

POLITICAL POWER, GOVERNANCE, AND CONFLICT

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FORMAL EMPIRE, INFORMAL HIERARCHIES, CARCERAL VIOLENCE, AND 'NATURALNESS' OF RUSSIA'S PRESENCE AS IMPERIAL STRATEGY (THE ARMY AND PRISON AS TOOLS OF RUSSIAN NEO-IMPERIALISM)

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Abstract

This article examines the Russian military and state apparatus through the lens of systemic violence, prison culture, and neo-imperial ideology. The author argues that Russian imperialism represents a continuous 500-year project of colonial expansion driven by a carceral logic permeating military organisation, governance, and society. The analysis traces how informal prison hierarchies (*ponyatiya*) and military hazing (*dedovshchina*) function as governance mechanisms, creating a 'carceral-prison state' where violence is not dysfunction but essential structure. The study documents Russia's 200+ colonial wars, the weaponisation of ethnic minorities as 'colonial infantry', the systematic torture in filtration camps, and the transformation of the military into a predatory caste system during the Ukraine invasion. Key findings reveal how prisoner recruitment, private military companies (Wagner, Redut), and barrier troops maintain hierarchical control through extrajudicial executions, sexual violence, and forced conscription. The work demonstrates that the Russian Orthodox Church theology sanctifies warfare, creating 'Z-Orthodoxy' as imperial ideology. The author challenges Western assumptions about Russian decline, arguing instead for adaptive imperialism that modernises control mechanisms through systematic violence. The conclusion advocates for comprehensive decolonisation – dismantling the Russian Federation's territorial integrity – as the only viable security solution, since the system's path-dependency on violence makes genuine liberalisation structurally impossible. The analysis synthesises historical sociology, institutional ethnography, postcolonial theory, and human rights documentation to reveal Russia not as a reformable nation-state but as a persistent imperial formation requiring fundamental transformation.

Keywords: Russian imperialism, torture culture, Wagner PMC, Russian World ideology, ethnic hierarchies, military hazing, systemic violence, colonial infantry, *dedovshchina*, *ponyatiya*.

Introduction

Russia's default form of government is autocracy, where absolute power over the state is concentrated in the hands of one person, whose decisions are subject neither to external legal restraints nor to regularised mechanisms of social control.

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At the same time, the Russian military reflects Russian society. Autocracy creates a military that adheres to orders as the militaries of democratic societies do, but also one where decentralisation, honest communication, and individual rights are not only incompatible with the ethos of the state but also threaten it. Autocracy cannot survive if its military culture opposes the autocratic state. Over centuries, the Russian military developed to protect the state by defeating its enemies while having a system compatible with autocracy, so as not to undermine it.

Therefore, this study employs a multidisciplinary methodological framework integrating historical analysis, institutional ethnography, comparative imperialism and prison studies, and critical discourse analysis to examine the Russian Federation as a neo-imperial prison-carceral state characterised by systematic violence, informal governance structures, and continuous territorial expansion. The research synthesises diverse sources to demonstrate how carceral logic permeates the Russian military organisation, state administration, and imperial strategy.

Methodology: Research Design and Theoretical Framework

This article adopts a critical historical-sociological approach informed by postcolonial theory, institutional analysis, and carceral studies. The central analytical premise positions Russia not as a conventional nation-state but as a persistent imperial formation whose structural continuity transcends regime changes from the Muscovite Principality through the Soviet Union to the contemporary Russian Federation. This '*path-dependent imperialism*' framework allows examination of how informal prison hierarchies and systematic violence function as governance mechanisms.

The methodology draws upon Erving Goffman's total institution concept while extending it through the '*carceral-prison state*' paradigm, which posits that Russian governance operates through the permeation of carceral logic beyond correctional facilities into military units, administrative structures, and civil society. This framework enables an analysis of how *ponyatiya* (informal prison laws) and *dedovshchina* (military hazing) represent functionally equivalent systems of informal social control that maintain hierarchical order in the absence of transparent legal-rational authority.

Data Sources and Collection Methods

The research utilises several categories of primary documentation:

1. Official documents and legislation: Analysis of Russian legal codes, military regulations, Ministry of Defence directives, and presidential decrees to identify formal institutional structures and their relationship to informal practices. This includes examination of conscription laws, military service regulations, and penitentiary system legislation.

2. Case law: European Court of Human Rights case law concerning Russian military hazing (particularly HUDOC, 2014) and prison conditions, which provide documented evidence of systematic abuses and state responses. These judgments offer legally authenticated accounts of institutional violence.

3. International monitoring reports: Documentation from the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT), UN Commission of Inquiry reports on Ukraine, and investigative findings from international human rights organisations regarding filtration systems, torture facilities, and violations of international humanitarian law.

4. Military communications and intercepted messages: Analysis of intercepted Russian military communications, published by Ukrainian intelligence services and independent media, revealing informal hierarchies, ethnic tensions, violence between units, and operational dysfunction. While requiring careful source criticism, these materials provide unprecedented insight into actual military culture distinct from official narratives.

5. Testimonial evidence: First-hand accounts from Russian military deserters, Ukrainian civilians who survived filtration camps and occupation, released prisoners of war, and defected personnel from Wagner Group and other PMCs. These testimonies underwent cross-verification against documentary sources and corroborating accounts.

The study synthesises scholarly literature across multiple disciplines, including Russian and Soviet history, military sociology, criminology, postcolonial studies, and international relations. Particular attention was paid to recent scholarship on Russian prison culture, *dedovshchina*, private military companies, and neo-imperial ideology. Historical sources documenting Russia's colonial wars from the 15th century through the Soviet era provided essential context for understanding continuities in imperial strategy.

Comparative analysis drew upon studies of British, French, and other European empires to situate Russian imperialism within broader colonial frameworks while highlighting its distinctive 'contiguous

colonialism' and integration of carceral governance. Demographic research on ethnic minority casualty rates in the Ukraine conflict provided quantitative evidence of internal colonialism.

Cultural and Ideological Materials

Analysis incorporated Russian cultural productions, including films, literature, prison chanson music, and propaganda materials, to trace the normalisation of carceral culture and violence in Russian society. Examination of '*Russian World*' ideology included official documents, patriarchal statements from the Russian Orthodox Church, and political speeches articulating neo-imperial doctrine.

Contemporary Russian military propaganda, political education materials, and the evolution of the 'Z' symbol provided insight into ideological mobilisation for the Ukraine invasion. Analysis of *fenya* (prison slang) usage in political discourse, including by President Putin, demonstrated the deliberate deployment of carceral language as a governance strategy.

Analytical Approaches

Process tracing methodology tracked the evolution of Russian imperial structures from the Muscovite Principality's initial expansion through successive regime transformations. This approach identified path-dependent mechanisms whereby informal carceral governance, established during Siberian colonisation and reinforced through the Gulag system, persisted across political discontinuities. The analysis traced institutional continuities in violence deployment, ethnic hierarchy construction, and territorial expansion strategies.

Particular attention focused on critical junctures, including the Stalinist period, when *dedovshchina* emerged, and prisoner labour became systematically integrated into state projects, and the post-Soviet transition, when the Sistema consolidated power through the merger of criminal networks with state authority. The 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine represented another critical juncture, revealing the operationalisation of accumulated imperial practices.

Comparative Imperial Analysis

Systematic comparisons between Russian, French, and British imperial systems illuminated distinctive features of Russian imperialism. While both empires employed indirect rule, economic extraction, and cultural imperialism, Russia's contiguous territorial expansion created a fundamentally different metropolitan-colonial relationship. The impossibility of '*lowering the flag*' in a land empire where colonies were incorporated into state territory explains contemporary decolonisation challenges. Comparative analysis extended to examination of colonial infantry deployment, revealing patterns where Russian authorities consistently mobilised ethnic minorities and convicts as expendable as *sault* forces, a practice with antecedents in British colonial levies but executed with distinct brutality reflecting carceral governance logic.

Institutional Ethnography

Drawing upon Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnography, the research examined how informal rules and practices constitute the actual 'ruling relations' within Russian military and penal institutions. This approach revealed the disjuncture between formal military regulations and the operative *dedovshchina* hierarchy, and between constitutional law and the Sistema's informal governance through *ponyatiya*.

Analysis focused on the 'work' performed by violence in maintaining institutional order: how beatings enforce the caste system, how torture serves as an administrative procedure in filtration, how summary execution disciplines refusal to fight. This methodology illuminated violence not as a breakdown but as a functional mechanism within Russian institutional logic.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Systematic examination of Russian state discourse employed critical discourse analysis to deconstruct how the '*Russian World*' ideology legitimises imperial expansion and systematic violence. Analysis traced how metaphors from the Great Patriotic War create moral permission structures for atrocities, how 'denazification' rhetoric enables genocide, and how Orthodox messianism sanctifies conquest. Particular attention was given to the deliberate deployment of prison slang by political elites to frame governance as dominance rather than a social contract, effectively communicating that Russian political space operates according to carceral rather than liberal-democratic logic. This analysis revealed how linguistic choices perform ideological work in naturalising authoritarianism.

Contribution to Scholarship

Methodologically, this study advances scholarship in several respects.

First, it demonstrates the analytical utility of treating Russia as a *persistent imperial formation* rather than a nation-state, enabling recognition of structural continuities invisible when analysis is periodised by regime type.

Second, it establishes the '*carceral-prison state*' as a productive analytical category for understanding governance systems where informal carceral logic supersedes formal legal-rational authority.

Third, it models how multidisciplinary integration – combining historical sociology, institutional ethnography, discourse analysis, and quantitative demography – can illuminate complex phenomena resistant to single-method approaches.

The study's findings challenge prevailing assumptions in both policy and academic circles that treat Russian military dysfunction as evidence of inevitable decline. Instead, the research reveals adaptive imperialism capable of regeneration through violence, suggesting that containment strategies premised on Russian weakness misunderstand the system's functional logic. This methodological reorientation has implications for scholarship on other authoritarian regimes and for policy frameworks addressing neo-imperial threats.

'Russian Spirit': The Cultural Engine of Imperial Expansion

We begin this research not with academic sources but with a quotation from Karen Shakhnazarov's allegorical Soviet fantasy film "*City Zero*" (1988). In the film's monologue, a Soviet prosecutor articulates what should be considered the most compelling explanation of the mysterious '*Russian Spirit*' – a concept that illuminates Russia's imperial trajectory from the Muscovite Principality to the modern Russian neo-empire (Mosfilm, 1988):

"Since the Mongol-Tatar invasion, the main idea that unites us all, the idea that generations of our ancestors served, is the idea of *Statehood*. A powerful, great *State* is the ideal for which the Russian people are ready to suffer, ready to endure any hardship, ready, finally, to give their lives.

This is an irrational ideal; it is not pragmatic. It is the idea of the '*Russian Spirit*', which subjugates and dissolves your and my individuality, but in return gives you and me a hundred times more. It is this *feeling of belonging to a great organism* that gives a sense of the spirit, a sense of strength, and immortality.

The West has always sought to compromise the idea of our *Statehood*. But the greatest danger to our idea lies not in the West, but in ourselves. It is we ourselves who cling to these endless fashionable Western ideas, seduced by their obvious practicality and rationality, without realising that this is precisely where their destructive power lies.

But never mind. Our own idea always prevails in the end. Look, all our revolutions ultimately led not to destruction but to the strengthening and consolidation of the State. And so, it will always be" (Mosfilm, 1988).

We should stress that Russia's expansion from a tributary principality of the Golden Horde into a transcontinental empire spanning eleven time zones represents one of the most profound geopolitical shifts in human history. Unlike the maritime empires of Western Europe, which projected power across oceans to establish discontinuous colonies, the Russian Empire engaged in '*contiguous colonialism*', an organic, relentless absorption of neighbouring territories across the Eurasian landmass. This article provides an exhaustive analysis of the colonial wars that drove this expansion, examining the strategic evolution of the Imperial Russian Army, the fierce and varied resistance of indigenous peoples – from the frozen tundra of Chukotka to the arid deserts of Turkestan and the precipitous peaks of the Caucasus – and the administrative mechanisms that consolidated these conquests.

The historiography of colonialism has traditionally prioritised the '*saltwater*' model of Western Europe, characterised by the overseas projection of naval power and the establishment of distinct *metropole-colony* dichotomies. Russian imperialism, however, defies this categorisation. It was a terrestrial process where the frontier was not a distant shore but a permeable borderland that required constant security stabilisation.

Considering the above, we should take a very brief look at the history of Russian colonial policy and related colonial wars, which were mostly deleted from the memory of Western society due to highly sophisticated imperial and neo-imperial propaganda.

The history of Russia is a history of endless colonial wars. The prominent Russian actor Georgy Burkov brilliantly expressed that "the ease with which [the Soviet State] enters foreign countries (or brings weapons there) – Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, East Germany, Afghanistan, Cuba, Nicaragua, China,

Vietnam, and many others – shows that the West has armed itself for a reason. We are *professional aggressors*. And we have not yet abandoned the idea of world domination, modestly calling this idea a *world revolution*” (Research Centre for Crime and Armed Conflicts, 2025).

Russian colonial wars encompassed a series of military and territorial expansions conducted by the Muscovite Principality from the late 15th century through the mid-20th century. This expansionist project primarily targeted indigenous, nomadic, and semi-nomadic populations across regions, including Siberia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Contemporary Ukraine represents a continuation of this historical pattern, though numerous other nations remain similarly threatened.

Imperial propaganda has always concealed colonisation and conquest behind ‘territorial development’ and ‘the desire of small nations to fraternise with the Russian people’. The famous Russian novelist Valentin Pikul writes: “While the Americans had the Wild West, we had the Wild East, and our Russian ‘great track’ to the Pacific Ocean looked more dangerous and much longer than America’s ‘great track’. In a historically short period of time, the Russians crossed all of Siberia, colonised the Kolyma, the Kuril Islands, and Kamchatka, sailed and rowed across the ocean, became neighbours with the Native Americans in Alaska, and bordered Spanish possessions in California. Yes, it was truly a ‘great trek’! Foreigners do not deny the greatness of the feat of the Russian explorers. The advance of the Russians across Siberia during the 17th century was as tonishingly rapid. This unknown army accomplished a feat that will remain a monument to its courage and enterprise, unmatched by any other European nation” (Pikul, 2024).

However, this expansion was far from ‘*territorial development*’. The initial phase of Russian expansion commenced under Ivan the Terrible, who launched military campaigns against native Finno-Ugrian populations and nomadic tribes. Throughout subsequent centuries, Russian rulers – including Ivan IV and Peter I – pursued aggressive territorial acquisition strategies aimed at subjugating indigenous populations, consolidating fragmented territories, and establishing control over critical trade routes (Windhausen, 2023). The table below represents a summary of the historical and political phenomenon, which is called ‘Russian colonial policy’ (Table 1).

Table 1

Number of armed conflicts with the participation of the Russian State

State Formation	Period	Number of Armed Conflicts
Principality of Moscow	1263 – 1547	~25 conflicts
Tsardom of Russia	1547 – 1721	~35 conflicts
Russian Empire	1721 – 1917	~90 conflicts
Soviet Union	1922 – 1991	~45 conflicts
Russian Federation	1991 – present	~12 conflicts

In general, all Russian colonial wars and armed conflicts should be structured in light of the different types of invasion:

1. TERRITORIAL CONQUEST (approximately 85 wars):
 - Siberian expansion;
 - Central Asian conquests;
 - Caucasus subjugation;
 - Baltic expansion;
 - Polish partitions;
 - Far Eastern expansion;
 - Soviet annexations 1939-1945;
 - post-Soviet neo-colonial interventions.
2. SUPPRESSION OF INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENTS (approximately 45 wars):
 - Bashkir rebellions (multiple);
 - Kazakh uprisings (multiple);
 - Polish uprisings (multiple);
 - Chechen wars (multiple);
 - Georgian conflicts (multiple);
 - Baltic independence struggles;
 - Ukrainian resistance (1917-1921, 1940-1960, 2014-present);
 - numerous other ethnic and national rebellions.

3. MAINTENANCE OF COLONIAL EMPIRE (approximately 30 wars):

- anti-communist insurgencies in Eastern Europe;
- Soviet interventions in satellite states;
- post-Soviet ‘frozen conflicts’;
- Russian “peacekeeping” operations in the former USSR.

4. IMPERIAL RIVALRY (approximately 30 wars):

- wars with the Ottoman Empire;
- wars with Sweden;
- wars with Poland-Lithuania;
- Napoleonic Wars;
- Russo-Japanese War;
- Cold War proxy conflicts.

Beyond the sheer volume of Russian colonial campaigns, their methodology warrants particular scrutiny. Direct conquest and territorial annexation constituted the hallmark strategies of the Russian Empire – a pattern disturbingly evident in 2025, as Putin seeks to fundamentally redraw Europe's borders and reconstitute the Soviet Union within its historic boundaries. This ambition poses an existential threat, including a military dimension, to nations formerly subjugated by the empire (Sidorzhevsky, 2025).

It includes direct military conquest followed by administrative integration, elimination of indigenous political structures, and establishment of Russian/Soviet administrative control. However, no less important was Russian settler colonialism, including mass settlement of Russian populations in conquered territories, displacement of indigenous populations, mass russification policies, and creation of ‘new’ Russian or Soviet territories.

Colonialism is always concerned with resource extraction. Here, the Russian state was not unique in emphasising policies such as control of the fur trade (Siberia), agricultural resources (Ukraine, Kazakhstan), mineral resources (Caucasus, Siberia, Central Asia), and strategic resources (oil, gas in the modern period).

No less important was Russian cultural colonialism, including forced conversion to Russian Orthodox Christianity (Tsarist period), imposition of Russian language and culture (Ukraine especially), Soviet atheism and communist ideology, and suppression of local languages and cultures.

Military occupation was also a priority of Russian imperial policy (permanent military bases in conquered territories, garrison cities and fortifications, use of military force to suppress resistance, and punitive expeditions against rebellious populations).

Administrative colonialism includes Russian/Soviet governors and administrators, integration into the imperial/Soviet legal system, economic integration and dependency, and political subordination to Moscow and St. Petersburg.

A colonial state cannot imagine itself without implementing the principle of *‘divide and rule’*, in which the Russian authorities have achieved stunning results by playing ethnic groups against each other, creating artificial administrative boundaries, privileging certain groups over others, and fostering dependency on imperial power.

Many conflicts involved large-scale ethnic cleansing or genocidal policies: 1) Circassian genocide (Caucasian War 1817-1864): mass deportation and death of Circassian population; 2) deportations of ‘punished peoples’ era (Chechens, Ingush, Crimean Tatars, and others) during WWII; 3) Holodomor (famine-genocide in Ukraine, 1932-1933); 4) ethnic cleansing of Georgians from Abkhazia (1992-1993); 5) ethnic cleansing of Georgians from South Ossetia (2008).

Since 1991, Russia has maintained colonial relationships through what can be termed *‘frozen conflicts’*, creating dependent pseudo-states in regions like Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The approach involves maintaining military bases in former Soviet republics and exercising economic dependency through energy politics and economic leverage. Political interference takes the form of support for pro-Russian politicians and parties, while direct military intervention has been used to prevent Western integration, as seen in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine from 2014 to the present. Additionally, Russia has employed military intervention through the use of Wagner Group, Africa Corps, and similar entities in Africa and the Middle East.

This post-Soviet neo-colonialism operates through five key imperial strategies: territorial expansion with a continuous drive to expand borders and spheres of influence, systematic suppression of autonomy by crushing independence movements, military dominance using overwhelming force against weaker opponents, strategic depth through the pursuit of buffer zones and security perimeters, and imperial ideology

justified through civilizing mission narratives, whether Tsarist, proletarian internationalism under the Soviet system, or protection of Russian speakers in the modern era.

The historical record demonstrates that Russian state formations, from the Muscovite Principality to the modern Russian Federation, have engaged in over 200 military conflicts over 700 years. A substantial majority of these conflicts (approximately 70%) exhibit clear colonial characteristics: 1) conquest and subjugation of non-Russian peoples; 2) territorial expansion through military force; 3) suppression of independence movements; 4) extraction of resources from conquered territories; 5) settler colonialism and demographic manipulation; 6) cultural imperialism and forced assimilation; 7) maintenance of empire through military occupation.

This pattern of colonial warfare has been remarkably consistent across different regime types (monarchy, communist state, post-Soviet federation), suggesting that colonialism is a fundamental characteristic of Russian statecraft rather than an aberration of any particular political system.

The colonial nature of Russian expansion has resulted in: 1) incorporation of vast territories into the Russian state; 2) subjugation of dozens of ethnic groups and nationalities; 3) destruction of indigenous political entities; 4) large-scale population displacements and ethnic cleansing; 5) ongoing conflicts in former colonial territories; 6) persistent neo-colonial relationships in the post-Soviet space.

Understanding this colonial history is essential for comprehending contemporary Russian foreign policy, particularly the ongoing war in Ukraine and interventions in other former Soviet republics and beyond.

Finally, intending to demonstrate the origins of contemporary Russian imperialism and colonialism, we present a table synthesizing the structural, administrative, legal, and economic verticals of the British, French, and Russian imperial systems during their zenith (c. 1850 – 1917).

The British, French, and Russian empires, despite their structural differences as sea and land powers, arrived at remarkably similar modalities of rule. All three utilised forms of indirect rule to manage vast populations; all bent legal categories to institutionalise inequality; and all reshaped the economic geography of their subjects to serve the metropole. Yet their approaches reflected distinct imperial ideologies: British pragmatism and racial hierarchy, French republican assimilationism and *'mission civilisatrice'*, and Russian Orthodox messianism and territorial absorption.

However, the divergence in their spatial morphology and ideological foundations created lasting differences in their legacies. The British Empire, separated by the oceans, could decolonise by simply lowering the flag and withdrawing the fleet, leaving behind clear (if scarred) nation-states. The French Republic, also maritime but ideologically committed to integration, created departments and citizenship frameworks that persisted, producing hybrid post-colonial relationships. The Russian Empire, bound by soil and river, wove the colony into the very body of the nation. The result was an empire that could not easily decolonise without dismembering itself – a process that arguably continued through the Soviet collapse and persists in the geopolitical tensions of Eurasia today (Table 2).

'Russian World' as a New Imperial Megaproject

The material practices of Russian neocolonialism are supported by a powerful metaphysical infrastructure. The ideology of *Russkiy Mir* ('Russian World') provides the moral and historical justification for expansionism, positing Russia not as a nation-state but as a *'civilisation-state'* with no fixed borders.

Putin's well-known recent statement to Russian students – that Russia's borders *"do not end anywhere"* – is not merely a rhetorical flourish but a crystallisation of neo-imperial doctrine. This pronouncement, delivered in an educational context, reveals how deeply imperialism has penetrated Russian state ideology. By telling young students that their nation has no boundaries, Putin transforms a discipline rooted in physical reality into a tool of expansionist propaganda. This echoes historical Russian imperial concepts like the 'gathering of Russian lands' and the notion of a borderless *'Russian world'* – ideological constructs that have repeatedly justified territorial aggression. From the outset, the danger of Putin's statement lies in its normalisation: presented not as a political manifesto but as a geographical 'fact' to the next generation (BBC, 2016).

Originally conceived in the late 1990s and formalised in the mid-2000s as a soft power instrument designed to foster cultural and linguistic ties with the post-Soviet diaspora, the *'Russian World'* has metastasised into a kinetic, militarised imperial megaproject. No longer merely a network of cultural centers or a framework for public diplomacy, it has evolved into a totalising state ideology that justifies territorial irredentism, the erasure of sovereign borders, and the systematic application of violence to enforce loyalty to a Moscow-centric civilisation.

Table 2

Comparative analysis of the main empires in XIX – XX centuries

Policy Domain	British Empire (Thalassocracy)	French Republic (Thalassocracy)	Russian Empire (Tellurocracy)
Geopolitics and Space	Maritime Discontinuity: Empire separated by oceans. Sharp psychological/legal distinction between 'Home' (the UK) and 'Empire'. The 'Moat' of the Channel allowed domestic liberalism alongside colonial authoritarianism.	Maritime Discontinuity with Republican Integration: The Empire separated by oceans and the Mediterranean. Distinction between France <i>métropolitaine</i> and the Empire, but ideological commitment to as simulation erodes this boundary. Republican universalism creates tension between colonial hierarchy and egalitarian principles.	Continental Continuity: Contiguous landmass. Blurred boundaries between Metropole and Colony. 'Internal Colonisation', where the core colonises itself. No clear geographic break
Agents of Expansion	Private Capital and Chartered Companies: East India Co., Royal Niger Co., British South Africa Co. Expansion is often outsourced to the market before state as sumption	State-Military Complex with Civilizing Mission: Colonial Army (<i>Armée d'Afrique</i>), Foreign Legion, Marine Troops. Expansion driven by state prestige, military officers, and republican ideology of bringing 'civilisation.' Private capital secondary (<i>Compagnie des Indes</i> collapsed in 1769)	The State and Military Estates: The Imperial Army and Cossack Hosts (Don, Kuban, Siberian). Expansion driven by state security imperatives and military settlement
Philosophy	Indirect Rule: Governing through indigenous pre-existing structures (Princes, Emirs, Chiefs). The 'Resident/advises; the Native Ruler executes. Minimal British manpower ('The Thin White Line')	Association and Assimilation (Dual System): Direct rule in 'old colonies' (Antilles, Réunion) with a path to French citizenship. Association in newer territories: Preserve local structures but under French sovereignty. <i>Gouverneur-Général</i> coordinates but uses indigenous intermediaries (chefs de canton, chefs de province)	Military-Popular Administration: Direct military rule at the executive level (<i>Governors-General</i>); preservation of native courts/elders at the local level for stability. A hybrid of direct military control and local neglect

Continuation of table 2

Policy Domain	British Empire (Thalassocracy)	French Republic (Thalassocracy)	Russian Empire (Tellurocracy)
Legal Statutes	Subjecthood: Hierarchy of <i>British Subject</i> (Empire-wide) v. <i>British Protected Person</i> (Protectorates). Rights stratified by race and locale. Rigid racial 'colour bar' preventing elite integration.	Tiered Citizenship: <i>Citoyens français</i> (full rights) vs. <i>Sujets français</i> (French subjects without full rights). <i>Code de l'indigénat</i> (1887): Special legal regime for colonial subjects with arbitrary administrative punishment. Selective assimilation: <i>Évolués</i> can become citizens but must renounce 'personal status' (Islamic or customary law)	Estate System (<i>Soslovie</i>): <i>Inorodtsy</i> ('Aliens'). Categorised by lifestyle (settled, nomadic, wandering). Non-Russian elites (Tatars, Georgians) often co-opted into the Russian nobility (<i>Dvoryanstvo</i>)
Land Policy	Alienation and Reserves: Creation of 'Crown Land' and 'Native Reserves'. Displacement of locals for white settler commercial farming (e.g., Kenya, Rhodesia). Private property focus	<i>Cantonement</i> and <i>Séquestre</i>: Forced consolidation of indigenous lands into 'reserves' (<i>cantonement</i>). Seizure of 'vacant' and 'tribal' lands for colonists (European settlers). Algeria: Massive land expropriation (Senatus-Consulte 1863, Warnier Law 1873), creating settler estates	Resettlement (<i>Pereselenie</i>): Seizure of 'surplus' nomad lands for Slavic peasant colonisation (<i>Stolypin Reforms</i>). State-managed migration to relieve domestic agrarian pressure
Economic Strategy	Free Trade (Post-1850): Integration into global markets. Colonies as sources of raw materials and markets for British manufactures. Laissez-faire extraction	<i>Assimilation économique</i> and <i>Pacte Colonial</i>: Integration into the franc zone. Colonies as protected markets for French manufactures and sources of raw materials. Infrastructure investments favour extraction (Dakar-Niger railway, Indochina railways). High tariffs protect French industry.	Autarky and Protectionism: High tariffs to protect the infant industry. Turkestan developed as a captive cotton colony to eliminate dependence on US imports. Command-style industrialisation
Networks	Commercial/Military Rail: Massive networks (Indian Railways) funded by private capital with state guarantees. Focused on export to ports	Strategic and Commercial Rail: Trans-Saharan railway (planned but incomplete). Extensive networks in Indochina and the Maghreb for both military control and resource extraction. Ports developed as imperial hubs (Dakar, Algiers, Saigon)	Strategic Rail: Trans-Caspian, Trans-Siberian. Built by the military for troop movement and internal cohesion. Overland connectivity

Continuation of table 2

Policy Domain	British Empire (Thalassocracy)	French Republic (Thalassocracy)	Russian Empire (Tellurocracy)
Cultural Ideology	‘The White Man’s Burden’: Racial hierarchy. Duty to ‘civilise’ through law, commerce, and hygiene. Assimilation is theoretical and distant. Macaulay’s ‘<i>Anglicist</i>’ education	Mission Civilisatrice (Civilizing Mission): Republican duty to spread the French language, culture, secular education, and ‘rational’ governance. Assimilation as a goal: Transforming subjects into French citizens culturally and linguistically. Jules Ferry’s colonial doctrine: ‘Superior races have a duty toward inferior races.’ <i>École coloniale</i> trains administrators in this ideology	Russification (<i>‘Obrusenie’</i>) and Orthodoxy: Administrative unification (language) and religious conversion. <i>Ilminsky’s method</i> (vernacular education). Assimilation is often a goal for security.
Religious Policy	Secular Distancing: State neutrality (post-1857 India) to avoid revolt. Missionary societies act independently, sometimes restricted by the state	<i>La Laïcité</i> with Pragmatic Exceptions: Separation of Church and State (1905 Law) NOT applied in colonies. Catholic missions tolerated and often supported in sub-Saharan Africa. Islamic law was maintained in North Africa and West Africa to avoid a revolt, but was subordinated to French sovereignty. Ambivalence toward Islam as both a civilisational rival and a governance tool	State Confessionalism: Orthodoxy as the state religion. Missionary work is state policy (e.g., Volga), though ‘ignored’ in volatile Muslim areas like Turkestan.
Resistance and Policing	Punitive Expeditions: ‘<i>Air Control</i>’ (Iraq), burning villages. Focus on restoring order to maintain trade.	Punitive Expeditions and Razzia: ‘Pacification’ campaigns using systematic village burning (<i>enfumades</i> in Algeria). Collective punishment, hostage-taking of chiefs. <i>Code de l’indigénat</i> allows administrative detention without trial. Large-scale massacres during resistance (e.g., Sétif 1945, Madagascar 1947)	Scorched Earth and Exile: Mass deportations (Circassians), brutal suppression. Focus on territorial cleansing and security.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the '*Russian World*' has manifested as the ideological bedrock of an '*Axis of Upheaval*', where religious and cultural narratives are weaponised to justify aggression and internal repression. The state has deployed a sophisticated toolkit of coercion that extends far beyond the battlefield. This includes the systematic use of torture as an administrative procedure, the creation of a vast network of 'filtration' camps to sift populations for loyalty, the weaponisation of the prison system to absorb and 're-educate' dissenters, and the forced militarisation of youth both in Russia and the occupied territories of Ukraine.

To understand the operational violence of the Russian Carceral-Prison new empire, one must first grasp the ideological framework that legitimises it. The '*Russian World*' is not a static dogma but a very flexible, adaptive narrative that integrates disparate and often contradictory elements – Soviet nostalgia, Russian Imperial revanchism, and Orthodox messianism – into a cohesive justification for expansion and the annihilation of Ukrainian identity.

The foundational premise of the current Russian strategic culture is the rejection of the 'nation-state' in favour of the '*civilisation-state*'. This distinction is critical for understanding the rationale behind the violence. A nation-state operates within defined, internationally recognised borders; a civilisation-state, as envisioned by Kremlin ideologues and the '*Russian World*' doctrine, is an organic, expanding entity whose borders are contingent on the reach of its culture, language, and '*spiritual values*'.

Recent doctrinal shifts have solidified this view. The concept of '*Russia as a Civilisation*' posits that Russia is neither Western nor Eastern but a unique, self-contained world with a distinct moral mission. This emerging '*Ideology of the Future*' asserts that Russian civilisation offers a superior alternative to 'failing liberal democratic systems' and that the Russian state has a duty to protect and expand this civilisation. In this worldview, the invasion of Ukraine is reframed not as a violation of sovereignty, but as a '*restoration*' of historical unity and a defence against a '*satanic West*' that seeks to dismantle Russian distinctiveness. As stated in Elina Murtazova's song 'Russia, Hold On', "*Two mighty forces clashed to the death: Satan's stronghold and the army of good. Here, Russia united against the Nazis, Bandera, and NATO*".

The fluidity of this ideology is its greatest strength in domestic mobilisation. It allows the Kremlin to appeal simultaneously to Soviet-era nostalgia – using the red flag and symbols of the 'Great Patriotic War' to evoke a time of superpower status – and Imperial Russian sentiments, invoking 'Novorossiya' (New Russia) and the conquests of Catherine II. This synthesis creates a 'discursive habitat' where contradictions are resolved through the unifying goal of state power. For example, the erection of statues of Lenin in occupied cities occurs alongside the promotion of Tsarist imperialism, a juxtaposition that makes sense only if the ultimate value is the reach of Moscow's power, regardless of the historical vessel.

The concept of 'sovereign democracy' has evolved into '*civilisational sovereignty*', which implies that Russia cannot be judged by universal human rights standards, as these are viewed as Western constructs designed to weaken Russia. This ideological insulation provides the moral permission structure for the army and security services to ignore international humanitarian law, viewing it as a tool of 'lawfare' against the Russian World.

The Sanctification of Violence: The Role of the Church

A pivotal element in the militarisation of the '*Russian World*' is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). The ROC has effectively become the spiritual arm of this *military-industrial complex*, providing theological cover for war crimes and imperial ambition. Patriarch Kirill and other hierarchs have articulated a '*theology of war*' that frames the invasion as a 'metaphysical struggle' against sin and moral decay, thereby elevating a territorial land grab to the status of a holy war.

The concept of '*Holy Russia*' serves as a geopolitical myth that sanctifies territorial claims. By designating Kyiv and Crimea as '*cradles of Christianity*' and the baptismal font of the Russian people, the Church transforms political borders into spiritual boundaries that must be defended by force. This rhetoric has tangible consequences on the battlefield. It frames the opponent not as a political adversary but as an existential, even demonic, threat ('de-Satanization'), thereby lowering the moral threshold for violence and justifying the extermination of those who resist.

The 'Z' symbol, initially a tactical marking, has been elevated to a *quasi-religious icon*, merging with Orthodox symbolism in a new '*Z-Orthodoxy*'. This fusion equates the military campaign with a holy crusade, where death in battle is promised to wash away sins, and the destruction of 'enemies' is viewed as a salvific act. This sacralisation of violence is crucial for maintaining domestic support and motivating personnel to commit acts that would otherwise be morally repugnant. The narrative suggests that Russian soldiers

are not predatory neighbours, but '*cleansing*' the world of evil, a narrative reinforced by the distribution of religious icons alongside ammunition.

The Russian Orthodox Church has become an integral part of the Russian neo-empire. Today's Russia is by no means a secular state; on the contrary, the Russian state is based on religious dogma. However, this religious dogma does not originate from the classical canons of the Christian church, but rather from a militarised religious order, very similar to the Oprichnina of Ivan IV's time.

Today, it is hardly necessary to mention that the Russian Church performs auxiliary functions in the aggressive colonial policy of the Russian Empire. For example, it reaches the point of absurdity when Russian priests consecrate missiles classified as 'Satan,' which is, in fact, absolute political and ideological nonsense, but at the same time, it does not cease to be a reality.

The Russian Church fundamentally condones violence and torture. In addition to blessing any colonial war of the Russian neo-empire, including the war against Ukraine, the Russian Church categorically ignores violence within Russian society and gives absolute indulgence to the Russian authorities regarding torture, not only of foreign citizens, but also of its own citizens. And this is the main problem with the ideology of the Russian Orthodox Church, which demonstrates complete tolerance of torture and violence.

On the other hand, of course, this does not come for free. The Russian Church receives maximum material benefits from the state and protects these benefits with the help of very deliberate strategies. Sometimes it reaches the point of absurdity, such as when, for example, in Orenburg, food shaped like the dome of St. Basil's Cathedral was seen as an attack on the foundations of the church, with the owner of the restaurant being punished for it (Idel Real, 2025). To a member of Western society, this may seem absurd, but this is precisely the basis for the unity of the Russian state and the Russian church in achieving the common goal of a new colonisation policy for the 21st century.

Historical Revisionism as a Kinetic Weapon

The neo-imperial regime employs history as a primary weapon of indoctrination and a *casus belli*. The 'Great Patriotic War' (instead of World War II) has been elevated to the status of a civic religion, serving as the central legitimising myth of the modern Russian state. This narrative requires the perpetual existence of 'Nazis' to fight, necessitating the labelling of any opposition to Russian influence as 'Nazism'.

In the context of Ukraine, this historical revisionism denies the very existence of a separate Ukrainian identity, framing it as an artificial construct of the Soviet era or a tool of Western subversion. Putin's 2021 essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" laid the intellectual groundwork for erasure, arguing that true sovereignty for Ukraine is only possible in partnership with Russia and that Ukrainian nationalism is inherently anti-Russian (Putin, 2021).

Consequently, the 'denazification' stated as a war goal is effectively a code for 'de-Ukrainization'. If Ukrainian identity is inherently anti-Russian – and therefore 'Nazi' in the Kremlin's lexicon – then the removal of that identity is a moral imperative. This logic underpins the targeting of cultural institutions, the burning of books, and the 're-education' of children. It frames the existence of a sovereign Ukraine as a historical error that the Russian army is tasked with correcting.

The Use of Nature and Culture for the Needs of Russian Imperialism and Colonial Policy: 'Russian Birch' as an Instrument of Russian Imperialism

The birch tree occupies a special place in Russian symbolic space, functioning not only as a national symbol but also as a powerful instrument of propaganda. Unlike most national symbols, which emphasise strength or grandeur, the birch tree in Russian cultural code is systematically associated with sacrifice, grief, and passive suffering. This feature transforms it into a mechanism for legitimising Russian colonial policy through the inversion of the roles of aggressor and victim.

The central element of this strategy is the consistent association of the birch tree with maternal grief rather than heroic military tradition. Memorials in the occupied territories systematically include birch trees as a mandatory element. Russian soldiers are portrayed not as aggressors but as 'children' who have been 'lost' by their motherland. When society is encouraged to mourn losses instead of celebrating victories, criticism of military policy becomes taboo – it is interpreted as 'disrespect for the memory of the dead'.

The birch tree is consistently gendered as a 'feminine tree', as associated with passivity, defencelessness, and vulnerability. The combination of a national symbol with such characteristics creates a paradoxical situation: the aggressor nation represents itself through a symbol of defencelessness.

This allows Russia to be constructed not as a predator, but as a ‘vulnerable victim’ that is ‘forced to defend itself’. The cult of maternal grief not only legitimises past military actions but also creates the preconditions for justifying future ones.

The biological peculiarity of the birch tree – its ability to grow in different climatic zones – is used to symbolically mask imperial expansion. When birch trees are planted near military memorials in occupied territories (from Kaliningrad to the Kuril Islands, from Transnistria to Syria), it creates the illusion of the ‘naturalness’ of Russia's presence. The practice of erecting memorials to the ‘fallen’ in occupied territories is a classic colonial tool – symbolic markers designating the territory as ‘Russian’.

The systematic planting of birch trees near memorials in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia creates a visual code of ‘shared sacrifice’. Particularly cynical is the practice of planting birch trees near memorials at sites of mass crimes committed by the Soviet regime. The birch tree becomes an instrument of revisionist historical policy: it visually equates the victims of the Holodomor with the ‘fallen’ occupiers, the victims of deportations with the aggressors. Younger generations may perceive this visual equivalence as historical truth: as if ‘everyone suffered equally’, as if there is no difference between the executioner and the victim.

An analysis of the functioning of the image of the birch tree reveals a complex mechanism of legitimising colonial violence. The birch tree performs interrelated functions: symbolic inversion of the aggressor into the victim, gender manipulation through feminisation, naturalisation of the occupation, export of victimhood, and sacralisation of aggression.

The Army as the Imperial Vanguard and Instrument of Colonisation

The Russian Armed Forces function not merely as a combat entity but as the primary instrument for imposing the ‘Russian World’ ideology on conquered territories and the domestic population. The military has been restructured to serve as an agent of socialisation, economic integration, and political repression, effectively blurring the lines between warfighting and colonial administration.

Since the onset of the full-scale invasion, the Russian military has intensified efforts to institutionalise ideology within its ranks. The resurrection of the Main Military-Political Directorate (GlavPUR) in 2018 signifies a return to Soviet-style political control but with a nationalist-imperialist content rather than Marxist-Leninist dogma (President of the Russian Federation, 2018). Alexander Kanshin, deputy chairman of the public council under the Ministry of Defence, stressed that the new structure would have greater powers. Among other features, he said, it would have a strict vertical structure, which would be linked to the defence ministry: “Today, there is an urgent need to strengthen the moral and political fortitude of enlisted personnel and officers at all levels and to strengthen the cohesion of army units to solve several important tasks” (Lenta Ru, 2018).

New educational modules and textbooks have been introduced to align military personnel with the ‘Ideology of the Future’. Soldiers are taught that they are fighting for the survival of ‘Russian civilisation’ against a collective West that seeks to dismantle it. This indoctrination aims to create a ‘*warrior caste*’ immune to ‘Western propaganda’ and fully committed to the state’s expansionist goals. The military is presented as the guardian of the state’s ‘*cultural code*’, engaging in a ‘Kulturkampf’ (culture war) that has turned kinetic.

The ‘Z’ symbol plays a central role in this military culture. It has evolved from a friend-or-foe identifier to a symbol of ‘Angry Patriotism’ and total war. ‘Z-patriots’ within and around the military advocate for even more brutal methods, pushing the regime toward total mobilisation and the rejection of all international norms. This subculture within the army promotes an ethos where ‘*violence is a virtue*’ and ‘*mercy is a weakness*’, directly contributing to the atrocities observed in occupied areas. The ‘Z’ movement demands the suspension of ‘normal life’ and the complete subordination of society to the war effort, mirroring totalitarian movements of the 20th century.

Conscription of the Conquered: A War Crime as Imperial Integration

A particularly insidious aspect of the ‘Russian World’ megaproject is the forced mobilisation of residents in occupied territories to fight against their ‘*own country*’. This practice, a clear violation of the Geneva Conventions (Article 51), serves a dual purpose: it replenishes Russian manpower while simultaneously destroying the male population of the recalcitrant territory.

In the Donetsk and Luhansk regions and occupied Crimea, the conscription machinery has been integrated into the Russian military system. Residents are subject to Russian laws on military duty, and refusal

often leads to imprisonment or worse. Reports indicate that in some areas, men were snatched from streets and workplaces and sent to the front lines with minimal training and obsolete equipment, effectively used as *'cannon fodder'* to expose Ukrainian firing positions.

This strategy of *'using the enemy to kill the enemy'* is a hallmark of imperial warfare, reminiscent of colonial levies. It breaks social bonds within the occupied society and implicates the local population in the occupation's crimes, making post-conflict reconciliation significantly harder. By forcing Ukrainians to wear the Russian uniform, the state performatively annexes their bodies before it even fully secures their land.

Torture as an Administrative Procedure

Violence in the 'Russian World' megaproject is not an aberration or a breakdown of discipline; it is a feature of the *'Sistema'*. The widespread reports of torture, sexual violence, and summary executions point to a systemic policy designed to break the will of the population, eliminate potential resistance, and enforce compliance with the new order. The infrastructure of violence is established almost immediately upon the occupation of new territory.

Investigations by international bodies and human rights organisations have documented that torture is applied systematically across all occupied territories. The term 'torture chamber' (*kativnya*) has become synonymous with Russian occupation administration. These facilities are not hidden anomalies but central nodes of local governance. The consistency of methods – electric shocks (often using field telephones or specialised stun batons), beatings with pipes and batons, mock executions, rape and other forms of sexual violence – across different regions (Kyiv, Kharkiv, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia) indicates a centralised directive or at least a standardised training and culture of abuse.

Russia's withdrawal from the European Convention against Torture in September 2025 revealed what decades of impunity had already demonstrated: torture functions not as a systemic failure but as a deliberate instrument of governance, deeply embedded in state practice from police stations to military units and penal colonies (The Diplomatic Service of the European Union 2025). This normalisation extends beyond institutional mechanisms into a broader cultural pathology where the population has internalised its own subjugation – accepting brutality as inevitable, even necessary – creating a society that paradoxically venerates the very apparatus that systematically dehumanises it, whether through hazing rituals (*dedovshchina*), prison hierarchies (*vory v zakone*), or the casual violence permeating everyday encounters with state authority.

The 'Filtration' System: Industrial-Scale Sorting

The 'filtration' process is the primary mechanism for managing the population in occupied areas and constitutes a massive violation of human rights. It involves the mass screening of civilians to identify combatants, civil servants, and activists. However, the criteria for 'failing' filtration are dangerously broad, often including anyone with pro-Ukrainian symbols, military tattoos, or even posts on social media.

Filtration is a dehumanising process involving strip searches (to check for 'patriotic' tattoos or bruises from recoil), biometric data collection, and interrogation. It acts as a gateway to the Gulag-like system of detention: 1) First level: Checkpoints and mobile screening; 2) Second level: Detailed interrogation centers where civilians may be held for days or weeks; 3) Third level: Transfer to the prison system or deportation to Russia.

Those who pass may be deported to remote regions of Russia or allowed to remain under strict surveillance; those who fail are sent to 'filtration camps' (often penal colonies) where they face high risks of torture and enforced disappearance. This system echoes the Soviet NKVD's filtration of returning POWs after WWII and the filtration camps used in the Chechen wars, demonstrating a continuity in Russian imperial governance methods. It transforms the civilian population into suspects who must prove their innocence (and loyalty) to the occupying power.

Sexual Violence as a Weapon of Demoralisation and Dominance

Sexual violence has been identified as a recurring tactic used by Russian forces. The UN Commission of Inquiry and other bodies have documented rape and sexual assault committed against women, children, and men (United Nations, 2025). These acts are often committed publicly or with the knowledge of family members, maximizing the psychological trauma and social shame.

In the context of the 'Russian World' ideology, which prides itself on *'traditional family values'* and moral superiority over the 'degenerate' West, the widespread use of sexual violence exposes a deep

hypocrisy. However, functionally, it serves as a tool of domination, as asserting absolute power over the 'subjugated' bodies of Ukrainians. Survivors report that perpetrators often use explicit hate speech, linking the violence to the victim's Ukrainian identity, suggesting genocidal intent – the idea that Ukrainian women should be violated so they will not bear Ukrainian children. This biopolitical violence is a direct expression of the imperial desire to erase the future of the subject nation.

The 'Putinjugend': Militarisation of Youth

In the Russian neo-empire, the militarisation of youth is a priority. Organisations like *Yunarmiya* (Youth Army) and '*Movement of the First*' have established branches in occupied schools (BBC, 2016a). These programs dress children in uniforms, teach them to handle weapons, and indoctrinate them with loyalty to the Russian state and the '*Great Victory*'.

Active-duty Russian soldiers and veterans conduct '*Lessons of Courage*' in schools and orphanages, glorifying the war and teaching children how to assemble assault rifles. This is a strategic investment in future conflict. By raising a generation of Ukrainian children to identify as Russian soldiers, the Kremlin aims to secure the territory demographically and ideologically for the long term. It transforms the occupied youth into the future defenders of the empire that conquered them.

Russia as a Carceral-Prison State

The prison-carceral state model (Yagunov, 2020; Yagunov, 2025a) describes a governance system where carceral logic – informal hierarchies, violence-based control, and the instrumental use of criminal populations – extends beyond penal institutions to structure the entire state apparatus. This is not state capture by organised crime but the deliberate construction of a state that functions according to prison rules at every level, from military units to regional administration (Yagunov, 2025a).

The governance structure of the Russian Federation is characterised by a fundamental tension between its formal constitutional architecture and its operational reality. On the one hand, the state maintains the facade of a law-based entity, declaring guarantees such as judicial protection, constitutional principles of pluralism, and the separation of powers. On the other hand, formal structures are totally circumvented or overridden by highly personalised, opaque networks of power and unwritten rules. This system of informal governance is widely referred to as the *Sistema*, as associated with corruption at all levels of the state machine.

However, corruption is not the cornerstone of the Russian state. A much more important element here is the traditional use of criminals and prisoners for numerous spheres of public administration.

Russia is an example of the paradoxical relationship between crime, punishment, police, and the prison system, which is difficult for Western citizens to understand. Having the largest number of prisoners who reject the State, Russia has always relied upon the criminals, convicts, and prisoners. The core rules of the well-known Russian informal criminal and prison laws were defined by outright rejection of the State. At the same time, the State has been built on informal criminal and prison laws.

The criminal and prison subculture penetrates structurally into all Russian state institutions and society (Varlamov, 2020). Empirical evidence indicates that police and prison officers often view informal prison laws (*ponyatiya*) as '*necessary and useful*' for fulfilling official duties. This signifies that state agents may adopt criminal and prison norms to maintain order or gather information, essentially validating and leveraging the criminal ethos for state function.

As a result, the structural resemblance between the guiding principles of the criminal and prison subcultures and those of contemporary elite governance demonstrates a clear case of institutional borrowing. The *Sistema* employs concepts that are functionally equivalent to the *ponyatiya*, ensuring that opaque governance and resource capture are maintained.

The Carceral Archipelago Reloaded: Prisons and Surveillance

The expansion of the 'Russian World' has necessitated the expansion of the Russian carceral system. A shadow network of formal and informal detention centers has been established to warehouse the thousands of Ukrainians detained during filtration or security sweeps. This network integrates the occupied territories into the Russian prison system even before formal annexation.

The occupation authorities utilise a hybrid network of facilities that spans the border:

1. Occupied Prisons: Existing Ukrainian prisons in occupied territory (e.g., in Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson) have been seized and integrated into the Russian system. Ukrainian staff who refused to collaborate were replaced or detained.

2. Trans-border Deportation: Civilians are frequently deported illegally across the border to pre-trial detention centers and penal colonies within the Russian Federation (e.g., Taganrog, Rostov, Voronezh, and even deeper into Siberia).

3. Makeshift Prisons: Basements, factories, and other non-standard sites are used for initial detention and torture before transfer to the formal system.

This network operates in a legal black hole. Ukrainian civilian detainees are often not charged with any crime but are held ‘incommunicado’ as ‘combatants’ or under administrative detention provisions that are renewed indefinitely. This prevents access to lawyers, the Red Cross, or family contact, facilitating unchecked abuse.

The Romanticisation and Mass Appeal

The normalisation of the criminal and prison ethos in Russian society is long-standing, historically reflected in the ‘glorification’ of criminals in works by literary figures such as Maxim Gorkii and Anton Chekhov. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, this trend surged, characterised by the widespread use of prison slang and an increased romanticisation of informal criminal and prison leaders. This cultural contagion reflects a societal devaluation of state law and formal institutions.

This cultural preconditioning for accepting the criminal ethos facilitates the acceptance of the *Sistema*. When language and cultural themes of coercion, criminal patronage (*krysha*), and network affiliation (*blat*) are widely understood and romanticised, the transition to a governance structure defined by informal deals and personalised clientelism becomes a natural progression. The cultural versatility of *fenya* – even inspiring comedic satirical retellings in media – perpetuates the allure of the criminal subculture and makes the inherent absurdity of the *Sistema* tolerable and functional for the elite.

Political Legitimation: Prison Culture as the Discourse of Power

The most explicit manifestation of the prison subculture’s influence is the political elite’s use of prison slang and logic in official state discourse. This practice is deliberate and resonates deeply with the population. Examples include President Putin’s aggressive use of prison metaphors to describe political and geopolitical situations (Interfax, 2011). His dismissive characterisation of the opposition as wearing ‘*contraceptives*’ and his use of aggressive sexualised idioms to describe geopolitical negotiations – such as ‘*be patient, my beauty*’ regarding Ukraine’s reluctance to accept terms – demonstrate the institutionalisation of coercive, non-legal language in statecraft (Vedomosti, 2022).

By employing the blunt language of the criminal and prison world, the State normalises coercion, torture, violence, dominance, and non-accountable behaviour. This rhetoric frames politics as an exercise in raw power, where weakness is despised, and submission is expected, effectively utilising prison discourse to create a conceptual environment where the whole state is seen metaphorically as a prison and all citizens as prisoners.

The political adoption of the *ponyatiya*’s underlying logic is fundamentally an explicit rejection of Western liberalism and transparency. The criminal and prison code’s absolute anti-state posture transforms into a political anti-liberal stance when adopted by the state, using the cult of power inherent in the criminal world to justify arbitrary authority.

The political rhetoric frequently relies on the logic of total victory and resolve, such as the statement regarding a potential nuclear exchange where ‘*We, as martyrs, will go to paradise, and they will simply kick the bucket*’ (BBC, 2018). This demonstrates a political ethos that prioritises strength and unwavering resolve over rational, mutually beneficial legal frameworks. Opponents, both domestic and foreign, are often implicitly categorised as *kozly* (informers or fools) for cooperating with ‘external’ norms or displaying perceived weakness.

Blurring Lines Between State Officials and Informal Criminal/Prison Leaders

The practical implementation of the *Sistema* confirms the structural overlap between organised crime and state power. Biographical evidence reveals numerous high-profile figures who successfully merged criminal leadership with positions of economic and political authority.

These include individuals who simultaneously led major criminal syndicates while holding senior positions in large companies, such as Vladimir Barsukov (born Kumarin), the former deputy president of the Petersburg Fuel Company, who was the boss of the *Tambov gang* (OCCRP, 2009).

For the modern Russian political elite, perhaps the most striking example is the head of the so-called 'Republic of Crimea', Sergey Aksyonov, who appeared in police operational databases in the mid-1990s under the nickname '*Goblin*' as one of the members of the well-known organised criminal group '*Seilem*'.

The adaptation of the 'criminals-in-law' to modern oligarchy and global opportunities underscores the reality that criminal structures have achieved political and economic capture. The interchangeability of roles – where a state official can also be a crime boss – solidifies the societal view that the true mechanisms of power in Russia derive directly from the criminalised *Sistema* structure.

The CPT Perspective: Prison Subculture as a Prison System Management Engine

In April 2025, the CPT adopted a new prison standard focused exclusively on the issues of prison subculture in post-Soviet prisons (CPT, 2025).

Regardless of Russia's withdrawal from the Council of Europe in 2025 and further denunciation of the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, this prison standard has the main message that Russian prisons and prisons in many other post-Soviet states are still run under a set of informal prison rules (Council of Europe, 2025).

In the Standard, the CPT pushes forward a well-grounded thesis that Soviet prisons were mainly characterised by what researchers refer to as *carceral collectivism* (as opposed to *carceral individualism*, which is typical of most Western European countries).

This system consisted of three main components: managing the prison system through the mutual surveillance among prisoners; the transfer of power and control to the prisoners themselves; and collective accommodation, which is the result of organising prison life through mass living in dormitories (CPT, 2025). Managing such a huge population proved impossible (and also prevented the correctional institutions from achieving their expected production targets) unless prison officials delegated at least some of their official and unofficial supervisory powers to the prisoners themselves (CPT, 2025).

During the 1930s, the Soviet regime attempted policies of *perekovka* ('reforging'), seeking to rehabilitate inmates and treating thieves and repeat offenders as '*social allies*'. This inconsistent approach granted certain privileges and amnesties to talented workers, with some even transitioning into law enforcement roles. The state's failure to implement a coherent and consistent correctional policy created the necessary institutional vacuum for the criminal elite to formalise their internal governance.

We must stress that Russian prison subculture transcends the walls of prisons. It represents a fundamental characteristic of Russian state governance and societal organization. The CPT's 2025 standard recognises what decades of research have demonstrated: the informal hierarchies, violence-based regulation, and transfer of official power to criminal elites that define Russian prisons are not aberrations but deliberate features of a broader system of control.

Born from the Soviet state's calculated delegation of authority to prisoners and its inconsistent rehabilitation policies of the 1930s, this carceral collectivism created an institutional vacuum that criminal hierarchies filled and have sustained ever since. Despite the FSIN's formal bureaucratic structure, real power operates through these shadow mechanisms – making violence not a breakdown of order but a very foundation.

With Russia's exceptionally high incarceration rates, millions of citizens cycle through this system, carrying its norms, hierarchies, and methods of control back into society. The prison becomes a training ground where informal governance, coercive hierarchies, and the primacy of force over law are normalised and reproduced. Thus, understanding Russian prison subculture is essential to understanding Russia itself: a state where formal institutions mask informal power, where violence serves as governance, and where the line between prison and society has long since dissolved. The prison is not separate from the Russian state – it is its microcosm and its teacher.

Russian Army as a Tool of Imperialist Policy

Russian imperialism – the conviction that Russia possesses a divinely ordained role within the Orthodox and Slavic spheres – exemplifies such cultural factors. Imperial ambitions reinforced Russian autocratic governance structures (Wasielewski, 2023).

The fundamental message of the Russian imperial policy, which is distributed permanently – both in the country and abroad – is that '*We have never conquered any country; we have just defended ourselves*'. It is not just a slogan. It serves as a deep '*natural formula*' which has passed down from generation to generation and, at the same time, as moral justification for any war crime committed during such a '*war of liberation*' which is considered as 'fair remuneration' for Russian 'liberators'.

Another formula that is deeply incorporated into the mentality of Russian people is '*military aid to a brotherly nation*', which serves as a moral justification for any invasion of any state for the last three centuries at least.

Dedovshchina: Applying Institutional Collectivism to the Military Management

Erving Goffman's total institution framework is relevant, yet incomplete, for understanding how Russian military forces incorporate informal regulations. The Soviet Army was run based on the philosophical concept of *dedovshchina* – the institutionalised hazing and bullying of young recruits, which goes far beyond classic views on the army as a kind of total institution (Andrejson, 2023).

Historically, *dedovshchina* was a ritualised hierarchy based on time served. Conscripts in their first year ('spirits' or *dukhy*) were subjected to abuse and servitude by those in their second year ('grandfathers' or *dedy*), engaging in menial labour and suffering physical violence to enforce informal discipline. This system provided a twisted form of unit cohesion and a path to status; if one survived the abuse, one eventually became the abuser.

Dedovshchina is an institutionalised practice where senior conscripts subject newer recruits to systematic abuse, including violence, degradation, theft, severe hazing, and occasionally lethal attacks. It has its roots in the Tsarist era, when officers would drive new recruits around like beasts, flogging them with whips (Strauss 2025). Today, to understand the current informal hierarchy, one must first analyse the erosion of the pre-war social order within the military barracks. The historical phenomenon of *dedovshchina* – literally '*the rule of the grandfathers*' – was the defining informal institution of the late Soviet and post-Soviet army.

Such a pervasive system could only persist with tacit approval from the officer class. Its continuation stems from a structural void: due to the lack of professional non-commissioned officers to establish order, this abusive hierarchy among enlisted personnel becomes a crude substitute for proper military structure. Russian commanders permit *dedovshchina* to continue because they view this violence as a pragmatic tool for enforcing obedience and maintaining rank discipline (Wasielowski, 2023).

In 1989, the movie "*Do It – One!*" was released, depicting a very strong informal hierarchy in the Soviet Army. Such a movie was the first one that tried to attract attention to informal relations in the army and the corresponding violence. Among other things, the sergeant delivers to the '*Freshers*' informal laws, which are to be obeyed: "Now, the most important thing. If you want to live well, remember this. Article one. The old man is always right. Article two. Do not argue with the old man. Article three. If the old man is wrong, see article one" (Mosfilm, 1990).

Moreover, in 2000, the comedy movie "*DMB*", which means '*dembel*' (demobilisation), was released. This movie is still one of the most popular movies among the Russian population. On one hand, it presents the Russian army in a very satirical style, ridiculing all Soviet atavisms preserved. On the other hand, it still makes an injection that the Army, with all its informal laws and corresponding violence, is a positive phenomenon that is to be accepted. Even the phenomenon of *dedovshchina* is presented as sometimes not pleasant but, finally, necessary and logical for the social career of any man: "So, you understand. Those who have served six months are considered young and are as signed to the ladle. Those who have served a year are as signed to the bucket. The bucket is under the command of the old man. The old man has served for a year and a half. He respects the demob. Your life is complete shit. In the army, you're disembodied spirits, and everyone bullies you" (Kino Teatr, 2000).

The problem of *dedovshchina* is also presented in the case of *Perevedentsevy v. Russia*, where the ECtHR stated that under a system of *dedovshchina*, second-year conscripts force new recruits to live in a year-long state of pointless servitude, punish them violently for any infractions of official or informal rules, and abuse them gratuitously (HUDOC, 2014). Dozens of conscripts are killed every year as a result of these abuses, and thousands sustain serious – and often permanent – damage to their physical and mental health (HUDOC, 2014). Hundreds commit or attempt suicide, and thousands run away from their units (The UN Refugee Agency, 2004). This abuse takes place in a broader context of denial of conscripts' rights to adequate food and access to medical care, which causes many to go hungry or develop serious health problems, and abusive treatment by officers (HUDOC, 2014).

Dedovshchina permeates military installations across Russia. The system creates an unofficial ranking structure among enlisted soldiers that is determined by duration of service, with each tier having its own designated privileges and responsibilities. New arrivals possess virtually no privileges within this

framework – such entitlements must be accumulated gradually through time served (The UN Refugee Agency, 2004). During their initial period, recruits are deemed ‘unqualified’ for basic activities, including eating, bathing, resting, sleeping, falling ill, or even monitoring the passage of time. A new soldier's existence revolves around endless duties serving those conscripts who have completed sufficient service – typically one year or beyond – to have secured their position in the unofficial pecking order. Those in their second year of service, known as *dedy*, wield nearly absolute authority over their less experienced counterparts. They possess the power to command subordinates to perform any action they desire, regardless of how humiliating or irrational the assignment may be, while operating outside the boundaries of any formal regulatory system. Should a first-year soldier decline to comply or prove unsuccessful in completing the designated duty, the veteran conscript has free rein to impose whatever disciplinary measures he considers fitting, irrespective of their brutality (HUDOC, 2014).

Dedovshchina is characterised by exploitation, brutality, and a complete absence of accountability. Throughout their initial year of service, conscripts exist under the perpetual threat of violence should they fail to satisfy the endless commands and requirements of the *dedy*. Numerous conscripts devote entire days to executing these directives, which span from mundane tasks – polishing senior soldiers' footwear or preparing their sleeping quarters – to exploitative demands, including surrendering their meal portions, or obtaining (through lawful or unlawful means) cash, liquor, or tobacco products for their superiors. Junior conscripts encounter violent reprisals for any noncompliance, and punishment is frequently administered collectively rather than individually, affecting all who fall short of the *dedy's* expectations. Typically, such retribution occurs during nighttime hours after commissioned officers have departed. The *dedy* rouse first-year servicemen from sleep in the dead of night and force them to execute physical exercises – push-ups or squats, usually while being struck – until physical collapse. Junior conscripts also regularly suffer arbitrary abuse, frequently entailing severe physical assault or sexual violation, at the hands of intoxicated *dedy* during nocturnal hours (HUDOC, 2014).

While *dedovshchina* may once have served the purpose of initiation, it has in the past thirty years degenerated into a system in which second-year conscripts, once victims of abuse and deprivation themselves, enjoy untrammelled power to abuse their juniors without rule, restriction, or fear of punishment. The result is not enhanced esprit de corps but lawlessness and gross abuse of human rights. The collapse of *dedovshchina* as an initiation system has occurred at both the command level and at the conscript level (HUDOC, 2014).

At the command level, abusive practices associated with *dedovshchina* have persisted due to an almost universal failure on the part of the officers' corps to take appropriate measures. Our research found that the vast majority of officers either chose not to notice evidence of *dedovshchina* or, worse, tolerate or encourage it because they see *dedovshchina* as an effective means of maintaining discipline in their ranks. Indeed, we found that officers routinely fail to send a clear message to their troops that abuses will not be tolerated, reduce existing prevention mechanisms to empty formalities or ignore them altogether, and fail to respond to clear evidence of abuse (HUDOC, 2014).

The Collapse of the Statutory Order

The operational history of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine from 2022 to 2025 reveals a profound dichotomy between the *de jure* structure of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the *hierarchy* that governs life and death both on the contact line and behind the lines.

While the military doctrine outlines a rigid chain of command based on rank and billet, the reality of prolonged attritional warfare has calcified a parallel social order. The functional command structure of the Russian military is no longer defined by the formal regulations but by a predatory *caste system* predicated on proximity to political power, contractual legal status, ethnic origin, and financial liquidity.

The disintegration of the formal hierarchy has not led to anarchy, but rather to a ruthless form of ‘*combat Darwinism*’. The traditional Soviet-era practice of *dedovshchina* (hazing based on seniority) has mutated into a lethal management tool where violence, extortion, and summary execution – colloquially known as ‘*zeroing out*’ – serve as the primary mechanisms for maintaining cohesion.

During the invasion of Ukraine, this transformation has been driven by the necessity of managing a disparate force composed of mobilised civilians (*mobiki*), professional contract soldiers (*kontraktniki*), penal contingents (Storm-Z and Storm-V fighters), corporate mercenaries (*Wagner, Redut, Gazprom battalions*), and foreign proxies (*North Korean troops*).

Mutation of *Dedovshchina*: From Barracks Hazing to Systemic Predation

After the 2022 Russian invasion began, *dedovshchina* proved remarkably *useful* for imperial policy objectives rather than disappearing as some anticipated. According to EUAA Military Service reports, the military's profound unpopularity in 2022 stemmed from the complete domination of junior soldiers by their seniors, perpetuating a widespread culture of robbery, torture, and sexual assault. Yet the prevailing assumption that "the perversity of this attitude toward 'maintaining discipline' undermines the effectiveness of Russia's armed forces" proved disconnected from reality (HUDOC, 2014). Russian propagandists achieved something extraordinary: they transformed the traditionally secretive atmosphere surrounding *dedovshchina* into openly legitimised violence serving state purposes. What had operated in the shadows became a *publicly sanctioned tool* of imperial warfare.

Having experienced various forms of violence as army soldiers, young men internalised *dedovshchina* as a functional tool of self-organisation within the dysfunctional military institution and came to embrace the values of endurance and maturation central to male identity (Maklak, 2015). Emphasizing the heroism of Russian soldiers while characterising Western efforts to 'undermine Russian sovereignty' through 'attacks on the Motherland', the Kremlin obscured the *dedovshchina* phenomenon through a narrative of necessary and natural sacrifice by the 'sons of the Motherland' that frames certain violence originating 'from above'.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the partial mobilisation of September 2022 dismantled this time-based hierarchy. This leads to the needed, updated exploration of *dedovshchina*, a decade-plus since the 'new look' reforms were launched (Coffey, 2022).

The influx of older reservists, convicts, and highly paid volunteers disrupted the traditional age-based dominance. By 2025, the '*rule of the grandfathers*' has been replaced by a hierarchy of *expendability*. Status is no longer derived from how long one has served, but from one's classification: elite specialist, volunteer contractor, mobilised civilian, or penal recruit. The abuse that was once a rite of passage has evolved into systemic predation, where the strong (those with weapons, rank, or money) prey upon the weak (those without protection) to ensure their own survival.

The Non-Commissioned Officer Vacuum and Officer-Warlords

A structural catalyst for this toxic hierarchy is the Russian military's chronic failure to develop a professional Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) corps. In Western military doctrine, NCOs serve as the '*backbone*' of the army, enforcing standards and ensuring soldier welfare. In the Russian model, these responsibilities fall to junior officers who are frequently detached, overwhelmed, or corrupt.

The absence of a professional NCO layer creates a vacuum in the chain of command that is filled by informal power brokers. In the trenches of occupied Ukrainian territories, discipline is not maintained through the code of military justice, but through the '*law of the fist*'. Officers, insulated by an informal ban on prosecution for crimes committed in the 'Special Military Operation' zone, have devolved into petty warlords. Investigations reveal that commanders operate with total impunity, using torture and execution to enforce orders, knowing that the military prosecutor's office is prioritising 'operational stability' over legal accountability. This institutionalised impunity has transformed the unit commander from a tactical leader into a feudal lord who holds absolute power over the lives and financial assets of his subordinates.

Treatment of Deserters by Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine

Numerous media outlets documented cases of unlawful detention and torture of contract soldiers in Russian-controlled areas of Ukraine who had refused to fight and sought to leave the country. Ukrainian Defence Intelligence reported that a captured Russian soldier described the deployment of '*execution squads*' to eliminate deserters amid mounting unrest within Russian military ranks (Charter 97% 2025). In July 2022, Russian soldiers opened fire on approximately 30 members of their own unit who were attempting to desert. On 4 November, the UK Ministry of Defence stated via its official Twitter account – citing UK Defence Intelligence – that "Russian forces have probably started deploying '*barrier troops*' or '*blocking units*' to Ukraine". According to this assessment, these units threaten to shoot their own retreating soldiers to compel continued offensives, a tactic Russian forces have employed in previous conflicts (EUAA, 2022).

The Class War in the Trenches: Mobilised vs. Contract Personnel

The 'partial mobilisation' of 2022 introduced a deep fissure in the social fabric of the Russian army. By 2025, a distinct class antagonism has solidified between the *mobiki* (mobilised personnel) and the *kontraktniki* (contract soldiers).

The Legal and Economic Schism

The root of the conflict lies in the disparity of status and compensation. Professional contract soldiers, particularly those who signed up after the invasion began, often receive significant signing bonuses (up to \$2,000 – \$5,000 depending on the region) and higher monthly wages. In contrast, mobilised personnel, dragged from civilian life, often face bureaucratic delays in payment and possess a far more precarious legal status.

While contract soldiers theoretically serve defined terms (though ‘*stop-loss*’ measures effectively extend these indefinitely), mobilised men are bound to service until the official end of the war – a horizon that remains invisible. It has created a sense of indentured servitude among the mobilised, who view themselves as ‘*hostages*’ of the state, compared to the ‘mercenary’ nature of the voluntary contractors.

Operational Segregation and Resentment

This legal schism manifests physically on the battlefield. Reports from the front lines describe a system of segregation where elite or professional units hoard critical resources – thermal optics, commercial drones, electronic warfare jammers, and modern body armour – while mobilised units are left to scavenge or rely on crowdfunding from relatives.

Intercepted communications reveal a profound lack of horizontal trust. Mobilised soldiers frequently complain of being abandoned by contract units on their flanks or being used as ‘trench meat’ to absorb Ukrainian artillery fire while professional units remain in the rear. Contract soldiers, conversely, often view the mobilised as untrained liabilities, referring to them with derogatory slang and refusing to integrate them into complex operations. This stratification compromises combat effectiveness; a battalion commander cannot rely on the cohesion of a force where half the personnel view the other half as a privileged caste profiting from their misery.

The Fragmentation of Force: PMCs, Corporate Armies, and Warlordism

The mutiny of the Wagner Group in June 2023 did not end the phenomenon of Private Military Companies (PMCs) in Russia; it merely forced their restructuring under state control. By 2025, the monopoly on violence has fractured into a complex web of “semi-state” armies, where loyalty is purchased by corporations and intelligence agencies rather than the state itself.

Redut: The GRU’s Proxy Umbrella

The primary beneficiary of Wagner’s dissolution was Redut (Redoubt). Unlike Wagner, which was a personalistic empire, Redut functions as a recruitment and administrative umbrella controlled directly by the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU).

Redut acts as a holding company for various mercenary formations, providing a veneer of deniability while ensuring direct MoD oversight.

Redut mercenaries occupy a privileged tier. They are often better paid and equipped than regular MoD troops, serving as shock infantry or specialised reconnaissance as sets. However, they lack the operational autonomy Wagner once possessed, functioning more as “specialists” within the MoD’s operational design.

The Corporate Battalions: Gazprom’s Private Army

A unique feature of the 2024–2025 landscape is the proliferation of ‘corporate battalions’ funded by state-owned enterprises, most notably Gazprom. Units such as *Potok* (‘Stream’), *Fakel* (‘Torch’), and *Plamya* (‘Flame’) were created to fulfil state quotas for volunteers while protecting corporate assets and demonstrating political loyalty.

These units recruit primarily from corporate security guards and employees, offering lucrative salary top-ups from Gazprom coffers in addition to MoD pay.

Despite their high pay, these units have performed poorly. In battles near Bakhmut, regular army commanders accused *Potok* units of abandoning positions, citing a lack of heavy weapons and poor integration with artillery support.

Regular soldiers view these ‘*Gazprom battalions*’ with disdain, labelling them ‘*security guards playing soldier*’. Their existence highlights the fragmentation of the war effort, where different elite factions (the energy lobby vs. the security services) field their own armed formations with little interoperability.

Ideological Extremists: *Rusich* and *Española*

Occupying a niche tier are the ideologically motivated units. *Rusich*, a neo-Nazi sabotage group led by Alexey Milchakov, operates with a high degree of autonomy, often conducting brutal reconnaissance missions. Similarly, the *Española* battalion, formed from football hooligans (*ultras*), served as a specialised assault unit until facing pressure to disband or integrate in late 2025. These groups represent the 'true believers' of the war. While numerically small, their ideological fanaticism and tactical proficiency give them status above the *mobiki*. However, their open embrace of neo-Nazi symbolism creates a PR headache for the Kremlin's 'denazification' narrative, leading to frequent friction with the political leadership.

The Ethnic Hierarchy and Internal Colonialism

As stated in Elina Murtazova's song 'Russia, Hold On', "*Here, Russia has united against the Nazis, Bandera and NATO. Here, Russians stand alongside Chechens, Avars, and Buryats, Tatars and Yakuts, Mordvins and Cossacks*". Here, we argue how the demographics of the Russian invasion force reveal a stark center-periphery divide. The burden of combat has fallen disproportionately on ethnic minorities from impoverished regions, creating a racialised hierarchy on the front lines.

The Colonial Infantry

The Russian neo-empire has its colonial infantry, which became famous far beyond Russian borders. Over the past 100 years, Russia's armed forces have established ethnic battalions on three separate occasions. First, during WWI, the Tsars organised the renowned '*Savage Division*', comprised of regiments from the Caucasus region. Later, similar temporary factions appeared among opposing forces during the Russian Civil War. Finally, amidst World War II, Stalin permitted the creation of these units to facilitate the nation's mobilisation against the Nazi incursion (Goble, 2016). If before the 2022 Russian armed aggression, few people in the Western community knew about Buryats, Tuvans, Kalmyks, and members of smaller ethnic groups, such a situation changed significantly due to the mass involvement of colonial infantry from Russian colonies and war crimes committed by them in Ukraine.

On September 22, 2022, the Guardian reported that many mobilised men are in Russia's ethnic minority republics, reinforcing a sense that the country has been disproportionately relying on ethnic minorities to provide its main fighting force in Ukraine. Those regions have also suffered a disproportionate number of deaths and casualties from the war (Roth, 2022).

At the same time, Russian propaganda does not hide the participation of ethnic minorities as military professionals. Historically, many occupied territories in Siberia were covered with forests. Consequently, many local ethnic groups developed as cultures of professional hunters and shooters whose skills can be highly necessary on the frontline. Russian propaganda regularly stresses the high effectiveness of Buryat snipers (Arigus TV 2024). Much attention is paid to their 'bravery' and readiness to 'sacrifice their lives' (Ulan Media 2025). Attention is also paid to their military technical skills (Infpol, 2025).

Even the national Buryat media sends messages regularly about the value of its infantry on the frontline (Novaya Buryatia 2025). Considering their historically shaped skills, Russian authorities use their experience to prepare new generations of snipers: "The VOIN Centre has introduced a new training programme into its educational programmes: sniping. The course, developed in collaboration with the Russian Combat Sniping Federation, is being taken by teenagers from all over the country during the summer specialised camps called 'Time of Young Heroes' (Egov Buryatia, 2025).

Russia has maintained a protracted colonial legacy characterised by the strategic manipulation of inter-ethnic tensions among minority populations, a practice that continues to serve Kremlin interests through the selective attribution of culpability for egregious war crimes committed in Ukraine to specific ethnic groups (Newman, 2022).

At the same time, Russian society, being deeply chauvinistic by nature, has a clear and stable negative attitude toward all ethnic minorities, which is reflected in relations in military units. Here, we can once more recall the movie 'DMB', where such an attitude is presented in a highly humiliating manner: "*Hello, brothers in spirit! Are you Tungus? But you do not understand a word of Russian! I didn't know we had Tungus serving in our army. I thought they all died out*".

A 2023 study published in Demographic Research has shown that Russia's ethnic minority populations are experiencing disproportionate fatalities in Ukraine (Bessudnov, 2022). The pattern of Russia's massive combat losses indicates that society's most impoverished and marginalised groups are bearing the burden of Putin's aspirations. Russia's imperial outlook favours those geographically and

politically nearest to Moscow's centers of power, from isolated ethnic communities to individuals convicted of severe offenses (Cremin, 2024).

Russia's military mobilisation for the Ukraine conflict has disproportionately targeted ethnic minority populations (Tabarovsky, 2025). In 2022, between 4,000 and 5,000 residents of Buryatia were drafted on the first night of conscription (Light, 2022). At the same time, indigenous communities – particularly Buryats, Tuvans, Kalmyks, and members of smaller ethnic groups – face recruitment rates that exceed national averages and suffer correspondingly elevated battlefield mortality (Tabarovsky, 2025). Statistical analysis of casualty data from 2022 – 2025 confirms that soldiers from the ethnic republics of Tuva and Buryatia suffer mortality rates significantly higher than ethnic Russians from Moscow or St. Petersburg. The chances of a Buryat dying in the war in Ukraine are 7.8 times higher than an ethnic Russian; a Tuvan is 10.4 times more likely (Petkova, 2022).

The EUAA Military service report, citing a range of sources, stated: 'In October 2022, the media reported that ethnic minority populations of Siberia and the North Caucasus, as well as Crimean Tatars, were disproportionately affected during the mobilisation. In October 2022, the percentage of people drafted under the mobilisation order reached 5.5 % in the Krasnoyarsk region, 4 % in Sevastopol, 3.7 % in Buryatia, 2.6 % in Dagestan, and 2.2 % in Kalmykia (Home Office, 2023).

Here, we must have a brief historical explanation.

The Buryat homeland was carved up during the Russian conquest in the 17th century. Cossacks and other military contingents of the Muscovite Tsardom began pushing eastward into the Lake Baikal region (Khankhalain, 2025). Violence, plunder, forced attempts at Christianisation, and crude interference in local life led to what historians call the "wars with the Buryat people".

Later, Stalin's purges in the 20th century led to the execution of Buryat elites and clergy while their language was recast. These episodes of conquest and colonisation created historical grievances that continue to shape Buryatia's political landscape today. Moscow has systematically removed the Buryat language from core school curricula and restricted its use in official documentation, closed down academic centers focused on Buryat culture, and harassed activists working to preserve the language. As a result, cultural revival efforts have been forced onto independent online platforms and into diaspora communities (Khankhalain, 2025).

The Kremlin consistently portrays Buryats as brutal warriors in the Ukrainian conflict, despite the demographic reality that approximately thirty percent of Buryatia's population consists of ethnic Buryats, a Buddhist people with cultural and ethnic ties to neighbouring Mongolia. The disproportionately high casualty rates suffered by Buryat servicemen in the war, coupled with the apparent instrumentalization of their ethnic identity as scapegoats for documented atrocities, reveal a calculated pattern of exploiting minority populations for strategic military and propaganda purposes while simultaneously deflecting accountability for war crimes away from the Russian state and its ethnic majority population (Ackeret, 2022).

The Republic of Buryatia, a region in East Siberia, has been under the spotlight since February 2022 because of what looks like disproportionate representation of Buryats among the ranks of Russian soldiers (Kennan Institute, 2024). According to the Demographic Research study, a Buryat male faces seventy-five times greater odds of appearing among Russian war dead compared to a Muscovite male. Mongolic and Turkic ethnic minorities within Russia, including the Buryats, are excessively represented in military formations stationed in Russia's Far East. These same formations are regularly assigned to Ukraine's most lethal combat zones.

The case of Tuva is even more attractive and contradictory.

The Soviet annexation of Tuva in October 1944 exemplified Russian colonial expansion disguised as voluntary incorporation. While officially approved by Tuva's parliament (Little Khural), no referendum was held, and the circumstances of annexation remain deliberately obscure (Kamusella, 2020). The USSR immediately established colonial administrative control by appointing Salchak Toka as First Secretary of the Tuvan Communist Party, who ruled as Moscow's representative until 1973. Tuva was initially downgraded to an Autonomous Oblast before being elevated to an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1961 – a status that ensured subordination to Moscow while maintaining the fiction of autonomy. Most tellingly, the Soviet Union imposed a complete information blockade, keeping Tuva sealed from the outside world for nearly fifty years, effectively transforming the territory into a closed colonial possession where external observation and independent development were impossible.

Therefore, the contradiction is shaped due to the situation that people from the colony, being victims of the Russian imperial policy, are used as a tool of the Russian imperial policy.

Tuva, as well as other colonised regions from which soldiers are sent to Ukraine, represents the double victimisation paradox. On one hand, these populations experience a dual trauma – first as subjects of Russian imperial policy, then as unwilling participants forced to perpetuate the system that oppresses them. This transforms victims into vectors of imperial expansion, creating layers of moral complexity and psychological damage.

We can also argue about the structural coercion mechanism where the Russian empire systematically exploits economic deprivation, limited opportunities, and social marginalisation in colonised regions to create a recruitment pool for armed aggression in Ukraine. Military service becomes one of the few pathways to social mobility, effectively weaponizing poverty against the colonised themselves.

Moreover, there is an obvious picture of Russian imperial *recycling of violence*: The empire extracts human resources from peripheral territories to protect the imperial core, making colonised populations absorb the costs of imperial ambitions in both blood and moral compromise. This creates geographic stratification where certain regions serve as perpetual sacrifice zones.

Finally, Russian imperial policy creates *erosion of solidarity*. By forcing colonised peoples to take part in armed aggression against Ukraine, the Russian neo-empire prevents horizontal alliances among oppressed groups and maintains its divide-and-rule strategy across its imperial space.

However, what is common for all the mentioned above regions, in the informal hierarchy, these minority troops are treated as *'assault reliable'* – a cynical assessment that they are less likely to have political connections to protest suicidal orders. They are the workhorses of the infantry, deployed to the most dangerous sectors.

This exploitation has fuelled violent friction. Ukrainian intelligence and Russian independent media report armed clashes between Russian soldiers and ethnic Tuvans (Petrenko, 2023). These incidents, often fuelled by alcohol, stem from disputes over risk-sharing, with minority troops accusing Finno-Ugric commanders from Moscow of using them as shields.

Several areas with high minority populations have suffered the most casualties in the war. Russian imperial policy is not merely claiming lives – it is eroding Russia's ethnic and cultural plurality. However, such a state of things fits well in the Russian imperial policy regarding occupied nations and national minorities. The Kremlin has reinvigorated Russification as a tool to suppress opposition among non-Russian ethnic communities. The Russian government is imposing Russian linguistic and cultural norms upon minority populations to foster ideological conformity. For instance, indigenous minority languages hold only elective status in Russian educational institutions. Consequently, in territories inhabited by these native populations, compulsory Russian instruction has downgraded minority languages to inferior standing. Depriving indigenous peoples of their native tongues blocks their ability to connect with and preserve their distinct cultural heritage (Cremin, 2024).

Even minority languages that were not previously at risk are suffering: for example, only eight people registered for the Tatar language exam in 2023 in the republic. In Bashkiria, only 20% of schoolchildren study Bashkir as their native language, and this number is steadily declining (Real Time, 2022).

In Komi, only 1,500 schoolchildren study the Komi language as their native language: in ten years, their number has decreased fourfold (Komi Daily, 2023). In the Republic of Mari El, only about 10% of schoolchildren study Mari as their native language (Idel Real, 2018). The number of students learning Chuvash has fallen by almost half, from 84% in 2017 to 2021 (Vesti Chuvashii, 2021).

Table 3 lists the languages that have fallen into disuse and disappeared since the beginning of the 20th century (ordered by date of decline/disappearance).

In Russia, indigenous and small peoples are dying out: 67% of them have declined in number over the last 10 years. Despite this, it is the Russian republics that have been hit hardest by mobilisation. Belonging to an indigenous minority is grounds for exercising the right to alternative civilian service, but this right does not apply to conscription.

In Buryatia, men were taken straight from their beds to military registration offices, classes in schools, which were turned into mobilisation points, were cancelled, and teachers were forced to deliver summonses. Men were taken *en masse* to war in Yakutia and Chuvashia. In some regions, entire villages of men were mobilised. For example, in the village of Dada, where mainly Nanai people live, 40 out of 400 people were taken, practically the entire young male population (Indigenous Russia, 2023). In the Murmansk region, in the village of Lovozero, the Sami were taken to war. From the village of Krasnaye in the Nenets Autonomous Okrug, 37 people were mobilised, 18 of whom were representatives of indigenous small peoples (Indigenous Russia, 2023). In November, in Yakutia, the military commission demanded that 500 people

Table 3

Extinction of languages in the territory of Russia

Genealogical classification	Languages	Time of extinction and other comments
Eskimo-Aleut	Aleut	The last speaker died in 2021
Uralic: Finno-Ugric	Middle Mansi	The last speaker died in 2018
Sino-Tibetan: Sinitic	Tazovsky	In the 2010s, there were still speakers, but currently, there are none.
Tungusic-Manchu	Oroch	The last active speaker died in 2008
Tungusic-Manchu	Bikinsk-Nanai	It is not known exactly when it disappeared
Chukotko-Kamchatkan	Kerek	In 1991, there were three speakers; by 2005, there were none left
Eskimo-Aleut	Sirenik	In 1997, the last speaker of the language died
Eskimo-Aleut	Inupiaq	The last speaker in Russia died in the 1990s
Yeniseian	Yugsk	In the early 1980s, there were two speakers, but by 1992, there were none
Uralic: Samoyedic	Kamasinsky	In 1989, the last speaker died
Turkic: Sayan	Soyot	Disappeared in the 1970s; attempts to teach in schools
Uralic: Ugric	South Mansi	Disappeared in the late 1960s
Uralic: Finno-Ugric	Khandai	Sometimes combined into a common "Khanty" language; it disappeared in the early or mid-20th century.

be sent to war each week (Indigenous Russia 2023). Mobilisation hits the smallest peoples the hardest. For example, there are fewer than 1,500 Udeghe people left in the Far East. Nevertheless, in some Udeghe villages, all young men are being mobilised (Indigenous Russia, 2023).

Bashkortostan remains the leader in terms of the number of deaths both among the regions of the Volga region and in Russia as a whole. According to reports, at least 8,134 natives of the republic have died since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine (Idel Real, 2025).

As we mentioned above, such a policy achieves two aims. First, the Kremlin eliminates physically potential insurgents and activists of national movements in the far territories. Second, the Russian regime removes the ideological basis from all national movements.

Kadyrov's Praetorians: A State Within a State

In stark contrast to the Buryats and Tuvans, the Chechen units loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov (Akhmat Special Forces) occupy the apex of the informal hierarchy. While technically subordinated to Rosgvardia or the MoD, they operate with virtual autonomy as a 'private army' of the Chechen leader.

Regular Russian soldiers frequently disparage Akhmat Special Forces as '*TikTok troops*', accusing them of staging combat videos in safe rear areas while regular infantry do the dying (Kyiv Post, 2025).

More ominously, Akhmat Special Forces are widely identified as serving as barrier troops (*zagradostryady*). Positioned in the second or third echelon, they are tasked with preventing the retreat of regular Russian units and Storm detachments.

This role creates intense animosity. Regular soldiers view Kadyrovites not as comrades but as enforcers. Documented incidents of firefights between Kadyrovites and Russian military police – often over looting rights or checkpoints – rarely result in punishment for the Chechens, underscoring their status as the Kremlin's untouchable enforcers.

The Monetisation of Duty: Corruption and the 'Price List' of Survival

Corruption, the use of public power for private gain, is found in all societies but is exceptionally prevalent in Russia. Accordingly, corruption in the Russian armed forces has been a long-acknowledged truism. It remains a problem for the Russian armed forces. It occurs from the top to the bottom, leading to shortages of skills and equipment, and ultimately reduced performance in combat. However, it is important to note that this situation may not be universal (Cranny-Evans, & Ivshina, 2022). Some Russian units are better motivated and equipped than others, indicating that corruption has not prevented those units from receiving the equipment necessary to perform their roles.

Today, Russia occupies 137th place out of 180 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (Ukraine is ranked 116th, the United States 24th. This reality is consistent with Russian and Soviet history. Under the Tsars, autocracy and centralisation led to serfdom for the peasants and obligatory state service for the nobles (Wasielewski, 2023).

Here, we argue that corruption in the Russian Army is not an example of 'white-collar' crime or an economic phenomenon. We point out that corruption serves as a basis for the proliferation of violence and torture in the armed forces.

The Russian Army is totally corrupt. Corruption is not a side quest in the Russian governmental system; it is the game engine.

According to Prosecutor Iurii Skuratov, by 1998, "the Armed Forces were the most corrupt government structure in Russia" (Galeotti 1998). In April 2002, Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov stated that the Ministry of Defence's most pressing task was to halt the "epidemic of theft in the forces" (Bukkvoll, 2025). A 2005 report on the state of corruption identified as one of its principal findings a further "fantastic rise" in military corruption (Bukkvoll, 2025).

In January 2004, Chairman of the Russian Audit Chamber Sergei Stepashin claimed that in 2003, approximately 14 billion roubles of the defence budget's allocation for maintenance of the forces had not been spent according to plan. That amounts to approximately 10% of the upkeep part of the 2003 defence budget (Bukkvoll, 2025).

First of all, from the top of a pyramid, the military industry suffers from structural vulnerabilities rooted in corruption. Institutionalised malfeasance represents a core attribute of the defence-industrial sector and the broader Russian military apparatus. Rather than being anomalous, corrupt arrangements function as essential lubricants within the military-industrial machine. The wartime economic mobilisation initiated in 2022, alongside corresponding increases in military appropriations, has multiplied opportunities for fraudulent business schemes. These conditions have predictably resulted in cost overruns, manufacturing bottlenecks, and systematic underperformance against production benchmarks (Boulègue, 2025).

While formal cost-cutting anti-corruption measures might occasionally achieve positive outcomes, they are unlikely to address systemic corruption or cultivate the essential environment of inventiveness of the Russian industrial complex (McDermott, 2010).

The same principles apply to the direct relations between officers and soldiers on the frontline. In the absence of the rule of law, the command structure has been thoroughly monetised. The relationship between commander and subordinate is increasingly transactional, with survival, leave, and medical treatment becoming commodities to be purchased. Instead of 'one team, one fight', you get fiefdoms (Shevchenko, 2023).

Russian servicemen can purchase their escape from frontline duty through systematic bribery schemes, with payments ranging dramatically from 700,000 to 3,000,000 rubles, depending on multiple factors, representing a significant increase from 2023, when similar services were available for approximately 500,000 rubles. The price structure for these illegal transactions is determined by several key variables, including serviceman status, which varies based on whether the individual is a mobilised conscript, a contract soldier, or a former prisoner recruited through the Wagner Group or similar programs. Geographic deployment plays a crucial role in pricing, as servicemen stationed in occupied Ukrainian territories face different rates compared to those deployed in Russian border regions such as Kursk Oblast, where fighting has intensified, while the complexity of individual circumstances and risk factors associated with the extraction further influence the final bribe amount. This corruption scheme exposes the systematic exploitation within Russia's military apparatus, where those with financial means can buy their way out of combat zones while less affluent soldiers remain trapped on the frontlines, thereby highlighting the intersection of economic inequality and institutional corruption within the contemporary Russian military structure (Atasuntsev, 2025).

However, the *Sistema* tolerates financial extraction from the *citizens* within certain thresholds yet punishes severely anyone who threatens its capacity to disseminate neo-imperial ideology. This pattern manifested in September 2025 when Russian authorities detained Alexander Vlasov, Deputy Governor of Russia's Krasnodar region, on corruption allegations. Vlasov faced accusations of misappropriating funds designated for Russian volunteer military units operating in Ukraine (The Moscow Times, 2025).

The Penal Stratum: The Institutionalisation of Disposable Infantry

At the bottom of the informal hierarchy lies the penal contingent. The recruitment of prisoners, pioneered by the Wagner Group, was nationalised by the MoD in 2023, creating a permanent underclass of soldiers whose primary tactical utility is their expendability. This stratum has evolved from a redemption mechanism into a system of indefinite penal servitude.

Convict Battalions: Russia's Mass Prisoner Recruitment and Its Societal Impact

By September 2022, Wagner PMC recruiters had conducted visits to no fewer than 44 correctional facilities nationwide, with some institutions receiving multiple recruitment missions. These operations typically enlisted approximately one-fifth of each prison's inmate population. Wagner demonstrated a marked preference for individuals convicted of homicide, serious assault, and armed robbery. Evidence suggests Wagner PMC also accepted prisoners diagnosed with infectious diseases, including HIV and hepatitis C – the former being endemic within Russian penal institutions – as well as inmates holding citizenship of other former Soviet republics such as Belarus and Tajikistan (Home Office, 2023). Nevertheless, certain factors generally rendered candidates ineligible: advanced age, Ukrainian nationality, and prior convictions for terrorism or extremist activities. Some accounts indicate that individuals sentenced for sexual crimes and narcotics violations were also accepted into service.

Moscow began recruiting convicts for the war in summer 2022, initially through the Wagner mercenary company and later directly through the Russian MoD. According to Ukraine's Foreign Intelligence Service, Russia has recruited between 140,000 and 180,000 prisoners to fight in its full-scale war against Ukraine as of November 2024.

The recruitment campaign has significantly depleted Russia's prison population. Russia's prison population fell from over 1 million prisoners in 2000 to approximately 433,000 by January 2023, representing a decline of roughly 60% (Prison Studies, 2025). The incarceration rate dropped from 729 per 100,000 in 2000 to 300 per 100,000 in 2023 – still high by European standards but dramatically reduced from its peak. In 2024, Russian prisons held approximately 300,000 to 350,000 inmates – roughly half the number incarcerated in 2014, according to Ukrainian intelligence.

However, prisoner-soldiers face notable disadvantages compared to regular military personnel. They and their families are denied various payments and benefits available to members of volunteer formations, and their salaries are two to four times lower than those of other Russian soldiers, the agency reported.

The program has also raised serious public safety concerns. Dozens of men convicted of violent crimes have been permitted to return to Russian society after completing their service, and in some cases, these ex-convicts have been accused of committing new crimes (Denisova, 2025).

From Storm-Z to Storm-V: The Closing of the Exit Strategy

The transition from *Storm-Z* to *Storm-V* units marks a hardening of the state's exploitation of convict labour.

Storm-Z (Early – Mid 2023): Modelled on Prigozhin's Wagner formulation, these units offered a 'golden ticket': a presidential pardon and expungement of criminal records after a six-month combat tour. Despite high casualty rates, the promise of freedom was a tangible incentive.

Storm-V (Late 2023 – 2025): Following the disbandment of *Storm-Z*, the new *Storm-V* units eliminated the pardon. Convicts are now granted 'conditional release' and are contractually bound to serve until the end of the war, identical to mobilised personnel (Table 4).

The fundamental distinction is contract duration and exit conditions: *Storm-Z* offered the possibility of freedom after six months, while *Storm-V* represents indefinite service until the war's end. This makes *Storm-V* an even more coercive system, eliminating the 'light at the end of the tunnel' that motivated *Storm-Z* recruits. However, both units maintain the same disposable infantry doctrine with minimal training, poor equipment, and extraordinarily high casualty rates.

Table 4

Military units composed of prisoners

	Storm-Z	Storm-V
Period of activity	2022 – 2023	2023 – present
Recruitment Base	Sentenced prisoners	Sentenced prisoners and detainees in pre-trial prisons
Legal mechanism	Presidential pardon	Conditional release (No pardon)
Service term	6 Months (Fixed)	Indefinite (Until the end of ‘SMO’)
Survival probability	Very low	Extremely Low (Assault Specialists)
Training Duration	10–15 Days	~12 Days
Financial Status	Irregular / Withheld	Full pay and benefits (Theoretically)

The Doctrine of the ‘Meat Assault’

The tactical employment of Storm-V units is explicitly nihilistic. Governments are likely to perceive convict-soldiers as expendable, compared to other sectors of a population, making them more prone to abuse by the military apparatus and the state (Pattison, 2024). These detachments are tasked with ‘meat assaults’ against heavily fortified Ukrainian positions in sectors like Avdiivka, Chasiv Yar, and Pokrovsk. Their role is often to draw enemy fire, revealing Ukrainian firing positions for regular Russian artillery and aviation to target.

In the informal hierarchy, Storm troops are ‘*untouchables*’. Regular army officers do not lead them from the front but direct them from the rear, often using drones to monitor their progress and ensure they do not retreat. The ‘V’ or ‘Z’ marking on their personnel files serves as a brand, marking them as *ammunition* rather than manpower. Survivors of these units report being treated as ‘wet rags’ left to rot, with medical evacuation prioritised for regular troops. The integration of Storm-V into the regular army structure has not normalised their status; it has merely bureaucratised their disposal.

Enforcement by Terror: The *Zindan*, Barrier Troops, and ‘Zeroing Out’

To maintain cohesion in a force defined by low morale and corruption, the Russian military has reverted to totalitarian enforcement mechanisms reminiscent of the darkest days of World War II. Soldiers who refuse to fight – designated as ‘500s’ in military slang (an extension of the 200/dead and 300/wounded codes) – face extrajudicial imprisonment. The *Zindan* (an underground pit, cellar, or cage) has become an ubiquitous feature of Russian rear areas (Chaturvedi, 2023).

Soldiers who are subject to punishment are locked in pits dug in the ground and covered with metal mesh. Victims are punished by their superiors for as king to be allowed to terminate their contracts and return home during the military operations in Ukraine, or for violating regulations, for example, by getting drunk. The report is supported by ‘numerous reports prepared by Russian personnel’, British intelligence notes that such severe measures are used to punish breaches of discipline (L'Unione Sarda, 2023).

Refuseniks are thrown into these pits, beaten, starved, and denied medical care until they agree to return to the assault or sign new contracts. In a disturbing escalation reported in 2025, military police have begun targeting the families of deserters, using kidnapping and torture (including electric shocks) of relatives to force soldiers to return to their units.

‘Zeroing Out’: Summary Execution

The term ‘*zeroing out*’ (*obnulenie*) has entered the military lexicon to describe the extrajudicial executions of one’s own soldiers. The practice targets ‘*troublemakers*’ (those who protest corruption), ‘*cowards*’ (those who retreat), and the severely wounded who are difficult to evacuate. Methods range from shooting to the cynical use of ‘suicide missions’ where soldiers are sent to positions known to be pre-sighted by Ukrainian artillery.

Barrier Troops (*Zagradotryady*)

The historical practice of using blocking detachments has been revived (Ryskov, 2007). Intelligence confirms that specific units – primarily Kadyrovites and FSB border troops – are positioned behind assault waves with orders to shoot retreating personnel. This creates a *'kill or be killed'* dynamic where the Russian soldier is trapped between Ukrainian fire to the front and the guns of his own 'comrades' to the rear.

The Foreign Legion: North Korean Integration and Friction

The strategic partnership between Moscow and Pyongyang led to the deployment of North Korean (DPRK) troops to the Kursk and Donbas fronts in late 2024 and 2025. While politically significant, the tactical integration of these forces has introduced a new, volatile layer to the informal hierarchy.

Despite official propaganda celebrating the alliance, Russian soldiers on the ground view North Korean troops with a mix of xenophobia and disdain. Intercepted communications reveal Russian personnel referring to DPRK troops with racial slurs or dismissing them as 'Chinese', highlighting a profound lack of cultural awareness.

The integration plan allocated one translator for every 30 North Korean soldiers – a ratio that Russian officers derided as 'nonsense', making effective command and control impossible. As a result, the friction of coalition warfare has turned lethal. In December 2024, a 'friendly fire' incident occurred in Kursk Oblast where North Korean troops, disoriented and unable to communicate, opened fire on a unit of Kadyrovite (Akhmat) forces, killing eight Chechens (Ukrainian National News, 2024).

In the informal order, DPRK troops are viewed as dangerous liabilities. Russian soldiers have been recorded expressing a desire to 'kill them' due to the chaos they introduce. They are treated as a distinct underclass – useful perhaps for mass labour or wave attacks, but unworthy of the trust accorded to fellow Slavs or even the grudging respect given to Storm-Z convicts.

Ukrainian troops are capturing Koreans, which creates additional diplomatic and ethical problems. Many experts believe that North Korean prisoners will be immediately executed upon their return home. For the North Korean regime, secrecy is the main consideration in this case (Ryall, 2025). The fact that these fighters surrendered rather than committing suicide, as they were ordered to do according to documents seized by the Ukrainians, means that they did not carry out their orders.

Prison Subculture in the Russian Army: How Military Units Became Prison Barracks

Russian society is deeply permeated by prison culture (Yagunov, 2025b). Millions of citizens have experience of imprisonment or close ties with those who have served sentences (Yagunov, 2025b). Prison chanson, specific jargon, a special system of values – all this has become an integral part of everyday life, even among the affluent sections of the population (Yagunov, 2025b). Along with this subculture, society has adopted the prison hierarchy and specific norms of behaviour. The army has always been influenced by this, but in recent years, the situation has reached a critical point.

Torture and Sexual Violence as Management Tools

The Russian army does not keep any statistics on sexual violence. This is quite logical – no one intends to punish the guilty. According to officers, such cases have become widespread and have turned into standard practice. In some units, there are soldiers whose daily role is to be objects of violence. This specific caste is borrowed directly from the prison system.

Although until 2022, Russia was considered by many experts to be one of the leaders in involving soldiers in prostitution and the porn industry (Dancor, 2016).

Now it is a generally accepted reality that no one is fighting against.

Some officers use the threat of violence as a motivational tool: disobeying orders, refusing to hand over money from a card, unwillingness to 'chip in' for the needs of commanders – all of this can lead to gang rape. *'Imelschiki'* (rapists) are present in almost every unit. The only exceptions are elite formations – special forces and army intelligence, as well as individual units led by conscientious commanders, of whom there are few in the modern Russian army.

Prison Hierarchy Instead of Military Hierarchy

Earlier, we described six 'castes' in the Russian army, formed by power relations and financial factors. Now, an internal hierarchy, transferred directly from prisons, is superimposed on this structure. Mobilised soldiers play the role of 'prisoners' – the silent majority who endure everything, adapt, and try to wait for the end of the war, but never resist.

A Torture Culture

The murder of comrades represents only one aspect of the Russian army's deteriorating state. Torture has become widespread, with numerous videos circulating on Telegram channels dedicated to the war. Soldiers are beaten into submission and forced to perform degrading acts – often for arbitrary reasons such as a week's delay, a commander's mood, or perceived infractions. In some cases, they are forced to '*hug a tree*', tied to tree trunks and left outside for days without food or water (O'Donnell, 2025).

Soldiers may be shot and subsequently reported as missing or killed in action. Furthermore, officers routinely threaten soldiers by holding a gun to their heads if they disobey a direct order or fail to follow a soldier deployed ahead of them to their death (O'Donnell, 2025).

The justifications for these 'punishments' vary widely – disobedience, disciplinary violations, alcohol consumption, disagreements with officers, or refusal to surrender equipment. Ironically, those who commit these brutal acts often have superiors who engage in similar or worse behaviour. For instance, Russian officers have been recorded mocking disabled soldiers and stripping supplies from their units. These high-ranking officials project an image of superiority and invincibility while simultaneously exploiting their positions. This creates a culture where difficult military orders are enforced through fear and violence rather than proper military authority, which soldiers then replicate with their subordinates (O'Donnell, 2025).

Russia's culture of impunity within the army corrupts officers and enables the abuse of undisciplined soldiers. The officer corps has grown increasingly problematic since the 1990s. Many officers obtained their positions simply by purchasing them rather than earning them through merit. These corrupt practices include forcing soldiers to perform officers' personal tasks or bribing superiors to secure promotions. Experts argue that the Russian army has fundamentally changed during the war in Ukraine. It now operates on fear and coercion, exhibiting little regard for soldiers who no longer share the army's former values (O'Donnell, 2025).

From Internal Violence to External Atrocities

The roots of Russian military brutality run deep. During World War II, the Red Army earned a reputation for its harsh treatment of both enemies and civilians. As Soviet soldiers advanced through Eastern Europe, they left a trail of destruction, including widespread rape and looting (Ash, 2015). Stalin once infamously suggested that rape was a reward for Soviet soldiers liberating Eastern Europe from the Nazis (Beevor, 2022). In cities from Berlin to Budapest, hundreds of thousands of women were brutally abused. Those who resisted were shot (Strauss, 2025).

Impunity and cruelty in the Russian army are naturally projected onto the treatment of prisoners and civilians (Limaye, 2022). The chaos, crimes in the Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia regions, in the occupied part of the Donetsk region, shootings in the Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Chernihiv, and Sumy regions, the killing of the wounded in Mariupol – all these atrocities not only took place but were also encouraged.

Propaganda of Horror and Projection of One's Own Crimes

Soldiers who commit atrocities themselves expect even greater horrors from the enemy. Army propaganda exploits this fear by talking about '*Ukrainian Nazis*' and '*the horrors of Ukrainian captivity*', about severed limbs, torture with barbed wire, and construction foam. In reality, all these methods were used by the Russians themselves – in Chechnya, Syria, and now in Ukraine.

Beyond Technological Determinism: Russia's Adaptive Imperial Flexibility

Here, we would like to challenge traditional academic views on Russian imperialism, emphasising that contemporary analyses fail to consider the Russian Federation's adaptive capacity to preserve and project imperial power. Contrary to notions of technological and institutional backwardness, Russia's neo-imperial apparatus demonstrates extraordinary flexibility through its use of private military companies (PMCs), the instrumentalization of the criminal population, and systematic reliance on state-sanctioned violence. Drawing on a conceptual model of Russia as a 'prison-carceral state', this section demonstrates that the Russian imperial system functions as a *self-reproducing mechanism* in which any liberalisation threatens its fundamental military capacity. We argue that comprehensive decolonisation, understood as the dismantling of the current territorial configuration of the Russian Federation, is not only a normative goal but also a strategic necessity for global security.

Contemporary scholarship on Russian imperialism suffers from a fundamental analytical deficiency: the persistent application of static models to a clearly dynamic imperial system. Western researchers, relying on assumptions about conservative institutional inertia in empires, systematically underestimate the Russian

Federation's capacity for adaptation and innovation in the projection of power. This misperception has significant political implications, as it obscures the mechanisms by which Russian neo-imperialism regenerates itself in response to geopolitical pressure and technological change.

The prevailing discourse on Russia's military capabilities exemplifies this analytical gap. While observers correctly identify the Ukrainian Armed Forces' acquisition of unprecedented operational experience through prolonged defensive operations, they often overlook the parallel – and perhaps more significant – accumulation of combat experience by Russian regular and irregular forces across multiple 21st-century theatres of war. This asymmetry in analytical attention reflects deeper misconceptions about the nature of Russian imperial power and its evolutionary trajectory.

Characterising Russia as a technologically or institutionally backward country fundamentally distorts the operational logic of the empire. Russian imperial policy demonstrates sophisticated adaptability, particularly in the deployment of asymmetric mechanisms for projecting power. The proliferation and institutionalisation of private military companies within Russia's strategic architecture is an example of this adaptive capacity. Russian private military companies are not a situational response to specific unforeseen circumstances but an integral part of a specially designed system of power projection that allows for plausible deniability and minimizes the domestic political costs associated with losses in conventional military operations.

This institutional innovation allows the Russian neo-empire to pursue aggressive foreign policy goals while circumventing traditional restrictions on the deployment of military forces. The Wagner Group and the organisations that succeeded it have operated on several continents – from Syria and Libya to the Central African Republic and Mali – promoting Russia's geopolitical interests. This model is not imperial decline but imperial evolution, an adaptation of 19th-century conquest strategies to the normative and informational conditions of the 21st century.

The stability of Russian imperial power is based on what might be called the 'prison and carceral state' paradigm – a system in which systematic violence, torture, and informal prison laws and rules permeate both internal governance and military organisation. This violence is not merely a rhetorical figure, but an analytical necessity: the Russian state's ability to project military power stems directly from its willingness and institutional capacity to mobilise a population that is subject to extreme coercion.

The recruitment of military personnel from prisons, widely documented during the ongoing war against Ukraine, illustrates how this mechanism works. By turning prisoners into combatants, the Russian state simultaneously solves the demographic problems of military mobilisation and reinforces the prison logic and culture that underlies its internal order. This practice is not exceptional but rather symbolic of a broader model, in which violence and coercion are not merely instruments of state power, but its fundamental organisational principles.

Importantly, this system demonstrates a path dependency that makes significant liberalisation impossible. The metaphor of a bicycle, which needs to keep moving forward to avoid falling, accurately reflects Russia's neo-imperial dilemma. Any significant reduction in the systematic use of violence, any genuine move towards transparency, accountability, or a reduction in rigid vertical governance based on rights threatens to undermine the mechanisms by which the Russian state maintains both internal control and external projection of power. The Russian neo-empire cannot liberalise without ceasing to be a neo-empire.

The implications of this analysis extend far beyond regional security concerns in Eastern Europe. The Russian Federation's neo-imperial apparatus, based on systematic violence and demonstrating an ability to adapt in the projection of power, poses a fundamental challenge to the international order. This threat cannot be adequately addressed by mechanisms based on assumptions about Russia's backwardness or its inevitable decline.

The question facing the international community is not whether to contain Russia's imperial ambitions, as containment implies stable borders and mutual recognition of spheres of influence. Instead, the strategic imperative is to dismantle the imperial apparatus itself. This inevitably involves supporting decolonisation processes that will lead to the fragmentation of the Russian Federation along lines that correspond to the national and ethnic identities of the formerly occupied populations that have been under Russian imperial rule for five centuries, since the time of the Moscow principality.

This position may seem radical within the framework of traditional political discourse, but it is a logical consequence of recognising the logic of the functioning of a prison state. An imperial system that cannot liberalise without disintegrating and whose military power depends on systematic violence against both its 'civilian' subjects and its own citizens mobilised for war cannot be reformed. It can only be transformed through comprehensive decolonisation.

Coming to the Conclusions: The Paradox of the 'Russian Democratic Neo-Empire'

In synthesising the foregoing analysis of the multifaceted phenomena examined above, it is imperative to transcend the examination of individual manifestations of the contemporary Russian prison-carceral state and address its fundamental ontology – one predicated upon an organic, quasi-biological form of colonialism and imperialism.

The signing of the 'Declaration of Russian Democratic Forces' in Berlin on April 30, 2022, was a landmark event in the history of modern Russian political emigration. The document, which brought together the signatures of figures such as Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Garry Kasparov, Dmitry Gudkov, and representatives of various anti-war initiatives, was intended to consolidate the scattered forces of the opposition around a single strategic platform. The text of the Declaration postulates goals that at first glance seem unconditionally anti-imperialist: an end to aggression against Ukraine, the restoration of the internationally recognised borders of 1991, compensation for victims, and the creation of a constitutional state.

However, despite its clearly anti-Putin rhetoric, the document has been subjected to harsh, systematic criticism from representatives of the national liberation movements of Russia's indigenous peoples, the Ukrainian intellectual community, and Western researchers of post-colonialism. The essence of the complaints boils down to a paradoxical thesis: by declaring democratic values, the Berlin Declaration actually preserves the imperial structure of the Russian state.

To understand the imperial underpinnings of the document, it is necessary to analyse not only what it says, but also what the authors chose to leave unsaid. The structure of the Declaration is based on five key points, each of which, when examined closely through the prism of decolonial theory, reveals hidden mechanisms for maintaining imperial control.

First, we can emphasise the dichotomy of '*regime*' versus '*state*'.

The Declaration states: '*Putin's regime is illegitimate and criminal. Therefore, it must be eliminated.*' This formulation is the cornerstone of the ideology of the Russian 'liberal opposition'. By localising the source of aggression and pathology exclusively in the 'regime' (a temporary political superstructure), the signatories implicitly remove the Russian state itself as a historical and territorial entity from the line of fire. Critics, relying on the concept of 'imperial innocence', point out that this approach ignores the deeply rooted colonial nature of the Russian statehood, which reproduced expansionist practices under Tsars, General Secretaries, and Presidents. By reducing the problem to the personality of the dictator and his entourage, the Declaration proposes a 'change of management' in the metropolis, while preserving the very structure of the subordination of the regions to the centre. This avoids the painful conversation about collective responsibility and the need to re-establish statehood on new, contractual terms, or to dismantle it altogether.

Second, there is an obvious sacralisation of the 1991 borders as a tool of retention.

The clause on the need to restore 'the internationally recognised borders of Russia' serves a dual function. In terms of foreign policy, it is an unconditional signal about the return of Crimea and the occupied territories to Ukraine, which is welcomed by the West. However, in the domestic political sphere, this clause serves as a legal barrier to any separatist movements within Russia itself. Recognising the 1991 borders (the borders of the RSFSR) as 'sacred' means automatically denying the right to self-determination to republics such as Ichkeria, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, or Yakutia, if their peoples choose the path of independence. Representatives of national movements point out that the borders of the RSFSR were drawn by the Soviet authorities using administrative and command methods, without considering ethnic areas and the will of the peoples, and that their forcible maintenance by democratic methods is no different from imperial policy. Thus, the 'democratic' Russia in the version of the Declaration denies colonised peoples the right to secede from the federation in advance.

Third, the clause on '*refraining from public conflicts.*'

Representatives of decolonial movements are particularly alarmed by the signatories' commitment to 'refrain from public conflicts in democratic and anti-war movements.' At a time when there is a heated debate within the opposition among supporters of a united Russia (centralists) and supporters of its disintegration (regionalists), this clause is perceived as a tool of censorship. Any criticism of the imperial consciousness of the Moscow opposition, any reminders of the xenophobic past of individual leaders, can be classified as a 'public conflict' and a violation of the Declaration. This creates a mechanism for silencing uncomfortable questions about internal colonisation, allowing the 'status' opposition to monopolise the microphone in front of Western partners.

Federalism versus Decolonisation: An Ideological Divide

The central point, on which the Berlin Declaration is classified by critics as imperial, is its commitment to federalism as the only model for the future structure.

Opposition leaders consistently argue that Russia's problem is not its size or multi-ethnicity, but the absence of true federalism. According to this logic, restoring budgetary autonomy and free elections to the regions would be enough to eliminate centrifugal tendencies.

The opposition's policy documents assert that many national republics are economically unsustainable without central support, and that their independence will lead to their degradation and disappearance from the map. This paternalistic position ('we know better what you need') is perceived by indigenous peoples as a continuation of colonial rhetoric that denies their capacity for self-organisation and sovereignty.

However, even Yeltsin's 'democratic' Russia launched a brutal colonial war against Chechnya when it attempted to exercise its right to secession. This proves that changing the label from 'authoritarian' to 'democratic' does not alter the imperial essence of a state that seeks to hold on to its colonies by force.

Critics point out that the Declaration does not provide for a mechanism for referendums on independence, which means that it imposes on peoples the default status of remaining part of Russia. However, the 'opposition' has no moral right to decide the fate of the Bashkirs, Tatars, Yakuts, or other peoples.

Criticism from indigenous peoples is also based on economic factors. The regions of Siberia and the Volga (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Yakutia) are the main contributors to the federal budget. The idea of 'preserving a united Russia' is perceived by their representatives as Moscow's (including the liberal opposition) desire to maintain control over resource rents. Critics of decolonisation are, in fact, defending an economic model in which resources are extracted from ethnic republics to ensure the standard of living in the metropolis and to finance state projects.

The Concept of 'Imperial Innocence' and the Rejection of Responsibility

An in-depth analysis by sociologists and historians shows that the Berlin Declaration is a product of so-called '*imperial innocence*'.

The Declaration pushes the idea of Russians as the '*first victims*'. The declaration expresses solidarity with 'the tens of millions who refuse to participate in the crimes of the regime.' This narrative constructs an image of the Russian people as hostages, the first victims of Putin's occupation. This position allows Russians (and the opposition) to avoid responsibility for colonial policy by presenting themselves exclusively as the aggrieved party.

Ukrainian intellectuals and Western researchers point out that this is a form of self-deception. The war in Ukraine is being waged not only by the 'regime,' but also by hundreds of thousands of mobilised citizens, supported by millions through taxes and tacit consent, fuelled by a culture that has normalised domination over neighbours for centuries. The Declaration's refusal to acknowledge this collective responsibility and its limitation of guilt to a narrow circle of 'war criminals' is perceived as an attempt to preserve the moral comfort of the imperial nation.

The rhetoric of the Declaration's signatories often reveals a belief that Russia is bringing 'civilisation' to the periphery. Navalny and his supporters often appeal to Russia's 'European path', while ignoring or marginalising Asian and Muslim identities within the country. Representatives of indigenous peoples (Buryats, Kalmyks) see racist undertones in this: '*Beautiful Russia of the Future*' is being built for white Europeans in Moscow and St. Petersburg, while the cultures of indigenous peoples are seen as archaic, doomed to assimilation or disappearance in the market conditions of a 'normal country'.

The Ukrainian perspective: The Threat of Revanchism

For Ukraine, the Berlin Declaration poses a threat not because of what it declares, but because of what it preserves. The preservation of a unified, centralised, industrially powerful Russia with nuclear weapons is seen in Kyiv as a war postponed.

The Ukrainian experience shows that Russian liberals often 'break down' on the Ukrainian question (the famous phrase '*Crimea is not a sandwich*'). The fact that the Declaration calls for the restoration of borders is perceived positively, but it is not enough. Without the physical disintegration of Russia and its denuclearisation, any democratic regime will inevitably slide back into authoritarianism and revanchism, driven by post-imperial syndrome.

The Declaration refers to '*payment of compensation*'. However, if Russia remains a single state, the process of paying reparations will depend on Moscow's political will. In the event of decolonisation,

new independent states (such as oil-rich Siberia) could enter into agreements directly with Ukraine and the international community, which would make the process more transparent and secure. Maintaining centralised control over resources through the 'Federation' leaves the levers of pressure in Moscow's hands.

Conclusion

Western scholarship and political discourse must fundamentally re-evaluate prevailing notions of Russian imperialism. The Russian Federation is not a declining state stumbling towards inevitable collapse but an adaptive empire that has successfully modernised its mechanisms of control and power projection. Its reliance on private military companies, the instrumentalization of the criminal population, and the systematic use of torture and violence are not archaic relics but modern innovations in imperial governance.

The path dependency inherent in the carceral-prison state model makes significant liberalisation impossible. Therefore, stable security in Europe and beyond requires not containment but rather *total decolonisation* – the collapse of the imperial structure of the Russian Federation and the restoration of sovereignty of all nations and peoples that have been under imperial rule for over 500 years. Only through such a comprehensive transformation can the cycle of violence originating from Russian imperialism be finally broken.

This conclusion challenges convenient as sumptions about gradual reform and integration. However, it reflects the logical consequences of an honest assessment of how Russian imperial power actually functions in the 21st century. The choice facing policymakers is not between idealism and realism, but between a steadfast commitment to decolonisation or an acceptance of the permanent instability generated by an adaptive imperial system that relies on violence, a prison subculture, and governance through informal prison laws and rules.

When discussing modern Russia, every researcher must consider a fundamental factor related to the fact that Russia is a unique state in the world, which has preserved its essence for at least the last 500 years. This period began when the Muscovite Principality launched its colonial policy, which continues to this day. This is the first aspect.

Secondly, regardless of the name this state had – the Muscovite Principality, the Tsardom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, or the Russian Federation – it essentially retains, regardless of its formally proclaimed ideology (communist, democratic or quasi-democratic), the same agent of power, a centralised centre of power that has existed for the last five centuries. In fact, we are talking about approximately the same territory where this imperial policy was born and from which it is implemented externally, targeting other countries and territories.

The Russian neo-empire is a unique state built on the constant use of force against its neighbours. Moreover, the direction of such force is an indispensable condition for the preservation of Russian statehood. On the other hand, to ensure the functioning of such a state, the modern Russian neo-empire needs a cementing solution. It consists of the absolute use of violence.

Modern Russian statehood is a unique example, the only one in world history, where, against the backdrop of proclaiming external democratic attributes, the state system is an extraordinary mix of prison and criminal subcultural principles of governance. As a result, the entire domestic policy of the Russian empire is based on connections between the state and the criminal world that are completely uncharacteristic of Western Europe. The main idea is that to govern this state effectively, it is necessary to apply the same criminal or prison informal laws. In fact, this state must be governed as one large prison with informal castes, informal rules, a common fund, and all the characteristics of a modern Russian prison.

Thirdly, we must not forget what the colonial policy of the Russian Empire entailed. And here it would be a fundamental mistake to limit this to the Gulag, Stalin's repressions, and everything related to the abstract category of the *Gulag*, which the vast majority of Western researchers are inclined to focus on. Yes, it was certainly during Stalin's time that the Soviet empire demonstrated an unprecedented number of prisoners, prisons, and the penetration of prison subculture norms into society. This led to the transformation of society into one large collective of prisoners, which needed to be managed precisely through prison norms.

However, we must not forget that from the very beginning, when the Muscovite Principality began its colonial expansion beyond the Urals and started to develop Siberia, it consistently and completely destroyed a huge number of indigenous peoples and used them for further colonisation. An example of this, again, can be found in modern Ukraine: the use of military units from Buryatia and Tuva as cannon fodder and the imposition on these units of an unfounded aura of endlessly cruel punitive formations. All this began in the 15th – 16th centuries, when Russia began to conquer vast eastern territories.

The *main principle* was as follows: in order to develop vast territories in the absence of a state apparatus, funding for the ramified network of this apparatus, and when the main population consists of convicts and exiled criminals, it was only necessary to create intermediate links to manage this collective. It was necessary to give informal leaders of prisoners the levers of influence and management tools so that they could create their own quasi-state vertical of management. This happened in parallel with the creation of the state apparatus.

Similarly, from the very beginning, the army, despite its Soviet-style gloss and talk of high officer honour, was prone to violence, a phenomenon already widespread in the West under the category of hazing.

At the same time, both Western and domestic scholars often forget who created the very code of thieves in law, who created these informal 'concepts', known to many researchers and even familiar to people through Hollywood films. These are former White officers, officers of the Russian Imperial Army.

In addition, the uniqueness of the situation that occurred during the Russian invasion of 2022 lies in the fact that due to the injection of prisoners who were given *carte blanche* in using torture, an already low level of tolerance for torture in the Russian army (at the level of hazing, where there was still a certain reasonable limit) was completely destroyed after the large-scale injection of Russian prisoners who were initially recruited through the Wagner PMC and then through Storm-Z or Storm-V.

Finally, the creation of an additional informal hierarchy of Russian military units (i.e., elite units, contract soldiers, '*mobiki*', former prisoners released for the purpose of fighting in Ukraine) has created a completely new layer of relations in the modern Russian neo-empire for managing this post-imperial monster. This monster cannot stop and switch to the democratic principles of governance until the subject of power ceases to exist within these same borders. In fact, it can be predicted that the only way out of this endless cycle for many subjects of the Russian Federation is to divide Russia into a sufficiently large number of subjects on a national basis and restore the status quo that existed before the 15th century.

The analysis of the 'Russian World' as a new imperial megaproject reveals a deeply disturbing reality. It is not merely a rhetorical device, a soft power initiative, or a cultural aspiration; it is a sophisticated, totalizing system of governance that relies on the industrial-scale application of violence.

The Russian army, prisons, and security services have been fused into a single machine of subjugation. The 'Z' ideology provides the moral permission for atrocities, framing them as necessary acts in a civilisational struggle against a demonic West. The filtration camps and torture chambers serve as the mechanism for purifying the population, removing those who cannot be assimilated. The deportation of children and the militarisation of youth ensure that the conquest is perpetuated into the next generation.

This megaproject represents a fundamental rejection of the post-1945 international order. It posits that might makes right, that sovereignty is a function of power, and that distinct national identities can be erased by force. The 'Russian World', in its current kinetic form, is a machine for the production of empire through the destruction of human beings. It is a revival of 20th-century totalitarian practices – filtration, camps, ideological indoctrination – adapted for the 21st century with digital surveillance and hybrid warfare tactics.

The 'Russian World' megaproject forces the international community to confront not just a rogue state, but a rogue ideology that has mobilised the full resources of a modern industrial power to dismantle neighbouring nations. Addressing this requires more than military support for Ukraine; it demands a recognition of the genocidal nature of the project and a concerted legal and political effort to hold the architects of this new empire accountable.

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