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Introduction: “The Russian Question” into the Twenty-First Century

FROM FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY and Vladimir Solovyov to Nikolai Berdyaev and beyond, Russian philosophers, writers, poets, and historians have been recurrently haunted by “the Russian idea,” the people’s spiritual mission in the world.¹ Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, thinkers seem to be more concerned with “the Russian question.” This change of terminology in theoretical discourse on the fate of Russians reflects an abrupt devolution of perceptions of the country among its leading sages. The image of the Russian people as the bearer of a messianic, universal idea has been transformed into only a semblance of a fading community—a community whose continued existence in the new millennium suddenly has been thrown into question. In short, “the Russian question” is one of survival and a search for a new identity.²

This book is an attempt to come to grips with one particular and often overlooked aspect of the Russian question after the collapse of the Soviet Union: the impact of new diasporas on the current quest for a new Russian identity.³ Post-Soviet geopolitical rearrangements in Eurasia have been accompanied by what is perceived by many Russians as separation of their twenty-five million coethnics from a new Russian state. I will argue that Russia, while trying to establish special ties with its “compatriots abroad” is not only seeking domination in Eurasia but

also looking to resolve the haunting legacy of its empire, an empire in which, ironically, Russians denied themselves for centuries an articulated ethnicity.

Instead of the expected triumphalism over the fall of communism, there is a growing pessimism and despair among many Russian intellectuals and the public in general. Why is this the case? Are the economic difficulties, social dislocations, and fragility of democratic institutions sufficient explanations for such a mood? Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Russia's most dedicated foe of communism and the only contemporary Russian writer who can be called great without a second thought, has tormented himself with issues that to him became much more fundamental than economic reform and democratization. He has argued that Russia has been "flattened," "smashed, run over, stunned, corrupted," that Russians are in a "national faint," "national pulverization," and that there is a danger of its total disappearance from the earth.⁴ According to Solzhenitsyn, Russians became a divided nation when the Soviet Union collapsed along the Bolshevik-drawn administrative borders.⁵ Even worse, he believes, "We have lost the feeling of one people."⁶ For Solzhenitsyn, the issue of the Russian diaspora in the "near abroad," as many Russians call other Soviet successor states, became a litmus test for the state of the Russian question. Public indifference to Russians who flee to Russia from the near abroad prompted him to argue that "the fate of miserable refugees is a menacing prophecy of our own all-Russian fate." Without understanding of the refugees' plight, "there is no understanding of today's Russia, or of the modern Russian people."⁷ Solzhenitsyn studied the Russian question without leaving his strong nationalist convictions behind.

Is it possible to address the Russian question in the framework of an Anglo-American tradition of political thought? To be sure, such an attempt faces serious theoretical difficulties. Modern Russian thinkers talk about the fate of the Russian people as a collective entity that makes its own journey through history. But for Anglophone theorists since John Locke, any notion of the "people" as something more than a collection of independent individuals has been almost taboo.⁸ This intellectual prohibition stands in sharp contrast to German and Russian traditions, which suggest more collectivist versions of nationhood, with an emphasis on the *spirit* of the people.⁹ Karl Marx and John Mill strongly disagreed on whether humans were a social derivative or

whether society was no more than a product of independent individuals' activity.

Perhaps if we replace the notion of a collective "people" (with its dangerous allusion to the German *Volksggeist*, though such an allusion is absent in the Russian language) with "nation," a term more common to modern political science, it would be easier to find an appropriate theoretical framework for discussing the Russian question. However, there are many theoretical challenges to the idea of nation as well. Anthony Smith contends that "there is an inherent instability in the very concept of the nation, which appears to be driven, as it were, back and forth between the two poles of *ethnie* and state which it seeks to subsume and transcend."¹⁰ Indeed, very few countries have experienced as strong a tension between ethnicity and the state as has Russia, and the result is extreme ambiguity concerning the definition of the Russian nation. Most Soviet successor states construct their nations on the basis of myths of common blood and soil. Yeltsin's regime did not take this route, and there is little evidence thus far that President Vladimir Putin will radically change policy in this area. However, the issue of state boundaries and membership in a political community, taken for granted in Western political theory, remains contested by Russia's main political actors.

David Laitin argues thus: "The boundaries of states are territorially defined, and despite border wars, remain fixed over time. Classic theories of international relations assume fixed boundaries. But the boundaries of nations are defined by the cultural stocks of people, and these boundaries are forever ambiguous."¹¹ In such a way, Laitin expertly sums up why any attempt to implement the old European idea that the boundaries of the state must approximate those of a nation may face fierce resistance from those who interpret the boundaries between nations differently. The question of nations' limits is a field where individual and collective identities, their differing interpretations by intellectuals and political entrepreneurs, geopolitics, and the interests of the states meet and often clash—and sometimes clash violently. That is why the problem of the Russian quest for a new post-Soviet identity is more than a purely academic issue.

The term "diaspora" has become especially popular in Russia since 1995.¹² Often, the term has been used together with or instead of such terms as "Russians and Russian-speakers," "compatriots," or the oxymoron "ethnic citizens of Russia," which appeared in political and

theoretical discourse from 1991 to 1994.¹³ The reconceptualization of large groups of the population in the near abroad as “the Russian diaspora” reflected the attempt to emphasize the connection of these people to Russia proper, a collective memory and myth about a common homeland, a traumatic experience, and a troubled relationship with host societies. This term is in many respects opposite to a term favored in the diplomatic lexicon since World War I—namely, “national minority,” which explicitly places the subjects under the jurisdiction of the former Soviet Union’s newly independent states.

The impact of the diasporas on a new Russian collective identity is different from what is known about the experience of classic diaspora peoples—for example, Jews, Greeks, Armenians, and Chinese. The intellectual and political influence of the Russians from the near abroad on their “historic homeland” has been minimal thus far, unlike the effect of Jewish, Greek, or Armenian diasporas on their respective homelands. However, those “other Russians” play an important role as subjects of Russian theoretical, political, and foreign policy deliberations and actions. The reference group for those who debate, conceptualize, and shape a new Russian identity by political means has been extended beyond the state borders of the Russian Federation—a new phenomenon for Russia. Throughout the past several centuries, the state reached well beyond the territory where Russian culture, language, religion, and traditions held sway. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the official Russian body politic no longer covered the entirety of this domain, while continuing to include entities that can hardly be said to belong to Russia culturally; Chechnya is the most striking example. Very few modern nations have succeeded in attaining congruence between ethnicity and the state, and the issue of minorities exists in many countries. While having this problem, Russia is also confronted by the question of its diasporas. In this way, Russia faces a double challenge to nation building—internal and external: Russia must address the issues of both the minorities inside and ethnic Russians outside its state boundaries.

Tension between the concepts of the Russian state and the Russian nation—if major political actors acknowledge ethnicity as its important component—has the potential to undermine the evolving system of international relations throughout Eurasia and to embroil this vast territory in conflict. This book argues that there are many factors that may

strengthen a relatively dormant Russian ethnonationalism in the years to come, and the plight of the Russians in the near abroad and an attempt in Russia to mobilize politically around this issue should be considered one of the most important of these factors.

It should be acknowledged that there are at least three major ways to contest this argument. First, one could suggest that the economic, political, and international cost of ethnonationalist mobilization in Russia is too high. Russian leaders and the public understand that they will lose too much and gain too little by embarking on such a path. The horrible predicament of Serbia, which tried to unite all ethnic Serbs under one political roof and extended its support to coethnics in the neighboring states, serves as a warning against this policy. Second, one can counter that Russia's self-definition has been traditionally supra-ethnic. Russian identity can be called imperial or universalistic, depending on political preferences, and in any case, Russian ethnic identity is too weak to be the basis for political mobilization. Third, Russia has been morally and physically exhausted by centuries of imperial overextension and communist rule, and it lacks the appropriate ideas, institutions, and leaders for any kind of mobilization. The paralyzing combination of a weak state and a weak, atomized society precludes the rise of a strong ethnonationalist Russia.

These are respectable perspectives, yet they are insufficient to make sound predictions. The first perspective is based on a rational model of policy. Ilya Prizel has shown convincingly that an irrational concept of nationalism and national identity has been a vital element of the foreign policies of many countries, although contemporary scholars shun this approach.¹⁴ Prizel's argument can be easily extended into domestic politics as well.

The second perspective underestimates the situational and constructed aspects of national identities. When studying the post-Soviet states, David Laitin, Ronald Suny, and others have argued that nations as a rule are not "out there"; rather, they are a function of social, political, and economic processes.¹⁵ Prizel has argued along similar lines: "While the redefinition of national identities is generally a gradual process, under situations of persistent stress even well-established identities can change at a remarkable rate, and a people's collective memory can be 'rearranged' quite quickly."¹⁶ Modern Russia is under such a condition of persistent stress, and there is no reason to believe that it will

necessarily and indefinitely cling to its old universalistic traditions. Ethnicity could become the major building block in the efforts of the Russian elite to construct a new nation.

The third argument, which emphasizes the extreme weakness of Russia, has been the major concern of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn as well as a theme in the disturbing, epic account of the debacle in Chechnya by Anatol Lieven, one of the most thoughtful Western observers of Russia.¹⁷ Certainly, this perspective adequately reflects the current state of the Russian nation. However, it lacks dynamic and comparative components. Russia in the early seventeenth century and after the collapse of statehood in 1917, China throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Germany and Japan after defeat in World War II—all were fragmented or devastated to such an extent that nobody awaited their rise as meaningful political entities. There is not enough evidence to prove that Russia's current dire situation means that the country cannot reappear on the global arena of the twenty-first century in some new and important role. What exactly this role will be is, of course, a debatable issue. While I contend that it is too early to write off Russia, I do not mean that its political future is necessarily that of a Western-style liberal democracy.

In today's Russia, many intellectuals believe that the country must readdress and reshape the very core of its existence, beginning with a redefinition of its identity. The redefinition of national identities always contains a significant destabilizing component and, therefore, can be considered a potential security threat. This threat presents a challenge to Russia, its Eurasian neighbors, and, because of Russia's size and nuclear arsenal, the world. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has lost its old identity but has not yet found a new one. Nearly a decade has passed since the collapse of the Soviet empire, but debates are still taking place concerning the boundaries of the new Russian state, as well as the very meaning of being Russian. This book argues that the fate of the new Russian diasporas, the twenty-five million Russians who suddenly found themselves "outside Russia" after the breakup of the Soviet Union, is an essential element in defining the new Russian identity.

The purpose of this book is to analyze the interrelationship between identity, diasporas, foreign policy, and conditions for international security in and around Russia. Most of the researchers working in the field of international relations are separated from those who address

questions of identity transformation and modern diasporas.¹⁸ Theoretical advances in the research of nationhood, ethnonationalism, and diasporas made by Margaret Canovan, Anthony Smith, Walker Connor, Rogers Brubaker, Liah Greenfeld, Robin Cohen, Roman Szporluk, and others are of particular importance and underlie the approach applied in this book.¹⁹ Chauncy Harris, Vladimir Shlapentokh, Munir Sendich and Emil Payin, Paul Kolstoe, Neil Melvin, Jeff Chinn and Robert Kaiser, David Laitin, A. I. Ginzburg, S. S. Savoskul, Vladimir Kozlov, Valery Tishkov, Sergei Kuleshov, T. Poloskova, G. Vitkovskaya, and other scholars have begun analyzing Russian communities in the countries of the former Soviet Union.²⁰ Nikolai Rudensky, Elizabeth Teague, Neil Melvin, and Aurel Braun outlined some aspects of Russian policy toward the diasporas in the near abroad in the context of relations between the former Soviet republics.²¹ However, these advances have not been applied to broader questions of Russian identity and to security studies. The question of how the problem of the diaspora is perceived inside Russia by politicians, intellectuals, and the public, and how Russia is addressing the issue in its foreign policy is still open. We know little about the history of the issue, the concrete manner in which the modern Russian elite redefines Russian identity, or the effect of all of this on international security in Eurasia. Are Russian communities in the near abroad perceived in Russia as parts of the Russian nation? What role have they played in Russia's foreign policy agenda from 1991 to the present? What are the consequences of Russian policy for international peace and security in the vast Eurasian region? These questions are related to a fundamental theoretical problem: After having been an empire for centuries, is contemporary Russia finally becoming a nation-state?

Chapter 1 begins with the assertion that the idea of becoming a nation-state within the current borders is entirely new and still problematic in Russia. It will show that the forceful building of a nation-state in Russia may put painful and explosive issues concerning the Russian people's frontiers on the country's political agenda. Emphasizing Russian ethnonationalism politicizes the question of the diasporas in the near abroad.

Chapter 2 argues that in both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union the cultural and historical boundaries of the Russian people were blurred. This lack of clarity had several causes, including the combination of somewhat intertwined ethnic and imperial components in the

national consciousness, the overlap of cultural and historical distinctions among Eastern Slavs, the suppression of Russian nationalism, the concept of “the Soviet people” (and the reality that supported this concept), and, finally, weak state institutions of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Chapter 2 also argues that intellectual history has not provided modern Russian thinkers and politicians with the foundation for an innocuous attitude toward the new geopolitical situation and a painless reconciliation with the new state boundaries. On the one hand, the supraethnic (imperial) tradition of defining “Russian-ness,” dominant in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, points to the breakup of the Soviet Union as a historical defeat of the Russian state. On the other hand, the primordialist Soviet conception of *ethnos* is instrumental for the rise of modern Russian ethnonationalism and for an assertive policy toward the diasporas—which, within such a conception, can be easily stated to be parts of the Russian nation.

Chapter 3 analyzes the essential link between the Russian intellectual quest for a new identity and specific governmental policies, a link that consists of the domestic politics of nation building. Findings show that there are five major perspectives on building the state and nation in contemporary Russia: new state-building, ethnonationalism, restoration of the Soviet Union, integration of the post-Soviet states, and hegemony/ domination. Chapter 3 also argues that ethnonationalism gradually strengthened its position in the political arena in the 1990s, not because of the rise of pure ethnonationalist groups, but as a result of incorporation of their ideas by major opposition parties, namely the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) and the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR). However, the forces that accept state building within current borders and advocate de-ethnicized nation building maintained stronger influence on concrete policies from 1991 to the present.

Chapter 4 addresses those features of the Russians of the near abroad that affect Russia’s quest for a new identity and argues that the conditions of the Russian communities in the near abroad are as varied as the states and regions in which they live. Only nationalist ideology can reduce all of the complexities of these diaspora communities to a single problem with a single solution. As of yet, there are no noticeable horizontal ties among the Russian communities and few prospects that such ties will be constructed. Most Russian communities are very poorly

organized, and political mobilization, solidarity, and cooperation along ethnic lines are in fact entirely new concepts for this once-dominant ethnic group. Nevertheless, there are important factors that might unite the Russian communities to a certain extent: a common culture and language, and the psychology of “victims” of the Soviet Union’s dissolution. However, absent the Russian government’s involvement, problems arising within the diasporas are likely to remain local issues. The only major factor that could make the problem significant for international security is the existence of a common “external homeland” for the diasporas—a regionally dominant Russia.

Chapter 5 argues that, contrary to the belief that Russian policy in the near abroad has been imperialistic and aggressive over issues concerning the Russian diasporas, Russian policy has instead been reasonably moderate in some aspects and tremendously ineffective in others. Indeed, in those undertakings that could destabilize the whole region, Russian policy has been particularly ineffective so far. As a result of both moderation and ineffectiveness, there is a great discrepancy between the boastful, assertive rhetoric of Russia’s leaders and the actual policy of Russia in its relations with the Russian diasporas. In situations where Moscow has encountered determined resistance from other governments on an issue, it has simply backed off. In light of such responses, integration in Eurasia might further temper Russia’s ethnonationalist and imperialist ambitions, however slight they may be at present.

If all these arguments hold, the most general conclusion must be that the Russian question was not resolved in the twentieth century and it will remain in the center of Eurasian political development in the new millennium. U.S. foreign policy officials must take this into account in their attempts to outline a long-term strategy in the region. Such attempts will require rethinking some theoretical assumptions about nation-state building, a realization that Russia may respond in several different ways to the evolving situation around its diasporas, and, finally, a search for new approaches to Eurasian regional development.

