

**FT Magazine Politics**

## **Putin: the disorder the far right and far left have in common**



George Orwell was right. Hating your country is every bit as bad as loving it blindly

Simon Kuper 3 HOURS AGO

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One oddity of the Ukrainian war has been watching far-right leaders such as Marine Le Pen, Matteo Salvini and Nigel Farage scramble back from their adoration of Vladimir Putin, while their far-left peers tone down the excoriations of Nato. It must have felt similar watching Hitler's appeasers reinvent themselves in autumn 1939. Today's far right and far left share an outlook: hatred of one's own nation, at least in its current incarnation, and the search for a better foreign country to love.

George Orwell saw this first. In May 1945, in his essay "[Notes on Nationalism](#)", he defined "transferred nationalism": people displacing their nationalist loyalties to another country. The Corsican Napoleon and the Austrian Hitler were case studies. Orwell wrote that in his day, the phenomenon was strongest among western leftwing intellectuals, whose transfer of loyalty was "usually to Russia".

The fashionable objects of transferred nationalism change over time. It always helps to know little about the adored country, so that it can be safely idealised. In the 1960s and 1970s, the far left worshipped Cuba, Ho Chi Minh's North Vietnam and Mao's China. Meanwhile, on the American right, [writes Canadian author Jeet Heer](#), the journal National Review "ran ads for tourist agencies offering trips" to apartheid South Africa and fascist Spain and Portugal. Later, the US right adopted Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel, while leftists such as Jeremy Corbyn chose Palestine, and embraced what has been called "Khomeinism", after the late Iranian ayatollah.

Almost any political movement will occasionally be tempted to reject its own country. Some of my fellow British Remainers did this after the Brexit vote, often transferring their nationalism to [Angela Merkel's Germany](#). At other times, one's own country becomes impossible to love: Nazi Germany, and perhaps Putin's Russia. But for today's far right and far left, disgust at one's own nation is the standard condition.

For the far left, this typically boils down to the notion of original sin. One's home country's past crimes — colonialism, slavery, genocide — prefigure whatever it is doing today. The far-left American thinker Noam Chomsky, for instance, condemns Putin's invasion but spreads [blame to the US](#), adding: "The US has a long record of undermining and destroying democracy. Do I have to run through it? Iran in 1953,

Guatemala in 1954, Chile in 1973, on and on.” For Chomsky, his own country can never learn from its sins and improve.

By contrast, far-right nationalists who despise their own nations focus on betrayal. They believe that the real country has been sneakily replaced by a fake country full of immigrants and “woke” customs. Recall Trump’s warning to the marchers on the Capitol, on January 6 2021: “If you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country any more.” In this view, modernity equals destruction. The British philosopher Roger Scruton — “the greatest modern conservative thinker”, [according to Boris Johnson](#) — wrote in a “funeral oration” for his own country: “The old England for which our parents fought has been reduced to isolated pockets between the motorways.”

The nativist promise is that the betrayal can be reversed, that one day it will be bright, sunny 1955 again. But for now, if politically correct globalists are erasing one’s nation, then nativists need to find another country to love — a country that has remained pure, white and martial, where nobody is allowed to oppose the Leader, and where men are still men, and women mere women.

For years, the chief beneficiary of transferred nationalism, as in Orwell’s time, was Russia. After Trump became president, most US Republicans who expressed a view [considered Russia a friendly nation](#). Or look at the photograph on Le Pen’s original campaign leaflets of [her shaking hands with Putin](#): Make France Great Again morphs into Make France Russia. Moscow encouraged such feelings with monetary benefits. Le Pen’s party took [loans from Russia worth €11mn](#), inevitably entering a relationship of obligation.

Now that Putinphilia has become at least temporarily embarrassing, the far right needs a new pet nation. The US right’s trendsetting Conservative Political Action Conference meets in Budapest in May with a keynote speech from nativist Hungarian prime minister [Viktor Orban](#).

But perhaps the most prominent nationalist now assailing his own country, destroying his people’s peaceful, unheroic, modestly prosperous lives, is Putin himself. As The Economist noted: “He says he loves the motherland, but his actions suggest the opposite.” It’s like romantic love for a real, flawed person: the actual modern country never lives up to the nationalist ideal.

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