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**Russian Racial Logic:
Examining White Nationalism and Narratives of Race in Russia**

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Dedication

To mom, Amy, Shreese, Ashley, and everyone who supported me in my search for peace after these attacks.

Abstract

Russian Racial Logic: Examining White Nationalism and Narratives of Race in Russia

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This thesis uses qualitative content and historical analysis to understand the narratives of race and racism in the Russian Federation. It analyzes the history of race as a concept and the racialization of collective identities to challenge a common Russian trope that “there is no racism in Russia.” It reveals that Russia has a history of racism that it actively supports within its own society, but that this racism is cloaked behind nationalist rhetoric and does not use the terminology commonly administered to describe global racisms. As a result, white nationalist organizations that openly advocate for the superiority of the Russian ethnicity over others and commit violence against minorities are able to publicly do so without earning the label of “racist.”

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Chapter I: Introduction

On a crisp March evening in 2019 I walked into a cafebar in Vladivostok, Russia to research and write my final essay for the great power politics course I was taking while on an internship at Vladivostok State University. I regularly sat in this particular cafebar multiple times per week and was on a first name basis with every server and bartender. The atmosphere was relaxed, the food was delicious, and the proximity to the university was ideal for frequent visits. On this particular day, I was helping a few acquaintances (Aleksandr and Dmitri) with their English work as I wrote my final paper. After working for about half an hour, a third man, in his mid-40s, came over to the table to ask if any of us had a cigarette. Aleksandr and Dmitri said they were out and I told him I do not smoke. He continued small talk for about a minute with the three of us and then left to go ask someone else for a cigarette. After he left, Dmitri mentioned how the interaction was kind of strange, but Aleksandr replied saying that he had smoked outside of the cafebar with the man in the past and that he is a “good guy.”

A few minutes later Aleksandr left to go buy cigarettes and then, as I later found out, smoked outside with this man. When they returned, the man followed Aleksandr to our table and asked me if I could do a one-armed pushup and handstand pushups. At this point the man stood too close to me and was constantly leaning on my bag, so I started to pretend that I understood less Russian than I do because I did not want to engage and Dmitri and Aleksandr started “translating” for me. When I said that I can do a small amount of

those pushups he started saying that I am outrageous because he has a bad heart and can do 30 one-arm pushups and we are all young men and should be stronger than him. After about four minutes of this ridicule and further comparisons to the physicality of Russians and “my people,” he walked away and went back to sit with his belongings.

About twenty more minutes later, the same man walked up to our table with a more determined look in his eyes, greeted Aleksandr, and then started shouting at me to go home. “*Домой пошли! Пошли домой!*” (“Go home!”) Each time he shouted he spat at my face, hair, and body and I acted as if I could not understand him; after about fifteen seconds of this spitting and shouting, Dmitri said, “He’s with us. He’s fine. You don’t understand.” But the man kept repeating it. Dmitri continued saying, “he’s with us” but the man ignored him, turned to me, and said, “Come to the bathroom with me, so I can show you something. Come take a piss.” Just as before, I continued acting as if I did not understand his Russian, so then he started acting out how to pee toward me so I could see what he was asking me to do. He kept saying, “*мне надо 누사*” (“you need to piss”) to which I finally replied, “I don’t need to go to the bathroom” and he said, “yes you do.” Then, as Dmitri tried to translate what the man was saying- thinking I actually did not understand- the older man started petting my head as if I were a dog and then wrapped his arm around my neck and grabbed me from the table. As he started cutting off my air, I instantly thought, ‘if I push this man off of me it could start a fight, in which the police would be called, and if I got arrested for fighting in a bar in a foreign country I could say “goodbye” to my dreams of working for the U.S. State Department. However, I can’t just let this man continue to choke me.’

Luckily, about ten or fifteen seconds into this altercation, Dmitri stood, grabbed the man by the shoulders in a side hug, and led him outside to smoke, with Aleksandr following closely behind.

I sat at the table alone for about ten minutes processing everything that had just happened while everyone around me continued eating and talking as if nothing abnormal had occurred. Dmitri returned and, acting as if nothing had happened, wanted to talk about American rap, about which I know very little. Aleksandr, who ran inside and said he was going to go on a walk with the older man, was gone for about 20 minutes and then came back asking me my room number. Dmitri had asked me this question when we first met for dinner so he replied saying, “he said he lives on the second floor,” but Aleksandr said to him in a hurried whisper that the older man wanted to know what room I lived in because “he knows the security guard” to my building. I ignored Aleksandr’s question and continued speaking with Dmitri about American rap culture for fifteen minutes. I eventually saw that the older man did not return to the cafebar and then went back to my room for the evening.

This was not my first attack in the region; there had been other occurrences both in Vladivostok and in other cities in Russia and other former Soviet states in which I had lived. Though this vignette is not as bad as it could have been, it is the one that has bothered me most since my return from Russia because the man petted me and then choked me, as my “friends” sat and watched with smiles on their faces.

Over the following weeks, I mentioned what happened to numerous people: classmates in the United States and Russia, internship colleagues, internship bosses,

graduate advisors in Texas, professors in Russia, dorm mothers in Russia, and numerous others, all of whom had one of two reactions. First, the Americans almost exclusively said some variation of, “that’s unfortunate, but of course that happened. It’s Russia, what did you expect?” Second, the Russians almost all responded with some variation of, “that’s odd, he must’ve been drunk or crazy or [insert adjectival excuse here]. It can’t be because of your race, there’s no racism in Russia. You should know that, you come from the United States where there is racism everywhere.”

Both of these responses are indicative of two larger, opposing narratives surrounding the presence and pervasiveness of race in Russia. The former represents an apparent ‘common knowledge’ about racism in Russia from the United States and the West, even though most Americans and Westerners cannot name a particular instance or statistical number of racial attacks in Russia. This assumption is rooted in the belief that Russia’s race relations are so apparent that spending time and intellectual effort evaluating their prevalence is superfluous. Indeed, upon choosing this project and initially finding few secondary sources on the topic, a professor responded by saying, “perhaps the reason no one has researched this topic is because it does not matter.”

The latter response, from the Russian perspective, echoes a very common belief that there truly is no racism in the Russian Federation. Notwithstanding the recent proliferation of academic studies, ethnographic research, and organizations dedicated to documenting and analyzing the presence of overt racism and race-based hate crimes in the last two decades, this belief is held by individuals in different sectors of society, from those in the education system to those working for the Russian state. For example, after the

murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the subsequent protests and riots in the United States and around the world in solidarity, Vladimir Putin publicly spoke about the situation and stated that Russia does not have “those problems.”¹ But, as seen through the previously mentioned academic studies, ethnographic research and organizations such as the SOVA Center, Russia *does* have a problem with racism and racial hierarchies. In fact, there are popular groups that openly advocate for both the preservation and strengthening of these hierarchies within the Russian Federation.

How, then, can the Russian government confidently say that there is no racism in Russia while these groups openly exist and there are numerous detailed accounts of racist attacks across the Russian Federation? Where does the belief that there is ‘no racism in Russia’ come from and how is it so widely believed today within Russia? Why is there a tendency for the Russian state and the Russian media to compare Russia with the United States whenever confronted with the ideas of race and racism within their own country? Which of the opposing narratives I received after my attack in Vladivostok is most accurate, or are they both wrong?

This thesis attempts to answer these questions by focusing specifically on the narratives of race throughout Russian history, how they have informed contemporary Russia’s relationship with the concept of race, and how the boundaries and manifestations of racism operate in contemporary Russia.

¹ The Moscow Times, “Putin Criticizes U.S. Coronavirus Response, Condemns ‘Mayhem and Rioting’ at Anti-Racism Protests,” June 14, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/06/14/putin-criticizes-us-coronavirus-response-says-protests-show-deep-seated-internal-crises-a70565>

Before the turn of the century, there was a common belief that Russia's experience with race was immune to the racism that plagued other European empires because there was no formal use of race as a categorical concept in Russian academia or state policies. However, after the fall of the Soviet Union scholars began to further research the presence of race as a concept in Russian history and found that the Russian experience is different from its contemporary counterparts, but no more immune to the problems of racism than the American or German experiences. Believing that Russia is exceptional and immune to the problems of racism and racial hierarchies presumes both a common understanding and historical usage of race by the rest of the world from which Russia was excluded. However, this is incorrect because every European empire had a different relationship with race internally as well as within their colonies, and they developed different social stratifications following these imperial relationships; for example, the United States, South Africa, and Brazil all created their societies around a specific understanding of race that derived from their imperial pasts.

Russia, therefore, is not special in its understanding of race. Its particular understanding is one of numerous racial logics that evolved throughout the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that have all manifested divergently in the twenty-first century. Imperial Russia never formally dealt with the concept of race as their European and American counterparts did; but they developed a hierarchy of social belonging on the basis of biological difference that, at the time, held ethnic Russians above everyone else and persecuted those who failed to reaffirm this dynamic.

After the Bolshevik Revolution and the fall of the imperial regime, the Soviet Union had a domestic racial logic that was adapted from the imperial regime and a foreign racial logic that they weaponized against their enemies in the West. Internally, there was a hierarchy of superiority based on the perceived development of the citizens in the various national regions and republics. *Russkiy* culture, language, and physical appearance were the top of this hierarchy and all other nationalities were placed on this hierarchy contingent upon their cultural, linguistic, and biological proximity to the *russkie*. There was a deep assumption that race was malleable, so individuals could therefore change their race if they changed their behavior and cultural traits. For example, there was debate around whether or not *russkie* who migrated to Siberia had “gone native” whilst living among the “savage” races native to the region.² These people were believed to have changed their identity from the “civilized” *russkiy* into some amalgamation of civilized savagery.³

In the role of foreign policy, instead of introducing formal racial concepts into society as a way to divide the population, the Soviet Union introduced various concepts to its society as a way to promote ‘anti-racism.’ That is, in order to distance itself from and internationally criticize the United States throughout the twentieth century, and especially during the Civil Rights era, the Soviet leadership introduced formal racial concepts and ideals of racial equality as a way to unite society under socialism, rather than divide it under capitalism. On the African continent and throughout southeast Asia, the Soviet Union

² David Rainbow, “Racial ‘Degeneration’ and Siberian Regionalism in the Late Imperial Period,” in *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context* (Montreal ; Kingston ; London ; Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), pp. 179-207.

³ *Ibid.*

portrayed socialism and communism as the non-racist alternative to the United States, which actively treated its own black and brown citizens with violence and contempt. For example, the march that became known as “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, Alabama in 1965 became strong fodder for anti-capitalist propaganda both within the Soviet Union and in other countries, such as Vietnam, that became centers of proxy wars between the two superpowers.

At the same time, the Soviet leadership opened its borders to students from across Africa in a policy meant to solidify Africa as a socialist continent by spreading Marxist revolutionary ideology as a solution to the consequences of Western imperialism and racism. However, despite this Soviet propaganda, the African students who travelled behind the Iron Curtain were not popular among native citizens in the Soviet Union. For example, Soviet men struggled to accept the presence of these visual others as Soviet women’s fascination with them increased. African men with Soviet girlfriends were attacked and sometimes murdered by Soviet men who felt that the African men encroached on their romantic territory and did not belong.⁴

There are numerous examples of tension and violence between African students and Soviet citizens throughout the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s.⁵ Though the relationship between African students and the citizenry during the Soviet Union was better than between African (and African-American) students and the citizenry during the Russian Federation, there

⁴ Julie HESSLER, “Death of an African Student in Moscow,” *Cahiers du monde russe. Russie - Empire russe - Union soviétique et États indépendants* (Éditions de l'EHESS, February 22, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.9591>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

were still severe problems for African students during the Soviet period.⁶ This struggle in itself demonstrates at least the presence of a visible racial hierarchy during the Soviet Union, though not one as pervasive as other societies.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia became a nation of chaotic leadership, unreliable communication, and inconsistent access to necessary resources such as water and electricity in certain regions of the country. Only those who were quickly able to privatize ownership over vital areas of the Russian economy (for example, oil, machine manufacturing, auto manufacturing, etc.) successfully traversed this struggle for resources.⁷ The vast majority of the former Soviet citizenry was left to compete with one another over these necessities. As the resources remained scarce throughout the 1990s, people fought over who deserved a portion of these resources and who was only taking away from the Russian people. Non-Russian ‘others’ became competition for resources and a main reason for the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁸ Some believed that the union collapsed because it tried to support the advancement of other countries while its own society was failing. But instead of placing the responsibility solely with those in charge, many disillusioned citizens blamed the foreigners from those countries who benefited from

⁶ Kevin O'Flynn, “Russia's Black Community And The Obama Effect,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty (Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, July 7, 2009), <https://www.rferl.org/a/For-Russian-Blacks-Obama-Visit-Stirs-Special-Interest/1770531.html>.

⁷ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Andrew B. Wachtel, “Post-Soviet Russia,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., August 8, 2020), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia/Post-Soviet-Russia>.

⁸ Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud, *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000-2015* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

the Soviet Union's political openness- i.e., immigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia and the African students studying at Russian universities.⁹

When Vladimir Putin rose to power and stabilized Russian society after this chaotic decade, he galvanized the hatred of 'others' that had become prevalent in Russia and aligned Russian morality, norms, and global strategy with *russkiy*¹⁰ culture. Most apparent of which was his reinvigoration of the Eurasianism ideology: the belief that Russia is neither European or Asian, but the perfect mix of both that is destined to expand its territory, recreate the Soviet empire, and undermine Western liberalism that is the antithesis of the Russian identity.¹¹ Chief among his intellectual advisors is Alexander Dugin who takes this idea further and asserts that *nerusskaya* (non-Russian) peoples are below the *russkie* and that liberalism is an attack on collective identity; that is, an attack on *russkiy* identity that wishes to keep the *russkie* from achieving their rightful place above everyone else. Dugin's anti-liberal, superiority perspective is widely referred to as Duginism.¹²

These ideologies are important for this study because they are supported by the Russian government and call for a societal distrust of anyone and anything *nerusskaya* in origin, including people. Upon initial exposure, one would most probably consider these ideologies to be rooted in racialized hierarchies and that the Russian government is

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ It is important to note that in the Russian language, there are two words that translate to the English word "Russian." *Russkiy* (*russkiy* adj. *russkie* noun pl.) refers to those who are ethnically Russian and *Rossiyskiy* (*rossiyskiy* adj. *Rossiyskie* noun pl.) refers to those who are citizens of the Russian Federation. The emphasis of *russkiy* by the actors in this study demonstrates how these ideas of collective identity are tied to the Russian ethnic identity rather than a general Russian federal identity.

¹¹ Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow - the Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* (Yale University Press, 2017).

¹² *Ibid.*

blatantly lying when they claim there is no racism in Russia. But these ideologies are not considered racist in Russia because they portray *russskiy* as a national identity that they believe is distinct from a racial identity. In this respect, to be pro-*russskiy* and anti-everyone else is nationalist, not racist. Advocating for a hierarchy in which the *russskie* are dominant is viewed as patriotic as a result of the anti-‘other’ logic that became popular during the 1990s and under Vladimir Putin, and any criticism against this tactic is an attack on the Russian way of life.

This allows the contemporary Russian government to operate within a quasi-state of cognitive dissonance. It can claim that there is no racism in Russia because Russia does not have the same racial problems as the United States, Western Europe, Latin America, etc. while also openly proclaiming ‘Russia for *Russskie*’ because the federal identity of Russia is closely connected to *russskiy* identity. Any attack on this contradiction is treated as an attack on the core of Russia itself; changing this dynamic is equated with changing the heart and soul of Russia and therefore is never seriously evaluated for prejudices or adjusted for improvement.

Using this dynamic, this thesis attempts to explain how the claim that there is no racism in Russia is so widely believed while the calls for *russskiy* superiority over others is so explicit. By highlighting major nationalist groups in the Russian Federation and connecting their actions and beliefs to the larger Russian narrative of race, I argue that the Russian state has used the country’s historical confusion with formal racial concepts to assert a *russskiy*-superior racial hierarchy through the language of racelessness. This multi century-long manipulation of logic has allowed for contemporary white nationalist groups

in the Russian Federation to gain public support and commit numerous acts of violence in the name of nationalism while allowing the state to maintain that the country itself does not have a problem with racism.

Chapter one outlines the historical understanding of race and racial practices throughout Russian history and finds that race, *rasa*, was introduced alongside nationality and ethnicity into Imperial Russia and that the various terms used to describe the same or slightly different ideas- for example, *plemia*, *poroda*, and *narod*- all became confused and then amalgamated in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as the empire was waning. Then, under Soviet leadership, the same syntactic confusion surrounding race from imperial times was maintained as the concept of race became a tool of anti-Westernism. The Soviets actively upheld social hierarchies along biological lines just as their Western foes, but the use of the word ‘race’ to describe these hierarchies was never introduced into the Soviet system, therefore they touted a feigned ethical superiority over the United States while practicing the same behavior.

Chapter two profiles five of the most prominent white nationalist groups in the Russian Federation from the past decade (2010-’20). Each group’s profile answers the following questions: 1) Who are they? 2) Where are they based? 3) What is their core ideology? 4) What is their online and social media presence, if any? 5) For which social hierarchies do they advocate? These groups range from neo-Nazi organizations to imperialist paramilitary training groups, so there are countless differences amongst them. But this chapter finds that, through all of these differences, all five groups have two ideas in common: their belief that Russians, *russkie*, belong at the peak of every social hierarchy

and their usage of nationality to assert these hierarchies. For each group, subjugating domestic national minorities in order to maintain *russkiy* dominance is the natural course of governance for the Russian Federation. These hierarchies, they believe, must be upheld to maintain *russkiy* purity and the future dominance of Russia on a global scale.

Chapter three draws a connection between contemporary Russian white nationalism and global white nationalism. Russia is not unique insofar as its society operates outside of the purview of race. Understanding the historical trajectory of racial practices in Russia demonstrates how the actions of Russian leadership throughout history allowed for the assumption that *russkiy* represents a quintessential ‘Russianness,’ just as whiteness in the United States represents a quintessential ‘Americanness.’ When we remove ourselves from the importance of specific vocabulary and focus on the structural formations of human hierarchy, we see that Russia, the United States, Brazil, Germany, etc. follow a similar pattern of racial logic. Each adopted a similar conceptual framework for justifying their particular racial hierarchies; or, in other words, all of these states are racist, but in their own way.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis uses qualitative methods as quantitative methods alone are not sufficient for answering any of the questions posed above. This study is not as concerned with how many national minorities are attacked by white nationalists in Russia or how many members each group has in comparison to the others; rather, it is more concerned with the prevalence of the perception of Russian superiority and how the people who subscribe to

this ideology also widely believe that it is not racist, but strictly nationalist. This study focuses on the sentiments of white nationalism, such as victimhood (feelings of lost economic opportunity or a subjugated role in society as a result of the presence of ‘others’), feelings of loss, and how these sentiments are connected to global white nationalism and white supremacy. To this end, qualitative methodologies more effectively capture the sentiments and underlying meanings behind certain actions and behaviors.

The primary qualitative method used was content analysis. I visited these groups’ official websites, if available, followed their social media accounts for several months, analyzed Russian media sources pertaining to these groups, and read interviews given from various national minorities about their experiences living in the Soviet Union and Russian Federation. As stated above, I found that these so-called nationalist groups provide varying motivations for their hierarchical beliefs, but I also found a few ways in which these groups’ motivations overlapped.

Using this overlap, I place these groups within the context of Russia’s historical understanding of race to demonstrate the logical manifestation of these groups; and I compare them to global racism and show how the processes of Russian racism mirror the processes of racism in other societies around the world.

For both academics and policymakers this topic is important because as we get lost in the details of race terminology, the rhetoric, actions, and intentions surrounding it become less important. The concept of race does not speak to one static idea, but rather is fluid, and requires a contextual and historical framing, which is why this thesis avoids any

formal definition of the term. Creating policy under the guise of race being one particular idea allows various actors to justify their prejudices in a seemingly infinite number of ways as they claim to be non-racist while following racist logic and administering racist practices. Subscribing only to a singular definition or popular manifestation of race creates at best a dishonest academic field and at worst a violent racialized state. It is our responsibility as intellectuals and leaders to understand that aspects of life are seldom as they appear on the surface and this includes manifestations of race.

Chapter II: Historical Racial Logic in Russia

Race and racism do not have singular definitions that are applicable to every person in every culture around the world. Each society has its own historical relationship with race that has shifted and influenced its contemporary treatment of the concept, both academically and discursively. Leading critical race scholar, David Theo Goldberg, coined the term “racial regionalization” in his book, *The Threat of Race* where he discusses “regionalized racisms” as phenomena demographically, historically, conceptually, and systemically distinct from one another based on the geographic context of the society in question. He argues that these geographic differences result in diverging securitization narratives and objectives for different groups of people and that race and racism fall within this larger framework of security needs.¹³

While each nation or empire’s usage of racial concepts varied throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they all discursively adopted the ambiguity of the French scientific discourses that defined race as a combination of physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural features, all of which were attained through blood and heredity. But, with this understanding, Finns, Celts, Semites, and Slavs are all considered different races, just as Kenyans and Japanese are; and most of these groups can simultaneously be considered nations depending on the era and country making the categorization.¹⁴ The imprecision and opaqueness of boundaries around race allowed for each society to create

¹³ Goldberg, David Theo. “Racial Europeanization.” *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*, 151–98. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

¹⁴ Reynaud-Paligot, “Construction and Circulation of the Notion of ‘Race’ in the Nineteenth Century,” 87-99.

their own understanding and social hierarchies based on various features of this broad concept.

There was a common idea among Soviet scholars that the Soviet Union was a raceless society and not directly shaped by the intricacies of racial logic because its society was not as racially heterogeneous as other infamous racialized societies around the world (South Africa, Brazil, United States, etc.). In a special 2002 publication of the *Slavic Review* journal, numerous scholars examined the presence of race in pre-revolutionary Russia, the former Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation. Two of the most influential contributions that challenged the ‘raceless’ assumption came from historian Eric Weitz and anthropologist Alaina Lemon as they dealt with the conceptual manifestations of race in the region and developed a key distinction for understanding the functionality of global racism: race as a concept vs. race as practice.

Weitz stated that the relationship between categories of ‘nation’ and ‘race’ were fluid. He advised scholars of pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union to see race as “practice,” that is, as “policies exercised by states that structure or ascribe identity”¹⁵ in one of two ways: actions taken against bodies and actions taken against identities. The latter represents an effort by Soviet leadership to practice racial politics “despite the absence of an articulated racial ideology” under Soviet rule.¹⁶ Lemon uses this same idea but argues that ascribing identity is “not only a ‘mark’ of practice, nor just a brake on

¹⁵ Weitz, Eric D. “Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges.” *Slavic Review*. 61, no. 1 (2002): 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2696978>.

¹⁶ Lemon, Alaina. “Without a ‘Concept’? Race as Discursive Practice.” *Slavic Review*. 61, no. 1 (2002): 54–61. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2696981>.

practice, but *is* a practice among others.” She rejects the assumption that the absence of explicit racial ideological language means that Russian and Soviet policymakers had no concept of race. Instead, she states that looking for race concepts can be misleading because “races are not things to be named. [They] exist only insofar as people deploy racializing criteria of difference to organize social relations.”¹⁷ For Lemon, the employment of the term ‘race’ or the use of racial terminology are not as significant compared to how a society codifies social difference, regardless of which official concepts are used.

This chapter’s analysis operates within the distinction of race as a concept vs. race as practice. Russia’s regionalized racism does not include the formal racial concepts that are used in other societies around the world. Russian racism was developed through a maze of terminological confusion and an absence of clear, determinable boundaries between race, nation, and ethnicity. As a result, the Soviet Union and Russian Federation employed language that was seemingly about equality and created a system of feigned racial ignorance in which white nationalist groups have successfully used non-racial terminology to cloak their racism in ultranationalist fervor.

The following chapter briefly details the Russian experience with these concepts and how the nationalist groups in focus are a logical manifestation of the terminological inconsistencies of these ideas in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This is by no means a detailed explanation of national or race relations in Imperial and Soviet Russia;

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

instead, this section should be read as an overview of how Russian actors viewed these concepts and the shifts in their usage over time.

HISTORY OF NATIONAL RACIALIZATION

Imperial Russia

As race and racial concepts developed in Western Europe and the United States (the connection of biological difference to intellectual capacity, molding beauty standards around European features, etc.), the same process was occurring in the Russian Empire with a slightly different trajectory. Russian Studies scholar Vera Tolz clearly outlines the construction of race, ethnicity, and nationhood in Imperial Russia.

The official term “race,” *rasa*, was introduced to the Russian vernacular from the French in the 1830s; but even though the widespread understanding was that a race was a group of people with shared physical characteristics, its usage in Russia, much like the rest of the world at the time, was not consistent. For example, in Russian society there were “races of shepherds and seafarers” and a debate of “free races [vs] those destined for slavery,” and even moral definitions that denoted races as being “proud, treacherous, and spineless.”¹⁸

In addition to this confusion around the use of ‘race,’ there were two words commonly used in Imperial Russia that also meant race: *poroda* (breed or stock) and *plemia*

¹⁸ Rainbow, David, and Vera Tolz. “Constructing Race, Ethnicity, and Nationhood in Imperial Russia: Issues and Misconceptions.” Essay. In *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context*, 32. Montreal ; Kingston ; London ; Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019.

(tribe). According to Vladimir Dal's dictionary at the time, there were five primary groups of *plemia*: white (Europe and the Caucasus), yellow (Asia), red (the Americas), brown (Polynesia), and black (Africa).¹⁹ In addition to this categorization, the dictionary also shows that both *plemia* and *poroda* were used to mean nationality as well. For example, one of the definitions of *plemia* was “*narod, iazyk* (language), [and] a local community” while one of the definitions of *poroda* was “*narodnost*”, as in the expressions ‘German or English race,’ *nemetskaia, angliiskaia poroda*.’²⁰

This terminological maze became so entrenched by the late-nineteenth century that most Russians, even the scholars of race science, found it difficult to differentiate between “the groups defined by physical features and those defined through language and other cultural characteristics.” As a result, by the turn of the twentieth century, “rather than achieving a clearer separation of the concept of race from the most important notion of community belonging- the nation- the understanding of the latter began to be further racialized.”²¹ In other words, rather than separating race from nation, the two became even more interconnected through the haze of this etymological confusion.

From here, it is conceivable how race, ethnicity, and nationhood were all developed as a single conceptual field in Imperial Russia. Three eighteenth century scholars epitomize the blurred lines between *rasa*, *poroda*, and *plemia* in Russian discourse. Historian Ivan Boltin argued that all tribes and peoples derived from their own *poroda*, each *poroda* had

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Dal, *Tolkovyi Slovar' zhivago velikorusskogo iazyka*, vol. III, 124, 319.

²¹ Rainbow & Tolz, 32.

different origins, and that there is a hierarchy amongst the different groups. As certain scholars, professors, and school teachers began using these terms interchangeably, Boltin's three arguments held true for all.

The most apparent conflation of Boltin's use of *poroda* and the use of *plemia* was with Aleksei Lovetskii, professor of natural sciences at Moscow University in the mid-nineteenth century, where he taught about *plemena* in a hierarchy of civilization, in which blacks were at the bottom, Europeans at the top, and Slavs as the most idyllic group within the hierarchy that were "rapidly moving toward the state of perfection."²² In his teachings, he maintained the same ideas as Boltin that these groups have differing origins and that these origins are the source of social hierarchies, but he explicitly uses *plemia* and not *poroda* to make this point.

In the wake of these two scholars' work, debates surrounding the meaning and boundaries of the Russian identity plagued society and the term *narodnost'* was used by ethnographers to mean "a close link between people's physical features, innate cultural and moral characteristics, and their way of life."²³ At this time, leading ethnographer Nikolai Nadezhdin reaffirmed the idea that race and nation were interconnected. He stated, "even though 'people' (*narody*) are not the same as 'races' (*porody*), nevertheless in their [people's] differences one can notice physical, bodily-animalistic [features]. These,

²² Lovetskii, *Kratkoe rukovodstvo k poznaniu plemen*, reprinted in *Russkaia rasovaia teoriia*, ed. Avdeev, 70-1.

²³ Rainbow & Tolz, 34.

therefore, even if partially, are also part of the ‘national’ (*narodnoe*).”²⁴ After this, not only were the common uses of ‘race’ interchangeable, the use of nationality (*narod*) joined this kaleidoscope of terms in the delineations of group belonging and group persecution.

A specific shift toward this usage was after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II by “the people” - the group who committed the murder referred to themselves as *narodnaya volya* (the people’s will). Reacting to the murder of his father, Tsar Alexander III began a reactionary campaign of “uniformity” in the 1880s in order to clearly determine the loyalty to the state of various groups around the empire. In the process of attaining this uniformity, also referred to as “Russification,” the refusal to accept Russian Orthodoxy, the refusal to speak Russian, and the refusal to adopt Slavic, *russkiy* culture and customs all became signs of disloyalty to the Tsar and the Russian Empire.²⁵ He quickly decided that those who failed to adopt this uniformity became disloyal ‘others’ and the state began identifying these ‘others’ as affiliated with certain groups (*narody i porody*) and penalizing entire categories of citizens.

Alexander III disregarded the fact that each nationality within the empire had its own language, customs, and relationship to the state and that many of them refused to adopt this new uniformity because they viewed it as an attack on their individual national identities rather than a test of loyalty to the state. He only saw that those rejecting the uniformity policies did so upon national justification and therefore certain nationalities

²⁴ Nadezhdin, “Ob etnograficheskom izucheshii narodnosti russkoi” (Chast’ I), *Otnograficheskoe obozrenie*, I (1994): 112-3.

²⁵ Florinsky, Michael T. “Alexander III.” Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., March 6, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alexander-III-emperor-of-Russia>.

could not be trusted. As a result, national persecution became one of the primary characteristics of the Tsarist state under Alexander III and visibly different nationalities received the most immediate repercussions simply as a result of being the easiest to identify as ‘other’ and, therefore, disloyal.²⁶

That is, through his desire for uniformity, Alexander III equated loyalty and ‘Russianness’ to certain nationalities and a major vehicle to determine this loyalty was physical appearance. Therefore, visible othering became a defining factor of Tsar Alexander III’s reign; but since the terminology used to other these people surrounded “nation;” the physical (visible) differences between *nationalities* became a primary characteristic of group belonging in Russia.

Though Alexander III’s policies were particular to Russia, each empire had a different relationship with racial concepts and each developed an understanding of how race operated within their own societal structures. In the case of the Russian Empire, as with other Central European empires, race became almost inseparable from nationality and, as seen during the Soviet Union, most efforts to separate these ideas are fruitless.

Soviet Union

The Soviet Union inherited the legacy of national persecution from Imperial Russia and at first attempted to change this societal dynamic. Then, after the death of Lenin and in an attempt to define itself against its western enemies, the Soviet Union readopted Tsarist

²⁶ *Ibid.*

national persecution but became famous for its anti-*racist* rhetoric and active criticism of the United States' well-known struggles with racial hierarchies. But, with some analysis, what we actually see throughout the Soviet regime is a rhetorical attempt to be anti-racist while actively administering racialized practices throughout society under the guise of non-racial (national) terminology.

Pre-revolution, the Bolshevik leadership under Lenin upheld the ideal of national self-determination and the right to secede from a proposed federation if national minorities saw fit to do so.²⁷ Post-revolution, in the 1920s, the leadership developed the *korenizatsiya* (nativization) policy, which promoted the installment of representatives of national minorities into positions of power within their own Soviet republics. This policy was an attempt to reverse *russkiy* political, cultural, and linguistic dominance in *nerusskaya* national republics. The policy even required *russkiy* citizens within these republics to learn the local language and customs.²⁸

However, Stalin argued that national self-determination symbolized the counterrevolutionary movement. He believed that citizens were either in support of the proletariat or were self-deterministic bourgeois nationalists who worked in opposition of the working class.²⁹ So, after the death of Lenin and Stalin's consolidation of power, the policies of self-determination and *korenizatsiya* were retracted and the ideal "Soviet Man

²⁷ Lenin, "The Socialist Revolution and the Rights of Nations to Self-Determination." *Lenin's Collected Works*. Vol.22; 143-156.

²⁸ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 132-181.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 211-272.

and Woman” were created through the process of Sovietization. This process was two-fold. First, *russskiy* citizens became the “first among equals,” meaning their language, culture, and customs became the dominant features of Soviet society and *russskiy* leaders replaced *nerusskaya* leaders in *nerusskaya* national republics. There was fear from the leadership in Moscow at the time that too much individuality between the republics would result in war and unifying them in this way would prevent conflicts along national lines.³⁰ Though many national minorities pushed against this reverse of *korenizatsiya* they were unsuccessful against Stalin’s repressive forces and were obliged to adopt Sovietization.

The second phase of this process was much more daunting and required transforming each minority into the Soviet Man and Woman. This required Soviet leadership to understand 1) what it means to achieve this ideal, 2) how far from it each citizen is (in various ways- language, behavior, clothing, etc.), and 3) how to guide everyone from where they are to where they need to be. The two inherent assumptions in this belief are that human identity is malleable enough for everyone to successfully achieve the ideal and that there is a categorical tethering of people to their nationality which equates changing the nationality with changing the people. But even with this logic, the Soviet leadership failed to complete all three phases of this transformation; they never moved beyond the second phase. By categorizing the different nationalities and analyzing their differences and how far away from the ideal they were, the contours of their differences became rigid and immutable regardless of the people’s efforts to change their identity.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 254.

Brigid O’Keeffe illustrates this problem in her study of the Roma population during the Soviet period. In the case of the Roma, Soviet nationality policies outwardly promoted the idyllic Soviet Man and Woman toward which everyone should thrive and promised to transform the Roma into this ideal but, in actuality, the policy “had the effect of deepening their ‘gypsiness’ in the process.”³¹ According to O’Keeffe, the Soviet leadership required the Roma to pronounce “one’s Gypsy self and one’s Gypsy nationality as fundamentally backward [and] as essentially ‘Gypsy.’” The Roma successfully integrated into Soviet society as citizens and adopted the customs of the Soviet Man and Woman, but they “could not escape the stigmatizing vision of Gypsies as a people who were nomadic, stubbornly marginal, swindling, and ambiguously exotic.”³²

This process was used against several national minorities and, despite individual or group consent, their differences, visible or not, were solidified as “Roma,” “Jewish,” or some other nationality and persecution followed those who did not become the perfect Soviet Man or Woman as a result of failing to escape these categories that they themselves may not have chosen.

Similarly, Adrienne Edgar explores this tension through her study of children of mixed marriages born between 1950 and 1970 in the Soviet Union. Numerous participants interviewed stated that they felt their personal identities transcended nationality. In the Soviet nationality policy, citizens were compelled to select a single national identity for

³¹ Rainbow, David, and Brigid O’Keeffe. “The Racialization of Soviet Gypsies: Roma, Nationality Politics, and Socialist Transformation in Stalin’s Soviet Union.” Essay. In *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context*, 143. Montreal ; Kingston ; London ; Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019.

³² *Ibid*, 154.

their passport but many described what Edgar wrote as a “dilemma of belonging” wherein they did not fully identify with either parent’s national identity but were still forced to choose one. The participants almost exclusively spoke of wanting to write “Soviet” on their documents because it felt more natural than choosing one half of their home identity. But, since “Soviet” was not an option, what resulted was people choosing a nationality other than what they believed themselves to be based on arbitrary, less significant details.³³

This reaffirms the problem shown above of the Soviet leadership creating a societal ideal and forcing people into certain, pre-selected categories that determine how far away from the ideal a person is and how much they need to change. Edgar does not explicitly state that the categories of race and nationality during the Soviet Union are interchangeable, but she does clearly argue that nationality was deeply racialized and utilized in a similar fashion to race in the United States and Western Europe. She states, “people struggled when they looked like one nationality but felt like another because they feared others would not believe their claim to national belonging.”³⁴ This racialized social stratification of the Soviet Union was thrust upon the citizenry and used in a manner counterproductive to the goal of achieving their ideal Soviet identity by locking certain groups in a national category for various reasons (both visual and non-visual) and restricting movement between these categories in order to become “Soviet.”

³³ Rainbow, David, and Adrienne Edgar. “Children of Mixed Marriage in Soviet Central Asia: Dilemmas of Identity and Belonging.” Essay. In *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context*, 208-33. Montreal ; Kingston ; London ; Chicago: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 17.

During the Soviet period, we see that race and nation cannot necessarily be deemed synonymous. But several race scholars, such as Barbara Weinstein, argue that nationality in itself is inherently exclusive and therefore when there is an ideal national identity toward which citizens must strive, the boundaries of that identity become increasingly more rigid as more people attempt to claim it as their own. As such, creating the Soviet Man and Woman and basing their characteristics around *russskiy* culture and language all but solidified an unbreachable societal structure that placed the *russkie* at the top, those groups most similar (national minorities of Slavic origin) in the middle, and those groups most different at the bottom.

CONCLUSION

The immutability of certain characteristics of these groups and the normalization of their boundaries by those at the top with complete disregard for those within these groups mirrors the processes of racialization and racial group belonging that occurred in the United States and Western Europe. Viewing race as *practice* shows that the distinctions drawn between groups in Russia are a form of racism, not only nationalism, that is universal in its global application. This realization debunks the popular idea that the Soviet Union was a raceless or anti-racist society. In reality, they administered the same racial practices in their own society as their rivals abroad, they simply used the terminological haze surrounding race from the Tsarist regime to disguise their practices with the use of non-racial nomenclature.

Chapter III: Contemporary Russian White Nationalism

On 6 April, 2020 the United States Department of State designated the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and its leaders as global terrorists,³⁵ the first time a white supremacist group has earned this label from the US government. The State Department justified this action by citing a quote from President Trump in 2019 proclaiming, “in one voice, our nation must condemn racism, bigotry, and white supremacy”³⁶ and stating that RIM and its leaders provide training “for acts of terrorism that threaten the national security and foreign policy of the United States.”³⁷ Following this announcement, the US government called on other nations to stand with them against global terrorism and for the Russian Federation to condemn and disband this group.

In response, Russia criticized the United States for inadequate justification and using an external organization as a propaganda tool for domestic political points. The Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova precisely stated, “since no intelligible and detailed information about the rationale for its decision was voiced in Washington, there was a feeling that it was designed primarily for an external propaganda effect and has little to do with the real task of jointly combating international terrorism.”³⁸

³⁵ Pompeo, Michael R. “United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists - United States Department of State,” April 7, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/united-states-designates-russian-imperial-movement-and-leaders-as-global-terrorists/>.

³⁶ This statement has faced scrutiny from numerous people as Donald Trump before and after making this statement has also made numerous racist remarks about his own black and brown citizens and people from Africa, Latin America, and Asia, while failing to condemn white supremacist groups within the United States that actively advocate for racist and bigoted ideals.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ “США Ответили На Критику РФ Из-За Включения ‘Русского Имперского Движения’ в Список Террористов.” Interfax.ru, April 14, 2020. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/704163>.

After this announcement, Russian media and scholars began reacting to the news in articles and social media saying that the United States should address its own white supremacist organizations and hate groups if it wants to address racism and bigotry.³⁹ They asserted that there are more examples of greater magnitude within the United States than from external sources in Russia but that the Trump Administration wanted to gain political points by appearing anti-racist against a group that would have no negative effect on the social fabric of the United States; therefore, Trump appears anti-racist while gaining support from the most racist groups in his own nation. In a tweet replying to the Russian Foreign Ministry's criticism of the State Department, one user even wrote that the United States does not want to blacklist its "own children."⁴⁰

This reaction to the United States condemning a Russian organization as racist is a textbook *tu quoque* fallacy. There was no attempt from the Russian leadership to address the claims made by the State Department by censoring this group or reviewing possible white terrorism originating from within Russia. The response from the Russian government and many Russian academics was to disregard the initial claim by bringing attention to the hypocritical position of the United States in this realm of thought. Discussing the United States' relationship with race, then making a comparison of how the United States is worse than Russia in terms of racial treatment was used to invalidate the U.S. designation for this

³⁹ Грязев, Алексей, and Алексей Поплавский. "Удобная Цель: Почему США Преследуют Русских Монархистов." Газета.ру, April 7, 2020. https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2020/04/07_a_13039981.shtml.

⁴⁰ MFA Russia. Twitter. Twitter, April 9, 2020. https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1248310470890659841.

group and assert that, through this hypocrisy, the United States is never correct in mentioning the racist actions of another nation or foreign organization.

Notwithstanding the unique experience with race in the United States, as stated in the introduction, there is a common perception outside of Russia that the Russian Federation is racist and implicitly supports racist organizations. Many people within Russia argue that the nation is not racist and the idea that they are is Western propaganda to disguise its own problems with race. This chapter will examine five of the most prominent white nationalist groups in the Russian Federation in order to establish differences and similarities amongst them, how they are situated within the narrative of global white nationalism, how they use the concept of race, if at all, and how open they are in Russian society. These groups range from political parties to non-political organizations, and include political parties that became non-political organizations as well as non-political organizations that became political parties. Because the main objective of this thesis is to discuss the common ideologies of Russian nationalism, as opposed to the processes of how these groups formed, I do not differentiate between these categories of white nationalist groups.

Furthermore, I am only researching those groups that were prominent after the year 2000 and are still relevant to the larger Russian nationalist movement in 2020. In this regard, the thesis does not take into account federal leadership changes, skips the rampant instability of the 1990s, and requires a sustained relevance of these groups through major geopolitical events within the 21st century; such as Putin's 2007 speech, Russia's wars in both Georgia and Ukraine, Russia's active presence in Syria, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Therefore, the groups Pamyat and Rodina, which were the largest nationalist groups after the fall of the Soviet Union and have been included in many contemporary Russian nationalist articles and studies,⁴¹⁴² are omitted from this thesis. Many of the groups examined are splinters of one of these two parties, so the ideological underpinnings of the two are represented within the analysis, but there will be no specific examination of either Pamyat or Rodina since they do not meet the aforementioned criteria.

Finally, this chapter is not an in-depth analysis of any of these five groups; an analysis of each group could be a study in itself. Instead, this chapter is a general overview of these five groups meant to answer the following questions: 1) Who are these people? 2) What is their ideology? 3) Where and how strong is their online presence? 4) What are the social structures and hierarchies for which each of these groups advocates? Their similarities will then be compared to determine if Russian nationalist groups share a particular logic that makes their presence and sustainability both possible and probable in the Russian Federation.

⁴¹ Korey, William. *Russian Antisemitism, Pamyat, and the Demonology of Zionism*. Chur, Switzerland: Published for the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism (SICSA), the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, by Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995, edited 2013.

⁴² Frolov, Vladimir. "Russia Has Its Own Tea Party With Rodina." *The Moscow Times*. The Moscow Times, October 6, 2012. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/10/06/russia-has-its-own-tea-party-with-rodina-a18341>.

RUSSIAN WHITE NATIONALIST GROUPS

Russian National Unity

The first of the five groups examined is the organization Russian National Unity (RNU). This group is both a neo-Nazi political party and a paramilitary organization based in Moscow and led by the ultranationalist Aleksander Barkashov. Though created in 1990, the group has modernized with the 21st century and has an active online presence on its own platform and on Russian social media. Their rusnation.org website includes the history of the organization, ways in which to contact the group, links to their radio shows, articles, books, and other associated sites, and a forum where members can discuss various topics ranging from increasing youth masculinity to the government's role in advancing their objectives.

Their social media pages all push the idea that Russia should be the moral police for the world. On their VKontakte page,⁴³ the first line states, “our people are chosen to preserve True Orthodoxy in the world until the Second Coming [of Jesus Christ].”⁴⁴ In addition to this, the main slogan for the group is ‘Russia for Russians’⁴⁵ but they only advocate for the outright expulsion of minorities whose national or ethnic origin is outside of the Russian Federation- such as South Caucasians (those from Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), Central Asians (those from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

⁴³ VKontakte is the Russian language equivalent of Facebook.

⁴⁴ “РНЕ: РУССКОЕ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЕ ЕДИНСТВО.” VK. Accessed July 26, 2020.
<https://vk.com/rne.barkashov>.

⁴⁵ Once again, it is important to note that the Russian language has two words that translate to the English word “Russian:” *russkie* and *rossiyskie*. *Russkie* are those who are ethnically Russian and *rossiyskie* are those who are citizens of the Russian Federation. The original slogan ‘Russia for Russians’ uses *russkie*, not *rossiyskie*, thereby specifically referring to those who are ethnically Russian and no one else.

Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), Jews, the Roma, and blacks (both Africans and those of African descent from Western Europe, North America, and Latin America). The group does not differentiate between immigrants and those with a foreign national and ethnic origin born within the Russian Federation; they believe that all minorities whose national or ethnic origin is outside of the formal borders of Russia must leave.

Those who are not *russskiy* but whose ethnic origin is within the borders of the Russian Federation (Siberia, the Far East, North Caucasus, etc.) are considered “compatriots” and are allowed to live in Russia but must remain within the borders of their ancestral home and never have interethnic or interracial marriages that will erode the dominant Russian ethnicity. Further, this group desires to maintain a social hierarchy amongst the nationalities. Reminiscent of Russians during the Soviet Union as the “first among equals,” RNU argues that while these groups may remain in Russia, the *russskiy* ethnicity is the default federal identity and the most important group within the country.⁴⁶

Within the organization there is a clear social hierarchy in which different ranks have different responsibilities and maintain visibility for the group in various ways. This hierarchy is intended both as a structural framework for the group, but also to give the members order, stability, and ideals for which to strive as they become “true men”. New recruits, referred to as “*storonniki*” (supporters) hand out flyers to the general public, attend information sessions on group ideology, transport leaders around their specific cities, and other low-level jobs. Those who advance from this level are “*spodvizhniki*” (companions).

⁴⁶ “Основы социально-политической концепции ВОПД РНЕ.” Accessed July 26, 2020. <http://rusnation.org/>.

These members are allowed to wear the organization insignia- an embellishment of the traditional Nazi swastika- and they participate in paramilitary training, which includes everything from handling a firearm and target practice to outdoor survival and hand-to-hand combat. In this level, the members learn how to be “real” Russian men and represent the true, dying breed of man that Western liberal democracies try to eradicate. The final level of membership, reserved for the most dedicated members, are referred to as “*soratniki*” (associates) and they serve as leaders within the organization.⁴⁷

In all three levels, the group has partnered with businesses, military services, and state officials in various ways and at times they accompany police officers on their nightly patrols of their cities. The relationship between the state apparatus and RNU solidified specifically after the organization’s assistance in Eastern Ukraine with the war in Donbas.⁴⁸ Though they sometimes criticize the “multiculturalism” of the federal government, they have not broken any federal laws and are therefore allowed certain privileges.

Liberal Democratic Party of Russia

The second group is one of the most well-known political parties in the Russian Federation: the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). Led by Vladimir Zhirinovsky and based in Moscow, this group has the largest formal membership of all five groups examined in this paper with official numbers surpassing 295,000 in 2019.⁴⁹ The main

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ “Putin’s Neo-Nazi Helpers.” Human Rights in Ukraine, March 10, 2014. <http://khpg.org/en/index.php?id=1394442656>.

⁴⁹ “Для СМИ.” - Официальный сайт ЛДПР, информационное агентство ЛДПР, новости ЛДПР. Accessed July 26, 2020. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190306183027/https://ldpr.ru/party/>.

slogan for the party is ‘Freedom, Patriotism, Law’ and they advocate for a “revival of Russia as a great power” and an imperial reconquest of the near abroad, mainly the former Soviet republics.⁵⁰ While the RNU calls for all *nerusskie* to leave, the LDPR believes that *nerusskie* from the near abroad may remain in the Russian Federation because Russia’s “natural borders” include Transcaucasia, Central Asia, Belarus, and Ukraine. However, they maintain that *russskie* are the dominant group and all others should be subservient to the needs and objectives of this superior group.

The group does believe, however, that the existence of national republics in Russia—that is, the politically concentrated presence of ethnic minorities such as Chechens, indigenous peoples of Siberia, Kamchatkans, etc.—undermines the territorial unity of the entire Russian Federation. In online discussions, many members expressed the belief that “some citizens and territories live and exist at the expense of others” and that the *russskiy* citizens were unfairly supporting many of the other nationalities through their subsidization of these unnecessary national republics.⁵¹ This, they believe, is a form of discrimination against the *russskie* as it supports a fiscal favoritism for the other nationalities but does not economically advance the *russskie*. Furthermore, the leadership of the party asserts that the *russskie* are being “squeezed out of the executive and legislative branches and lose their job positions” in various fields in order to accommodate these nationalities. They argue that

⁵⁰ “Партия.” - Официальный сайт ЛДПР, информационное агентство ЛДПР, новости ЛДПР. Accessed July 26, 2020. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190306183027/https://ldpr.ru/party/>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

this displacement is the primary “ethnic crime” against the *russkie* as the “superior” ethnic group within the Federation.⁵²

Similar to the RNU, this organization has an active online presence both in Russian media (VKontakte and Telegram) and in Western media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). They pride themselves on being one of the oldest nationalist groups in contemporary Russia and for providing their members a place in which to share their beliefs, qualms, and ideals together. Also, as a participating party in the Duma,⁵³ they have a formal legitimacy that many of the other organizations have failed to achieve. They use this legitimacy to further the social superiority of the *ruskiy* citizenry and present their vision of Russia as *the* patriotic, national vision for everyone.

Russian Imperial Movement

As previously mentioned, this third group made international headlines in early 2020 as the first white supremacist/white nationalist organization labelled as a global terrorist group by the United States Department of State. The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) is an ultranationalist, far-right paramilitary organization based in St. Petersburg and led by Stanislav Vorobyev. RIM is more similar to RNU than LDPR in its actions around Russia, but its ideology differs drastically. Their main ideology is ‘Orthodox Imperial Nationalism,’ and their primary belief, building on the popular Duginist and Eurasianist

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ The Duma is the legislative branch of the Russian Federation; equal to the parliaments of Western Europe.

ideologies widely accepted in Russia today, is that Orthodox Christianity and the *russskiy* people are the basis of and future for Christianity and a morally just society, writ large.⁵⁴

On their webpage, the organization writes that it aims to “exclude the rot of liberalism and democracy in the political, moral, and national issues of modern Russia”⁵⁵ through community education and protection in three primary fields: 1) political and religious education- the teachings of Orthodoxy, monarchism, and Christian nationalism; 2) the preservation of core Russian interests- traditional values, political/spiritual/cultural expansion, anti-illegal immigration, and anti-Russophobia; and 3) the defense of Orthodoxy and the Russian Orthodox Church- against proselytism, heretics, and other schisms within the church. The group garners much of its inspiration from the Black Hundreds- an early 20th century ultranationalist group that incited pogroms, pushed *russskiy*-centric doctrines, and advocated the subjugation of all others, especially Ukrainians and Jews- and pushed for a return to the pre-Soviet *russskiy* dominance of the Near Abroad⁵⁶ and the expulsion of all “others” from Russian territory, namely Jews, blacks, and the Roma.

The specific paramilitary branch of the organization is called the Imperial Legion and has two large sporting facilities in St. Petersburg in which the members train any Russian men who, according to their website, “believe that, in modern Russia, not to be a

⁵⁴ “РУССКОЕ ИМПЕРСКОЕ ДВИЖЕНИЕ.” Accessed July 26, 2020. <https://public.wikireading.ru/115358>.

⁵⁵ “Русское Имперское Движение.” Telegram. Accessed July 26, 2020. https://t.me/s/Rus_imperia.

⁵⁶ The fourteen post-Soviet states excluding Russia that constitute much of Russia’s surrounding territory.

warrior is a criminal weakness.”⁵⁷ They teach hand-to-hand combat, combat survival, outdoor survival techniques, and many other topics in order to increase the virility of Russian masculinity that is threatened by the West and the pervasiveness of multiculturalism and other “effeminate” cultures.⁵⁸ In addition to these basic survival and combat needs, they teach urban assault and tactical training with advanced weaponry to their attendees.

After solidifying these courses, in an attempt to assert *russkiy* superiority over other European nations in a manner that mirrors imperial civilizing missions, they opened their facilities to white men across Central and Eastern Europe. Attendees of these training courses have gone on to bomb and attack civilian urban centers in Western Europe that house the perceived enemies of RIM and its ideology.

The most publicized attack of RIM training attendees was the 2016 Gothenburg attack in Sweden where a group of Swedish men committed a series of bombings in Gothenburg that targeted a refugee shelter, a shelter for asylum seekers, and a popular cafe. Three of the perpetrators were arrested and subsequently convicted and Swedish prosecutors found that the bombers credited RIM for their “terrorist radicalization and relevant training.”⁵⁹ This decision, according to the official U.S. State Department website, began the U.S. government’s initial investigation into the organization and after finding that RIM has provided this paramilitary training to white supremacists across Central and

⁵⁷ “Русское Имперское Движение.” VK. Accessed July 26, 2020. https://vk.com/rus_imperia.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ The Local. “Trio Locked Up Over Gothenburg Bomb Attacks.” [thelocal.se](https://www.thelocal.se/20170707/trio-locked-up-over-gothenburg-bomb-attacks-sweden-neo-nazi), July 7, 2017. <https://www.thelocal.se/20170707/trio-locked-up-over-gothenburg-bomb-attacks-sweden-neo-nazi>.

Eastern Europe, including Germany, Poland, and Finland, they actively decided to label this group as a terrorist organization.⁶⁰

The official website of RIM is blocked on US internet servers, but the group maintains an open presence on Telegram, VKontakte, and other open forum websites to espouse their views and allow a space for their followers to also express themselves on whatever topic they deem necessary. Common topics include the perceived attacks on masculinity from Western culture, the divergence of the Russian people from Christian values, the role of the state in achieving these ideals, and more. While RIM and RNU seem almost identical with their beliefs and domestic paramilitary action, the RNU is specifically a neo-Nazi organization and supports the ideology of global national socialism. RIM draws its inspiration from Imperial Russia- particularly, the final decades of the regime that institutionalized Russification and ultranationalism- a desire to reinstate this imperial order, and the belief that German Nazism is inferior to Russian imperial might.

Great Russia Party

The fourth group is the Great Russia Party (denoted ‘VR’ from its latinized form, ‘*Velikaya Rossiya*’). VR is an ultranationalist, far-right political party that is often associated with neo-Nazism, even though their ideology makes no official mention of national socialism.⁶¹ The Moscow-based group was formed by leaders of three other

⁶⁰ Pompeo, Michael R. “United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists - United States Department of State,” April 7, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/united-states-designates-russian-imperial-movement-and-leaders-as-global-terrorists/>.

⁶¹ “The Ultra-Right in Russia in 2012.” SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, October 12, 2012. <https://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/reports-analyses/2012/10/d25539/>.

organizations- Rodina, the Movement Against Illegal Immigration, and the Congress of Russian Communities- and is currently led by Andrei Saveliyev. The most important of these ‘parent’ groups for this study is the Movement Against Illegal Immigration. This group also adopted the slogan ‘Russia for Russians’ and advocated specifically against Caucasians and Central Asians who they deemed criminals. In 2011, the organization was officially banned by the High Court of the Russian Federation due to its members’ active roles in violent protests against the presence of foreigners and the government’s use of foreign workers and the group’s relentless efforts to incite intragroup hatred between *russkie* and national and ethnic minorities. However, after the 2011 court decision, most of the members joined VR and continue to influence its actions and ideology in 2020.⁶²

The overall ideology of the party is not unique from the first three groups; rather, it is an amalgamation of the larger points already explained. ‘Russia for Russians,’ Russian Orthodoxy as the purest religion, and a superiority of *russkiy* citizens are the three main ideological pillars for the party. But while VR’s ideology itself does not differ significantly from the aforementioned groups, the organization is unique because of its advocacy for a different form of public engagement. The members criticize the other organizations for advancing ideologies and rhetoric that is “alien to Russians” and subsequently losing vital support for the overall cause. That is, VR believes that the other groups’ messaging is not

⁶² “Партия.” Партия | Великая Россия, March 1, 2020. <http://velikoross.org/category/partiya>.

palpable to the overall *russskiy* population and they fail to garner as much support as possible through their refusal to appeal more to the larger *russskiy* community.⁶³

Instead, the party presents a logic that equates patriotism to nationalism; it argues that, in order to be a true Russian patriot, one must be a Russian nationalist- meaning they must support the aforementioned ideologies. Framing the problem in more palpable language and simple logic for the general public will garner more support for a common *russskiy* superior objective, rather than dissuade people from the cause.

In this regard, their online presence is vital for their sustainability. On their website, they have an active forum where individuals- both members and non-members- are encouraged to discuss any and all topics related to Russian nationalism. Racial and ethnic phenotypes, government action, the presence of *nerusskie* throughout the Federation, and other topics are explored and argued on the forum. For example, there is a running conversation on the forum about the sustainability of whiteness and the *russskiy* identity in a world of multiculturalism and a call to safeguard the white race from destruction.⁶⁴ Some of the most fascinating statements and points of debate are around the importance of a pan-European whiteness into which the *russskie* should invest and lead, and also around the condemnation and/or criminalization of those in interethnic or interracial relationships and birthing children with diluted *russskiy* blood.

⁶³ “Предзаказы На Книгу Андрея Савельева ‘Русская Идеология.’” Великая Россия, January 28, 2017. <http://velikoross.org/132477-predzakazy-na-knigu-andreya-saveleva-russkaya-ideologiya.html>.

⁶⁴ “КАК РАСОВО ОЧИСТИТЬ РУССКУЮ НАЦИЮ.” как расово очистить русскую нацию | Русский Портал. Accessed July 26, 2020. <http://bb.velikoross.org/forums/topic/kak-rasovo-ochistit-russkuyu-naciyu/>.

Since this particular conversation has been running since 2013 there are numerous tangents and breakaway conversations that could be a source of further analysis in another study. But the most important takeaway from this example is how the forum serves as a platform for individuals to explore different ideas and engage in debates about the boundaries of their respective white identities, the hierarchies they create, and how to intellectually spread this ideology amongst their comrades. In fact, the party itself explicitly argues that this open source for ideas, and the intermittent explanation from party members using science and logic, advances their goals more effectively than preaching about theoretical ideals and comparing intangible systems.⁶⁵ If people understand the logic, they will follow more readily than if they do not. The party must operate outside of its current stance in order to convince those who do not explicitly agree with the ideas and actions espoused by the group but are open to persuasion.

Russian National Socialist Party

The final, and arguably most extreme, of the five groups is the Russian National Socialist Party (RNSP). Created after one of the Pamyat members separated from the larger group, this party is based in Moscow and was led by Konstanin Kasimovsky. The group has four main ideological principles: 1) a strong state; 2) “aggressive Russian nationalism;” 3) non-Marxist socialism; and 4) Orthodox Christianity; though there has been a significant push to distance the group from an emphasis on Orthodoxy, it remains one of the central

⁶⁵ “Предзаказы На Книгу Андрея Савельева ‘Русская Идеология.’” Великая Россия, January 28, 2017. <http://velikoross.org/132477-predzakazy-na-knigu-andreya-saveleva-russkaya-ideologiya.html>.

tenets for the party today.⁶⁶ Within these four main principles, the RNSP outlined eight objectives as well that include the “spiritual and biological healing of the ‘*russskiy* nation’, the purity of *russskiy* culture and language, strengthening the family, establishing moral censorship [and] creating a new community of *russskiy* people.”⁶⁷

The reason this group is the most extreme is because their believed superiority and hatred toward foreigners led some members to execute foreign and *nerusskie* domestic students by beheading them. Group members later published the videos of their actions in order to bring attention to Russia’s need for stricter immigration laws.⁶⁸ The other groups hold violent ideals and promote certain actions- some of which came to fruition outside of the Russian Federation, see RIM- but they have not resorted to vigilante violence as a means to achieve their respective goals. Though the men who claimed the murders named their group the “Militant Organization of Russian Nationalists” and the photograph of one student’s severed head was sent to the Sova Center by this group,⁶⁹ two of the victims are heard in their execution video saying, “we were arrested by Russian national socialists” before they were shot, stabbed, and beheaded.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ “Russian History.” Russia, February 2001.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20081120013849/http://www.axt.org.uk/antisem/archive/archive4/russia/russia.ht>.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ “Europe | Russian Held over 'Deaths' Video.” BBC News. BBC, August 15, 2007.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6946810.stm>.

⁶⁹ “Russian History.” Russia, February 2001.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20081120013849/http://www.axt.org.uk/antisem/archive/archive4/russia/russia.htm>.

⁷⁰ “Europe | Russian Held over 'Deaths' Video.” BBC News. BBC, August 15, 2007.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6946810.stm>.

As a result of these actions, the group remains hidden from public view and it does not have open social media accounts for public access. But there is a common belief that these groups operate online in private forums and coded chat rooms to signal one another. Unfortunately, I was not able to infiltrate the groups because my fake profile was not adequate enough for membership; however, they are present if one knows where to search and how to adequately convince the leadership of one's dedication.⁷¹

CONCLUSION

While there is plenty of overlap between these groups in the different ideals for which they advocate, there are significant differences between them as well. But before we begin the comparison, it is important to note that when examining these types of groups we need to remain aware of the complexities of racism and nationalism. These groups can be labeled 'racist' and 'nationalist,' but it is then necessary to unpack how these labels operate in a specific Russian context and the implications that follow those labels within that context.

Avoiding any official labels, what we see is that each of these groups diverge on how Russia should be governed (through fascism, monarchy, orthodoxy, etc.) but they overlap in two particular areas. First, it is important to consider their use of hierarchies of national and ethnic identities and their treatment of the *nerusskaya* undesirables. For

⁷¹ This begs the question, why did the U.S. State Department label RIM a terrorist organization, but not RNSP? Perhaps RNSP's lack of public presence makes it a difficult organization to target, but, if the U.S. State Department was genuinely concerned with enacting Donald Trump's 2019 statement, this group would logically be the most apparent terrorist organization of the five groups highlighted.

example, some groups believe that people from Ukraine and Belarus deserve more privileges than non-Slavic peoples while others believe that only the *russkie* should enjoy widespread societal privileges. But, paying attention to non-Slavic minorities, the role of national minorities is similar throughout all five groups. *Russkiy* is at the top of all five societal structures and the ‘undesirables’ trickle down the hierarchy variously.

The second overlap for these groups is the importance of masculinity for their members. Most of the groups discuss how multiculturalism and Western ideas are an attack on traditional gender roles and that the proper way of life is for men to become physically strong, train in combat, and reject all forms of femininity. While this second area of overlap is fascinating and deserves further research and analysis, this study focuses on the first area of overlap and not the second.

With this in mind, and using the historical understanding from chapter one, the next chapter will demonstrate how Russia’s use of national minorities in social hierarchies mirrors other societies’ treatment of racial minorities. In other words, racism is pervasive in Russian society, just as it is in the United States, South Africa, Brazil, and other largely heterogeneous societies. One of the main differences in Russia is not a lack of racism, but a lack of formal racial language that allows openly racist groups, such as those examined above, to operate relatively freely while maintaining the widespread belief that Russia is not racist.

Chapter IV: Contemporary Racialization of Nationality

This chapter compares racialized group differences in the United States and Russian Federation to demonstrate how the current processes of racialization in both countries are mirror images of one another, even though the United States explicitly uses the word ‘race’ and the Russian Federation explicitly uses the word ‘nationality.’ This is not an assertion that the United States and Russian Federation are *exactly* the same in their uses of race; rather, it serves to show how there remains a racial logic in Russia even without the explicit use of racial terminology.

GLOBAL RACIALIZATION OF NATIONALITY

The most useful framework for understanding contemporary racialized nationalism is provided by political scientist Ashley Jardina in her 2019 book *White Identity Politics*. She works specifically within a US context but her ideas transcend racial regionalization because she provides clear and concise theories and examples of how nationality is racialized and then weaponized against those races and/or nationalities deemed undesirable.

One of the main themes Jardina uses in her study to discuss this process is the relationship between whiteness and a particular conception of national identity.⁷² Whiteness in the United States is typically synonymous with ‘American,’ similar to the connection of whiteness to ‘English’ or ‘Russian’ (*russkiy*) in their respective nations. In

⁷² Ashley Jardina, *White Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 120.

turn, the dominant identity of these nations is defined by whiteness. So, most white Americans, Brits, Russians, etc. view themselves as the prototypical members of their respective nations, meaning they set the framework for social structures and determine which privileges certain groups receive as a result of their proximity to this prototypicality. It follows then that “the relationship between national identity and racial identity [is] somewhat symbiotic.”⁷³ In other words, higher levels of white identity are associated with higher levels of American, British, or Russian identity. Therefore, to be white is to be American and to be *russkiy* is to be Russian.

Jardina’s framework is useful for this analysis because people who view themselves as the prototypical members of a group or nation are more likely to insist upon strict boundaries defining this group or nation.⁷⁴ These “hard” boundaries support a particular, normative idea of who represents a “true” national. They often include characteristics that people either cannot change or have difficulty changing: place of birth, native language, practicing Christianity, or being white. While there are also “soft” boundaries that less prototypical members of a group or nation may hold- obtaining citizenship, respecting the laws and norms of the nation in question, or ‘feeling’ American, British, Russian, etc., most white nationalist and white supremacist groups explicitly advocate for more distinct and unbridgeable boundaries around national identity.

In addition to this solidification of the borders of the ideal, Jardina finds that white racial solidarity also has a deep influence on beliefs of group competition. Controlling for

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 123.

outgroup animus, she finds that those who have a strong sense of white (dominant, prototypical) identity almost exclusively believe that 1) more jobs for racial minorities means fewer jobs for white people, regardless of what the job is; 2) more political influence racial minorities have means white people have less influence; and, inversely, 3) less political and social influence racial minorities have means white people have more influence, which they believe is how life should be governed.⁷⁵

Jardina's themes provide a framework against which to measure the internal white identity politics of any given nation. In the case of the Russian Federation, using the five groups from chapter two, by replacing 'white' with '*russskiy*' and 'racial minorities' with 'national minorities' we see that the processes Jardina details in the United States are the exact same processes used in the Russian Federation only with a slightly different vocabulary.

There are two primary beliefs about the dynamic of *russskiy* vs *nerusskaya* peoples which all five of the white nationalist groups hold as truth; first, the sense that *russskiy* citizens are victims of minority encroachment. This sentiment is held against both visible and non-visible minorities and against domestic (North Caucasians, Siberians, Central Asians, Jews, etc.) and foreign minorities (blacks, Latinx, East and Southeast Asians, etc.). The most common manifestation of this victimhood is in the resentment held by these groups against migrant workers from Central Asia and people from the North Caucasus for "stealing" jobs and opportunities away from the *russskie*. A major objective of the 'Russia

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 141.

for Russians' platform is the expulsion of these *nerusskaya* workers from the nation in order to increase opportunities for those who "deserve" them.⁷⁶ This falls directly into Jardina's point on perceived group competition. These nationalist groups do not account for the *russskiy* refusal to work menial jobs nor for the possibility of expanding or restructuring the oligarchic system. For them, the problems of poverty and disparity in Russia are the fault of these outsiders who do not belong.

Similarly, Jews are also blamed for the multitude of problems in the Russian economy. Conspiracies about Jewish-owned businesses secretly running the world are not unique to Russia, but many Jewish-owned businesses throughout Russia are frequently vandalized and the Jewish owners attacked.⁷⁷ The presence of these Jewish businesses in *russskiy*-dominant areas is seen by these white nationalist groups as a Jewish attempt to overrun *russskiy* businesses and economic opportunities. So, to them, the best way to ensure *russskiy* economic growth and safety is to eliminate the *nerusskaya* competition.

This belief that all other groups are in competition with the *russskie* extends beyond the economy. Religious freedom, resource allocation, political office, and many other categories are arenas in which these groups believe the *russskie* are under attack and must defend themselves against all others because the presence of other national minorities threatens the status and material wealth of the *russskie*. But this analysis focuses specifically

⁷⁶ Richard Arnold, "Visions of Hate," *Problems of Post-Communism*. 57, no. 2 (2010): pp. 37-49, <https://doi.org/10.2753/ppc1075-8216570203>.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

on the economic factors because they are tangible outside of the *russskiy* vs. *nerusskaya* dichotomy.

The second common idea amongst the five groups from chapter two is about how the *russskiy* people represent Christian purity and how the dilution of this purity is, among other things, akin to sinful. The maintenance of this perceived purity is almost exclusively tied to the persecution of visible minorities. Central Asians and blacks, those whose physical difference is most apparent, receive the largest number of interpersonal physical and verbal attacks from members of these groups.⁷⁸ As stated above, Central Asians are attacked on economic lines, but they are also visibly easier to identify than Jews and other white or Slavic *nerusskie*. The presence of these people, especially in Moscow, sullies the image of Russia as the third Roman Empire that must hold the mantle of world leader until the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. To these white nationalist groups, particularly those tied to Imperial Russia and/or the Orthodox Church, the *russskie* were chosen by God for their purity; therefore, mixing with others dilutes this purity and threatens the future of all Christianity.

Similarly, Caucasians are also often attacked in northwest and central-west Russia and told to “go home.”⁷⁹ Once again, the white nationalists shouting these orders disregard reality by ignoring the fact that North Caucasians are citizens of the Russian Federation and, therefore, *are* home in these instances. But, as stated above, white nationalist groups view the presence of Caucasians in these spaces as a direct attack on the sustainability of

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

russkiy purity. Russia is a federation with multiple ethnic and national minorities, but these groups believe that the *russkie* must occupy the top tier of the social hierarchy and all others exist within varying degrees of closeness to the *russkie* depending on ethnicity, language, religion, and all of the other factors created under Alexander III's "uniformity" and subsequently reinvigorated under the Sovietization policies.

This second idea falls under Jardina's framework concerning boundaries. According to these groups, the contours of *russkiy* (or, in this instance, Christian purity) are unbreachable and must not be altered by the presence or interference of others. This normative idea of "pure" and "good" mirrors common American ideas of purity, particularly pre-2010s. In the United States, '*russkiy*' becomes 'white' and 'national minority' becomes 'racial minority', but the process and results are the exact same. There is a dominant group who has historically tied its own identity to the prototypical identity of the political entity and the efforts of minorities to infiltrate or change this identity or the characteristics that create it are met with intense resistance by certain groups whose main objective is upholding the supremacy of the dominant group.

CONCLUSION

The Russian experience with race and racial concepts is unique insofar as the terminology Russian society has and continues to use differs from that of many other racialized societies around the world. But, similar to other racialized societies, there exist racialized structural hierarchies that define Russian society and allow for white supremacist groups to advocate the continued structural and systemic dominance of the *russkie* over

ethnic and national minorities. Meanwhile, the state continues asserting a type of nationalist discourse that is often framed as raceless and/or devoid of race and racism. The confusion of the past briefly outlined in chapter one and the constant need to define itself against the West has allowed for Russia to occupy this seemingly obvious cognitive dissonance; but, they are in no way an aberration of racial logic. Understanding this history and the current trajectory of racialized hierarchies in Russia helps enrich the conversation of global racisms and forces race scholars to remove ourselves from the normative structures provided by the United States, South Africa, Nazi Germany, and others. Race is pervasive in every society in different ways and we must be open to understanding this logic in each relative societal structure. Russia's logic, though difficult to follow at certain times, clearly demonstrates that there is racism outwardly practiced in the Russian Federation, contrary to the popular misconceptions provided by the Russian government and some Russian scholars.

Chapter V: Conclusion

The argument outlined in the preceding chapters points to the idea that, in Russia, only the use of explicitly racist language can be considered an act of racism; race as practice seems less important than race as a concept. But, there *is* an understanding of racist behavior separate from explicit racist language when discussing other societies. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States was a topic of major debate in Russian academic, political, and social media discourses following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. We see through this example that there are different metrics by which certain Russian actors measure global racism and domestic racism, even though the actions of both may mirror one another. The reaction of the Russian far-right (the most “nationalist” end of the political spectrum in Russia) is briefly detailed below.

The far-right reaction consists of the creation of the hashtag ‘RussianLivesMatter’ as a form of comparative victimhood and the creation of various racist internet memes criticizing the Black Lives Matter movement. Overall, the Russian far-right is anti-Black Lives Matter for two primary reasons: 1) the belief that black Americans have no right to complain because Russians have also suffered, and 2) the conflation of the Black Lives Matter protests with looting and assertion that black Americans are shouting ‘racism’ as a way to escape punishment for their illegal actions.

First, the creation of #RussianLivesMatter by Russian libertarian Mikhail Svetov was meant to bring attention to the killing of a man by police in the central Russian town

of Yekaterinburg.⁸⁰ The hashtag was written specifically in English as a dog whistle message against police brutality in Russia, but when translated into the Russian language, the word *russskiy* is used, not *rossiysky*. This movement in itself is used to demonstrate how the *russskiy* suffer more than other groups, including black Americans. In fact, on a twitter thread about this topic a user wrote about how the world is upset about black Americans but no one wants to show solidarity for the *russskiy* man killed in Yekaterinburg or other murders of the *russskie*.⁸¹ Svetov himself wrote, “how is it safer for blacks in the United States than for *russskie* in Russia?”⁸² Similar to the theme of victimhood in the ideologies of some of the white nationalist groups from chapter two, Svetov and the supporters of #RussianLivesMatter use this victimization in order to place their own group above everyone else. In this instance, the idea is that the *russskie* have a more difficult experience than black Americans and therefore black Americans have no right to complain, cause problems in their own country, and garner international support.

The second reason for the reaction of the Russian far-right is shown below in a number of racist memes which were harvested from various Russian social media accounts that argue that black Americans are stealing and destroying property and only scream “racism” when held accountable for their actions. The most popular category of these memes is called, “*ты что расист?*” (“are you a racist?”) in which black Americans are

⁸⁰ “Russian Twitter Users Launch Hashtag Campaign against Police Brutality Following Yekaterinburg Shooting,” RTVI, June 2, 2020, https://rtvi.com/stories_en/russian-hashtag-campaign-against-police-brutality/.

⁸¹ “BLM à La Russe Russian Libertarians Want a Localized Movement against Police Brutality and Now They've Got a Hashtag All Their Own,” Meduza, June 2, 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/06/03/blm-a-la-russe>.

⁸² *Ibid.*

depicted breaking laws and being unreasonable and then labeling the white people who address their behavior as racists. This clearly is a conflation of the Black Lives Matter movement with the looting and rioting that occurred at the same time in the United States, but it has gained popularity among the Russian far-right social media pages. The logic is as follows: the Black Lives Matter protests began after the murder of George Floyd, the police forces in various cities reacted negatively against the protests, the rioting and looting began in the wake of these tensions, and therefore Black Lives Matter caused the destruction and theft of private and public property. The implication here is that black is bad and white is good, which is perfectly personified in the final meme. In this meme, as George Floyd's soul is leaving his body it questions why people are destroying the country and the caption above it reads "his soul is definitely white."⁸³



Figure 1: black caricature asks, "Are you a racist?" White caricature says, "yes."⁸⁴

⁸³ The explicitly racist caricatures of black Americans in these memes can be a study on its own, but I believe that black Americans were drawn in this particular fashion in order to demonstrate how claims of racism against black people are nothing in comparison to the crimes committed by those same people. In this respect, the actions were quantified and respect for property was deemed more important than interpersonal respect.

⁸⁴ Eliot Borenstein, *Russian Racist Memes*, June 24, 2020, June 24, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3H9Oo84lfQ&feature=emb_logo.



Figure 2: White caricature asks, “Hey what are you doing? Why are you setting fire to my car? What does my private property have to do with it? How will my burned-out car help you catch a police officer?” The black caricatures ask, “What are you, a racist?”⁸⁵

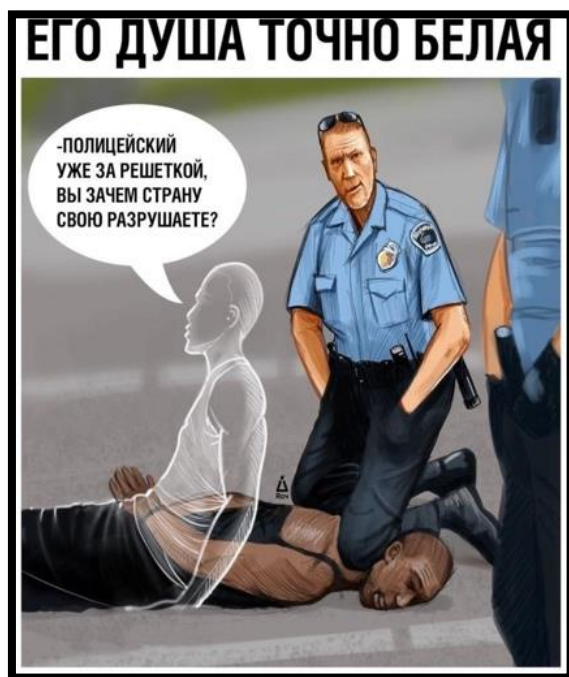


Figure 3: George Floyd’s soul asks, “The police officer is already behind bars, why are you destroying your own country?” The caption above reads, “his soul is definitely white.”⁸⁶

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

I briefly discussed this reaction to Black Lives Matter to demonstrate how the Russian racial logic does not disregard all forms of racism. There is a threshold in Russia upon which racism is determined just as there is in every other society. But for Russia, as demonstrated above, the threshold for domestic racism is separate from that of global racism.

There is a particular history of the way race and nationality are understood in Russia that creates a conceptual murkiness which allows Russians to practice exclusionary politics against minorities without understanding these practices as being racist. But racism is not about using clear racist language, it is a series of exclusionary practices that include systemic, systematic, and interpersonal inequality and violence. When looking at what kinds of practices are commonly used to attack other races globally, they are exactly the practices we see used in Russia today. In other words, Russia is just as racist as the United States, Western Europe, and Brazil, but it has managed to disguise this racism by not using the terminology typically associated with racism.

But race and racism are not limited to the common etymology we ascribe to them. There are actions and behaviors that accompany social hierarchies on the basis of biological difference which are intended to assert the dominance of one group over another. Intellectual capacity and moral tendency are conflated with cultural characteristics and biological features in order to create collective identities. Then, the categorization of entire groups of people based on this fusion of individual agency and immutable group difference allows those within the dominant group to assign worth to groups beneath them with little option for lower groups to challenge or change this label and the status associated with it.

In Russia, these boundaries are delineated alongside perceptions of national difference, but the process is similar to countries that create these boundaries alongside perceptions of racial difference. This does not mean that Russia is void of racism, it simply means that Russia's racial logic uses different terminology than other countries to create and signal the boundaries of its social hierarchy. The *russkie* are the dominant group and all other national minorities are placed in varying degrees below them in society and face a variety of discrimination based on this status.

However, the explicit use of nationality instead of race allows for individuals and groups to commit violence against minorities and foreigners without it being labeled racism. This is what happened in the aftermath of my attack in Vladivostok. Russia's racial logic did not deem the petting, spitting on, or choking of a black American by a *russskiy* man as racist; if anything, it was a nationalist attack as a result of my being American, but not a racist attack. This explains the overwhelming reaction by the Russians who said that my attack was not the result of racism. To them, this man was not racist because racism requires explicitly racist language; this man did not call me a racial slur nor did he explicitly discuss my skin tone, therefore, Russian racial logic excludes this interaction from the label of racism.

I am not naive enough to believe that this thesis, or any study of this fashion, will change the interactions between white nationalists in Russia and visibly different racial minorities, or that it will stop another black American from experiencing what I did. What this does show, however, is that race, racism, and nationality require a much wider understanding from those with the power to enact such changes. It is our responsibility as

intellectuals and leaders to create a larger dialogue surrounding these ideas and their manifestations as sources of collective identity and collective oppression. Policy must be created with the explicit knowledge that racism is perpetuated in various ways and areas of life. Race is a social construction with real, tangible consequences. We must understand that just as the United States is not unique in its treatment of “others,” nor are the places who claim racial equality, such as Russia.

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