# The Historical Foundations of Russian Strategic Culture

*Endurance, Authority, and National Identity*

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## Abstract

Russian strategic culture is often explained through contemporary military capabilities and geopolitical ambitions. This paper argues that recurring narratives of invasion, sacrifice, and centralized authority, though shaped and exploited by political elites, are grounded in remembered historical trauma and help define which security choices appear legitimate to Russian leaders and publics. Through an interpretive reading of four cultural works (a film, a poem, a wartime story, and an oral history) set against key moments from the memory of Mongol rule to the war in Ukraine, the paper traces how duty, endurance, and state authority are presented as conditions of survival, and at what cost to individuals. It proposes these narratives as a historical foundation for analyzing Russian leaders' decision-making and security behavior.

**Keywords:** Russian strategic culture, historical memory, political culture, national identity, state authority, collective sacrifice, Russian foreign policy, international security

## Introduction

In the eyes of the West, Russia has long been categorized as cold, authoritarian, and aggressively nationalistic. From the Cold War to the war in Ukraine, this view has often lumped Russian people together with failed politics or harsh ideology. Russian history and literature, spanning centuries, reveal a far more complex cultural identity. Invasion, political instability, imperial expansion, and Soviet state-building have led many in Russian society to see discipline, sacrifice, and endurance as necessary for survival. Cultural works repeatedly explore the tension between the needs of the individual and the demands of the state. From the rise of centralized power after Mongol rule to Soviet wartime ideology and post-Soviet testimony of Soviet-era trauma, these works portray suffering not simply as tragedy, but as something deeply connected to survival and national identity. Whether in practice or in artistic expression, duty is presented as both destructive and necessary.

The central argument is that these recurring narratives are not only tools of elite control. They also reflect a genuine historical lineage: shaped by remembered trauma, they help define which security choices appear legitimate and necessary to Russian leaders and publics. Elites clearly use such narratives, but those who use them are also formed by them. The paper makes an interpretive and historical contribution. It does not claim that culture alone causes Russian decisions, only that it shapes the context in which those decisions are made. It first places the argument within the strategic culture debate and explains its sources and method, then analyzes four works in chronological order, traces the continuity of these narratives into contemporary behavior, and considers counterarguments and limits. It is also intended as a historical foundation for broader research on leader psychology and security decision-making.

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## Strategic Culture: Theory and Debate

Strategic culture entered the study of international security in the 1970s, when Snyder (1977) argued that Soviet nuclear thinking could not be explained by rational calculation alone and was shaped by a distinctive historical and organizational experience. Gray (1999, p. 58) later described strategic culture as the "world of mind, feeling, and habit in behaviour," and argued that it provides context for decisions, even where the final choice is "all but counter-cultural" (Gray, 1999, p. 59). This is the sense in which the term is used here: culture does not dictate choices, but it shapes what leaders perceive as threatening, possible, and legitimate.

Critics have raised two challenges. The first is that culture is hard to separate from behavior: if any action can be read as an expression of the culture, the concept explains nothing (Johnston, 1995). The second, from critical or second-generation approaches, is that strategic culture is less an inherited disposition than a discourse produced by elites. Lock (2010), synthesizing Klein's (1988) approach, describes strategic culture in this tradition as a political web of interpretation in which strategic practices gain meaning, rendering some options possible and legitimate and others not.

This paper accepts part of the critical argument and resists the stronger form of it as Lock presents it. Elites do use narratives for control, and two of the works analyzed below were state-sanctioned. But the elite use of a narrative does not show that it is merely a tool. Leaders are formed by the same education, commemorations, literature, and family memories as everyone else, and may believe what they promote. On this view, strategic culture is constructed but not arbitrary: it is built up over time from experiences that were real, and it is remembered, retold, and reactivated in later crises. Work on collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011) and ontological security (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008) offers ways to think about this transmission, although this paper does not test them directly. Work on Russia makes versions of this argument. Neumann (2011) argues that a memory of domination by the Golden Horde shaped Russia's early stance toward Europe, a point developed below. Götz and Staun (2022) describe Russian strategic narratives as rooted in socially constructed interpretations of history, geography, and domestic traditions, and note that the collective memory of invasions is "deeply ingrained in Russian strategic thought" (Götz & Staun, 2022, p. 484). Dagi (2025, p. 21) argues that Russian strategic culture is not "etched in stone" but a dynamic context shaped by narratives, which fits the view taken here that culture is constructed but not arbitrary, though this paper places more weight on the historical experiences those narratives draw on.

## Sources, Method, and Scope

The analysis rests on four primary works: Sergei Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible, Part I* (1944), Alexander Pushkin's poem *The Bronze Horseman* (1833), Boris Polevoi's story from *We Are Soviet People* (1949), and Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* (originally published in Russian in 1997; English translation 2006). They were chosen because each engages a traumatic or defining episode in Russian memory: foreign domination and the building of the centralized state, imperial construction and its human cost, invasion and total war, and technological disaster and state secrecy. Each also links the experience of individuals to the demands of the state. The secondary literature discussed above provides the theoretical frame and historical context, and is kept separate from these primary texts.

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The works are read interpretively, with three questions in mind. How is the threat to the community described? What does the work ask or expect of the individual? How is state authority justified or questioned?

The approach has limits. Four works are not a representative sample of Russian opinion, and they are read here in translation. Eisenstein and Polevoi were produced under Stalin and show the official narrative at least as much as popular belief, while Pushkin and Alexievich offer more ambivalent and critical views and so serve as a check on the official line. The paper therefore claims that these narratives recur and plausibly shape what leaders regard as legitimate, not that culture alone caused particular decisions. If the argument holds, we should expect to find these motifs recurring across periods and genres, including in works that complicate the official line; leaders invoking these memories in high-stakes decisions and not only in public rhetoric; and perceived weakness treated as the central danger. The argument would be weakened if the motifs faded in later periods, or if leaders' choices were fully explained by material interests alone.

## Historical Origins of Russian Strategic Culture

The memory of Mongol rule is often traced as the earliest root of this mentality. Mongol overlordship lasted roughly 240 years, until 1480, when the standoff at the Ugra River ended with the Horde withdrawing, an event traditionally treated as the end of the “Tatar yoke.” The Mongol period subsequently became associated with the historical image of a foreign “yoke,” although historians have challenged this characterization as an oversimplification of complex Russo-Mongol relations (Halperin, 1985; Bilz-Leonhardt, 2008). Halperin emphasizes political cooperation, institutional borrowing, trade, and alliances alongside conflict. For the argument here, the memory matters more than the events: the story of subjugation and liberation became a foundation for how Russian rulers and later writers explained the need for a strong, centralized state. Neumann (2011) argues that Russia's stance toward European polities in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is best understood through a key memory of having been dominated by the Golden Horde, and suggests that Russia has “never really let go of its memories” of being part of that suzerain system (Neumann, 2011, p. 463). He also notes that this memory carried an understanding of politics as the constitution of a center, which helps frame the rule of Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible, r. 1547–1584). Centralized institutions had already developed in Muscovy before his reign (Martin, 2007), and Ivan inherited and extended them. Under Ivan IV, Muscovite political authority was articulated through claims of tsarist legitimacy and autocratic rule, although the meaning of autocracy was more complex than the notion of unlimited personal power (Halperin, 2014).

In Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible*, leadership decisions that could be considered erratic or harsh are justified by the need to protect the state from foreign invasion and to preserve cultural identity from erasure. Because the film was made during the Second World War and approved by Stalin's government, it shows how Soviet authorities wished Ivan to be remembered. That Part II, unlike Part I, was banned in 1946 after its portrayal of Ivan conflicted with the state's preferred image of a decisive ruler, and was not released until 1958 (Elphick, 2024; Bordwell, 1993; British Film Institute, n.d.) illustrates both the use of culture for control and a leader's sensitivity to how power and its costs were portrayed, a reminder that elite control and elite belief are hard to separate. The memory of occupation remained influential in the centuries that followed. Over time, sacrifice for the nation became intertwined with patriotism and survival.

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## State Power and Imperial Identity

The conflict between individual needs and national greatness is particularly evident in Alexander Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*. The poem celebrates the creation of St. Petersburg by Peter the Great while also detailing the suffering of individuals caused by imperial ambition. In the opening pages, Peter resolves that a city will be founded on the Neva's shore to spite the haughty neighbor (Pushkin, 1993, p. 9). St. Petersburg represents Russia's transition into a modern imperial power and the triumph of state ambition. There is clear admiration for the creation of this city, a “window to the west,” as it was called. The narrator then addresses the city directly and declares his love for it as Peter's creation (Pushkin, 1993, p. 9). However, the poem also reveals the costs of this project. St. Petersburg's location on the Neva River left it vulnerable to flooding, and the poem draws on the real flood of 1824. Its main character, Evgeny, loses the woman he loves during a catastrophic flood, which causes him to descend into madness. The poem presents Russia's greatness as both admirable and destructive, and suggests that personal sacrifice and suffering are treated as a fundamental condition of national survival. Nicholas I personally reviewed and censored the manuscript, Pushkin did not publish the complete poem in his lifetime, an altered version appeared in 1837, and the original lines were restored only in later editions (Izmailov, 1973; Rosenshield, 1996). This shows the reach of the state even into this ambivalence.

Imperial ambition also invited retaliation. Napoleon's invasion of 1812, which reached Moscow, was remembered as the Patriotic War, a name later echoed in the “Great Patriotic War” of 1941–1945 (Mikaberidze, 2011). Together with the memory of Mongol rule, it reinforced the lesson that Russia's territory was vulnerable to invasion and that survival required a strong state and a mobilized population.

## Collective Sacrifice During the Great Patriotic War

This theme intensified during the Second World War. Germany's invasion in June 1941 was one of the great invasions in the national memory, alongside those of the Mongols and Napoleon, and it was far more destructive. The Stalinist era of Soviet history emphasized working harder and providing for one's country at any cost. Duty to the state was not just patriotic; it was presented as morally necessary. Boris Polevoi's *We Are Soviet People* clearly reflects this worldview. In the story, a young woman in the midst of wartime reflects on what she has been taught about responsibility to the state, and what that means for her in the present. She thinks back to old sayings from her father, one of which is, “It is your duty to render a greater service to the government by working in the rear” (Polevoi, 1949, p. 200). With these memories, she expresses, “We have to win at any price. This is no time for petty calculations” (Polevoi, 1949, p. 200). To many readers, this would be seen as blind obedience without regard to oneself, or as clear evidence of propaganda, and as a wartime publication it was certainly meant to mobilize. However, for many Soviet citizens, sacrifice became second nature and a crucial means of resisting destruction. In Russia, the Second World War became known as the Great Patriotic War, which remained a symbol of unity (Ward & Thompson, 2021, p. 226). The expectation that citizens should endure suffering for the greater good became deeply ingrained within Soviet political culture.

The state's demands extended to those who survived. Order No. 270 of August 16, 1941 treated surrender as treason, threatened commanders who surrendered, and imposed penalties on the families of captured soldiers (Moore, 2022). Many returning prisoners later underwent NKVD screening, and some were detained or sent to labor camps, though outcomes varied (Bernstein, 2019). Stalin's distrust of internal enemies predated the war, as the purges of 1937–1938 show, so the war is better read as

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reinforcing a suspicion of weakness than as creating it. It is a case in which the demand for duty and strength was tied to a fear of vulnerability.

## Secrecy and Silence: Chornobyl

The legacy of sacrifice and endurance appears in late Soviet and post-Soviet literature as well. Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl* presents firsthand accounts from survivors of the Chornobyl disaster and exposes the human cost of the Soviet emphasis on duty and silence. (Chornobyl is in present-day Ukraine, and Alexievich is a Belarusian writer. The disaster is relevant here as an event of the Soviet state, whose culture of duty and secrecy these accounts describe.) The firefighters and liquidators responded to the disaster without being adequately informed about the radiation dangers they faced. This reflected both a deeply rooted habit among Soviet citizens of doing as the state instructed without question and the effects of state policy itself. Soviet authorities initially concealed the true nature of the accident from the public and from the responders, presenting it as a fire rather than a nuclear accident with extremely high radiation. Of the firefighters, one account states that they “weren't wearing their canvas gear. They went off just as they were, in their shirt sleeves. No one told them” (Alexievich, 2006, pp. 5–6). These accounts convey that the workers were not simply loyalists willing to die for the interests of the state. Rather, they were ordinary people attempting to survive psychologically in unimaginable circumstances.

The cover-up can be read in several ways: as bureaucratic self-protection, as the habit of a secretive system, and as an instinct that admitting failure would expose the state's weakness. These explanations reinforce one another, and the paper does not claim that culture alone explains it. Even after decades of government secrecy and political failure, many citizens continued to place collective survival above personal safety, because suffering itself had become deeply connected to responsibility. In *Voices from Chernobyl*, endurance no longer appears glorious or triumphant. Instead, it appears exhausting and profoundly human.

## Continuity and Contemporary Strategic Behavior

Although these works examine different historical periods, they reveal consistent themes that continue to shape discussions surrounding contemporary Russia. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 can be read as the next link in this sequence. It was not an invasion, but it was experienced by many as a sudden loss of territory, status, and security. Putin described it in 2005, in the Kremlin's English translation, as “a major geopolitical disaster of the century” (Putin, 2005). A 2015 survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center found that 53 percent of respondents expressed negative feelings about the 1990s (Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 2015), although this does not show that most experienced it as humiliation. Official narratives have also framed the period as one of weakness and humiliation (Malinova, 2021). This framing is a later, politically useful interpretation, which is exactly why the paper separates elite use of memory from genuine lineage: the argument is that the second helps explain why the first finds an audience.

Several examples illustrate how these themes may be observed in recent Russian security behavior. First, in December 2021 Russia published draft treaties demanding legally binding guarantees against NATO enlargement (Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021a, 2021b). This can be read through the long memory of invasion and the search for a buffer, as well as through ordinary great-power interests.

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Second, Putin's July 2021 essay on the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians (Putin, 2021; Düben, 2023) and the official justification of the 2022 invasion (Zavershinskaia, 2024) draw heavily on history, grievance, and the survival of the state. Victory Day has become the central secular holiday of the Russian state, and official commemoration of the Great Patriotic War continues to frame the defense of the homeland as the nation's central collective achievement (Soroka & Krawatzek, 2021). Skak (2016, p. 324) traces the evolution of the Kremlin's threat perception starting from its sense of vulnerability to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, and Østbø (2026, p. 608) argues that Russian "hypersensitivity to provocations" has had catastrophic consequences. Together these suggest that such narratives can distort judgment as well as motivate action.

These links are suggestive and not proof of causation. They should also be read alongside the fact that the same narratives can serve very different ends, a point taken up below. While modern Russia differs significantly from both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, these historical narratives provide valuable context for interpreting Russian strategic behavior and contemporary foreign policy.

## Counterarguments and Limits

The central risk is that any behavior, defensive or aggressive, can be read as consistent with this culture. The same themes can explain both: a state that fears invasion may seek buffer zones, which look aggressive from outside. This is only a strength if the argument says what would count against it. Gray's (1999) point that culture shapes context even where the final choice runs against it is useful here, because it means periods of cooperation must be explained, not ignored. Gorbachev's arms control and withdrawal from Eastern Europe, the cooperation of the early 1990s, and Putin's early overtures to the West, including his March 2000 interview expressing openness to Russian NATO membership, conditional on Russia being treated as an equal partner (Kupiecki & Menkiszak, 2020, p. 337), are all cases to engage. They show that culture limits and shapes choices but does not determine them.

A second challenge comes from competing explanations: neorealist security competition, regime survival, bureaucratic politics, and the personalities of individual leaders. The Cuban missile crisis, for example, is often explained by bipolar competition and the presence of American Jupiter missiles in Turkey, which formed part of the strategic context and eventual settlement (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.), and the Chornobyl cover-up by bureaucratic incentives, as noted above. Culture is best understood as one factor interacting with these, and the question is what it adds to them. The author's broader research on leader psychology is intended to answer that question by showing how historical narratives are filtered through individual leaders.

Finally, there is a risk of essentialism and selection bias. Four works cannot speak for a whole society, and invasion is not unique to Russia: other states, such as Poland and China, also have long memories of invasion. Russia has also been an invader and an empire, and Ukrainians, Belarusians, and many other peoples experienced Russian and Soviet power very differently. The claim here is therefore limited to recurring narratives and their plausible influence, not to a fixed national character.

## Conclusion

It is easy to view a state such as Russia as abstract or callous, a distant figure of coldness and moral obscurity. Wars, corruption, stereotypes, and a deep desire for power can create a narrative that extends beyond history or politics. Russian culture has been put under a microscope in recent years, but it takes

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zooming out to understand the whole picture. From the Soviet-era portrayal of Ivan the Terrible to the personal testimonies in *Voices from Chernobyl*, there can be no simple description of Russia as a country, or of the people who inhabit it. There is no single outlook that fits the entire population, and it is unfair to assume that ordinary people share responsibility for the decisions of their governments. In the relationship between the individual and the state, there is both a great divide and a purposeful intertwinement. Within Russian history and culture, personal lives and individual desires are often treated as secondary to national ambition, survival, and expansion. However, Russian society is also heavily influenced by patriotic duty and sacrifice.

Understanding this complexity does not justify oppression, but it does humanize the people who lived within these systems. Rather than portraying the Russian people as unthinkingly one with the state, these cultural works reveal generations of ordinary people struggling to maintain their own identity while surviving under immense pressure. Ultimately, Russian culture repeatedly asks the same difficult question: what real choice can the individual make between themselves and the state after centuries of dependence, sacrifice, and survival?

The broader argument of this paper is that such narratives are neither pure propaganda nor fixed national character. They are historically grounded stories of invasion, survival, and authority that elites exploit and also share, and that help define which security choices appear legitimate. For analysts, policymakers, and scholars, understanding these historical foundations provides valuable context for interpreting Russia's strategic behavior. The next step, which the author's wider research takes up, is to examine how individual leaders filter these narratives, and to test them against competing explanations of conflict and decision-making.

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