, including the present.

The focus is on the time before the revolution of 1917. First, we will take a look at the medieval ideas about enemies, and then focus on the usage of historical enemy images in the 19th century, when nationalistic ideas were developed in earnest. Certain points concerning the images and uses of history in the 20th century and post-Soviet time are shortly examined in the final section of the chapter.

By no means does this overview aim to be a comprehensive representation of the very complicated and multifaceted matter of extensive time span, or to cover all the relevant aspects. For instance, the focus in this chapter is in 'outer' enemies, not in the 'inner' ones – although, as we shall see, these categories have tended to shift and fluctuate according to the circumstances at each given time, adding to the complexity of the issue.

For anyone acquainted with complicated and multifaceted questions, such as shared or collective identities, the conception of Us versus Other – insiders and outsiders – is a familiar one, as well as the formation processes of the two categories (or sometimes

more than two, as we shall see). It is precisely through contacts with other groups that the self-image of a group begins to take shape; the features typical to one's own reference group form not by themselves but in relation to and reflecting the others. Further, the features connected to Us tend to be antonyms of those describing the Other: negative attributes projected to form the image of the Other implicitly or explicitly allow us to embrace the opposite ones (see e.g. Feres, 2006; Löytty, 2005, pp. 7–15). To put it simply, for every hero there has to be a villain.

Image, in this context, refers to mental schemas formed of certain issues – practically any issues – in a human mind when information of the issue is received and processed in relation to previous information and conceptions, the individual's personal history, learned values, emotions and so on. Once formed, images tend to be persistent and hard to change. It is also typical for images that those formed of distant objects, such as a faraway ethnic group, tend to be sketchy and coarse owing to a lack of information and personal experiences (Boulding, 1956, pp. 56, 68; Fält, 2002, p. 10; Ratz, 2007, p. 201). Further, the enemy is basically the Other that threatens the security, well-being or whole existence of Us; the image of an enemy is thus an image of threat. As Marja Vuorinen (2012, pp. 1–4) puts it, an established enemy image can gradually turn into an archenemy, an ever-present threat (see also Rieber and Kelly, 1991).

Institutions, such as the education system and media, are important producers and distributors of so-called shared or collective images (indeed, when examining an image we always examine its *producer* rather than its *object*) (see e.g. Boulding, 1956; Fält, 2002; Ratz, 2007). More often than not, those institutions, most often connected to contemporary power structures, have political and/or ideological motives in choosing what sorts of information is distributed in order to influence the image formation. Obviously, until the 19th century and the emergence of mass media it is hardly possible to talk about truly shared images; instead, we should talk about images produced by the elite and also assumed by them. But, along with the rise of literacy and the production

of printed material aimed at common readers, the formation and distribution of collective images of Others, including hostile ones, became a significant development.

Impressive images of the collective past with its heroes and villains were a significant tool of nationalistic indoctrination, especially from the 19th century onwards, in Russia as well as in other countries. A crucial and conspicuous category of that historical imagery was the representations of historical conflicts and hostile encounters; defining mental (Us versus Others) as well as concrete borders has been – and most definitely still is – an essential factor of nation building.

Dualism: Christianity Sets the Tone

In order to understand the present perceptions of Russia's geopolitics, its national narrative and relation to its Others, we have to take a look all the way back to medieval text production. The medieval worldview produced some of the basic premises for categorizing otherness in Russia, echoes of which can be heard in contemporary discourse. It can be said that the ideas presented in chronicle texts formed a kernel of some sort, on which layers of changing meanings were added later on over the centuries. For instance, as we shall see, a certain tendency towards a dualistic categorization in Russian culture – central for enemy image formation – can be traced to the medieval worldview as presented in the preserved texts and concrete images (see e.g. Lotman and Uspenskij, 1984).

One of the earliest sources preserved for examining medieval Rus' is the so-called *Primary Chronicle*, which depicts events related to Kievan Rus' from the 9th to the 11th century. It has been preserved as two manuscripts, dated to the 14th and 15th centuries. One has to bear in mind that, owing to the temporal distance between the presumed original production date and the date of preserved copies, the information may have been remarkably altered when the text was copied. Editing texts according to the contemporary political situation was a normal procedure in medieval text production; parts were added or removed, or details

changed, according to the political situation and interests of any given time. Therefore, the *Primary Chronicle* may reflect the 14th- and 15th-century understanding of certain issues rather than that of the original production date (Korpela, 2009, p. 342).

The depictions of 'otherness' in the *Primary Chronicle* consists of interaction with a wide array of peoples from the steppe. Pechenegs, Hagarians, Khazars, Bolgars, Cumans and many others are mainly represented in the context of shifting alliances and hostile encounters with the people of Rus'. Nevertheless, the enemies are depicted relatively neutrally; practically no negative or pejorative attributes are connected to them by the author(s). Greeks are also represented as constantly waging war with Kievan Rus', but even they are depicted in quite a docile way, despite certain fleeting comments such as: 'and so the Greeks talked, treacherously, for they have always been cunning and are to this day' (Povest' vremennikh let, 1926, p. 50).

As the narrative proceeds, the *Primary Chronicle* depicts the arrival of Christianity to Kievan Rus'. The impressive and often quoted story of Prince Vladimir I choosing the religion, and the collective baptisms arranged by him, are most probably a hagiographic-historical legend. Nevertheless, the gradual turning of Rus' into a Christian realm was a central development for our topic, though far less rapid and drastic than it is often presented. After the descriptions of the Christianization of Rus', chronicle passages concerning hostile encounters have a deeply dualistic tone: we are Christians, while Others are pagans – or those of Latin faith, which was deemed equally negative. In medieval Russian¹ chronicles, the Orthodox Christian sphere was the uncompromised foundation and context in relation to which all the other confessions and their supporters were interpreted and weighed – invariably for the benefit of Orthodox Christianity.

Slavic *pogan* derives from the Latin word *paganus* – in Greek παγανιστής – and originally it meant a villager, a dweller of the countryside. In Russian chronicle writing, it refers to mostly non-Christians, who were represented as a threat and a constant nuisance. However, conflicts with non-Christian peoples were still depicted as God's punishment, with no pejorative descriptions

of the opponents in the *Primary Chronicle*. For instance, it is described how ‘pagan Cumans’ invaded Rus’ in 1068 because of the principality’s internal quarrels (Povest’ vremennikh let, 1926, pp. 118–120).

Early chronicles produced in Novgorod offer quite a similar imagery about certain encounters. The earliest copy of the *First Chronicle of Novgorod* is dated to the 13th century, and the *Fourth Chronicle* to the 15th century. Their depictions of Novgorodians’ campaigns and battles against peoples named variably as Nemtsy, Chuds and Iems (some of the names have often been interpreted to refer to Finno-Ugric tribes), as well as against Lithuanians, are not especially explicit in their descriptions of the enemy; rather, they are neutral and somewhat pragmatic, concentrating on the outcome of the each event rather than the opponents’ qualities (see *Novgorodskaa četvertaâ letopis’*, 1848, pp. 11, 15, 17; *Novgorodskaa pervaa letopis’*, 1841, pp. 4–6, 9–10).

A crucial turning point in the chroniclers’ attitude to Otherness in relation to the Orthodox Christian realm is reflected in the descriptions of the Tatar invasions, beginning with the depictions of the first assault in 1223. The *Novgorod First Chronicle* describes the confusion concerning the identity of the invaders in its depiction of the Battle of Kalka:

The same year, for our sins, unknown tribes came, of whom no one exactly knows, who they are, nor whence they came from, nor what their language is, nor of what race they are, nor what their faith is; but they call them Tatars. (*Novgorodskaa pervaa letopis’*, 1841, p. 39)

The Tatar dominance over Russian principalities lasted for about 240 years, and, not surprisingly, in 15th- and 16th-century texts Tatars are presented as the main protagonists of Russians, who ‘take’ and ‘plunder’ cities. The alleged division is of a deeply religious nature, and depictions of Tatars brought on a colourful usage of diverse concepts underlining the wild otherness of the invaders. They are called not just pagans but ‘those of other faith’, ‘faithless’, ‘godless’, ‘Hagarenes’, ‘Ishmaelites’ and so forth.

As the Muscovite power was consolidated at the expense of the other principalities of Rus', the idea of Moscow fighting the infidel enemy in cooperation with the Orthodox Church gave chronicle texts that were describing conflicts an increasingly dualistic tone. For instance, the descriptions of the Battle of Kulikovo (1380), fought between a Tatar usurper, Mamai, and Muscovite Grand Prince Dmitrij Ivanovič and their allies, were remarkably 'fattened' during the 15th and especially 16th centuries. The first, laconic, chronicle passages are preserved from the 1440s, and they depict quite a typical medieval skirmish. Gradually, however, the battle narratives were interpolated into long, colourful, detailed and dramatic descriptions of an apocalyptic encounter between good and evil forces, Moscow gaining the glorious victory with the support of the Church (Parppei, 2017).

It can be said that, together with the representations of the siege of Kazan (1552) the 'Kulikovo cycle', as the texts concerning the battle are collectively called, set the tone for representations of – especially Islamic – enemies of Russia for centuries to come. From the 1550s onwards, images of Otherness in relation to Us were sketched in earnest in Muscovite text production, based firmly on religion.²

During the 16th century, the attempts to represent the history of Muscovite power as a kind of a holy continuum found a form in two great compilations produced during the latter half of the century, *The Book of Degrees* and the *Nikon Chronicle*. For the first time, chronicle entries and stories were turned into whole narratives with both a context and purpose, and the already-established imagery concerning Russia's relation to its Others was further consolidated. For instance, Grand Prince Aleksandr Nevskii's alleged victories against the Swedes and Livonians in 1240 and 1242 were turned into significant reference points for military encounters with the Western enemies. The hero of the Battle of Kulikovo, Dmitrij Ivanovič – called 'Donskoi' from the 16th century onwards – and Aleksandr were symbolically paired to represent the defenders of the Fatherland from the Eastern and Western threats, respectively (Isoaho, 2006, p. 371).

The practices of printing arrived in Russia relatively late, and chronicle writing and copying persisted for quite a long time as a primary form of history writing. A certain watershed in distributing images of the collective past is the 1680s, when a publication called the *Kievan Synopsis* was produced, printed and distributed. Hailed as the first textbook of Russian history and utilized for that purpose up until the 19th century, the book was compiled by the monks of Kievan Cave monastery. The monks wanted to emphasize the importance of Muscovite central power for warding off the political and military threat represented by Muslims and Catholics, and they used a concept of ‘Slavo-Russian’ nation to refer to this idea (however, when it came to ecclesiastic power, they wanted to keep it firmly in Kiev) (Plokhy, 2010, pp. 258–266). This setting – the first part of which was understandably favoured by Russian power circles – set the tone for the whole publication, emphasizing the external threat. For instance, a long and detailed version of the narrative of the Battle of Kulikovo was included in the second edition of the *Synopsis* in 1681, obviously inspired by the Russo-Turkish War (1676–1681) (Parppei, 2017, pp. 102–107).

Owing to the relatively wide distribution and long ‘life span’ of the *Synopsis*, as well as its role as a source for later historians, it can be said that the medieval ideas and images of Rus(sia)’s external enemies were smoothly transferred to the age of print along with this book compiled by Kievan monks.

Russia Against the ‘West’

National history writing began to take shape along with the rise of nationalistic and national-romanticist ideas from the 18th century onwards. In Russia, the first scholarly historians were imported from Western Europe; higher schooling was still only budding during the first half of the century. But soon the collective past became of interest to Russians, too, scholars and amateurs alike. Medieval texts were used as source material, and the representations of history were quite laconic catalogues of events and turns following the style of chronicle entries (Thaden, 1999, pp. 15–78).

In general, the post-Petrine Russian elite was very much oriented to the West, especially France, and the national past, or the geopolitical position of the empire, was not seen as an acute question to discuss or write about. From the 17th to the 19th century, however, the empire had expanded remarkably, which had brought along new issues and questions in defining Us and Others. From the 17th century onwards, religion gradually lost its primary role as the dividing line. As the Russian empire came to embrace a growing variety of peoples and cultures, some of which had previously been fought off as enemies, the diverse customs and habits of the new 'Russians' puzzled the early scholars and also mixed with the budding field of history and the questions of the origins of Russians and the Russian state (Shields Kollmann, 2017, pp. 55–83; Slezkine, 2001, pp. 33–50).

In 1812, during the Napoleonic Wars, a series of events took place that can be said to have remarkably steered the direction of Russian nationalistic thinking – already in formation – and accelerated the attempts to define the empire's geopolitical status, especially in relation to Western Europe. Napoleon Bonaparte managed to move his troops all the way to Moscow; nevertheless, his campaign ended in retreat and severe problems caused by the harsh Russian winter. Despite the victory, the invasion by the French emperor caused a deep collective trauma in Russia. In the texts produced after the events, Napoleon was emphatically compared to historical evildoers, such as Attila and Xerxes – universal history was more familiar to the early 19th-century elite, who produced the texts, than Russian history – but also to Batu, Mamai and Tokhtamysh, the infamous Tatar invaders (Napoleon i francuzy v Moskve, 1813, p. 104; Pis'mennoe nastavlenie Napoleona svoemu istoriografu, 1814, p. 37; Pis'mo iz Vitebska, 1813, pp. 6–7; Uvarov, 1814, p. 24; Parpei, 2019, pp. 140–166).

Thus, an already-established image of certain kinds of archenemies was applied to refer another sort of invader – while Tatars, the 'original' enemy, had been gradually assimilated into the Russian empire. The Battle of Moscow in 1612 was often used as a reference point, too, probably because the Polish-Lithuanian troops had, like Napoleon's, arrived from the west. Also, a statue

celebrating the victory of the Russians two centuries earlier had been planned in Moscow (Ašurkov, 1980, p. 69).

The Napoleonic Wars produced not just a collective trauma but also a collective pride of having been the nation that ‘saved the whole of Europe’, despite the fact that the said Europe had, in fact, turned against it in the form of Napoleon and his multinational troops (see e.g. Carleton, 2017, pp. 42–43). Further, medieval dualistic thinking resurfaced in the ideas of pious and God-loving Russian people alone defending their fatherland against an evil invader – in the texts published during and right after the campaign, French people were described as having given up God and the proper world order in the revolution, and sometimes Napoleon was compared to the Antichrist himself (Pesenson, 2006). It can be said that the Napoleonic Wars and their ideological aftermath notably accelerated the discourse of the geopolitical position of Russia between ‘Europe’ and ‘Asia’, and the events form a certain kind of foundation in Russia’s further ponderings of its role in relation to other nations.

During the 19th century, some crucial developments took place in relation to the distribution and consolidation of enemy images, together with the indoctrination of patriotic ideas of Russia. First, national historians, Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826) at the fore, with his massive *History of the Russian State*, formulated the national narrative of Russia’s past in an eloquent and fascinating way, completely different from the style of the 18th-century historians. Colourful and dramatic turns of the history of the Fatherland – and his anachronistic applications of contemporary ideas, such as ‘national pride’, to medieval societies – marked out the way for the future popular representations of Russian history, including its military gains and losses (Thaden, 1999, pp. 47–78).

Second, the schooling system was developed, contributing to the growing literacy rate and enabling the gradual distribution of the imagery of the national past. School textbooks were an effective tool for establishing shared images of collective history, including ideas and conceptions of historical enemies of Russia. Even though schooling was arranged by numerous distributions,

there were certain attempts by state officials and churchmen to unify curricula (see Brooks, 2003, pp. 35–58).

Third, the amount of popular printed images and literature rose remarkably during the 19th century, together with the development of the schooling system. So-called *lubok* illustrations were colourful prints, sold on the streets and bought by people to decorate the walls in their houses. The topics included military ones – and images of enemies. By the time of Napoleon’s invasion, some two hundred *lubok* prints were already being produced and distributed about the event. Quite often these images were satirical in nature, depicting Napoleon and the French troops in trouble, while some of them celebrated ‘Russian spirit’ as a counterforce to the enemy (a prime example of the formation of collective identities by using the Other as a parallel) (Norris, 2006, pp. 13–35).

Further, the production and coverage of not just prints but whole popular booklets grew rapidly, especially during the second half of the 19th century. Most of the topics were aimed to entertain – for instance, folk tales were a popular theme – but historical and military issues found their textual form as well (Brooks, 2003, pp. 59–62, 67–80). While a printed image opened possibilities for distributing, for instance, powerful caricatures of an enemy, or military gains of the Russians, popular textual material gave a possibility to contextualize events and produce powerful propaganda about enemies.

For instance, in 1877–1878 during the Russo-Turkish War a wide array of popular booklets was published depicting the military events in the Balkans and their background. The mostly anonymous authors tended to leave aside recent historical events – such as the Crimean War of 1853–1856 – and concentrated on contextualizing the Balkan campaign in Russian national history and Russians’ historical battle with Muslims, beginning with the Tatar invasions (Berens, 1877, pp. 6–8; *Russko-tureckaâ vojna i mir Rossii s Turciej v 1878 godu*, 1878, pp. 3–4, 31–35; Suvorov, 1877, pp. 5–6, 20, 37). They also enthusiastically emphasized – in the spirit of pan-Slavism – the Russians’ duty to help their brothers in tribe and faith to fight against Turkish tyranny. The booklets

presented the reader with colourful and graphic depictions of the horrors performed by the Turks in Slavic villages, as well as representations of Turks as wild, unorganized, lazy and immoral (as opposed to hard-working and pious Slavs) (Malyhin, 1878, pp. 1–12; Spasenie russkimi hristianki ili Vostočnaâ vojna, 1877, p. 26; Suvorov, 1877, pp. 13–14, 24; Vojna serbov i černogorcev (slavân) s Turciej za nezavisimost', 1877, pp. 13–14, 40–54; Vojna s turkami. Sovremenno-istoričeskij očerk, 1877, pp. 7–13). Typical conceptions of the enemy in propagandistic representations as such, these depictions once again leaned on the already-established imagery of Muslims as an archenemy of Orthodox Russians (and Slavs in general) (Vuorinen, 2012, pp. 2–4). They also reflected the contemporary ethnic-religious tensions within the empire. The expansion into the Caucasus and Central Asia brought a challenge to assimilate new Muslim minorities, and the already-assimilated ones, such as the Tatars of Crimea and Kazan, were considered a potential risk, especially during times of war (Brower, 2001, pp. 115–135; Campbell, 2015; Jersild, 2001, pp. 101–114).

As was the case in the Napoleonic Wars, Russia was once again presented as a lonely defender of Christian faith; the 'West' – referring to Western European countries – is depicted as an ally of Turkey, more interested in its own profit than the distress of fellow Christians at the Balkans (Russko-turetskaâ vojna i mir Rossii s Turciej v 1878 godu, 1878, p. 46; Vojna s turkami. Sovremenno-istoričeskij očerk, 1877, pp. 20, 27). Around the same time, N.A. Danilevskij (1822–1885) published his writings on Russia and Europe, asserting that Russia had never been an aggressor in its dealings with its neighbours; rather, the peoples integrated into the empire had greatly benefited from the providence of Russia (Danilevskij 1995, pp. 18–44).

Further, according to Danilevskij, the peaceful state had been repeatedly hounded into such positions that defence was the only option:

And so, the composition of the Russian state, the wars it waged, the goals it pursued, and even more, the recurrent favorable circumstances it never utilized: all show that Russia is not an

ambitious, aggressive power, and that in the modern period of its history it most often sacrificed its own evident gains, which were legal and just, to European interests, often even considering that its responsibility was to act not as an independent entity (with its own significance and its own justification for all its actions and aspirations) but as a secondary power. So why, I ask, should there be such distrust, injustice, and hatred toward Russia from the governments and public opinion of Europe? (*ibid.*, pp. 35–36).

As we shall see, this conception, formulated during the 19th century and based on Slavophilic doctrines, was to become a central one for Russia's national 'self-image'.

During the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905), the production and distribution of enemy images was taken to a new level: for instance, in *lubok* images racial differences were brought out, exaggerated and ridiculed – Japanese soldiers were compared to, for instance, monkeys and dogs (Norris, 2006, pp. 109–115). Notably, this war was – like the preceding ones – represented in the context of a dualistic juxtaposition between Orthodox Russia and the savage enemy (even though the nature of this conflict was not depicted religious as such). It is also interesting how medieval imagery was used in the pictures: a Russian medieval knight was depicted fighting 'yellow dwarves'; also, Japanese were referred to as Mongols, thus creating links to the established conceptions of archenemies of Rus(sia) (*ibid.*, pp. 120–121).

During the first decades of the Soviet system, national history with its images of (arch)enemies was paid generally less attention than had been during the 19th century. Nevertheless, the massive ordeals of the century – the Second World War being the most influential one for Russia's narrative – called for reference points from the national past to encourage and raise the morals of the troops. For instance, the bravery of Aleksandr Nevskii and Dmitrii Donskoi was pinpointed by Josif Stalin as an example for Soviet soldiers; the latter was also a topic of a propaganda poster, reminding that death was better than honourless life (a quote regularly used in connection with Dmitrii Donskoi and the Battle of Kulikovo). Also, in a booklet about the Battle

of Kulikovo, published for the usage of the Red Army in 1945, the challenges faced by Soviet soldiers were called ‘contemporary Kulikovo fields’ (Dunlop, 1983, pp. 218–219; Parppei, 2017, pp. 216–220).

Also, it can be said that the dualistic pattern – previously applied to religion as the dividing line – once again resurfaced in the form of politics. At the level of images, fascism was the main enemy, against which the Soviet ideology fought with the same devotion as previously the defenders of the Fatherland supported by the Orthodox Church. Later on, the ‘capitalist West’, the United States at the fore, formed the most significant ideological opponent of the Soviet system.

National Narrative and Contemporary Enemies

In many cases, the dividing lines between Us and the Others in contemporary Russia are nothing but clear; instead, they are fuzzy and fluctuating and prone to criticism and re-evaluation. For instance, when the date of the Battle of Kulikovo was announced a national holiday in 2001, Tatars criticized the decision (Sperling, 2009, pp. 244–245). In 2011, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (2011) announced that the battle should not be seen to have been an ideological one, and that Russians and Tatars had been fighting on both sides. The value of the multi-ethnicity of Russia is also constantly emphasized in the presidential statements. For instance, in the speech delivered on the Day of National Unity in 2017, President Putin noted that:

Every nation brings to the world its own lesson, its unique heritage. Russia has such an invaluable legacy in the centuries-old experience of the peaceful living of people of different nationalities. Another large, multi-ethnic country like ours just does not exist. And the preservation of the diversity of the peoples of Russia, their ethnic and cultural identity, is of key importance to us, as well as traditions of mutual trust, consent and kinship. These foundations fill the unity of the Russian nation by a special, internal force. (President of Russia, 2017)

Nevertheless, the dualistic imagery regarding, for instance, the Battle of Kulikovo has not been compromised in school textbooks and other popular representations of the issue. It can be said that finding the balance between the usage of dualistic imagery to consolidate the national narrative and inner cohesion, on the one hand, and cherishing the idea of multi-ethnic realm, on the other, is difficult and calls for constant negotiation. Moreover, while contemporary Tatars and other relevant ethnic minorities have been distanced from the ideas of ancient archenemies, the state aims to keep them in control by, for instance, language policy, as has been the case for centuries. Also, Jews are constantly brought out in the context of conspiracy theories by nationalist historians (King, 2014, pp. 215–219).

Another example of the ambiguous definition of contemporary enemies is the question of Ukraine. According to a questionnaire by the Levada-Center (2017), in 2017 Ukraine was considered the second in the list of Russia's enemies, right after the United States. However, it is precisely the idea of East Slavic unity that is used to justify Russia's demands and expectations concerning Ukraine. As Serhii Plokhy (2017, p. 349) has put it,

Post-Soviet Russian identity is probably best imagined as a set of concentric circles. At the center of them is the core of Russian ethnic identity. The first concentric circle surrounding this core deals with Russian political identity based on Russian citizenship. There follows a circle concerning East Slavic identity. The final and outer layer consists of all other participants in Russian culture – the Russian-speakers of the world. (ibid.)

Plokhy's formulation reminds of Thomas Hylland Eriksen's suggestion concerning anthropological categorization: instead of clear-cut boundaries defining 'us' from 'them', some groups can be considered closer to us than the others, 'almost like ourselves'. Eriksen (2010, p. 79) calls this approach *analogue*, as opposed to *digital*, in which categories of otherness are unambiguous and fixed. Questions concerning categories of belonging have recently also turned acute in the context of the Orthodox Church and

the issue concerning the potential autocephaly of the Ukrainian church, which the Russian Orthodox Church considers intervention and a threat to its historical unity by the Patriarchate of Constantinople (OrthoChristian.com, 2018).

Partly relying on the idea of profound East Slavic unity, the imagery of the past has been used as a tug-of-war for the right of possession for Crimea. One argument for the peninsula belonging to Russia is that it is the place where Vladimir I performed the baptism of Rus(s)ians. Vladimir Putin called it a 'sacred land' and compared it to Jerusalem (President of Russia, 2014). Ukraine has used the same argument to defend its point – Vladimir was, the Ukrainians have pointed out, a ruler of Kyiv (RadioFreeEurope, 2014). Unveiling a massive statue of Vladimir in Moscow in 2016 was a part of this competition for the symbolic control of the ideas of the past. When it comes to Crimea, the layers of military meanings also include the Second World War, during which it was occupied by Axis troops and served as a stage for some of the bloodiest battles at the Eastern Front.

In general, the 'West' is a general concept that can refer to everything that threatens traditional Russian values, questions – implicitly or explicitly – Russia's position as a modern superpower, and intentionally destabilizes established relations between Russia and former Soviet republics, as in the case of Ukraine. It can be said, in the light of the previous examples, that one set of enemies also consists of those – also largely 'Western' actors, or domestic ones controlled by the 'West' – who, according to Russia, attempt to 'falsify history' to belittle the military heroism of Soviet and Russian troops, or present Russia as an initiator in military conflicts (contemporary or historical).

The importance of the ideal of national collective understanding of history – the great national narrative – for the contemporary power circles in Russia can be seen in the presidential speeches to the Federal Assembly, in which the national past and its heroes are constantly referred to. For instance, on 12 December 2012, President Vladimir Putin announced:

In order to revive national consciousness, we need to link historical eras and get back to understanding the simple truth that

Russia did not begin in 1917, or even in 1991, but rather, that we have common, continuous history spanning over one thousand years, and we must rely on it to find inner strength and purpose in our national development. (President of Russia, 2012)³

Also, Eastern European attempts to re-evaluate the Soviet-induced history writing of the Second World War, which in Russia is depicted (once again) as a scene of undisputed Soviet/Russian heroism and sacrifice, called for reactions, such as the ‘Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests’, founded in 2009. The foundation of the commission, as well as the project of producing ‘unified school history textbooks’ (see e.g. *Rossijskaâ gazeta*, 2013; *Znak.com*, 2016), are prime examples of attempts to control the ideas of the past.

Those attempts, however, have been explicitly represented as reactions to others’ attempts to contort the past. In 2017, President Vladimir Putin warned against ‘falsifying and manipulating’ history as a threat to world order (*EADaily*, 2017). Also, in the foreword to S.F. Platonov’s *Unified Textbook of Russian History* – a 2017 reprint of a popular textbook from the beginning of the 20th century – a conservative politician and writer, Nikolai Starikov,⁴ announces that

If you want to change the future, get occupied with changing the past. The contemporary falsifiers of history work exactly according to this principle. Exactly because of the future there are attempts to contort the past, to replace values, change facts, give a different interpretation of events. Young ones – they are the goal of falsifiers of history. It is very difficult to redo an adult, but to plant a different interpretation of history in the undeveloped souls and minds is completely possible. And so the heroes of Great Patriotic War are represented almost as criminals, and traitors, such as Vlasov, are painted with heroic colors. (Starikov, 2017, p. 5)⁵

Starikov further claims that these falsifications are the ‘deliberate work of Russia’s geopolitical opponents’, and that those who write them are funded, encouraged and praised by ‘the West’. He

also mentions that ‘precisely in school patriots have to be brought up, and in the university this education must be “consolidated”’ (Starikov, 2017, pp. 5–6).

Further, the established idea of Russia as a reactive rather than military active nation is cherished both implicitly and explicitly: the concept of Russia as a victim and saviour rather than an aggressor of any sort (King, 2014, p. 227). For instance, in presidential speeches it is often emphasized that Russia does not attempt to wage war but rather tries to work as a peacekeeper while other nations refuse to do their part in, for instance, disarmament; thus, Russia is forced to defend its interests (President of Russia, 2018a, 2019).

The foundation of ‘Russia – My History’ theme parks in numerous cities around Russia sends this message of national innocence to Russians (only a limited number of English translations are available). The project is carried out by organizations such as the Patriarchal Council for Culture and the Foundation for Humanitarian Projects and supported by, for instance, Gazprom. The impressive multimedia show takes the visitor all the way from the Middle Ages to the present day and its challenges. The cooperation of the state and the Orthodox Church is – once again – emphasized, and the whole history of Russia is presented as a coherent narrative, excluding any optional interpretations or questions (19th-century historians’ views on Russian history and nation building are quoted conspicuously). The modern multimedia helps to create powerful, if somewhat kitschy, images of the nation’s great past and its battles and heroes according to the established national-historical canon.⁶ Not surprisingly, these theme parks have been criticized by professional Russian scholars for being historically inaccurate and propagandistic by nature (Kurilla, Ivanov and Selin, 2018).

Conclusion

Certain basic premises of the formation of enemy imagery are universal; however, each group and society has its own special

features that can be examined from a historical perspective. In the case of Russia, medieval text production was firmly intertwined with the formation of strong central power and the interests of both ecclesiastic and secular power structures. The Orthodox Church and Christian worldview formed the measuring stick that was used to perceive the reality, including defining and evaluating Otherness.

The medieval perceptions and images of the Others were transferred to centuries to come in at least two overlapping ways. First, the historical image of an infidel archenemy – represented mostly by Tatars – and a courageous Russian hero has been a useful reference to be used not just in situations involving conflicts with Muslims, such as warfare with Turks, but also in cases involving other kinds of enemies, from French to Japanese and German. The medieval imagery is also effectively applied to contemporary conflicts, as in the case of Crimea, which has called Russian power circles to emphasize the importance of the peninsula to Russia by referring to the (myth)historical baptisms performed by Prince Vladimir I (as noted above, the claim is nevertheless complicated since Ukraine can appeal to the same event to defend its case) (President of Russia, 2018b).

Second, medieval dualistic thinking – Orthodox Christian Russians versus infidel enemies – can be said to have been very persistent in Russia's national narrative and (popular) historiography: not just in its original form, popping up from time to time, but transformed into other kinds of oppositions placing Russia against the Others, emphasizing its exceptionality in relation to other political or ideological systems or worldviews.

While a certain amount of exceptionalism is innate to any national narrative, Russia belongs to those nations that have cherished it in earnest. Implicitly, the medieval setting of representing the 'good' against the 'bad' is reflected in the idea that Russia's military actions have always been reactionary and defensive rather than aggressive, and that it has been a victim rather than an initiator in conflicts. This view is uncompromised, as can be seen in reactions to any attempts to reinterpret or re-examine

national history in ways that may present acts of Russia or the Soviet Union, or their troops, in a questionable light – especially in the case of the Second World War.

Notes

- ¹ Despite a certain historical inaccuracy of the choice, in this chapter ‘Russian’ is used to refer to people and activities that took place in the area of Kievan Rus’ and the principalities that were formed in the Middle Ages in the area nowadays known as Russia.
- ² Even though the reality of ethnic and religious relations was more complex and multifaceted than the black-and-white perceptions presented in the texts, certain discrimination took place in real life, too; for example, in order to properly assimilate, a non-Christian was supposed to prove his loyalty by converting to Orthodox Christianity (Khordakovskiy, 2001, pp. 11–18).
- ³ Not all the political references to the long history of Russia hit the mark, though: in 8 April 2020, during his meeting with regional heads on combatting the spread of the coronavirus in Russia, President Vladimir Putin announced that ‘Our country has suffered through many ordeals: both Pechenegs and Cumans attacked, and Russia got through it all. We will also defeat this coronavirus infection. Together, we can overcome anything’ (President of Russia, 2020). This comparison was received with sheer amusement (see e.g. Gutterman, 2020).
- ⁴ Nikolai Starikov (born in 1970) is an economist, active writer and one of the founders and leaders of the conservative-patriotic Great Fatherland Party. In his numerous popular historical books and blog writings – the latter in Russian and English – he has defended Russian national view on history and, for instance, called for respect for Stalin (see e.g. Starikov, 2013).
- ⁵ Vlasov refers to Andrei Vlasov (1901–1946), a Red Army general, who defected and led a so-called Russian Liberation Army, which fought under German command.
- ⁶ As the website of the park project – only available in Russian – announces: ‘The creators of the park – that is, historians, artists, filmmakers, designers, specialists in computer graphics – have done everything to move the Russian history from the category of black-white textbook into bright, fascinating and at the same time objective

narrative, so that each visitor would feel complicity to the events of more than thousand-year history of the Fatherland' (Rossiâ – Moâ istoriâ, 2019).

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