



Who Supports the War? And Who Protests? The Legacies of Tzarist Social Divide in Russia

TOMILA LANKINA 

RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

Although Russian studies is a thriving field, there are significant gaps in our knowledge of Russian politics and society. One of the most significant blind spots is how Russian support for the war remains apparently robust, despite the atrocities inflicted on Ukraine and the tenuous justifications that have been offered for war. I draw on my own research to make sense of social responses to autocracy and the war. Specifically, I highlight the deep and intractable social inequalities within Russia that date back to the tsarist times and that the communist project never succeeded in obliterating. The social divides help explain why there has been no mass opposition to autocracy and the war.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Tomila Lankina

Professor of International Relations, Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

t.lankina@lse.ac.uk

KEYWORDS:

Russia; social divisions; inequality; tsarist legacies; autocracy; *sosloviya*; Russian studies

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Lankina T. Who Supports the War? And Who Protests? The Legacies of Tzarist Social Divide in Russia. *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2023; 3(1): 3, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.76>

In May 2022 Ukraine held the first trial for war crimes in Russia's current war on Ukraine.¹ The accused was Vadim Shishimarin, a 21-year-old Russian army sergeant charged with shooting and killing a 62-year-old unarmed Ukrainian civilian. In the media, almost all of the attention was on the crime and its punishment. Did the soldier admit to committing the crime? Has he shown remorse? How long will his sentence be [4]?

As a political scientist who has studied Russia for over two decades, I saw the young soldier as the face of a society about which we know little, hardly anything. Despite the fact that Russian studies is a thriving field [5, 6], there are significant blind spots in our knowledge of Russian politics and society.

It is these blind spots that are the focus of this piece, and how gaps in our knowledge have implications for broader debates on Russia, whether in government, public policy, think tanks, or the realm of public opinion. One of the most significant blind spots is how Russian support for the war remains apparently robust despite the atrocities inflicted on Ukraine and the tenuous justifications that have been offered for war.

Within this piece, I draw on my own research, which has highlighted the deep and intractable social inequalities within Russia that the communist project never succeeded in abolishing. I consider how we are dealing with a historically bimodal society, where conventional class and social categories are meaningful only when we systematically embed them in the complexities and historical texture of Russian society.

The divide – or *chasm* as the pre-Revolutionary Russian intelligentsia aptly termed it – between the classes is a by-product of the institution of *sosloviye*. The most accurate translation of this is 'estate', as in the estates of the realm that we are familiar with from reading about the French Revolution. The pre-Revolutionary Russia's estate system rigidly divided society into the four estates: the hereditary nobility and personal nobles (equivalent to a life peer in the UK) at the very top of the social hierarchy, the clergy, the urban estate consisting of merchants, *meshchane*, and artisans, and, at the very bottom, the peasant estate. The Bolsheviks abolished the estate system in one of their first decrees. But their own policies contributed to the reproduction and even consolidation of the gulf between peasants and urban worker masses, on the one hand, and on the other, the small minority of the habitually educated estates of nobles, clergy, and those from the urban merchant-*meshchane* estates who smoothly transitioned into the so-called new Soviet intelligentsia and middle class. Superficially, the Soviet project 'levelled' society in a material sense. But the vast gulf in education between the tiny minority and the majority never disappeared. The tsarist and communist-era social inequalities also shaped the opportunities of people to adapt to the new trans-nationalised market economy during the so-called post-communist transition of the 1990s. The educated intelligentsia had the human capital – knowledge of foreign languages and specialised skills in engineering and IT, for instance – to adapt to the new market economy and take advantage of opportunities to study and work abroad. The low-skilled populations in the collective farms and the urban blue-collar workforce had fewer such opportunities. In the USSR, collective farm workers faced restrictions in access to urban residence, employment, and higher education. For many peasants, the opportunity for social mobility was to join the urban factory workforce. But equally important is the difference in the rights and citizenship of the various groups in pre-Bolshevik Russia, something that is likely to have shaped civic values, political participation, and public engagement among the respective social strata. In Russia, serfs were only emancipated in 1861. But even after emancipation, peasants remained tied to their rural commune because they owed to the state payments for the land-plots that they received. And even after 1861, former serfs faced hurdles to become urban residents and acquire the rights of the urban

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Workshop on Political Ethnography of the State in the Post-Soviet Contexts, held on December 9-10, 2022, at the East European and Eurasian Studies Program of the Yale MacMillan Center, New Haven. This essay also develops some of the themes I discussed in my new book on the Russian social divisions and support for democracy/autocracy [1]. I also draw on my contribution to the special issue of the journal *Post-Soviet Affairs* that I guest edited, on the logic of 'fractals' in Russian studies [2]. The title of my PSA essay reflects the sociologist Andrew Abbott's discussion of the propensity of fields and sub-fields of knowledge to divide along disciplinary, epistemological, and other fault-lines; 'fractal' captures the self-replicability of broader disciplinary divisions within the sub-divisions, for instance, between positivists and non-positivists; Marxists, feminists, and others, etc. [3].

estates of *meshchane* or merchants. Meanwhile the urban estates enjoyed the privileges of trading, owning property, and receiving social services in towns. The clergy and aristocracy also were more privileged than the rural estate. Unlike the vast majority of peasants, members of these estates habitually attended secondary schools and studied at university. These different opportunities to free movement, property rights, and educational access will have implications for the ease with which members of the various estates could become professionals in a modern sense. And these legacies affected how the various groups would be positioned in the Soviet class system and how they would fare in the circumstances of the market transition of the 1990s. Just like under the tzars, Russian society remains divided between a tiny minority of dynastically educated intelligentsia who are able to access high-status professions that are insulated from state pressures to conform to the regime line, and the economically vulnerable – and poorly educated – majority [31].

This is the background to the story of the majority supporting Putin or those unable to challenge the autocracy and of those vulnerable to his propaganda, on the one hand, and, on the other, of the tiny minority of active dissenters. This pattern of social divides in education and professional opportunities has been recurring through Russian history for centuries. But why did we get Russia so wrong despite these realities that are obvious to anyone with even a cursory familiarity with Russian history? Why did so many contemporary observers in the 20th century believe that there had been an egalitarian society in the USSR, and why did others believe that Russians in their mass would embrace democracy after the collapse of the Berlin Wall?

A variety of factors explain this. A focus on the urban elites and the neglect of the precariat and rural folks left behind, as well as the shallow obsessions of the mainstream media and the trade presses with Putin – a form of neo-Kremlinology – made it difficult for us to make sense of the opinions and sentiments of the broader swathes of Russian society. There are also ideological reasons for our misconceptions about Russia. During communism, Western left-leaning intellectuals embraced the narrative of Soviet propagandists about the bright new revolutionary dawn that left behind the centuries-old social injustices. After communism's collapse, the new focus was on the transition to democracy and to free-for-all market capitalism, with a strong underpinning in the prevailing ideologies of neo-liberalism. While this ideology is increasingly discredited, many seasoned western foreign policy experts now couch their discussions of Russia using the Kremlin's rhetoric (<https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/why-john-mearsheimer-blames-the-us-for-the-crisis-in-ukraine>, <https://www.ft.com/content/2d65c763-c36f-4507-8a7d-13517032aa22>, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3838012-kissinger-admits-he-was-wrong-on-ukraine-what-about-taiwan/>, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/there-are-three-possible-outcomes-to-this-war-henry-kissinger-interview/>). Thinkers like Henry Kissinger and John Mearsheimer explain Russia's politics of uber-patriotism and war as reaction to NATO expansion, Western democracy promotion, and other such purported threats to national security. Russian society and the nuanced texture of social relationships going back to the tsarist period have been left out of these narratives.

THE FACE OF THE SOLDIER AS THE RUSSIAN POLITICAL UNKNOWN

As Russia's full-on aggression against the Ukrainian people unfolded, a more systematic picture began to emerge that allows us to put concepts and causes to the face of the Russian war criminal. Most of the soldiers, it became clear, come from the rural communities or from small town precariat. A significant minority come from ethnic minority communities, such as in Siberia and the North Caucasus. The Russian and then Soviet colonial project has altered or destroyed their native ways of life under the banner of modernization and progress even when giving a superficial nod to native languages. The destruction of indigenous ways of life in Siberia impinged on the livelihoods of native peoples. While the privileged elite could find ways to avoid performing military service, the state can more easily pressure young men from deprived communities to enlist.

But not all Russian soldiers are conscripts. Even in towns and even among the reasonably well-off strata of society there are volunteers to fight, many of whom feel that it is their 'patriotic duty'.

In Russian and Western media commentary there has been some sympathy for the minorities disproportionately recruited; for the destitute who could not buy their way out of conscription; and for those who clearly did not know where they were going or what they were going to do. However, there has been significant derogatory commentary, on social media and elsewhere, for those who queued – voluntarily and even enthusiastically – to join the Russian forces waging war upon the people in Ukraine. They were described as *kak barany* (like sheep) [7]. Did they not know that they are going to get slaughtered? Did the perverse promise of sexual violence against Ukrainian women blind them so much to the reality that they are heading into the embrace of death? A number of studies have analysed how the state fabricates compliance with its policies, explaining how Russian propaganda works [8–10] and how it fabricates support for the war. But there is an ongoing question about why it works on some and not others.

Of course, ‘pocketbook’ explanations abound. An individual’s personal finances and their level of education are two characteristics that explain the efficacy of conscription and a person’s susceptibility to propaganda. Over the last century the trend has been for the urban educated in many states to protest against oppressive regimes globally [11]. Regardless of the country under analysis, the evidence suggests there are some people who are susceptible to spin, and some who are not [10].

Equally, while explanations of brutal repression putting a break on protest go some way towards accounting for the apparent passivity of the populace, there is the unsettling picture of thousands of women, men, and children resisting the regime in Iran. There has been a more muted response in Russia. Both populaces faced the risks of brutal repression, yet Iran’s rebelled, while Russia’s acquiesced. And of course we have the example of Ukraine, which has experienced far more sustained mobilization in 2004, and then again in 2013–2014, and its citizens are mobilising to fight and otherwise bravely resist aggression – amidst violence far more horrific than anything that Russian protesters have ever experienced over the course of Putin’s rule. What is it that motivates acquiescence or inhibits rebellion?

RETHINKING RUSSIAN SOCIETY: BRINGING THE HISTORICAL SOCIAL DIVIDE IN

There is a puzzling variation in support for democracy among various social groups and in various Russian regions. Siberian regions and cities like Tomsk or Omsk tend to be more democratic than the so-called Black Earth ‘red belt’ territories that stubbornly voted communist or endorsed the pro-Kremlin party of power, United Russia. This determination was present even in the face of opposition activists like Alexei Navalny, who branded it as the party of ‘crooks and thieves’. It is also why, even now, citizens in some regions actively protest against the war while others are heavily contributing conscripts and volunteers.

History matters, and there are historical drivers of these variations going beyond even the communist period. In my book, *Estate Origins of Democracy in Russia*, I discuss the significance of the tsarist division of society into *sosloviya*. I point out how when the Bolsheviks took power, they ended up reproducing the tsarist social divisions. We all know about the high-profile regicide and witch-hunts against the extended royal family and the bourgeoisie. Less is known about the fate of the wider swathes of educated nobles, clergy, and urban groups. In my book, I trace the process of transformation of the cultivated members of tsarist society into the Soviet middle class. I also discuss how the Bolsheviks trapped the peasants in collective farms and limited their possibilities for escape into towns and especially Moscow and Leningrad, where the prestigious universities and jobs were concentrated. Different regions had variable constellations of *sosloviya*, and the prevalence of serfdom also varied across Russia. Accordingly, the local economies developed in different ways and citizens did not have the same opportunities to obtain higher education and become professionals in high status occupations where state pressures to conform are less severe than in public sector jobs. But political scientists studying the social consequences of the market and ‘democratic’ transition of the 1990s paid scant attention to these legacies of tsarist and communist Russia.

The *sosloviya*, a relic of the bygone times, had no place in the then-fashionable intellectual paradigmatic frameworks. What made this more complex was that communism as a paradigm had programmed both those outside and inside Russia to think about Soviet society as the ‘great leveller’ [12], as did the celebrated Marxist and other left-leaning thinkers past [13] and

present [14]. We have tended to couch the new inequalities with reference to the apparatchiks or Komsomol functionaries who became oligarchs, and the rest of the population we labelled the ‘middle class’ and ‘workers’ who lost their Soviet-era social safety nets and were cast adrift into the wild free-for-all of the catastrophically executed market transition.

The problem with the communism paradigm is that while it accepts that there had been a layer of citizens more equal than others, there is the general notion that the Bolsheviks inflicted death upon the old pre-Bolshevik order and the social baggage that it carried. These assumptions persist among social scientists even though new historical research is beginning to question them. Sheila Fitzpatrick wrote about the adaptation of the bourgeoisie in Soviet Russia [15, 16]. New ethnographic work is suggestive of the layering of religious and other sensibilities from the bygone era upon experiences intrinsic to communism [17]. Together, these works ought to have steered us towards a rethinking of the nature of Russia’s social relations.

Nor do categories from comparative politics, even if taken from contemporary autocracies, help clarify the nature of Russian society and its resilience (or lack thereof) against autocratic government. In the traditional language of political science, autocratic government is divided into: (i) the autocrat; (ii) the elites; and (iii) the masses, sometimes disaggregated into the ‘middle class’ and the ‘working class’. We have individuals with ‘tertiary’ education and those with none. The reality is that education is an unreliable predictor of democratic inclinations. Autocracies have shorn the concept of the middle class of its rosy modernization paradigm-inspired premise, for huge chunks of the middle classes in autocratic strongholds like Russia or China are state dependent [18]. Put simply, educated middle-class Russians do not always behave as predicted or as their counterparts do in other post-socialist countries and beyond.

Understanding the nature of the transition was further complicated by the fact that the first post-Soviet decade was dominated by survey research in an attempt to depart from Kremlinology and ‘area studies’. Valuable as the insights were, the mega cross-national projects to study public opinion in ‘countries in transition’ [19] left little room for the insertion of context-rich nuance that would allow for greater insight into the existing social divides and their likely impact on the political realm. This was evident as late as in 2017, when I, with my collaborators, attempted to survey respondents on the basis of their *sosloviye* ancestry [20]. No previous academics or pollsters had examined this factor. The deep historical divisions in Russian society apparently had no place in survey work. This situation is not an indictment on the method per se. Instead, it illuminates how we have not embedded ourselves sufficiently in the *sui generis* texture of social relations that still bear strong echoes of the more distant, pre-communist past. We have, in other words, failed to move beyond the paradigm of *post-communism*.

THE RUSSIAN *SOSLOVIYE* AND WHY IT MATTERS FOR POLITICS NOW

To understand Russian social divides that explain the motivations of different social groups to support or challenge autocracy and Putin’s war, we need to go back to the *sosloviye*. The Russian historian Boris Mironov defines estate (*sosloviye*) as ‘a juridically circumscribed group with hereditary rights and obligations’. It was a term that became widespread in Russian jurisprudence by the second quarter of the nineteenth century [21: p334]. The legal underpinnings of the *sosloviye* were enshrined in the 1835 Code of Laws of the Russian Empire (*Svod zakonov Rossiyskoy imperii*). This Code was modified over time but remained in place until the Bolshevik Revolution. Within the Code, there were four main estates of: (i) nobles (*dvoryane/dvoryanstvo*), the service estate, which is also often referred to as ‘gentry’ [22]; (ii) the clergy (*dukhovenstvo*); (iii) town dwellers (*gorodskiye obyvateli*); and (iv) rural dwellers (*sel’skiye obyvateli*), which included serfs (before emancipation) and other categories of peasants, such as state peasants, who had greater freedoms. Russian laws distinguished between the various categories even within one estate designation, for instance, hereditary and personal nobility [23]. The Great Reforms of the 19th century helped undermine the estate division, not least because many nobles became less wealthy after losing serf ownership, while former serfs acquired rights they never had before. But this does not mean that the ‘the four-estate paradigm’ ceased to be relevant. Rather, it affected both the rights that different categories of citizens had and their obligations towards the state, and, in a cognitive sense, how they perceived others.

The Bolsheviks inadvertently contributed to the preservation of the estate divides. After the Revolution, there was an exodus of peasants from the countryside into large cities, notably Moscow, over the course of the 1920s and 1930s. Russian urban society became ‘peasantified’ during and immediately after collectivization in the late 1920s through early 1930s [24]. Collectivization worsened the conditions after the Bolshevik Revolution, whether in terms of food supply or health. Many peasants fled into cities while they still could, in search of a better life. Of course, in the last decades of the Romanov dynasty, peasants had been also increasingly moving to cities, and this process accelerated after serf emancipation in 1861. The process of urbanization was not a straightforward one. The urban corporations (*soslovnyye obshchestva*) sought to restrict peasant entry into towns. Even after serfs were emancipated, they could not easily attain the status of urban citizens with the same rights as merchants or *meshchane*. Many peasants living in towns retained their peasant estate and maintained a foothold in villages. Peasant assimilation in cities as full urban burghers had been protracted and piecemeal. As Alison Smith writes in her book on estates in late Imperial Russia, the process sometimes took several generations, and often it took a long time before the peasant swapped the rural estate for an urban one with full urban citizenship rights [25].

But after the Bolshevik Revolution, the pace of urbanization dramatically accelerated. The new peasant entrants into towns confronted severe prejudice from established urbanites. The Bolsheviks made the chasm worse when, faced with peasant resistance to collectivization, they adapted draconian laws which had the effect of trapping, in the new collective farms, peasants who had not escaped or were not exiled or otherwise repressed. These restrictions lasted well into the 1950s–1960s. Because peasants were deprived of passports and could not easily leave the village without permission from the local soviet and collective farm managers, they were deprived of the rights and opportunities that urban citizens enjoyed in the Soviet Union. Among these possibilities were obtaining education in prestigious universities and joining the elite professions that allowed travel abroad and access to foreign periodicals, newspapers, and other sources of information alternative to Soviet propaganda.

The Bolshevik policies thus overall consolidated the chasm that had existed for centuries, still separating a small minority of educated elites from the vast majority denied such opportunities because of the *sosloviye* system or the imperatives to keep peasants in their collective farm. Even as the 1950s–1960s atmosphere of political liberalization in the period after Stalin’s death and the lifting of restrictions for peasant movement encouraged greater numbers of the *kolkhozniki* (collective farm workers) to move to towns and cities, the rural communities faced serious barriers to social mobility [5].

The consequence of this was that at the end of the 20th century, Russia was still a less-urbanised country. Anatoliy Vishnevskiy, the social demographer, points out that in 1990, urbanization stood at 66% in the USSR, a significantly lower percentage than the UK or the USA, where it stood at about 78%. But more importantly, a large chunk of the urban population that is included in the urbanization statistic had not even been born in cities. Vishnevsky estimates that among those aged 60, only approximately 15–17% had been born in the city (*korennyye gorozhane*); roughly 40% of those aged forty; and only among those aged twenty and younger, there were over 50% who were native urbanites, and this group formed only 37% of the population [26].

The new urbanites did not have the same opportunities as the established urban professionals when it comes to access to education and the high-status professions. And like in tsarist Russia, in the USSR, the new urban citizens kept strong ties to the countryside. Many had either moved to cities from their villages in adulthood or, even if born in a town, had parents and grandparents who did manual labour in the collective farms for a living. Scores of the new urbanites joined the bloated public sector and became clerks, schoolteachers, or social workers highly dependent on the state for pay and perks. These latter-day rural and new urban workers fared poorly in the context of market transition. As Vishnevskiy wrote:

By the time of the USSR’s collapse, one could not contend that Soviet society became a solidly and overwhelmingly urban society. The USSR citizens in their majority remained urbanites in the first generation, with half to three quarters comprised of urbanites and half or a quarter of peasants – bearing the stamp of transient status, of marginality. To a certain extent, this stamp will be inherited by their children [26].

Why did collective farm workers find it so hard to integrate into the Soviet urban society? The Soviet state set up the *propiska* system of residential registration that made it difficult for citizens to move into prestigious cities like Moscow and other large regional hubs. For many citizens, geographic and social mobility meant moving from their village into the nearby regional centre, often with few opportunities for higher education and high-paying jobs. Russia has many medium-size towns that used to be company towns where workers have remained dependent on one or a handful of factory employers for jobs and social welfare. The collective farm workers who were lucky to gain a foothold in the larger cities often congregated in the *micro-rayony* (micro-districts) with low social prestige on the outskirts in the sprawling suburbia of faceless tower blocks. Yekaterina Gerasimova and Sofya Tchuikina powerfully describe how these communities re-enacted their rural lives and re-created a kind of rural microcosm, which remained separate from the cultural influences of the urbanites living in the more prestigious elite districts [27].

As the public sector under Putin's autocracy expanded, the historically marginalised rural and urban citizens coveted the service jobs in the increasingly vast public sector, including in the police and national guard (*Rosgvardiya*), viewing them as a means to improve their social standing.

We have yet to paint a systematic social portrait of the urban public sector workforce that includes joiners of Putin's vast repressive machinery. But we can examine the biographies of prominent Putin opponents in the prestigious and high-status positions; these are easily available from Wikipedia and other public sources. Take TV Rain, the independent news channel that became an eyesore for Putin because of its critique of the war and as an outlet that routinely gives a platform to the political opposition. The Putin regime has branded the channel a 'foreign agent' in the context of witch-hunts against the opposition and liberal NGOs and press; it is now broadcasting from the Netherlands. The journalists employed on this channel, including the editor-in-chief Tikhon Dzyadko and Anna Mongait, another prominent journalist, come from families of dynastic intelligentsia who were already privileged or well-educated before the Revolution and joined the academic, artistic, and other professional elite in Soviet Russia. As I write elsewhere,

The probability of a peasant *otkhodnik* [seasonal urban worker] ascending into the prestigious and autonomous Soviet professions with the pedigree of Dzyadko or Mongait's family was extremely low... the pathway to becoming a Soviet dissident and post-Soviet Russian public intellectual openly challenging Russia's war against Ukraine does not lie via the peasant route to social mobility [5].

Timothy Frye and his collaborators have researched 'workplace dependencies' whereby enterprise managers pressurise vulnerable and dependent employees to support and cast their vote for incumbents or incumbent-supporting parties during elections [28]. And Bryn Rosenfeld shows how being socialized within the public sector of autocratic regimes engenders pro-regime sentiments and orientations [18]. But we are still left with the question of why an Anna Mogait or a Tikhon Dzyadko are able to avoid employment with the state-dependent enterprises or public sector. What does it take for someone to be able to join the independent media on a trendy news channel, one of the few islands of open challenges to the regime whether in Russia or in exile?

The reality is that the 'communism as a great social leveller' narrative does not capture the persistent divide between the peasant estate on the one hand and, on the other, the descendants of the educated *sosloviye*, a stratum that together with a sprinkling of the upwardly mobile educated peasants comprised a minority of the Imperial population.

Habitually literate and educated, many, though of course not all, from among the educated and privileged estates were in the best position to withstand the ideological onslaught of Bolshevism, and their descendants now are better able to scrutinise and resist Putin's propaganda machinery. They form the bulwark of anti-Putinism. The minority's democratic inclinations are not so much because of deeply internalised democratic values, though many of course share them. Rather, this small minority of Russian society are able to resist because these groups have habitually colonised the professions where independent thought thrived and where there is greater access to alternative sources of information. They were also desperate

to safeguard their identities as cultivated Russian nobility and the bourgeoisie, distinct from the rural mass with which they never identified and for which many had disdain even as they pursued ‘done with illiteracy!’ and other progressive causes. Their preoccupations were not so much public as they were corporate and in-group. But corporate autonomy also provides those with a moral core with the resources to resist or to flee. The Soviet dissidents came from this milieu, and in Russia now it is the cultural and scientific intelligentsia and people in the spheres of independent journalism, academia, and the arts who are in the anti-Putin vanguard.

The second prong of the bimodal society has neither the imperative nor the resources to resist in the same way. This does not mean that the marginalised people – the majority actually – in Russian society do not resent authority, autocracy, and atrocity. They do. But their resentment is also about the big chasm and their failure to identify with the small minority of the habitually privileged intelligentsia. Understanding how Russians perceive Putin and the war requires factoring the triadic nature of this attitudinal phenomenon. It’s not just about how the ‘masses’ perceive the ‘autocrat’; it’s more about how perceptions of the autocrat are filtered through attitudes vis-à-vis those who resist him – the historically and intergenerationally privileged minority. The underprivileged will not join the protest, because they do not identify with the people who stage it.

Vladimir Putin’s life story too illustrates the different family trajectories and sentiments of individuals from distinct social backgrounds in Russia. It is well known that Putin grew up in the city of Leningrad (renamed now again St Petersburg), where he was born into a family of workers of peasant origin. Putin’s grandfather famously was a chef to Stalin; and Putin’s father was a Navy conscript, while his mother was a factory worker. Tchuikina and Gerasimova and Tchuikina found that social divisions in Soviet Leningrad derive from tsarist times, when aristocrats colonised central districts of the city; they continued to do so discreetly in the Soviet period, while the un-prestigious Soviet suburbs, the *mikrorayony*, remained plebeian and overwhelmingly concentrated factory workers of peasant origin, mirroring the predicament of the peasant *otkhodniki* in tsarist times [27, 29].

Putin would have acutely felt his underprivileged position in the Soviet Union where the tsarist-era intelligentsia continued to look down upon the peasants and ‘proletariat’ overwhelmingly of peasant origin. Behind Putin’s lashing out against a new liberal Russia and the Western-oriented intelligentsia there may well be the generations of accumulated marginality that began with his peasant ancestors and ended in the St Petersburg *kommunalka* (communal apartment). Like scores of others of his group, Putin would never wash off the stigma of the downtrodden in Russian Imperial and then Soviet society. While the descendants of aristocrats, merchants, clergymen, and *meshchane* with a sprinkling from the peasant estate – the core of the so-called Soviet middle class – colonised the elite professions, the media, and the arts, the likes of Vladimir Putin had to bury their resentments in the backstreets of his shabby dwelling.

CONCLUSION

The example of the soldier that I gave at the start of this essay ought to make us reconsider how we study Russia and how we make sense of it. What do we know about the social predicament of this young man? How does his upbringing differ from that of the small intelligentsia in large cities who are not fighting in this war and perhaps are even protesting against it? What imprint does he have of the values of his grandmother? Has his family been repressed by Stalin? Were they peasants before the Revolution? What parallels can we draw between his life and that of one Vova (Vladimir) Putin growing up in Leningrad? Does he feel the same kind of anger about the cultivated neo-aristocracy of museum workers, art historians, physicists – people with whom he will never identify? What role for social identity in constructing a social consensus against the war? Does his faith matter?

The research that I have carried out recently for my new book, *Estate Origins*, tells me that the dissenting minority in Russia can be best understood in a historical sense. My Ukrainian colleagues and fellow scholars of Central and Eastern Europe are rightly calling attention now to the differences in civic culture between Russians and Ukrainians [30]. This is an important argument that also deserves careful historical study. But I here present a complementary angle that shows that if there is a ‘civicness’ in Russia, it has been limited to much smaller segments

of society (and now, with the exodus of the educated and opposition-minded citizens, it is shrinking too) than in the countries of Central Europe with very different historical trajectories, a record of organising to resist the colonial empire, and more limited experience of serfdom. Throughout Russian history, only a small minority of citizens had the education, freedoms, and autonomy to resist the pressures of the autocratic state to conform – whether tsarist, Soviet, or post-Soviet. Understanding this reality of a deeply divided society should help us not only make sense of the drivers of social support for or challenge to Putinism, but to anticipate what might happen after Putin exits the stage.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The author acknowledges support from the Research Infrastructure Investment Fund grant, LSE International Relations Department.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Tomila Lankina  orcid.org/0000-0002-8303-1747

Professor of International Relations, Department of International Relations, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK

REFERENCES

1. **Lankina TV.** *The estate origins of democracy in Russia: from imperial bourgeoisie to post-communist middle class.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009071017>
2. **Lankina T.** Branching out or inwards? The logic of fractals in Russian studies. *Post-Soviet Affairs.* 2023; 39(1–2): 70–85. Special Issue: Conversations within the Field: Russia’s War against Ukraine and the Future of Russian Studies. Guest Editor: Tomila Lankina. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2147382>
3. **Abbott A.** *Chaos of disciplines.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2001.
4. **Myre G.** Ukrainian judge hands down a sentence in the first war crimes trial in that conflict. In: Inskeep S, (ed.). *Heard on Morning Edition*; 2022.
5. **Lankina T.** Branching out or inwards? The logic of fractals in Russian studies. *Post-Soviet affairs.* 2022; ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print): 116. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2147382>
6. **La Lova L.** Methods in Russian Studies: Overview of Top Political Science, Economics, and Area Studies Journals. *Post-Soviet Affairs.* 2022; 39(1–2): 70–85. Special Issue: Conversations within the Field: Russia’s War against Ukraine and the Future of Russian Studies. Guest Editor: Tomila Lankina. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2022.2162293>
7. **Kharatyan K.** Barany i soldaty (sheep and soldiers). *The Moscow Times*; 2022 30 September.
8. **Lankina T, Watanabe K, Netesova Y.** How Russian media control, manipulate, and leverage public discontent: framing protest in autocracies. In: Koesel KJ, Bunce VJ, Weiss JC, (eds.), *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia*, 137–64. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190093488.003.0006>
9. **Lankina T, Watanabe K.** “Russian Spring” or “Spring Betrayal”? The media as a mirror of Putin’s evolving strategy in Ukraine. *Europe-Asia Studies.* 2017; 69(10): 1526–56. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2017.1397603>
10. **Guriev S, Treisman D.** *Spin dictators: the changing face of tyranny in the 21st century.* Princeton: Princeton University Press; 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691224466>
11. **Beissinger MR.** *The revolutionary city: urbanization and the global transformation of rebellion.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press; 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691224756>
12. **Scheidel W.** *The great leveler: violence and the history of inequality from the Stone Age to the twenty-first century.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press; 2017. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400884605>
13. **Webb S, Webb B.** *Soviet communism: a new civilization.* Third ed. London: Longmans, Green; 1947.
14. **Piketty T.** *Capital in the twenty-first century.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press; 2014.

15. **Fitzpatrick S.** The two faces of Anastasia: narratives and counter-narratives of identity in Stalinist everyday life. In: Kiaer C, Naiman E, (eds.), *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*, 23–34. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press; 2006.
16. **Fitzpatrick S.** *Tear off the masks! Identity and imposture in twentieth-century Russia*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press; 2005. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400843732>
17. **Rogers D.** *The old faith and the Russian land: a historical ethnography of ethics in the Urals*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press; 2009.
18. **Rosenfeld B.** *The autocratic middle class: how state dependency reduces the demand for democracy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press; 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691209777>
19. Barometer Surveys: The University of Strathclyde. https://www.cspp.strath.ac.uk/catalog13_0.html.
20. **Lankina T, Libman A, Tertychnaya K.** State Violence and Target Group Adaptation: Maintaining Social Status in the Face of Repressions in Soviet Russia. *The Journal of Peace Research*. Forthcoming.
21. **Mironov BN.** *Sotsial'naya istoriya Rossii perioda Imperii (XVIII–nachalo XX v.). Genezis lichnosti, demokraticheskoy sem'yi, grazhdanskogo obshchestva i pravovogo gosudarstva Revised third ed.* St Petersburg: Dmitriy Bulanin; 2003.
22. **Reyfan I.** *How Russia learned to write: literature and the imperial table of ranks*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press; 2016.
23. **Mironov BN.** *Rossiyskaya imperiya: Ot traditsii k modernu*. St Petersburg: Dmitriy Bulanin; 2014.
24. **Hoffmann DL.** *Peasant metropolis: social identities in Moscow, 1929–1941*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press; 1994.
25. **Smith AK.** *For the common good and their own well-being: social estates in imperial Russia*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2014. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199978175.001.0001>
26. **Vishnevskiy A.** *Serp i rubl': Konservativnaya modernizatsiya v SSSR*. Second ed. Moscow: State University Higher School of Economics; 2010.
27. **Gerasimova Y, Tchuikina S.** Ot kapitalisticheskogo Peterburga k sotsialisticheskomu Leningradu. Izmenenie sotsial'no-prostranstvennoy struktury goroda v 1930-e gody. [From capitalist St Petersburg to socialist Leningrad: Changes in the socio-spatial structure of the city in the 1930s]. In: Vihavainen T, (ed.), *Normy i tsennosti povsednevnoy zhizni [Norms and values of everyday life]*, 27–72. St Petersburg: Neva; Letniy Sad; 2000.
28. **Frye T, Reuter OJ, Szakonyi D.** Political machines at work: voter mobilization and electoral subversion in the workplace. *World Politics*. 2014; 66(2): 195–228. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S004388711400001X>
29. **Tchuikina SA.** *Dvoryanskaya pamyat': "Byvshiy" v sovetskom gorode (Leningrad, 1920-30-e gody)*. St Petersburg: European University at St Petersburg; 2006.
30. **Hale HE, Onuch O.** *The Zelensky Effect*. London: Hurst Publishers; 2022.
31. **Lankina TV.** *The estate origins of democracy in Russia: from imperial bourgeoisie to postcommunist middle class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2022. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009071017>

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Lankina T. Who Supports the War? And Who Protests? The Legacies of Tzarist Social Divide in Russia. *LSE Public Policy Review*. 2023; 3(1): 3, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.76>

Submitted: 25 February 2023
Accepted: 20 April 2023
Published: 08 September 2023

COPYRIGHT:

© 2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

LSE Public Policy Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by LSE Press.