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The Kremlin's Nationalist Utopia

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Executive Summary

When Russia unleashed a brutal full-scale war against Ukraine, it was acting as an aggressive nationalising state. The Kremlin leadership is driven by a twisted historical imagination that portrays Ukraine as an inalienable part of the pan-Russian nation. The splitting of the Russian “national body” in 1991 and the emergence of an independent Ukraine are seen as a historical aberration that needs to be corrected. The Kremlin’s historical fantasy was not born out of thin air. It is the result of an idiosyncratic reading of Russian history advanced by the Russian nationalist historiography of the late imperial period. For Russian imperial nationalists, Ukraine along with Belarus belong to the imperial core and Ukrainians together with ethnic Russians constitute a *Staatsvolk* destined to rule the sprawling Eurasian empire. President of Russia Vladimir Putin, an avid reader of history books and amateur historian himself, is a staunch disciple of this nationalist school of thought. His obsession with Ukraine as part of the Russian “national unity” and his fear of “losing Ukraine” in the growing geopolitical rivalry with the West appear to have prompted him to make the fateful decision to send an invasion force into an east Slavic neighbouring state.

Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian full-scale war, now in its second year, is perceived very differently by the warring sides. For Ukrainians, it is a war of national liberation, an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggle against the former imperial overlord. From the Kremlin’s perspective, however, the war is not so much an imperial affair as a nationalist Reconquista unleashed in a desperate attempt to redefine the Russian nation, with an eye to reabsorbing Ukraine into the Russian *national* body. This distinction has important political implications. It is easier to negotiate the secession of a former imperial dominion than to come to terms with losing part of what is seen as your own self.

Ukraine in Russian Historical Imagination

In a recent wide-ranging interview with key Russian media outlets, Dmitry Medvedev, Russia’s former president, bluntly stated that “Ukraine is part of Russia”. He then explained that Ukraine had not only been part of the Russian Empire, but that the territories of contemporary Ukraine, populated by “genuine Russian people”, had been “part of Russia in the narrow sense”. This statement is a crystal clear indication that the Kremlin sees what happened in 1991 – the break-up of the Soviet Union and the emergence of “invented borders” between the Russian Federation and Ukraine – as an “unnatural disunion” of what used to be a single “national whole”.¹

1 “Medvedev nazval Ukrainu chast’iu Rossii”, *RIA Novosti*, 23 March 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230323/medvedev-1859935789.html>

Historically, the problem of Russian national identity – essentially, the Russian understanding of what constitutes Russia and the Russian people – has been inextricably linked to Ukraine. Whenever this vital link was destabilised an existential question would immediately arise: “What is Russia?”.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Russian Empire, like many other major European imperial polities, bar Austria-Hungary, was a nationalising empire preoccupied with forging a nation at its imperial core. *Velikorosy* (ethnic Russians) along with *Malorosy* (Ukrainians) and Belarusians, as the three branches of the “pan-Russian people”, were widely seen as constituting the backbone of this emerging imperial nation. In his seminal 1915 article, Petr Savitskii, one of the future leaders of the Eurasianist movement, argued that: “The main imperialising nucleus of the Russian Empire, the great *all-Russian national unity* was formed following the merger of Muscovy with Ukraine”.² The empire’s “Ukrainian lands” – with Kyiv, the “mother of Russian cities”, the site of the baptism of ancient Rus’, and the place where Russia’s Primary Chronicle, the *Tale of Bygone Years*, was compiled – were never considered a periphery or a colony, but a crucial part of the metropole.

“Losing Ukraine” to an external enemy or to a domestic secessionist movement would have been tantamount to the dismemberment of the national body. Petr Struve, one of the most prominent imperial nationalist thinkers who contended that the multi-ethnic Russian empire was a nation in the making, stated as much in 1912 when he wrote that even imagining Ukraine as something culturally distinct from “Russia” would result in a “gigantic and unprecedented schism of the Russian nation”.³ Moreover, there was a strong conviction widespread within Russian nationalist circles that the very idea of “Ukrainianness” was a harmful invention, a result of the intrigue of Russia’s enemies. According to the writer, Vasilii Rozanov, and other like-minded Russian nationalist intellectuals, the separate Ukrainian language and other markers of a distinct Ukrainian identity were “purposefully invented in order to disunite the Russian people, i.e. to split them into two halves so that they start fighting each other”.⁴

The schism that Struve so dreaded occurred just a few years later when, following the 1917 Revolution, the Russian Empire fell apart and an independent Ukraine emerged as a fledgling nation state. This was a fleeting moment, however, as Moscow-based Bolsheviks, the victors in the multi-sided civil war, managed to reconstitute most of the territories of the former empire as a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the early 1920s with Ukraine as one of its constituent parts. Crucially, however, its nationalities policy differed fundamentally from the one pursued by the imperial bureaucracy. The Soviet leadership dispensed the notion of the greater Russian nation comprising the Great Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians to the dustbin of history, and with it the ambitious strategy of forming an “imperial Russian nation” was buried for good. Instead, Lenin (and Stalin as Bolshevik Commissar for nationalities) devised the idea of a “socialist federation” based on the principle of territorialised ethnicity. Ukrainians became a “titular nationality” in their “own” republic with a limited ability to cultivate a distinct cultural identity.

2 Petr Savitskii, “Bor’ba za imperiiu”, *Ruskaia mysl’*, no. 2 (1915), 68.

3 Petr Struve, “Obshcherusskaia kul’tura i ukrainskii partikuliarizm: Otvet Ukraintsu”, *Ruskaia mysl’*, no. 1 (1912), 85.

4 Vasilii Rozanov, “Golos malorossa o nemalorossakh”, *Novoe vremia*, no. 13598, 19 January 1914.

Russian émigrés observing Bolshevik policy from their European exile were extremely concerned about Ukraine's cultural and institutional distancing from "Russia". "The Ukrainian problem," argued the Russian liberal Christian thinker Georgii Fedotov in the late 1930s, "has an infinitely more profound meaning for Russia than all other national problems. It is a question not only of the political structure of Russia and its boundaries but of its spiritual life".⁵

The Soviet leadership, however, made sure that the link between Russian national identity and Ukraine was preserved; first, through control over the historical discourse – in the Bolshevik grand narrative, "Russian" or rather "Soviet" history began on the banks of the Dnieper River; and, second, through the important ideological concept of the "friendship of the peoples". The latter postulated a gradual "coming together" and ultimate "merger" of the myriad Soviet ethnic groups – a process that would produce, according to Communist ideology, a "new national and social entity, *sovetskii narod*" (the Soviet people). Finally, Russians – the largest Soviet "nationality" that did not possess its "own national state" as the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic was a federation in its own right – were encouraged to identify with the multi-ethnic Soviet state in its entirety. Thus, *Soviet* came to be equated with *Russian*, the USSR was widely perceived – both inside and outside the country – as "Soviet Russia" and Ukraine remained a key component of Russians' self-understanding.

The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of an independent Ukrainian state fundamentally destabilised Russian national identity. Not unlike the early 20th century, when in anticipation of the coming political upheaval the Russian symbolist poet and writer Andrei Bely posed the question: "What is Russia? What does it mean to be Russian?",⁶ this same question was asked time and again at the century's end.

Russia's new incarnation – the Russian Federation – emerged as one of 15 new states from under the rubble of the Soviet Union. Historically, it had never previously existed within its current borders and its identity was flimsy as the notion of "historical Russia" was firmly associated with the defunct USSR. Moreover, more than 20 million ethnic Russians found themselves beyond the Russian Federation's borders, the overwhelming majority of them in Ukraine. In the early 1990s, the Russian leadership under President Boris Yeltsin pursued a two-pronged policy: trying to build a civic nation of *rossiiane* (citizens of the Russian Federation) and to settle relations with its former-Soviet neighbours, above all with Ukraine, within the framework of the "civilised divorce" formula. These policies failed due to two mutually reinforcing processes: Russia's growing authoritarianism, which was the flipside of its inability to carry out a comprehensive democratic transformation, and the souring of relations with the West. As a result, Russia bounced back to what has historically been its default mode: hegemon always aspire to be hegemon in what they consider to be their geopolitical backyard.

In parallel, in the late 2010s a number of leading Moscow political thinkers began to characterise Russia as a "state-civilisation".⁷ The vision of Russia as a civilisation, they argued, overcomes the conundrum created by the rigid empire–nation dichotomy. It highlights both

5 Georgii Fedotov, "O Mazepe", in *Polnoe sobranie statei v shesti tomakh* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1988) 4:207.

6 Andrei Bely, "Rossiia", *Utro Rossii*, 18 November 1910.

7 Andrei Tsygankov, "Crafting the State-Civilization: Vladimir Putin's Turn to Distinct Values", *Problems of Post-Communism* 63, no. 3 (2016), 146-158.

the importance of national identity (the primacy of Russian culture) and tolerance towards other (non-Russian) cultures. In addition, unlike the idea of empire, the notion of civilisation is devoid of expansionist connotations. Used in combination with equally hazy notions of Russian World (*Russkii Mir*) and the Moscow Patriarchate's pet project of Holy Russia (*Sviataia Rus*), however, the idea of "Russian civilisation" still hints at the Russian Federation's incompleteness and evokes a vision of "historical Russia" – a glorious state with a 1000-year pedigree and an East Slavic national core that comprises Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.

Vladimir Putin's Blind Spot

President Vladimir Putin is the greatest champion of "historical Russia". As early as 1991, Putin accused the Bolsheviks of sabotaging the Russian war effort during the First World War, bringing down the empire and partitioning the Russian "unitary state" into dozens of "principalities that had previously never existed on the world map".⁸ Ukraine and Russo-Ukrainian "unity" play an inordinately large role in Putin's historical imagination. The late Harvard historian, Richard Pipes, who wrote the best political biography of Petr Struve once aptly noted that: "Ukraine was always Struve's blind spot".⁹ Like Struve, Putin is obsessed with Ukraine and its unique significance for Russian national identity. For him, the "schism" of 1991 that resulted in Ukraine's independence cut right through the Russian national body, depriving Moscow not only of millions of its kin and vast "historical Russian lands" but, more crucially, of the most precious and ancient part of "Russia's" own history. After all, it is absurd to begin one's historical narrative in the capital of a foreign country.

Two intertwined processes appear to have led to all-out war. One was taking place in the realm of European geopolitics: Ukraine's steady drift westwards. Kyiv's ultimate goal is membership of NATO and the European Union, which Putin's land grab in Crimea and Russian-backed insurgency in the Donbas had failed to prevent. The other process was taking place inside Putin's head. The Kremlin dictator has increasingly immersed himself in a specific type of historical scholarship – one produced mainly by Russian nationalist scholars and political thinkers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Geopolitical events engendered an acute sense of urgency: a fear that the Kremlin was losing a race against time. According to Avril Haines, Director of National Intelligence in the Biden administration, Putin "saw Ukraine inexorably moving towards the West and towards NATO and away from Russia".¹⁰ Bill Burns, Director of the CIA, echoes this idea: "My own impression, based on interactions with him over the years, was a lot of this had to do with his own fixation on controlling Ukraine. He was convincing himself that strategically the window was closing on his opportunity to control Ukraine".¹¹

The nationalist historical treatises that Putin was avidly devouring enhanced his sense of mission. He came to see himself as the Russian leader destined to reassemble the

8 Tatiana Melikian, "'Zalozhili atomnuu bombu'. Kak prezident Rossii otzyvalsia o vozhdiax i bolshevikakh", Lenta.ru, 24 January 2016, https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/01/24/putin_lenin/

9 Richard Pipes, "Peter Struve and Ukrainian Nationalism", *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, Vol. 3/4, Part 2 (1979-1980), 675.

10 Garrett M Graff, "Russia-Ukraine War: Oral History", *Politico*, 24 February 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/02/24/russia-ukraine-war-oral-history-00083757>

11 Ibidem.

dismembered Russian national body and right the wrongs that the West and internal traitors had done to historical Russia in 1917 and again in 1991. He appears to be driven by a desire to take revenge for Russia's defeat in both the First World War and the Cold War. After almost a quarter century in power, Putin is increasingly measuring himself against Russia's greatest monarchs. A former senior official told the Financial Times: "He really believes all the stuff he says about sacrality and Peter the Great. He thinks he will be remembered like Peter".¹²

Inspired by his megalomaniacal historical vision and increasingly isolated, the Kremlin leader refused to take advice from prominent Russian historians and leading foreign policy analysts. It is noteworthy that at a series of discussions co-sponsored by the Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and Higher School of Economics in the late 2010s, a distinguished group of experts made two important recommendations to Russia's policymakers. First, it was suggested that Russia should exercise strategic caution, focusing on patiently building a "Concert of Powers" similar to the one the Russian Empire helped to bring about 200 years before. Second, the experts specifically warned of imminent disaster if Russia were to succumb to the lure of irredentist ideas. The discourse of a "divided nation" is extremely dangerous, they argued: it is unclear how to achieve an irredentist programme without "destabilising a huge chunk of geopolitical space". It was absolutely clear, however, that "questioning the borders of the exiting state would be a casus belli".¹³ Putin would not listen, however, and threw caution to the wind. As Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has noted: "he has three advisors: Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great".¹⁴

The criminal irredentist war that the Kremlin has unleashed has been an unmitigated disaster but it is also something unprecedented in the 21st century: a delusional political leader seeking to pursue his utopian nationalist vision based on an antiquated primordialist notion of nation long ago discarded by scholarship. If there is a worse thing than imperialist expansion, it is an aggressive ethnic nationalism. These types of conflict are not easily resolved.

Conclusion

To paraphrase Charles Tilly's often-quoted dictum, warfare both creates and destroys national identities. For Ukraine, the ongoing war, whatever its outcome, will undoubtedly constitute a new national foundation myth, and thus form a solid ideational basis for the development of a more coherent Ukrainian civic nation and a more stable civil society. Stories of battle, combat valour, sacrifice, heroism and martyrs will replace the controversial and divisive national symbols and images that emerged in the aftermath of the first and second world wars. By contrast, Russia will face an opposite process: the final destruction of pan-Russian identity, which subsumes Ukrainians and Belarusians under the notion of a larger Russian nation. This first emerged in the 17th century, became a cornerstone of the Russian imperial grand narrative in the 19th century and, resurrected by Putin as a cause of irredentist war, will

12 Max Seddon, Christopher Miller, and Felicia Schwartz, "How Putin Blundered into Ukraine – Then Doubled Down", Financial Times, 23 February 2023, <https://www.ft.com/content/80002564-33e8-48fb-b734-44810afb7a49>

13 Fyodor Lukyanov et al., "Mezhdu imperiei i natsiei: pochemu Rossii ne nado delat' etot vybor", Rossiia v global'noi politike, no. 1 (2017), <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Mezhdu-imperiei-i-natsiei-18570>

14 Seddon et al., "How Putin Blundered into Ukraine".

finally meet its inglorious end in the 21st century. The mythic vision of “East Slavic Orthodox unity” will eventually be replaced by a new, modern Russian identity – a process that will help Russia’s elites and wider public to come to terms with the idea that Ukraine constitutes a distinct national and cultural entity and cannot be viewed as part of “historical Russia” or a no less imaginary “Russian World”. It is a tragedy that it should take a major war to disabuse the Kremlin of its nationalist utopia.



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