

# The Undying Wily Man

By Hunter Wanamaker

## INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of Vladimir Putin's rule over the Russian Federation in 2000, the idea of the Russian World, or *Russkii Mir*, has shaped the Russian President's political agenda perpetually. Russia's illegal and illegitimate annexations and invasions of bordering territories, like Chechnya, Crimea, the Donbas, and now the entirety of Ukraine, characterizes the Eastern power's 21st century foreign policy. Putin continues to justify Russia's militaristic actions publicly through the narrative of the *Russkii Mir*, a united empire joint between Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, and the disputed territories shared between them on the basis of historical legacies of shared ethnicity, Russian Orthodoxy, language, and heritage. "Putin is obsessed with this history," Felix Light, a Reuters Russian correspondent and journalist, notes.<sup>1</sup> Putin utilizes this history to argue his right to Ukraine and his right to extend the current war, one in which Russia has seen little permanent success. However, while Putin may frame his beliefs within Russia's historical context, the manner the Russian people approach their perspective on the war, and the decaying support they have for it, can also be explained

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<sup>1</sup> "Presentation by Felix Light."

through historical context. The majority of the Russian populace has expressed self-interested personal reactions to the war that conflict their resolute trust in Putin's leadership. I argue that these reactions hinge on Russian history and its socialization of the citizenry – a citizenry that continues to embody Yuri Levada's "Wily Man." One must concede that certain social groups within the Russian population may possess stronger, differing, or more selfless opinions about the war; yet, by and large, Russia's past has the uncanny ability to explain the nature of these Russian individuals in the present as well.

## CURRENT STATE OF RUSSIAN PUBLIC OPINION

Outside of any historical context, support for war among a nation's populace likely cannot be sustained indefinitely, especially as Russia fails to make legitimate gains against a resilient Ukrainian defense.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in the first two months following the February 24th invasion, an indisputable majority of Russians supported the war effort.<sup>3</sup> However, the famous American political scientist John Mueller explained this phenomenon as a "rally-round-the-flag" effect.<sup>4</sup> Light confirmed this "rallying-round-the-flag" effect in his experience staying in Russia for the first ten days of the war, in which his

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<sup>2</sup> "Ukraine Shows Ability to Strike Far Inside Russia," *Reuters*, December 6, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-appears-show-ability-strike-far-inside-russia-2022-12-06/>

<sup>3</sup> "The Conflict with Ukraine and Responsibility for the Deaths of Civilians," Yuri Levada Analytical Center, last modified May 18, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/05/18/the-conflict-with-ukraine-and-responsibility-for-the-deaths-of-civilians/>

<sup>4</sup> John Mueller, "Russian Public Opinion on the Ukraine War: Perspectives from the American Experience," *Newstex*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/russian-public-opinion-on-ukraine-war/docview/2669495231/se-2>.

progressive, educated, Muscovite flatmate shocked him with her immediate support of the war early on.<sup>5</sup> Mueller sought to predict the potential progression of the Russian people's support for the war entirely through an analysis of the United States' last four wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Although admittedly uninfluenced by any sort of Russian historical or sociological context, Mueller's analysis detailed that regardless of history, media coverage, anti-war sentiments or demonstrations, censorship, or war occurrences, all four of these wars mentioned experienced heightened support due to an instinctive "rally-round-the flag" patriotism. In turn, and again regardless of any public responses or circumstances pertaining to these wars, support inevitably declined. Mueller believes this same progression will occur in Russia, as he explains that the only commonality to point to between the American wars is the culmination of casualties that eventually force a dwindling of support.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in the present, Mueller's prediction has come to fruition due to a combination of a restored common Russian apathy to its country's political affairs, Putin's call for partial mobilization in September, and the continued death of Russian soldiers.

While Mueller's argument contributes to a decrease in support for the war, a cold Russian self-interest contradicted by a persistent faith in Putin's leadership plays a major role in the corrosion of Russian public approval of the Ukraine conflict. After acquiring opinion poll results from a Kremlin-issued survey from October, originally designated as classified, *Meduza*, an investigative Russian independent news website, revealed that a 55 percent majority of Russians favor peace

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<sup>5</sup> "Presentation by Felix Light."

<sup>6</sup> John Mueller, "Russian Public Opinion on the Ukraine War: Perspectives from the American Experience."

talks with Ukraine and only 25 percent of Russians support continuing the war. But in July, the same Kremlin agency found only 30 percent of people desired peace talks and 57 percent of people favored continuing the war.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the Yuri Levada Analytical Center, the most reputable, yet still government supported, Russian sociological institute, recently released the results of a late October opinion poll on the state of the war in Ukraine that found a similar 57 percent of Russians in favor of peace talks. The Levada Center surveyed respondents 18 years and older across 137 municipalities of 50 regions in Russia, rural and urban alike.<sup>8</sup> Likely perpetually intimidated by Putin and the Kremlin to misrepresent their research for the purpose of saving face, these polling data reveal how salient the growing disapproval of the war is for Russian people today. The director of the Levada Center, Denis Volkov, points to Putin's partial mobilization decree on September 21 as the culprit of this recent wave of disapproval:

This is sheer reluctance to take part in the war personally. They continue to support, but they have very little desire to participate themselves. Besides, their support was, from the very start, something they declared with regard to what they perceived as having nothing to do with themselves: "Life goes on – it's even getting better." Now, the risks are greater, and people want to start the talks. Still, the majority of people leave this to the government: "We'd like it, but it's up to them to decide."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Pertsev, "Make peace, not war," *Meduza*, November 23, 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/11/30/make-peace-not-war>

<sup>8</sup> "Conflict with Ukraine: October 2022," Yuri Levada Analytical Center, last modified November 11, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/11/01/conflict-with-ukraine-october-2022/>.

<sup>9</sup> Pertsev, "Make peace, not war."

Volkov's perspective on the Russian citizenry's war sentiments communicates a distinctive, cold apathy to the actual result of the war and its impact on Ukrainian and Russian soldiers alike. Rather, Volkov paints the Russian people as individuals only concerned with their personal health – the majority only favored peace once their lives were at stake. Ironically, in opposition to their self-interest, Russians still have faith that the government will lead them in the right direction regardless of their fear over the possibility of being drafted.<sup>10</sup> In the words of Light, "Russian's are willing to support another attack on Kiev or an end to the war as long as Putin wants it."<sup>11</sup> It appears, the Russian's maintain a paradoxical psyche. Indifference to the Russian Federation's actions in Ukraine is the leading emotion among Russians under 55, yet, their faith in Putin is still unrelenting as revealed in Levada's data along with Volkov and Light's testimonies.<sup>12</sup> To determine whether this phenomenon can be explained by Putin's effectiveness and popularity as a leader or a lack of Russian personal interest in political affairs or a combination of the two, an analysis of Russian history is required.

First, I must point out that certain social groups have reacted with more selfless passion and concern for the direction of the war, though they represent the minority of Russians. Moreover, these reactions can nonetheless be explained by examining historical and sociological legacies as investigated in section III. One of the greatest supporters of partial mobilization are respondents who live in less populated areas

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<sup>10</sup> "Approval of Institutions, Ratings of Politicians," Yuri Levada Analytical Center, November 1, 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2022/11/01/approval-of-institutions-ratings-of-politicians-2/>

<sup>11</sup> "Presentation by Felix Light."

<sup>12</sup> Yuri Levada Analytical Center, "Conflict with Ukraine: October 2022."

with up to 100 thousand residents.<sup>13</sup> Less urban peoples approve of Putin's Ukrainian policy decisions and the happenings of the war, likely due to the wide cultural differences in rural areas and the provinces of Russia. Meanwhile, ethnic minority groups, intellectuals, progressives, journalists like Felix Light, and students have all sought to flee Russia since the outbreak of the war due to their disapproval of the invasion and the censorship that could come along with it.<sup>14</sup> Crimean Tatars, an ethnic minority with a tumultuous historical experience in Russia have fought to do the same.<sup>15</sup> Understandably, those opposed to war or the invasion of Ukraine do not want to be enlisted or persecuted for demonstrating against it.

## HISTORICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

I present that the turbulent history of Russia forged the modern Russian temperament, typified in the previous discussion of the paradoxical response to the war in Ukraine by the majority of the populace. The previously mentioned "indifferent" and "apathetic" responses that couple with a contradictory determined support of Putin, can be attributed to Yuri Levada's socialized character he developed in his sociological research labeled the "Wily Men." With a historical investigation into this seeming predisposition to submissive "wiliness," one can find that post-Soviet, Soviet and even pre-

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<sup>13</sup> Yuri Levada Analytical Center, "Conflict with Ukraine: October 2022."

<sup>14</sup> Carlotta Dotto, "Putin's war has triggered an exodus out of Russia – but the options are shrinking," *CNN*, March 30, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/30/europe/russia-ukraine-brain-drain-graphics-intl-cmd/index.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "I'm spoiled by my Ukrainian love of Freedom," *Meduza*, November 7, 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/11/07/i-m-spoiled-by-my-ukrainian-love-of-freedom>; Dotto, "Putin's war has triggered an exodus out of Russia – but the options are shrinking."

Revolutionary Russia cultivated this wily man for over a century. In Joshua Yaffa's *Between Two Fires*, Yaffa details Levada's inquiry into the wiliness of the average Russian as he describes the development of post-Soviet Russia. Prior to Putin's ascendancy, Levada first formulated a definition for the nature of just the Soviet populace: Homo sovieticus, a people motivated by survival to carve out their place in the "super-institution, universal in its functions and sphere of activities . . . of a pre-modern paternalistic type that penetrates into all corners of human existence."<sup>16</sup> The omnipotence of the Soviet state forced the people into this role, like Vasily Grossman's character, Nikolay Andreyevich, in *Everything Flows* who built his career through his compliance with Stalin's purges of the intelligentsia.<sup>17</sup> Yet, Yaffa notes that this nature of "cleverness and resourcefulness" even calls back to the folklore of 19th century Russian serfdom:<sup>18</sup> the wily serf in Pushkin verses, "while remaining in bondage, [was] constantly able to undermine and outsmart his baron."<sup>19</sup> Simultaneous subservience and cunning appear to be a socialized Russian trait developed out of necessity. Yaffa asserts that the wily nature of Russian people coincides with Putin's rise to power and the manner in which he facilitated it: "Putin was less the country's captor than a manifestation of its collective subconscious."<sup>20</sup> Yaffa's argument rests on the idea that the Russian people accept the corruption of the state because they can carve out their place in it through their craftiness – "it was

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<sup>16</sup> Joshua Yaffa, "The Wily Man," in *Between Two Fires* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2020), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Vasily Grossman, Elizabeth Chandler, and Anna Aslanyan, *Everything Flows* (New York Review Books, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Yaffa, "The Wily Man," 6.

<sup>19</sup> Yaffa, "The Wily Man," 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> Yaffa, "The Wily Man," 12-13.

to your advantage to guess what [Putin's state] wanted from you...while also being clever enough to extract some benefit for yourself.”<sup>21</sup> Putin can possess direct preeminence over TV channels, oil companies, oligarchs, the economy, the use of force, the military, etc. so long as the people remain wily. Moreover, in today's terms, as long as the people can remain wily enough to stay satiated out of the fray, faith in Putin and in Russian leadership will endure.

In terms of the war in Ukraine, the definition of the “Wily Man” serves as an appropriate explanation for the reactions of the majority of the Russian people. The apathy that would be characteristic of a Wily Man to the actual occurrences of war, or an abiding patriotism, or a defense against NATO and Western encroachment is evidenced in the majority's recent increase in support for peace talks once Putin called to enlist more citizens. Section II revealed that most Russian citizens did not care how the war progressed or how Putin handled his foreign policy so long as they remained uninvolved with and removed from the fighting. Volkov's lamentations virtually describe exactly what a Wily Man is.<sup>22</sup> Putin, for so long, has provided the people with relative stability in which they need not worry about his policy. While this section of the Russian citizenry has not needed to act “wily” in the sense of angling for a position in society that would excuse them from war or persecution like a member of the USSR, their complacency and indifference to the illegality and horror of Putin's advances on Ukrainian independence could in itself be considered wily. In Felix Light's words, this “apathy provides a form of stability to allow Putin and his inner circle to move as they please.”<sup>23</sup> However, after

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<sup>21</sup> Yaffa, “The Wily Man,” 20.

<sup>22</sup> Pertsev, “Make peace, not war.”

<sup>23</sup> “Presentation by Felix Light.”

their contentment was threatened with Putin's partial mobilization, the indifferent populace began to grumble with disapproval as demonstrated through current polling data. Moreover, as the war continues to progress with no end in sight, a potential full mobilization looms heavy: "Society has barely noticed [the embarrassing recent Russian retreat from Kherson] at all...it was overshadowed by mobilization," said a member of Putin's administration in November.<sup>24</sup> Thus, it remains to be seen whether these wily peoples may have to step outside of their conditioned personas and disinterested satisfaction with Putin if this senseless war wears on too long.

In addition, the resilient Crimean Tatars, a Muslim ethnic group with Mongolian ancestry, have faced conflict with Russia since the eighteenth century. The Ottoman Empire fought with the Russian empire over the Crimean Peninsula for generations until the USSR integrated it as an autonomous republic and vacation destination within Soviet state's bounds in 1922. Following this integration, the Crimean Tatars experienced a protracted era of displacement, discrimination, and marginalization that would render their present opinion on the war in Ukraine glaringly obvious. Stalin deported almost 200,000 Tatars to Central Asia and Serbia during WWII, a large portion dying on the way or immediately upon arrival and not returning to their homeland until the Perestroika-era in which they returned to a Crimean autonomous republic within Ukraine. Russia illegitimately annexed Crimea with a corrupt referendum, and in the present, Tatars are being drafted into war for a country they hold no true connection to. Moreover, Tatars are reported to be disproportionately targeted by Putin's mobilization campaign, an unnerving, discriminatory call back

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew Pertsev, "We've lost the real war," *Meduza*, November 18, 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/11/18/we-ve-lost-the-real-war>.

to Stalin era policies.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, through this historical context, it comes to no surprise that Tatars refuse to support the war and seek refuge outside of Russia.

Although from more of a sociological perspective rather than historical, rural Russian opinion on the war is shaped by their circumstances on the fringes of Russian society. Rural Russian peoples, as opposed to the modern urban population, live in conditions that bear zero resemblance to their Muscovite and Petersburgian counterparts in terms of education and infrastructure, but Putin's influence knows no bounds. In Maxim Osipov's 2019 "The Cry of the Domestic Fowl" and "The Mill" from his collection *Rock, Paper, Scissors, and Other Stories*, Osipov details narratives about life in the Russian provinces and illuminates the cultural disparity between rural and city in Russia: "Electricity, gas, phone bills unpaid? In the capital, a lack of money is something to be ashamed of; here, it's pretty much the norm."<sup>26</sup> In "The Mill," the narrator says of the provincial town of Liebkehtsk, "The town lives. It's nothing to rave about, but still, we've never had it so good. The state supplies our fuel oil, the boiler house works, and homes have heat – hot water, even."<sup>27</sup> Based on appearances, Moscow resembles any bustling major western European city, with all the standard amenities included; meanwhile, based on Osipov's detail, the Russian periphery struggles to afford the basic necessities. Light described the urban/rural margin as "on steroids" in comparison to other countries.<sup>28</sup> However, Osipov's narrative suggests the people are satiated with their

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<sup>25</sup> "I'm spoiled by my Ukrainian love of Freedom."

<sup>26</sup> Maxim Osipov, "The Cry of the Domestic Fowl," in *Rock, Paper, Scissors, and Other Stories*, (New York Review Books, 2019), 6.

<sup>27</sup> Maxim Osipov, "The Mill," in *Rock, Paper, Scissors, and Other Stories*, (New York Review Books, 2019), 178.

<sup>28</sup> "Presentation by Felix Light."

situations – situations in which they rely on the state and unreliable infrastructure to barely get by. Politics are often polarized on many axes, but one consistent across the world is rural versus urban with a proxy to education levels. Moscow and St. Petersburg are the most urbanized areas in Russia and in turn possess the best universities, attract the best teachers, and possess the highest level of education. Thus, supported by Osipov's description, the Russian rural tendency to approve of the war and Putin is understandable with the normalization of an abysmal economic infrastructure and an education system with the resources likely only capable of promoting pro-war, pro-Putin ideals rather than progressive ones (on the assumption that high levels of education in Russia yield more progressive, anti-war, and anti-Putin sentiment).<sup>29</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Evidently, Russian history and the dynamics of ethnic and regional differences sculpted the Russian populace's reactions to the war in Ukraine in varying capacities, whether that be the tsarist and Soviet legacies that formulate Levada's "Wily Man," the longstanding struggles of the Crimean Tatars, or the environment of life in the Russian provinces. In terms of the war's future, the most preeminent current war sentiment that favors peace talks, retained by the formerly indifferent who now fear mobilization, will be a critical one to look out for if Putin drafts more and more Russians. As the Ukrainian Armed Forces began conducting drone strikes deep within Russia as recently as December 6, the Ukrainian resistance continues to solidify. Furthermore, beyond the potential for the "wily" people to no longer be so indifferent, the Russian elite

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<sup>29</sup> "Presentation by Felix Light."

and other Putin subordinates have started to question Putin and the direction of Russia's future.<sup>30</sup> Undisclosed elite businessmen within Putin's circle claimed this past November, "we've lost the real war."<sup>31</sup> Another anonymous official in the state government complained, "We're not privy to anything; we learn a lot of our information from the news – and from Ukrainian and Western sources. It looks like we're constantly making concessions while also trying to cover them up and hide them."<sup>32</sup> A third lamented over the "complete opacity of our country's top leadership."<sup>33</sup> If these signs of dissatisfaction among the highest degree of Russian society carry true weight, they do not bode for Putin's future as Russia's leader if he cannot handle the war in Ukraine appropriately.

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<sup>30</sup> "Hundreds of miles past the border," *Meduza*, December 7, 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/12/07/hundreds-of-miles-past-the-border>.

<sup>31</sup> Pertsev, "We've lost the real war."

<sup>32</sup> Pertsev, "We've lost the real war."

<sup>33</sup> Pertsev, "We've lost the real war."

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## FINAL NOTE

- A. I would like to note that I considered implementing analysis of Andrew Zyvaginstev's "Leviathan" in my discussion of the sociological context of rural Russian opinion on the war in Ukraine. However, as the movie focused on the reaches of Putin's corruption rather than individuals living in the Russian periphery, I did not feel it would be a suitable investigation within the limited provided length of our assignment. Yet, I also do not want to ignore the fact that Putin's unbounded influence over the entirety of the Russian empire, along with his expansive web of corruption, likely holds significance in how rural Russians have shaped their opinions about the war.
- B. Second, I recognize that my argument does generalize the overall population of Russia, as it rests on polling data that could never account for the individual human experience. I am fully aware I may be misrepresenting the sentiments of a host of Russian citizens. This investigation is just an attempt to explore the motivations for the leading local reactions to the war in Ukraine.