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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Russia: Fascist or Conservative?

Mitchell A. Orenstein

University of Pennsylvania, USA
Email: more@sas.upenn.edu

Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West, by Marlène Laruelle, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 2021, $39.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9781501754135, ISBN 101501754130.

When I cracked open Marlène Laruelle's new book, *Is Russia Fascist?*, I immediately wondered, who really thinks Russia is fascist? I was aware of Timothy Snyder's study of Russian President Vladimir Putin's glorification of the debatably fascist political theorist Ivan Ilyin, but fascist? Really? But Laruelle quickly shows in the introduction that this is not a canard or a straw man. Many reputable scholars and public intellectuals have drawn parallels between the Putin regime, its actions, and European fascism, including Snyder, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Alexander Motyl, Vladimir Inozemtsev, Gary Kasparov, Anna Politkovskaya, Madeline Albright, and Hillary Clinton. The term "fascism" has become part of the Western discussion on the nature of the Putin regime, even more so since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

At the same time, Russia has deployed the term "fascism" frequently to describe the supposed "fascist junta" ruling Ukraine and other Central and East European governments that it does not like. In most cases, Russia makes these accusations against countries whose governments or national liberation movements collaborated with the Nazis against the Soviets, seeking to draw a parallel between the Great Patriotic War and the struggles of today. Laying claim to the legacy of Stalin's victory in the Second World War is vital to the Putin regime, because it remains the defining moment in Russian identity. Opposition to "fascism" thus remains fundamental to Russian identity. This book dramatizes the odd contradiction that "fascism" has been used by Russia to describe the politics of its former colonial subjects and by analysts to describe Russia's aggressive authoritarian regime.

Yet I have become convinced in recent years that "conservative" rather than "fascist" provides a better label for the Putin regime. Katharina Bluhm and Mihai Varga's 2019 book, "New Conservatives in Russia and East Central Europe," has been critical in my own thinking about not only Putin but the whole contemporary wave of seemingly "populist" governments that have come to power in Europe since 2008. Antidemocratic, check. Pro-church, check. Pro-family, check. Nationalist, check. This represents a revival of 19th century European illiberal conservatism, for instance that of Metternich.[1]

Laruelle seems to agree. Russia, she argues, can better be described as "illiberal" or "conservative." But definitely not fascist. Russia under Putin lacks too many of the characteristics of fascist regimes, as defined by most scholars. Putin's Russia falls short of being a totalitarian regime. While freedoms have been increasingly curtailed, there is still an open opposition in Russia, with some ability to express its views in public (though this has been curtailed since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine). Russia remains a multi-party system. While Russia deploys propaganda, it does not demand the same level of mass indoctrination and mobilization as did the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. Most of all, there is no "utopian project of transformation that operates by mobilizing the masses around a promotion of violence (145)," the essence of fascism in Laruelle's

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definition. Also, not everyone is wearing uniforms. And there are no mass rallies, just fireside chats. Though this may have changed after the invasion of Ukraine.

Laruelle proposes the term "illiberal" to describe Russia today. This term has many benefits. It encompasses the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of Russia's resistance to liberalism. But Laruelle also uses other terms to define the Russian regime, "Christian, conservative, geopolitically continental, and nation-centric" (166). And these present a perhaps more complete, composite view of the Putin regime. Though I doubt very strongly that Laruelle would use this word, Putin is a tsar, not a Hitler.

So far, so good. But there is a nagging problem. In seeking to dispel the "fascist" label, Laruelle provides a detailed examination of the Putin regime's flirtation with and promotion of far right and fascist groups and ideologies and it is quite comprehensive and, well, worrying.

In trying to describe Russia's actual fascist groups and movements as marginal, Laruelle uncovers many disturbing connections between these "marginal" groups and important politicians and power centers. Russian National Unity, "Russia's main 'black shirts' paramilitary group in the early 1990s" (101), provided security to Gennady Zyuganov of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF). Laruelle points to "the rising subculture of militia" (107), that can incorporate fascist, anti-immigrant, or related ideologies and has ties to the government. In 2013, the Orthodox Patricarchate in Russia founded its own fascist militia, Sorok Sorokov (SS). She claims that it is "supported by the Moscow municipality … Members meet regularly with Arch-priest Dmitrii Smirnov, and they have direct access to Patriarch Kirill." She notes that militia culture is related to the broader popularity of "sambo" or self-defense without weapons, a Russian martial arts discipline promoted by President Putin, and mixed martial arts. Putin has promoted the Night Wolves and other vigilante groups, which played a role in the Crimea invasion, "patrolling the streets of Sevastopol, blockading the main routes into the city, and participating in attacks" (110).

In fact, Laruelle points out that far right and fascist movements have enjoyed the support of the three main power centers she identifies of the Putin regime: the *siloviki*, the church, and the presidential administration. While many in the military industrial complex value a "healthy" patriotism, Laruelle provides plenty of evidence that it also harbors a wide variety of far-right figures. Overall, the *siloviki* work closely with Zyuganov's CPRF, Vladimir Zhirinovsky's LDPR, and Dmitrii Rogozin's Rodina, the latter two of which show far-right leanings. Zhirinovsky frequently referred to fascism in the 1990s and promised he would "act like Hitler in 1932" if he were to become president (91), though he later cooled this rhetoric. Some LDPR deputies have supported skinhead actions, portraying them as "simple acts of defense by ethnic Russians under attack by foreigners" (92). While Dmitrii Rogozin "has been careful to restrain his ideological arsenal so that it would remain in the world of political correctness" (93), his party has harbored more radical, far-right figures, connecting with skinhead leaders: "In the 2010s, some of Rodina's new rising ideological stars continued to exhibit roots in neo-Nazi subcultures, for instance, Fiodor Biriukov… . a prolific composer [who] composed many songs dedicated to Hitler, the swastika, and the white race" (93–94). The *siloviki* contains or is allied to some true fascist elements.

Already beginning to worry? Well, it gets worse. The orthodox church, another power center of the regime, contains groups that celebrate the "black hundreds," the proto-fascist Tsarist militias. Others "combine extreme Orthodox ideology and racist theories inspired by the U.S. White Power movement" (96). Orthodox church and Kremlin connected businessmen, such as Konstantin Malofeev, have "funded several meetings at which the European and Russian Far Right have become acquainted with one another" (97). Laruelle reminds us about Russian "Whites who sympathized with fascist regimes or (in the more extreme cases) collaborated with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union" (99), but insists that fascist links remain somewhat marginal in the Orthodox conservative ideological mainstream.

Laruelle paints the presidential administration in a complex light, as an unsystematic but "illiberal" ecosystem composed of various ideas and ideologies that are deployed at will, whenever the Kremlin wishes: "The state-backed ideology remains vague, comprising primarily anti-Western

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and antiliberal attitudes, Soviet nostalgia, and a classic, state-centric vision of Russia. Beyond these three points, fuzziness prevails" (88). Therefore, it would be hard to characterize the presidential administration as "fascist." It does not even have a single ideology. Nonetheless, Laruelle notes that the presidential administration's top government officials, including Dmitrii Rogozin, Sergey Glazyev, and Sergey Naryshkin, endorse cooperation with the European Far Right. While the presidential administration seemed to tolerate and promote Russian far right groups in the 2000s, it changed tack around 2008–2010 and forced them back to the margins. Laruelle takes from this that the Kremlin remains in firm control of its marginal fascist groups, but the fact that Kremlin ideologists choose to deploy them at all creates some legitimate concerns.

Throughout the book, Laruelle tells us that the fascist threat in Russia is overblown and that far right groups are more marginalized than, for instance, in the United States. However, reading the book produces a different impression. In the US and other liberal democracies, the far right is certainly present, but it is firmly opposed by a large liberal ecosystem composed of parties in power and civil society groups working to keep the far right in check. In Russia, liberals (and their ideas) are almost as marginal as the far right, perhaps more so.

Is Russia Fascist? shows that the Kremlin administration, which dominates power fairly absolutely in the country, adheres to a classic, anti-democratic, European conservatism, which blends into far right and fascist ideologies towards the margins. While reading this book, which is somehow conceived as a response to Timothy Snyder's work, I found myself wanting to reconcile the two. Yes, Laruelle is right when she claims that the regime in Russia is conservative, not fascist. But yes, Snyder is right that the Putin regime flirts with fascist ideology, and at times seems inspired by it.

And while Laruelle convinces me that the Putin regime has been more von Hindenburg than Hitler, for obvious reasons, I do not find this massively reassuring. The recent war in Ukraine provides further evidence that the Putin regime has evolved towards a religiously-tinged fascism, just as Snyder warned it would.

Note

1 Orenstein, Mitchell. "Vladimir Putin: An Aspirant Metternich?" *Foreign Policy Research Institute*. February 12, 2015. https://www.fpri.org/article/2015/02/vladimir-putin-an-aspirant-metternich/ (Accessed June 11, 2021.)

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