

Putin Pays Homage to Ilyin

Publication: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 6 Issue: 106

June 3, 2009 02:55 PM Age: 135 days

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http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35075

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin lays flowers to the tomb of writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn

On May 24 Russian Prime minister Vladimir Putin visited the Sretensk Monastery's cemetery in Moscow, laying flowers on the graves of the White Russian generals Anton Denikin and Vladimir Kappel; emigre nationalist philosopher and the leading ideologist of the White cause Ivan Ilyin, emigre writer Ivan Shmelyev and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. The remains of Denikin, Ilyin, Shmelev and Kappel had been reinterred in Moscow in the 2000's from graves in the United States, Switzerland, France and China respectively in a symbolic gesture of healing the Russian civil war rift. Putin was accompanied on his visit to the cemetery by Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov, the father superior of the Sretensk Monastery.

Shevkunov is a leader of the most conservative, nationalist and monarchist wing within the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), close to the new Patriarch Cyril. He has also been known for his close links to Putin. In fact, Putin had chosen him to prepare the reunification of the ROC and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) which took place in May 2007, with the ROCOR becoming part of the ROC. Shevkunov has neither confirmed nor denied persistent rumors that he is Putin's confessor, but he has emphasized his allegiance to him. In 2001 Shevkunov said: "Vladimir Putin is indeed an Orthodox Christian believer...who confesses, takes Communion and realizes his responsibility to God for the high service entrusted him, and for his immortal soul...He who really loves Russia and wishes it well, can only pray for Vladimir, placed at the head of Russia by God's will" (Izvestia, December 8, 2001). It was through Shevkunov that Putin publicly disclosed his visit to the cemetery.

According to Shevkunov, Putin cited Denikin's suggestion that "No-one must be allowed to interfere in relations between us, 'big Russia,' and 'little Russia' -that is Ukraine. This was always a purely Russian affair." Putin added that Denikin viewed any movement toward disunity between Russia and Ukraine as "impermissible." Shevkunov also told the journalists that Putin "recalled reading Denikin's memoirs in which the latter said that despite his hostility to Soviet power, even to think about the dismemberment of Russia was a crime ...especially when talking about the little Russian land - Ukraine" (www.grani.ru, May 25).

Indeed, an impeccably honest individual, patriot and talented writer, General Denikin emerged as the leader of the White government in southern Russia, which in 1919 almost toppled the Bolshevik regime. Only 130 miles lay between his advancing troops and Moscow.

However, the Denikin movement collapsed owing to his intransigence toward the aspirations of non-Russian nationals within the empire. His insistence on seeing them all as subjects of the "one and indivisible Russia" alienated Poles, Ukrainians, Georgians, Finns, and many others from the idea of a broad-based anti-Bolshevik united front, which was the only hope of putting down Lenin's revolutionaries. Now, in the current political context, Putin's invoking Denikin's political dictums might suggest that there is trouble ahead.

Putin has always been contemptuous of Ukrainian statehood. In April 2008, Putin was quoted by the Moscow-based Kommersant as telling President George W. Bush: "Ukraine is not a state. What is Ukraine? Part of its territory is in eastern Europe, and another part - a significant part - was given to it by Russia." Putin clearly let Bush understand that NATO membership for Ukraine, might risk Russia taking over the Crimea and Eastern Ukraine (Kommersant, April 7, 2007).

In August 2008 Putin was closely involved in successfully taking over the breakaway Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia - and getting away with it - and with the worsening of the Russian economic crisis he might not wait for Ukraine's NATO membership as an excuse. Sources in Ukraine and one senior Western diplomat in Moscow confirmed to Jamestown that Russia continues to issue passports to citizens in the Crimea. Russia had used the same pattern in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, until the number of Russian citizens reached 95 percent -and Moscow "had" to protect its citizens.

Another method of handling Ukraine is by using Russia's "pipeline troops." On May 29, Putin warned that Russia might again turn off gas supplies to Ukraine, based on its failure to pay (www.news.ru.com, May 29). Moscow has insisted for some time that one way out of this deadlock for Ukraine is to turn over its natural gas transportation system to Russia -along with its political independence.

The homage paid by Putin to Ilyin's grave on his visit to the Sretensk Monastery cemetery makes his actions and intentions appear particularly ominous. Ilyin has long been Putin's spiritual guru, to the extent that he cited him in his presidential addresses in 2005 and 2006, and in his speech to the council of state in June 2007.

Meanwhile, Ilyin advocated strong authoritarianism, founded on the link with the ROC, as the only acceptable form of government for Russia. In his work "National Socialism: New Spirit" in 1933 Ilyin condoned Hitler as a defender of Europe from Bolshevism. In 1948 in his essay "On Fascism" Ilyin wrote that "Fascism emerged as a concentration of statist-conservative forces...It was a healthy phenomenon during the advance of leftist chaos." Ilyin, however, decried fascism's "mistakes," such as the suppression of all rival forces and the Church -he suggested that religion, the media and political parties might be tolerated "to the degree of their loyalty."

Putin's ideology can be traced to his state's origins both within the Romanov empire, the White cause's patriots and Stalin's Soviet empire. His growing authoritarianism combined with his cemetery visit, coordinated with the ROC, sends another signal of his intention to defend the Russian state and its interests in the near abroad.