Revising History and 'Gathering the Russian Lands': Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian Nationhood

BJÖRN ALEXANDER DÜBEN ⓘ

ABSTRACT

While the causes of Russia's war against Ukraine are often discussed in terms of geopolitics, another factor that seems to have been an important part of Vladimir Putin's rationale for launching the invasion in February 2022 is his nationalist vision of Ukraine – or significant portions of it – as a historic part of Russia. In the years leading up to the invasion, Putin wrote and spoke at great length about Ukrainian history, establishing a narrative centred around the denial of Ukraine's historic state- and nationhood, presenting Ukrainians and Russians as a single people, and laying claim to large swathes of Ukrainian territory as 'primordial' Russian lands. While analysts have long struggled to adequately assess it, Putin has used this narrative to justify the invasion of Ukraine to a domestic audience, and it appears to have influenced the Kremlin's war aims and the conduct of Russian troops on the ground. There is much to suggest that Putin's invocation of such nationalist and irredentist themes, rather than being a purely tactical move, reflects his genuine convictions. In addition to analysing how and why Putin has been (mis)interpreting Ukrainian history and denying Ukrainian nationhood, this article examines how this narrative has affected the Russian war effort and how far Putin's territorial claims in Ukraine extend.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Björn Alexander Düben

Assistant Professor, School of International and Public Affairs, Jilin University, China

dueben@jlu.edu.cn

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most surprising aspects of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was how many international analysts and policymakers were surprised by it. By the time the Kremlin's 'special military operation' commenced, its contours had been visible for months. Moscow had clearly laid the logistical, administrative, and informational foundations for a complex military offensive, and each operational step of Russia's armed forces had been minutely predicted and documented by American and British intelligence. Indeed, the assault in 2022 was not even an entirely new conflict but the escalation of a hybrid invasion that had begun in 2014. One likely reason why the invasion caught so many observers by surprise was their proclivity to regard Vladimir Putin's motivations through a predominantly realist lens. Russia's president was seen as a rational, non-ideological practitioner of realpolitik – an image that appeared at odds with the reckless and strategically misguided nature of the campaign. In countless speeches and discussions in the months prior to the invasion, Putin had constantly spoken about Ukraine under its post-Maidan government as a geopolitical threat to Russia, particularly in light of Kyiv's aspirations to join NATO. Those who viewed Putin as a quintessential realist and prudent strategist were inclined to regard the massing of Russian troops on Ukraine's borders as a deterrent measure and a geopolitical bargaining chip. They generally did not – or refused to – see it as preparations for an imminent attack against a much weaker neighbour that posed no immediate threat.

It is very likely that the geopolitical grievances and concerns that Putin repeated in the months leading up to the invasion were one of his main motivations for launching the attack on Ukraine. But another motivation seems to have been equally relevant for cementing Putin's conviction that Russia needed to seize and control Ukraine, even at the risk of triggering a major war: his nationalist, irredentist perspective on Russian and Ukrainian history, culminating in his repeated claims that Ukraine has no state- and nationhood of its own and is essentially a historic part of Russia.

This article seeks to analyse this aspect of Putin's reasoning and is structured as follows: It first outlines what Putin has stated about Ukrainian history and Ukraine's historic statehood, and it examines how this is related to the Russian-Ukrainian war. Second, it considers whether Putin is promoting these views for tactical reasons or out of genuine conviction, and it assesses whether they are historically (in)correct. Lastly, to the extent that Putin acknowledges Ukraine's statehood at all, the article examines which parts of its territory he views as 'historic Russian lands' which he aims to 'restore' to Russia, and it assesses how plausible these territorial claims are.

2. LESSONS FROM RUSSIA'S HISTORIAN-IN-CHIEF

For many observers, this nationalist and irredentist part of Putin's mindset regarding Ukraine first became clearly visible in a speech he gave on 21 February 2022. This was the day he formally dispatched Russian troops into the separatist 'republics' in eastern Ukraine's Donets Basin (Donbas) in preparation for the all-out invasion of Ukraine three days later. While Putin repeated the same geopolitical talking points he had been voicing for months, he surprised his audience by devoting around a third of the hour-long speech to expounding his idiosyncratic interpretation of Ukrainian history. Addressing Ukrainians as 'our compatriots', he proclaimed that Ukraine was a part 'of the historical Russia' and that 'Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space' [1]. Among his most memorable claims, Putin asserted 'that Ukraine actually never had stable traditions of real statehood'. Instead, 'modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia'. In Putin's view, it 'can be rightfully called "Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine." He was its creator and architect.' What's more, 'Lenin and his associates did it [creating Ukraine] in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia – by separating, severing what is historically Russian land' [1]. Putin condemned the Bolsheviks for having transferred territory to Ukraine and other Soviet republics: 'vast territories that had nothing to do with them … were transferred along with the population of what was historically Russia'. In particular, this included the 'Donbass, which was actually shoved into Ukraine', and 'the lands of the Black Sea littoral', formerly known as 'Novorossiya (New Russia)'. Putin left no doubt that he regarded 'the disintegration of our united country' and the formation of Ukrainian statehood as a series of 'historic, strategic mistakes' that ran against 'the historical destiny of Russia and its peoples' [1].

Putin's lengthy lecture about Ukrainian history may have seemed out of sync with his previous Ukraine-related statements directed at international audiences. But his spotlighting of Ukrainian history and his denial of Ukraine's historical statehood was in fact nothing new. As early as April 2008, on the sidelines of a NATO summit in Romania, Putin had reportedly told then US President George W. Bush that 'Ukraine is not even a state! What is Ukraine? A part of its territory is [in] Eastern Europe, but a[nother] part, a considerable one, was a gift from us!' [2]. On the same occasion, Putin also went on the record with the comment that

> Ukraine is a very complicated state. Ukraine, in the form it currently exists, was created in the Soviet times. … It received huge territories from Russia in the east and south of the country. It is a complicated state formation. … Well, seventeen million Russians currently live in Ukraine. Who may state that we do not have any interests there? South, the south of Ukraine, completely, there are only Russians. [3]

At a conference in Kyiv in July 2013, Putin spoke about Ukraine's 'reunification with Russia' from the 17th century onwards and referred to Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians as 'a single people' [4].

While Putin's public denial of Ukraine's historical statehood was initially subtle and implicit, it became increasingly explicit in later years, particularly following the ouster of Viktor Yanukovych's pro-Russian government in Kyiv in early 2014 and Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea. In his speech marking the annexation on 18 March 2014, Putin proclaimed that Russians and Ukrainians

> are not simply close neighbours but, as I have said many times already, we are one people. Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other. [5]

In subsequent years, Putin went on to make similar assertions. In February 2020, for instance, he stated in an interview that Ukrainians and Russians 'are one and the same people', and he insinuated that Ukrainian national identity had only emerged as a product of foreign interference [6] – claims which he repeated in his annual marathon press conference in June 2021 [7].

Meanwhile, some of Putin's closest associates went considerably further in their public derision and denial of Ukrainian state- and nationhood. Vladislav Surkov, for instance, formerly one of Putin's top advisers and his point man on Ukraine prior to 2020, stated in February of that year that

> there is no Ukraine. There is Ukrainian-ness. That is, a specific disorder of the mind. An astonishing enthusiasm for ethnography, driven to the extreme. … But there is no nation. [8]

Throughout the last decade, Putin has shown a remarkable interest in historical themes, taking time out of his presidential schedule to write lengthy treatises on historical topics. In June 2020, he published an article in *The National Interest* which tried to revise the academic narrative about the outbreak of the Second World War by justifying the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and its secret protocol [9]. The article was roundly dismissed by foreign historians as unprofessional and poorly researched. But few historical topics appear to have preoccupied Putin as much as the history of Ukraine. This became particularly evident in July 2021, when he published a 6900-word article titled 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'. Providing a sweeping (but extremely selective) account of Ukrainian history stretching back to the early Middle Ages, Putin tried to make the case that Ukrainians and Russians – along with Belarusians – form 'a single large nation, a triune nation', and that they are essentially 'one people – a single whole. … It is what I have said on numerous occasions and what I firmly believe.' According to Putin, it has been Moscow's historical mission to be 'the center of reunification, continuing the tradition of ancient Russian statehood [and] gathering the Russian lands' [10].

In Putin's historical account, Ukrainians always thrived most when they were under Moscow's rule, and the common people in Ukraine consistently wished to remain close to Russia. By contrast, whenever there had been manifestations of 'the idea of Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians' (an idea for which 'there was no historical basis'), these were merely the aberrant schemes of self-serving, detached elites, usually acting at the behest of

manipulative foreign powers that wished 'to divide and then to pit the parts of a single people against one another'. These historical villains ranged from 18th-century anti-Muscovy Cossack leader Ivan Mazepa, 'who betrayed everyone' to Lenin's Bolsheviks, who, according to Putin, instigated the consolidation of the Ukrainian language and identity in the early 20th century. The ultimate result of these misguided policies was that 'in 1991, all those territories, and, which is more important, people, found themselves abroad overnight, taken away … from their historical motherland' [10]. In his article, Putin also repeatedly claimed that, historically, 'people both in the western and eastern Russian lands spoke the same language'. While not explicitly denying the development of a separate Ukrainian language, he implied that it was a mere outgrowth of 'regional language peculiarities, resulting in the emergence of dialects' which remained virtually indistinguishable from Russian. To Putin, the works of Ukrainian writers 'are our common literary and cultural heritage' which must not 'be divided between Russia and Ukraine' [10].

Putin's July 2021 article, which was made required reading in Russian military academies shortly after its publication [11], provides the most exhaustive summary of his views on the history of Ukraine and Ukrainian statehood, which he has voiced in a more piecemeal fashion on countless other occasions. Since the start of Russia's 'special military operation', Putin has frequently repeated and reaffirmed these views. When asked at a plenary session in October 2022, for instance, if he had changed his mind about whether Ukrainians and Russians 'are one people', Putin responded,

> No, of course not. And how can this be changed? This is a historical fact. Russian statehood became established on our territories in the 9th century, first in Novgorod, then in Kiev, and then they grew together. It is one nation.

Putin went on to claim that it is 'a historical fact that Russians and Ukrainians are essentially one ethnicity' and that 'the nation that we now call Ukrainians' only emerged 'because some of Old Russian lands in the west became parts of other states' which then 'started making attempts to divide the united Russian nation'. He concluded that 'Ukraine, of course, is an artificially created state', and, 'in fairness, Russia, which created today's Ukraine, could have been the only real and serious guarantor of Ukraine's statehood, sovereignty, and territorial integrity' [12].

Putin's constant denial of a Ukrainian state- and nationhood separate from Russia appears to resonate with large parts of the Russian population. Since February 2022, Putin's rhetoric has served as a catalyst for radical anti-Ukrainian and ultra-nationalist views, which previously were commonly found on the fringes of public discourse in Russia, to become fully accepted in mainstream discussion and debates. Other Russian senior officials, such as former President Dmitry Medvedev, are now referring to Ukraine as 'the Kyiv province of our native Malorossiya' [13] (Little Russia) – the latter being an obsolete way of referring to the Ukrainian lands as a province of the tsarist empire. In Russia's official and media narrative, it has become an article of faith that the territories being fought over in Ukraine are and always have been Russian lands. Most commentators in Russian state media, including lawmakers and senior officials, now routinely speak about the war as a reclamation of 'historical territories', claiming that Ukraine is not a nation in its own right and that the Ukrainian language is merely a Russian dialect.[1]

Since the war in Ukraine failed to progress as originally planned, the nationalist narrative of Ukraine being a historical Russian land has played an important role in the Kremlin's attempts to justify and promote the invasion domestically. This narrative has become firmly established as part of a trifecta of official justifications for the invasion – the other two being the alleged 'genocide' of Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine and the existential geopolitical threat posed by NATO and the 'Anglo-Saxon' West. The government-sponsored narrative of Ukraine's historical nonexistence as a state also appears to have left an imprint on Russia's actual conduct in occupied parts of the country, where towns have been renamed with Russian or Soviet (rather than Ukrainian) names, Ukrainian street signs have been systematically replaced, Ukrainian-language libraries and archives have been closed or destroyed, and Ukrainian-language curricula have been cancelled in many schools and universities, with the apparent aim of thoroughly 'Russifying' all conquered territories in Ukraine. An investigation by UN Human Rights Council special rapporteurs in Ukraine condemned the Russian occupation authorities'

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1   For a selection of some of the more egregious examples of such statements (some of which essentially amount to calls for genocide), see [28].

severe targeting of Ukrainian cultural symbols. Cultural resources – such as repositories of Ukrainian literature, museums, and historical archives – are being destroyed, and there is a widespread narrative of demonisation and denigration of Ukrainian culture and identity promoted by Russian officials. [14]

The report added that

Efforts are being made to erase local culture, history, and language in cultural and educational institutions and to forcibly replace them with Russian language and with Russian and Soviet history and culture. [14]

3. FACT-CHECKING PUTIN'S HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

One of the central questions regarding Putin's nationalist, irredentist historical claims vis-à-vis Ukraine is whether they reflect his genuine beliefs and convictions or whether they are tactical, serving to motivate the Russian public to support the war and its sacrifices and to convince Ukrainians of the legitimacy of their 'reintegration'. This question cannot be conclusively answered, but it appears unlikely that his use of these narratives has been purely tactical. Putin's intense preoccupation with historical themes (particularly those that intersect with Russian nationalist narratives) suggests that these themes do reflect his genuine beliefs. The same can be said about his propensity for comparing himself with historical rulers like Peter the Great, as well as his self-professed affinity for the works of nationalist philosophers, such as the fascist-leaning Ivan Ilyin, whose views on Ukraine largely prefigured Putin's own [15] (and whom Putin quoted when he signed the accession treaties for four occupied Ukrainian provinces in September 2022 [16]).

Putin's views on Ukraine's historical state- and nationhood are essentially reiterations of a nationalist narrative that was already widespread in imperial Russia in the 19th century, but they do not stand up to any serious scholarly scrutiny. The roots of Ukraine's spiritual appeal to Putin and many of his compatriots lie in the fact that the Kyivan Rus' – a medieval state that came into existence in the 9th century and was centred around present-day Kyiv – is commonly regarded as a joint ancestral homeland that laid the foundations for both modern Ukraine and Russia. But from the time of its foundation to its conquest by the Mongols in the 13th century, the Rus' was an increasingly fragmented federation of principalities. Its southwestern territories (including Kyiv) were conquered by Lithuania and Poland in the early 14th century. For roughly four centuries, these lands, encompassing most of present-day Ukraine, were formally ruled by Poland-Lithuania, which left a deep cultural imprint on them. During this time, the Orthodox East Slavic population of these territories gradually developed an identity distinct from that of the East Slavs remaining in the territories under Mongol and later Muscovite rule (although some degree of cross-border contact between both East Slavic communities continued). A distinct Ukrainian (Ruthenian) language had already begun to emerge around the time following the disintegration of the Kyivan Rus' (notwithstanding Putin's incorrect assertion that 'the first linguistic differences [between Ukrainians and Russians] appeared only around the 16th century' [6]). Once present-day Ukraine had come under Lithuanian and Polish rule, the Ukrainian language evolved in relative isolation from the Russian language. At the same time, religious divisions developed within Eastern Orthodoxy, and from the mid-15th to the late 17th centuries, the Orthodox churches in Kyiv and in Moscow developed as separate entities.

Most of what is now Ukraine was formally governed by Lithuanian and Polish nobility prior to the 18th century, but these lands were predominantly inhabited by Orthodox East Slavs. Striving to escape the strict confines of serfdom, many of them began to form semiautonomous (and ethnically diverse) hosts of peasant warriors – the Cossacks – in the vast steppes on either side of the Dnipro river from around the 15th century. Most of them felt a cultural and religious affinity for Muscovite Russia but had no particular desire to be a part of the Muscovite state. In the 16th through 18th centuries, the Cossacks in present-day Ukraine formed their own de facto self-governed statelets, the 'Zaporizhian Sich' and the Cossack 'Hetmanate'. They staged a major uprising against their Polish overlords in 1648 and signed a treaty of allegiance with the expanding Tsardom of Russia in 1654. Notwithstanding this temporary turn towards Moscow, the Cossacks also explored other options. In the abortive Treaty of Hadiach with Poland-Lithuania in 1658, they were briefly on the verge of becoming a fully fledged constituent

member of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Internal disagreements about whether to side with Poland or Russia contributed to a series of civil wars among the Cossacks in the late 17th century. Their leaders frequently shifted their allegiance between Russia, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire, with the ultimate aim of preserving some degree of autonomy from all sides.

In 1667, Poland-Lithuania had to cede to Russia formal control of Kyiv and the territories east of the Dnipro river (Left Bank Ukraine). The Cossack statelet in the eastern territories was gradually reduced to a Russian vassal state, but its relationship with the tsarist government was often rife with conflict. Sporadic Cossack uprisings were now directed against the Russians as well as the Poles. In 1708, for instance, the Cossacks' leader Ivan Mazepa (whom Putin, in his 2021 article, singled out as a national traitor) allied himself with Sweden and unsuccessfully fought against Russia in the Great Northern War. In 1775, the Zaporizhian Sich was razed to the ground by Russian forces, and the Cossacks' institutions of self-governance were liquidated. Following the final partitions of Poland in the 1790s, the Russian Empire absorbed the remainder of modern-day Ukraine – apart from its westernmost regions, which were annexed by Austria. Most of present-day Ukraine remained a part of the Russian state for the next 120 years. Nonetheless, a distinct Ukrainian national consciousness emerged and consolidated in the course of the 19th century, particularly among the elites and intelligentsia, who made countless efforts to further cultivate the Ukrainian literary language. The strength of the budding Ukrainian nationalism was such that Russia's imperial authorities perceived it as a serious threat, leading them to systematically suppress expressions of Ukrainian culture and the Ukrainian language. In his 2021 article, Putin tried to downplay and justify these repressive measures, which included the Valuyev Circular of 1863 and the Ems Ukaz of 1876, falsely asserting that these tsarist decrees merely 'restricted the publication and importation of religious and socio-political literature in the Ukrainian language' [10]. In actual fact, the Ems Ukaz in particular almost completely prohibited the usage of the Ukrainian language (which it labelled the 'Little Russian dialect') in open print, in lectures, theatre, and other performances.

When the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917, the Ukrainians declared a state of their own. However, after several years of quasi-independence, involving multiple abortive state entities plagued by foreign military interventions, Ukraine was once again partitioned between the nascent Soviet Union and newly independent Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. From the early 1930s onwards, nationalist sentiments were rigorously and violently suppressed in the Soviet parts of Ukraine, but they remained latent and gained further traction through the traumatic experience of the 'Holodomor', a disastrous famine brought about by Joseph Stalin's agricultural policies in 1932–1933 which killed around four million Ukrainians. Ultimately, it was only with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 that Ukraine gained lasting independent statehood of its own. But strong sentiments of Ukrainian nationhood and Ukrainian de facto political entities struggling for their independence had already existed long before that.

Questions of historical state- and nationhood are inherently fraught with ambiguity. In contrast to Putin's essentialist understanding of a nation as a historical entity that exists as an objective fact over hundreds or perhaps thousands of years, scholars commonly understand nationhood as a relatively modern concept that is, in essence, socially constructed and malleable. Benedict Anderson, one of the foremost scholars of nationalism, described nations as 'imagined communities': large groups of people with a strong sense of commonality, which are far too big to allow for direct personal relations among all their members and could only develop in conjunction with certain socioeconomic processes linked with modernity (such as the emergence of print capitalism and the spread of literacy) [17]. Irrespective of how constructed and 'imagined' the nation as a sociopolitical principle is, however, conceptions of nationhood do not typically emerge out of thin air but are usually formed around pre-existing, relatively objective and recognisable sociocultural markers, such as a distinct language or religion, or a socially meaningful shared history.

In the case of the Ukrainian nation, it clearly does possess certain objective and conspicuous markers of nationhood, first and foremost a distinct Ukrainian language. Being under constant pressure from its more powerful (and often predatory) neighbours, it took until the 20th century for Ukraine to appear on the map of Europe as an independent state (notwithstanding the centuries-long history of segments of Ukrainian society struggling for some form of independent statehood) – a fate that Ukraine shared with many other modern nation-states, both inside and outside of Europe.
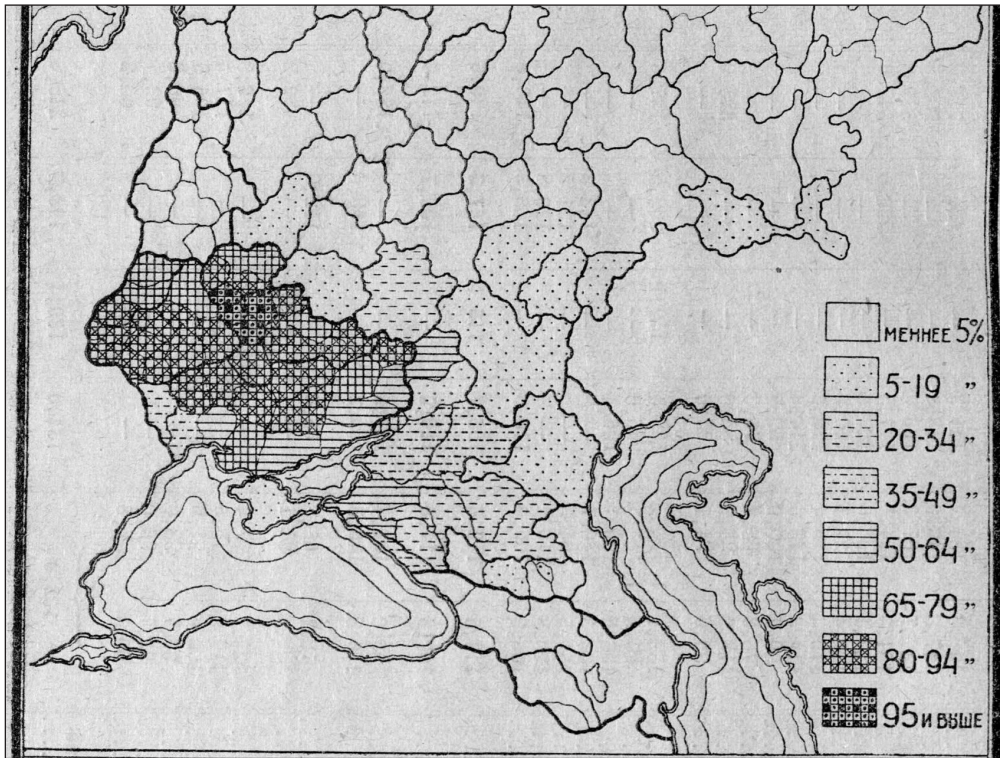
Original graphic from the 1926 Soviet population census report, depicting the distribution of ethnic Ukrainians in the south-western districts of the Soviet Union. For each district, the shading/pattern illustrates the relative percentage of ethnic Ukrainians among its total population (ranging from 'less than 5%' to '95% and higher', see bottom right). As is visible here, there were ethnic Ukrainian majorities in all districts of eastern Ukraine (UkrSSR), but also in several districts of southern Russia (RSFSR).

Source: Central Statistical Administration of the USSR – Census Department: Vsesoyuznaya perepis' naseleniya 17 dekabrya 1926 g. – issue 4. 1928, p. XXX. https://ia804700.us.archive.org/34/items/perepis_naseleniia_1926/vyp.%204%20(RAW).pdf.

4. THE TERRITORIAL QUESTION

Besides questioning Ukraine's historic state- and nationhood in toto, Putin also very clearly claimed in his historical treatises that, to the extent that Ukraine as an entity exists at all, its internationally recognised borders are artificial, and much of its present-day territory historically belongs to Russia but was accidentally 'lost' to Ukraine in the upheavals of the 20th century. The question he raised is thus not only whether Ukraine is a nation in its own right but also where its historic borders lie and whether Russia might have a claim to large swathes of its sovereign territory. This question directly relates to the presumed goals of the Kremlin's war effort.

What Putin's precise objectives are remains nebulous. It is unclear whether his aim is to erase Ukraine as a sovereign entity altogether or to retain a 'rump' Ukrainian state with a Moscow-friendly puppet government (similar to neighbouring Belarus), and if the second, how large such a semi-sovereign 'rump Ukraine' would then be. What we do know is that Putin's aim has been to annex and formally incorporate large parts of Ukraine's sovereign territory into Russia. In September 2022, he announced the formal annexation of four Ukrainian administrative regions: Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts in eastern Ukraine (which together form the Donbas) and the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Oblasts in southern Ukraine [16]. But it is doubtful that this represents the full extent of Putin's territorial ambitions, and it remains unclear how much more Ukrainian territory he ultimately seeks to place under Moscow's direct control.

Throughout his observations on Ukraine, Putin's explanations as to Russian territorial entitlement remained inconsistent and sometimes self-contradictory. Naturally, these claims include the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia formally annexed in 2014 and which Putin described as having 'always been an inseparable part of Russia' [5]. Putin has also left little doubt that he lays claim to the entire east and south of Ukraine. Since 2014, he has constantly referred to these parts of Ukraine as 'Novorossiya', an administrative name dating from the time when Ukraine was a part of the tsarist empire [18, 19]. 'Novorossiya' is an ambiguous concept, but it historically referred to a governorate of the Russian Empire that was created in the late 18th century and encompassed the bulk of southern Ukraine, including most of its Black Sea and Azov Sea coastlines and major cities like Odesa, Dnipro, Zaporizhzhia, Mariupol, Mikolayiv, and Kherson.

Putin, however, appears to be embracing a more expansive and ahistorical definition of 'Novorossiya' that also encompasses large areas of northeastern Ukraine. At an April 2014 press conference, he stated

that what was called Novorossiya (New Russia) back in the tsarist days – Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa – were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why? Who knows.' [20]

Judging from this and similar statements,[2] in addition to the territories of the former Novorossiya governorate and of Donbas (only parts of which had been within the boundaries of historic Novorossiya), Putin also considers the area around the country's second-largest city, Kharkiv, in northeastern Ukraine a historic Russian land.

Somewhat confusingly, there are other passages and statements in his speeches and historical treatises which suggest that Putin may have a very different understanding of where the 'historically correct' border between Ukraine and Russia ought to be. In his July 2021 article on Ukraine, for instance, he quoted his own political mentor, Anatoly Sobchak, the former mayor of Saint Petersburg, as having stated that

> the republics that were founders of the [Soviet] Union, having denounced the 1922 Union Treaty, must return to the boundaries they had had before joining the Soviet Union. All other territorial acquisitions are subject to discussion, negotiations, given that the ground has been revoked. In other words, when you leave, take what you brought with you. This logic is hard to refute. [10]

But it is unclear what exactly Putin thinks such a logic implies. Following this principle, Crimea would have been a part of Russia after 1991, but several now-Russian territories would not. Donbas and 'Novorossiya' would still be part of independent Ukraine, since they were within the borders of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkrSSR) in 1922, as well as large swathes of territory around the cities of Taganrog and Shakhty, which were transferred from the UkrSSR to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) in 1924.

In contrast to this, various other statements from the 2021 article and from Putin's speeches indicate that his territorial pretensions vis-à-vis Ukraine extend considerably further. In his February 2022 pre-invasion speech, Putin claimed that

> since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. This was the case before the 17th century, when a portion of this territory rejoined the Russian state, and after. [1]

He thereby asserted that the Ukrainian territories annexed by tsarist Russia in the 17th century – that is, most of the lands east of the Dnipro river (Left Bank Ukraine), as well as the capital of Kyiv – are integral parts of historic Russia. But he also implied that, to his mind, they merely constituted 'a portion' of Russia's historic southwest, which was evidently meant to encompass western (Right Bank) Ukraine as well. This is underscored by claims he made in his 2021 article. Ultimately, Putin has effectively described the entirety of Ukrainian territory as 'historically Russian lands'. His use of words like '*re*joined/*re*united' (воссоединилась) and '*re*gained' (возвратила) with reference to Russia's territorial conquests of the late 17th and 18th centuries (which involved territories that had never actually been under Muscovite/Russian rule before) demonstrates that his concept of 'historically Russian lands' appears to encompass, at a minimum, all the former territories of the medieval Kyivan Rus' (and, by implication, all of present-day Ukraine).

What makes the extent of Putin's territorial claims vis-à-vis Ukraine particularly difficult to assess is the fact that he appears to have formulated them with no serious consideration of the historical and demographic realities in the Ukrainian borderlands. It is undeniable that the historic borders of Ukraine, particularly in the country's east and south, are difficult to pinpoint. In the days of the Kyivan Rus', control of what is now southern Ukraine was at best sporadic, and it never extended to the east, which was ruled by Turkic tribes. During Polish-Lithuanian rule, the vast plains of present-day eastern and southern Ukraine became known as the 'Wild Fields' – a sparsely populated no-man's-land that was constantly threatened by Tatar raids. By the early 17th century, the Zaporizhian Cossacks had established a

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2   Later that year, during a meeting with academics, Putin used an identical definition of the 'land that historically always bore the name of Novorossiya. … This land included Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Nikolayev, Kherson and Odessa Region' [29].

modicum of control over these territories, and they also settled in some regions that extend far into southern Russia. When most of present-day eastern Ukraine came under formal Russian control in the late 17th century, the Cossacks' rule there initially remained largely autonomous. Meanwhile, Ukraine's southern coastal territories (including Crimea) remained in Tatar and Ottoman hands until the late 18th century. Following Russia's conquest of eastern and southern Ukraine, the tsarist authorities established various cities there, usually at the sites of pre-existing Cossack or Tatar settlements. Nonetheless, substantial settlement of these vast territories did not begin until the early 19th century, and they remained very ethnically diverse and multicultural. The eastern borders of Ukraine were formally drawn in 1919–1924 as the boundaries of the UkrSSR. Putin has vigorously condemned this process on many occasions, for instance in his 18 March 2014 address to the Russian parliament, when he claimed that

> after the revolution, the Bolsheviks, for a number of reasons – may God judge them – added large sections of the historical South of Russia to the Republic of Ukraine. This was done with no consideration for the ethnic make-up of the population, and today these areas form the southeast of Ukraine. [5]

At a January 2016 speech, he similarly lamented that the Soviet Union's internal borders had been 'established arbitrarily, without much reason' and called the inclusion of Donbas in the UkrSSR 'pure nonsense' [21]. During a press conference in December 2019, he complained that

> when the Soviet Union was created, primordially Russian territories that never had anything to do with Ukraine (the entire Black Sea region and Russia's western lands) were turned over to Ukraine. [22]

As outlined above, Putin also repeated these claims at length in his July 2021 article and in his pre-invasion speech in February 2022.

But Putin's historical claims are wrong on two counts: Firstly, the assertion that present-day eastern or southern Ukraine should have been considered part of 'the historical South of Russia' or 'primordially Russian territories' in the 1920s is preposterous since there had been no substantial Russian demographic presence in these territories at any time prior to the 19th century. Even Crimea, the region of Ukraine with the highest concentration of Russian speakers, had only become Russian territory in 1783. Ethnic Russians constituted less than half of Crimea's population until the 1940s, when the Stalinist mass deportation of the entire Crimean Tatar population, as well as smaller populations of ethnic Armenians, Bulgars, and Greeks, changed the demographic make-up of the peninsula forever.

Secondly, Putin's assertion that Ukraine's southeastern borders were established 'with no consideration for the ethnic make-up of the population' is false. The first Soviet census, conducted in 1926, a few years after the eastern borders of the UkrSSR had been finalised, showed that in all territories of Ukraine, including the border regions with Russia, the Donbas, and southern Ukraine, ethnic Ukrainians still far outnumbered ethnic Russians (especially outside of the major cities) [23]. While the census figures on Ukrainian or Russian ethnicity ('nationality') were based on the respondents' self-identification, the 1926 census also separately recorded the respondents' native language. Native Ukrainian speakers outnumbered native Russian speakers (who tended to be clustered in the major cities and also included various Russian-speaking minority groups) in all but four districts of the UkrSSR, out of a total of 41 districts: Hlukhiv, Luhansk, Stalino (present-day Donetsk), and Odesa (in the latter two districts, the number of Ukrainian speakers and Russian speakers was almost identical). In most of Donbas, almost all of the historic 'Novorossiya', and almost the entire northern Ukrainian border region with Russia (including Kharkiv), the number of native Ukrainian speakers far exceeded the number of native Russian speakers. What's more, in several districts of the RSFSR (especially parts of present-day Rostov Oblast and Krasnodar Krai in Russia), the number of (self-identifying) ethnic Ukrainians exceeded the number of ethnic Russians, and in two of these districts the number of native Ukrainian speakers exceeded the number of native Russian speakers [23]. What ultimately changed the demographic composition of eastern Ukraine and southwestern Russia, as it had been recorded in the 1926 census, was the devastation wrought by Stalin's agricultural genocide, the 'Holodomor', in the 1930s, which decimated the local populations, particularly in the Ukrainian-speaking countryside.

5. CONCLUSION

In order to properly assess the causes of the Russian-Ukrainian war, we must try to understand the motivations of the man who instigated it. While any attempt to analyse Vladimir Putin's reasoning risks being overly speculative, his statements and writings do give us certain pointers as to his aims and convictions regarding Ukraine. It is likely that Putin's complex calculus for launching the invasion combined a variety of different motives, including geopolitical concerns about systemic threats to Russia's national security and domestic considerations of shielding his own authoritarian regime against potential pro-democratic 'spill-over' from across the border. But there is much to suggest that Putin's personal readings of Ukrainian and Russian history, combined with deeply held ethno-nationalist and irredentist beliefs, have been one of the core factors motivating his decision to unleash a full-scale military assault against Kyiv.

In his communication with foreign leaders and international audiences, Putin has typically framed his justifications for the invasion in geopolitical terms, claiming that the prospect of further NATO expansion, which is itself part of a US-led scheme to diminish or destroy Russia and prevent it from being a challenge to US hegemony, left Moscow no choice but to launch a pre-emptive attack against Ukraine. This geopolitical narrative has also featured heavily in the Kremlin's efforts to justify the war to *domestic* audiences within Russia, especially as it has tried to explain its consistent military failures in Ukraine by asserting that it is now engaged in an existential conflict against all of NATO. But in its domestic messaging, the geopolitical account has been constantly intermixed with nationalist and irredentist claims that Moscow went to war to recover historic Russian lands – claims which are largely absent when addressing international audiences.

It is impossible to ascertain how much of his own geopolitical narrative – that NATO expansion and Ukraine's westward turn have posed an existential threat to Russia's security – Putin actually believes. But his belief in the *nationalist* narrative of Ukraine being a historic Russian territory, rather than a nation-state of its own, appears to be genuine and deep-seated. Putin is embracing a neo-imperialist account that exalts Russia's centuries-long repressive rule over Ukraine, while simultaneously presenting Russia as a victim of 'US imperialism' and a champion of the worldwide anti-colonial cause. There is much to suggest that, in Putin's mind, the various different arguments advanced to justify the war, incongruous though they are, have been fused together into a hybrid ethno-realist grand narrative: The Ukrainians are really Russians, but they have constantly been turned against Moscow by hostile foreign powers who used them for their own geopolitical schemes, with the primary aim of weakening Russia. Today's hostile foreign power is the US-led 'collective West', and it is repeating history once more by turning Ukrainians against Russia and thus using Ukrainian statehood as a geopolitical weapon against Moscow.

Throughout the last decade, Putin has written and spoken at great length about Ukrainian history, leading him to deny Ukraine's historic state- and nationhood and to essentially claim that present-day Ukraine, or at least a very large portion of it, ought to rightfully be considered a historic part of Russia. That Putin has developed such a fixation on historical scholarship is regrettable, not least since he is not very good at it. At a press conference in May 2005, where he discussed the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, the Soviet occupation of Estonia, and, very briefly, a potential return of Crimea to Russia, Putin stated in jest that perhaps he did not study well at university since he spent his free time 'drinking a lot of beer' [24]. Fast-forward to the present and Putin has nonetheless assumed the role of Russia's historian-in-chief, and he seems convinced (in the words of his spokesman Dmitry Peskov) that he 'has an absolutely phenomenal knowledge of history' [25].

In practice, Putin's understanding of Ukrainian state- and nationhood and the history of Russian-Ukrainian relations is confused and inadequate. His treatment of historical developments has been extremely selective and imbued with nationalist irredentism. As a consequence, he has reproduced a narrative already popular in Russian nationalist circles since the 19th century, which propagates a mythical 1000-year continuity of the Russian nation and systematically ignores all manifestations of the historic growth of a distinct Ukrainian nationhood. In Putin's mind, to the extent that Ukraine as an entity exists at all, it ought to renounce most of its territory to Russia – irrespective of the fact that Russia neither has a strong *historical* claim to these lands (including Donbas, 'Novorossiya', and even Crimea), nor a *demographic* one, since the preponderance of Russian speakers in certain parts of Ukraine is not only a legacy of Russian imperial rule and colonisation but also a cruel consequence of Stalinist ethnic cleansing.

Regrettably, the fact that Putin's historical claims do not hold up to serious academic scrutiny appears to be of little practical relevance. What matters for the course of events in Ukraine is not so much objective scholarship but the version of history that exists in Putin's mind. There is every indication that Russia's president firmly believes what he has been postulating about Ukrainian history and statehood (or lack thereof). In Russia's increasingly closed authoritarian political system, there are practically no opportunities left for an open, critical discourse about Putin's claims, since historical statements and research that contradict the official narrative have increasingly been criminalised [26]. For this reason, and due to the fact that it has fallen on a fertile soil of pervasive nationalist and neo-imperialist grievances among large parts of Russian society, Putin's claim that Ukraine is not a nation in its own right but should be considered a historical part of Russia appears to have become the commonly accepted default narrative in Russian public discourse today. As such, it has served as an additional powerful and resonant narrative justifying Russia's devastating war against Ukraine to a domestic audience.

It is harder to assess to what extent the Russian president's historical convictions have had a concrete impact on Russia's *conduct* of the war. Putin's nationalist mythmaking has been infused with assumptions about the supposed wishes and desires of the Ukrainian people, paired with an outright refusal to acknowledge their own agency (and their democratic political choices), presenting them instead as perpetual pawns of malevolent foreign powers who have always quietly striven to be under Russian rule. It seems likely that this conviction played a role in Putin pursuing what in retrospect appears to have been an utterly unrealistic invasion plan in February 2022, in the apparent expectation that most Ukrainians would swiftly abandon their own elected government and greet Moscow's troops as liberators.

While it is probable that Putin's ultimate aim in this war is to gain some form of control over the entirety of Ukraine, it remains unclear how much of Ukraine's territory he is planning to annex to Russia. In this context, it is insightful to revisit Putin's oft-quoted statement that the breakdown of the Soviet Union was a 'geopolitical catastrophe': There is little to suggest that Putin had much affinity for the Soviet system, its leadership, or its ideology, but he seems to regard the Soviet Union as a political and spatial continuation of the 'historical Russia' of the nationalist imagination, which included the entirety of what he has termed the 'Russian World' and which then tragically splintered into a multitude of independent states. Putin might well be seeing himself as a 'gatherer of historic Russian lands', but based on his writings and statements, it is hard to deduce exactly how far his territorial ambitions extend. Incidents such as Putin's explicit denial of neighbouring Kazakhstan's historical statehood in August 2014 [27], barely half a year after the annexation of Crimea, serve as reminders that this question is not only relevant with regard to Ukraine but could have significant ramifications for Russia's future relations with all other states in the post-Soviet space as well.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Björn Alexander Düben ⓘ orcid.org/0000-0002-4920-9468
Assistant Professor, School of International and Public Affairs, Jilin University, China

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