

Who's a Fascist?

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Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West, by Marlène Laruelle, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2021, \$39.95 (hardcover), ISBN 9781501754135.

We are living in a time of increasing authoritarianism around the world, with populism and illiberalism growing not only in states that traditionally have not been very democratic but also in established democracies. These troubling trends have led to alarms being sounded and much labeling of threats, including the use of the term *fascist* for some countries, as well as parties, movements, and individuals, within both democratic and nondemocratic countries. But who is actually a fascist? What does the term mean and why is it used? And more specifically, is Russia fascist?

Marlène Laruelle takes up these questions in a systematic and insightful way. In *Is Russia Fascist?* Laruelle not only provides a definition of fascism and an explanation for what kind of regime Russia is, but she also explains why the discussion of regime types, and in particular calling Russia fascist, matters. Indeed, in my view the major contribution of the book is to bring to the fore the value of branding one's enemies as fascist.

In order to answer the first question of whether Russia is fascist, Laruelle starts with a straightforward discussion of the definition of fascism and proceeds to analyze whether Russia fits that definition. She writes in the introduction,

In this book, I define fascism as a metapolitical ideology that calls for the total destruction of modernity by creating an alternative world based on ancient values reconstructed with violent means. The apocalyptic dimension of fascism—destroying to rebuild—seems more relevant than seeing it as an “extreme” nationalism. I therefore share the definition proposed by one of the main Russian scholars of fascism, Aleksandr A. Galkin, who characterized fascism as “rightist-conservative revolutionism” (*pravokonservativnyi revoliutsionarizm*), emphasizing the revolutionary aspect more than the nationalist one. (13)

One can see therefore from the start that fascism, according to Laruelle, is going to require a revolutionary ideology, not merely authoritarianism, nor even authoritarianism plus nationalism, even if it's extreme nationalism.

Well, one might say that if you define something one way, you stack the deck in favor of your analysis of whether or not something fits a definition, because you've chosen the criteria. That is to some extent true, but to quibble about the exact definition of fascism misses the point and the main contributions of Laruelle's book. In making her argument she lays out an astute discussion of key aspects of the Putin regime, and this is useful whether or not one considers them to constitute fascism.

Laruelle calls the Putin regime illiberal, which is not just authoritarian but post-liberal in that it rejects liberal internationalism (i.e., governance by multilateral, liberal institutions), rejects liberal

economic policies (i.e., free trade, markets over states), and rejects liberal culture (expansive views of the nation and liberal social norms such as LGBTQ+ rights). That is interesting in itself, and Laruelle's concept of illiberalism places the Putin regime in a specific historical time period: both after the end of the Cold War, and also after the "New World Order" of the 1990s, which was supposed to have replaced the Cold War, but which has been increasingly rejected by Russia. That is, Putin's is a regime of the 2000s. To the extent that there is any ideological basis of the Putin regime, Laruelle argues that it is this illiberalism.

But she rightly also argues that the Putin regime is marked by a lack of ideological coherence. The regime has evolved since taking power in 2000, and Laruelle details here and in other work the incoherence or heterogeneity in regime values and actions over time. Indeed, except for the most stubborn observers of Russia who refuse to update, this incoherence or mess of countervailing tendencies within the regime is very clear, as a few examples may illustrate: Putin seems like a nationalist with all the flag waving and emphasis on Russianness, but he regularly refers to Russia as a multinational state, and he clearly cracked down on extreme nationalists in the second half of his regime (creating such ire among them that some Russian nationalists went to fight on the side of Ukraine against the Putin-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine); he seems very pro-USSR, which was very clearly a revolutionary atheist state, and he called the end of the USSR the greatest tragedy of 20th century, but his regime has overseen the shockingly fast revival, growth, and expanding political influence of the Russian Orthodox Church; Putin often gave speeches about combatting corruption and modernizing (diversifying) the economy, but he then did the very opposite making Russia more corrupt and more dependent on oil and gas exports than ever; Putin seemed to want to build up Russian soft power and influence abroad—remember the Sochi Olympics?—but then invaded Ukraine and made Russia an international pariah. One could go on and on with the contradictions, but suffice it to say that Laruelle is correct to point out the ideological incoherence of the regime, and in my view those who continue to overstate the regime's coherence and master plans really should take note. This is an especially important point following the Ukraine invasion, which some commentators now see as having been inevitable.

Laruelle cites Gleb Pavlovsky who characterizes the Putin regime as an improvisational jazz group, improvising "as an attempt to survive the latest crisis" (85). And indeed Laruelle notes that the regime is more of an adaptive set of ecosystems made up of the presidential administration, the military industrial complex, and the Russian Orthodox Church. Moreover, the regime is not so secure: it has to constantly figure out how to get some level of popular support via a controlled media environment, rigged elections (which increasingly do not deliver on legitimacy), economic growth (which is harder and harder to achieve given the corruption and placement of politics above the economy), and unfortunately the growing use of violence to maintain power. The constant need for survival has led the regime to a state of ad hocism.

Hence, Laruelle argues that Russia is not fascist, and in following her analysis of illiberalism and a more in-depth discussion of the ideology of the Putin regime (chapter 5) and also the ideology of a variety of right-wing and conservative thinkers in Russia (chapter 6) and their connections with European fascists (chapter 7), she makes the case more explicitly in chapter 8 that Russia is not fascist. In doing so, she adds three additional points. First, she argues that the historical parallels are wrong: Putin is not Hitler, and not Stalin. I agree with the former, but the comparison of Putin with Stalin in light of the 2022 invasion, war, and atrocities in Ukraine and the growing crackdown within Russia makes the Stalinist comparison harder to dismiss. Second, Laruelle argues that Russia is not a totalitarian state because there is no utopian vision and no plans for the future. Third, Laruelle further argues that Russia is not ethnonationalist or imperialist but a postcolonial state.

This last point is kind of subtle: it seems to me easy to agree that Russia is not an ethnonationalist regime. But is it imperialist? We have seen in 2022 that Russia does not respect Ukrainian sovereignty or nationhood at all. And what are Russia's aspirations with regard to the rest of the near abroad, that is, the 14 other sovereign states of the former Soviet Union? Are they allowed to exercise full sovereignty and independence? There is a lot of pressure on Belarus, as well as Central

Asian and Caucasian states, to align with Russia, or at least to not align with the West. The possible linkage of Ukraine with the European Union and the imagined connection to NATO (despite that not really being on the table) perceived as an intrusion by Europe, NATO, and the USA into Russia's sphere of influence seems to have been a central rhetorical issue in the 2014 Crimea invasion and again in the 2022 Ukraine war, so there are serious doubts about whether Russia will allow the other former Soviet states to exercise full independence.

Laruelle's answer is that Russia's characterization of its behavior in the near abroad is "not expansionist but rather protectionist" (148). But then we are back to what "protectionist" means: for Ukraine in 2014 it meant invading and incorporating some additional territory into Russia—a situation which one might characterize as expansionist. We might have thought Crimea was an exception. But in 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine supposedly to protect it from nazis and fascists (among other absurd ad hoc rationales) and in the process the Russian army brutalized the civilian population of Ukraine in ways that are likely to be named war crimes or even genocide. Hence, whether Russia is fascist, imperialist, or postcolonial is a question we will return to in the future, but at least for Ukraine, Russia has been violently expansionist rather than protectionist.

The year of 2022 complicates this book. Overall, I think that Laruelle has made a compelling case that Russia had not been fascist, at least in terms of having a coherent revolutionary ideology, but with the changes domestically within Russia following the invasion and war in Ukraine we may see the development of the kind of fascist ideology that had been lacking before the war. In any case, Laruelle's analysis of the Putin regime highlights many important facets of the regime that other analysts might have overlooked, and therefore the discussion of the regime alone is well worth the read, regardless of whether one agrees with her conclusion on fascism.

Yet, all this has been a prelude to a bigger question that Laruelle poses in the book: what purpose does it serve to label a state as fascist? Interestingly, people in both the West and Russia call their enemies fascist. While Western intellectuals debate whether Russia is fascist, the labeling of political enemies as fascist and the constant retelling of Russia's victory over fascism in World War Two (or the Great Patriotic War as it's known in Russia) has become a central part of the Putin regime's discourse on Russia's international behavior.

Laruelle may be one of the first to locate the discussion of the question of whether Russia is fascist squarely within the context of Russia's labeling of its enemies as fascist. She catalogs in detail the use of fascism in the Soviet Union (chapter 2) and the contemporary usage in Russia (chapter 3). She argues that calling one's enemies fascist allows Russia to highlight its continued centrality in international affairs, and the discussion of fascism provides an avenue for endless commemoration of the Soviet victory in World War Two, which reminds everyone of Russia's indispensable role in the victory over the world's worst regime, Nazi Germany. All of this analysis seems to have played out exactly in Russia's justification for the invasion of Ukraine.

Yet, in the chapter "International Memory Wars" (chapter 4), Laruelle makes clear that the use of labeling enemies as fascist is not just a game played by Russia. Central and Eastern European states also play the fascist card, this time equating Stalin with Hitler, which has the effect of simplifying the enemy (Stalin and the USSR) and distracting from a much messier reality of complicity with the Nazis by many people in many parts of the region. As Laruelle writes, "As is proverbially said, memory tells us more about the present than about the past, and memory wars between Russia and its neighbors are no exception" (81). Thinking about what is to be gained by labeling enemies as fascist, as Laruelle does in these chapters, provides insight into current day political insecurities and is a productive way to approach the debate.

Indeed, I would add that perhaps it is not surprising that Americans in the time of Trump, where our own institutions of democracy are gravely threatened (although probably by gerrymandering, populism, and corruption more than by actual fascists if we stick to Laruelle's definition), have also jumped on the anti-fascist bandwagon. Calling Russia fascist and blaming Russia for the election of Donald Trump allows Americans to not think too hard about why approximately half the country

voted for Trump and why the vast majority of Republicans continue to support his ham-handed coup attempt and his false electoral fraud claims. Why look in the mirror for your own flaws or in your own communities for the source of your own problems when there are fascists on the outside just waiting to be called out?