

# Back to the Russian Empire

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## **Vladimir Putin's version of history is little more than propaganda to justify his war aims**

For the last two weeks, analysts have been puzzling over Russian president Vladimir Putin's motives for launching the invasion of Ukraine. Ilya Matveev, a left-wing Russian sociologist, [states](#) that Putin's motivations lie neither in economic nor geopolitical security interests, i.e. not in the West and NATO, since these factors do not explain the current turn of events. Reflecting critically on his previous stance, Matveev notes that he had not taken the ruling elite's imperialist, nationalist ideology adequately into account, who evidently have assigned themselves a historical mission of restoring Russia to its former greatness.

Could or should this ideology have been taken into account earlier? Certainly. Anyone who has travelled around Russia could not fail to notice the ubiquity of the imperial politics of memory. One example is the interactive exhibition "Russia — My History", which is now on permanent display in 23 cities in Russia. The technology is up-to-date, but the message is questionable. A basic colour-coded scheme informs visitors, especially young people, whether a ruler was good or bad. The exhibition turns green, signalling "good", if the ruler or the state was strong and gained territory. On the other hand, the exhibition turns red to indicate eras in which the ruler was weak and internal conflicts paralysed the empire.

The exhibition does not teach visitors how to reflect critically on historical narratives; its sole concern is to transmit an image of imperial strength. Putin, of course, also aspires to be lit in green in the prospective master narrative of Russia's imperial strength.

But you didn't have to travel to Russia to find all this out, you also could have read about it. Last year, the German magazine titled its July issue "[The Spirit of the Times: War Speeches from Russia](#)". The issue addressed Russia's contemporary politics of memory and Putin's statements from July 2021. Andreas Kappler issued a clear [warning](#): "Putin's threats should be taken seriously." [Andrei Kolesnikov](#) stated as early as 2020: "The dominant discourse [in Russia] is imperial, militaristic, centred around making threats."

The Left saw these developments, but we failed to address them publicly. Instead, these warnings were often dismissed as "the production of imaginary enemies" and brushed aside. The past few weeks have shown that we should have engaged much more critically with these remarks-

## **Ukraine: Just a Part of the Russian Empire?**

A longing for the lost empire has long been part of the Russian politics of memory and is by no means a new phenomenon. As early as 2005, Putin [spoke](#) of the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century. He based this claim on the fact that millions of Russians suddenly found themselves living outside their own country overnight. Tremendous economic turbulence and serious social problems that resulted from the disintegration of the Soviet Union were of secondary concern to him. Putin's top priority was the fact that Russians had to live outside of Russia. These people, who Putin was addressing directly in his speech, live not

only in Ukraine, but also in other states including Belarus and Kazakhstan.

An important moment in this imperial politics of memory was an article published in July 2021 entitled [“On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”](#). Putin claimed authorship over this article, which sets out his view of history: Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians are one people. He traces this unity back to the Kyivan Rus’, the loose medieval Slavic federation.

In a tour de force spanning centuries, the article explains why Ukraine is not an independent nation. Along the way, the claim is made that it was only the historical coincidence of the Mongol invasion that led to the division of the Kyivan Rus’. Later, foreign rulers tried to declare what is today’s Ukraine — without calling it by that name — to be a separate entity from the Tsarist empire.

Putin is not falsifying history in this account, but he is adding an [imperialist and nationalist undertone](#) to the narrative. In order to justify Russia’s current political agenda and to lay claim to Ukraine, medieval Kyivan Rus’ is equated with Russia. He does not address how the political situation in the Middle Ages differs from that of today. Of course, there is no use in launching into a precise exegesis of his pamphlet. Putin is not a historian, nor is he concerned with historiographical discourse. Putin’s text merely serves as a justification for Russia’s imperialist policies today.

Putin uses terms from the time of the Tsarist Empire, such as “Little Russia”, and ignores Ukraine’s nation-building processes in the nineteenth century. For him, there is only the Ukraine of the twentieth century, which is a creation of the Soviet Union. Putin notes that the Bolsheviks allocated many territories to Ukraine without asking the people in those regions. This fact is supposed to justify Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea following a referendum, an operation which was supervised by the “green men” (Russian soldiers without insignia, as Putin later openly admitted). This time, at least, the people were asked.

### **Defending Russia from Lenin**

While the first part of Putin’s diatribe concentrates on the non-existence of Ukraine’s history as a separate entity, the second part discusses Ukraine in its 30 years of independence. It profited from its relationship with Russia, but foreign influence caused the growth of “Anti-Russian sentiment”. Putin claims that the US and the EU are to blame. He insists that Ukrainians have neither the ability to make their own decisions nor any power to act. These external influences have led to the country adopting an anti-Russian policy, and to a “violent assimilation” of the Russian-speaking people in Ukraine. This would be “comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us”, Putin said.

[Andreas Kappler](#) saw that these words were potentially dangerous and warned that “such statements increase the concern that Russia could use the alleged persecution and discrimination of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Ukraine as a pretext for indirect or even direct intervention.” This concern was justified. A striking illustration of this is the way that Russian propaganda commonly refers to “genocide” in the Donbas region, which is also being used as justification for the current attack on Ukraine.

Last summer, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky joked that he had no time to read this article, let alone write one himself, since he had a country to run. Today, he may end up eating his words. On 21 February 2022, the next step of the imperial plan was implemented: Russia recognized the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. In his statement, Putin said: “Ukraine is not simply a neighbouring country for us. It is an integral part of our own history, our culture, our spiritual space.”

Lenin, the destroyer of the Russian Empire, is banished from Putin's politics of memory as punishment for creating Ukraine in the first place. This gift from Russia ended up being detrimental to Russia itself. Lenin is the bogeyman who is held responsible for the existence of Ukraine and the other Soviet republics. In granting these countries the right to leave the Soviet Union, he made Putin's "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century" possible. While Stalin at least reunited the Soviet Union with an iron fist, his fatal mistake was to fail to revise the right to leave the Soviet Union, which was enshrined in the constitution. Stalin, who otherwise symbolizes Soviet strength, victory in World War II, and the power of the Russian empire, overlooked this. For Putin, the Soviet Union is historical Russia under a different name.

While Putin's closing remarks claimed that the citizens of Ukraine would decide for themselves what would become of Ukraine, as of 24 February he has been trying to influence further developments in Ukraine by use of force. In his [declaration of war](#), he spoke of the areas on the Russian border that "historically belong to us [Russia]". It turns out that this article from summer 2021 was not just another statement by the Russian president, notorious for his high degree of ideological flexibility, but a roadmap for war.

Whether the Russian people will let him get away with attacking Kiev, "the mother of all Russian cities" as he himself describes it, remains to be seen. The protest movement against the war which took to the streets of Russia and which also plays out on the internet give hope that a different kind of unity between the people of Ukraine and Russia exists—a unity that opposes Putin's war against Ukraine, and which instead advocates for a peaceful, equal relationship between the people.

### **The Uses and Abuses of Soviet Anti-Fascism**

Victory Day, which celebrates the surrender of Nazi Germany, is celebrated each year in Moscow on 9 May with a large military parade. Each year, the latest developments of Russian arms manufacturers, one of Russia's few world-class industries, are put on display. While the people commemorate their fallen ancestors who fought against Germany and the 27 million citizens of Soviet Union who lost their lives as a result of the German invasion, the state's spectacle is not concerned with this suffering. The Russian leadership is instead concerned with demonstrating the country's power and greatness.

Leftists in Russia, including Kirill Medvedev, have criticized the parade as a "[show of Putinist nationalism](#)". Other leftists from Ukraine, such as [Stanislav Serhiienko](#), have also weighed in critically. Serhiienko insisted that "the true anti-fascist struggle must not be built on militarism and the cult of war. It must be directed against all fascist movements, as well as against any manifestations of racism, xenophobia, conservatism and nationalism." This criticism did not receive widespread attention among the Left. However, the military parades on 9 May is not the only place where the victory against fascism is distorted and made into a sign of military, imperial strength. Similar manoeuvres can be found in other aspects of "patriotic-military education" in Russia. In the Patriot Park outside Moscow, for example, adolescents can re-enact the storming of the Reichstag. The anti-fascist liberation struggle is turned into a militaristic spectacle even for the youngest.

Russia's leadership has always instrumentalized the anti-fascist victory to suit its own interests. Putin's justification for the attack on Ukraine is catastrophic. In addition to demilitarization, Putin claims to be pursuing a policy of [denazification](#) in Ukraine, by which he means eliminating the current Ukrainian government. In his speech, he attempted to link this policy to the memory, still virulent in Russia, of 22 June 1941, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. He talks of Russia being under threat and equates the Ukrainian government with Ukrainian Nazi collaborators in World War II. Even today, according to Putin, [neo-Nazis and drug addicts](#) rule in Kiev.

In all of this, Putin is doing a grave disservice to anti-fascism. Progressive forces in Ukraine have long criticized [right-wing violence in Ukraine](#), the [networking of Ukrainian neo-Nazis in Europe](#), and [the problematic politics of memory](#). However, the accusation that the Ukrainian leadership are Nazis is detrimental to the anti-fascist cause and further encourages both a trivialization of fascist forces in Ukraine as well as a fatal politics of memory that glorifies Ukrainian collaborators and fascists. Regardless of the outcome of the war, we can expect a surge in nationalist sentiment and significantly less space for critical reflection on a politics of memory in Ukraine. Anti-fascists, such as the [International Auschwitz Committee](#), are right to resist this cynical appropriation of Soviet anti-fascism.

We would have done well to listen to our Russian and Ukrainian comrades who criticized this misuse of the anti-fascist history before Russia's attack. In 2005 an initiative launched in Moscow turned the [black and orange striped Ribbon of St George](#) into a new symbol of military victory in World War II. St George's Ribbon refers to the Orthodox Saint George, and replaced the previously widespread red Soviet flag.

Using old imperial Russian motifs to increase the appeal of the Soviet leadership was also historically a part of Stalin's strategy during World War II. Imperial figures such as Aleksander Nevsky, to this day a national hero, have been repeatedly celebrated in recent years. Following 2014, the ribbon was also used in (Eastern) Ukraine and Russia as a symbol against "the fascists in Ukraine" — who do indeed exist and are a problem, but whose importance has been vastly exaggerated in pro-Russian propaganda to fuel the war.

All of this should have been criticized alongside the [EU's harmful politics](#) of memory. However, the voices were too quiet and were not heard. An anti-fascist legacy could unite progressive forces in Europe across borders. This hope, championed by Kirill Medvedev, has probably been exhausted in light of Putin's renewed instrumentalization of the history of anti-fascism. Uniting across international borders behind the banner of anti-fascism would be the right thing to do, but it is now becoming incredibly difficult, as are many other things — the fight against rearmament, against nationalism, and further military escalation. But these are all more necessary now than ever!

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