

# Putin's War on History: The Thousand-Year Struggle Over Ukraine.

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On the evening of February 21, 2022, three days before Russian forces began the largest land invasion on the European continent since World War II, Russian President Vladimir Putin gave an angry televised speech. In it, he expressed familiar grievances about the eastward expansion of NATO, alleged Ukrainian aggression, and the presence of Western missiles on Russia's border. But most of his tirade was devoted to something else: Ukrainian history. "Ukraine is not just a neighboring country for us," Putin said. "It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space." Ukraine's borders, he asserted, have no meaning other than to mark a former administrative division of the Soviet Union: "Modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia."

To many Western ears, Putin's historical claims sounded bizarre. But they were of more than casual importance. Far from an innovation of the current crisis, Putin's argument that Ukraine has always been one and the same with Russia, and that it has been forcibly colonized by Western forces, has long been a defining part of his worldview. Already during the Maidan popular uprising in Kyiv in 2013-14, Putin claimed that the people leading the huge protests were Western-backed fascists (fascists) trying to tear Ukraine from its historical roots. (In fact, the protests caught the West by surprise, and although they included a far-right fringe, they were no fascist takeover.) And in July 2021, well before the buildup of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border, the Kremlin published a 7,000-word essay under Putin's byline with the title "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." Both Russia and Ukraine, it asserted, have not only common roots in language and faith but also a shared historic destiny. Since its publication, the essay has become part of the required curriculum for all service members in the Russian armed forces, including those fighting in the current war. According to Putin's logic, all divisions between Russia and Ukraine are the work of Western powers. From Poland in the sixteenth century to the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the nineteenth century and the Nazis in World War II, they have periodically coerced Ukraine or led it astray. In this reading, Kyiv's pro-Western outlook over the past decade is only the latest form of external interference--this time by the European Union and the United States--aimed at dividing Russia against itself. Ukraine's "forced change of identity," Putin wrote, is "comparable . . . to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us." In Putin's meaning, "us" included Ukrainians. Ukrainians and Ukraine, in other words, aren't just naturally part of Russia; they don't even really exist.

A variation on the "Ukraine doesn't really exist" theme is the Kremlin's assertion that Ukraine is a foregone failure. According to this view--long echoed in a more sophisticated form by Western commentators--thanks to its geography and political history Ukraine is forever destined to be riven by internal division or torn apart by more powerful neighbors. This was the core narrative of Putin's propaganda the last time he invaded Ukraine, when he grabbed Crimea and the Donbas following the Maidan protests in Kyiv. Then, Russian state media reported that Ukraine was a failed state taken over by a neo-Nazi junta and that Russian forces were riding to the rescue. The close Putin adviser who directed all this propaganda, the bodyguard turned strategist Vladislav Surkov, reprised the theme in an interview with the Financial Times last year. Ukraine, he said, using an odd analogy, was like the "soft tissue" between two bones, which, until it was severed, would rub painfully together. (With Russian journalists, he was more straightforward: the "only method that has historically proved effective in Ukraine," he said, is

"coercion into fraternal relations.")

As the extraordinary resilience and unity of the Ukrainian population in the current war have demonstrated, these Russian claims are nonsense. Saying that Ukraine doesn't really exist is as absurd as saying that Ireland doesn't exist because it was long under British rule, or that Norwegians are really Swedes. Although they won statehood only 31 years ago, the Ukrainians have a rich national history going back centuries. The idea that Ukrainians are too weak and divided to stand up for themselves is one they are magnificently disproving on the battlefield. As for the neo-Nazi insult, this is belied by the fact that Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky is Jewish and that in the most recent parliamentary elections, in 2019, Ukraine's farright party, Svoboda, won less than three percent of the vote. As Putin's imagined Ukraine has increasingly diverged from Ukrainian reality, the myth has become harder to sustain, the contradictions too acute. But rather than adjusting his historical fantasy to bring it closer to the truth, Putin has doubled down, resorting to military force and totalitarian censorship in a vain attempt to make reality closer to the myth. He may now be learning that reality is hard to defy: the wages of bad history are disaster in the present.

## GATHERING RUSSIA

Putin's obsession with Ukraine's past can be traced to the trauma of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Until 1991, most of today's Ukraine had been ruled by Russia for 300 years--slightly longer, in other words, than Scotland has been ruled by England. And with a population that is today nearly as large as Spain's, Ukraine was by far the most significant Soviet republic besides Russia itself. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former U.S. national security adviser, famously wrote, "Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire." This isn't literally true. Russia today is still a vast multiethnic empire, taking in a 3,000-mile-wide slice of northern Asia and including more than a dozen Asian nationalities, from the 5.3 million Tatars on the Volga River to a few thousand Chukchis on the Bering Strait. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, Moscow lost its West.

For Putin, Russia's European empire was all-important. Although there has long been an exoticizing streak to Russia's self-image--"Yes, we are Scythians!" the hitherto gentle poet Aleksandr Blok declared after the 1917 revolution--the country has always seen itself as a European, rather than an Asian, power. Its great composers, novelists, and artists have been European in orientation; its historic military triumphs--against Napoleon and Hitler--made it a senior player in Europe's "concert of nations." By pushing Russia back into her gloomy pine forests, away from such ringing old place names as Odessa and Sevastopol, the loss of Ukraine, in particular, injured the Russian sense of self.

At the heart of Russia's Ukraine problem, then, has been a war over history. The first battle is over where the story begins. Conventionally, the story starts with a legend-wrapped leader from the Middle Ages, Volodymyr (or Vladimir in Russian) the Great. A descendent of Norse raiders and traders from Scandinavia, Volodymyr founded the first proto-state in Kyiv toward the end of the tenth century. A loose but very large fiefdom known as Rus, it was centered on Kyiv and covered today's Belarus, northwestern Russia, and most of Ukraine. Volodymyr also gave Rus its spiritual foundations, converting his realm to Orthodox Christianity.

Although Russians and Ukrainians concur on Volodymyr's importance, they disagree over what happened after his kingdom broke up. Through the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it disintegrated into warring princedoms, and in the thirteenth, it was overrun by the Mongols, under Batu Khan. In Russian accounts, the population--and, with it, true Rus culture--fled the violence, heading northeast, to Moscow and Novgorod. Ukrainians, however, argue that Rus culture remained squarely centered on Ukraine and that what emerged in Moscow was a separate and distinct tradition. To Western readers, the argument seems trivial: it is as though the French and the Germans were locked in battle over whether Charlemagne, the ninth-century founder of the Carolingian Empire, belongs to modern France or modern Germany. Ukrainians, however, understand the significance of the Russian claims. One of Kyiv's landmarks is a large nineteenth-century statue of Volodymyr the Great, holding a cross and gazing out over the Dnieper River. When Putin put up his own, even bigger Vladimir the Great outside the Kremlin gates in 2016, Ukrainians rightly saw it not as a homage to a tenth-century king but as a blatant history grab.

In fact, for most of the next seven centuries after Volodymyr's reign, Ukraine was outside Muscovite control. As Mongol rule crumbled through the 1300s, the territory of present-day Ukraine was absorbed by the emergent Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which in turn combined by dynastic marriage with Poland, so that for the next two and a half centuries, Ukraine was ruled from Krakow. Eventually, even Ukraine's faith acquired a Western veneer: in 1596, the Union of Brest-Litovsk created the Greek Catholic, or Uniat, Church--a compromise between Catholic Poles and Orthodox Ukrainians that acknowledged the pope but was Orthodox in ritual and allowed priests to marry. A politically canny halfway house between the two religions, the union helped Polonize the Ukrainian nobility part of what Putin sees as a long pattern of the West pulling Ukraine away from its rightful Orthodox home.

It was not until the late seventeenth century that Moscow forcefully entered the picture. A series of uprisings by Ukrainian Cossacks--militarized frontier groups, centered on the lower Dnieper--had weakened the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom. Then, following a long war with Poland over Ukraine, expanding Muscovy was finally able to annex Kyiv in 1686. For Ukrainians, it was an "out of the frying pan into the fire" moment: Polish rule was simply swapped for its harsher Muscovite counterpart. But in Putin's telling, it was the beginning of the "gathering of the Russian world," using an archaic phrase that he has resuscitated to justify his war against Ukraine today. Another century later, Poland itself was partitioned among Austria, Prussia, and Russia, with Russia ending up with what is today Belarus and central Ukraine, including Kyiv, and Austria with today's western Ukraine, then known as eastern Galicia, which included Lviv.

## STATE OF STRUGGLE

Ukraine's modern national movement began in the 1840s, led by the first great Ukrainian-language writer, Taras Shevchenko. Born into an enserfed peasant family in a village near Kyiv, he exhorted Ukrainians to throw off the Russian yoke and excoriated the many who Russified themselves in order to climb the socioeconomic ladder. (These views earned him ten years in Siberia.) As the century progressed, and especially after Tsar Alexander II's assassination by anarchists in 1881, tsarist rule became more repressive. Hundreds of Ukrainian socialists followed Shevchenko into exile, and Ukrainian-language books and education were banned. At this point, Ukraine's eastwest divide turned into an advantage--at least for those living in the western part--because in Austrian-ruled Galicia, Ukrainians were able to adopt the freer civic culture then taking root in Europe. In Lviv, they published their own newspapers and organized reading rooms, cooperatives, credit unions, choirs, and sports clubs--all innovations borrowed from the similarly Austrianruled Czechs. Although disadvantaged by a voting system that favored Polish landowners, they were able to form their own political party and sent representatives to Lviv's provincial assembly, to which the typical Ukrainian deputy was not a fiery revolutionary but a pince-nez-wearing, mildly socialist academic or lawyer.

Ukraine's reputation as a land cursed by political geography--part of the "bloodlands" in the title of the historian Timothy Snyder's best-selling book--was earned during the first half of the twentieth century. When the tsarist regime suddenly crumbled in 1917, a Ukrainian parliamentary, or "Rada," government declared itself in Kyiv, but it was swept away only a few months later, first by Bolshevik militias and then by the German army, which occupied Ukraine under the March 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. After the armistice that November ending World War I, Germany withdrew again, leaving the Red Army, the reactionary Russian White Army the Polish army a Ukrainian army under the socialist Rada minister Symon Petlyura, and an assortment of independent warlords to fill the power vacuum. In the chaotic civil war that ensued, the group worst hit was Ukraine's Jews. Scapegoated by all sides, more than 100,000 were killed in 1919, in a series of massacres unmatched since the 1600s. Beaten by the Reds, Petlyura formed a last-ditch alliance with Poland, before fleeing to Paris when Poland and the Soviet Union made a peace that divided Ukraine again, the Russians taking the east and the center, the Poles the west. Two small borderland regions--today's Bukovina and Transcarpathia--went to newly independent Romania and Czechoslovakia, respectively.

Not surprisingly, Petlyura is a hotly contested figure. For Russians, he was just another pogromist warlord. (That viewpoint saturates the Kyiv-bred but ethnic Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The White Guard*, for whose characters Petlyura's army is a frightening mob.) For Ukrainians, conversely he led their country's first stab at independent statehood, which might have succeeded had the Allies only given him the same diplomatic and military support

that they did the Balts and (less successfully) the Armenians, the Azerbaijanis, and the Georgians. To accusations of ethnonationalism, they rejoin that the Rada government printed its banknotes in four languages--Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish--and that the leader of the Ukrainian delegation to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference was a distinguished Jewish lawyer, Arnold Margolin.

Petlyura's army rampaged, they concede, but he could not control it, and so did all the others. The controversy played out in 1926 in a Paris courtroom, after Petlyura was assassinated by a Jewish anarchist who claimed to be avenging family members killed by Ukrainian soldiers. The three-week trial was an international sensation, with the defense presenting a devastating dossier of evidence about the pogroms, while the prosecution sought to paint the assassin as a Soviet agent. After only half an hour's deliberation, the jury declared him innocent, and debate over the affair still rages.

## BETWEEN STALIN AND HITLER

In fact, the violence and chaos of the Petlyura era were merely a prelude to much greater Ukrainian tragedies in the years that followed. Beginning in 1929, Joseph Stalin launched the Holodomor--literally, "killing by hunger"--a program of forced deportations and food and land requisitioning aimed at the permanent emasculation of Ukraine's rural population as a whole. Rolled out in parallel with a purge of Ukraine's urban intelligentsia, it resulted in the deaths of nearly four million Ukrainians. Covered up for decades, there is no doubt that this extraordinary mass killing was deliberate: the Soviet authorities knew that villagers were dying in great numbers, yet they persisted in food requisitioning and forbade them from leaving the famine areas for the towns. Why Stalin perpetrated the famine is less clear. An estimated three million Kazakhs and Russians also starved to death during these same years, but he chose to hit Ukraine hardest, probably because it embodied his twin demons in one: the conservative peasantry and a large, assertive non-Russian nationality. Even today however, there is an ongoing effort by Russia to block international recognition of the Holodomor as a genocide. In his "Historical Unity" essay, Putin refers to the famine only once, in passing, as a "common tragedy." Stalin's name is not mentioned at all.

Less than a decade later, a new round of horror was visited on Ukraine following the signing of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Red Army occupied the Polish-ruled western part of the country--the first time Russia had ever controlled this territory. Two years later, however, the Wehrmacht marched in anyway, and two years after that, the Red Army returned. Both armies deported or arrested the Lviv intelligentsia--a rich mix of Ukrainians, Poles, and Jews--as they arrived and killed political prisoners as they departed. For a few months in 1943, a large ethnonationalist Ukrainian partisan army controlled most of northeastern Ukraine, establishing a primitive administration and its own training camps and military hospitals. Remarkably, small units of this army carried on an assassination and sabotage campaign for years after the war ended, with the last insurgent commander killed in a shootout near Lviv in 1950.

Overall, 5.3 million Ukrainians died during the war years, an astonishing one-sixth of the population. Again, many died of hunger, after Germany began confiscating grain. And again, it was Jews who suffered most. Before the war, they made up a full five percent of Ukraine's population, or some 2.7 million people; after it, only a handful remained. The rest had fled east or lay in unmarked mass graves in the woods or on the edge of cemeteries. (In the fall of 2021, as part of an effort to commemorate these events, Zelensky presided at the opening of a new complex at Babi Yar, or Babyn Yar, the park next to a metro station where nearly 34,000 Kyivan Jews were massacred in September 1941. On the sixth day of Putin's invasion this year, three Russian missiles landed in the park, causing damage to the Jewish cemetery there.) For the Soviets, and for Putin today, the most important fact about the Ukrainians during the war was not their victimhood but their alleged collaboration with the Nazis. The most controversial Ukrainian figure of the period is Stepan Bandera, the leader of a terrorist organization in Polish-ruled interwar western Ukraine. Having already been sour when the area was under Austrian rule, Polish-Ukrainian relations dramatically worsened with the new government's Polonization drive, in the course of which Ukrainian language schools were closed, Ukrainian newspapers strictly censored, Ukrainians banned from even the lowliest government jobs, and Ukrainian candidates and voters arbitrarily struck from electoral rolls. The repression radicalized rather than Polonized, so that the largest Ukrainian parliamentary party, the compromise-seeking

Ukrainian National Democratic Alliance, was increasingly squeezed out by Bandera's underground nationalists. When the Wehrmacht entered western Ukraine in June 1941, Bandera joined forces with the Germans, organizing two battalions, Nachtigall and Roland, although he was almost immediately arrested by the Nazis, who found him too hard to control.

Ever since, Russia has used Bandera as a stick with which to beat the Ukrainian national movement. No matter that far more Ukrainians fought in the Red Army than in the Wehrmacht and that Germany was able to recruit tens of thousands of Russian prisoners of war, too. As in Soviet days, a standard epithet for Ukrainians in Russian state media today is Banderivtsi--"Banderites"--and Putin revisited the trope in an even odder than usual speech on February 25, the day after the Russian invasion began, in which he called on the Ukrainian army to overthrow the "drug addicts and neo-Nazis" in power in Kyiv.

After the end of World War II, and especially after Stalin's death in 1953, Ukraine enjoyed several decades of relative stability. Compared with the other non-Russian nationalities in the Soviet Union, the Ukrainians were simultaneously extra repressed and extra privileged, making up the largest single group of political prisoners but also acting as Russia's junior partner in the union. The Politburo was packed with Russians and Ukrainians, and in the non-Slavic republics, the usual pattern was for an ethnic national to be appointed first party secretary, while a Russian or a Ukrainian wielded real power as number two. When the Soviet Union collapsed, in 1991, Ukraine floated to independence without bloodshed, after its own Communist Party leadership decided to cut the tow rope to the sinking mother ship. It is this late-Soviet "little brother" relationship that Putin grew up with--and which he may believe (or have believed) Ukrainians would be ready to return to were it not for the West's interference.

## WESTWARD OR BACKWARD

Ukraine's political path in the three decades since independence has accentuated all of Russia's fears. At first, it seemed as if Russia and Ukraine would move on parallel tracks in the post-Cold War era. Both countries were riding the rapids of economic collapse combined with new political freedoms; neither seemed interested in the past. In Ukraine, nobody bothered to take down Kyiv's Lenin statue or rename its streets. Russia's new ruling class, for its part, seemed more interested in making money than in rebuilding an empire. It was easy to imagine the two countries developing along separate but friendly paths: like Canada and the United States or Austria and Germany.

That happy illusion lasted only a few years. The two hinge moments of Ukraine's post-Cold War history were two highly effective and genuinely inspirational displays of people power, both provoked by the Kremlin. In 2004, Putin tried to insert a burly ex-convict and regional political boss from Donetsk, Viktor Yanukovych, into the Ukrainian presidency, an effort that seems to have included having his pro-European electoral rival, Viktor Yushchenko, poisoned. After Yushchenko survived the attack (with his face badly scarred), the vote was blatantly falsified instead. Sporting orange hats and ribbons, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians poured into the streets in protest and stayed there until the electoral commission conceded a rerun, which Yushchenko won.

For Putin, the protests, known as the Orange Revolution, were a plot orchestrated by the West.

In 2010, Yanukovych finally won the presidency, after the pro-European bloc rancorously split. For the next four years, he devoted himself to looting the Ukrainian treasury. But in November 2013, he went a step too far: just as Ukraine was about to ink a longplanned and widely popular trade deal with the European Union, he abruptly canceled it and, under pressure from Putin, announced a partnership with Russia instead. For Ukrainians, as for Putin, this was not just about how best to boost the economy but also about Ukraine's very identity. Instead of heading westward--perhaps even one day joining the European Union--the country was being coerced back into the Russian orbit. Initially, only a few students came out in protest, but public anger grew quickly after they were beaten up by the police, whose upper echelons Yanukovych had packed with Russians. A protest camp on Kyiv's central square, known as the Maidan, turned into a permanent, festival-like city within a city, swelling to a million people on weekends. In January 2014, the police began a violent crackdown, which climaxed with the killing of 94 protesters and 17 police officers. When the crowds still refused to disperse, Yanukovych fled to

Moscow, and the contents of his luxurious private compound--Hermes dinner services, chandeliers the size of small cars, a stuffed lion--went on display in Ukraine's National Art Museum. In the power vacuum that followed Yanukovich's flight, Putin invaded first Crimea and then, via thuggish local proxies, the eastern border cities of Donetsk and Luhansk.

The land grab pleased the Russian public, but if Putin intended to pull Ukraine back toward Russia, his actions had the opposite effect. New presidential elections brought in another pro-European, Petro Poroshenko, a Ukrainian oligarch who had made his money in confectionary rather than corruption-ridden mining or metals. Then, in the years that followed, a mass civilian effort supported Ukrainian forces in a low-level but grinding conflict with Russia in and around Donetsk and Luhansk. (Until the Ministry of Defense was reformed, the previously neglected Ukrainian army was literally crowdfunded by direct donations from the public.) Ukrainian support for NATO membership rose sharply, and in June 2014, Ukraine signed a wide-ranging association agreement with the European Union. Most symbolic and popular--or, in Putin's eyes, most cunning--was the EU's 2017 granting to Ukrainians of *bezviza*, visa-free 90-day travel to the whole of the Schengen area. Russians still need visas, which are extortionately expensive and burdensome. The contrast grates: little brother has not only abandoned big brother; he is better traveled now, too.

## RUSSIAN BONES, UKRAINIAN SOIL

Ukraine's progress before the invasion should not be overstated. Shady oligarchs pulled strings behind the scenes, and the country was hobbled by pervasive corruption. (Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index puts Ukraine alongside Mexico and Zambia but ranks it as slightly less corrupt than Russia.) But for all of the country's problems, its history since independence has been one of real changes of power, brought about by real elections, between real candidates, reported by real free media. For Putin, the Ukrainian example had become a direct political threat. What if Russia's own population--and not just the urban intelligentsia--started demanding the same freedoms? In his "Historical Unity" essay, Putin explained away the fact that Ukrainian presidents change as being the result of a "system" set up by "the Western authors of the anti-Russian project." Ukraine's pro-Russian citizens, he wrote, are not vocal because they have been "driven underground," "persecuted for their convictions," or even "killed." Whether he actually believes this is unclear, but it might explain the slightly ad hoc tactics used by the Russian army in the first week of his war on Ukraine. Putin may really have expected his tank battalions to be greeted as liberators.

As during the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2013-14 Maidan protests, which came to be known as the Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine's fierce self-defense today is a defense of values, not of ethnic identity or of some imagined glorious past. Putin's obsession with history, in contrast, is a weakness. Although earlier in his presidency, banging the "gathering of the Russian world" drum boosted his approval ratings, it has now led him down what may turn out to be a fatal dead end. In terms of square mileage alone, Ukraine is the second-largest country in Europe, after Russia itself. If you placed it over the eastern United States, as *The Washington Post* recently observed, it would stretch "from Missouri to the Atlantic Ocean, and from Ohio to Georgia." Occupying it permanently would be enormously costly in troops and treasure. Moreover, Putin's war has unified Ukrainians as never before. And whether they are speaking Russian or Ukrainian, their sentiment is the same. Already, video clips have gone viral of babushkas telling Russian soldiers that they will leave their bones in Ukrainian soil and of Ukrainian soldiers swearing joyously as they fire bazookas at Russian tanks, all in the purest Russian. The war is likely to go on for a long time, and its final outcome is unknown. History, Putin may be learning, is only a guide when it's the real sort.

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