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War in Ukraine and the idea of the *Russian order*

Report – part 1

The war in Ukraine, launched on February 24, 2022 with a full-scale attack by Russian troops, took most analysts by surprise. The magnitude of the action taken and the propaganda message used were frightening. The world began to ask itself: why did the Russian state decide to make this move? Is it merely the result of President Vladimir Putin's madness, or is it a long-term, well-thought-out strategy?

The Sybir Memorial Museum, opened on September 17, 2021 in Białystok as a key academic institution dealing with the topic of deportations and exile, but also analyzing the policies of the Russian state in the 19th century and then the Soviet state in the 20th century, decided to publish a report — historical analysis of the current situation in Ukraine entitled *The war in Ukraine and the idea of the 'Russian order'*. The publication is intended to familiarize the European readers with the historical background of the actions taken by the contemporary Russian state. Without understanding the historical background of the Russian idea of expansion, encapsulated in the words *Russian order*, it is difficult to analyse the current situation in Ukraine.

From the very first days of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the Sybir Memorial Museum has been actively involved in a number of support activities. Within the framework of the 'Common Legacy of Freedom' campaign, we hold scientific meetings and debates, we have launched a special tour of the permanent exhibition adapted to the sensitivity of war refugees from Ukraine and we have started an innovative series of therapeutic classes entitled 'Strong Together', which make use of the museum's historical themes and are addressed to both Ukrainian and Polish young people.

Russian order

The word 'mir' ('order') in Russian has two meanings: 'world' and 'peace'. Combined together, they form a concept similar to the word 'civilization' in the Russian language. This is also how the term Russian order should be treated: as 'world', 'peace' but above all as 'civilization' — Russian civilization.

Russian order has always contained not only a political meaning, but also a philosophic religious. It once was and still is the quintessence of Russian civilization, which, in its own mind, inherited the right to be the 'Third Rome'. After the collapse of the Roman (with Rome as its capital) and then the Byzantine (with Constantinople as its capital) civilization, the Russian Church was to take over the whole legacy. It did not yield to partial reformation like the Catholic Church or complete reformation like the Protestant Churches. It was to preserve the purity of the 'divine' message, personified by the tsar's absolute power. Paradoxically, the idea of the 'Third Rome', articulated in a modified form in the 18th or 19th century in the Russian Empire, was also adopted by the communist state. It did not admittedly use the term 'Third Rome' and did not refer to the Orthodox heritage, but it was, nevertheless, the fullest

embodiment of a new and enlightened civilization, that was supposed to be spread across the world.

The end of the Communist era, in the *Russian order* narrative, meant another period of 'Time of Troubles', that is the loss of Moscow's leadership role in political and philosophical terms. In the opinion of Russians themselves, no one in the world was willing to reckon with the new Russian state of the era of President Boris Yeltsin. The role of Russia — a country that, after all, had nuclear weapons — was significantly weakened. The former Soviet empire was barely able to maintain its dominant position in some of its former republics. Russian youth was subjected to the influence of Western (American) culture, which was the clearest symptom of the failure of the *Russian order*. The efforts of whole generations trying to stop the West's expansion to the East turned out to be wasted.

Post-communist Russian society needed hope. It was to be found in the new, athletic president of Russia, Vladimir Putin. A politician (at the same time a former officer of the communist secret services of the KGB) who gave a chance to reverse the fate of Russia. He combined the old tsarist heritage with the memory of the successes of the communist empire and the hope for new Russia. The country was to restore its political, military and philosophical position. As clean, uncontaminated, it was supposed to build the dam for the "western decay" embodied, among others, by sexual promiscuity, for example in the form of homosexual couples, which in the West have been equated legally and emotionally with traditional heterosexual relationships.

The beginning of the 21st century has seen an attempt to rebuild Russia's imperial position, a return to political relevance, but in close association with the rebuilding the sense of value of the Russian society. The mixture of slogans from both the tsarist and communist times, put out by the president of Russia, completely incomprehensible in the West, was welcomed with joy in Russia. Despite Russia's economic weakness, the president began to restore, at least partly, a sense of pride in being Russian.

Building a new world requires sacrifices. After all, this is how each "messianic" message is structured, no matter whether it is religious (Orthodox) or secular (communist). Now only this rhetoric has been returned. Again, Russia was supposed to be right in political and philosophical sense.

The war in Ukraine from the military point of view is completely incomprehensible to the Western countries. What does Putin actually mean? Does he not have enough land of his own? After all, Russia is so vast that it cannot be fully developed. A large part of the population lives on the edge of poverty.

The attack on Ukraine results not only from desire to annex new lands but, above all, to expand the Russian way of life, the *Russian order*, to new groups of people. The war is only a tool to achieve this goal, to build a better world based on 'true' (because 'Russian') values. This was and still is the mission of the Russian country, regardless of the ideology currently being preached. Putin has restored the meaning of life to millions of Russians. He broke them out of the stagnation of post-communist hopelessness.

Seeing the conflict only that way, the Ukrainians are right to claim that it is not only a fight against their country, but also against the whole Western civilization. Ukraine, which began to articulate its pro-European and pro-NATO aspirations, was no longer interested in the

Russian order. Russia was not going to watch these processes passively and, brought to a finality, had no choice but to act. This was the very last chance to 'convert' Ukraine on the 'right' track.

In the opinion of Russian ideologues, Kiev is not, as it seems to 'Ukrainian Nazis', the capital of 'some independent' state, but the cradle of the *Russian order*. The war is only meant to restore the natural, and as defined by Russia — 'divine' order. The ends justify the means. This is exactly how Russians see the conflict in Ukraine. It is not an offensive war, but a defensive one. Russia is not the attacker, but the defender of the *Russian order*.