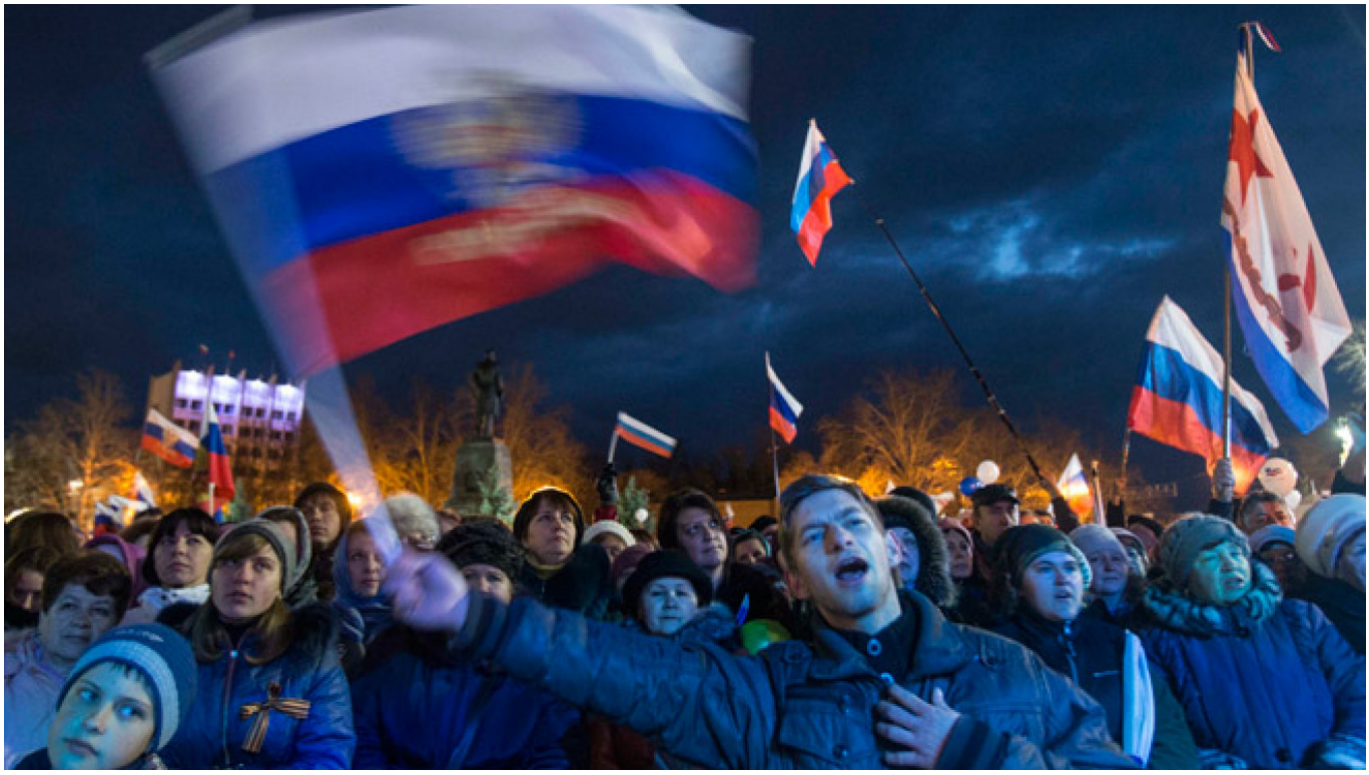
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Us Against Them: Russia's Frightening New Cult

By Gleb Kuznetsov

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If you believe that the U.S. aggressors were preparing to land in Crimea in the winter of 2014 in order to help the Ukrainians kill all the Orthodox Russians there, and that only the pre-emptive military operation under the command of President Vladimir Putin saved them, then you are "one of us" — that is, a true-blue adherent of the state's cult.

However, if you think that the United States was not planning a military operation in Crimea last year, that it did not "have its eye on" the peninsula and that NATO never did and still has no plans for it as a theater of war, then you are officially a heretic.

You are a heretic regardless of your past services, social status, annual income or membership in the ruling party. All of those are secondary to the main question: Do you believe, or do you not?

Anyone attempting to analyze Russian policy and predict its future course should understand one fundamental thing: Modern Russian policy is not rational and not based on political

considerations. It is irrational and religious — with all of the attendant religious stereotypes, prejudices and dogmas.

The authorities have created a kind of "creed" right before our eyes, a set of words and concepts that allow them to easily label someone as either "loyal" or "disloyal." All political and existential concepts are now reduced to black and white and the entire spectrum of political viewpoints has become a dichotomy of "friend" or "foe" — the forces of Evil against the forces of Good.

In a paradigm where good is embodied by the state, the great millennial empire with a unique historical role, then evil is whatever hinders that empire from carrying out its role. The external enemy is the West — cunning, rich, heavily armed and working to secretly undermine the country through Russian "liberals."

"Liberalism" is no longer seen as a political outlook so much as a heretical belief system. According to the ubiquitous propaganda — and therefore, the public mind — a "liberal" is not someone who advocates the free market, personal freedoms and other such boring nonsense, but an individual who brazenly refuses to join the state cult or to nod his assent at sharply rising food prices and the deployment of Russian troops to a nearby, brotherly state.

A liberal denies the great benevolence and inherent correctness of the state. A liberal does not accept the fact that the state is the only defense against the evil poised just beyond Russia's borders, waiting to break through this country's heavy defenses and feed like a swarm of voracious locusts on the blessed soil of the faithful.

The liberal is an enemy because he does not see God in the state. He is a heretic because he does not subscribe to the dominant cult — and that makes him a potential traitor, a conduit through which evil from abroad might threaten the true faith.

The "true believers" agree completely that Putin was right to consider putting the country's nuclear arsenal on red alert during the annexation of Crimea. After all, the NATO horde was planning to attack.

The "true believer," like the loyal Soviet citizen before him, honestly believes that nuclear weapons are necessary in the "struggle for peace."

The "heretic," however, finds such talk of nuclear war extremely upsetting. "Russia declares its readiness to wage nuclear war in the complete absence of any threat," they say. "What a nightmare!"

And so it is with everything.

According to the "loyalists" and "true believers," the deaths in a fire in Odessa in May, the war in the Donbass and everything that has happened since illustrates the fate that awaited Crimea had Russia not intervened.

But the "heretic" sees all of it as the direct and tragic consequence of Russia's annexation of Crimea. They understand that the pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine had counted on a repeat of the Crimea scenario, on the Russian army conducting the same type of "humanitarian intervention" on their behalf, but received instead a rebuff from Ukrainian

armed forces who suddenly displayed a readiness to fight after the shock of losing Crimea.

World War II plays a particularly fundamental role in the new state cult. Putin claims that the West is trying to strike Russia from the list of victors in that war, and that Moscow should make a vigorous response for the sake of its honor and integrity.

Close Kremlin ally Alexander Beglov — who worked alongside Putin back in his days with the mayor's office in St. Petersburg, and who now heads Pobeda (Victory), an agency charged with maintaining Russia's status as one of the victors in World War II — has proposed using the fire from eternal flame monuments, a strictly secular symbol, to light the lamps and candles in Orthodox churches.

Thus, political and religious symbols blur smoothly together, with Christianity relegated to a subordinate position in the hierarchy of the state cult.

And there are a dozen more criteria by which the authorities determine whether someone is a loyal believer or a disloyal heretic — now and forever.

And thanks to that overriding dogma, it is now impossible to hold a meaningful debate in Russia regarding the results of the first year since annexing Crimea.

You either believe that Russia's army and its military intervention in Crimea saved Russia from a U.S. and NATO invasion on the peninsula or you don't.

At this turning point in history, you are either "one of us" and can enjoy all the benefits that the best state in the world has to offer, or else you are "one of them," and there's no knowing what new problems to expect from you tomorrow. There is no third option.

This explains the obsession with dividing Russian society between "friends" of the state and its "enemies."

Even the decision to classify the murder of Boris Nemtsov as a "hate crime" is part of that effort to divide Russian society. It seems these people sincerely believe in the threat of a "revenge of the liberals," in a "Russian Maidan" and that "the liberals could turn violent."

And the situation really is scary when politics and politicians are no longer rational, but irrational, and appeal not to logic, but to base emotion.

According to this paradigm, the whole planet is nothing but a stage for the confrontation between Russia, with its forces of light, and the West, with its forces of darkness. And the constant comparison between the mighty and therefore towering figure of Vladimir Putin with the weak and therefore "dwarf-like" Western leaders is designed to endow the Russian president with almost superhuman qualities.

In fact, when Putin recently dropped out of sight for 10 days, the Russian people were most concerned not with his job performance, but with the possibility that their national leader might be subject to such human frailties as illness.

In fact, the oft-repeated suggestion that "Putin is Russia" and that "Without Putin, there can be no Russia" has turned modern Russian politics into a sort of Manichean cult.

It is both pointless and counterproductive to try to analyze this cult from a political perspective, or to use political criteria to understand or predict its behavior.

In fact, it would probably take not a political scientist but a specialist in religious studies to fully understand today's quasi-Soviet, quasi-cultish ruling regime in Moscow.

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