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Published online: 20 May 2023.

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The Fight for the Past: Contested Heritage and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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ABSTRACT

Many in the West do not understand why Putin decided to attack Ukraine. Russian propagandists have thrown up a smokescreen, placing the blame on the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe, slandering the Ukrainian government as a 'Nazi' regime, suggesting that ethnic Russians needed protection, or even insinuating a conspiracy by the West to destroy the Russian state and Russian culture. This article shows that there are deep underlying reasons for the invasion which are linked to how Ukraine and its history are perceived by Russian nationalists and imperialists. This article examines some of the historical justifications put forward by Putin and his views on Ukraine, Russia, and their history. The article gives an overview of some key moments of Ukrainian and Russian history and discusses the long shadow of the events of the 20th century, from initial Ukrainian attempts at state building to Putin's rejection of ideas of Ukrainian state- and nationhood. The article also analyses the impact the conflict has had on monuments and heritage sites, including the deliberate destruction of monuments and the capture and removal of artefacts and relics.

Introduction

In 1995, the historian Mark von Hagen from Columbia University, New York, asked the provocative question 'Does Ukraine have a history?'[1] His answer was not clear-cut. Ukraine may not have a history, but it will have one. If there is a state, there will be a history. This did not go down well with historians in Ukraine. It was also a bit unfair, given the fact that already in 1898 Mykhailo Hrushevsky, the great Ukrainian historian, published the first volume of his monumental History of Ukraine-Rus' in which he made the case that there is a Ukrainian story to tell which is different from the story told by Russian historians.[2]

But von Hagen had a point. Between 1945 and 1991 Ukrainian history was barely represented at any American or European universities. Only a few historians – often of Ukrainian descent – continued to insist that Ukrainian history was not part of Russian history. In the Soviet Union, a crippled version of Ukrainian history prevailed, which saw Ukraine eternally bound to Russia. Von Hagen argued that Ukraine, now

independent, had a choice: either to frame its history as the history of its territory and the cohabitation of many ethnic and religious groups or to write a history of ethnic Ukrainians. Von Hagen favoured a progressive post-national history of Ukraine. Yaroslav Isaevych, a leading Ukrainian historian, found this suggestion patronising as it was urging Ukraine to do something which was not in line with how most nations deal with their history.[3]

A widely accepted national narrative can strengthen the identification of citizens with their state. Authorities and political elites everywhere try to promote a certain idea of the history of their nation and use the education system to instil this idea in the younger generation. The history policy of post-independent Ukraine, supported by its cultural elites and historians, aims to create a 'usable past' and strengthen Ukrainian unity and statehood.[4]

In this essay I will explore the historical dimension of the current conflict in Ukraine, the fight for the past, and the impact this has on the cultural heritage in Ukraine.

The Kyivan Rus', Muscovy and Poland-Lithuania

Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians trace their origins back to the Kyivan Rus' (or, to use the transliteration from Russian, the Kievan Rus'). The Kyivan Rus' was a large and influential medieval principality, mostly inhabited by East Slavic tribes. It was founded in the 9th century by Viking warrior-traders along the river Dnieper and was organised around the trade route stretching from Scandinavia to Constantinople. In the year 988, Grand Prince Volodymyr (Russian transliteration: Vladimir) of Kyiv and his subjects were baptised. Significantly, they took their form of Christianity from Byzantium, not from Rome, and became part of the Orthodox Christian world.[5]

1025 years later, in 2013, a prominent visitor from Moscow addressed a conference In Kyiv celebrating the Christianisation of the Rus':

'This – *he refers to the baptism of 988* – was not just Ukraine's civilisational choice. Here at this site, at the baptismal site on the Dnieper River, a choice was made for the whole of Holy Rus, for all of us ... When I say 'for our entire people', we know today's reality of course, know that there are the Ukrainian people and the Belarusian people, and other peoples too, and we respect all the parts of this heritage, but at the same time, at the foundations of this heritage are the common spiritual values that make us a single people (...)

In mediaeval times, Ukraine was part of first one and then another European power centre, coming under the rule of one country, then another. But the vision of uniting both the western and eastern parts of Rus', the state that had its beginnings here in Kiev (...) always lived on in the east (*he means Russia)* and in the west (*he means Ukraine)*, wherever our people lived. The unity of east and west changed the lives of Ukraine's population and its elite for the better, as everyone knows. (...)

Let me say again that we will respect whatever choice our Ukrainian partners, friends and brothers make. The question is only one of how we go about agreeing on working together under absolutely equal, transparent and clear conditions'.[6]

The speaker was Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia.

One year later Russia annexed the Crimea and started providing military support to pro-Russian rebels in two south-eastern provinces of Ukraine. It is therefore worth having a closer look at some of Putin's claims.[7]

Ukraine and Russia have the same cultural roots: That is partly correct; both trace their origins back to the principality of Kyiv and its Christian orthodox culture. But there were also other cultural influences at play which contributed to making Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians distinct nations.[8]

Putin also claimed that for centuries Ukraine was under foreign rule, but 'common spiritual values (…) make us a single people'. This only tells one part of the story. With the arrival of troops of the Mongol Empire in the mid-13th century, the land of the Kyivan Rus' was broken up. The Rus' was therefore no longer a political unit but split into many semi-independent principalities ruled by descendants of the Kyiv dynasty who often fought one another for pre-eminence. In the 14th century, the western and southwestern Rus' principalities, which constitute most of the territory of today's Ukraine and Belarus, were split between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland. Subsequently, the Grand Duke of Lithuania claimed to be the ruler of Rus'.[9] Meanwhile the northern and north-eastern principalities, where Muscovy (the old name for Moscow) is located, remained a part of the Mongol Empire and were largely cut off from developments in Europe for 200 years.[10]

From the middle of the 13th to the middle of the 17th century, almost all the territory of today's Ukrainian state was not part of the Principality of Vladimir-Suzdal or its successor Muscovy but was either part of the Crimean Khanate, a successor state of the Mongol Empire, or part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland. Poland and Lithuania were joined in 1389 in a personal union. The Grand Duke of Lithuania was at the same time King of Poland but both countries had separate administrations, laws, and parliaments. In 1569 Poland and Lithuania formed a political union with a common parliament.[11] The Orthodox Ukrainian lands under Polish-Lithuanian control participated in all cultural and political developments of this crucial period of European history while Muscovy did not. Ukraine experienced the Renaissance, and the Reformation and Counter-Reformation also swept through Ukraine. Many of its cities, including Kyiv, had local forms of self-administration based on German – Magdeburg – law, something unheard of in the Tsardom of Muscovy.[12]

In this period, the East Slavs, descendants of the inhabitants of the Kyivan Rus, developed into three distinct groups, with different political cultures, traditions, and customs. The Tsardom of Muscovy had an autocratic ruler, combining Mongol and Byzantine forms of rule, while Poland-Lithuania developed into a state dominated by numerous noble families who enjoyed equal political rights. The respective spoken and written languages also started to develop in different directions.[13] In the mid-17th century, Moscow diplomats needed a translator to understand the Ukrainian spoken by the Zaporizhian Cossacks.[14]

During the decline of the Mongol Empire, the rulers of Muscovy set themselves the task of reconquering the lands of the old Kyivan Rus, and contesting the claims of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, Tsar Ivan III added Ruler of all Rus' to his titles. He and his successors justified interventions in the domestic affairs of Poland and Lithuania and the annexation of its territory by arguing that they were protecting Orthodox believers and were just taking what belonged to them as the successors

of the grand princes of Kyiv anyway.[15] From the mid-16th century onwards, the rulers of Moscow started to use the term Russia (Rossija) instead of Muscovy, to emphasise their claim to the land of the Rus'.[16] This was the point when it became significant that Poland in 966 and Lithuania in 1387 had adopted the Christian religion from Rome, not from Byzantium. Almost all of the East Slavic population of Poland and Lithuania were Orthodox, like the Tsar of Muscovy, while the King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania belonged to the Latin (Catholic) Church. After the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, the tsars of Moscow claimed to be the legitimate successors of the Byzantine emperors and propagated the idea that Moscow was the 'Third Rome' and the true centre of Christianity, after the first Rome had become schismatic and the second Rome (Constantinople) had come under Muslim rule.

In 1721 the Tsar Peter I, known as the Great, proclaimed himself emperor and started to call his tsardom the Russian Empire.[17]

In the mid-17th century, Poland-Lithuania slipped into a deep political and military crisis, and over the next 120 years the Russian tsars, emperors and empresses, and their allies managed to destroy the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and annexe about 80% of the territory of today's Ukraine, inhabited by 'Orthodox brothers and sisters'. At this time Kyiv was a cultural and intellectual centre. In 1632, Petro Mohyla, archimandrite of the Orthodox Monastery of the Caves (Pecherska Lavra), founded an Orthodox school with Latin and Polish as languages of teaching. He had been trained by Jesuits and took elite Polish schools (collegii) as his model. The school already became an academy under Polish rule and developed into one of the main places of higher learning in Ukraine and, later, the Russian Empire. Subsequently, there was a gradual 'brain drain' from Kyiv to Moscow. Intellectuals and theologians from Kyiv played a key role in the modernisation of the Russian Orthodox Church and in formulating the political ideology of Peter the Great.[18]

However, about 20% of the territory ot today's Ukraine in the west and southwest around Khust, Lviv and Chernivtsy never became part of the Russian Empire but belonged to Hungary, Poland, Moldova, or the Ottoman Empire before becoming part of the Habsburg Empire from 1772 onward.[19]

In the Russian census of 1897, only 44% of the population of the Empire were registered (based on their native language) as Great Russians (which is what we call Russians).[20] The 18% of persons registered as Ukrainians were referred to as Little Russians, and the Russian elites referred to the Ukrainian language – called Little Russian dialect – as to a corrupted form of Russian. The 19th century saw the emergence of modern Ukrainian literature, art, music, and political thought. The Russian imperial authorities desperately tried to stop Ukrainian nation-building by closing Ukrainian cultural organisations and suppressing publications in Ukrainian. Russian historians claimed the heritage of the Kyivan Rus exclusively for Russia, leaving no space for a different Ukrainian narrative. Ukrainians were considered a branch of the Russian people who had been estranged by temporarily coming under Lithuanian, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, Ottoman or Austrian rule.[21] This view of the Tsardom of Muscovy and the Russian Empire as the legitimate and only heir of the Kyivan Rus was cemented by the work of thousands of historians in and outside of Russia. Until very recently, it dominated

academia and shaped the wider public's perception of Ukraine and its history as part of the Russian world.[22]

The Ukrainian National Movement and the Cossacks

This claim – that the Principality of Kyiv is solely part of Russian history – was challenged by the emerging modern Ukrainian national movement which began in the Russian part of Ukraine in the first half of the 19th century. As a result of the anti-Ukrainian measures in the Russian Empire, in the 1860s, the centre of Ukrainian politics moved to Eastern Galicia, the region around Lviv, which belonged to Austria-Hungary.[23]

The dominant Ukrainian national narrative of the time did not view Russians and the Russian Empire but rather Ukrainians as the true heirs of the Kyivan Rus.[24] There is a strong emphasis in Ukrainian historiography on the continuity of the people who lived in the territory of the Kyivan Rus', Ukrainians consider themselves to be the descendants of those people and insist that Ukrainian traditions of statehood exist: they consider the Kingdom of Galicia-Volhynia in Western Ukraine and not Muscovy as the true successor of the Kyivan Rus. Ukrainians and Belarusians also claim a share of the heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – whose court language was not Lithuanian, a Baltic language, but Chancery Slavonic, a precursor of modern Belarusian. Many noblemen in Lithuania were Orthodox East Slavs, also known as Ruthenians.[25]

Ukrainian historians view the Cossack hetmanate of Bohdan Khmelnytsky in the middle of the 17th century as the first attempt to create a genuinely Ukrainian state. The Cossacks play an essential role in Ukrainian story and are even mentioned in the current national anthem.[26]

Who were these Cossacks? Cossacks were originally outcasts of society, peasants escaping serfdom in the Ukrainian lands under Polish control who had run away to the steppe region of southern Ukraine. There they formed bands, living from hunting, fishing, and raids into Tatar territory. The Cossacks also created fortified villages and fortresses, and a society of warriors and farmers soon began to emerge. The first Cossacks in Ukraine were of mixed ethnicity, and included Tatars, Poles, Lithuanians, and Ruthenians.

In the 16th century the East Slavic element began to predominate. Everyone arriving in the region under Cossack control was free. The Polish crown used the Cossacks as border guards against the Crimean and Nogay Tatars, two of the successor states of the Mongol Empire. The Cossacks governed themselves and formed four regiments. They controlled what is today south-eastern Ukraine. The Cossacks elected their officers, including their military leader who took the title Hetman. In war they formed the infantry of the Polish Army. The Cossacks first tried to find their place within the social order of Poland-Lithuania, mostly noblemen and enserfed peasants. The Cossacks tried to acquire rights similar to those enjoyed by the Polish and Polonised Ruthenian nobility but failed. Only a few thousand Cossacks were registered and received some of the privileges enjoyed by the nobility. By the middle of the 17th century, the Cossacks finally had enough. They tried to separate themselves from the Polish crown, fought against the Polonised Ruthenian nobility, killed many Jews who had acted as middlemen between the nobility and peasants, and created state-like structures.[27] When the fortunes of war started to turn and the Cossacks lost their main ally against Poland, the Crimean Khan, they came under severe military pressure and asked the Tsar of Muscovy for help. This was a logical decision

on their part, as one of the reasons for the Cossack rebellion was the discrimination against the Orthodox Church in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The overwhelming majority of Cossacks were Orthodox and, through their religion, connected with the Tsar of Muscovy. From the perspective of the Cossack leaders and later Ukrainian historians, the alliance with Muscovy in the treaty of Pereyaslav of 1654 was a temporary alliance, from the perspective of the Tsar and Russian historians it was the acknowledgement of Moscow's suzerainty for all eternity.[28] In Ukrainian national historiography, the decision of the Cossack leaders is contested as it subordinated the Cossack lands to the Tsar. Over the next century Cossack autonomy was slowly eroded until its last remnants were finally abolished by Empress Catherine II in 1783. In Russian and Soviet historiography, the treaty of 1654 meant the reunification of Ukraine – the heartland of the medieval Kyivan Rus' – with Muscovy under Russian leadership.[29]

Putin, the Historian

This is the view shared by Putin. Last year he published an essay 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'. He considered it a 'great common misfortune and tragedy' that a wall 'has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space'. He implied that Russia's enemies were trying to 'sow discord among people, the overarching goal being to divide and then to pit the parts of a single people against one another'.[30]

In the same speech he claimed that the Bolsheviks and their leader V. I. Lenin are at the beginning of modern Ukrainian statehood. 'So, I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia.' He considers the principles on which the Soviet Union was built - especially giving their constituent parts like Soviet Ukraine the right to secede - to be 'worse than a mistake'.[31]

For Putin, Ukrainians are an 19th century invention of Russia's enemies at the time: Austria-Hungary and the German Empire. In Putin's view, these two powers encouraged a Ukrainian national movement with the aim of weakening Russia, a strategy which Putin considers is now being continued by 'the West', i.e. by the U.S.A, NATO, and the European Union. Soviet Ukraine which in 1991 became independent Ukraine is for him an artificial creation, the result of Lenin's wrong decisions after the October Revolution.[32]

The Ukrainian Revolution

Putin is right - Lenin was the 'creator and architect' of Soviet Ukraine but before he became that he had to destroy an already existing independent Ukrainian state which the Ukrainian national movement had created after the two Russian revolutions.

The precondition for Ukrainian independence was the demise of the Russian Empire. In the First World War, an opportunity arose for the Ukrainian national movement to pursue its dream of Ukrainian statehood. But even after the Russian February Revolution of 1917, many Ukrainian patriots still believed that they would live in one state together with Russians. In March 1917, Ukrainian national organisations formed a council in Kyiv, the Central Rada, chaired by the historian Mykhailo Hrushevsky, to speak for the Ukrainian provinces of the Russian Empire. In its first decrees, the Rada demanded not full

independence, but autonomy for a united Ukraine within a democratic and federal Russia. The Central Rada only declared full independence for Ukraine after the Bolsheviks came to power. Between 1918 and 1920 several attempts were made to form an independent Ukrainian state.[33]

But the would-be Ukrainian governments found themselves first trapped between the Entente and the Central Powers and then – after the defeat of Germany and Austria-Hungary – caught in the middle of the Russian civil war and state-building wars. The counter-revolutionary Russian White Armies and the Bolshevik Red Army both tried to prevent Ukraine from becoming independent. The newly independent Poland laid claim to Western Ukraine and defeated Ukrainian state-building attempts there. Support from the Entente was not forthcoming and the attempts to create an independent Ukrainian state ended 1920 in defeat.[34]

The territory of today's Ukraine was subsequently divided between Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, with the lion's share, i.e. the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, becoming part of the Soviet Union.

Ukraine as Part of the Soviet Union

The attitude of the Bolsheviks towards Ukraine was ambivalent but at least – in contrast to the Russian Empire – the Bolsheviks recognised Ukrainians as a distinct nation. The Soviet Union was founded in 1922 and consisted of several republics. The largest republic was the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic; today's Russian Federation is its successor. The Ukrainians also had their own republic: the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, but neither of the two states was independent; instead, they formed part of the Soviet Union which was held together by the dictatorship of the Communist party. The Soviet government tried to distance itself from the repressive nationality policy of the Russian Empire and promoted the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian culture.[35] Without the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 bringing a party to power with a universalist, socialist, supranational ideology, the Russian Empire would have disintegrated earlier, probably already in 1918. Other than Putin believed of being a mistake, Lenin's clever nationality policy and the creation of a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics allowed the new state to hold on to most of the territory of the Russian Empire. Lenin saw in Great Russian chauvinism the greatest danger for the Soviet Union and tried to suppress it, but it re-emerged under Stalin in the 1930s. Stalin considered the nationalism of non-Russians as a greater danger for the Soviet Union than Russian nationalism. Many Ukrainian politicians, artists and intellectuals were arrested, sent to labour camps, or shot. Collectivisation and dekulakisation hit Ukraine particularly hard, resulting in a man-made famine in which several million people, four million of them ethnic Ukrainians, perished.[36] Today, many historians of Ukraine and most Ukrainian politicians view the famine as an attempt to destroy the Ukrainian nation, viewing it as a genocide.[37] Following the example of parliaments in several other nations, the German Bundestag recognised the Ukrainian famine as a genocide against the Ukrainian nation on 30 November 2022.[38] On December 15, the European Parliament followed suit.[39]

The Second World War and the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists

Something which Putin often uses as justification for the Russian attack is the concept that Ukraine is ruled by fascists and that Ukrainian nationalism is intimately linked to national socialism. That is wrong but there are reasons why this idea is so popular in Russia.

As a result of the German-Soviet treaty of 23 August 1939, regions of Ukraine which had previously not been part of the Russian Empire came under Soviet control. The Soviet invasion of Western Ukraine led to mass arrests, deportations, and executions of Poles, Jews, and Ukrainians. The Ukrainian nationalists who were concentrated in this part of Ukraine fought against Sovietisation and allied themselves temporarily with Nazi Germany. The most influential Ukrainian organisation during the war was the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists or OUN, which in 1940 split into two factions, named after their respective leaders Andrij Mel'nyk and Stepan Bandera. Both factions, OUN-B and OUN-M, consisted of integral nationalists who had embraced fascism in the 1930s and early 1940s. In the summer of 1941, they participated in anti-Semitic pogroms and later, after Nazi-Germany had murdered almost all Jews, fought against the Polish presence in Western Ukraine by murdering tens of thousands of Polish civilians. These Ukrainian nationalists continued their fight against the Soviet Union even after German troops had been expelled from Ukraine. Their last units only surrendered in the early 1950s. Between 1944 and 1947 the Soviet authorities killed more than 100,000 Ukrainians in the annexed territories who were resisting Sovietisation, and many more were deported. Especially in Western Ukrainian society, members of the OUN are remembered, first and foremost, as anti-Soviet resistance fighters, while in the Soviet Union they were denounced as Nazis and German collaborators. In the Ukrainian protests of 2004 and 2014, groups placing themselves in the tradition of the OUN played a visible role, but while they used OUN symbols, many of them did not know much about its ideology or its crimes. In parliamentary elections since then, no right-wing party in Ukraine has managed to clear the 5% of votes needed to send deputies to the parliament. It is therefore a blatant lie to accuse Ukraine of being dominated by fascists. The overwhelming majority of Ukrainians fighting in the Second World War, about seven million or 95% of all Ukrainian combatants, fought in the ranks of the Soviet Army. The descendants of these Ukrainian Red Army Soldiers are the ones who today are fighting against Russian aggression.

Post-War Developments

The Soviet victory in the Second World War brought one big gain for modern Ukraine. It brought almost all the lands where the majority of the population was Ukrainian into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, one of the reasons for Putin's claim that 'modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era' and 'for a significant part – on the lands of historical Russia'.[40] The latter statement is only true if the land of the medieval Kyivan Rus' and the territory in southern Ukraine annexed by Russia in the 18th century are 'historical Russia' and not the Principality or Tsardom of Muscovy. To refer to all of Rus' and southern Ukraine as 'historical Russia' is an imperialist claim. What constitutes Ukraine today was not part of the Tsardom of Muscovy but was incorporated into the Russian Empire

following imperial expansion. The enlarged post-war Ukraine was part of a repressive state, and the important decisions were made in Moscow. After the war, more Russians moved to Ukraine as workers and administrators, and Russian culture and the Russian language permeated Ukraine. This process of gradual Russification has a long tradition but accelerated in the 1970s. In Central and Eastern Ukrainian, especially in the towns and cities, Russian was spoken more often than Ukrainian. This went so far that in the 1980s, Ukrainian culture and the Ukrainian language in Central and Eastern Ukraine were under severe threat.[41]

The disappearance of the idea that Ukrainians differ from Russians was exactly what Putin was hoping for. It should be clear by now that for Putin Ukraine does not have the right to exist independently from Russia. The major problem for Putin is that Ukrainians had and have other ideas. The first Ukrainian state-building attempts between 1918 and 1920 failed, but in 1990 the overwhelming majority of the population of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, one of the 15 constituent parts of the Soviet Union, voted for independence. This also included the majority of Ukrainian citizens with Russian as their native language. The support for independence was lowest in Crimea with 54%, but even there, the majority still voted for an independent Ukraine.[42]

Developments Since 1991

For the Ukrainian nation, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a blessing while Putin considers it a tragedy. Ukraine became an independent country although the country struggled after independence. Corruption was widespread and a few oligarchs became richer and richer, while the country continued to be dependent on Moscow.[43]

Revolutions, war, and the disintegration of states lead to a re-invention of public spaces. Monuments fall or are re-interpreted, new monuments are built, historical sites are re-decorated, and their meanings re-configured. This also happened in Ukraine after independence. The first Soviet monuments, in particular monuments to Lenin, fell in the early 1990s, followed by two more waves in 2013/14 during and after the fall of President Yanukovych and again 2022 after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Removing Lenin monuments was both a rejection of the Soviet past and an attempt to severe ties with Russia.[44] Initially, de-communisation of public space happened much more thoroughly in Western Ukraine. New monuments were built and streets renamed, dedicated to Ukrainian national traditions, but also to problematic heroes, such as Stepan Bandera, Roman Shushkevych, and other members of the OUN and its military arm, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army.[45]

The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia's military support for pro-Russian rebels in Eastern Ukraine did not have the effect Putin had expected. He thought that it would destabilise Ukraine, that Ukrainians would be divided, and eventually accept being ruled indirectly by Moscow. Contrary to his expectations, however, his aggression has led to much greater national unity in Ukraine while simultaneously making it obvious to everyone that the current Russian regime is an enemy of the Ukrainian nation and of Ukrainian independence. Because of Putin's actions the identification with Ukraine in all Ukrainian regions has grown stronger.

2014 also intensified the attempts in Ukraine to reduce the influence of the Russian language. To give an example of the Russian cultural influence: a study from 2012 claimed

that only 3.4% of songs played on Ukrainian radio were in Ukrainian while 60% were in Russian. More than 60% of newspapers, 83% of journals, and 87% of books were in Russian. Many of the books were imported from Russia. During prime time on the eight most popular television channels only 27.9% of programmes were in Ukrainian, 43.8% were in Russian, and 28.3% were in both languages.[46] The following year, the share of purely Russian programmes increased to 50.3% with 17.9 being bilingual and 31.8% Ukrainian.[47]

Many Ukrainians are at least bilingual and about 30%, including President Zelensky and his wife Olena Zelenska, have Russian as their first language. Putin wanted to exploit the presence of so many Russian speakers. He presented Russia as their protector and used alleged violations of their interests to justify his interference in the internal affairs of Ukraine. The Ukrainian parliament and government played into his hands by repealing the use of Russian as the second state language in some regions, by allowing Russian-language newspapers only to be published if they also had a Ukrainian-language edition, and by pushing to replace Russian-language schools by Ukrainian-language schools. From a Ukrainian perspective, these were defensive measures against the consequences of colonisation which aimed to reduce Russian cultural influences in Ukraine and push back the influence of a state – Russia – that had just annexed part of Ukrainian territory and was clearly aiming to destabilise the country.[48]

Heritage and Culture Wars

There can be no question that Putin's first war aim was to remove President Zelensky from power, take Kyiv and, by controlling the city, also control the cultural heritage.[49] Putin would have used this to cement the Russian claim of Russia being the only and legitimate heir of the Kyivan Rus. Heritage and identity are linked. Destroying or expropriating sites and material objects of Ukrainian cultural heritage is meant to weaken Ukrainian identity. Claiming these sites and objects as part of Russian heritage denies the existence of a Ukrainian culture and nation distinct from the Russian culture and nation. If Ukrainian culture is just part of Russian culture, then there is also no Ukrainian nation.

It does not make much sense for the Russian Army to target Orthodox churches and other heritage sites which can be claimed for Russia. They are viewed as elements of a common Orthodox Russian culture. In this case, the aim is to hand such sites over to the Russian Orthodox Church under the Moscow patriarchate, which supports the war against Ukraine. The Moscow patriarch gave his spiritual blessing and views the war as a war to save the Russian world, which the Church identifies with Russian Orthodoxy.[50]

A detailed discussion of the Greek Catholic Church, or the Ukrainian Catholic Church as it is known today, would go beyond the scope of this essay. This Ukrainian Catholic Church dominates in southwestern Ukraine, in those regions which were once part of Poland, then became part of Austria from 1772 and reverted to being part of Poland between 1918 and 1939. This Church is Ukrainian and fully supportive of Ukrainian statehood. Its history goes back to the Union of Florence in 1439 and the Union of Brest in 1596 when attempts were made to re-unite the Latin (Roman) and Greek (Orthodox) Churches but under Rome's leadership. The Greek-Catholic or Uniate Church retained the Orthodox liturgy and many other elements or Orthodoxy but accepted Catholic dogma and recognised the Roman Pope as Head of the Church.

Of greater interest are the different Orthodox Churches. I will only mention two of them here. The Russian Orthodox Church sees itself as the only legitimate successor of the Orthodox Church of the medieval and early modern Metropolinate of Kyiv. In 2019, after many years of trying, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church which had cut its links to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1990 was recognised by the Ecumenical Orthodox Patriarch in Istanbul as autocephalous, i.e. as fully independent. The Ukrainian authorities are now trying to make this Church the dominant and only Orthodox Church in Ukraine.[51] In November 2022, the Ukrainian government removed Pecherska Lavra, the Monastery of the Caves, from the Orthodox Church with links to Moscow and handed it over to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.[52]

For Russia the war is also a fight against Ukrainian culture and the Ukrainian language. In schools in the occupied territories, the Russian school curriculum and Russian textbooks have been introduced. In May, the Russian occupiers looted Scythian artefacts (gold) from Melitopol. Before they withdrew from Kherson, they emptied the Local History Museum and the Art Museum. More than 10,000 artefacts were stolen. The Ukrainian Ministry of Culture reported that Russian forces looted thousands of artefacts from more than 40 museums. In the occupied regions, Russian authorities have targeted Ukrainian culture, looted libraries, dismantled monuments displaying Ukrainian culture, removed artefacts from museums and transported them to Russia. They even exhumed the remains of Prince Potemkin from Kherson and took them to Russia.[53] Potemkin stands for the annexation and integration of so-called New Russia, the territories near the Black Sea in the Russian Empire. Until the 18th century, this region (including Crimea) had been controlled by the Crimean Khanate, which at that time was a vassal of the Ottoman sultans.

So far, none of the seven UNESCO world heritage sites in Ukraine have been severely damaged. In Kyiv, these are the 11th-century St. Sophia Cathedral and the ensemble of Pecherska Lavra, the Monastery of the Caves (built between the 11th and 19th century), in Lviv it is the historic town centre.[54]

By 8 March 2023, UNESCO had verified damage to 246 cultural sites, 107 religious sites, 20 museums, 88 buildings of historical or artistic interest, 19 monuments, and 12 libraries. Most of them seemed to have been damaged or destroyed because the Russian army did not – as it should do under the 1954 Hague convention – take special care to avoid damage to cultural sites.[55]

Ukrainian authorities and UNESCO have warned that the destruction and removal of art in Ukraine is an attempt to destroy Ukrainian heritage and Ukrainian identity.[56] This view is underpinned by numerous threats issued by Russian politicians and public figures to do away with the Ukrainian nation.[57]

What the Russian aggressor seems to target specifically are those parts of the Ukrainian heritage which are not compatible with the version of history dominant in Russia. The occupiers are trying to destroy heritage which could support the idea of a distinct Ukrainian nation. Several museums or monuments of the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko have been destroyed, as were monuments commemorating victims of Soviet terror and Holocaust memorials. To give another example: the Cossack hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky is a positive figure in Russia as he signed the treaty of Pereyaslav. Khmelnytsky monuments are not threatened; however, a favourite target are monuments dedicated to victims of the Holodomor, the famine-genocide of 1934. Russian authorities deny that it was a genocide directed against the Ukrainian nation, preferring to refer to it

as a 'tragedy' which also affected Russians and other ethnic groups. It is also possible that at least one regional archive has been destroyed because it held secret police files from the Soviet period.[58]

Ukrainians are trying to protect their monuments, libraries, archives, and museums. Volunteers all over Ukraine are putting artefacts, libraries, archives into storage. Other less movable items are being protected by sandbags, wooden boxes or wrapped in plastic. Digitisation projects are under way with international help to save Ukrainian cultural heritage from destruction.[59]

The Russian occupation forces seem to specifically target houses of culture and libraries, but by destroying them they are also destroying thousands of valuable Russian books. Many churches have been damaged or destroyed. By doing this the Russian troops are destroying the cultural heritage which Putin claims as Russian.[60]

In recent years in Ukraine, debates about the imperial past have intensified and efforts to decolonise public space have increased. Streets have been renamed, monuments toppled, museums which evoke the imperial past closed or re-dedicated. Russian culture and language are seen as the language and the culture of the enemy, of the aggressor who wants to destroy the Ukrainian nation.[61] The relationship to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union is interpreted as a colonial relationship, with Ukraine having been colonised by both. De-russification is seen as part of decolonisation.[62] Since the Russian attack, the Ukrainian authorities have renewed their attempts to get rid of the remaining monuments and street names from the Soviet period (decommunisation or de-Sovietisation) and the Russian Empire. As part of de-russification this campaign is now also directed against symbols of Russian culture. The debate about Aleksander Pushkin – criticised as apologist of empire – is a good example of this.[63] There are currently no performances of Russian music or plays in Ukraine.[64] Some authors and artists born in Ukraine are claimed for Ukraine. Examples include Mykola Hohol/Nikolaj Gogol, who was born in Ukraine and also wrote about Ukrainian topics but whose most famous works were written in Russian, and the famous suprematist artist Kazimir Malevych.[65] On the other side, Putin has recently claimed Taras Shevchenko as part of a shared culture as he also wrote in Russian. To claim the Ukrainian national poet Shevchenko for Russia is quite a stretch. In the Russian Empire, Shevchenko was imprisoned, drafted into the army, and sent to Kazakhstan because of his support for the Ukrainian national movement.[66]

On 19 June 2022 the Ukrainian parliament passed a law banning book imports from Russia and Belarus and in November 2022, the Ukrainian Minister of Culture called upon the West not to perform music or plays by Russian artists as long as Russia continues to wage war on Ukraine.[67] But nobody has done more for Ukrainisation than Putin himself with his attempts to control Ukraine, his annexation of Crimea, support for pro-Russian rebels, denial of the existence of a Ukrainian nation, and finally attack on Ukraine.

Over the last thirty years, more and more Russian native speakers have identified ethnically as Ukrainians and brought their civic identity in line with their ethnic identity. This is a natural process in any state.[68] Since the Russian attack, there has been increasing social and political pressure on native Russian speakers in Ukraine to speak more Ukrainian in everyday life. Many Russian native speakers have voluntarily switched to Ukrainian to show their support for Ukraine. The best example is the presidential couple: Zelensky and his wife Olena's native language is Russian.[69]

But for many people with unclear national identifications or who are of mixed Ukrainian-Russian family background – and there are millions of them – the war has been a blow to their identity. Before the war, it was possible to have a hybrid Russian-Ukrainian identity. War does what war always does. It forces people to make decisions which they otherwise would not have to make.

In 2015, one year after the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war against Russian sponsored rebels in Luhansk and Donetsk provinces, the Verkhovna Rada, the Ukrainian parliament, passed a law 'On the condemnation of the Communist and National-Socialist (Nazi) totalitarian regimes, and prohibition of propaganda of their symbols.' Local authorities were told to implement this policy in urban space. In the following years 'at least 51 thousand streets, 987 towns and villages were renamed; 2389 monuments were demolished, including 1320 Lenin monuments'.[70]

The People's Friendship Arch in Kyiv, also known as the Monument to the Reunification of Ukraine with Russia, was not on the list. It was unveiled in November 1982, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Soviet Union and the 1500th anniversary of Kyiv. The popular name of the arch was Yarmo, meaning yoke. After 2014 a debate started whether it should be destroyed and be replaced by a monument to the victims of war or to the glory of those fighting for Ukraine or just a Ferris wheel. In November 2018, some activists painted a black crack on the arch, symbolising the rupture between Ukrainians and Russians. After the Russian attack on Ukraine, in May 2022, the Kyiv City council renamed it into the Arch of Freedom of the Ukrainian people. On 26 April 2022, Mayor Vitalii Klichko announced that the sculptural part with a Russian worker and the Russian delegation at the Pereyaslav meeting in 1654 would be dismantled like 60 other monuments in Kyiv. He also announced that more than 460 streets and places in Kyiv would be renamed. In the following weeks this was done.[71]

Conclusion

In the past, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was not an ethnic conflict, a conflict between the people, but rather a conflict in which the interests of the Russian state with its imperial ambitions (whether it was the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, or today's Russian Federation) takes centre stage.

The alienation between Russians and Ukrainians before the Russian attack on Ukraine is not the result of Ukrainian attempts to join the European Union and the NATO, it is the result of Putin's policy of trying to bring Ukraine back under Russian control. There can be no question that Russia and Ukraine would have much closer relations if Russia were a democratic country and had renounced imperialism.

Along with many members of the Russian political elite, Putin shares the view that it is not in the Russian interest to allow Ukraine leave its sphere of influence. He would agree with the former advisor to the American president Zbigniew Brzezinski, who in 1994 famously remarked that 'it cannot be stressed strongly enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire'.[72] Putin wants Russia to be an empire, his nostalgic feelings for the Soviet Union have nothing to do with sympathies for socialism. He sees the Soviet Union as a state in which Russia was able to express its power and establish its hegemony over Eastern Europe.

This war started as Putin's war. It was not the war of Russian oligarchs or wanted by the Russian military or 'military-industrial complex' and it was not a war of the Russian people. But Russian society is divided. For some Russians, the current war is a tragedy, and all their instincts tell them that it is fundamentally wrong for Russian soldiers to be shooting at or bombing Ukrainians. But Russians who protest against the war are arrested, mistreated, lose their jobs, have left the country or are in the process of leaving. Yet a large part of the Russian population seems to have bought into Putin's delusions and believes the propaganda reiterated daily in the Russian media, that Russia itself is under threat and that there is a larger 'Russian world' which cannot exist without Ukraine. Putin has managed to make the people around him, the Russian army, and Russian soldiers his accomplices. The more war crimes Russian soldiers commit, the more the perpetrators are bound to Putin.

Originally Putin intended to eliminate the democratically elected Ukrainian government and replace it by a pro-Russian puppet government while winning over the Ukrainian people. He denounced the Ukrainian leadership as Nazis and argued that the war was necessary to denazify Ukraine. Then Putin came to believe that the Ukrainian people were the enemy. His preference was to reverse Ukrainian nation-building and force Ukrainians to accept their fate and become part of the Russian people. The destruction or appropriation of Ukrainian cultural heritage is part of this policy. The recent Ukrainian successes on the battlefield make this unlikely. Now, he is trying to grab and keep as much Ukrainian territory as possible, but even these limited aims are now threatened.

Notes

1. Von Hagen, "Does Ukraine have a history?".
2. Hrushevsky, *Istorija Ukrajiny-Rusy*, t. 1 (History of Ukraine – Rus', vol. 1). The English edition was published between 1997 and 2014 by the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies. Plokhy, *Unmaking Imperial Russia*.
3. Isaevych, "Ukrainian studies".
4. Marples, *Heroes and villains*, 1–35 and 239–281.
5. There are several excellent surveys on Ukrainian history in English, for example Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe*; Yekelchyk, *Birth of a modern nation*; Wilson, *The Ukrainians*. Still valuable Subtelny, *Ukraine*; Magocsi, *History of Ukraine*. For the place of the Kyivan Rus in Russian identity formation see Riasanovsky, *Russian identities*, 18–32.
6. Putin, addressing the Foundation of Ukraine's civilisational choice conference in Kyiv, 27 July 2013.
7. See also Reid, "Putin's war on History".
8. The Washington Post published in 2015 an article with seven maps showing the historical development of Ukraine. Tharoor/Thorp, "How Ukraine became Ukraine, in seven maps" (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/09/maps-how-ukraine-became-ukraine/).
9. Plokhy, *The gates of Europe*, 41–72.
10. Halperin, *Russia and the Golden Horde*.
11. Frost, *The Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, 405–494.
12. Plokhy, *The gates of Europe*, 58–60, 67–72, 85–85. Snyder, *The reconstruction of nations*, 105–112.
13. Plokhy, *The gates of* Europe, 63–72. Plokhy, *The origins of the Slavic Nations*.
14. Plokhy, *The gates of Europe, 104*.
15. Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, 15–16, 72–73. Miller, *A testament of the all-Russian idea."* 234–235.
16. Kloss, *O proizkhozhdenii nazvanija"Rossija"*.

17. Hughes, *Russia in the age of Peter the Great*.
18. Snyder, *The reconstruction of nations*, 112–119. Plokhy, *The gates of Europe, 109–146*.
19. Snyder, *The reconstruction of nations*, 122–132.
20. Kappeler, *The nationalities of the Russian Empire*.
21. Miller, *The Ukrainian question*, 26–30. Plokhy, *The gates of Europe*, 147–173.
22. Khromeychuk, "Where is Ukraine?".
23. Himka, *Galician villagers*. Magocsi, *The roots of Ukrainian nationalism*.
24. Hrushevsky, *From Kievan Rus to modern Ukraine*.
25. Plokhy, *The gates of Europe*, 64–72. Plokhy, *The origins of the Slavic nations*, 85–121.
26. Plokhy, *The gates of Europe*, 73–84.
27. Ibid., 97–107.
28. Ibid., 103–105.
29. Davies, "The road to Perejaslav", 484–493.
30. Putin, "On the Historical Unity", 1.
31. Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation", 1.
32. Ibid., 6, 7, 14.
33. Yekelchyk, *Ukraine*, 64–78. Liber, *Total wars*, 55–80.
34. Subtelny, *Ukraine*, 339–379. Mick, *Lemberg*, 137–209. Suny, "National revolutions", 119–140. Adams, "The Great Ukrainian jacquerie", 247–270.
35. Martin, *Affirmative action empire*, 75–124. Liber, *Total wars*, 116–125. Yekelchyk, *Ukraine*, 79–84.
36. Liber, *Total wars*, 151–159.
37. Applebaum, *Red Famine*.
38. Deutscher Bundestag, "Plenarprotokoll 20/72", 8418–8426.
39. Press release by the European Parliament, December 15, 2023.
40. Putin, "On the historical unity", 10.
41. Yekelchyk, *Ukraine*, 173–175.
42. Ibid., 188–192. See also "10 maps that explain Ukraine's struggle for independence" (https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2015/05/21/10-maps-that-explain-ukraines-struggle-for-independence/).
43. Motyl, *Dilemmas of independence*. Havrylyshyn, *The political economy*.
44. Gaidai, "Leninfall in Ukraine", 11.
45. Sereda, "Politics of memory". Liebich and Myshlovska, "Bandera", 750–770.
46. "Ukrajins'ka mova", 2012.
47. "Ukraijins'ka mova", 2013.
48. Kulyk, "Shedding Russianness", 119–138.
49. On the development of the war "Ukraine in maps: Tracking the war with Russia" (https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-60506682).
50. Press Service of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, 27 February 2022.
51. Mykhalenko, "The new Independent Orthodox Church", 476–499.
52. Tymotsko, "Orthodox Church in Ukraine". Tondo, "Ukraine's security service". Graham-Harrison, "Ukraine's pro-Russian monasteries".
53. Human Rights Watch, 12 December 2022. Santora, "Why Russia stole Potemkin's bones from Ukraine".
54. "Damaged cultural sites in Ukraine verified by UNESCO"(Situation on March 8, 2023).
55. 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.
56. "Targeted destruction of Ukraine's Culture Must Stop: UN Experts", February 22, 2023. Kovai/Gaidai, "The destruction of Ukrainian cultural heritage".
57. See for example Sergejtsev, "Chto Rossija dolzhna sdelat' s Ukrainoj", March 4, 2022.
58. On the dismantlement of the Holodomor monument in Mariupol see Statement of the Holodomor Museum, 20 October 2022.
59. Kurin, "How Ukrainians are defending their national heritage".
60. Kishkovsky, "Ukrainian Churches". Seymour, "Is Ukraine's cultural heritage under coordinated attack". Mohan, "How Russia plans to 'de-Ukrainise' captured territories".

61. Lutska, "Why are Ukrainian cities renaming streets".
62. Barkawi, "War and decolonisation in Ukraine".
63. Betlii, "The identity politics of heritage", 159–167.
64. Mirovalev, "How Ukrainians 'de-Russify' themselves".
65. On Hohol/Gogol see Poilukhovych, "Stolen identity".
66. Putin, "On the historical unity", 6.
67. "Ukraine calls on Western Allies to cancel Russian culture", *The Guardian*, December 7, 2022. Tkachenko, "As Ukraine's culture minister, I'm asking you to boycott Tchaikovsky until this war is over". *The Guardian*, December 7, 2022.
68. Brubaker, R. *National minorities*, 113–115.
69. Mirovalev, "How Ukrainians 'de-Russify' themselves". Luxmoore, "Moscow's invasion".
70. Betlii, "The identity politics of heritage", 155.
71. Ibid., 153–159.
72. Showing astonishing foresight: Brzezinski, "The premature partnership", 80.

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