

The New York Review of Books
April 5, 2018

God Is a Russian

by Timothy Snyder

An expanded version of this essay, “Ivan Ilyin, Putin’s Philosopher of Russian Fascism,” appears on the NYR Daily.



State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
Mikhail Nesterov: *The Thinker (Portrait of Ivan Ilyin)*, 1921

“Politics is the art of identifying and neutralizing the enemy.”
—Ivan Ilyin, 1948

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

And so the Russian, a philosopher, understood history as a disgrace. The world since creation was a meaningless farrago of fragments. The more humans sought to understand it, the more sinful it became. Modern life, with its pluralism and its civil society, deepened the flaws of the world and kept God in exile. God’s one hope was that a righteous nation would follow a leader to create a new political totality, and thereby begin a repair of the world that might in turn redeem the divine. Because the unifying principle of the Word was the only good in the universe, any means that might bring about its return were justified.

Thus this Russian philosopher, whose name was Ivan Ilyin, came to imagine a Russian Christian fascism. Born in 1883, he finished his thesis, on God’s worldly failure, just before the Russian Revolution of 1917. Expelled from his homeland in 1922 by the Soviet power he despised, he embraced the cause of Benito Mussolini and completed another book in 1925, a justification for violent counterrevolution. In German and Swiss exile, he wrote in the 1920s and 1930s for White Russians who had fled their homeland after defeat in the Russian Civil War, and in the 1940s and 1950s for future Russians who would see the end of the Soviet power.

A tireless graphomaniac, Ilyin produced about twenty books in Russian and another twenty in German. Some of his work has a rambling and commonsensical character, but one current of his thought is coherent over the decades: the metaphysical and moral justification for political totalitarianism, which he expressed in practical outlines for a fascist state. Though he died forgotten in 1954, Ilyin’s work was revived and republished by a few enthusiasts after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and has been read and cited widely by Russian politicians, especially Vladimir Putin, since the 2000s. His most influential book is a collection of political essays, *Our Tasks*.

The Russian Federation of the early twenty-first century is smaller than the old Russian Empire, and separated from it in time by seven decades of Soviet history. Yet the Russian Federation of today resembles the Russian Empire of Ilyin’s youth in one crucial aspect: it has not established the rule of law as the principle of government. The trajectory in Ilyin’s understanding of law, from hopeful universalism to arbitrary nationalism, has been followed by the discourse of Russian politicians, including Putin. Because Ilyin found ways to present the failure of the rule of law as Russian virtue, he helps today’s Russian kleptocrats portray economic inequality as national innocence. By transforming international politics into a discussion of spiritual threats,

Putin has used Ilyin's ideas about geopolitics to portray Ukraine, Europe, and the United States as existential dangers to Russia.

Ilyin confronted Russian problems with German thinkers. His father was a Russian nobleman, his German-Russian mother a Protestant convert to Orthodoxy. As a student in Moscow between 1901 and 1906, Ilyin's subject was philosophy, above all the ethical thought of Immanuel Kant. For the neo-Kantians who then held sway in universities across Europe as well as in Russia, humans differed from the rest of creation by a capacity for reason that permitted meaningful choices. They could freely submit to law, since they could grasp and accept its spirit.

Law was then the great object of desire of the Russian thinking classes. It seemed to offer an antidote to the ancient Russian problem of *proizvol*—arbitrary rule by autocratic tsars. As a young man, Ilyin hoped for a grand revolt that would hasten the education of the Russian masses. When the Russo-Japanese War created conditions for a revolution in 1905, Ilyin defended the right to free assembly. With his girlfriend, Natalia Vokach, he translated a German anarchist pamphlet. The tsar was forced to concede a new constitution in 1906, which created a new Russian parliament. But after the tsar twice dismissed parliament and illegally changed the electoral system, it was impossible to think that the new constitution had brought the rule of law to Russia.

Employed to teach law by Moscow State University in 1909, Ilyin published a beautiful article in both Russian (1910) and German (1912) on the conceptual differences between law and power. But how to make law functional in practice and attractive to rulers and subjects? Like other Russian intellectuals, Ilyin was drawn to Hegel, and in 1912 he proclaimed a "Hegelian renaissance." Yet just as the immense Russian peasantry had given him second thoughts about the ease of communicating law to Russian society, so experience made him doubt that historical change was a matter of Hegelian Spirit. He found Russians, even those of his own class and milieu in Moscow, to be disgustingly corporeal. In arguments about philosophy and politics in the 1910s, he accused his opponents of "sexual perversion."

In 1913, Ilyin proposed Freud as Russia's savior. Even as he was preparing his dissertation on Hegel, he offered himself up as the pioneer of Russia's national psychotherapy, traveling with Vokach to Vienna in 1914 for sessions with Freud. In Freud's view, civilization arose from a collective agreement to suppress basic drives. The individual paid a psychological price for sacrificing his nature to culture. Only through long consultations on the couch of the psychoanalyst could unconscious experience surface into awareness. Psychoanalysis therefore offered a different portrait of thought than did the Hegelian philosophy that Ilyin was then studying.

Ilyin was typical of Russian intellectuals in his rapid and enthusiastic embrace of contradictory German ideas. Another source, beside Hegel and Freud, was Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the founder of the school of thought known as phenomenology, with whom Ilyin had studied in Göttingen in 1911. Kant had suggested the initial problem for a Russian political thinker: how to establish the rule of law. Hegel had seemed to provide a solution, a Spirit advancing through history. Ilyin's reading of Freud had led him to redefine Russia's problem as sexual or psychological rather than spiritual. Husserl allowed Ilyin to transfer the responsibility for

political failure and sexual unease to God. Philosophy meant the contemplation that allowed contact with God and began God's cure.

While Ilyin contemplated God in 1914, 1915, and 1916, men were killing and dying by the millions on World War I battlefields across Europe. The Russian Empire gained, then lost, territory on the eastern front, and in March 1917, the tsarist regime was replaced by a new constitutional order. The new government tottered as it continued to fight a costly war. In April, Germany sent Vladimir Lenin to Russia in a sealed train, and his Bolsheviks carried out a second revolution in November, promising land to the peasants and peace to all. By the time Ilyin was defending his dissertation in 1918, the Bolsheviks were in power, their Red Army was fighting a civil war, and their Cheka was defending the revolution through terror. Just as World War I gave revolutionaries their chance, it also opened the way for counterrevolutionaries. Without the war, Leninism would likely be a footnote in Marxist thought; without Lenin's revolution, Ilyin might not have drawn reactionary political conclusions from his dissertation.

Lenin and Ilyin did not know each other personally, but their encounter was uncanny. Lenin wrote under the pseudonym "Ilyin," and the real Ilyin reviewed some of that pseudonymous work. When Ilyin was arrested by the Cheka as an opponent of the revolution, Lenin intervened on his behalf as a gesture of respect for his philosophical work. Their intellectual interaction, which began in 1917 and continues in Russia today, sprang from a common appreciation of Hegel. Both interpreted Hegel in radical ways, agreeing on important points such as the need to destroy the middle classes, disagreeing about the final form of the classless community.

Lenin accepted from Hegel that history was a story of progress through conflict. As a Marxist, he believed that the conflict was between the social classes: the bourgeoisie that owned property and the proletariat that enabled profits. Lenin added to Marxism the proposal that the working class, though formed by capitalism and destined to seize its achievements, needed guidance from a disciplined party that understood the rules of history. Yet he never doubted that there was a good human nature, trapped by historical conditions, and therefore capable of release by historical action.

Marxists like Lenin were atheists. They thought that by "Spirit," Hegel meant God or some other theological notion, and replaced Spirit with society. Ilyin was not a typical Christian, but he believed in God. Ilyin also thought that Hegel meant God, and that Hegel's God had created a ruined world. For Marxists, private property served the function of an original sin, and its dissolution would release the good in man. For Ilyin, God's act of creation was itself the original sin. There was never a good moment in history, and no intrinsic good in humanity. The Marxists were right to hate the middle classes, and indeed did not hate them enough. Middle-class "civil society" confounds hopes for the "overpowering national organization" that God needs. Because the middle classes block God, they must be swept away by a classless national community. After he left Russia, Ilyin would maintain that Russians needed heroes, outsized characters from beyond history capable of willing themselves to power. It was an ideology awaiting form and name.

Soon after his emigration from Russia in 1922, Ilyin's imagination was captured by Benito Mussolini's March on Rome, the coup d'état that brought the world's first fascist regime. He

visited Italy and published admiring articles about the *Duce* while he was writing his book *On the Use of Violence to Resist Evil* (1925). If his dissertation had laid the groundwork for a metaphysical defense of fascism, this book was an ethical apology for an emerging system. Christianity meant the call of the right-seeing philosopher to apply decisive violence in the name of love. To be immersed in such love was to struggle “against the enemies of the divine order on earth.”

Thus theology becomes politics. Ilyin blurred “democracy,” “socialism,” and “Marxism” into a single continuum of corruption, and maintained that politics that did not oppose Bolshevism opposed God. He used the word “Spirit” (*Dukh*) to describe the inspiration of fascists. The fascist seizure of power, he wrote, was an “act of salvation.” The fascist is the true redeemer, since he grasps that it is the enemy who must be sacrificed. Ilyin took from Mussolini the concept of a “chivalrous sacrifice” that fascists make with the blood of others. (Speaking of the Holocaust in 1943, Heinrich Himmler would praise his SS men in nearly identical terms.)

Ilyin dedicated his 1925 book to the Whites who had resisted the Bolshevik Revolution. It was meant as a guide to their future, a future that was the absolute negation of his hope in the 1910s that Russia might become a rule-of-law state. “Fascism,” wrote Ilyin, “is a redemptive excess of patriotic arbitrariness.” In this one sentence, two universal concepts, law and Christianity, are undone. A spirit of lawlessness replaces the spirit of the law; a spirit of murder replaces a spirit of mercy.



Sputnik/Alexei Druzhinin/Kremlin/Reuters

Vladimir Putin emerging from the waters of Lake Seliger during Orthodox Epiphany celebrations, Tver Oblast, Russia, January 2018

Although Ilyin was inspired by fascist Italy, his home as a political refugee between 1922 and 1938 was Germany. As an employee of the Russian Scholarly Institute (Russisches Wissenschaftliches Institut), he was an academic civil servant. Writing in Russian for fellow émigrés, Ilyin was quick to praise Hitler's seizure of power in 1933. "A reaction to Bolshevism had to come," he wrote. Above all, he wanted to persuade Russians and other Europeans that Hitler was right to treat Jews as agents of Bolshevism. This "Judeo-Bolshevik" idea was the specific ideological connection between the Whites and the Nazis. The claim that Jews were Bolsheviks and Bolsheviks were Jews had been White propaganda during the Russian Civil War. Of course, most Communists were not Jews, and the overwhelming majority of Jews had nothing to do with communism. The conflation of the two groups was not an error or an exaggeration, but a transformation of traditional religious prejudices into instruments of national unity.

During and after the Russian civil war, some Whites had fled to Germany as refugees. It was their conception of Judeo-Bolshevism, arriving in Germany in 1919 and 1920, that completed the education of Adolf Hitler as an anti-Semite. Until that moment, Hitler had presented the enemy of Germany as Jewish capitalism. Once convinced that Jews were responsible for both capitalism and communism, he could take the final step and conclude, as he did in *Mein Kampf*, that Jews were the source of all ideas that threatened the German people. In this respect, Hitler was a pupil of the Russian White movement. Ilyin, the Whites' ideologist, wanted the world to know that Hitler was right.

As the 1930s passed, though, Ilyin began to doubt that Nazi Germany was advancing the cause of Russian fascism and cautioned Russian Whites about the Nazis. Coming under suspicion, he lost his government job and in 1938 left Germany for Switzerland, which he knew well from previous vacations. From a safe vantage point near Zurich, Ilyin observed World War II. Though he harbored reservations about the Nazis, he called the German invasion of the USSR a "judgment on Bolshevism." After the Soviet victory at Stalingrad in 1943, when it became clear that Germany would likely lose the war, Ilyin changed his position. Then, and in the years to follow, he would present the war as one of a series of Western attacks on Russian virtue over the centuries.

Russian innocence was becoming one of Ilyin's great themes. As a concept, it completed his fascist theory: The world had lost its "divine totality" and "harmonious unity." Only Russia had somehow escaped the evil of "history" or "the fragmentation of human existence." Because it "drew the strength of its soul from God," it was under perpetual attack from the rest of the malevolent world. Its immaculate essence had endured "a millennium of suffering." This Russia was not a country with individuals and institutions but an immortal creature, a "living organic unity." Ilyin enclosed the word "Ukrainians" within quotation marks, since in his view they were a part of the Russian organism. The fascist language of organic unity, though discredited by the war, remained central to him. But the victory of the Red Army in 1945 had made it impossible to imagine, as Ilyin had in the 1920s, that the Whites might someday return from exile to power in Russia. What was needed instead was a blueprint for a post-Soviet Russia, enabled by a "national dictator."

"Power comes all by itself," declared Ilyin, "to the strong man." This leader would be responsible for every aspect of political life, as chief executive, chief legislator, chief justice, and

commander of the military. Democratic elections, Ilyin thought, institutionalized the evil notion of individuality. It followed that “we must reject blind faith in the number of votes and its political significance.” Elections should rather be a ritual of submission of Russians before their leader. Russia was a body, thought Ilyin, so allowing Russians to vote was like allowing “embryos to choose their species.” In an organism there was no place for “the mechanical and arithmetical understanding of politics.” The middle classes, “the very lowest level of social existence,” had the power to corrupt Russia and even to halt its redemptive mission. They and their individualism had to be suppressed.

“Freedom for Russia,” as Ilyin understood it (in a text selectively quoted by Putin in 2014), would not mean freedom for Russians as individuals, but “the organic-spiritual unity of the government with the people, and the people with the government”; in this way, even “the empirical variety of human beings” could be overcome.

Russia today is a media-saturated authoritarian kleptocracy, not the religious totalitarian entity that Ilyin imagined. Yet his concepts illuminate, and sometimes even guide, Russian politics. In the early 2000s, Putin maintained that Russia could become a rule-of-law state. Instead, he succeeded in making economic crime systemic. Once the state became a criminal enterprise, the rule of law became incoherent, inequality entrenched, and reform unthinkable.

Another political story was needed. Because Putin’s victory over Russia’s oligarchs also meant control over their television stations, new media instruments were at hand. The Western trend toward infotainment reached an apotheosis in Russia, generating an alternative reality designed to promote faith in Russian virtue and cynicism about facts. This transformation was engineered by Vladislav Surkov, the Russian propaganda genius. It was a striking move toward the world as Ilyin imagined it, a dark, confusing realm without truth, given shape only by Russian innocence.

Beginning in 2005, Putin began to rehabilitate Ilyin himself as a Kremlin court philosopher. That year, he cited Ilyin in his addresses to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation and arranged for the reinterment of Ilyin’s remains in Russia. Surkov, too, began to cite him, accepting Ilyin’s idea that “Russian culture is the contemplation of the whole” and summarizing his own work as the creation of a narrative of an innocent Russia surrounded by permanent hostility. Surkov’s enmity toward factuality is as deep as Ilyin’s, and like Ilyin, he claims theological grounds for it. Dmitry Medvedev, the leader of Putin’s political party, recommended Ilyin’s books to Russia’s youth. He has been cited by the head of the constitutional court, by the foreign minister, and by patriarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church.

After a four-year intermission, between 2008 and 2012, during which Putin served as prime minister and allowed Medvedev to be president, Putin returned to the highest office. Ilyin’s arguments helped him transform the failure of his first period in office—the inability to introduce the rule of law—into the promise for a second period in office, the confirmation of Russian virtue and its superiority to Europe. The European Union, the largest economy in the world, is grounded on the assumption that international legal agreements provide the basis for fruitful cooperation among rule-of-law states. In late 2011 and early 2012, Putin made public a new ideology, based on Ilyin’s thought, that defined Russia in opposition to this model of Europe.

In an article in *Izvestiia* published on October 3, 2011, Putin announced a rival Eurasian Union that would unite states that had failed to establish the rule of law. In *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* on January 23, 2012, citing Ilyin, he presented integration among states as a matter of virtue. The rule of law was not a universal aspiration, but part of an alien Western civilization; Russian culture, meanwhile, united Russia with post-Soviet states such as Ukraine. Ilyin had imagined that “Russia as a spiritual organism served not only all the Orthodox nations and not only all of the nations of the Eurasian landmass, but all the nations of the world.” In a third article, published in *Moskovskie Novosti* on February 27, 2012, Putin predicted that Eurasia would overcome the European Union and bring its members into a larger entity that would extend “from Lisbon to Vladivostok.”

When Putin returned to power in 2012, it was thanks to presidential and parliamentary elections that were ostentatiously faked, during protests whose participants he condemned as foreign agents. In depriving Russia of any accepted means by which he might be succeeded by someone else or the Russian parliament might be controlled by another party but his, Putin was following Ilyin’s recommendation. Elections had become a ritual, and those who thought otherwise were portrayed by the formidable state media as traitors. Even as Russians protested electoral fraud, Putin sat musing in a radio station with the fascist Alexander Prokhanov. “Can we say,” he asked rhetorically,

that our country has fully recovered and healed after the dramatic events that have occurred after the Soviet Union collapsed, and that we now have a strong, healthy state? No, of course, she is still quite ill; but here we must recall Ivan Ilyin: “Yes, our country is still sick, but we did not flee from the bed of our sick mother.”

The fact that Putin cited Ilyin in this setting is very suggestive, but the way he did so seems strange. Ilyin had to leave Russia because he was expelled by the Cheka. Ilyin, who dreamed his whole life of a Soviet collapse, thought that KGB officers (of whom Putin was one) should be forbidden from entering politics after the end of the Soviet Union. Putin’s reinterment of Ilyin’s remains was a mystical release from this contradiction. He was reburied at a monastery where the ashes of thousands of Soviet citizens shot by the NKVD (the heir of the Cheka and predecessor of the KGB) had been interred. When Putin later visited the site to lay flowers on Ilyin’s grave, it was in the company of an Orthodox monk who saw the NKVD executioners as Russian patriots and therefore good men. At the time of the reburial, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church was a man who had himself served the KGB as an agent.

As critics of Ilyin’s second book in the 1920s put it, the émigré philosopher was a “Chekist for God.” Ilyin was returned, body and soul, to the Russia he had been forced to leave. And that very return, in its inattention to contradiction, and its disregard of fact, was the purest expression of respect for his legacy. To be sure, Ilyin opposed the Soviet system, but once the USSR ceased to exist in 1991, it was history—and the past, for him, was nothing but cognitive raw material for a fiction of eternal virtue. Even the faults of the Soviet system thus became necessary Russian reactions to the prior hostility of the West.

Within Russia itself, Ilyin is not the only native source of fascist ideas cited with approval by Putin, but it is his works that most seem to satisfy political needs and provide the “spiritual

resource” for the kleptocratic state machine. In 2017, when the Russian state had so much difficulty commemorating the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Ilyin was advanced as its heroic opponent. In a television drama about the revolution, he decried the evil of promising social advancement to Russians.

The ongoing Russian campaign against the “decadence” of the European Union is in accord with Ilyin’s worldview, as is the anxious masculinity of Putin’s Russia. First, Ilyin called Russia homosexual, then he underwent therapy with his girlfriend, and finally he blamed God. Putin first submitted to years of fur-and-feather photoshoots, then divorced his wife, then blamed the European Union for Russian homosexuality. Ilyin sexualized what he experienced as foreign threats.

When Ukrainians in late 2013 began to assemble in favor of a European future for their country, the Russian media raised the specter of a “homodictatorship.” Ilyin’s arguments were everywhere as Russian troops entered Ukraine multiple times in 2014. As soldiers received their mobilization orders for the invasion of Ukraine’s Crimean province in January 2014, all of Russia’s high-ranking bureaucrats and regional governors were sent a copy of Ilyin’s *Our Tasks*. After Russian troops occupied Crimea and the Russian parliament voted for annexation, Putin cited him again as justification.

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

1. *

I thank Pavel Gavriluk, Klaus Nellen, Randall Poole, and Marci Shore for comments and Mary Gluck for reminding me of dialectics. Interpretations and translations are my own. [↩](#)