National Bolshevism: From Nikolai Ustryalov to the Special Military Operation in Ukraine

Andrey Dmitriev

It is believed that the ideology of National Bolshevism appeared in Germany in 1919, when the term "national Bolshevism" was first used in the German press. In Germany, a kind of informal party of people who wanted to cooperate with Soviet Russia and saw the future of Germany in an alliance with it began to form. They were not communists, Leftists, rather national Bolsheviks. Ernst Niekisch, an outstanding thinker of the 20th century, was the most famous.

The formation of the ideology of Russian National Bolshevism is associated with Nikolai Ustryalov's name. Nikolai Ustryalov was born on November 25, 1890 in St. Petersburg. He was a lawyer, law teacher, professor, and politically active as a member of the Cadet Party Central Committee. It is believed that the Cadets were liberals of their time, the beginning of the 20th century. But despite the fact that they demanded democratic freedoms and the Constitution, as the name of the party indicates, they were convinced Russian imperialists. Pavel Milyukov, one of the leaders of the party, demanded during the First World War to take the Straits so that the Russian flag would be raised over Istanbul. And after the revolution, living abroad, (though, he really hated the Bolsheviks and the Soviet leadership), still, he supported the Winter War – he said: "I need Vyborg." Nikolai Ustryalov was also a Russian imperial and statesman. During the Civil War he joined the White Army. He was one of Kolchak's associates and headed his press office. Gradually, however, in 1918-1919, during the Civil War, he began to grow disillusioned with the White Movement, to move away from the ideas and practices of the White Movement, and to look closely at the Bolsheviks.

How did this happen? In the first place, he saw in the Bolsheviks a more powerful force, a more strong-willed movement than the one represented by the Whites. In 1918, he left for Perm, at that time taken by the Red. Here are his memories: "I remember once sitting in a public canteen in Perm. All around at the tables there were Red Army soldiers, commissars, "emergency workers". Vividly imprinted, cast in a hammered form, the Jacobin type has gone down in history. The same is true of the Bolshevik type; there is no doubt that it has already been cast in the same way - a terrible type. But one can feel this originality, the main thing is the will, which will also be on display in the wax museum." Here's his take on the whites: "Neither Alexeyev, nor Kolchak, nor Denikin had the Eros of power. They were all "wobbly leaders of the wobbly," despite their personal courage. That's no accident, of course. The revolution succeeded in giving flesh to the idea of power, in combining it with the temper of power. Firstly, there was a choice between the solid and the wobbly ones. And it was in Lenin that he saw the Eros of power, as opposed to the leaders of the White movement. The second point is that in 1918-1919 the Civil War was still going on with might and main, but he already saw the Bolsheviks in the future as "collectors of Russian lands" and wrote the following: "Bolshevik centralism, only outwardly surrounded by the demagogy of the free definition of peoples, is real terror for the living belt of the district dwarfs (here, of course, we mean Ukraine, Georgia and other national outlying empires). And the national mission, which might have taken a loyal Russian government many decades to carry out, is now promised to be carried out in a very disloyal way, in a shorter time and with fewer victims". He wrote this in his diaries in 1919. Then he forms an ideology, says that he is a national Bolshevik, a supporter of Soviet power. In Manchuria, while working on the Chinese-Eastern Railway, he followed its development and published collections of articles that were carefully studied both in Moscow and in the West. His ideas were discussed at party congresses, and we stress that once again, like the German National Bolsheviks, he does not turn into a communist, he does not become a Marxist, but at the same time he concludes that the Bolsheviks are the force that can revive Russian statehood. He welcomes those steps that are aimed at this, and he does not welcome those that are not. This path took quite a long time, a large number of victims were sacrificed, but in the end everything happened as Ustryalov had predicted, though not immediately. The 20's and 30's were filled with the struggle between two tendencies: National Bolshevism, the centralist tendency (the national Bolsheviks as supporters of a large centralized state) and national communism. Mikhail Agursky, in his work "The Ideology of National Bolshevism", first published in 1979 in Paris, wrote: "If National Bolshevism is an etatist movement, then the national communism of the periphery is for the representatives of the Communist Party, people of radical left views who were, in addition, nationalists." Georgian nationalists, Ukrainian nationalists, Tatar – there were many of them in the established Communist parties. The largest circle of national communists was the Ukrainian one. The 20's and 30's were a dramatic period for Ukraine, when at first, with the blessing of the party leadership, the so-called policy of Ukrainization was carried out, which was then stopped in the mid-30's. There are a lot of people out there who would like to throw a stone at the Bolshevik leadership for this indigenization. I won't argue with them - it was a big political mistake when the Ukrainization of the native Russian regions was actually top-down. When the press was translated into Ukrainian, quotas were introduced for admission to the civil service, it was necessary to speak Ukrainian, even at universities. The Ukrainian identity was artificially formed, and many people protested against it - party members, Donbass workers, people in Slavyansk, in Kharkov. It was discussed and debated within the Party as well. In defense of the Bolshevik leadership, we can say, first of all, that it was still carried out within the framework of a single state. Although the Ukrainian SSR was formally independent, the situation was completely controlled from Moscow - there was no phenomenon of Svidomism (separatism), as we are observing today, and it could not have existed. Secondly, they fought against the excesses, including Ukrainian nationalism, during the process of Ukrainization. That is, there were two tendencies: one was Ukrainization, and the other was the struggle against those who clearly expressed this svidomist ideology. Finally, the third is the result of this process. As a result, Ukrainization was curtailed by the early 1930s. Skrypnik and the Ukrainian poet Khvylevoi, the author of the slogan "Get out of Moscow!", who published novels in which he addressed the Russian, Moscow Soviet intellectuals: "You see the Petliura in us, but you do not notice any Ustryalovism in yourself" - were either shot during the repression or committed suicide. Ukrainization was over by the mid-30s. In 1937, at the height of the Great Terror, Ustryalov returned to Moscow. He was shot, accused of espionage, working for Japanese intelligence, anti-Soviet activities, etc., which in my opinion is complete nonsense, as there is no evidence. It seems to me that had he returned after the Second World War, he would have lived quite peacefully in the USSR as well as Alaxander Vertinsky or Alexander Kazembek, who was an outstanding figure in the White Movement. Nikolai Ustryalov had the misfortune to come to Moscow in 1937. He was also too prominent a figure, and Stalin needed to eliminate the witness of evolution.

However, Ustryalov's ideas of National Bolshevism began to prevail. This was the subject of our first speaker's talk - the turn in politics, ideology, culture and history at the end of the 1930s. Joseph Stalin with Andery Zhdanov, secretary of the CPSU Central Committee (b), staged a real coup. The short path of the history of the CPSU (b) disappears with new historical data, when there is no more Russian Empire, the "prison of nations", which was proclaimed by the school of Mikhail Pokrovsky, one of the prominent Soviet historians. The movies like "Alexander Nevsky", "Ivan the Terrible" by Sergey Eisenstein were released. The Red Count Alexei Tolstoy wrote the novel "Peter I". The names of the Russian generals and tsars came back in their positive meaning. This national-Bolshevik Ustryalov turn in the late 1930s was very timely, because without it it would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible, to survive and win the Great Patriotic War. No wonder the Bolshevik Party found the right words in other slogans, such as "brothers and sisters," which appealed to ancient Russian history. In fact, since the end of the 1930s, the National Bolshevik Party had become an additional ideology of the Soviet society in addition to the classical Marxism. This was Ustryalov's vision and preaching - he died, but his ideas were victorious.

If we move to another historical period, the late 80s - early 90s, we see how national communism was revived in the Soviet republics, when Leonid Kravchuk and other people from the party nomenclature began to say: "Yes, we are communists, but first of all we are Ukrainians." And then they successfully participated in the collapse of the country - they did not need communism or the Soviet Union. There was the collapse of the country, the plundering of property and the cultivation of a svidomist ideology, which we observe in such an ugly form in the enemy today. It is logical that in the 90s, National Bolshevism was revived as an imperial ideology. On May 1, 1993, after the famous massacre with OMON in the center of Moscow, Alexander Dugin and Eduard Limonov signed the Declaration on the creation of the National Bolshevik front as a reaction to the betrayal, the collapse of the country, Yeltsin and what he was doing. Since National Bolshevism is an ideology of the state, the attitude towards the Ukrainian question was expressed in an unequivocal manner. I am sure that everyone has seen the video in which Limonov is being interviewed at one of the demonstrations of the so-called red-brown patriots and leftists. He put it this way: "Why on earth the Donbass and his native Kharkov (he was born in Dzerzhinsk, but grew up in Kharkov), the Crimea was given to Kiev? We will have to fight and shed blood for this". It happened 20 years later. Of course, for both the banned National Bolshevik Party and Limonov's Other Russia Party, the Ukrainian issue has always been important. Thus, in 1999 the banner "Sevastopol is a Russian city" was hung on the tower of the Seamen's Club in the city. At the time, the newspaper of the Russian Black Sea Fleet objected to this action, claiming that the National Bolsheviks were using this provocative slogan to come between Russians and Ukrainians. Then there was the first war of 2014-2015, in which the National Bolsheviks also actively participated. The Interbrigade movement was created, and now we have revived it and continue to do so. Someone is in combat, someone is a war correspondent, someone is a humanitarian aid worker. This is our contribution to the victory over the enemy. I would like to point out that there is also a demand for national Bolshevism, and it is a very great demand. In many ways, it happens spontaneously, when people look at some of the things the Russian authorities are doing and fail to understand. This is what happened when some of our prisoners were exchanged for many Azov Battalion commanders and Viktor Medvedchuk. This was the cause of a storm of indignation in Telegram among the soldiers, the military officers, and all other observers of the process. St. Petersburg war correspondent Roman Saponkov writes: "Looking at all this cynical things happening, I begin to understand the atmosphere of the Russo-Japanese war or of 1916 - an impenetrable stupidity and degradation surround me - and I have more and more respect for the Bolsheviks from the point of view of state planning. They always had zero doubt and reflection." For example, Stalin once said: "I do not exchange soldiers for generals." That is, the same thing: for the solid ones, against the wobbly ones. If now the Russian government does not show the necessary firmness, and sometimes it seems that it is hesitating, if there will not be a National-Bolshevik top-down turn to put an end to the legacy of the 90s, i.e. the oligarchs who have not left the Russian elites, if the attacks on the Red ideology, on the history of the Soviet Union (I do not mean historical discussions - we can argue about Lenin's and Stalin's role) are not stopped... This must not happen from on the state level, because it causes a split between the Red and the White patriots, and everyone understands the consequences this split. It will be worse for everyone if we lose. Thus, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to defeat the enemy without this National-Bolshevik turn, without the necessary determination. Let's remember the lesson from 1941-1945. Then we defeated an even stronger enemy.

Q&A

Nikolai Arutyunov: National Bolshevism considers the history of Russia as an integral whole, choosing those points where it is possible to rely on a specific historical reality, while accepting all the stages of history and never forgetting them. And what is your opinion, for example, on the concept of social monarchism, which is the subject of Vladimir Karpets' books?

Andrey Dmitriev: I can't talk about it in detail because I haven't read it, to be honest. But this is indeed true with regard to the historical traditions of the perception of National Bolshevism. Russian history, including that of the Bolsheviks, is perceived as a continuous process from the very beginning. It is interesting to know that the people of culture and artists, people of the Silver Age, were the first to feel this. Agursky examines these aspects in detail, the poem "12" being one of the symbols: " In a wreath of white rose, Ahead of them Christ Jesus goes" (Translated by Jon Stallworthy and Peter France) leads a detachment of Red Army soldiers. Or Maximilian Voloshin with his "Tsar Peter was the first Bolshevik" - we've had mentions of the Bolsheviks today, too. "The Commissars have the spirit of autocracy, just as the Tsars have deep within them exploding revolution." There he has "folly" initially – "The Commissars have the folly of the autocracy." But we like this line with the word "spirit", too. All of this considers Bolshevism as a profoundly non-coincidental Russian phenomenon. In addition, as already mentioned, it was with the help of this ideology that Bolshevism managed to consolidate its positions, survive, and lead our country through the difficult trials of the 20th century.

Nikolai Arutyunov: I would like to say a few words about Vladimir Karpets. I think he is one of the greatest Russian philosophers, our contemporaries. May he rest in peace. Karpets is no longer with us. In his works, he claimed that there are two sides to life - material and spiritual. The ideas of the conventional left-wing, social justice in the economy which are native to Russia, for Russian people who painfully demand justice around them, are to the material side of life's spectrum. On the other hand, Vladimir Karpets saw Moscow Rus with its ideals of everyday Orthodoxy as the best embodiment of the spiritual image. It was directly embodied in life, when a person oriented himself in time and space according to the church calendar, because the guidelines of Orthodoxy played an important role for him. In the pre-revolutionary period, the ideal of monasticism was the highest among the people (I don't mean the elite). After the Revolution, the ideal of a scientist becomes a role model both for the common people and the elite for a certain period of time. A scientist and a monk are somewhat similar here (the scientist is of course in his modern age version).

Andrey Dmitriev: Again, Comrade Lenin perceived the Bolshevik Party as a religious order and even said: "The Party is the Order of the Swordsmen." The Church was understood in the same way. Let's remember the "reconciliation" of the authorities with the ROC that took place during the Second World War. The well-known visit of Patriarch Alexy I to Stalin is also a component of the National Bolshevik turn. As for the post–war era, this was the fight against cosmopolitanism. When it came down to pro-Westernism, the fight against rootless cosmopolitans was effective and actively supported in society. We can look at the Great Stalin Era as a jigsaw puzzle with many pieces. If we take into account this National-Bolshevik turn, everything adds up to a completely wholesome picture. I would like to remind you that this picture - post-war Stalinism of 1945-1953 - is the peak of our country's historical power for all time. The reign of Nicholas I was the peak of power in tsarist times, when Russia was the "gendarme of Europe". When Stalin was in power, half of Eastern Europe was also under our control, we were friends with China. Yes, there were later revolutions in Cuba, but discord had already started in the socialist camp, e.g., there was a quarrel with China during the Khrushchev period, and so on. Therefore, after all, the peak of power is post-war Stalinism, 1945-1953. Let's remember on what basis it was all built.

Daniil Shulga: Do you think it is possible to interpret the current events of the Special Military Operation as part of, if I may say so, the postponed civil war in the Soviet Union, which did not take place during the collapse of the Soviet Union, but was logically meant to take place anyway, and did take place in 30 years?

Andrey Dmitriev: This is exactly how it should be interpreted. As Mikhail Elizarov sang: "Damn you, Gorbachev." Of course, in Belovezhskaya Pushcha the top authorities of the CPSU, both Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, are to blame for these contradictions to be resolved the future. Some conflicts broke out immediately, such as the Georgian-Abkhazian and the Armenian-Azerbaijani or Transnistrian conflicts. It turned out that something was postponed for some time, and gradually (Vladimir Putin has been ruling the country for over 20 years, right?) this understanding comes over the years. First the Munich speech, then the Five-Day War, then 2014-2015, and now a special operation in Ukraine. The intellectuals of our time – Eduard Limonov, who said that we would have to fight, Alexander Prokhanov, Alexander Dugin – they all have been well aware of this. Now, with bloody consequences, we are unraveling everything that was arranged by the party nomenclature in the late 80s-early 90s, both the All-Union and of the national republics.

Nikolai Arutyunov: Colleagues, do you think modernization is possible without Westernization? Today Arkady Yurievich, with reference to Karamzin, spoke about his idea of the acquisition of technologies without the introduction of foreign customs. What can be done today? Considering that Russia and Russian intellectuals have gone such a long way, always focusing on the West, how can we do it today? How can we borrow technology without appropriating with the culture of consumption, the whole set of values that comes with the acquisition of technology.

Daniil Shulga: The fact of the matter is that there is no problem. There are also positive aspects to globalization. We live in a world where the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Koreans, especially the South Koreans, have a very high scientific and technical potential. At the same time, Westernization is affecting them in some way, but in a very, very peculiar way. Therefore, in the time of Peter the Great it was not necessary to change into Western doublets; but back then, there were other times, more local communities. Now, according to some technologies, Russia is an advanced country: behind all the news of battles, the fact that a closed reactor is almost finished, has disappeared. Waste, including nuclear, will be processed in the reactor, and it will be great. So we have many breakthrough technologies, and they will continue to evolve. Moreover, many scientific centers are now located in Asia, and to work in scientific cooperation in the exact and natural sciences with China and Japan (China is easier to cooperate with), we do not have to recognize the genius of Mao Zedong or Deng Xiaoping. Moreover, the Chinese, being pragmatic people, do not need it. They generally work without politics, for which they are loved in Africa and Central Asia. So, in my opinion, in spite of the national peculiarities, there is no problem. After all, we are all Homo sapiens. All of us, with the exception of Africans, have a little bit of Neanderthal in us, so we are not so different. We all live in a world of progressive capitalism, regardless of our national origin. Therefore, it is possible to establish scientific relationships in accordance with the laws of the outer world. It is clear that each local community develops according to its own laws, which are connected with geography, with the history of the people, with the national composition, and so on. In order to adopt Western technologies, we do not need to adopt a Western image, especially since we all understand that Western left-liberal discourse (although there is practically nothing left of it) has tarnished the reputation even in the West. It is no coincidence that in the last elections in France, Mrs. Le Pen increased her presence in Parliament by 11 times. The same happened in the elections in Italy, and so on. What is the discourse of the West? In the United States, the difference between the Democrats and the Republicans is the same as the difference between Puma and Adidas. Clearly, they are pretty much the same, only the groups are different. In Europe it's different. Therefore, Westernization without Westernization is possible in the modern world, so is the construction of a modern system. In Europe, we are all part of Christianity, we are all from a Christian civilization, from its various variants. There is a lot of Protestant statehood, Catholicism, in the West, as we know. But in fact, who is closer - Orthodox to Catholic or Orthodox to Calvinist - is a big question when we talk about civilizational-religious categories. So, I think it is quite possible. The main thing is to show common sense, look for normal partners and everything will be fine.

Nikolai Arutyunov: There was a remark about the possibility of naming the level of civilization of our culture as that of the Rossiyane (the citizens of Russian Federation as opposed to the Russians). It seems to me that this word has not caught on, because it may be associated with the times of Yeltsin, with the 90s. Russians can be spoken of here on two levels: on the civilizational level, as Stalin said: "I am a Georgian of Russian nationality"; but he meant that he was Russian in therms of civilization. And at the same time there are also ethnic Russians, they can be narrowed down to the naming of "Great Russians". And I think this is the right way. Even in the West, if a person comes from Bashkiria or Mordovia, he is called Russian. It was like that both in the 19th and in the 20th century. Therefore, it seems to me that it would be possible to calmly stop searching and develop this direction. As for the search for partners, it seems to me that without an ideology expressed in concrete concepts, without the authority itself or at least some groups within the elite believing in this ideology, it is impossible, because those who have a long-term idea will always win. It's only possible to exchange resources. But in the long run, those who have reasons and believe in them will win. We can look at the example of our country in the '70s. That's when ideology simply disappeared from the state. Perhaps it remained in the ordinary people, but those who spoke from high tribunes no longer had faith in what they were saying. And, in my opinion, this was one of the biggest and most important reasons for the collapse of the Union – there were no people in power who were ready to implement any ideals. Today there are people who have high ideals. They can be called differently, but what is common for them is love for Russia, for its manifestations, for the state, no matter how peculiar it may be. It's easy to love the Motherland, it's hard to love the state in this regard. Nevertheless, this is our part, our manifestation - the crudest one, the most external one. Again, there is love for culture, for something that can gather different elements, sometimes very diverse ones.

Daniil Shulga: The fact is that ideology is bad. In modern China, it is abundance. But another thing is that the Chinese are different (that's why they are more welcome in Africa than Americans), because they do not annoy everybody forcing the things to be done the way they do. It terms of domestic consumption, ideology is just fine. Why start selling it to everyone? Why is the Western world at odds with Saudi Arabia now? Because trying to bore everyone with the ideology leads to sad consequences. Like everything else, ideology is good in moderation. But I agree with you. As in the classic Soviet film: "The idea is my guideline." What's next? Of course, we must have an understanding of where we are in terms of development, where we are in terms of movement. And it is great to think about it and to discuss it. But at the same time, we should not forget daily bread or building the state. Because, for example, under Mao Zedong, China was super-ideologized, and, frankly speaking, it was quite poor. And Deng Xiaoping turned out to be more pragmatic. In fact, his group is called pragmatists in Chinese history. They have built a new China, which is now the number one state in the world in terms of purchasing power parity. At the same time, Deng Xiaoping did not get rid of the Communist Party, everything was fine with him. And the Communist Party still exists.

Translated by Daria Mochalova