

# Who Invented “Historical Russia” and Why?

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**Political philosopher Andrey Oleynikov tells a brief history of the concept which has become one of the key elements of Putin’s propaganda**

Until recently, only a small group of intellectuals found it pleasant to study the vocabulary of Putin’s regime. Indeed, a rare breed of people is preoccupied with chimeras of state ideology such as “sovereign democracy” or “deep people”, and the intellectual rubbish they are made of. Today, when this regime has to go to extremes to prolong its existence, unmasking its mock legitimacy becomes a matter of tremendous political importance. One of the major claims of this regime consists in its “organic” historical essence. Thus, one of the amendments to the constitution, which were adopted in 2020, reads:

“The Russian Federation, united by a thousand-year history, preserving the memory of the ancestors, who passed on to us ideals and faith in God, as well as succession in the development of the Russian state, recognizes the historically formed unity of the state.”

It is hard to overlook a tautological character of this statement: the Russian Federation, being a product of a thousand-year history, recognizes its own *historically formed* state unity. Hence, apparently, there is no other subject of founding action, which produced the Russian Federation, apart from history. Here it becomes clear why it is so important for current authorities to present themselves as pure and simple agents of history itself. A peculiar idiom of “historical Russia” was coined to reach this goal. Now it helps Putin’s regime to justify its actions inside and outside Russia.

It is hard to indicate a specific date when this very phrase was taken on board. According to my examination, hardly mentioned in 2000’s, it became visible starting with Putin’s third presidential term, and just before the war with Ukraine it turned into the main ideologeme of his external policy. So, what is “historical Russia” according to Putin? Firstly, it is the Soviet Union, the country which collapsed in 1991, with contemporary Russia becoming its legal successor. Why is it so important to consider the USSR part of “historical Russia”? Because Putin needs to create an impression that there what happened in 1917 was not a revolution, that the bolsheviks never aimed at setting the world proletariat free, and the Soviet Union “[in its essence](#)” was a “[historically big Russia which was essentially formed already in the XVIII century](#)” (italics is mine — A.O.). Secondly, “historical Russia” is not a national state. The peoples, which it consists of, once made a choice in favor of “a polyethnic civilization, fastened together by a Russian cultural core. And this choice was justified by the Russian nation time and time again — *not through plebiscite or referendums, but with blood*. With its whole thousand-year history (italics is mine — A.O.)”. And thirdly. All the state formations (except Russia), which appeared on the ruins of the USSR, are political misfits designed specifically to harm “historical Russia”. This is particularly the case with Ukraine seen as “[merely an offspring of the Soviet era](#)”.

Though perfectly understanding and criticizing such historical exercises, many clever and respectable [authors still engage in serious](#) debates with Putin about the development of Russian

civilization and alternative paths this development could have taken. Yet, when it comes to “historical Russia” it seems to be more appropriate to point at an exclusively instrumental usage of history to suit political interests, regardless of how sincerely Putin and his followers believe in what they say, without trying to understand if there is any “grain of truth” in these historical speculations or not. With that said, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the idiom “historical Russia” is not an invention of Putin and his pandits. It has existed in Russian political discourse for over a century and a half. I will give a brief account of its history.

Apparently, though I cannot claim pinpoint accuracy here, the coinage first appears in the post-reform epoch in conservative press. Thus, in one of the tribute articles to Mikhail Katkov, a famous conservative columnist, professor of Moscow University Nikolai Liubimov writes that the editor of the *Moscow Gazette* helped Russian audience realize the idea of “historical Russia”, which is “Russia a strong government, *unitary and alive, not collective and relative*. Historical Russia means Russian government and Russian people standing amicably together on guard of Russian interests (italics is mine – A.O.) [\[1\]](#). In fact, works of Russian conservatives at the end of XIX and the beginning of XX century use “historical Russia” as a synonym and broad definition of the czarist regime. After the revolution and the Civil War the term becomes popular in anti-bolshevist and immigrant environments as the antipode of Soviet political order. It loses its earlier necessary connection with czarism and turns into a nostalgic ideal of the state fully harmonized with popular aspirations. Ivan Ilyin, considered one of the most favorite conservative thinkers of Putin, uses the phrase in this vein. Ironically, it is the anti-Putinist usage of the term that strikes the eye. Ilyin openly declares the Soviet Union a complete antithesis of historical Russia. Having occupied its territory, this, as Ilyin calls it, “international bandit” refuses to understand that “international relations are based on law and mutual respect, that “the one who despises the rights of others will one day be stripped of all rights, as it happened with Hitler [...]” [\[2\]](#).

Nonetheless, Putin was not the first one to liken “historical Russia” to the Soviet Union. Gennady Zyuganov [the irremovable leader of the Russian Communist Party] back in the 1990’s had called the USSR “a natural successor of a thousand-year-old historical Russia” [\[3\]](#), while conservative politician Natalia Narochitskaya explained this metamorphosis, unthinkable for Ilyin, with the Great Patriotic War [WWII]. Through this war, according to Narochitskaya, the “Russian heritage” was incorporated into the Soviet doctrine and “historical Russia” rose from the rubble with a new name: the USSR [\[4\]](#).

Thus, creating his version of “historical Russia”, Putin used groundwork that evolved in the environment hostile to Yeltsin. However, unlike Russian irredentists or imperials and other revanchists devoured by resentment, Putin and his followers tried to create an image of this historical Russia, which would not demand a restoration of downtrodden justice, but would merely produce a slumberous depoliticizing effect on the population. It looks like Russia has earned the ruling of Putin by its thousand-year history. As if he stopped the processes of inner rotting and decay that mutilated the country in the 1990’s, as if he neutralized all its external enemies. And now, to preserve the achieved well-being Russian people need to do nothing but listen to their chief. After all, “right now we are together witnessing” — said Vladimir Medinskiy in one of his [speeches](#) — “how historical Russia is confidently regaining its rights — as it has always been in our history”.

This “eternal recurrence” will see its end only when *historical contingency* of Putin’s power becomes obvious, and it is about this contingency that Aleksey Navalny talked in the New York Times [interview](#) given from prison last year. One can imagine what this end will look like if we remember the celebration of *The Day of Russia* on June 12, 2017. On that day a crowd of protesters, inspired by Navalny, broke into Tverskaya and swept away a group of re-enactors from the Times and Epochs festival [a largest reenactment event held by the Russian Historical society]. That was a full rehearsal of the true history prevailing over mock history. Hopefully, we will just as well see a

premiere of this play.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] Liubimov N.A. *Mikhail Nikiforovich Katkov*, Russkiy Vestnik. 197(1): 3-49. 1888. p. 26.

[2] Ilyin I.A. *Soviet Union is not Russia*. All-time Theses. 1947. Munich: Im Werden Verlag. Non-commercial electronic issue, 2007.

[3] Zyuganov G.A. *Geography of Victory: basis of Russian geopolitics*. Moscow.: KPRF party press, 1997, p. 113.

[4] Narochnitskaya N. *Historical Russia and the USSR*. // *New and Newest History* 41(1), 1998. pp. 120-147.