

*The Issue of Messianism as an Historical  
Motive in Russian and Soviet Expansion*

*Mark G. Schmeltzer*

Winston Churchill once called Soviet behavior "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma"<sup>1</sup> Rubinstein further expounds upon the problem, stating that it was, "an amalgam of discrete elements...the end product of a complex interaction of many determinants, which, though always changing are ever present."<sup>2</sup> These accounts are clearly apt in light of the diversity of scholarly interpretations regarding Russia's historical motives in regional and international affairs. Because of the uniqueness of its internal and external developments, many interpretations of present day Soviet policy are possible." Furthermore, he adds that [while] "each has some validity,...none can claim exclusiveness."<sup>3</sup> He then breaks down the varying schools of thought into three general categories. The first claims that the foreign policy of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is primarily a continuation of "traditional Czarist objectives," and guided by such desires as resources, border security, and a stronger international position. The second, that it is guided strictly by the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of world-wide proletarian revolution and world domination, and a documented hostility toward the nations of Capitalism. And the third argument lies somewhere in the middle of these, between the "traditionalist and the ideological" schools.<sup>4</sup> This "dualistic" theory considers the role of geography, traditional patterns of expansion, changing international climates, and a "Marxian world outlook whose historical antecedent consisted of a deep-rooted Russian messianism."<sup>5</sup>

It is this concept of messianism which, whether Communist or Christian, traditional or revolutionary, Pan-slavic or international, can be detected in a variety of scholarly interpretations. Some of the authors to be considered, particularly those that maintain that 1917 marked a clear line

---

<sup>1</sup>Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union*, (New York: Random House, 1960), 3.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

separating Russia from its past, deny the role of traditional Russian messianism in foreign policy, and reject any argument defining any national, racial or cultural character. However, despite the early Bolshevik insistence on the equality of all nations, and the future "withering away"<sup>6</sup> of the state, the subsequent mutations in the Soviet policy began to display the traditional Russian assumption of itself as heir to an ideology; which it would then export abroad in order to "save the world from itself"<sup>7</sup> There are others, naturally, who claim that terms such as "messianic," "parochial," "ideological," etc., are irrelevant in that they are merely external justifications for traditional, European style imperialist motivations. Such pretexts, according to this view, claim a distinction from the Western world. Their purpose is to motivate their subjects to serve practical political and economic aims.

Indeed, there is an historical conflict with the Western world which can be seen through Russia's relationship with its East European neighbors. Whether any of these are genuine driving forces behind expansion or merely instruments of political power, or some sort of blending of the two, Russia's foreign outlook can be examined in the laboratory of the East European plain. This essay will focus on some of the arguments concerning the role of Russian messianism in territorial, ideological and political expansion in an attempt to shed some light on the "enigma" of Soviet foreign policy.

Numerous difficulties exist in attempting to define a correlation between the Czarist and Soviet empires, not the least of which is the disparity of information between the histories of pre- and post-revolutionary Russia. The lack of officially acknowledged Soviet archival data has forced modern scholars to rest on their speculations and assumptions derived from patterns of behavior and Communist literature.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the unpredictability of Soviet leaders, which is due in part to their adjustments of Marxism to fit varying conditions (i.e. tactics and strategies<sup>9</sup>), leads Paul Winterton to conclude that "there are no experts on the Soviet Union, merely varying degrees

---

<sup>6</sup>Peter Meyer, "The Driving Force Behind Soviet Imperialism," chap. in *Readings in Russian Foreign Policy*, Robert A. Goldwin, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 668.

<sup>7</sup>Edward Crankshaw, "Russia's Imperial Design," chap. in *Readings in Russian Foreign Policy*, ed., Robert A. Goldwin, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.), 718.

<sup>8</sup>Ivo J. Lederer, ed., *Russian Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University, 1962), xvii-xix.

<sup>9</sup>Barrington Moore Jr., "The Pressure Behind Soviet Expansion," chap. in *Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union*, ed., Alvin Z. Rubinstein, (New York: Random House, 1960), 421.

of ignorance."<sup>10</sup> However, Robert C. Tucker of *New Republic* magazine reminds us that recent changes will make future Soviet study easier, since the standard Soviet texts are currently "under reconsideration."<sup>11</sup>

One cannot argue the fact that, at least on the surface, claims about Russia's historic mission have been made. Only their actual impact on popular sentiment and government policy is debatable. While there may have been some disagreement concerning their regional or international function, the thought of the nineteenth century Slavophiles became a central player in the messianic ideal.

Roger Dow characterizes their belief as emphasizing the gulf between the Slavic world and the civilization of Western Europe by claiming a "uniqueness of the Slavic culture," and a disdain for the decadence of the old world.<sup>12</sup> While this can be seen by some as a call to isolation, the idea of a distinct quality of their civilization sustained itself in its traditional belief that Russia was the "third Rome," whose inhabitants were a "spiritually...chosen race," who would one day "astound the world by their example."<sup>13</sup> Edward Crankshaw notes that the other equally important factors guiding Russia's imperial development were strategic and economic, and that no empire building has ever begun on purely altruistic motives.<sup>14</sup> But, this does not diminish the force of "messianic zeal and a new imperial spirit of Pan-Russianism."<sup>15</sup> These latent forces, having been directed inward for so long, were suddenly turned outward and revitalized after the defeat of Napoleon.<sup>16</sup> Alexander went to the Congress of Vienna representing a major power, and saw himself as a Christian monarch whose God-given mission was to "organize Europe," and repel the secular threat of revolution.<sup>17</sup> Crankshaw says the result was that, "Russian thinkers began to elaborate the concept of Russia, backward for so long, but with her vital forces husbanded, bringing to a corrupt

---

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Rubinstein, *Foreign Policy of the Soviet Union*, 407.

<sup>11</sup>Robert C. Tucker, "Czars and Commieczars," *The New Republic*, 204:3,29-35.

<sup>12</sup>Roger Dow, "Proster," chap. in *Readings in Russian Foreign Policy* ed., Robert A. Goldwin (New York: Random House, 1960), 710.

<sup>13</sup>Crankshaw, "Russia's Imperial Design," 710.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 705.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 711.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 710-711

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 710.

and bankrupt world a pristine spiritual impulse.<sup>18</sup> The consequent foreign policy was, according to Crankshaw, the realization for "Russia's historical aspirations towards Constantinople," and the beginnings of Tsarist expansion into the Balkans, fueled and rationalized by this revived messianic spirit.<sup>19</sup>

In "The Utopian Conception of History," Feodor Dostoevsky charged that the old, isolationist Russia did an injustice to mankind. Russia had kept "her treasure, her Orthodoxy, for herself, to seclude herself from Europe," in order to prevent the "Russian idea" from being spoiled by the influence of Western civilization.<sup>20</sup> He proclaimed: "he [who] wishes to be first in the kingdom of God must become a servant to everybody/ This is how I view the Russian mission in its ideal."<sup>21</sup> However, within his view of Russia as the "protectress and guardian" of Orthodox Christianity, lies the mission of unifying Slavdom, even non-Orthodox European Slavs, under the protection of Russia.<sup>22</sup> The right of Russia to serve in this leading role is crucial to Dostoevsky since, without its strength and unifying determination the Slavic people would "exhaust themselves in mutual strife and discord."<sup>23</sup> He also denies that such a conquest would not be a political union since it would be different from anything before it. Unlike the European form of subjugation, the Russian empire would be a "union founded upon the principles of common service to mankind," and "man's regeneration based upon the true principles of Christ."<sup>24</sup>

According to the 19th century philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev, the roots of Orthodox messianism extend further into Russian history than the end of the Napoleonic era, rather they go back considerably further to the start of Russian expansionism, defined by Roger Dow, as the reign of Ivan IV.<sup>25</sup> Berdyaev cites the fall of Constantinople in 1453 as the awakening within the Russian consciousness the idea of Moscow as the "Third Rome". Afterwards this aspiration became "the

<sup>18</sup>Ibid. 710.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 711.

<sup>20</sup>Feodor Dostoevski, "The Utopian Concentration of History," chap. in *Readings in Russian Foreign Policy* ed., Robert A. Goldwin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 19.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 22-3.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Dow, "Proster," 3.

basic idea on which the Muscovite state was formed. The kingdom was consolidated and shaped under the symbol of the messianic idea."<sup>26</sup>

It can be argued that the external manifestation of this ideal was evident in Muscovy's historical rivalry with the "champion of Catholicism"—the kingdom of Poland. Russia and Poland often competed for control of the borderlands and the loyalty of the Ukrainian people, who shared a mixture of religious, linguistic, and cultural traits from both of its embattled neighbors.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout the development of a Russian messianism based on religious Orthodoxy, another strain of the messianic tradition evolved which adds to the complexity of Russia's foreign relations. This was the same idea of the peculiarity, even superiority, of Russian culture to the decaying and hostile west; the same type of nationalism later glorified by the Slavophiles. Arnold Toynbee claims that the centralization of the Russian political tradition, which remains an historical constant, arose out of the necessity of defense against western conquests.<sup>28</sup> Berdyaev takes this claim further to show how it became interrelated with the forces of Orthodox messianism in the process of the nationalization of the Church.<sup>29</sup> Berdyaev states that:

Religion and nationality in the Muscovite kingdom grew up together, as they did also in the consciousness of the ancient Hebrew people/ And in the same way as the messianic consciousness was an attribute of Judaism it was an attribute of Russian Orthodoxy also/ But the religious idea of the kingdom took shape in the formation of a powerful state in which the Church was to play a subservient part. The Moscow Orthodox kingdom was a totalitarian state.<sup>30</sup>

In *The New Imperialism*, Hugh Seton-Watson shows how this centralizing, autocratic tradition, driven by its rapidly burgeoning bureaucracy, eventually led to the policy of Russification near the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> This policy toward the non-Russian subjects of its empire,

---

<sup>26</sup>Nicholas Berdyaev, "Religion and the Russian State," chap. in *Readings in Russian Foreign Policy*, ed., Robert A. Goldwin (Oxford University Press, 1959), 27.

<sup>27</sup>Hugh Seton-Watson, *The New Imperialism* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1971), 14-15.

<sup>28</sup>Arnold J. Toynbee, "Russia and the West," chap. in *Readings in Russian Foreign Policy*, ed., Robert A. Goldwin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 28.

<sup>29</sup>Berdyaev, "Religion and the Russian State," 28.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>Seton-Watson, *The New Imperialism*, 30-1.

displayed the messianic tendencies of nationalism and militarism.<sup>32</sup> Russification was a policy based on the illusion of Russian superiority, and sought to impose its language, culture, and religion upon the conquered non-Russian peoples of the empire, in an attempt at "reducing all Russian subjects to a common denominator."<sup>33</sup>

This is how some scholars have perceived the role and evolution of Russia's messianic character. As mentioned above, there is considerable debate over whether or not it was a "force" in Russian expansionism. Furthermore, an equal degree of controversy exists over whether or not this messianism continued in Soviet expansionist policies.

Those who identify the Russian trait of messianism in motives of Soviet expansionism often do so by citing a parallel between Russia as the spiritual center of Orthodoxy, and the USSR as the ideological nucleus of world Communism. This view holds that the Soviet monopoly on matters of ideology and power over its satellite nations, and the Marxist-Leninist ideal of the inevitable world proletarian revolution, upon which the union was formed are consequences of Russia's assumed sense of ideological superiority and a desire to correct the evils of Western civilization. This view also serves to explain the centralizing, bureaucratic tendencies, as well as its cultural impositions upon the governments of its subject nations. In fact, the apparent similarities between "Russification" and "Sovietization" of incorporated peoples are striking. While it is true that messianic similarities can be seen in the methods and practices of Soviet foreign policy, the real debate concerns itself with motives.

In *The New Imperialism*, Seton-Watson treats the role of Marxist ideology in Russian hands much the same way he saw their use of religious messianism. While he does not overlook the more basic motives of international realpolitik, he describes the historical messianic tendency of Russians to claim exclusiveness to an ideology and view itself as the bastion and protector of that faith, be it religious or political. He further explains the continuity in Soviet expansionism as arriving from a double origin, the first of which is that the Soviets "inherited the Soviet Empire," and all of its non-Russian peoples collected by their Tsarist predecessors.<sup>34</sup> The second is that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) is "inspired by a missionary ideology, which is its duty to impose...on

---

<sup>32</sup>ibid., 31.

<sup>33</sup>ibid.

<sup>34</sup>ibid., 9.

those nations which have not yet accepted the Communist faith or Communist institutions."<sup>35</sup> The results of the Soviets' economic, social and political monopolies, and the contradictions between expansionist practices and denials by the government of their own imperialism, are irrelevant to the messianic ideal, or the question of it being, at least part of the original impetus for expansion. This is especially true in light of the Bolshevik faith in the international proletariat. Seton-Watson points out that Lenin saw the role of a Communist government as one of assistance in the acceleration of the natural laws of history to achieve the inevitable triumph of Socialism. However, he did not see this process as a series of "military conquests by the Red Army."<sup>36</sup> Under Stalin, the strategy of the world revolutions quickly changed. Now, only the Soviet Regime could correctly be viewed as providing the "blueprint for socialism," with its "forced collectivization of agriculture and forced planned industrialization."<sup>37</sup> Before long, "Socialist revolution could only mean the extension by force, of the Soviet system to other countries."<sup>38</sup> Seton-Watson shows how the Soviets demonstrated this in their belief that the CPSU was "in possession of the truly proletarian theory, the science of Marxism-Leninism."<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, the infallibility of the Soviet party leaders, according to their own accounts, denies all charges of its imperialism. They claimed that any Soviet conquest of another nation "can only be liberation, and can only lead to the establishment of true liberty and social justice."<sup>40</sup>

However, the messianic quality of Soviet Communism is more than just a clever semantic manipulation by government spokesmen. The basic Marxist-Leninist doctrine of world revolution, regardless of any subsequent tactical deviations, did intermingle with the Russian feelings of uniqueness, and played itself out on the world scene with traditional mistrust of the west. Arnold Toynbee constructs this historical bridge by noting, "Eastern and Western Christianity have always been foreign to one another, and have often been mutually apathetic and hostile, as Russia and the West unhappily still are today, when each of them is in what one might call a 'post-Christian' phase

---

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 76.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 77.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 129.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 130.

of its history."<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the bureaucratic, centralizing administration of official ideology, mentioned above as a traditional messianic tool, was also integrated in the Soviet Communist Party's control over its subjects, both at home and in the satellites of Eastern Europe. Robert C. Tucker, in his recent analysis of current interpretations of the Soviet period, by Russian intellectuals, calls the Soviet government a "neo-czarist order that calls itself socialist."<sup>42</sup> Tucker cites the popular view, "that czarist absolutism, and centralized bureaucratic statism, made a comeback in the framework of the Communist Party state," and traces this "administrative-command system" back to Ivan the Terrible.<sup>43</sup>

Philip E. Mosely explains that the role of territorial disputes in facilitating Soviet suzerainty in the region. The Soviets offered arbitration in national conflicts within its expanding sphere of influence; and the appeal of Moscow as a strong protector of national integrity against aggressors, asked in return for "loyal obedience" and "political conformity" to the interests of the USSR.<sup>44</sup> Here again, Russian historical messianism, in its role as "big brother" over its East European neighbors, resulted from failed regional cooperation, and offered unity in the morass of infighting and "small power imperialism."<sup>45</sup> While it may be quite a stretch to view this relationship as "pan-Slavism," it certainly contained many of the messianic traits of Russia's assumed role as regional protector.

The scholars who cite the prevailing force of Russian messianism throughout its entire history of East European relations attempt to understand or predict Soviet behavior by forging a link between the pre- and post-revolutionary periods. Others, however, disagree on the existence of an overriding historical force in the character of Soviet geopolitics, yet they accept that the role of messianism cannot be a reality in policy. Some of the arguments deal with the distinct nature and international scope of Communism, while others claim that all Russian expansion has resulted from historical needs and geographical constants, (such as the need for access to warm-water sea outlets, foreign resources, and the need to strengthen border security against the great powers of Western Europe. Still others

---

<sup>41</sup>Toynbee, "Russia and the West," 681-2.

<sup>42</sup>Tucker, "Czars and Commieczars," 29.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>44</sup>Mosely, Philip E., "Soviet Policy and Nationality Conflicts in East Central Europe," in *The Kremlin and World Politics*, 223-245.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 244-45.



attack the very idea of Russian uniqueness by demonstrating how its expansionist development closely followed traditional European models of imperialism, with its ruthless exploitation of the economies, industries and resources within its conquered territories. According to this view, such is the case in both the Tsarist and Soviet eras. Still another view disputes the prevalence of any deep rooted messianism by claiming that it was a view of a minority of educated elite, and not a popular sentiment among the Russian masses.

The arguments and their variations are too numerous to examine here, and they provide an ample source for further study. However, I should briefly mention an important counterargument to the messianic theory, since it contains many of the above elements. It holds that, regardless of one's historical bent concerning the problem of Russian expansion, all claims of a messianic mission serve only as a pretext for the territorial ambitions of rulers of either state. This approach recognizes such calls to action as a smoke screen for government policy, as well as a tool of state power. Edward Crankshaw admits that ideology is often manipulated to fulfill the thirst for wealth and power by any ruler. He explains how the politically successful are not regularly guided by a purely ideological zeal: "born leaders and organizers are not given to philosophical speculation."<sup>46</sup> This raises yet another important problem in defining motives of policy: that is, the relationship between creed and practice, and leads Lederer to ask, "is a dichotomy between ideology and Realpolitik possible?"<sup>47</sup>

However, Crankshaw still wants to emphasize the role of Russian messianism, and concludes: "There will always be Russians, under whatever regime, who will believe in their mighty destiny to save the world from itself and sweep away the effeteness of Western European culture."<sup>48</sup> The recent changes in the Soviet Union, however, undoubtedly will alter our understanding of the Russian "enigma," as Helene Carrere D'Encausse concludes: "The period of the Russian empire built on a common ideology--monarchial, Christian Russia or totalitarian, Marxist Communism--is over."<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup>Crankshaw, "Russia's Imperial Design," 716.

<sup>47</sup>Lederer, xxii.

<sup>48</sup>Crankshaw, "Russia's Imperial Design," 718.

<sup>49</sup>Helene Carrere D'Encausse, "Springtime of Nations," in *The New Republic*, 204:3., 22.