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The Grand Theory Driving Putin to War

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By Jane Burbank

President Vladimir Putin's bloody assault on Ukraine, nearly a month in, still seems inexplicable. Rockets raining down on apartment buildings and fleeing families are now Russia's face to the world. What could induce Russia to take such a fateful step, effectively electing to become a pariah state?

Efforts to understand the invasion tend to fall into two broad schools of thought. The first focuses on Mr. Putin himself — his state of mind, his understanding of history or his K.G.B. past. The second invokes developments external to Russia, chiefly NATO's eastward expansion after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, as the underlying source of the conflict.

But to understand the war in Ukraine, we must go beyond the political projects of Western leaders and Mr. Putin's psyche. The ardor and content of Mr. Putin's declarations are not new or unique to him. Since the 1990s, plans to reunite Ukraine and other post-Soviet states into a transcontinental superpower have been brewing in Russia. A revitalized theory of Eurasian empire informs Mr. Putin's every move.

The end of the Soviet Union disoriented Russia's elites, stripping away their special status in a huge Communist empire. What was to be done? For some, the answer was just to make money, the capitalist way. In the wild years after 1991, many were able to amass enormous fortunes in cahoots with an indulgent regime. But for others who had set their goals in Soviet conditions, wealth and a vibrant consumer economy were not enough. Post-imperial egos felt the loss of Russia's status and significance keenly.

As Communism lost its élan, intellectuals searched for a different principle on which the Russian state could be organized. Their explorations took shape briefly in the formation of political parties, including rabidly nationalist, antisemitic movements, and with more lasting effect in the revival of religion as a foundation for collective life. But as the state ran roughshod over democratic politics in the 1990s, new interpretations of Russia's essence took hold, offering solace and hope to people who strived to recover their country's prestige in the world.

One of the most alluring concepts was Eurasianism. Emerging from the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, this idea posited Russia as a Eurasian polity formed by a deep history of cultural exchanges among people of Turkic, Slavic, Mongol and other Asian origins. In 1920, the linguist Nikolai Trubetzkoy — one of several Russian émigré intellectuals who developed the concept — published "Europe and Humanity," a trenchant critique of Western colonialism and Eurocentrism. He called on Russian intellectuals to free themselves from their fixation on Europe and to build on the "legacy of Chinggis Khan" to create a great continent-spanning Russian-Eurasian state.

Trubetzkoy's Eurasianism was a recipe for imperial recovery, without Communism — a harmful Western import, in his view. Instead, Trubetzkoy emphasized the ability of a reinvigorated Russian Orthodoxy to provide cohesion across Eurasia, with solicitous care for believers in the many other faiths practiced in this enormous region.

Suppressed for decades in the Soviet Union, Eurasianism survived in the underground and burst into public awareness during the perestroika period of the late 1980s. Lev Gumilyov, an eccentric geographer who had spent 13 years in Soviet prisons and forced-labor camps, emerged as an acclaimed guru of the Eurasian revival in the 1980s. Mr. Gumilyov emphasized ethnic diversity as a driver of global history. According to his concept of "ethnogenesis," an ethnic group could, under the influence of a charismatic leader, develop into a "super-ethnos" — a power spread over a huge geographical area that would clash with other expanding ethnic units.

Mr. Gumilyov's theories appealed to many people making their way through the chaotic 1990s. But Eurasianism was injected directly into the bloodstream of Russian power in a variant developed by the self-styled philosopher Aleksandr Dugin. After unsuccessful interventions in post-Soviet party politics, Mr. Dugin focused on developing his influence where it counted — with the military and policymakers. With the publication in 1997 of his 600-page textbook, loftily titled "The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia," Eurasianism moved to the center of strategists' political imagination.

In Mr. Dugin's adjustment of Eurasianism to present conditions, Russia had a new opponent — no longer just Europe, but the whole of the "Atlantic" world led by the United States. And his Eurasianism was not anti-imperial but the opposite: Russia had always been an empire, Russian people were "imperial people," and after the crippling 1990s sellout to the "eternal enemy," Russia could revive in the next phase of global combat and become a "world empire." On the civilizational front, Mr. Dugin highlighted the long-term connection between Eastern Orthodoxy

and Russian empire. Orthodoxy's combat against Western Christianity and Western decadence could be harnessed to the geopolitical war to come.

Eurasian geopolitics, Russian Orthodoxy and traditional values — these goals shaped Russia's self-image under Mr. Putin's leadership. The themes of imperial glory and Western victimization were propagated across the country; in 2017, they were drummed home in the monumental exhibition "Russia, My History." The expo's flashy displays featured Mr. Gumilyov's Eurasian philosophy, the sacrificial martyrdom of the Romanov family and the evils the West had inflicted on Russia.

Where did Ukraine figure in this imperial revival? As an obstacle, from the very beginning. Trubetzkoy argued in his 1927 article "On the Ukrainian Problem" that Ukrainian culture was an "individualization of all-Russian culture" and that Ukrainians and Belarusians should bond with Russians around the organizing principle of their shared Orthodox faith. Mr. Dugin made things more direct in his 1997 text: Ukrainian sovereignty presented a "huge danger to all of Eurasia." Total military and political control of the whole north coast of the Black Sea was an "absolute imperative" of Russian geopolitics. Ukraine had to become "a purely administrative sector of the Russian centralized state."

Mr. Putin has taken that message to heart. In 2013, he declared that Eurasia was a major geopolitical zone where Russia's "genetic code" and its many peoples would be defended against "extreme Western-style liberalism." In July last year he announced that "Russians and Ukrainians are one people," and in his furious rant on the eve of invasion, he described Ukraine as a "colony with a puppet regime," where the Orthodox Church is under assault and NATO prepares for an attack on Russia.

This brew of attitudes — complaints about Western aggression, exaltation of traditional values over the decadence of individual rights, assertions of Russia's duty to unite Eurasia and subordinate Ukraine — developed in the cauldron of post-imperial resentment. Now they infuse Mr. Putin's worldview and inspire his brutal war.

The goal, plainly, is empire. And the line will not be drawn at Ukraine.

Jane Burbank is an emeritus professor of history and Russian and Slavic studies at New York University and an author, with Frederick Cooper, of "Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference."