

# Imperial Chekism: Putin's new ideology



## RUSSIA'S SECURITY SERVICES THROUGHOUT HISTORY

- Russia has had a historical tradition of semi-unaccountable security services whose role has been to oppress the population in the name of order and security (the Oprichniki under Ivan IV, the Secret Chancellery under Peter the Great, the Okhrana under the later Tsars, the Soviet Cheka/OGPU/NKVD/MGB/KGB).
- As these organisations became increasingly powerful (and loathed), successive heads of state would publicly dissolve them and reorganise them under new names with shuffled and overlapping responsibilities. This gave the appearance of reform and prevented any agency becoming too powerful. In the Soviet period the Cheka became the OGPU which reformed into the NKVD (which shared responsibilities with SMERSH in wartime), which after the Second World War became the MGB before reaching its final incarnation during the "de-Stalinisation" period: the KGB.
- After the Cold War, the KGB was split into the four main organisations that exist today: the FSB (responsible for security domestically and in former Soviet states); the FAPSI (electronic reconnaissance); the SVR (foreign intelligence) and FSO (bodyguard service), while some of its responsibilities were transferred to the GRU (military intelligence).
- Despite these multiple incarnations throughout the Cold War and its aftermath, the modern Russian security services have continually identified with the Cheka; leading to the nickname 'Chekists' and their governing ideology: 'Chekism'.

## WHAT IS CHEKISM?

Derives from "Cheka", the first incarnation of the Soviet Secret Police. Alludes to the suborning of all spheres of the state and public life to the security services and their interests rather than the traditional vice versa. Is defined by nationalism and 'security' as the paramount state interest, carried out by an unaccountable set of security services.



Core members of Putin's inner circle and critical policy makers in Russia, all Chekists. More [here](#)

continual campaign to convince the Russian people theirs is a unique state besieged by hostile powers and conspiracies (a core Chekist belief).

## CHEKISM IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA

- During the attempts at liberalisation and transition to capitalism during the 1990s, the Chekists lost a significant amount of their influence to oligarchs (although many obtained positions in local administrations and/or within organised crime groups).
- After Putin became president, the state (and the Chekists) reasserted control; imprisoning oligarchs, co-opting criminal gangs and, according to defectors and dissidents, staging false-flag terror attacks.
- By 2006, it was found that up to 78% of 1,016 leading political figures in Russia had previously served directly, or in organisations affiliated with, the KGB or FSB
- Putin has since expanded and strengthened Russia's security apparatus; expanding the Security Council's powers, creating the National Guard, engaging in a lawfare campaign to stifle criticism of the Soviet Union and dissent, and a

## IMPERIAL CHEKISM

- Debate has concentrated on Chekism as a domestic policy, but increasingly under Putin it has begun to govern foreign policy; combining ultranationalism with Chekist beliefs in unaccountability and conspiratorial practices to create a new expansionist ideology: Imperial Chekism.
- This has been most noticeable in Africa; where the majority of Russian policy has not been carried out by diplomats, but by network of mercenary outfits linked to the security services, most notably the Wagner Group.
- Similarly, in Ukraine, responsibility for the 2014 invasion of Crimea, the covert conflict in the Donbas and the planning for the current invasion has largely fallen to the security services.
- When dealing with dissidents abroad, the Kremlin has increasingly used assassinations as a go to rather than traditional international practices like extradition; demonstrating the Chekist narrative that "traitors" deserve only death and a belief in unaccountability that manifests as contempt for international norms.
- However, the recent invasion of Ukraine has illustrated the inherent flaws in Imperial Chekism. The secretive planning process has led to widespread shock and confusion among the armed forces that has undermined their effectiveness, while consistent disinformation of Ukrainians as a people subjugated by fascists awaiting liberation have left the army and Kremlin leadership unprepared for Ukrainian resistance and contributed to war crimes that have made public support of Russia increasingly difficult.
- Imperial Chekism's fundamental flaw is that it places power in the hands of a few people who's actions are guided by paranoia and self interest and who are isolated from the consequences of their decisions. This is a significant contrast to the Ukrainian leadership; demonstrating the advantages of openness in a democratic system.