ნაციონალური ნარატივების როლი რუსეთის მსოფლმხედველობაში

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL NARRATIVES IN RUSSIA'S WORLDVIEW

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ანთროპოლოგიის დეპარტამენტი,
ვაშინგტონის უნივერსიტეტი სენტ ლუისში

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რეზიუმე

წინამდებარე ესეიში რუსული აგრესიის ანთროპოლოგიურ-ფსიქოლოგიური ახსნაა მოცემული. ამერიკელი ანთროპოლოგი, ჯეიმს უერტჩი, რუსულ მსოფლაღქმას და რუსეთის უკრაინულ აგრესიას ნარატივების კუთხიდან განიხილავს. ავტორის აზრით, ნარატივების ანუ ამბის ამა თუ იმ ფორმით თხრობის თავისთავადი ძალა მნიშვნელოვანი პოლიტიკური გარემოებაა. იგი, ერთი შეხედვით, ყველაზე უფრო რაციონალურ სფეროში, ეკონომიკაშიც კი ქმნის ამინდს. მოკლედ, ნარატივი იდენტობის საყრდენია და, ესე იგი, ქმედებებისაც.

უერტჩი ყურადღებას ამახვილებს განსხვავებაზე ე.წ. სპეციფიკურ და სქემატურ ნარატივებს შორის. პირველი კონკრეტული ამბის თხრობაა, მეორე კი მასში ჩადებული აბსტრაქტული სააზროვნო ხაზი, ტელეოლოგიური შიგთავსი, რომელსაც ზედაპირული წამკითხველი ვერც ამჩნევს. ასე მაგალითად, ჰიტლერელთა დამარცხება სტალინგრადთან, კურსკთან და ბერლინთან რუსების სპეციფიკური ნარატივია, რომლის უკან იმალება უცვლელი, ზოგადი ნარატივი „უცხო მტრის განდევნისა". ავტორისათვის საგანგებო გარემოებაა, რომ რუსული ნარატივები მუდამ ამ სქემას მისდევდა, იგი არა მხოლოდ ფიზიკურ დაპირისპირებებს ეხებოდა, როგორიც იყო, მაგალითად, „მშვიდობიან რუსეთზე" მტრული პოლონეთის თავდასხმა მე-17 საუკუნეში და შემდგომ მათი განდევნა, არამედ იდეების სამყაროსაც: სოლჟენიცინს მარქსიზმი მიაჩნდა რუსეთის ცივილიზაციის მტრად, დოსტოევსკის კი, ზოგადად, დასავლური იდეები. სქემატური ნარატივი აქეზებს რუსებს, რომ მტერი დაინახონ იქ, სადაც სხვები მას ვერ ხედავენ.

ესეი მიდის უფრო ღრმად ნარატივების სამყაროში, გამოყოფს „პრივილეგირებული ამბის ნარატივს", „ნარატივის ეროვნულ პროექტს" და, ხაზს უსვამს რა ასეთი მენტალური სამყაროს უნივერსალურობას, უბრუნდება რუსულ ქეისს. ავტორი ასკვნის, რომ ნარატივების სამყარო სახელმწიფო პროპაგანდამდე არ დაიყვანება და იმავე რუსული ნარატივების ცვლას არა მხოლოდ პროპაგანდის შეწყვეტა, არამედ ალტერნატიული ნარატივების შექმნა-გავრცელება ესაჭიროება.

Since Aristotle, we have recognized that humans are story-telling animals. We use narratives to understand grand tragedies in real or fictional worlds, mundane episodes in everyday life, and international events in times of crisis. Narratives may be as long as War and Peace, but they also operate in very condensed form in the unconscious snap judgments of „fast thinking" (Kahneman 2011) that we use to size up people and events. Their ubiquity in everyday life makes it easy to overlook their power, but to do that would be to overlook one the most important means we have for understanding human communication and mental life.

A renewed concern with the power of stories[1] has given rise to a sort of „narrative turn" in the social sciences. After decades of privileging the rational actor in accounts of decision making, scholars have increasingly been turning to narratives to provide insight into issues that otherwise resist explanation. Even in economics — the discipline most committed to assumptions about the rational actor — scholars have explored this idea. A leading figure in this disciplinary effort is Robert Shiller, winner of the 2013 Nobel prize in economics. In his 2019 book Narrative Economics, Shiller argued for the importance of „economic narratives" for his discipline. He formulated this claim in terms of „contagious economics stories" that affect how decisions are made about such things as whether to invest in Bitcoin.

This new focus does not amount to a rejection of rational decision making as a topic in economics or other social sciences. Instead, Shiller sees narratives as „an important new element to the usual list of economic factors driving the economy" (Shiller 2019, 3) Analogous claims can be made for political science and international relations, where the point is to expand inquiry beyond decision making based on the rational calculation of costs and benefits. Narrative thinking adds an essential dimension to inquiry in all these fields by virtue of its „peculiar logic" (Brooks 1984) for grasping together a temporal sequence of events into a plot. The narratives involved in national identity are often fairly simple and seldom involve the sort of complex plot twists found in a Shakespeare play or a detective novel. But they still build on Aristotle's deceptively simple observation that narratives have a beginning, middle, and end, with contemporary scholarship giving special weight to the „sense of an ending" (Kermode 1967) that assigns meaning to the preceding events. This „peculiar logic" of narratives (Brooks 1984) shapes most realms of human discourse and thought.

Anthropology and psychology have chimed in with further ideas about the form and function of narrative, and this has led to studies of topics such as how stories underpin collective memory and identity. Such stories are a ubiquitous part of the everyday life of collectives, but they come into particular focus in clashes between nations over „what really happened" in their past. Consider, for instance, the never-ending clash between Israelis and Palestinians over what happened in 1948 or between Indians and Pakistanis when it comes to Partition in 1947.

Disputes over such matters differ from disputes over opinions. In the latter, we might find ourselves saying things like, „Well, I guess we just have different opinions," whereas matters are more difficult with narratives because they involve truth. We can find ourselves deeply frustrated when a narrative we hold to be true encounters a contradictory account that may include the same facts but a different plot structure. Such encounters can lead to saying – or shouting, „I'm not just giving you an opinion, I'm telling you what really happened!" And then, as frustration mounts, we might go on to say, „I can't believe you know what happened and still deny the truth!" Things can go further downhill

1 The terms „narrative" and „story" are used interchangeably in this report.

when interlocutors switch to accusations of how others (never ourselves!) are brainwashed, stupid, or ignorant – signaling the collapse of communication.

Specific Narratives and Narrative Templates

In order to address these issues, a more elaborated notion of narrative is required. We often speak blithely of „narrative" as if it is just one construct, but in fact, it is a broad umbrella term that covers a several ideas and distinctions. An especially important distinction for my purposes is that between „specific narratives" and „narrative templates,"(Wertsch 2021) which applies to fictional as well as nonfictional texts.

Specific narratives have a surface form that can be heard in spoken discourse or seen in written text, film, or other media, and they include concrete information about an event with its actors, dates, and places. By contrast, narrative templates are underlying schematic codes that are not directly accessible to observation. They are posited by analysts as they try to make sense of patterns in specific narratives such as those used by members of a national community. As abstract forms of representation, narrative templates include little or no concrete information about dates, places, and actors. They are the kind of representation studied by cognitive psychologists for decades under the heading of „scripts"2 or „schemata"(Bartlett 1932).

To illustrate these two levels of narrative analysis, consider first the following specific narrative about The Great Patriotic War, an event that the Kremlin views as the most important and glorious episode of the twentieth century and a bedrock of Russian national identity. An abbreviated version of this specific narrative is:

> On June 22, 1941, Germany launched a vicious, unprovoked attack on the Soviet Union. This attack was halted when Soviet forces stopped the German army at the Battle of Moscow. The war went on to include massive victories by the Soviet army at the Battle of Stalingrad in the winter of 1942-43, the Battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943, and the Battle of Berlin in the spring of 1945.

This qualifies as a specific narrative because it has a surface form and because it includes concrete information about events, actors, times, and places. One or another version of it, often in more elaborated forms, is found in countless textbooks and films, and it is memorialized and celebrated every year in Russia on May 9th, the Day of Victory, which is currently the most important state holiday in Russia.

There is, of course, good reason for commemorating The Great Patriotic War in Russia, given the massive loss and trauma the nation experienced. But the staying power of specific narratives about the war also reflects the fact that they share a generic plot line that is part of a larger worldview, and this brings us to narrative templates. The particular narrative template at issue in this discussion is what can be called the „Expulsion-of-Alien-Enemies" story, a schematic code posited by analysts that can help account for patterns found across multiple specific narratives. Unlike specific narratives about The Great Patriotic War, this narrative template is not overtly taught in schools. Instead, it is

2 D. Berntsen. Life scripts

an unconscious code that has coalesced out of countless encounters with specific narratives. It serves as a sort of cookie-cutter form for generating multiple specific narratives and can be represented as:

1. An initial situation or setting in which Russia is peaceful and not interfering with others
2. „Trouble," in which an alien enemy viciously attacks Russia without provocation.
3. Russia comes under existential threat and nearly loses everything as the enemy attempts to destroy it as a civilization.
4. Through heroism and exceptionalism, against all odds, and acting alone, Russia triumphs and succeeds in expelling the alien enemy.

During the Soviet years, this narrative template was instantiated in countless specific narratives about The Great Patriotic War that featured the Communist Party as the major protagonist and hero. In textbooks and other official sources, the Party was depicted as the courageous agent at the vanguard of the people that had the wisdom and iron will needed to win the war. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, this story abruptly changed. The Party was no longer presented as the hero it had earlier been made out to be, and official and unofficial accounts started to report that the Party had actually been an impediment to the war effort.

Such a claim would have been heretical, even criminal in earlier years when Party and state authorities tried to exert strict control of narratives about the past. But in the 1980s and 1990s it surfaced as part of glasnost' and ignited heated debates about what had really happened in The Great Patriotic War. During this period, my friends in Moscow marveled at the fact that official documents were saying things that could have cost people their job or even freedom just a few short years earlier. For them, it was hard to fathom that they could now openly talk about what had formerly been heretical and dangerous to discuss in public.

To be sure, there was something new, even revolutionary, in these post-Soviet accounts of the war, but further inspection reveals that the change was at the surface level of specific narratives and left the underlying narrative template largely untouched. In the transition from Soviet and post-Soviet textbooks, for example, the Russian people replaced the Party as the heroic protagonist that checked the German invasion and saved the nation and the world from fascism. Such accounts were radically new on the surface, but the reflected the continuing power of the Expulsion-of-Alien-Enemies narrative template. This amounted to something like the same story with different characters. Or new wine — or vodka — in old bottles.

Recognizing the power of the Expulsion-of-Alien-Enemies narrative template is crucial for understanding this transformation in post-Soviet Russia, but it is a narrative template that has much broader applicability as well. It has long provided the basic plot line in Russia for a litany of historical episodes, including the invasions of Teutonic knights in the thirteenth century, Mongols in the fourteenth century, Poles in the seventeenth century, Turks in the eighteenth century, French in the nineteenth century, and Germans in the twentieth century. Among Russians, it is widely accepted that these episodes all involve a setting in which a peaceful Russia is attacked by vicious enemy and responds with a heroic effort to quash the existential threat and expel the enemy.

Perhaps even more striking, at least to Westerners, is that this narrative template has been used to understand alien enemies in the form of ideas. In his 1978 commencement address at Harvard University, for example, Alexander Solzhenitsyn3 argued that Marxism was an alien enemy that had

3 Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. A World Split Apart. https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/alexandersolzhenitsyn-

invaded and almost destroyed Russian civilization, only to be expelled after seven decades of suffering under Soviet Marxist-Leninism. In the eyes of some quarters in Russia, alien ideas have posed the most dangerous existential threat of all because they undermine their nation's unique spiritual mission and the very nature of Russia. This has been asserted for decades, even centuries. For example, in his 1872 novel Demons, Dostoevsky envisioned a threat to Russian civilization in the form of a „miasma" of Western ideas such as socialism and nihilism that had infiltrated the population.

Overall, then, the Expulsion-of-Alien-Enemies narrative template has come to play a central role in the Russian imagination to such an extent that it can encourage Russians to see threats where others do not. This is sometimes viewed by Westerners as paranoia, but for Russians it reflects a deeply held and unconscious underlying code that reveals the truth about what really happened. Accounts of events based on this narrative template can be hard for outsiders to accept, making it difficult for them to engage with Russians in productive discussion. Frequently, the result is charges by Westerners of brainwashing, which only serve to set off further alarm bells in the Kremlin. In other cases, talk about existential threats is dismissed by Western observers as cynical rhetorical moves by Putin and others, which indeed sometimes may be the case. But there remains ample evidence that Russian rhetoric reflects a long tradition of Russian thought, education, and public discourse.

Is this a uniquely Russian phenomenon? After all, didn't many Americans view the 9/11 attack in 2001 through the lens of the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941? This might be viewed as evidence that America also uses an Expulsion-of-Alien-Enemies narrative template. This seeming parallel between the Russian and U.S. cases can be attributed in part to the fact there is probably a limited set of general narrative templates for all nations. All nations tend to claim that they are unique (indeed, more unique than others!), but at an abstract level, the narrative templates available to interpret the world appear to come from a restricted set, including expulsion of alien enemies after an unprovoked attack; heroic survival of a national community (usually a small one) in the face of endless efforts to destroy it; the triumphal creation a nation as a great power; and the heroic struggle required to follow a divine mission.

But there remain clear differences between Russia and America in the role of national narratives about eventual victory after invasion by alien enemies. An additional notion about narratives and their function is needed to see how this is so. This is the notion of a „Privileged Event Narrative" (PEN) (Wertsch 2021). A PEN is a specific narrative, but one that also mirrors a narrative template. The Russian account of The Great Patriotic War qualifies in this regard in that it is a specific narrative about a concrete event and also clearly reflects the Expulsion-of-Alien-Enemies narrative template.

Privileged Event Narratives

The power of this PEN reflects the impact of real experience of a national community, to be sure, but it also stems from the fact that the Expulsion-of-Alien-Enemies narrative template has come to occupy a privileged position in Russian discourse and thought. It is a lens that is widely used there, including on occasions where members of other national communities do not see its relevance. This can lead to puzzlement over why it is introduced into a conversation and to the question, „Why do

harvard.htm (22.02.2023)

you see everything in terms of The Great Patriotic War?" Privileged Event Narratives bear some similarity to Volkan Vanak's notion of a „chosen trauma" (Volkan 2009) that guides a group's perception of itself, but it does not have to include trauma as the organizing focus. The general point is that a PEN is characterized in part by a strong preference for members of a national community to invoke a particular event from the past as a lens for viewing other events.

To explore these claims further, consider Vladimir Putin's discussion with members of the international press about the 2008 „Five Day War" between Russia and Georgia. This brief, but brutal conflict started in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two contested regions of Georgia, but then spread to other areas of the country as well, with Russian tanks almost reaching the capital city Tbilisi. What began with a bombardment by the Georgian army of Tskhinvali, a city in the province of South Ossetia, was followed within hours by a large-scale invasion of the Russian army into South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the rapid retreat of Georgian forces from these two regions. Russian air strikes on these and other parts of Georgian territory continued until a ceasefire was called at the urging of the international community. The result was that Abkhazia and South Ossetia became „autonomous" statelets, at least in the eyes of Russia.

Kremlin accounts of the 2008 war rejects any suggestion of aggression or expansionism on Russia's part. Instead, they are organized around a narrative about a NATO threat to Russia. From this perspective, the Russian invasion was a response to an outside threat by alien enemies, which of course is the standard line being used today to justify its war with Ukraine. This interpretation was on display a few weeks after the 2008 war when Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke to an international group of journalists and scholars.4 There he asserted:

> One of the most difficult problems today is the current situation in the Caucasus: South Ossetia, Abkhazia and everything related to the recent tragic events caused by the aggression of the Georgian leadership against these two states. I call them „states,"5 because, as you know, Russia has made a decision to recognise [sic] their sovereignty.

Following this statement by Putin, British journalist Jonathan Steele noted in a question-and-answer session that the opening salvo of the war was fired by Georgian forces and that these forces had committed „atrocities" against South Ossetians. But Steele went on to say that the „moral high ground" then shifted to Georgia as Russian forces pursued their attack beyond South Ossetia. Putin responded to this with acerbic disbelief.

> You know, your question doesn't surprise me. What really surprises me is how powerful the propaganda machine of the so-called „West" is. This is just amazing. This is unbelievable. This is totally incredible. And yet, it's happening. Of course, this is because, first, people are very susceptible to suggestion. Second, ordinary people usually don't follow world events that closely. So, it is very easy to misrepresent the actual course of events and to impose somebody else's point of view. I

4 „Russia Has No Imperial Ambitions — Putin," *Russia Today*, September 2008. http://www.russiatoday.com/news/news/30316 (22.02.2023)

5 Before the 2008 conflict South Ossetia was a part of Georgian territory, and it has not been recognized as independent by all the nations who are members of the UN General Assembly except for Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, and Tuvalu.

> don't believe there is one person among us here who is not familiar with the facts. At least in this room, everybody knows perfectly well how the events unfolded in reality. I have given the true account on several occasions, including my recent interviews with CNN and ARD.

This might appear to be mendacious bluster by Putin, but there is good reason to take his comments as sincere and reflecting deep beliefs held by himself and a large segment of the Russian population. His words and actions in other settings have been consistent with a commitment to the truth of this account, which ran so deep that he found it difficult to believe anyone could hold another view. For him, it was „amazing," „unbelievable," and „incredible" that people did so, and he explained it away as reflecting people's susceptibility to suggestion and the „propaganda machine of the so-called 'West'."

This is a case where the truth claims of competing national narratives generated frustration and anger, in part because both sides viewed themselves as simply telling the truth about what really happened, leaving little room for anything other than a testy standoff. The fact that the opposing viewpoints remain so resistant to change and impervious to evidence suggests that strongly held underlying belief systems in the form of narrative templates were at work.

The power of the national narrative that guided Putin's remarks was further evidenced in this press conference when additional questions were raised about the need to invade Georgia. At that point, Putin invoked the PEN about The Great Patriotic War and spoke as an exasperated teacher might speak to a slow student, revealing his frustration at others' inability to see an obvious truth.

> Now, let me explain why we went there. I have already explained the military aspect to you. Now let's remember how WW2 started. On September 1 [1939], Nazi Germany attacked Poland. Then they attacked the Soviet Union [in 1941]. What do you think the Russian Army should have done? Do you think it should have reached the border and stopped there?

On hearing this, many Westerners are tempted to ask, „What does World War II have to do with the Russia invasion of Georgia in 2008?" Or „Why aren't you talking about Chechnya or Afghanistan as a lens for viewing events in Georgia?" At a more general level, the question is, „Why do Putin and other Russian leaders constantly bring up World War II when discussing events that seem to have little to do with it?" These questions are indicators that a Russian PEN is at work. This narrative clearly is something rehearsed and reinforced by the Kremlin, but it also is a deeply rooted in narrative habits for making sense of multiple invasions over the centuries. Putin's rhetorical move would have little appeal in Russia if it could not play off this narrative template, and for the same reason, it has little resonance, or just seems bizarre to members of other national communities. The PEN in this case surfaces so clearly that it begs the question of who is doing the talking and suggests that the PEN is a „co-author" of Putin's utterances.

National Narrative Projects (NNP)

Specific narratives, narrative templates, and PENs play crucial roles in Russian national identity, but in order to fill out the picture of how they contribute to this identity project, one additional form

of narrative needs to be considered — a National Narrative Project (NNP)(Wertsch 2021). An NNP is a kind of overall biography or life history of a national community that is directed toward an aspiration or ideal that guides a national community's understanding of itself. As is the case for the other forms of narrative I have discussed, an NNP has a beginning and a middle, but instead of an ending of the usual sort, it culminates in an aspiration or imagined „telos" for the future.

My notion of an NNP draws on ideas of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (1984), who asserted, „I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'." It should be noted that drawing parallels between individual and collective processes can be unhelpful or even misleading, but in this case it is legitimate because the focus is on individuals as members of a group. For MacIntyre, „an understanding of any society begins with „the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources." (MacIntyre 1984, 216) This has implications for individuals as members of a national community as they try to understand the „narrative quest" that characterizes their group and where it is headed.

Just as for individuals, narrative quests for a nation „sometimes fail, are frustrated, abandoned, or dissipated into distractions" (MacIntyre 1984, 219). Furthermore, in both cases the „criteria for success or failure . . . are the criteria for success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest." A narrative quest unfolds as it is being lived, with the result that „at any given point in an enacted dramatic narrative we do not know what will happen next." The unpredictability, however, „coexists with a second crucial characteristic of all lived narratives, a certain teleological character." The dialectic between lived events and an individual's or nation's sense of where it is headed means that „There is no present which is not informed by some image of the future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a telos — or a variety of ends or goals — toward which we are either moving or failing to move in the present. Unpredictability and teleology therefore coexist as part of our lives."

As an illustration, consider how the prospects for American victory over Japan appeared to be in early 1942. At that time, the outcome was quite unpredictable and could even be envisioned as total defeat, but the population and political leadership continued to be informed by „an image of the future . . . in the form of a telos" that guided their action as they pursued their efforts in the massive conflict. Of course, Japan was also guided by a telos, reminding us that a narrative quest does not necessarily lead to a desired outcome. In all cases, however, nations pursued their course of action in accordance with their understanding of what narrative they were part of.

Russia's National Narrative Project

In Russia, ideas about a narrative quest have long been part of a discussion of the „national idea" (Berdyaev 1992). This took on a particular shape during the Soviet period, when Marxism-Leninism was harnessed to provide a telos based on socialist ideals. But during Putin's time in power, it has shifted back to longstanding notions of Russian nationalism, suggesting that this version of the national idea and the NNP that goes with it can be expected to shape Russia's outlook and behavior for the long term, well after Putin leaves office.

A feature of this NNP is that Russia has a unique, grand mission for humankind. Putin's ideas about this mission have been shaped by the writings of Russian religious and philosophical figures

over the past few centuries. These include Lev Gumilev (Bassin 2016) (1912-1992), whose ideas have morphed into claims about a unique „Eurasian" civilization that is destined to be in constant conflict with „Atlanticist" forces of the U.S. and Europe, and Konstantin Leontiev (2020) (1831-1891), who envisioned Russia's quest in terms of closer ties with Asian societies in an effort to ward off the infiltration of polluting ideas from the West.

Another figure who has played an important role in shaping Putin's ideas is Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954), a philosopher who left Russia after the Russian Revolution and lived most of his life in Germany and Switzerland. Putin has often quoted Ilyin and has instructed Russian elites to study his writings. He also oversaw efforts to return Ilyin's archives from Michigan State University and his remains from Switzerland to Russia. In Ilyin's view, Russia is an innocent and pure nation that has repeatedly been victimized by invasions and the infiltration of alien ideas designed to weaken and destroy the nation. As outlined by the historian Timothy Snyder (2018), Ilyin provided a metaphysical and moral justification for an authoritarian state of the sort that Putin is now trying to build. It is a state based on „Christian fascism" that rejects representative democracy and the rule of law because they are direct threats to Russian purity. Instead, what's needed is an indomitable leader, fortified by strong Russian Orthodox spirituality, who is unafraid to take brutal action to repel foreign enemies and root out domestic ones. For Putin and his followers today, Ilyin has provided a road map to a fiercely proud, spiritually pure, unconquerable Russia of the future.

These ideas have an extensive genealogy in Russian culture. Most Russians today, for example, are familiar with the notion of Moscow as the „Third Rome," which can be traced to the monk Filofei of Pskov in 1510 and others of his time who claimed that corruption and moral decay caused the downfall of Rome and then Constantinople, which then led to the rise of Moscow as the center of pure Christianity. Such narratives about the divine mission of a spiritually pure Russia are practically unknown to Western readers, which only contributes to the conflict that often ensues from efforts to engage Russians in political discussion. Such conflict is exacerbated by national narratives are built around claims of Russia's special, divine missions for all of humankind as envisioned by Ilyin and others. Putin's ideas about the need to „liberate" Ukraine today reflect this line of thinking. For him, this is just the first step in a grand global struggle between the corrupt West and a conservative and pure, faith-based worldview based on Russian Orthodoxy.

National Narratives as Cultural Tools

I have argued that several types of narratives play a role in contemporary Russian discourse and thought. These include specific narratives, the narrative templates that underlie them, and Privileged Event Narratives that serve as lenses through which members of a national group view the world. All of these shape cognitive processes for making sense of past and present events. In addition, the notion of a National Narrative Project provides a telos and guides Russian cognitive and emotional commitments to a grand mission in the future.

An assumption that underpins this line of reasoning is that narratives are „cultural tools"(Wertsch 2021) They are not mechanistic forces that on their own determine what we say or think. To believe that would be to rob humans of agency and responsibility, which is not where we want to end up in discussions of national identity in Russia or anywhere else. Instead, these cultural tools are used

to co-author the discourse and thought of individuals as members of nations, and they can be used for both beneficial and destructive purposes. They serve as off-the-shelf semiotic technology that can be used both responsibly and irresponsibly.

The mental habits that grow out of the use of these narrative tools serve as the grooves — or ruts — that make it easy for individuals as members of a group to automatically and effortlessly size up events — and also difficult to see things from other perspectives. This line of reasoning reflects an assumption in cognitive psychology that humans are „cognitive misers" who rely on unconscious mental processes to handle most of their daily activities, thus freeing up energy and time required to deal with novel or difficult tasks requiring conscious reflection.

These ideas can be traced back to classic works in psychology such as William James's chapter on habit in his 1890 volume Principles of Psychology. There James compared the formation of a habit to putting a crease in a stiff piece of paper. Once this done, it is easy to fold the paper at the same place, but difficult to get out of that rut when trying to put another crease right next to the existing one. In James's account, habits are individual psychological phenomena, but they also serve as „the enormous fly-wheel of society." By this, he meant that they are a conservative force that preserves a social or political order, even one that might be criticized as unjust. Furthermore, James emphasized that the most opportune time to form habits is early in life, which has obvious implications for how nations organize education.

So, where does all this leave us in a world that is bitterly divided over national identity and ways of interpreting events? First, it provides a sobering picture of what we are up against. The powerful mental grooves provided by narratives, especially narrative templates and NNPs, are unconscious and deeply tied to identity. This often makes these narrative forms impervious to objective evidence and rational counterargument, and it may be only by recognizing narrative habits — in others as well as ourselves — that we can hope to achieve even a minimal level of understanding. This does not mean capitulation or simple agreement with others, but it does mean engaging in an informed effort to understand their worldview.

Another implication of this narrative analysis is that state propaganda may not be as powerful as we sometimes think. Instead of being all powerful, it is likely to have limited effectiveness unless it takes underlying, bottom-up narrative forces and habits into account. To be sure, propaganda efforts can have an impact, but the impact relies on finding resonance with existing elements of shared narratives and narrative templates, which can also put a brake on efforts to change things quickly.

A stark, either-or dichotomy between top-down and bottom-up forces is unlikely to yield useful insights. Instead, it is essential to recognize that narrative habits have lasting power in their own right that might not be particularly susceptible to top-down propaganda. This runs counter to many observations about state propaganda efforts, where one hears things like, „People support the war in Ukraine because they have been inundated by a steady stream of propaganda from the Kremlin." Again, this is not to say propaganda has no impact, but it is to say that propaganda relies on underlying codes such as narrative templates to be effective and these codes can be quite resistant to change. It very well may be that if state television propaganda broadcasts were taken off the air tomorrow, a national narrative would continue to guide popular opinion in large segments of the Russian population.

A takeaway message of this report it that attempts to respond to a national narrative by appealing to objective evidence and rational argument may not be particularly effective. Because national

narratives, especially narrative templates operate in unconscious ways and come with truth claims attached to them, they are resistant challenge. In many cases, the best-perhaps only effective way to confront a group's narrative will be come up with an alternative narrative with an effective plot of its own. This involves what political and public relations experts call „controlling the narrative." In some cases, this requires direct confrontation with another group's story, but it also can involve finding a larger narrative in which opposing groups both appear as actors. In the long run, early education will be a key ingredient in forming national narratives and making them more open to engagement with other accounts of events. Even in the best of circumstances, however, this will involve unearthing our unconscious assumptions and finding ways to manage, rather than transcend differences in narratives and the habits they spawn.

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