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**HISTORICAL MEMORY'S INFLUENCE
ON RUSSIAN POLICY**

by

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HISTORICAL MEMORY'S INFLUENCE ON RUSSIAN POLICY

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requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Russia's aggressive policies have increasingly drawn greater focus on the part of the United States and other Western states. Putin's aggressive behavior does not occur in a vacuum but has a multitude of catalysts. One of the factors shaping his decision-making is historical memory, or the narratives a society tells itself. This thesis analyzes how historical memory influences Russian nationalist narrative and impacts the choices of the Putin regime. My research contributes to our understanding of what guides the internal decision-making of the Putin regime by exploring how narrative and ideology have shaped how Putin's regime sees Russia's place in the world. Through case studies of the Russian invasion of Georgia and Ukraine, this paper proposes that historical memory has had an influence on the choices and outlook of the Kremlin.

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I. HISTORICAL MEMORY'S INFLUENCE ON RUSSIAN POLICY

A. INTRODUCTION

Historical memory influences decisions made by the Russian government. More precisely, historical memory has shaped Russian foreign policy and security decisions since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000. This thesis examines how Putin has interpreted aspects of Russia's imperial past and drawn lessons to inform foreign policy today.¹ Three case studies will be used to support how historical memory impacts Russian policy.² Two cases focus on the Russo-Ukrainian War while the other one examines Russia's war in Georgia.

This thesis adds to previous scholarship of identity and narrative within Russia by exploring historical memory in political decision-making. Scholars who specialize in Russian nationalism have shown how history has been coopted to form strains of Russian nationalism.³ My thesis expands upon the study of Russian nationalism and contributes to our understanding of how Putin has constructed a national narrative for Russia, which borrows heavily from ideology and myths from the past. Additionally, it contributes to our understanding of how the power of historical memory is wielded by politicians.

¹ Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia, July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>. An example of this thinking is this article by Putin. It shows how he selects aspects of Russian and Ukrainian history to draw lessons for the present. When Russia and Ukraine are united, it is represented as positive for both. However, when they are not united or acting separately, then it is represented as a negative historical development and something to be avoided.

² Lina Klymenko and Marco Siddi, eds., *Historical Memory and Foreign Policy* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 2. Klymenko and Siddi define "collective memory" as "the shared memories held by a community about the past, a subjective image of the past constructed by political actors in the present based on a community's social and historical necessities." When talking about historical memory, I am largely borrowing from this concept of collective memory but in relation to how historical events are portrayed in political discourse.

³ Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: Russia's New Nationalism*, New edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022); Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields*, BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies (London: Routledge, 2019), 11, 55–69. Clover shows how Russian pundits, like Lev Gumilev and Alexander Dugin, use history in the formation of Eurasianism, which he considers a nationalist ideology. Laruelle shows how history can be rewritten to support nationalism in chapter three of her book.

Before discussing historical memory, there are certain terms that must be defined. First, I make the case that Russia portrays itself as the successor to two empires: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the Russian Empire. To make this claim, I am relying on the definition of empire used by Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper. They define empire as, “Large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people.”⁴ Burbank and Cooper show how the USSR can be considered “an empire by communist means” due to the administrative positions set up across its territory and the hierarchical relationship to Moscow.⁵ To make my argument about how historical memory is used in the current Russian government, I will explore examples from both the USSR and Russian Empire. Historical memory in this paper refers to societal recollections about the past and, more specifically, a fondness in memory for past events and constructs.⁶

B. SIGNIFICANCE

The war in Ukraine has shocked the Western world, but it is not unprecedented. In 2008 and 2014, Russia invaded Georgia and Ukraine, respectively, illustrating a pattern of behavior built upon the desire to maintain spheres of influence and to destabilize its neighbors. The political impact of the latest Russian invasion of Ukraine reverberates throughout Europe and across the Atlantic. In the most recent *National Security Strategy*, the Biden administration named Russia as an “immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability.”⁷ U.S. national strategy is directly concerned with instability in Europe from the war in Ukraine, and decisions emanating from Moscow have altered the geopolitical order in Europe. By writing this thesis, I offer clarity into

⁴ Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 395.

⁶ Katherine Hite, “Historical Memory,” in *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, ed. Bertrand Badie, Dirk Berg-Schlosser, and Leonardo Morlino (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc., 2011), 1078, doi:10.4135/9781412994163. Hite explains that historical memory reflects the ways a collective group identify with historic events and how past narratives can be reformed to fit present events.

⁷ White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, 2022), 25.

some of the factors motivating Russian decision-making and how these decisions are justified to the Russian public and world. Gaining an understanding of the factors that shape Russian leadership can help explain how Russian policymakers arrive at certain decisions.

This thesis analyzes how historical memory influences Russian nationalist narrative and impacts the political choices of the Putin regime. My research contributes to our understanding of what is guiding the internal decision-making of the Putin regime by exploring how narrative and ideology have shaped how Putin's regime sees Russia's place in the world. This paper proposes that historical memory has had an impact on the choices and outlook of Russian leadership, acting as an impetus and legitimizer for foreign policy decisions.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have largely focused on identity and narrative when examining Russian political decision-making.⁸ Research on modern Russian identity has tended to focus on nationalism and Eurasianism, examining ties between those ideologies and Russian political leadership. Studies of historical memory are not new, and other scholars have demonstrated how it has impacted past policy choices and how Russian nationalism has been forged through a narrative of historic continuity. This thesis seeks to add to this literature by exploring historical memory's effects on present-day Russian policy towards its neighbors. It joins the debate on the effects of nationalism within Russian society, adding to this literature by proposing that historical memory has an outsized effect on Russian political choices.

Academics have demonstrated that nationalism is a construct built on narrative and identity. Ernest Gellner, one of the most influential scholars on nationalism, proposed that nations are not a naturally occurring phenomenon, as others have suggested, but have

⁸ Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia against the West and with the Rest* (New York, NY: Twelve, 2019), 25–43; Marcel Van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 110–12. Stent traces Russian identity from the eighteenth century to the present regime, showing how history shapes Putin's antagonism towards the West. Van Herpen explains how Russian politics, under Putin, reflect a chauvinistic identity built upon a history of strong statehood. This narrative prioritizes political choices that increase state power at the cost of others.

been constructed by people.⁹ To construct these nations, states used aspects of culture and myths built on a narrative of history when no nations existed. Societies constructed the idea of a nation, according to Gellner, “using as their raw material the cultural, historical, and other inheritances from the pre-nationalist world.”¹⁰ Gellner explains that nationalism is an intellectual and political construct of the stories people tell themselves. Taking this further, Benedict Anderson defines the nation as an “imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”¹¹ This definition allows one to see a nation as a construct of the mind that is physically finite and possesses a political community and sovereignty.¹² This construct of a nation lends itself to a historic narrative that can be used as a tool. Statesmen then foster this narrative and continue it through education.¹³ Consequently, both Gellner and Anderson acknowledge the role of a constructed narrative within nationalism that is maintained by the state and people within it. I see historical narrative as part of the identity building within nationalism, and this historical narrative of a nation can serve as both a tool and a source of inspiration.

Other scholars have illustrated how Soviet leaders used nostalgia as a tool to support policy or to inspire policy. Understanding the power of narrative and national identity, Soviet leaders used historic memory and nationalism to inform their policy decisions. Historian Yuri Slezkine shows how Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin cultivated an ethnic, language-based nationalism and folklorization of culture within the USSR, resulting in “ethnic particularism” entrenching itself in the nations of the USSR.¹⁴ Each nation developed its own narrative based on “Great Traditions,” some of which were completely fabricated, to give a sense of identity to a people that were part of a

⁹ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, New Perspectives on the Past (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹¹ Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (New York, NY: Verso, 2016), 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6–7.

¹³ Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 55–57; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 67.

¹⁴ Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 450, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2501300>.

larger whole.¹⁵ Stalin, during the Second World War, made the policy decision to save historic monuments and architecture to hearken back to greatness within the national narrative. Steven Maddox points out this paradox, explaining that Soviet leaders used crucial war material to protect the imagery of the society they vocally sought to destroy and had overthrown.¹⁶ During the 1960s, Soviet leaders searched for ways to overcome malaise toward socialist objectives by promoting Soviet citizens to become more patriotic. Victoria Donovan suggests that Nikita Khrushchev encouraged local historic revivals, focusing on the preservation of communities through studying the past, in order to impress on citizens “the relevance of their own contribution to the goals of socialist construction.”¹⁷ Therefore, Soviet leaders used ties to the imperial past to shape and help achieve policy aims built to advance a national narrative.

Other scholars have shown how nostalgia and nationalism impact the development of the Russian diaspora. Scholars have explained how everyday Russians have used nostalgia to account for seemingly contrasting identities. Historian Aaron J. Cohen demonstrates how Russian émigrés after the First World War used the war to “remember that a worthy Russia existed” prior to the USSR.¹⁸ The disjointedness of the new USSR and historic Russian Empire led Russian émigré communities to hold onto a nostalgic idea of the Russian Empire that no longer existed. Journalist David Remnick describes the complexity of Russian narrative today due to its dependence on blending the history of three different Russian identities: the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the modern Russian state.¹⁹ However, politicians, like Putin, blend that history by calling for a return to “historical greatness.”²⁰ The idea of looking to past events to galvanize and

¹⁵ Ibid., 447.

¹⁶ Steven Maddox, *Saving Stalin's Imperial City: Historic Preservation in Leningrad, 1930–1950* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015), 2–3, 196.

¹⁷ Victoria Donovan, “How Well Do You Know Your Krai? The Kraevedenie Revival and Patriotic Politics in Late Khrushchev-Era Russia,” *Slavic Review* 74, no. 3 (2015): 482, doi:10.5612/slavicreview.74.3.464.

¹⁸ Aaron J. Cohen, “Oh, That! Myth, Memory, and World War I in the Russian Emigration and the Soviet Union,” *Slavic Review* 62, no. 1 (2003): 83, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3090467>.

¹⁹ David Remnick, “Post-Imperial Blues Letter from Moscow,” *The New Yorker*, October 13, 2003, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/10/13/post-imperial-blues>.

²⁰ Ibid., 3.

inspire society within Russia are not new and exhibits an affinity for the nostalgic past. Russia's leadership relies on the historical memory of the greatness of two past empires, even if it is often a manufactured narrative.

Leaders today use nationalist rhetoric just as they have in the past; however, how and why it is being used is not immediately evident. Scholars show that Russia's political landscape is fraught with ideological battles. Charles Clover and Marlene Laruelle argue that competing ideologies give a sense of legitimacy to the Russian elite. Clover asserts that Eurasianism has become a "motivating ideology" for Russian elites and has shown itself to be present in the minds of Russian decision-makers.²¹ He is simultaneously dismissive of nostalgia, while also admitting it swayed the founders of Eurasianism.²² Laruelle claims that the Russian government uses nostalgia to focus on the historic continuity between the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the modern Russian state. She specifically deals with Soviet nostalgia and argues its role is in securing legitimacy for the Russian government.²³ Historical memory, for her, is shown in the concept of *Novorossiia*—an ambiguous territorial term spanning the northern Black Sea and can be translated to "New Russia"—and the revival of the Orthodox Church within nationalist circles.²⁴

Others have explained that Russian national identity is particularly fractured, opening an opportunity for political elites to craft a convincing narrative formed around historic identity. Anatol Lieven and Heidi Bradner claim that Russian national identity is so weak, it leaves Russian society to be exploited through narrative.²⁵ Russian scholar Vera Michlin-Shapir argues that an identity crisis occurred in post-Soviet Russia and this

²¹ Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow*, xii.

²² *Ibid.*, 17, 42.

²³ Marlene Laruelle, "Is Nationalism a Force for Change in Russia?," In "Russia Beyond Putin." Special issue, *Daedalus*, 146, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 95, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00437.

²⁴ Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*, 195–96.

²⁵ Anatol Lieven and Heidi Bradner, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), ix.

identity void resulted in “historical dislocation” that Putin has sought to exploit.²⁶ Professor Anne Clunan demonstrates that “historical memory” defines a national self-image and if this self-image “succeeds in dominating public discourse over time, it becomes institutionalized.”²⁷ She describes how national identity can alter how states see their goals and role within the larger geo-political environment. The institutionalization of a national self-image has occurred in Russia, and the Kremlin promotes the idea that Russia has a unique identity based on a historical trajectory that appears inevitable.

Scholars have revealed that narrative and identity play a role in modern Russian politics, due to the fracturing of identity in the post-Soviet period. Nationalism is a force within this system. This work seeks to build upon the existing scholarship by delving deeper into the impact of historical memory, especially around times of war in recent history.

Scholars and journalists have shown that the Russian government uses media as part of a larger information campaign designed to spread a particular Russian narrative. News from Russian sources broadcasted for international audiences seeks to mislead and divide.²⁸ By fragmenting and deceiving viewers and readers, the Kremlin seeks to displace Western influence and plant its own. To do so, it relies on a mix of social media and online news sources. Neil MacFarquhar, a New York Times journalist, explains that the Russians use information as a weapon and online sources like RT and Sputnik are included in this arsenal.²⁹ Philip Seib takes this further, describing Russia as “the most accomplished information warrior... at the heart of information war today,” and also includes online news sources like Sputnik, RT, and TASS as part of the Russian

²⁶ Vera Michlin-Shapir, *Fluid Russia: Between the Global and the National in the Post-Soviet Era*, NIU Series in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 6.

²⁷ Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 29.

²⁸ Nina Jankowicz, *How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict* (London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2020), xvii.

²⁹ Neil MacFarquhar, “A Powerful Russian Weapon: The Spread of False Stories,” *The New York Times*, August 28, 2016, 4–5, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/29/world/europe/russia-sweden-disinformation.html>.

information machine designed to destabilize and spread false narratives.³⁰ Nina Jankowicz agrees with Seib, stating that Russia “divides and deceives populations around the world” with the goal of destroying the West and relying on information in the civilian sphere to do so.³¹ Consequently, if the goal of Russia is to use its information apparatus, including RT, TASS, and Sputnik, to spread its own narrative, then this narrative can be studied and observed to better understand the Kremlin’s media goals during the current war in Ukraine.

Warfare and how it is portrayed can sway policymakers and civilians, so exploring the narrative the Russian media promotes can enhance our understanding of potential Russian political goals. Susan Carruthers argues that warfare requires civilian involvement and planning; consequently, “Civilians’ psychological mobilization is as necessary a precursor to war-waging as logistical preparations. Media organizations play a crucial role in this process as conduits through which the case for taking up arms is advanced.”³² Carruthers demonstrates that the media has an active role in building support for conflict. A specific interpretation of events pushed by the media can shape national security policy and its popularity. It can also build justification for a war.³³ While using such messaging strategies to justify war or push a strategy is not novel, it does merit understanding to see how countries use narrative in war.³⁴ The Kremlin is advancing its own interpretation to the forefront against the Western narrative surrounding Ukraine, and it is doing so through its official Kremlin press releases and its international sources of media. Additionally, a successful narrative is not necessarily reliant on reality or truth.³⁵ Russia is using its own cultivated messages to achieve

³⁰ Philip M. Seib, *Information at War: Journalism, Disinformation, and Modern Warfare* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2021), 115, 134, 137.

³¹ Jankowicz, *How to Lose the Information War*, xvii, xix.

³² Susan L. Carruthers, *The Media at War*, 2nd ed (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 16.

³³ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁴ Seib, *Information at War*, 111.

³⁵ Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations 138 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 279.

political goals of the Kremlin.³⁶ Consequently, the Russian government-approved news organizations and Kremlin press releases responsible for broadcasting to the world do so with a narrative-building focus to increase support for Russia while not necessarily relying on truth.

Through this literature review, I have demonstrated that nationalism, as defined by Gellner and Anderson, is constructed and yet remains a powerful force today. A nationalist narrative revolves around the use of history and memory, even if it is misrepresented. This historic narrative can build support for nationalist political goals and can impact a nation's domestic policy. In Russia, this has been done through imperial preservation of "greatness." The government and media of Russia have displayed the willingness to use historical events to build support for their own government efforts.

D. HYPOTHESES

Historical memory offers lessons for Russian leaders, making choices dependent on positive and negative aspects of historic narrative. This nostalgia for the past can motivate leaders to make decisions to restore a perceived glorious past or to avoid a perceived disastrous period in the past. Negative examples from the past can also reinforce aspects of governance and policy. In this sense, history can shape options available to leaders based on a perceived narrative of past events. For Russian leaders, the invasion of Ukraine may reflect a return to past glory. It incorporates a narrative of Russian-Ukrainian unity. If narratives surrounding the Russian Empire and USSR offer positive historic lessons for Ukrainian-Russian unity, then it would offer decision-makers incentive to pursue unification. Conversely, if narrative surrounding times when Russia and Ukraine were not unified is largely viewed as negative, then it can also spur action towards unification. Historical memory can be thought of as a lens through which Russian leaders and the Russian people view Russia and its role in the world, and this lens is concentrated on the past.

³⁶ Holger Mölder et al., eds., *The Russian Federation in Global Knowledge Warfare: Influence Operations in Europe and Its Neighbourhood*, Contributions to International Relations (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021), 368.

Leaders use historical memory to inspire nationalist movements, and it is conversely a force offering inspiration for action in leaders. For the case of Russia, nostalgia can both be a tool for leadership and source of motivation. Leadership can use nostalgia to justify and rally support for policy choices, and society can use nostalgia to put pressure on leadership. While the state may prop up or create institutions to support its narrative, what happens as those institutions begin to reinforce their own narratives? The Kremlin's own narrative and news organizations within Russia offer case studies to observe how aspects of society pressure leadership to make certain decisions based on their own glorification of the past and interpretation of lessons from the past.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis research design will focus on the time period since Vladimir Putin came to power to cite contemporary examples of when historical memory has been present in Russian security decision-making. It will rely on three case studies: the Russian invasion of Ukraine in both 2014 and 2022 and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. To study how historical memory has been present during each war, I focus on the timeframe of each case study to the month prior, month of, and month after the Russian decision to invade its neighboring country. By doing so, I offer a glimpse into the narrative of the Russian state, as conveyed by Putin and Russian government media, during the time of invasion. The sources of media examined include RT, TASS, Sputnik, and official Kremlin communications. It relies on the Kremlin English language translations for Putin's speeches, meetings, and communications to Russia and international audiences.

F. SCOPE OF THE ARGUMENT

The sources of media for study include RT, TASS, Sputnik, and official Kremlin communications. All sources studied are in English. This paper is using the English language version of Russian online news sources to study how the Russian media broadcast its narrative to the English-speaking world. Additionally, this study does not fact-check Russian media for accuracy, but the key themes and messages across sources are examined to see how the rhetoric portrays Russian actions. These case studies do not

seek to pass moral judgment on the Russian coverage of the war but merely highlight the themes and messages examined within the media and official Kremlin discourse as justification for war.

G. OVERVIEW AND OUTLINE

Following this introduction, Chapter II provides an overview of the history of Russia, showing how the Russian historical narrative has evolved over time. It traces Russian history through the Kyivan Rus' period, through the Russian Empire and Soviet Union to today. Chapter III examines how historical memory impacts aspects of Russian society. It specifically looks at official Kremlin transcripts and speeches from Putin and Russian international news sources and analyzes how these aspects of society are affected by or use historical memory. This thesis ends with a concluding chapter to succinctly describe the findings of the research.

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II. HISTORY OF RUSSIA: THE NARRATIVE

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter is designed to broadly trace the narrative of Russian history to better understand how historical memory impacts Russia today. Acknowledging that Russian history is complex and challenging to fully explain, this chapter seeks to tell the story of how Russia evolved over the centuries and how the Russian rulers and intelligentsia progressed in their own thinking of what constituted Russia. It points out where events within history have been used to justify the legitimacy of the Russian state and support some form of a shared identity for Russians. By the end of this chapter, one should gain knowledge of the broad overview of Russian history, the narratives of Russia, and how these narratives continue to influence politics.

The construction of nationalism as a political force relies on people sharing some type of national identity. This national identity may involve several shared factors, like language, culture, ethnicity, and history. Historically, these factors have been shaped by governments and intelligentsia, authoring a narrative of shared history or background. The scholarly discipline of history is linked to intelligentsia in Europe forming national identities, making the origins of modern states tough to define.³⁷ Despite a national identity being an artificial construction, typically with the advent of a nation being unclear, it still generates loyalty among population.³⁸ Therefore, to understand how historical memory is a factor within Russian politics today, it is necessary to understand Russia's history.

By knowing this history, statements and historical claims made by Putin can then be viewed in a more objective lens, observing how he references historical events, giving Russians a shared sense of identity. When Russia invaded Ukraine, Putin gave a speech to justify the action, stating that Ukraine was “an inalienable part of our own history,

³⁷ Serhii Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*, 1st paperback ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

³⁸ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 14.

culture, and spiritual space.”³⁹ This statement has repercussions for both Russia and Ukraine, and to understand why Putin makes this claim requires an understanding of history. This chapter will explore the historical narrative of Russia to understand how Russians see themselves as the successor to many different polities of the past. The modern Russian state, like all states, is built on foundational myths to trace a fabricated through-line to ancient history, giving the nation an identity and shared historical memory.

B. FROM KYIVAN RUS’ TO THE EMERGENCE OF MUSCOVY

As historian Serhii Plokhy illustrates, scholars in the countries of Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia all trace their origins as modern nations to the Kyivan Rus’.⁴⁰ However, the actual origins of the Rus’ are less clear, with the areas of the Rus’ being inhabited by several different ethnicities, including Baltic, Finno-Ugric, Turkic, and various Slavic peoples. Surviving historical records indicate that different groups of people came together in 862 and invited a Viking prince by the name of Rurik to rule over them. Whether this actually occurred or not is up for historical debate, but the idea that there were some types of identifiable people in the land from the Baltics to the Black Sea is significant.⁴¹ These descendants of Rurik, the Rus, settled and integrated into the land and formed trade networks. No real central power existed in the Rus’ land, and fighting occurred for crops, trade routes, wealth, and people. However, Kyiv did emerge as a central trading post and center of wealth, and, by 988, the Grand Prince Vladimir of Kyiv became an Orthodox Christian, crystallizing a hierarchical relationship within the lands under his control and bringing institutions and the laws of Orthodoxy to the area.⁴² Consequently, subsequent efforts were made to spread Christianity; artwork and literacy

³⁹ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

⁴⁰ Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations*, 1–2.

⁴¹ Valerie A. Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny, *Russia’s Empires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 18–19.

⁴² Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, Revised edition (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2021), 33–35. Plokhy argues that the conversion of Vladimir was driven by security and power and not necessarily for strictly religious reasons.

became pieces of survivable history that have cemented an idea of a Kyivan Golden Age as part of a foundational myth for Russia.⁴³

The Kyivan era of Slavic history ended around the twelfth century as Rus' cities fought each other for influence while outside European powers and the Mongols invaded the area. By 1240, the entity known as Kyivan Rus' had essentially been destroyed or incorporated into other polities. At this point, historiography splits with differing trajectories for the successor states of Ukraine and Russia. Differing centers of power operated under Mongol suzerainty and paid tribute to khans. While the Russian interpretation relies on the power center around Vladimir-Suzdal, the Ukrainian narrative follows the development of a Ukrainian identity forming in Galicia-Volhynia. Therefore, competing powers in Eastern Europe broke up the Rus' lands. These trajectories form two differing branches for a national myth as inheritor of the Rus' identity.⁴⁴ The Mongol invasion and fracturing of Rus' lands represents a key moment in history that makes historical claims to the land area of the Kyivan Rus' contentious.

While foreign conquerors divided Rus' lands, the principality of Muscovy emerged from the northeastern Rus' lands as a significant power. While Muscovy inherited some traditions from the Rus, like Orthodoxy, it inherited the structure of empire from the Mongols, giving the Muscovy leaders a blueprint of how to enrich the imperial center while also tolerating diversity of people, if loyal.⁴⁵ Additionally, the rulers of the lands of historically northeastern Rus' lands made no connection to a continuation of the Kyivan Rus. However, this narrative did develop in 15th century Moscow as a legitimation theory for continuation of rule from the pre- and post- Mongol period.⁴⁶ Therefore, the fragmentation of Rus' lands gave way to some important historical myths. The repeated invasions from Catholic Crusaders and pagan Mongols gave a later sense of uniqueness for the state that became Russia, as differences became highlighted between Moscow and those powers surrounding it. Internally, Rus'

⁴³ Kivelson and Suny, *Russia's Empires*, 23.

⁴⁴ Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations*, 50–52.

⁴⁵ Kivelson and Suny, *Russia's Empires*, 41.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 35–36.

principalities gained a sense of “otherness” from the rest of Europe, being Orthodox, under Mongol rule, and this led to greater ties to Byzantium and the eventual title of tsar.⁴⁷

C. FOUNDATIONS OF RUSSIA: FROM RURIKID TO ROMANOV

The emergence of something resembling a distinctly Russian state occurred in the 1500s under Ivan III and Vasily III, who established key claims, myths, and traditions for later rulers. It was during the reign of Ivan III that Muscovy expanded from Moscow to the Urals in the northeast and Novgorod to the west. It was also during this time period that the myths of Moscow’s status as a successor to Kyiv gained prominence and that Ivan III had a right to the “gathering of the Russian lands.”⁴⁸ To justify Moscow’s expansion to the west, Moscow-based intelligentsia manufactured a line of succession from ancient Kyiv to Moscow, from Rurik to St. Volodymyr to Ivan, giving Muscovite princes the dynastic legitimacy to claim to be the rulers of all historic Rus’ lands.⁴⁹ Plokhy points out that this myth “not only established a link between Moscow and Kyiv but also did so at Kyiv’s expense, excluding the Kyivan princes from the official genealogy of the ruling house of Rus.”⁵⁰ Consequently, by the time something resembling a Russian state existed, it had manufactured a claim to territorial gains outside the lands of Muscovy that was built upon a narrative of succession.

Key foundational narratives developed during the reigns of Ivan III and Ivan IV, giving the Russian Empire a narrative of succession from Kyiv to Muscovy and from the Roman Empire to the Russian Empire. While the succession narrative formed the basis to further territorial claims, the Russian tsars also used Orthodoxy and empire as a tool for legitimacy. Ivan III married Sophia Palaiologina, a Byzantine princess of the Palaiologos

⁴⁷ Christian Raffensperger, *Reimagining Europe: Kievan Rus’ in the Medieval World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), 186.

⁴⁸ Kivelson and Suny, *Russia’s Empires*, 62. While “gathering of the Russian lands” makes this process sound inevitable. Kivelson and Suny point out that it was done through a brutal process of conquest, collective punishment, and deportation.

⁴⁹ Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 37.

⁵⁰ Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations*, 137–38.

family, prompting a legitimacy claim to be the inheritor of the Roman Empire and defender of the Orthodoxy faith. With this marriage, a theoretical line was drawn from Rome to Byzantium to Moscow.⁵¹ Ivan IV became the first of the Russian rulers to use the title tsar, from the Latin word *caesar*, in 1547, illustrating the mythical succession and legitimacy of the Roman Empire to the Russian Empire.⁵² Therefore, by the sixteenth century, something resembling the Russian Empire, centered upon Moscow, truly came into being and key foundational narratives had been established as tools of legitimacy.

The reign of the Rurik dynasty came to an end after the death of Ivan IV's heir, Fyodor I, who had no heir to inherit the throne. Thus began the Time of Troubles, in which a succession crisis coupled with repeated invasions threatened the survival of the Russian Empire for about fifteen years. It was ended when a new dynasty emerged—the Romanov dynasty—with Michael I proclaimed tsar in 1613. The Romanovs ruled Russia for the next three centuries and furthered the national development of the Russian Empire, leading the empire through revolutionary developments in Western Europe that eventually grew to displace the ruling family.

D. CONSOLIDATION OF EMPIRE AND BEGINNINGS OF IDENTITY

The Romanov dynasty expanded the Russian Empire, resetting the power dynamics of Europe, and growing the territory of Russia to its greatest extent. By 1894 the empire stretched from the Pacific Ocean in the East and to the Baltics, Poland, and most of Ukraine in the West, and the Caucasus and Turkmenistan in the South. Over the course of this expansion, there was also a sense of growing identity among Russian elites, and what it meant to be Russian. Often, this was displayed against an idea of what Europe represented. For Peter the Great, the West represented something to be emulated and the key to a successful state.⁵³ However, through the reign of Catherine, a growing sense of a

⁵¹ Serhii Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation, from 1470 to the Present* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017), 23–24.

⁵² Paul Bushkovitch, *A Concise History of Russia*, Cambridge Concise Histories (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 48.

⁵³ Kivelson and Suny, *Russia's Empires*, 97.

unique Russian identity was often at odds with the idea of a Westernized Russia. Hostility towards Poland, Orthodox-focused security issues, and the geopolitical view of Russia as a besieged fortress became tied to Russian identity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁵⁴ Therefore, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represent a time of paradoxes for the Russian Empire and its rulers. Russian leaders sought to imitate the West, but it also represented a threat—something confirmed during the liberalizing French Revolution and growing nationalist movements of Europe.

Peter the Great's rule changed the nature of the Russian Empire, bringing it firmly onto the European stage. His war with Sweden expanded Russia into the Baltics, creating the port of St. Petersburg, and regaining land lost during the Time of Troubles. During the war, he even published a justification for the war against Sweden, signaling to the established empires of Europe that Russia had arrived as a diplomatic player onto the European scene, as this was largely a Western European custom prior to Peter.⁵⁵ With victory over Sweden at the Battle of Poltava, Peter ended Sweden's geo-political future as a large European power and secured the Baltics for the Russian Empire.⁵⁶

Peter's domestic programs and importation of Western reform gave credence to the trope that Russia needed a strong ruler forcing change upon an unruly and backward populace.⁵⁷ He imported the idea of a more secular culture into Russia by subordinating the Orthodox Church to the Russian state. As historian Paul Bushkovitch explains, "The consequence of his policies was to end the universal domination of religion in Russian culture, and to reduce it to the place it held in the mental life of early modern Europe after the Renaissance... thus he accomplished in thirty-six years a change in Russian culture that took centuries in Western Europe."⁵⁸ The changes Peter made encouraged reform within Russia, at the expense of more conservative elements of the Russian elite.

⁵⁴ Alexander M. Martin, "The Invention of 'Russianness' in the Late 18th–Early 19th Century," *Ab Imperio* 3 (2003): 131–32, <https://doi.org/10.1353/imp.2003.0133>.

⁵⁵ Kivelson and Suny, *Russia's Empires*, 94.

⁵⁶ Bushkovitch, *A Concise History of Russia*, 86.

⁵⁷ Martin, "The Invention of 'Russianness' in the Late 18th–Early 19th Century," 127.

⁵⁸ Bushkovitch, *A Concise History of Russia*, 96.

He altered the hierarchical relationship between the tsar and the people to one focused on an obligation to the service of the state.⁵⁹ Peter’s vision for Russia gave the state a mission—one focused on an inexorable march forward into a more glorious future, in line with European states of the time. With the increasing capacity of the Russian state under Peter, there arose an educated class that had a sense of national identity of Russia, shaped by Russian history and Western inspiration.⁶⁰

Later in the 18th century, Russian security interests and identity began to develop a more enduring phase, built from Peter’s earlier efforts of conquest. It had an enduring rivalry with Sweden, Poland, France, and Turkey, while typically allying itself with Austria.⁶¹ Furthering a Russian identity, Catherine the Great played on several tropes of Russia to initiate her own “Greek Project,” linking together religious and strategic visions in Russian culture.⁶² She pushed to create a Greek state, resembling something of the old Byzantine Empire, to liberate the historic Orthodox capital of Constantinople from the Ottomans while also securing the Black Sea for Russian interests. Doing so furthered the idea of Russia being the protector of Orthodoxy while also making it a major political player in the Balkans, Black Sea, and Anatolia.⁶³ Therefore, through Catherine’s campaigns, Russian identity was attached to security issues in the Balkans and Eastern Europe. By the end of Catherine’s reign, nationalism formally entered the geopolitical calculations of Europe’s monarchies as the ideas of the French Revolution spread throughout Europe threatening the monarchical establishment. Consequently, Russian identity and narrative faced a competing challenger for legitimacy in the nineteenth century.

⁵⁹ Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy from Peter the Great to the Abdication of Nicholas II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 61, 64; quoted in Kivelson and Suny, *Russia’s Empires*, 95.

⁶⁰ Martin, “The Invention of ‘Russianness’ in the Late 18th–Early 19th Century,” 122.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

E. MYTHS OF RUSSIA AT THE END OF EMPIRE

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Enlightenment originated in Western Europe, and the continent witnessed a transformation in the conception of sovereignty. The culmination of Enlightenment ideals was the French Revolution, resulting in a people seeing themselves as both “national and sovereign,” and exporting these ideas across Europe.⁶⁴ This idea challenged the conservative monarchies of the time and influenced scholars to rethink the relationship between rulers and subjects. As the ideas spread across the continent, Russian rulers and scholars also had to grapple with their own conception of what Russia represented, and it resulted in self-reflection and debate within the Russian Empire among the intelligentsia. As historian Ivan T. Berend explains, “The absolute state paved the road toward a unified nation-state.”⁶⁵ Russian rulers, in cooperation with scholars, developed their own narrative of history and used the revolutionary ideas of Western Europe to justify their own legitimacy and historical trajectory.

By the mid-1700s, Ukrainian scholars had shaped perceptions of a common historical narrative of both Moscow and Kyiv. Wars against Poland and the Ottoman Empire assisted in the cementing of the narrative, emanating from Kyivan scholarship that built the idea of a Russian “historical narrative and contributed to the formation of the ‘all-Russian’ imperial language.”⁶⁶ During partitions of Poland among Russia, Austria, and Prussia, Catherine gave thought on how to justify the partitioned lands. During the first partition, in 1772, Catherine focused on partitioning the land based on strategic considerations and delineating what was required for defense of the Russian Empire. However, during the second and third, in 1793 and 1795, there arose a different consideration: ethnic boundaries. Rather than only seeing the partition through religious grounds, which was highlighted as a necessity for the unity of Orthodoxy, she focused on reuniting lost “kinsmen” and what she saw as ethnic brothers through her study of Rus’

⁶⁴ Michael Rowe, “The French Revolution, Napoleon, and Nationalism in Europe,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Nationalism*, First edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 127.

⁶⁵ Ivan T. Berend, *History Derailed: Central and Eastern Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 7.

⁶⁶ Ploky, *Lost Kingdom*, 51.

history.⁶⁷ Therefore, as the beginnings of national identity spread throughout Europe, it also became part of the thinking of the Russian monarchy and elite and was also used to justify territorial expansion.

Russian aristocracy heightened the search for a national identity during the Napoleonic Wars and subsequent revolts of Poland. As a reaction to the liberalizing ideas from the French Revolution and Polish quest for autonomy, the Russian Tsar Nicholas I centralized education and appointed Count Sergei Uvarov as the minister of education. Uvarov was instrumental in developing an identity for the empire, basing it on “Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality.”⁶⁸ Orthodoxy referred to the Orthodox religion and Church and its historical role in Russia. Autocracy was the “affirmation and maintenance of the absolute power of the sovereign, which was considered the indispensable foundation of the Russian state.”⁶⁹ Lastly, nationality in Russia was not framed in ethnic terms, but it was the “nature of the Russian people, which, so the official doctrine asserted, made the people a mighty and dedicated supporter of its dynasty and government.”⁷⁰ Uvarov’s goal, with Tsar Nicholas’ backing, was to save Russia from what he viewed as the societal collapse of the West after the French Revolution. In this sense, Uvarov managed to fuse some of the nation-building influences of Western thought with a Russian conservative spin. His three pillars of Russian identity were built on perceived historical and cultural traditions of Russia.⁷¹

The conservatism that gave Russians a sense of self, especially under the monarchy of Nicholas I, came under threat repeatedly after 1815. As Valerie Kivelson and Ronald Suny explain, “Conservatism in the first quarter of the century was more an inclination to reject the materialism and rationalism of the French Revolution, a preference for order, fidelity to traditional and tried practices, and gradual organic growth

⁶⁷ Ibid., 63–65.

⁶⁸ Bushkovitch, *A Concise History of Russia*, 160.

⁶⁹ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 5th ed (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 324.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom*, 81–83.

rather than precipitate reform.”⁷² While the Russian army’s triumph in the Napoleonic Wars represented a high point for the Russian military and identification with the supremacy of Russian conservatism, the defeat in the Crimean War, around forty years later, confirmed that Russian society was backward when compared to Western Europe. From 1815–1856, Russia stayed a bastion of conservative thought, culminating in the Holy Alliance among Russia, Prussia, and Austria to uphold the conservative traditions as the revolutionary thoughts of France spread throughout the continent.⁷³ Russian officers that defeated France in the Napoleonic Wars had exposure to Enlightenment ideas, and they personified the liberal elements within Russian elite society, climaxing in the Decembrist Revolt of 1830. However, upon assuming the throne, Nicholas I put a violent end to the revolt, furthering the adherence to the three pillars of autocracy, Orthodoxy, and nationality, that had become central to Russian identity.⁷⁴ Russia even sent troops to help quell rebellion in Austria in the wake of the liberal revolutions sweeping Europe in 1848. It was the defeat in Crimea in 1856 that spurred Russia to seek reform in the face of technological advancement in Western Europe.

While the victory of Russia during the Napoleonic Wars confirmed for Russia the conservative nature of the monarchy, the defeat in the Crimean War represented the need to modernize and undergo reform. The reigns of Alexander II and Alexander III represented this struggle to modernize Russia and adapt to the nationalist influence of the intelligentsia, while also staying faithful to conservative principles of empire. From the mid-nineteenth century to the twentieth, Russia expanded while also struggling to maintain a grip on the ideological guidance spreading amongst its people. Collective identities like class and nation became rallying points and rearranged loyalties among the Russian population. Within Ukraine, the Russian government stifled a national movement, which argued that Ukrainians were a Russian people whose language had been corrupted by Polish pressure.⁷⁵ Separatist, nationalist movements within the

⁷² Kivelson and Suny, *Russia’s Empires*, 154.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

western territories of Finland, Poland, and Ukraine, were seen as threatening to the survival of the Russian Empire itself. Therefore, the Russian government mandated instruction within schools and government in Russian, attempting to Russify the population and eliminate separatist tendencies. However, the crackdown on national autonomy, especially use of native language, arguably accelerated the trend and consolidation of identity for people as something other than Russian in peripheral areas of the empire.⁷⁶ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Russian intellectuals, attempting to make sense of the multi-ethnic empire of Russia, leaned towards class distinction as a political force for change. Defeat in the Russo-Japanese War precipitated the first Revolution of 1905 while impending defeat in the First World War advanced the Russian Revolution and rise of the Bolsheviks.

F. REVOLUTION, THE SOVIET PERIOD AND NATION BUILDING

The beginning of the First World War represented tremendous opportunity for Russian nationalists to articulate a shared identity against foreign invasion; however, it ended in revolution, the overthrow of the monarchy, and the Bolsheviks ascending to power. At the outbreak of the war, the country rallied around Tsar Nicholas, and the historic mission of gathering Rus' lands became a uniting objective for the population. By Easter of 1915, the Russian Army had entered Galicia and captured the historically Rus' lands within Austria. It was, according to Plokhy, a "symbolic high point in the long campaign of Russian nationalists to gather the lands of the former Kyivan Rus', construct a big Russian nation, including Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, and bring together monarchy, religion, and nation in the service of the state...the Russian Empire had finally succeeded in making its long transition to a Russian nation-state."⁷⁷ To Russian nationalists, the nation-state including all strands of the descendants of Rus' had finally been made whole. However, these new borders did not last long. Germany and Austria counter-attacked, rolling back Russian gains in the Eastern Front. By 1917 Russia erupted

⁷⁶ Ibid., 207–8.

⁷⁷ Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom*, 185.

into revolution; the tsar abdicated, and questions of national boundaries and autonomy were central to the Russian government and territories of the former empire.

While the Soviet leadership failed to achieve a worldwide communist victory, they did succeed in developing national identities within the USSR. Over the course of the history of the Soviet Union, its leaders developed narratives, myths, and programs designed to increase the national identity of constituent republics and the USSR as a whole. The early leadership of Lenin and Stalin was essential in laying the political groundwork for policies that affected the USSR until its eventual breakup. These key narratives relied on re-writing history to encourage loyalty to nations and the Soviet state, and policies oscillated between highlighting constituent republic identity and more Russo-centric identity of the union as a whole. When the ideological underpinnings of socialism failed, all that was left were the national identities of the constituent republics, and the Soviet Union fractured along these lines.⁷⁸ But, how were these identities formed? The national myths developed during the 20s, 30s, and the Second World War and its immediate aftermath.

While professing to be leaders of a socialist revolution, the early leaders of the Soviet Union also did much to develop nationalism within their territory. The leadership of the Soviet Union used two parallel programs of nation-building designed to increase loyalty to the state. On one hand, the center encouraged national awareness among the constituent republics, encouraging the use of local language, reviving historical myths, and promoting affirmative action.⁷⁹ On the other hand, Lenin and Stalin attempted to construct a Russo-centric Soviet identity to increase loyalty to the USSR as a state.⁸⁰ The Bolshevik government initially expected nationalism to gradually dissipate over time as class loyalty became pre-eminent for people. Thinking in this way, they carried out programs designed to increase national awareness of the peoples within the republics of the Soviet Union. Lenin and Stalin believed that nationalism was a natural phase of

⁷⁸ Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 160; Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union*, Unabridged (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015), 393.

⁷⁹ Kivelson and Suny, *Russia's Empires*, 155.

⁸⁰ Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom*, 254–55.

development for humanity, and the development of nationalism could be hastened to reach the eventual development of communism, which was further down the line of humanity's evolution.⁸¹ Therefore, the early policies of nation-building within the Soviet Union had a lasting impact on narratives within the Soviet Union, as these narratives developed over time and became anchors for identity.

The biggest shift of Russian national development within the Soviet Union occurred before and during the Second World War, marking it as the most significant event in the history of the Soviet Union and still important in Russia today. The Lenin and early Stalin government projected a message of Russia as nation of imperial, chauvinistic tendencies that were anathema to the development of communism. However, this narrative shifted during the early 1930s under Stalin, projecting a message of Russian nationalism that needed to be celebrated.⁸² Why the shift occurred was largely due to pragmatic reasons. Tensions between Russia and its neighbors were on the rise. Despite trying to maintain good relations with Nazi Germany, the anti-Comintern Pact heralded trouble to come. During this time period, Hitler had successfully mobilized the German nation, and increased the power of the German state, mobilizing the country for war. Stalin, seeing the success of Hitler, needed an identity for the citizens of the USSR to mobilize around.⁸³ The official Soviet ideology that emerged was Russo-centric and relied upon an inheritance of myths and great power traditions of the Russian Empire.⁸⁴ The Soviet government used Russian nationalism as part of its state-building effort to increase loyalty and patriotic fervor in the years leading to the Second World War. Stalin re-introduced Russian imperial figures to the Soviet Union, casting them in a light that encouraged the peoples of the Soviet Union to see themselves as both revolutionary and inheritors of a Russian imperial greatness.⁸⁵ Consequently, Russian nationalism bridged

⁸¹ Kivelson and Suny, *Russia's Empires*, 281.

⁸² Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom*, 247.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 250–51.

⁸⁴ D. L. Brandenberger and A. M. Dubrovsky, “‘The People Need a Tsar’: The Emergence of National Bolshevism as Stalinist Ideology, 1931–1941,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 50, no. 5 (July 1998): 873, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/153897>.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 880, 883.

the gap between Russian imperial identity and Soviet identity. The Russian nation became tied to both polities, inheriting the legacy of imperial Russia and the Soviet Union.

The Second World War offered the Soviet Union a moment to solidify a new myth for the foundation of the state that appealed to both a larger Soviet identity and local national identities. Prior to the war, Stalin oscillated between policies favoring local nations and those favoring a Russo-centric identity. However, the Second World War represented a historical turning point for the Soviet Union, as its entire existence was threatened by the outbreak of the war and subsequent Nazi invasion. With victory in the Second World War, the narrative of the communist march to paradise for people, pulling and pushing all of humanity, had some justification within the historical event of the Second World War.⁸⁶ The all-encompassing nature of the war touched all facets of society, leading to a collective identity with the wartime experience. The war became part of a “Bolshevik master narrative” and “its new legitimizing myth.”⁸⁷ By beating the fascist forces of Germany, the Soviet Union looked upon itself as a historically righteous force marching in the direction of paradise. The various nationalities of the Soviet Union found some type of resonance within the larger USSR, while also being able to advance their own narrative of wartime participation. To motivate the population for war, Stalin largely turned to nationalist narratives, including those of the Russian imperial past. Peter the Great and Ivan the Terrible became celebrated, with movies depicting Russian imperial figures as historical defenders of the fatherland.⁸⁸ Military awards were named after old Russian generals and the Ukrainian Bohdan Khmelnytsky, as a way to appease Ukrainian nationalism during the war.⁸⁹ After the war, what remained was a strange mix

⁸⁶ Amir Weiner, “The Making of a Dominant Myth: The Second World War and the Construction of Political Identities within the Soviet Polity,” *The Russian Review* 55, no. 4 (October 1996): 639, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/131868>.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 658.

⁸⁸ Bushkovitch, *A Concise History of Russia*, 421.

⁸⁹ Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom*, 272–73.

of Russian-focused Soviet nationalism mixed with promotion of other Soviet nationalities.⁹⁰

The tension between a Russo-centric Soviet identity and the various nationalities within the Soviet Union continued until its collapse. Leaders of the Soviet Union, post-Stalin, continued policies to promote national identities within the Soviet Union while also enforcing loyalty to the center, with the expectation being that the various nationalities within the Soviet Union preferred to remain within the union due to the material and social benefits.⁹¹ As the USSR struggled to keep the promises of a communist paradise, peoples of separate nationalities started to view the socialist system as unworkable. Rather than overtake the West, the USSR fell economically behind, not keeping pace with lifestyles seen in the capitalist West in the 1980s. Therefore, the communist ideology of the Soviet Union lost some of its legitimation within the eyes of its own citizens.⁹² As the communist ideology lost legitimacy, so did the idea of the Soviet Union with all its various nations, leading to territorial splits largely along ethnic, linguistic boundaries.⁹³ With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia had to look inward for its own narrative and identity.

G. RESURGENT RUSSIA

On Christmas day in 1991, the sickle and hammer flag of the Soviet Union was lowered as the Russian tricolor flag was hoisted in place over the Kremlin. For almost sixty-nine years the Soviet Union led the charge in the communist revolution that never developed into a truly global proletarian victory. Russia emerged from the fallen communist empire and promised its people a transition to democracy and affluence, as seen in the West since Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost in the late 1980s. However, the transition never occurred. By the time Vladimir Putin inherited the Russian presidency in late 1999, and won his first election in 2000, the Russian government had

⁹⁰ Bushkovitch, *A Concise History of Russia*, 423.

⁹¹ Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 124.

⁹² Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000*, Updated ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.

⁹³ Plokhy, *The Last Empire*, 393.

inherited both a state and nation. However, it still had unanswered questions about its own identity and what type of state it would become.

As Yeltsin assumed the presidency of the Russian Federation, he promised a transition to democracy and affluence like that of the West; however, the transition failed miserably, prompting a crisis. To transform the economy, Yeltsin relied on economists who advocated for a quick transition, called shock therapy, in the hope that the transition to a market economy could transform the country before any type of counter-revolution took place. The hopes were high for economic reform to lead Russia into an economic windfall. As Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen points out, “Russia rushed into a new capitalist future, which most of the population expected to bring prosperity and variety.”⁹⁴ The economic hopes of ordinary Russians were for a rapid transition to “American-style affluence, combined with European-style social welfare.”⁹⁵ However, the economic shock therapy that Yeltsin advocated for was never quite implemented completely, and the Russian economy fell into a deep depression. The Soviet economy entered free fall, dropping seventeen percent in 1991, compared to only nine percent in 1929–1930, the worst year of the U.S. depression, while inflation rose to 250 percent per month.⁹⁶ The drop in wages and economic fortunes of the Russians paralleled that of their life expectancy and health. While the economy was ravaged by the shock therapy and dubious transition to a market economy, people were dying at unheard of rates and life expectancy was falling, leading to a death rate unseen since the Second World War.⁹⁷ To ordinary Russians, the transition to a Western style democracy had failed, and the previous era of communist ideology was illegitimate. Consequently, ordinary Russians looked to some type of leadership that projected stability and economic good fortune.

The opportunity for Putin to prove his ability to bring stability and prosperity to the Russian people was instant. Upon being appointed the successor to Boris Yeltsin,

⁹⁴ Masha Gessen, “The Dying Russians,” *The New York Review of Books*, November 9, 2014, 4, <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/sep/02/dying-russians>.

⁹⁵ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 115.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁹⁷ Gessen, “The Dying Russians,” 2–3.

Putin engaged in the Second Chechen War, ostensibly due to a Chechen invasion into neighboring Dagestan and apartment bombs in Moscow attributed to Chechen separatists.⁹⁸ From 1999–2000, the Russian military eliminated organized resistance through a brutal campaign of bombardment; however, Putin’s popularity soared as he projected an image of a strong leader instituting stability in a country that was decrepit from the 1990s.⁹⁹ Additionally, strong oil and gas prices in the early 2000s assisted Putin in maintaining high popularity ratings.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, Putin delivered on his promise to generate stability and a certain level of prosperity not seen since the days of the Soviet Union. However, with the economic recessions in 2008 also came the advent of renewed Russian aggression in its periphery. In 2008 Russia invaded Georgia while in 2014 it annexed Crimea and provided men and material for warfare in the Donbas. The narratives of these wars will be explored in the next chapter.

H. CONCLUSION

Through this historical overview of Russia, I have demonstrated how Russians today see themselves as descendants of multiple myths and historical narratives. These narratives and myths can be used and re-invented to legitimize political decisions in the eyes of Russians today. By portraying the modern state of Russia as an inheritor of legacies from the Kyivan Rus, Russian Empire, and Soviet Union, it gives the leadership and people a flexibility in creating its own myths and traditions of today while taking inspiration from themes in history. By understanding the major themes prevalent in Russian history, or the narrative of their own history, one can analyze the political discourse today to see how history justifies foreign intervention for today’s regime.

⁹⁸ Christoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 92–93.

⁹⁹ Aleksandar Matovski, “The Logic of Vladimir Putin’s Popular Appeal,” in *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia*, ed. Karrie J. Koesel, Valerie Bunce, and Jessica Chen Weiss (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 218, 224.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

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III. HISTORICAL MEMORY AND FOREIGN INTERVENTION

Although many years have passed (and many of your comrades have departed this life), you can be sure that our country, our people, our state will always honour all of the heroes of this battle and keep their memory alive because a country that has no historical memory is doomed to fall apart and has no future.¹⁰¹

—Dmitry Medvedev to a group of Soviet veterans of the Battle of Kursk
in 2008

A. PUTIN’S GRASP OF HISTORY

During the Spring of 2021, Western news sources raised the alarm about the significant number of Russian troops on the border of Ukraine. By April, the build-up garnered the attention of top European Union foreign diplomat, Josep Borrell, and a spokesperson from the Pentagon, who claimed that troop levels exceeded those in 2014.¹⁰² In the midst of the increasing tension between Russia and Ukraine, Vladimir Putin published an essay on the Kremlin’s website titled, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”¹⁰³ Subsequently, he also gave interviews and answered questions about the essay the day after its publication, devoting significant time to explaining how he saw current day geo-political friction within a historical lens. The publication of Putin’s own historical narrative showed that he has a distorted view of history, and, to him, history—and the present understanding of past events—matters.

While it would be easy to dismiss Putin’s view of history as something that has no impact on the world, these next few case studies illustrate how the conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine are products of a worldview in which history plays a part. In the case of Georgia, the historical memory of imperial Russian and Soviet territory provided reasoning for the intervention of Russian troops in the areas of Abkhazia and South

¹⁰¹ Dmitry Medvedev, “Opening Remarks at a Meeting with Veterans of the Battle of Kursk,” President of Russia, August 18, 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1120>.

¹⁰² Robin Emmott and Sabine Siebold, “Official Russian Military Build-up near Ukraine Numbers More than 100,000 Troops, EU Says,” Reuters, April 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-military-build-up-near-ukraine-numbers-more-than-150000-troops-eus-2021-04-19/>.

¹⁰³ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

Ossetia. In the case of Ukraine, Putin argued that the Ukrainian and Russian people were one, establishing that the Soviet Union's leaders artificially created a Ukrainian nation and state.¹⁰⁴ During all of these invasions, the Kremlin used and exported its own version of historical memory to legitimize the invasion of a neighboring sovereign state.

B. RUSSO-GEORGIAN WAR: A PLAYBOOK

The origins of the Russo-Georgian War stem from a history of ethnic conflict and questions of national identity within the Caucasus. When the Soviet Union incorporated Georgia as the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, it also granted autonomous status to the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia within Georgia. By 1989, Georgian was the largest ethnic group in Abkhazia, with 45.7 percent of the population, while ethnic Abkhazians made up 17.8 percent of the population.¹⁰⁵ Within South Ossetia, Georgians made up twenty-nine percent of the population while Ossetians made up sixty-six percent of the population.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, at the breakup of the Soviet Union, questions surrounding identity and autonomy remained for the future of the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia within the territory of the Georgian state. Nationalist discourse within Georgia grew into an organized political movement by 1988, focusing on a narrative of historical victimization from Soviet and Russian rule, and dominated political discourse by 1989.¹⁰⁷ Simultaneously, nationalist movements within the former autonomous regions of Georgia developed, pushing for independence from Georgia, preferring self-rule or rule by Russia.¹⁰⁸ From 1989 to 1993 Georgia and the secessionist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia fought two wars, ending with Russian peacekeepers stationed within the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

¹⁰⁴ Alexandra Sukalo, "Putin's Assault Also Targets Ukraine's History," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/14/putins-assault-also-targets-ukraines-history/>; Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."

¹⁰⁵ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 117.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁰⁸ Kivelson and Suny, *Russia's Empires*, 385.

On August 8, 2008, about one billion people, or around fifteen percent of the global population, gathered around TV sets to watch the opening ceremony of the Summer Olympics held in Beijing. China displayed to the world its rising power and carefully orchestrated image.¹⁰⁹ The spectacle involved thousands of performers and musicians all operating in a carefully choreographed scene to entrance viewers worldwide.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, halfway around the world, troops and tanks poured across the Georgian border as old grievances came to a boiling point. From the Opening Ceremony in Beijing, visiting Russian leadership monitored the invasion of its neighboring state of Georgia.

The exact chain of events that started the war remains unclear with each side accusing the other of firing the first shots. From the Russian point of view, troops from Georgia entered South Ossetia and launched attacks on the city of Tskhinvali, killing Russian peacekeepers and civilians. However, scholar Marcel H. Van Herpen argues that the Kremlin launched the invasion of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as part of a pre-meditated plan.¹¹¹ Regardless of how the war started, it ended with Russian troops soundly defeating the much smaller Georgian forces, signing a ceasefire, and recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia—two Georgian territories.

1. Historical Justification and Delegitimization

Over the course of Putin's first two terms as president, his policies increasingly favored deeper South Ossetian and Abkhazian integration into Russia while not offering a formal resolution to the conflict. He did not respond to calls in his first term for integration into Russia territorially, preferring to slowly increase authority within the region by granting Russian passports to people in those territories, handing out welfare

¹⁰⁹ Belinda Goldsmith, "Beijing Opening Night Lures 15 Percent of World," Reuters, August 10, 2008, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-olympics-viewers-idUSPEK15134720080811>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Van Herpen, *Putin's Wars*, 205. Van Herpen includes six indicators to prove pre-meditation. These include the following: cyber-attacks on Georgia prior to the outbreak, a large military exercise near Georgia's borders, the evacuation of civilian personnel in South Ossetia, the large presence of Russian journalists in the area, the preparation for war of Cossack militias in Russia, and the presence of regular Russian troops in South Ossetia.

payments, and maintaining the territorial status quo.¹¹² While Russia has not recognized the two separatist territories as part of Russia, the two territories have developed a dependence on Russia for survival as self-declared independent states. This arrangement between Russia and the two territories allows Putin to “settle into a relation of hegemony rather than incorporation of the states within its Near Abroad.”¹¹³ Therefore, Russia continues to maintain power over Georgia through the unfinished conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

During a lengthy interview with CNN in August of 2008, Vladimir Putin rationalized the Russian invasion of Georgia within a historical justification, broadcasting this narrative to a larger international audience. This interview gives a glimpse into how Putin saw the conflict, and wanted to project the conflict, at the time it was fought. Before discussing the conflict or conferring the reasoning behind the invasion, he made a point of explaining the Russian narrative of history stating, “I think both you and your—our—viewers today will be interested to learn a little more about the history of relations between the peoples and ethnic groups in this region of the world. Because people know little or nothing about it.”¹¹⁴ Immediately, this set the stage for a historical monologue where Putin laid out his own narrative of history to arrive at the Russian invasion of Georgia. Consequently, during the time of the Russo-Georgian War, Putin thought it essential that the history of the region be highlighted.

Putin’s monologue justified the invasion through a historical lens while also delegitimizing Georgian territorial integrity, painting it as something fabricated. According to Putin, during the mid-eighteenth century to early-nineteenth century, Georgia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia all became part of the Russian Empire

¹¹² Kivelson and Suny, *Russia’s Empires*, 386.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 388.

¹¹⁴ Matthew Chance, “Transcript: CNN Interview with Vladimir Putin,” CNN, August 29, 2008, <https://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/08/29/putin.transcript/index.html>.

voluntarily.¹¹⁵ Territorial boundaries between the three polities were inconsequential due to being part of the larger Russian Empire and later Soviet Union. Therefore, the Russian and Georgian people had a special, historical bond that formed over hundreds of years, resulting from being incorporated within two empires. The Russian and Georgian people “became, without a doubt, a part of the multinational culture of Russia” and the 2008 war had “a tinge of civil war” for Russians.¹¹⁶

Dmitry Medvedev echoed the sentiment that Russia had a historical right to intervening in Georgia. In a speech to the Russian Parliament, he claimed that “Russia has always been the guarantor of the security of the peoples of the Caucasus. This is our mission and our duty. We have never been just passive observers in this region and never will be.”¹¹⁷ Furthermore, when speaking with veterans of the Second World War, Medvedev pointed out that Russia did not historically start conflicts but did take up the role of guaranteeing peace within the former Soviet Union.¹¹⁸ Lastly, Medvedev explained the rationale for the invasion to Russians on a TV program:

There are regions in which Russia has privileged interests. These regions are home to countries with which we share special historical relations and are bound together as friends and good neighbors. We will pay particular attention to our work in these regions and build friendly ties with these countries, our close neighbors. These are principles I will follow in carrying out foreign policy.¹¹⁹

These statements from Russian leadership explain that historical ties to the area supported armed intervention. In the eyes of Putin and Medvedev, Russia had a special

¹¹⁵ Kivelson and Suny, *Russia's Empires*, 167–69. This narrative of Russia as a benign force in the Caucasus emerged following wars against the Ottoman and Persian Empires for territory in Georgia and Armenia, portraying the Russians as a liberating force for Christianity under oppressive Muslim rule. In reality, Georgia is incorporated into the Russian Empire as part of a series of conquests against the Ottoman Empire.

¹¹⁶ Chance, “Transcript: CNN Interview with Vladimir Putin.”

¹¹⁷ Dmitry Medvedev, “Opening Remarks at a Meeting with the Leaders of Parties Represented in Russian Parliament,” President of Russia, August 11, 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/1067>.

¹¹⁸ Medvedev, “Opening Remarks at a Meeting with Veterans of the Battle of Kursk.”

¹¹⁹ Dmitry Medvedev, “Interview Given by Dmitry Medvedev to Television Channels Channel One, Rossia, NTV,” President of Russia, August 31, 2008, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/48301>.

right to intervene militarily due to Georgia once being part of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. The justification for intervention hinged on historical control within the area while also being tinged with a narrative of victimhood.

Both Putin and Medvedev illustrated that Russia had been a victim in the past and needed to right historical wrongs. Putin claimed that during the Soviet era, Stalin made the decision to incorporate South Ossetia and Abkhazia within Georgia territorially as part of the larger Soviet Union. Therefore, if one defended the borders of Georgia in 2008, then one also defended the decisions of Josef Stalin.¹²⁰ Hence, Putin used the memory of Stalin, as one of the world's most heinous dictators, and trotted it back out in a present-day justification for the invasion of another state. Using this logic, it was imperative that Russian troops intervene within Georgia due to Russia's previously discussed historic ties to the region and to right the historical wrongs of Stalin—part of which was appeasing nationalist desires within the outskirts of Soviet territory, dividing territory from Russia.¹²¹ Therefore, Putin criticized the previously discussed nationality policies put in place during the Soviet Union by Lenin and Stalin, arguing they eventually led to diminishing historically Russian territory. Additionally, Medvedev invoked the 1938 Munich agreement when discussing the situation in Georgia, accusing the leaders of Georgia as being just as aggressive as the Nazis, while also pointing the finger at Western countries for allowing aggression to go unchecked.¹²² Consequently, these leaders argued that Russia had to act in its interests based on historical precedent to avoid victimization from aggressive neighbors.

2. Continuing Narrative to the World

At the time of the Russian invasion of Georgia, the Kremlin's international news sources did not focus on historical ties between the two countries; however, over time this has changed to build a narrative of victimization by the West. In news articles during and immediately after the invasion of Georgia, the news agency Sputnik pushed Putin's

¹²⁰ Chance, "Transcript: CNN Interview with Vladimir Putin."

¹²¹ Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 21, 2022.

¹²² Medvedev, "Opening Remarks at a Meeting with the Leaders of Parties Represented in Russian Parliament."

narrative of Western involvement in Georgia agitating for aggression towards Russia.¹²³ Articles focused on the moral right that Russia had to invade Georgia and how the Georgian government's actions represented a longer-standing U.S. foreign policy of antagonizing Russia that threatened to replace European countries' own policies.¹²⁴

The invasion of Ukraine prompted news agencies in Russia to broadcast a new narrative about the Russian war against Georgia in 2008. It became the symbol of new tensions against the West and more steeped in the history of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russian political commentator Evgeny Norin wrote a piece for RT describing the historical roots of the Russian-Georgian conflict and resonance with the war in Ukraine.¹²⁵ His article traces the historical connection between Russia and Georgia, how Georgia was once part of the Russian Empire, and how nationalist violence that broke out following the demise of the Soviet Union. In this narrative, the United States and NATO prompted Georgia, led by Mikheil Saakashvili, into conflict with Russia. Norin claims, "Within the country, the common take on the events was as follows: the West had used its vassal state to test how Russia would react to a great infringement upon its interests. It was the first time Moscow had actively fought back against Western pressure."¹²⁶ This statement largely tracks with the approval rating of Medvedev and Putin after the conclusion of the Russo-Georgian War. Despite the economic crisis of 2008 hurting both leaders' approval ratings, the war in Georgia temporarily inflated the approval of both to over eighty percent, illustrating popular support for the leaders after the successful invasion.¹²⁷ The public support for the Russian leadership illustrated popular backing for Russia's role in the former Russian imperial and Soviet space.

¹²³ "'Right Is on Our Side' over Georgia Crisis Says Putin," Sputnik International, August 31, 2008, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20080831/116421099.html>.

¹²⁴ "Putin Blasts Europe for Following U.S. Foreign Policies," Sputnik International, August 30, 2008, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20080830/116410385.html>.

¹²⁵ Evgeny Norin, "How the Ambitions of a Small Country's US-Backed Leader Launched the Current Confrontation between Russia and the West," RT, August 13, 2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/560690-five-days-war-georgia-russia-2008/>.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Daniel Treisman, *The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2012), 259.

3. Revision to Fit the Times

During the invasion and immediate aftermath, Russian leadership broadcasted a narrative showing how Russia had historical ties to Georgia, supporting the argument that intervention by Russian forces was legitimate. However, Russian international news sources focused on a narrative of Western-backed Georgia aggression. Furthermore, the narrative of Georgian aggression against Russia in 2008 has been linked to the current war in Ukraine. The Kremlin has created a throughline from the Russian intervention against Georgia to the current Russian invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, the public largely approved of the invasion, showing support for Russia's perceived return to a historical role in its former imperial space. Consequently, the war in Georgia operated somewhat as a playbook for the Russian elite going forward. The legitimacy narrative broadcasted to the Russian people and the world allowed for the Russian leadership to argue they had special rights based on historical claims to a territory outside of the internationally recognized Russian territorial borders.

C. THE BEGINNING OF THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR

From 1991 to 2014, the geopolitical tension between Russia and Ukraine underwent fluctuations, shaped by post-Soviet realignments and later Ukrainian moves to integrate further with the West. The immediate issues revolved around nuclear weapons and the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea. In 1994, as part of the Budapest Memorandum, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia agreed to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine in exchange for Ukraine giving up its nuclear arsenal to Russia. At the fall of the Soviet Union, Sevastopol remained the Black Sea Fleet headquarters for the Soviet Navy. Neither the Russians nor Ukrainians permitted all the ships falling into the others' hands. Therefore, the two sides reached an agreement in 1997 to divide the fleet, and Russia leased basing rights in Crimea from the Ukrainians.¹²⁸

Despite initial progress on treaties and negotiations between the two countries, tension started to rise around the 2004 Orange Revolution and subsequent Ukrainian push for more westward integration. During the Ukrainian presidential election in 2004,

¹²⁸ Stent, *Putin's World*, 188.

Russia-backed candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, lost to western-leaning candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, after a rerun due to initial protests against fraudulent results proclaiming Yanukovych the winner. While in power, Yushchenko favored deeper integration with the West, including in the European Union and NATO. Moscow's opposition to Ukraine's aspirations was evident in its diplomatic pressure, including leveraging the gas trade, and Putin's personal lobbying against Ukrainian membership in NATO.¹²⁹ Tensions continued to simmer between the two countries following Yanukovych's return to power in 2010. In the following years, Yanukovych simultaneously attempted to increase economic ties to the West while staying close to Russia, culminating in the tension and events of 2014.

In the early months of 2014, the global spotlight centered on two parallel events: the Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, and the escalating protests against Ukrainian leadership in Kyiv's central square. While Putin sought to portray a revitalized Russia to the world, the eyes of millions worldwide fixated on Kyiv's central square, known as the Maidan. As athletes competed in Sochi, a wave of civil resistance known as "Euromaidan," surged forth as Ukrainians displayed their aspirations for closer ties with the European Union, opposing President Viktor Yanukovych's pro-Russian leanings. The intensity of this movement, punctuated by clashes and the eventual fleeing of Yanukovych, broadcasted a dramatic shift in Ukraine's political compass, pointing it westward rather than eastward. The Euromaidan protests and escape of Yanukovych represented a turning point of Ukraine's relations with Russia and the West—one in which the Ukrainian people decisively picked the West.¹³⁰

Simultaneously, far from Kyiv's restless squares, the roads of the Black Sea's Crimean Peninsula witnessed the rapid arrival of troops without insignias, or "little green

¹²⁹ Andrew Gray, "Bucharest Declaration: NATO's Ukraine Debate Still Haunted by 2008 Summit," Reuters, July 10, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/natos-ukraine-debate-still-haunted-by-bucharest-pledge-2023-07-10/>.

¹³⁰ *Winter on Fire: Ukraine's Fight for Freedom*, Documentary (Netflix, 2015). Directed by Evgeny Afineevsky, this documentary gives an up-close look at the protestors and overall political situation during the Euromaidan protests in late 2013 to early 2014.

men.”¹³¹ These unmarked soldiers, later directly linked to Russia, took strategic positions, shifting the geopolitics of the region.¹³² By March, Russia firmly controlled the Crimean Peninsula, culminating in a controversial referendum representing the desires of a significant Russian-speaking populace. While international audiences debated the legitimacy of this sudden annexation and referendum, the eastern region of Ukraine festered, agitated by pro-Russian propaganda and the influx of fighters and weapons. By April, the region erupted into war as pro-Russian fighters seized government buildings and announced new separatist regions.

1. Reunifying Historical Lands in 2014

The Olympics gave Putin a platform to portray a renewed Russia since his ascent to power. Arguably, the spectacle, and the result of the games, increased patriotic feelings of Russians and increased the legitimacy of the Putin regime on the international stage.¹³³ In an interview after the games concluded, Putin discussed the implications of the games being such a great success. The interviewer, Alexander Lyubimov, expressed how he felt an outpouring of patriotism towards the Russian state during the games, despite these feelings being atypical for him. Reflecting on this sentiment and how to continue the feelings among Russia, he remarked, “We all did our utmost—the athletes, us, the entire nation. There was this wonderful spirit: we joined forces, we did it, and we are proud.”¹³⁴ Putin responded with approval, illustrating that Russia had shown that it was a “strong competitor” that had successfully defeated any anti-Russia propaganda

¹³¹ Neil Buckley et al., “Ukraine’s ‘Little Green Men’ Carefully Mask Their Identity,” *Financial Times*, April 16, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/05e1d8ca-c57a-11e3-a7d4-00144feabdc0>.

¹³² Andrew Higgins, Michael Gordon, and Andrew Kramer, “Photos Link Masked Men in East Ukraine to Russia,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/21/world/europe/photos-link-masked-men-in-east-ukraine-to-russia.html>.

¹³³ Bo Petersson, Karina Vamling, and Alexandra Yatsyk, “When the Party Is Over: Developments in Sochi and Russia after the Olympics 2014,” *Sport in Society: Cultures, Media, Politics, Commerce* 4 (2017): 456, doi:10.1080/17430437.2015.1100888.

¹³⁴ Alexander Lyubimov and Vladimir Putin, “Interview to Channel One, Rossiya-1, NTV and RBC TV Channels,” President of Russia, February 25, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20336>.

targeting Russia during the games.¹³⁵ Whether or not the invasion of Crimea was connected to this increased patriotism is unclear. However, patriotic feelings rose in Russia during the games, and the subsequent annexation of Crimea continued this outpouring of support for the regime with Putin's approval rating hitting eighty-nine percent by 2015.¹³⁶

After the closing ceremony of the Olympic Games but before the full annexation of Crimea, Putin reiterated the legitimacy of Russia's actions in the international arena and tied it to history. Euromaidan had reached a critical phase, and Yanukovich had fled to Russia, straining the relations between Russia and Ukraine. In the case of Russia, Putin argued that any type of potential Russian intervention in Ukraine was linked to "our interests to protect the people with whom we have close historical, cultural, and economic ties. Protecting these people is in our national interests."¹³⁷ In this formulation, Putin connected national interests with the historical ties of the Russian and Ukrainian people. The speech that really showed the historical connections within Putin's mind and narrative occurred on March 18, 2014—the day Russia annexed Crimea. Analyzing this speech shows how Putin used history to justify present-day actions of Russia. In the beginning of the speech, Putin claims that the overwhelming support for reunification can be understood if one knows "the history of Crimea and what Russia and Crimea have always meant for each other."¹³⁸ So, what is that history and why does the history imply support for reunification with Russia?

¹³⁵ Ibid. What this propaganda consisted of is unclear in Putin's interview. He points to no tangible instances of propaganda targeting Russia before or during the games in this interview. However, prior to the Olympics, articles and reports were published online expressing concern for human rights and widespread corruption involving the construction of infrastructure for the games. See the following: <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/misc/R43383.pdf>, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/2/8/sochi-2014-celebrating-authoritarianism>, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/31/sochi-olympics-controversial-5-reasons>.

¹³⁶ Ploky, *Lost Kingdom*, 341.

¹³⁷ Vladimir Putin, "Vladimir Putin Answered Journalists' Questions on the Situation in Ukraine," President of Russia, March 4, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20366>.

¹³⁸ Vladimir Putin, "Address by President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

In Putin’s narrative, “Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride.”¹³⁹ Putin backs this assertion with multiple historical claims. Crimea was the location of the baptism of Prince Vladimir of Kyiv, connecting the cultural heritage of Orthodoxy to Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus. The land also contained graves of Russian soldiers who fought for the Russian Empire under Catherine to conquer Crimea, legitimizing the reunification due to the historical ties of the old Russian Empire to the present Russian Federation. Additionally, Putin makes Sevastopol a symbol of Russian naval might, calling it “a legendary city with an outstanding history, a fortress that serves as the birthplace of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet.”¹⁴⁰ These statements early in the speech tug at a national pride, showing the historical narrative connecting Crimea to Russia. Putin directly alludes to these historical ties claiming, “In people’s hearts and minds, Crimea has always been an inseparable part of Russia. The firm conviction is based on truth and justice and was passed from generation to generation, over time, under any circumstances, despite all the dramatic changes our country went through during the entire 20th century.”¹⁴¹ In this narrative, Crimea represents something inalienable from Russia—and has been returned to its rightful place within Russia. The historical memory of Russians, that Putin capitalizes on in his speech, connects Crimea to a shared cultural, religious, and imperial heritage. While Crimea had not been part of Russia during the Soviet Union or post collapse, these eras of history were washed away due to the sins of past Soviet rulers. In Putin’s narrative, it was Nikita Khrushchev who betrayed Russia, for his own selfish gain within the Soviet Union, and gave Crimea to Ukraine. Therefore, Russia righted the past wrongs, giving the Crimeans a chance to rejoin Russia.¹⁴²

For Putin, the historical ties between Crimea and Russia gave the country a sense of legitimacy for annexation. By drawing upon history, Putin tapped into a sense of continuity from early days of Kyivan Rus’ to the present Russian Federation. The narrative illustrated that ties existed between Crimea and Russia, including language,

139 Ibid.

140 Ibid.

141 Ibid.

142 Ibid.

history, and a shared sense of the future. By portraying Crimea as something belonging to Russia due to their shared historical legacy, it framed the annexation as something not contradicting international law and played upon national feelings within Russia. Indeed, the move to incorporate Crimea was popular among the Russian population, buoying Putin's approval rating and encouraging him to run for another term as president.¹⁴³ This popular approval illustrates some sense of approval to regain territory that had historical ties to Russia.

2. Broadcasting a Historical Narrative to the World

Observing Russian international news sources shows two historical narratives broadcasted to the world surrounding Crimea: one closely resembled the historical narrative of Putin while the other connected Crimea to a trend of Western hypocrisy. In the middle of Euromaidan and the turmoil within Crimea, RT ran a piece laying out its own arguments for how Crimea became a focal point for geopolitics in 2014. Historically, Crimea endured centuries of colonization by different empires and groups, including the Greeks, Scythians, Tatars, and Ottomans. Russia was the latest in this sequence, conquering the peninsula in the 18th century under Catherine.¹⁴⁴ While ethnic tensions existed throughout the history of the peninsula, by 2014 the three primary ethnicities on the peninsula remained Tatar, Ukrainian, and Russian, with Russian being the majority. After the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine under Khrushchev, the Russians in Crimea still considered the territory as part of Russia. Meanwhile, the Tatar minority supporting the right to remain within Ukraine were “only a small part of the Tatar minority, while the rest remain apolitical or even support Crimea's right for self-determination.”¹⁴⁵ RT laid out the historical timeline of Crimea, connecting it to Russia under Catherine, and demonstrated that the Russian population of Crimea had become central to historical grievances under Ukrainian rule since Khrushchev, bolstering the narrative that Putin broadcasted from the Kremlin.

¹⁴³ Matovski, “The Logic of Vladimir Putin's Popular Appeal,” 232–33.

¹⁴⁴ “Facts You Need to Know about Crimea and Why It Is in Turmoil,” RT, February 27, 2014, <https://www.rt.com/news/crimea-facts-protests-politics-945/>.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

After the reunification, both RT and Sputnik broadcasted stories focused on the hypocrisy of the West, centered on quotes from Putin. The history of Crimea is not central to this narrative, but Crimea is used to show how it represents a historical trend of Western hypocrisy and hostility towards Russia. To these news organizations, the West, through its sanctions and outcry over Crimea, had continued the policy of a Cold War against Russia.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, the West had engaged in hypocritical actions. Crimea reunified with Russia with a referendum; therefore, by questioning the reunification of Crimea with Russia the West would also be bringing into question the reunification of Germany post-Cold War and the case for Kosovo to remain independent of Serbia.¹⁴⁷ The international narrative broadcasted from Russia focused on hypocrisy of the West, building upon a historical narrative that Russia remained victimized by Western states.

D. ATTEMPTING TO ERASE UKRAINE—2022 INVASION

In late 2021 and early 2022, international observers turned their attention away from the Beijing Winter Olympics towards Ukraine as signs of an increasingly large concentration of Russian forces around the Ukrainian border became undeniable. Documented evidence, including satellite imagery, indicated a systemic Russian troop build-up along the Russo-Ukrainian and Belarusian-Ukrainian border.¹⁴⁸ Despite repeated denials and justifications for the increased Russian presence along the border, the impending invasion underscored that Ukraine was a renewed geopolitical flashpoint between the West and Russia.

Concurrently, the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk experienced heightened tension as battles in the area increased. Official Russian statements accused Ukraine of violating peace agreements, alleging regional security was at stake due to Ukrainian

¹⁴⁶ “Russia, Crimea Sign Historic Reunification Treaty,” Sputnik International, March 18, 2023, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20140318/Putin-Signs-Crimea-Reunification-Treaty-188544388.html>.

¹⁴⁷ “Top 10 Powerful Quotes from Putin’s Historic Crimea Address,” RT, March 19, 2014, <https://www.rt.com/news/putin-address-ten-quotes-778/>.

¹⁴⁸ Al Jazeera, “Satellite Images Show New Military Movements by Russia,” *Al Jazeera*, February 21, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/21/satellite-images-show-new-military-movements-by-russia>; Tim Lister and Gianluca Mezzofiore, “New Satellite Images Show Continuing Russian Military Buildup on Three Sides of Ukraine,” CNN, February 11, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/10/europe/russia-military-buildup-images-intl/index.html>.

actions. Diplomatic negotiations between the West and Russia failed as the Kremlin aired grievances against Ukraine, NATO, and the collective West.¹⁴⁹ The sequence of events reached a critical point on February 21, 2022, when Putin officially recognized Donetsk and Luhansk as independent regions from Ukraine. Subsequently, in a move that shocked the world, overshadowing the closing of the Olympic Games in Beijing, Russian troops crossed the Ukrainian border in multiple locations on February 24, 2022, aiming to overthrow the Ukrainian government in Putin’s self-proclaimed “special military operation.”¹⁵⁰

1. Historical Memory in Full Force

In the tense days leading up to the invasion of Ukraine, Putin delivered two seminal speeches that were published on the Kremlin website, one on February 21, 2022, and one on February 24, 2022, laying out his own historical rationale for the invasion. These speeches build upon his earlier treatise, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” published on the Kremlin website the year before the invasion. Within that essay, Putin asserts that the Russian and Ukrainian people are one people, built upon “the same historical and spiritual space.”¹⁵¹ To make that claim, he traces a narrative of history, beginning with the Kyivan Rus’ and ending with an assertion that present-day Ukraine has lost its way by turning its back to a partnership with Russia. In Putin’s argument, the only Ukraine that can exist is one that aligns with Russia; he states, “I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia.”¹⁵² Therefore, to Putin, Ukraine had become something that, by not aligning with Russia, had betrayed his own primordial view of the nation. These claims from July of 2021 continued to resonate with Putin, and by February of 2022, they resurface in his speeches before the invasion.

¹⁴⁹ Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 21, 2022.

¹⁵⁰ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, February 24, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

¹⁵¹ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

¹⁵² Ibid.

Both February speeches involve the use of historical narrative as a justification for invasion. However, the first speech focused on deep historical connections between Russia and Ukraine while the second focused more on historical grievances of Russia since the end of the Second World War. These speeches—both immediately preceding the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia forces—give a glimpse into the thinking of Putin during that time. Additionally, they display the narrative he wanted conveyed to the Russian people and larger world. In his speech on February 21, 2022, Putin even stated that history was central “in order to understand what is happening today, to explain the motives behind Russia’s actions and what we aim to achieve.”¹⁵³ Both speeches will be examined in the following paragraphs to analyze what the historical narrative resembled on the eve of invasion.

Vladimir Putin tied Ukraine, like Georgia in 2008, to a notion of historical Russian control. He expressed that Ukraine, to Russia, “is not just a neighboring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space. These are our comrades, those dearest to us—not only colleagues, friends and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties.”¹⁵⁴ Describing the connection between the two countries, he explained that bonds existed since “time immemorial,” hearkening to an almost primordial sense of the nation, where Ukraine and Russia, existed as one nation forever; however, in Putin’s mind, something went wrong to tear the two states apart, despite being part of the same nation.¹⁵⁵ Putin’s historical memory links Ukraine to Russia through notions of a common religion and cultural heritage. It was Grand Prince Vladimir of Kyiv who was baptized in Ukraine; Orthodoxy spread through the area; Russian generals conquered the Black Sea coast for Catherine as “Novorossiia.”¹⁵⁶ However, according to Putin, Ukraine had begun to destroy its own cultural legacy, separating it from the Russian nation, and even threatening the Russian

¹⁵³ Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 21, 2022.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

nation. Consequently, Russia had a right to intervene in Ukraine, saving its own cultural legacy.¹⁵⁷

A major sticking point, for Putin, remained that Ukraine and Russia had been part of both the Soviet Union and Russian Empire; however, Lenin and Khrushchev made irrefutable mistakes in separating the two countries, leading to diverging identities. While Ukraine and Russia had been united under the Russian Empire, Lenin interrupted the historical destiny of Ukraine and Russia by dividing the two lands. Additionally, this process further developed under Khrushchev when he tore Crimea from Russia and awarded it to Ukraine.¹⁵⁸ Therefore, to Putin, Ukraine became a totally fabricated state, something that began as a Soviet project to satisfy nationalist demands in an arbitrary manner.¹⁵⁹ Thus, with this interpretation of history, Putin sought to erase the idea of a separate Russian and Ukrainian state in the modern world.¹⁶⁰

On the day of the invasion, Putin's narrative focused on building a more recent narrative of historic aggression towards Russia, while simultaneously portraying Russia as something of a savior. To him, Western politicians were "irresponsible" and created "fundamental threats... rudely and unceremoniously from year to year."¹⁶¹ The threats included NATO expansion, a disregard for international law, and a more long lasting, subversive threat to the existence of Russia. After the Cold War, the U.S. and its partners drove to "put the final squeeze on [Russia], finish us off, and utterly destroy us."¹⁶² Taking this point further Putin claimed, "The problem is that in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile 'anti-Russia' is taking

¹⁵⁷ Jade McGlynn, "Imposing the Past: Putin's War for History," War on the Rocks, March 15, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/imposing-the-past-putins-war-for-history/>. McGlynn argues that part of the reason Putin ordered the invasion was to restore a sense of Ukrainian identity, tying it to Russia, that Ukraine had lost.

¹⁵⁸ Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 21, 2022.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ While this paragraph is largely Putin's interpretation of events, there are multiple other explanations for the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954. See <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/why-did-russia-give-away-crimea-sixty-years-ago> for the competing explanations, including an internal politics dimension and competing Russian and Ukrainian claims.

¹⁶¹ Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," February 24, 2022.

¹⁶² Ibid.

shape.”¹⁶³ The territories adjacent to Russia had been infected with “far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis” that became connected to Hitler and the Second World War within Putin’s narrative.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, rather than looking inward at Russia’s own policies or geo-political moves that may have increased tension, Putin placed the blame squarely at the foot of the West, while also displaying the Russian people as fighting historical enemies in a new conflict along Russia’s own borders.

2. RT, TASS, and Sputnik Broadcast to the World

Putin’s speeches exhibited a historical narrative focused on the past connections between the Russian and Ukrainian nations while the outward facing international media focused on a more recent narrative and historical trajectory of increasing Western aggression counterbalanced with the narrative of Russia typically acting as a historical savior within its immediate region. Playing into the neo-Nazi rhetoric and Western aggression narrative highlighted in the February 24 address, Russian international media trumped up the threat and broadcast that narrative to the world. It assisted in validating the historical memory of the Russian people and pushed it to the wider world.

The Russian international media, parroting some of Putin’s talking points, published articles focused on Western aggression and provocations. The West, and especially the U.S., pushed a plot focused on “hysteria” due to alleged invasion schemes of Russia.¹⁶⁵ Russian media focused on U.S. publications talking of imminent invasion, and used it as evidence of U.S. fear mongering. Additionally, Russian news media showed that Russia faced dangers growing by the day due to weapons shipments coming from the U.S. into Ukraine, threatening the Russian people and stability within Europe. Stories focused on sensational facts built to craft a narrative of NATO aggression. Sputnik ran stories showing that NATO had begun to build bases in Ukraine and conduct exercises, with 64,000 NATO troops to be expected by the end of 2022, “transforming

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ “US Whips up Hysteria around ‘Invasion’ While Pumping Kiev with Weapons,” TASS, February 12, 2022, <https://tass.com/politics/1402423>; “Culmination of Anti-Russian Hysteria Is Way Ahead,” TASS, February 16, 2022, <https://tass.com/world/1404393>.

Ukraine into a military foothold” directed against Russia.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, the narrative around tension in Ukraine centered on portraying Russia as defending itself, and being the victim on the international stage of power politics, due to NATO troop increases and Ukraine being a potential launchpad for invasion of Russia.

International Russian media published stories on their websites focused on sustaining a narrative that Ukrainians were committing war crimes, connecting Ukrainians to Nazis of the past, thereby legitimizing the Russian invasion. People living in the Donbas were surrounded by Ukrainian army “monsters” and Ukraine “utilized Nazi militants and started a war.”¹⁶⁷ At the start of the war, Ukrainian military servicemembers were described as “neo-Nazis” and combat operations from Russia’s military forces highlighted operations against these neo-Nazi units.¹⁶⁸ RT linked Ukrainians to Nazi collaborators from the Second World War, overlooking Ukraine’s efforts during that time to fight against Nazis, while amplifying Putin’s claims that Ukraine carries a Nazi legacy.¹⁶⁹ Focusing on a narrative showing a people being oppressed by neo-Nazi Ukrainians allowed Russia to portray their own troops as saviors. It provided justification for the Russo-Ukrainian war. Additionally, Russian news examined the history of military interventions of NATO to validate the act of Russian

¹⁶⁶ Svetlana Ekimenko, “Jake Sullivan Reportedly Urged by ‘Russia Hawks’ to Send More Arms to Ukraine Ahead of Geneva Talks,” Sputnik International, January 10, 2022, <https://sputniknews.com/20220110/jake-sullivan-reportedly-urged-by-russia-hawks-to-send-more-arms-to-ukraine-ahead-of-geneva-talks-1092154662.html>; Evgeny Mikhaylov, “NATO Is Transforming Ukraine Into Military Foothold Against Russia, Lavrov Tells Sputnik,” Sputnik International, December 31, 2021, <https://sputniknews.com/20211231/nato-is-transforming-ukraine-into-military-foothold-against-russia-lavrov-tells-sputnik-1091937563.html>.

¹⁶⁷ Stepan Kostasnyk, “Why Did the Ukrainians Have to Kill Us?: Refugees Fleeing Donbass Talk to RT,” RT, March 9, 2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/551534-russia-ukraine-dpr-refugees/>; Vladislav Ugolnyy, “‘Without Russia, We Won’t Stop a Full-on Ukrainian Offensive’: What People in Donbass Say about the Ongoing Military Crisis,” RT, (February 4, 2022), <https://www.rt.com/russia/548202-donbass-residents-ukrainian-crisis/>.

¹⁶⁸ Sofia Chegodaeva, “DPR Head: Up to 200 People Buried Under Rubble as Azov Militants Blow Up Building in Mariupol,” Sputnik International, March 5, 2022, <https://sputniknews.com/20220305/dpr-head-some-200-people-buried-under-rubble-as-azov-militants-set-off-explosive-device-in-mariupol-1093607780.html>; Sofia Chegodaeva, “Russian MoD: Key Neo-Nazi Forces in Mariupol Residential Areas Destroyed,” Sputnik International, March 14, 2022, <https://sputniknews.com/20220314/russian-mod-key-neo-nazi-forces-in-mariupol-residential-areas-destroyed-1093865139.html>.

¹⁶⁹ Olga Sukharevskaya, “Under the Wolfsangel: The Uncomfortable Truth about Radical Ideologies in Ukraine,” RT, March 15, 2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/551975-nazi-influence-ukrainian-politics/>.

troops entering Ukraine while also pointing out the hypocrisy of Western criticism.¹⁷⁰ Through portraying Ukrainians as Nazi militants and pointing out Western invasions of other countries, the Russian media narrative focused on securing legitimacy for its invasion.

3. Historical Memory Reinforced

The historical narrative spread by the Kremlin and the news agencies has taken root amongst the Russian people, as they support the narrative, reflecting a bottom-up reinforcement. They have become actively involved in perpetuating the myth spread by the Kremlin. Grassroots movements like the “Immortal Regiment” have become coopted by the Kremlin to spread its own narrative of World War II.¹⁷¹ People march through Russian towns carrying photographs of their ancestors, wearing the St. George’s ribbon, symbolizing the struggle against fascism, and carrying Russian and Soviet flags. Historian George Mosse reveals that these types of movements, or mass ceremonial events, were central to a national identity for the German Nazi Party, as they allow “the ritual expression of a shared worship that was so crucial to their sense of belonging.”¹⁷² It allows for regular Russians, across class or social divides, to feel that they are a part of something bigger than themselves. The symbols and imagery associated with the regiments draw through lines from the sacrifices of the past to people today. The Second World War offers a myth to the people of Russia today, just as it did to Soviet society.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February of 2022, scholars and news outlets showed that the war in Ukraine was central to Russian identity, and Putin’s view of history. Russia scholar Jade McGlynn explained that Putin ordered the invasion “to impose his view of the past on a country that he feared was willfully and maliciously

¹⁷⁰ “The Height of Hypocrisy: Russia Criticised, But How Many Times Has NATO Acted Without Approval?,” Sputnik International, February 24, 2022, <https://sputniknews.com/20220224/the-height-of-hypocrisy-russia-criticised-but-how-many-times-has-nato-acted-without-approval-1093339428.html>.

¹⁷¹ Mikhail Nemtsev, “How Russia’s Immortal Regiment Was Brought to Life,” Riddle, May 8, 2019, <https://ridl.io/how-russia-s-immortal-regiment-was-brought-to-life/>.

¹⁷² George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 207.

misremembering it.”¹⁷³ During the invasion, artifacts central to both Ukrainian and Russian history have been carried off, at the direction of the Kremlin, by Russian soldiers, back to Russia.¹⁷⁴ While Putin has sought to reinforce Russia’s identity during the war, he has also pursued the destruction of a unique Ukrainian identity. Historian Alexandra Sukalo explains that Putin’s objectives go beyond military success, stating, “He will also seek to erase Ukraine’s separate and distinct history from the archival record.”¹⁷⁵ Removing these records perpetuates the myth of a unified Russian and Ukrainian people.¹⁷⁶ Therefore, Russian soldiers have conducted sweeps through occupied territory to destroy the legacy of Ukraine, including burning Ukrainian books and artwork.¹⁷⁷ Additionally, pamphlets issued to Russian soldiers convey the historic significance of the invasion, assisting each soldier in framing the conflict as essential to Russian identity and historic trajectory since the Second World War.¹⁷⁸ Consequently, through these actions Putin and the Russian government have made the interpretation of history central to modern conflict involving Russia. The narrative of Russian history and the connection to Ukraine had not fallen on deaf ears; rather, Russian society had internalized the message and acted to right perceived historical wrongs.

¹⁷³ McGlynn, “Imposing the Past: Putin’s War for History.”

¹⁷⁴ Marc Santora, “Why Russia Stole Potemkin’s Bones From Ukraine,” *The New York Times*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/27/world/europe/ukraine-russia-potemkin-bones.html>.

¹⁷⁵ Sukalo, “Putin’s Assault Also Targets Ukraine’s History.”

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ A. N. Razumov, G. A. Kryukov, and A. N. Kuznetsov, “I Live, I Fight, I Win: Rules of Life in War,” *Lethal Minds Journal*, January 3, 2023, <https://lethalmindsjournal.substack.com/p/i-live-i-fight-i-win-rules-of-life>.

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IV. LOOKING BACK WHILE MOVING FORWARD

This thesis shows the importance of historical memory within the Russian nation. It describes the connections between national identity and historical memory, showing how historical memory is crucial for understanding nationalism. For Russia, the narrative of its own history begins with the Kyivan Rus', extends through the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, continuing today. Along this path of history, Russian leaders have claimed to be inheritors of Rome, guardians of Orthodoxy, and rightful rulers of all lands once connected to the Kyivan Rus'. These strains of history continue to impact Russia and factor into leadership decisions.

The three case studies of Russian intervention in its periphery demonstrate that, for Russia, historical memory legitimizes, and may even drive, Russian foreign policy and creates a narrative, for both the Kremlin and Russian people, to broadcast to the larger world. Whether looking back to the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, modern-day Russia uses those two previous polities as a legitimizing force within its own politics. Russian leadership and the international news organizations in Russia draw connections, real or imagined, between the Russia nation and nearby territories. By drawing those connections, Russians create an impetus for intervention due to supposed historical lessons. Historical grievances become part of the narrative in order to further claims to territory or claim to be the rightful defenders of a land. Common linguistic or cultural heritage becomes a talking point for Russian geopolitical red lines. Additionally, when Russia does flex its muscles in its periphery, it has been largely popular within the population of Russia. Historical memory, specifically Putin's narrative of Russia, is a popular, and powerful, force in Russia.

Jade McGlynn has perhaps the best quote showing how the Russian people receive the Kremlin's narrative and are willingly coopted by it. She reveals, "The Kremlin has used smoke and mirrors to encourage Russians to support the 'special military operation'—but the Russian people are co-authors of this deception. In other words, the Kremlin's sales tactics are heavy-handed, but many Russians are in the market

for buying.”¹⁷⁹ If people are willingly coopted by a narrative, then it matters what this narrative looks like going forward. These case studies have demonstrated that the narrative from Russia relies on historical memory, and how Russia portrays its own history. If this historical memory continues to sway the Russian people and the Kremlin, then the decision-making will continue to be along the lines of flexing its muscles in its near abroad, or wherever Russians can claim deep historical connections.

While the focus of this paper has been Russia, other countries, and their leaders, also use historical memory as a legitimizer and to create impetus for action. Before and after the invasion of Iraq, George W. Bush repeatedly drew upon the historical memory of the Second World War, likening the liberation of cities during the Second World War to that of Baghdad in Iraq during the Global War on Terror. In doing so, he ensured that “the character of the World War II generation was transmitted to its successors” and “emphasized those aspects of wartime memory that emphasize historical continuity and national unity.”¹⁸⁰ Consequently, historical memory is a powerful force in politics, and not something uniquely Russian. It forms an integral part of identity within a nation and will continue to resonate with citizens of a country who desire to see their country in a certain light. Individuals and leaders seek justification in a nuanced world where historical memory often presents events in stark black and white terms, giving justification for action and emphasizing continuity in the nation.

¹⁷⁹ Jade McGlynn, *Russia's War* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2023), 9–10.

¹⁸⁰ David Hoogland Noon, “Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 7, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 339, 358, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41939926>.

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