

Case Study of Russian Nationalism: Domestic Mobilization

Many argue that there should be a natural decline in nationalism around the world due to the rise of globalization. Yet, in academia, scholars seem to see a rise of nationalism within Russia, precisely in the early 2000s under Vladimir Putin. The core issue in this case study is the state's concerning ability for aggressive war mobilization that allows for mass casualties and wars to erupt. This essay will examine how state elites mobilize a passive, peaceful population into willing to take on the horrors of war through Russia's invasion of Ukraine (2022-present) by first providing brief background on the origins of Russia has a nation-state (as best as we can without exact years provided)—and thus, the origins of nationalism and the country's foundations, and then showing how the nation moves from banal nationalism during peacetimes to hot nationalism during the unsettled time of war.

Russia was first a state, and then a nation, aligning with core modernization theory (Goble, 2008). The construction of a nation can be dated back to Peter the Great's reforms (1672-1725), but developed through the industrialization era and social unrests of the 20th century (Cambridge University, 2022). Following the modernization theory, the Russian state relied on a centralized mass education that spread a shared national Russian language (follows Gellner's theory of economic modernization), past memory, and myths—all inherent with "Russian nationalism" values and centralized television/broadcast networks. Through a standardized language and media, millions of people in the population across 11 time zones are then able to imagine themselves as a unified nation coexisting in "homogenous empty time" (follows Anderson's theory of cultural modernization) (Heidsiek, 2021). This was done throughout the course of the 18th to 20th century. In 2020, the Russian constitution officially established the country's language as Russian —"the language of the state-forming people",

indicating ethnic Russians. A unified national idea was implemented by Putin: “Orthodox Christianity, heterosexual marriage (so-called traditional values), strong borders, patriotism, loyalty, and a Russia-centric representation of history” (Cambridge University, 2022), which is apparent in the nation today.

In times of peace, Russia’s identity as a nation is maintained through unnoticed daily parts of life (ideological habits, citizen routine, and institutional structures)—referring to the idea of “banal nationalism” by Billig. The government poured resources to achieve its wanted nationalism ideology onto the population. Adding onto Billig’s analysis of unwaved flags hanging all around as a constant subconscious reminder of state sovereignty and the use of language devices that put the audience (reader or listener) in a position within a specific national space (The Russian nation-state) like “us”, Russia utilizes media. For instance, Russia’s media aimed to convince its audience that “their neighbors were patriots” as to overlap the state’s actions (the later 2022 invasion of Ukraine) and the citizens’ commonplace nationalism. (Goode, 2025). Another significant example is the grassroots ritual of “Immortal Regiment”, which is a massive public civic event held annually on May 9 across Russia. Participants march through streets carrying portraits of family members who served as soldiers, partisans, or home-front workers during World War II. Originally begun in 2011-2012 as an independent, non-partisan initiative by local journalists, the Kremlin and state-backed organizations took control of the movement in 2015 and used it to create a state narrative—a ritual remembering the collective memory of a national trauma. This works well to further evoke nationalism and national unity as grief and collective mourning or suffering holds greater national power than shared triumphs, due to the duties past suffering can impose, and a common effort asked for (Renan).

During Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine, the government (political elite) activated the nationalism core grown within the population through provoking fear (Pešić) and constructing a "us versus them" narrative (Feinstein). In Putin's February 24th address, he repeatedly discusses Ukraine and NATO countries as a threat to Russia (and thus its people): "Russia cannot feel safe, develop, and exist while facing a permanent threat from the territory of today's Ukraine", "NATO's eastward expansion the situation for Russia has been becoming worse and more dangerous by the year"; and NATO countries and Ukraine verses "them" rhetoric (Russian nation and people): "the leading NATO countries are supporting the far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine" (Presidential Executive Office, 2022). Through such fear pathos, passive national identities are activated, and banal nationalism is converted into hot nationalism. Additionally, the state countered the psychological terror and demoralization of military casualties by Mosse's "Cult of the Fallen Soldier". On Victory Day, state rhetoric emphasized that soldiers were "fighting for our motherland... so that nobody forgets the lessons of World War II". State propaganda launched campaigns to glorify casualties as heroic sacrifices for the motherland, turning wartime death as a source of pride for many (Sauer, 2024).

To address this problem of aggressive state mobilization, interventions should target the chain established in this essay (from nationalist establishment to banal nationalism to hot nationalism). First, independent media and initiative and intelligence groups should inform citizens about the propaganda of banal nationalism apparent in state media, teaching them about the use of a "us verses them" narrative, language like "us", "our", "we", and the reinterpretation of history. If the citizens themselves understand the potential misinformation or pathos used on them, the success of Pešić's fear manipulation and Feinstein's hot nationalism can be diminished. Second, international bodies should work to separate grassroots civil commemoration from state

control, such as the Immortal Regiment ritual, to return to its non-partisan origins. This prevents the state from turning Renan's "shared suffering" into an obligation for future military aggression.

In conclusion, the Russian state's domestic mobilization for the war in Ukraine shows that wartime nationalism is strategically grown and watered by the government through daily nationalism that is passive until activated. During peacetime, Russia's established identity was maintained through state media (Billig) and control over the narratives surrounding civic rituals (Renan). When the state entered into unrest with the invasion of Ukraine, the government provoked fear (Feinstein, Pešić) and glorified military sacrifice (Mosse) to transform banal nationalism into hot nationalism. By breaking down propaganda in media and rituals, society can counter the state's ability to aggressively mobilize the military whenever wished.

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