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# The Fall of an Empire, the Birth of a Nation

National Identities in Russia

*Edited by*  
**Chris J. Chulos and Timo Piirainen**



# THE FALL OF AN EMPIRE, THE BIRTH OF A NATION



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*Edited by*

CHRIS J. CHULOS and TIMO PIIRAINEN

*University of Helsinki*

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# 1 Introduction

CHRIS J. CHULOS AND TIMO PIIRAINEN

For the first time in its history Russia exists as a nation-state and not as an empire. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the end not only of the Soviet version of socialism and internationalism, but also the Soviet empire. The disintegration of the empire and the drifting apart of the 'family of peoples' held together by Soviet power has necessitated a redefinition of Russian national identity. Empire and the mission to spread the socialist doctrine and Russian civilisation to the neighbouring territories can no longer be among the basic constituents of the national self-understanding. The Russian Federation of today consists of many nationalities and Russia as a state has a strongly multi-national character, much as its imperial and Soviet predecessors had. The post-1991 situation is, however, different in that large territories with non-Russian majorities are no longer semi-independent republics, but independent nations. The titular national groups that live within the Russian Federation as autonomous republics are much smaller than those in the former Soviet Republics of Ukraine, Uzbekistan or Azerbaijan are, and in the majority of these republics the titular nationality is only a minority. As the case studies of this book show, internationalism and acceptance of multi-cultural realities continue, despite the loss of the empire, to be important features of national identity in contemporary Russia. The relationship between titular and other nationalities living in the territory of Russia is, however, being redefined and renegotiated as the perception of Russia and Russianness changes.

The objective of this volume is to study these changes in Russian national identity and self-understanding. The multi-disciplinary approach presented here examines the formation and re-formation of national identity from the perspectives of history, sociology, political science and cultural studies. Despite their diversity of disciplinary and topical focus, the articles can be organised according to three main themes: (1) identity formation and ideology in historical contexts, (2) nationality politics and the definition of nationalities, (3) contemporary national identity. Together these studies form a comprehensive picture of Russian national identity, its historical formation, national self-understanding during the Soviet era, and development of a new national identity in the post-Soviet era.

'Origin and Power,' Elena Hellberg-Hirn's article that opens the volume, presents the basic visual symbols of Russia which serve as the tradi-

tional constituents of identity for the Russian state, empire, and nation. Hellberg-Hirn's article provides a historical introduction to visual symbols and their relevance in national identity from the early days of imperial Russia to the post-Soviet period. As these symbols and their meanings developed and transformed over the centuries, they legitimated the centralised power of the Russian state. Visual symbols that represent the order of things in time and space correspond to social and political worlds.

While Hellberg-Hirn's article offers a historical introduction to the construction of Russian national identity, the articles by Chris Chulos and Arto Luukkanen look at identity formation and ideology at specific historical moments in which religion was viewed both positively and negatively as an important part of identity-building. In 'Orthodox Identity at Russian Holy Places', Chulos concentrates on the process of claims-making in the re-definition of Orthodox Christian identity in a Russian monastery town at the beginning of the twentieth century. Chulos' study illustrates definition and re-definition of identities at several different levels. In the turbulent social situation brought about by the rapid modernisation of society, new ideologies challenged old ones as local, national, and religious identities were all contested. In his article, 'In Quest of Values. Religion and Nationality in the Early Soviet Period,' Luukkanen describes the internal debate of the Communist Party in the 1920s concerning religious identities, both Christian and Muslim, and offers insights on the development of 'identity politics' during the first decade of the Soviet Union.

Nationality policy is the second major theme of the book. Three articles explicitly address this issue. Timo Vihavainen's analysis of Soviet nationality policies in 'Nationalism and Internationalism. How Did the Bolsheviks Cope with National Sentiments' is essential reading for understanding many of the more detailed case studies later in the volume. Vihavainen shows how Soviet power, most notably in Central Asia, used the creation of nationalities and the construction of corresponding identities to divide-and-rule non-Russian populations. In the first phase of this policy, the development of national institutions, vernaculars, cultures, and distinct identities in the Soviet republics was strongly encouraged by officials in Moscow, at least in part in order to create a diversity of national units that would not be susceptible to 'undesired influences' such as those of pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic movements. In the second phase, the heralds of the newly created national institutions, the intelligentsia and political leadership in the Soviet and autonomous republics, were, according to the ruthless Stalinist 'dialectics', then destroyed in order to ensure that these national entities remained docile members of the Soviet 'family of nations'. Soviet rule differed from other colonial regimes in its systematic attempt to create national institutions and identities in colonised territories – and in its unsurpassed systematic ruthlessness with which any signs of national-

ism were then suppressed among the indigenous population of these territories.

The Soviet Union left an ambiguous legacy to the new independent states that were formed in its territory. Soviet authorities strove to create a universal supra-ethnic identity at the same time a number of subordinate national identities were allowed to exist quite independently. For Russians – the ‘core nation’ of the former empire – internationalism is likely to remain a major element of the new national identity. In the case of the titular nationalities in the new independent states, this internationalist dimension is, by contrast, gradually giving way to an interpretation of national identity that is largely based on ethnicity and common origin. The results of this process of re-interpreting national identity vary greatly from state to state.

In ‘Ethnicity and Nationalism in Contemporary Russian Ethnography’, Kaija Heikkinen examines nationality politics and identity-building from the point of view of ethnography and describes the process of claims-making among Russian scholars concerning the definition of nationalities and national groups.

Thomas Parland’s study of nationalist extremism and extremist argumentation in contemporary Russian political discourse, ‘Russia in the 1990s: Manifestations of a Conservative Backlash Philosophy’, provides an account of the most important ultra-nationalist – or ‘national patriotic’, as the Russian term goes – movements and also an introduction to the basic concepts and intellectual currents related to the nationalist extreme right in Russia. In Parland’s opinion, the ‘red-brown alliance’, the shift of the Russian communists to the camp of the ‘national patriots’, is one of the dominant features of the modernisation process going on in post-Soviet Russia. As a specialist on the Russian extreme right, Parland argues that ‘national patriotic’ arguments have a chance of becoming mainstream in the process of claims-making concerning the new national identity. The ‘red-brown alliance’ has the role of a challenger and all the other political groups are forced to answer this challenge. In the political discourse that shapes national identity in the media, the extreme right has more influence than what its political weight might at first glance suggest.

The final section of the book examines meanings of national identity in contemporary Russia. Ralf Tuchtenhagen, in ‘The Problem of Identities in the Baltic Countries’, focuses his attention on the development of national identities in the Baltic countries. After the fall of the tsarist regime in Russia, these countries experienced a twenty-year period of national independence that lasted until Soviet occupation during the Second World War led to their re-annexation. This brief experience of independence vis-à-vis other Soviet republics is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the different trajectories of the Baltic states and the CIS countries in the post-Soviet

period. Since the Baltic countries never experienced the era of the Soviet 'nation-building' in the 1920s and 1930s, many social and cultural mechanisms that function as a bulwark for a 'genuine' national identity were left intact. Tuchtenhagen argues that during the period of independence between the two world wars, the national identity of the Baltic countries was predominantly defined in negative terms, that is, in opposition to the former masters – the Germans, the Poles, and most importantly, the Russians. This predominantly negative definition of identity helped to preserve a sense of national integrity through the decades of Soviet hegemony.

Timo Piirainen's article, 'The Fall of an Empire, the Birth of a Nation. Perceptions of the New Russian National Identity', examines the main characteristics of national identity on the level of everyday life in today's Russia. Piirainen's article is based on a case study conducted in St. Petersburg; the research data consists of qualitative interviews with schoolteachers about national identity. Piirainen concludes that among this sample population, internationalism and acceptance of multi-cultural realities continue to be basic traits of Russian self-understanding even after the collapse of the multi-national Soviet empire.

On the level of everyday life, schoolteachers understood Russia first in cultural terms as an entity that unites peoples, and not in terms of ethnicity, territory, or citizenship. An important element of national self-understanding for these teachers is the perception of Russia as having a 'civilising' mission. Through Russian culture, different peoples with conflicting national interests are (or were) brought into communion – an idea similar to the 'white man's burden' that prevailed in (other) colonial empires. As this imperial tolerance towards different nationalities and ethnic groups continues to be a major aspect of national self-understanding in post-Soviet Russia, it seems unlikely that ultra-nationalist movements – however loud and aggressive they may appear in their populism – will become dominant political forces capable of articulating the popular mood of disillusionment and discontent. In this way, the Russia of today is quite different from the Germany of the 1930s to which it is often compared.

The volume concludes with Jeremy Smith's examination of the development of national identities in the autonomous republics and regions within the borders of present-day Russia ('Russia's Minorities and the Soviet Legacy'). Here the situation is different from that of the newly independent Soviet republics in the sense that ethnicity, national culture, and common origin are in the majority of the cases not likely to form a basis for a radical redefinition of identities established during the Soviet era. Chechenia and Tatarstan – for very different reasons – are the exceptions. The Russian Federation may continue to proceed towards a stage of further territorial disintegration in the future, but in most autonomous republics and regions, the major cause of secession is unlikely to be the titular nat-

ionality's redefinition of identity, but a further deterioration of the economic situation throughout Russia.

The articles in this volume have their specific approaches and subject matters, but together they form a mosaic of national identity in contemporary Russia and some of the countries neighbouring it. A common thread that brings cohesion to these very different articles is the multiplicity of meanings 'Russianness' has had. As with all national identities, what at first appears to be a coherent thing is often an aggregate of sets of elements or traits which can be combined in a variety of ways by different people, groups, and interested parties. Russia does not fit the well-known dichotomy of basic types of nationalism, ethnic and civic, but instead is held together by a cultural nationalism.

After decades of authoritarian and totalitarian rule, it is unrealistic to expect a sudden collective identification with the new 'democratic' national institutions of today. Civil society that could be autonomous from the state was beginning to take shape in the last decades of tsarist Russia, but after 1917, its prospects soon turned bleak as the Soviet notion of citizenship, quite different from that in the western democracies, began to emerge. As Ilja Srubar foresaw in his 1991 article 'War der reale Sozialismus modern?',<sup>1</sup> one of the dominant features of the transition in the former Soviet Union has been the disintegration of society into primary groups that are unscrupulously self-seeking. This has created a social situation that hardly contributes to the development of civic virtues usually associated with the idea of citizenship. The current impotence of the Russian state raises questions about political legitimacy and is hardly conducive to the development of civic nationalism.

According to the authors of this volume, the rise of ethnic nationalism does not seem to be a likely development either. In general, ethnic nationalism has not been very characteristic of former colonial powers; the dominance of ethnicity as the criterion of nationality is, in the first place, typical of relatively new and small nation-states. Nations with a long imperial past usually define the criteria that regulate the inclusion into and exclusion from the imagined community of the nation in more generous terms than smaller nations that have recently escaped from the imperialism of others. This type of nationalism, which, in countries like Britain, France and the Netherlands, has taken decades and centuries to transform into civic nationalism, may be called 'cultural nationalism' for the simple reason that culture has been an important legitimation for colonial rule. Yet, as in the former Soviet Union, one consequence of these empires' demise has been a protracted and often bitter redefinition of identity in the parent nation, be it a question of political devolution, as in the United Kingdom, or spheres of influence, as in French and Dutch foreign affairs. And this

says nothing about other challenges to notions of unified national identity such as those shaped by cultural, economic, and social background.

Among former empires, Russia is a special case. Its colonies did not consist of overseas dominions, but it extended its dominance from the European centre of its power directly towards the periphery, over vast territories in the very heart of the Eurasian continent. In the words of Aleksandr Ahiezer,<sup>2</sup> Russia perceives itself as a *promezhutochnaya tsivilizatsiya*, a civilisation that is situated between west and east, between cultures and civilisations, and thus is destined to always have a dichotomous identity. As Elena Hellberg-Hirn points out in her article, the two-headed eagle, with the one head looking to the west and the other to the east, continues to be a key symbol for understanding Russian national identity.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Srubar, Ilja (1991): 'War der reale Sozialismus Modern? Versuch einer strukturellen Bestimmung', *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, vol. 43, 3:1991.

<sup>2</sup> Ahiezer, Aleksandr (1993): *Dumy o Rossii. Ot proshlogo k budushchemu*, Gumanitarnyi tsentr 'Strategiya', Moscow.

## 2 Origin and Power: Russian National Myths and the Legitimation of Social Order

ELENA HELLBERG-HIRN

The nation creates and re-creates itself through continuous symbolic discourse about its present and future, by referring to its past. The sedimentations of national identity offer alternative designs in the political strife for power. Symbols of national identity and myths of national past, being employed in the political discourse, serve as legitimation of power and political leadership. At the same time, the legitimation of power by the rulers on the one hand, and the willingness to accept and appreciate power and leadership by the ruled on the other, are mutually reinforced by belief in shared national values.

In a recent contribution to the topic of power legitimation, Pertti Sadeniemi (1995) argues that it is hard to formulate a conceptual structure that would help you to proceed without allowing illusions to replace reality. This is why the realist school has so long dominated the theory of international relations. Political legitimacy, as it is understood in this study, is an empirical and a social-scientific concept, as opposed to a normative or a juridical one. It is also relational. Legitimacy is claimed by a political leadership on the grounds of one principle or another; it is acknowledged or rejected by those over whom power is exercised, on the same grounds or on different ones (Sadeniemi 1995, 13).

An important point has been made by David Beetham on the relationship between legitimacy and people's beliefs: 'A given power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be *justified in terms* of their beliefs. This may seem a fine distinction, but it is a fundamental one' (Beetham 1991, 11).

National identity's passage into vogue, in Paul Gilroy's words, has been mirrored in conservative, authoritarian and right-wing thought, which has regularly attempted to use both enquiries into identity and spurious certainty about its proper boundaries to enhance its own interests, to improve its ca-



capacity to explain the world and to legitimate the austere social patterns that this kind of thinking favours. 'The crisis involved in acquiring and maintaining an appropriate form of national identity has appeared repeatedly as the principal focus of this activity. It too makes a special investment in the idea of culture, for nations are presented as entirely homogeneous cultural units staffed by people whose hyper-similarity renders them interchangeable' (Gilroy 1996, 37).

In the political discourse of our days, the ethnic and cultural agglomerate of the Russian nation is usually rendered by oversimplified stereotypes: either by a presumed pure and essential ethnocentric Russianness, or by statist territoriality. What is definitely missing is the open acknowledgement of Russian national identity as multiethnic and multicultural. 'Today, the volatile concept of identity belongs above all to the important debate in which multiculturalism is being redefined outside the outmoded conventions that governed its earlier incarnations, especially in the educational system' (Gilroy 1996, 47-8).

Noting the frequency with which the noun 'identity' appears coupled with the adjective 'cultural', Paul Gilroy makes a further comment: 'This timely pairing is only the most obvious way in which the concept "identity" directs attention towards a more elaborate sense of the power of culture and the relationship of culture to power' (Gilroy 1996, 36).<sup>1</sup>

### **Need for Legitimation**

As a matter of fact, the introduction of national elements and the development of a 'national consciousness' in Russia were to a significant extent the by-products of Western influence. The Russian school education gave only a somewhat dry and uninspiring catalogue of facts concerning Russia's past, or sang paeans in praise of Russian rulers and feats in the mistaken belief that these could lead to a genuine understanding of national traditions. (Raeff 1966, 143).

However, the history of Russia is far from a school-book parade of rulers and victorious feats; rather, as Nikolai Berdiaev stated in his *Russian idea*, it has been marked by catastrophic development including palace coups, royal murders and assassinations, false pretenders, uprisings and revolutionary turnovers.<sup>2</sup> Since the power, frequently grasped by a deliberate act of violence, was thus in need of justification, it had to be made legitimate by some alleged ultimate goal embracing highest social values; in other words, claims to power had to be teleologically and axiologically grounded.

To those holding power, the question of legitimacy as a rule is a matter of great importance. 'Political leaders claim legitimacy; that is, they wish those

subject to their power to believe that their power is rightfully held, and that the holders are people to whom their office can properly be trusted. Where no such belief exists, no legal argument and no ceremonial pomp can conjure up "legitimacy" in any sense that would make a difference in empirical terms' (Sadeniemi 1995, 21).

Where political power goes hand in hand with class status and privilege, the arguments of power legitimation regularly go together with the need to legitimate privilege and inequality in general. Where power is exercised by an ideological movement, the ideology furnishes the bulk of the necessary justifying arguments. Contrasting to this legitimation from above, the beliefs and opinions of the people over whom the power is exercised form the substantive content of legitimation from below (ibid., 23).

Dennis Wrong in his book on power puts the general argument of legitimacy of the power from above in the following way: 'a need to believe that the power they possess is morally justified, that they are servants of a larger collective goal or system of values surpassing mere determination to perpetuate themselves in power, that their exercise of power is not inescapably at odds with hallowed standards of morality' (Wrong 1979, 103). But alas, the role of morality as a political force is largely left unexplored!

As to the teleology of the power justification, the national goals usually imply utilitarian (common good), imperial (control and expansion of the territory), missionary (religious salvation of the people), and nationalistic aims (enhanced glory of the nation). The goals and the means to achieve them tend to overlap and amalgamate in a set of cultural key concepts used for national identification. For Russia, such key concepts of nationalism are The People (*Narod*), Homeland (*Rodina*), Holy Russia (*Svyataya Rus*), Great Power (*Derzhava*), all imbued with the highest axiological values representing Truth, Beauty and Justice. And it is their strong emotional appeal that enables their applicability in defending and justifying the Russian claims of hegemony over other nations, or the suppression and exploitation of other ethnic groups and minorities inhabiting the territory of the Russian state.<sup>3</sup>

The highest national goals (*Rodina*, *Derzhava*) are in Russia traditionally connected to the image of a powerful leader. At present, according to the opinion poll reported in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (24.01.96), Peter I appears as the most popular of all Russian rulers. It is commonly known that Peter I was motivated to his violent transformation of Russia not only by the utilitarian goals of the Enlightenment, but first and foremost by his vision of the Russian state as a great European power. He managed to turn the stagnant pious Muscovy into the secularised Russian Empire. Although by his contemporaries he was widely believed to be an illegitimate ruler, an Antichrist, and a changeling, the myth of Peter the Great as god on earth was soon created by the admiring posterity.<sup>4</sup>

Sentiments about Peter clearly indicate the belief that the greater power of the Russian state would result in the greater happiness of the Russian people as a whole (Raeff 1966, 181). The Petrine reforms were the culminating point for the evolution of the secular state; for that very reason many of them were designed to eliminate the outworn symbols and rituals of the former eschatologically oriented Christian society; therefore they tended to emphasise sharply the ideological difference between past and present.

Hence, for many Russians, the Russian Empire appeared as quite different and new, created *ex nihilo*. But, at the same time, the emperor carried with him the whole tradition of the ruler, Christ-like in person and in power, a tradition which, when Christ became irrelevant, made of the emperor a god on earth. (Cherniavsky 1961, 85, Uspenskii 1994.) The authoritarian power system was thus in the end always legitimated by the divine will. Also the idea of the monarch as the *deus ex machina* in solving the problems of his subjects that we find in eighteenth-century novels, comic operas, social criticism, and utopias, fitted well into the notions of enlightened absolutism and state paternalism (Raeff 1966, 190).

The traditional view of the tsar as father (*batiushka*) of the nation was part of the paternalistic pattern of power. The image of Peter as parent became particularly frequent after the 1721 Treaty of Nystadt, when he was officially declared *otets otechestva* ('the father of his country'). Throughout the eighteenth century, empresses were also called the 'mothers' of their country. The image of Russia as newly born was to continue throughout the eighteenth century and was often seen as a source of superiority to the dying countries of Europe (Baehr 1991, 209).

The national myth of Peter the Great embodies the Russian archetype of power: the family metaphor. Father-reformer, taking care of the family of his people, Peter carried out the historical project of connecting Russia to Europe, himself actively partaking literally in everything; he was, in Alexander Pushkin's words, 'an eternal worker on the throne' (which, in the former country of the dictatorship of the proletarians, was the quality that greatly contributed to his extraordinary popularity).

Richard Wortman has observed that the presentations of the Russian monarch were mythical in two senses of the word: they imitated or made reference to heroic and legendary archetypes, and they provided an animated political myth of rule. This was a world of beginnings, a world of fathers, a world of firsts and bests (Wortman 1995, 7).

Metaphor created the image of a monarch without debt to the past. Peter was compared to the Apostle Andrew and the emperors Augustus and Constantine. But most of all, Peter wished to be identified as creator. When he accepted the title of *imperator* from the senate in October 1721, the rhetoric of the speeches raised him to a supreme being. ... *Imperator* placed him in the company of the pa-

gan emperors of antiquity rather than the Christian emperors of the Byzantine empire. The adoption of the title of emperor turned a *tsarstvo* into an *imperia*. The renaming marked a cultural transformation (Wortman 1995, 68).

It is nevertheless remarkable that the above mentioned opinion poll (carried out by the Russian Independent Institute of Social and National Problems during the autumn of 1995) reveals that the appreciation of Peter the Great (54 per cent) is many times higher than that of all the other leaders of Imperial and Soviet Russia. (Catherine the Great, e.g., was supported by 13 per cent of the interviewees; Alexander II, 9 per cent; Khrushchev, 10 per cent; the period of stagnation, 17 per cent, but the Perestroika and the liberal reforms only 4 per cent and 3 per cent, respectively.) As to Peter, the highest estimation of his rule, over 60 per cent, came from Central Russia, from the traditionally conservative and nationalistic southern region. Also in the interviews with Russian teachers made in St. Petersburg in 1996, the tendency to estimate Peter I as the greatest national leader is clearly prominent.<sup>5</sup>

The myth of Peter the Great reveals popular longing for a hard-working leader endowed both with absolute power and a reformatory vision of the future. But the unique popularity of Peter is undoubtedly also based on his determination to connect Russia with Western Europe, which evidently conforms with the expectations of the population after the collapse of the former Soviet isolationism. This points to the persistence of the modernisation goal moulded after the Western model: for contemporary Russians who are well aware of Peter's Westernising reforms and their statist and cultural success, the collapse of the Soviet modernisation project is felt to be all the more disappointing. Besides, the utilitarian goals of Peter's policy support the secular version of the paradise myth still prevailing in Russian culture (Baehr 1991); its non-religious aspects seem to be highly acceptable for the secularised population strongly conditioned by the social utopia of the communist myth.

Stephen Lessing Baehr noticed in the preface to his book on the paradise myth, devoted to the visions of an ideal world in Russian culture: 'In tracing the roots of such visions, I found myself moving further and further into the past. By the time I reached the Primary Chronicle, I had come to conclude that since that famous day in 987 when the emissaries of Kievan Prince Vladimir reportedly experienced "heaven on earth" at an Orthodox cathedral in Constantinople, the quest for an earthly paradise has been one of the central focal points of Russian literature and culture; only later did I understand that paradise has also provided one of the prime means of propagandising the Russian status quo' (Baehr 1991, ix).

## **Dynasty and Power**

The sovereign power of the Russian monarchs has been legitimated by divine right and by the blessing of the Orthodox Church (patrimony), by force of tradition of power (the dynastic succession law of male primogeniture), or by a new power conquering the old one. Only once in Russian history, the sovereign right to rule the state was supported by a democratic decision of the very first Duma, in its choice of Mikhail Romanov as the Muscovite tsar in 1613. The Empress Elizabeth was the first one who came to the Russian throne in 1740 claiming her right to power by her origin as daughter of Peter I.<sup>6</sup>

However, the dynastic claims on power were not always self-evident. The male line of the Romanovs ended five years after Peter's death, in 1730, with his grandson Peter II; the rest of the century saw three empresses, one of them (Catherine II) a German princess quite unrelated to the Russian dynasty, and an emperor (Peter III), a Duke of Holstein, related by blood and not at all by culture or ideology. All of these were playthings of the Russian gentry, which made up the Guards regiments stationed in the capital. 'The Sovereign Emperor was such an abstraction that a German woman could fill the position', as Michael Cherniavsky (1961, 91) ironically comments.

The secular, absolutist state in Russia, as elsewhere, was symbolised by the final step in the evolution of the ruler-myth: for, if the rationale in the case of the saint-princes was the sanctification of power by the person, and in the case of the pious tsars the sanctification of the person by power, now power sanctified power (Cherniavsky 1961, 89). Peter I embarked on another violent act of cultural imposition, like Prince Vladimir's Baptism of Kievan Rus; he recast the image of tsar in terms of a myth of conquest and power. The image of conqueror thus disposed of the old fictions of descent.

The image of the monarch as conqueror, as bearer of foreign attributes, had been fundamental to the mythology of Russian power from the earliest chronicles. The Varangian lineage, the descent from Augustus, the seizure of the Byzantine regalia, and the discovery of the affinity with the kings of antiquity all defined rulers as wielders of an autonomous, political authority based on the capacity to exert force. ... The primitive founder came from outside and invaded as a conqueror, denying the prevailing mortal order to assert a new form of authority more ruthless and irresistible than the old (Wortman 1995, 41, 44).

Nevertheless, both dynasty and origin imply a continuity of power, and, consequently, the claims on power over the territory of Russia are made legitimate by reference to origin. And, after all, it is the common territory, language and tradition, i.e., continuity in space and time, that keeps folk and a nation together. The virtue of origin, of being there first, at the moment of

creation, in primordial or very early times, connects the creature and the Divine Creator with the myth of Origin of the world (Eliade 1991, 21-56).

Russian political discourse (now again, after a Soviet interval) makes ample use of various Orthodox symbols as signs of common origin. Icons, crosses, churches, clergy, liturgy, saints, religious processions, church holidays, etc. demonstrate belonging to the only Right Faith. Also the places and persons connected to the origins of the Russian Orthodoxy, such as Kiev, St. Vladimir, St. Andrew, the oldest monasteries and churches, served earlier (and serve again) as embodiments of Holy Russia. Historical sites connected to the birth of the Russian nation, and the old capitals (Novgorod, Kiev, Vladimir, Moscow) symbolically represent the origin of the Russian state and the Russian autocracy.

The legitimacy of the sovereign power of the Russian monarch is supported by legends of the alleged kinship with the Roman Emperors, via the Viking conqueror Rurik. He is believed to be the grounder of Rus according to the Russian Primary Chronicle of the twelfth century which begins with the words: 'The tale of bygone years from which the Russian land has come...'.

Also the well-known *History of the Princes of Vladimir*, written in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, advanced the legend that Russian princes were descended from Emperor Augustus through his brother, Prus, the ruler of Prussia. The focus of the account was a double one. By their birth, through the legendary Prus and through his direct descendant Rurik, the Russian princes were the heirs of the legitimate Roman emperors; through their power and glory, however, the Kievan ancestors of the Muscovite princes acquired imperial rank from the legitimate emperors of Constantinople, the Second Rome (Cherniavsky 1961, 41).

## **Centre and Origin**

Traditionally, the political centre of the national territory, i.e. the capital city, represents the summit in the hierarchy of power and authority. As the place of the royal or presidential residence, and thus the symbol of origin, the centre refers to the new beginnings, to the mythical theme of renovation. The power and the initiative, the commands and the bans always radiate from the centre to the periphery.

For two centuries, Moscow and St. Petersburg competed as the centres of absolute power during the Imperial period of Russian history. The recently renamed St. Petersburg tries to forget the Leningrad part of its existence, the traumas of the Soviet era, and its role as 'the cradle of the October revolution'. The former ex-centric centre of the empire is now a provincial city in

the periphery of the Russian Federation, while the political power again originates from the Moscow Kremlin, as in the days of the old Muscovy. The Soviet Union is gone, but the central power pattern of territorial representation remains part of Russian national identity.

The construction of the Russian Empire contributed to the formation of Russian identity as strongly centred, highly exclusive and exclusivist form of cultural identity. 'It knows itself as the centre and is able to place everything else as the "other", be it the colonised other or any less powerful other' (Hall 1991, 20-21). Such an identity conceives of itself as the centre where history was being made and it tends to place and recognise everybody else as peripheral.

National identity justifies various political claims 'forged amidst the cultures of terror that operate at the limits of a belligerent imperial system' (Cultural Studies 1996, 47). In the encounter between cultures, power is always involved, especially if one culture possesses a more developed economic and military basis. Whenever there is a conflictive and asymmetric encounter between different cultures, be it by means of invasion, colonisation or extensive forms of communication, the issue of cultural identity arises (Larrain 1994, 141-2).

Various kinds of kinship and territorial claims, religious and cultural claims, claims of political self-determination and economic self-rule, teeming with potential conflicts, are emerging in the contemporary Russian Federation. 'The nation-state could not remain the central legitimising principle brought to bear upon the analysis of the cultural relations and forms that subsumed identity. ... Henceforth, identities deriving from the nation could be shown to be competing with subnational (local or regional) and supranational (diaspora) structures of belonging and kinship' (Cultural Studies 1996, 47).

The brutal force used by the former Russian Empire against other ethnic groups in the process of colonisation and Russification of Central Asia, Siberia, and finally the Caucasus during 1830-1880 undoubtedly created strong feelings of guilt, which were projected into the need to idealise ethnic Russianness; but by the same token, colonisation promoted the emergence of a multi-confessional, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Russian state.

This process intensified during the Soviet period with its official internationalism and the alleged 'friendship of the peoples'. Needless to say, the Russian people continued to rank first and foremost, given the inherited paternalistic and colonial patterns of power, and Russian remained the common language of the Union, in a similar manner as it was earlier the official language of the Empire.

Still, there existed the overlapping myth of brotherhood among the more than one hundred differed ethnic groups, minorities and nationalities inhabiting the former empire, and a synthetic over-national Soviet identity, which

nowadays is challenged by the nationalist revival. The lost geographical identity of the different ethnic groups had to be restored, in their search for authenticity, to create a more congenial national origin than that provided by imperial history and by the very superstructure of state power. 'One of the first tasks of the culture of resistance was to reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land' (Said 1993, 273). As Edward Said points out, imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence, of long-standing territorial possession 'which dominates, classifies, and universally commodifies all space under the aegis of the metropolitan centre' (Said 1993, 272).

The nationalist revival in the Russian Federation challenges the centrality of this imperial vision that is registered and supported by the culture that produced it, then to some extent disguised it, and also was transformed by it. The salient fact of this centrality was absolutely constitutive of the whole nature of the Russian and Soviet political and social order. In this hegemonic order, the united symbolisms of origin and power coincide at the centre. An exceedingly hybrid, impure and complex relationship conceals the teleology of power for the sake of power itself.

### **Legitimation by History**

Another variant of legitimation by tradition, apart from dynasty, territory, myth and religion, is hidden in the appeal of history. Marc Raeff mentioned in his *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia* that Russian history was little taught in the schools, and it was poorly known in good society throughout almost the entire eighteenth century; on the other hand, universal history was better taught and better known, a fact that contributed to the isolation of the educated Russian from the historical experience of his nation.

Paradoxically, it was his acquaintance with universal history that led the Russian intellectual to become aware of his lack of contact with both the Russian tradition and the Russian people. ... Their Western heritage only deepened the isolation of the Russian intellectuals from the state and the people.

The task of Russian nationalism consisted, therefore, in creating this bond between the elite and the people. It happened that this was the direction advocated by the new ideas, which spread under the guise of sentimentalism. For the latter's stress on the emotional bond with the people and of the spiritual role of the folk and popular traditions found resonance in the young nobleman as he faced leaving the protective isolation of his school. In sentimentalism's call for a return to nature and its glorification of the simple folk, the young serviceman heard an echo of his own early years, when he was in the care of peasant nurses and tutors and played with the village children ... Rediscovery of his nation on emotional rather than rational grounds might well have helped to recall childhood fancies (Raeff 1966, 158-159).