

## Putin's Use and Abuse of History: Back to the 19th Century?

by Leo Goretti

"Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space." This is how Putin introduced the "decisions being made" in his 55-minute address to the nation on 21 February 2022, which paved the way for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> Several commentators noted how Putin's speech was replete with historical references: as historian Benjamin Nathans pointed out, Vladimir Putin seems to be "quite obsessed with history. So part of our attention [...] should be looking at how Putin is using history".<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, almost one-quarter of Putin's speech was devoted to a rather erratic

and convoluted discussion of pre-1991 Russian and Soviet history, departing from the assumption that this was necessary "to explain the motives behind Russia's actions and what we aim to achieve".<sup>3</sup>

Such a fixation with the past is even more evident if one refers back to the essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"<sup>4</sup> that Putin published in July 2021, right after diplomatic tensions with Kyiv due to a previous massive deployment of Russian troops and hardware near the border with Ukraine.<sup>5</sup> While it is unclear whether the essay was personally written by the Russian President, there is little doubt

<sup>1</sup> Russian Presidency, *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 21 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>. A video version is available at: <https://youtu.be/APPjVIUA-gs>.

<sup>2</sup> Kristen de Groot, "Russia's Attack on Ukraine, through the Lens of History", in *Penn Today*, 25 February 2022, <https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/russias-attack-ukraine-through-lens-history>.

<sup>3</sup> Russian Presidency, *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, cit.

<sup>4</sup> Russian Presidency, *Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians"*, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>5</sup> Mykola Bielieskov, "The Russian and Ukrainian Spring 2021 War Scare", in *CSIS Reports*, September 2021, <https://www.csis.org/node/62339>.

that he closely supervised the process.<sup>6</sup> Putin even devoted a special Q&A session to discuss the contents of the article in a more informal way.<sup>7</sup>

The choice to author an article whose English version is almost 7,000 words long is significant – and somehow deeply anachronistic. Not surprisingly, Ukrainian President Zelensky responded to its publication by quipping: “I am envious that the president of such a great power can permit himself to spend so much time [writing] such a volume of detailed work.”<sup>8</sup>

Stretching from the “Ancient Rus” to events taking place in May 2021, the essay provides a highly selective and ideological reading of over one thousand years of history. Despite Putin’s claim that this is “analytical material based on historical facts, events and historical documents”,<sup>9</sup> it would be pointless to engage in a sweeping review to debunk the individual claims made throughout.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Dmitry Shlapentokh, “Putin and Ukraine: Power and the Construction of History”, in *Institute of Modern Russia Analysis*, 8 September 2021, <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/3335>.

<sup>7</sup> Russian Presidency, *Vladimir Putin Answered Questions on the Article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”*, 13 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66191>.

<sup>8</sup> “Zelenskiy Trolls Putin After Russian President Publishes Article on Ukraine”, in *RFE/RL*, 13 July 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/zelenskiy-trolls-putin-ukraine/31356912.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Russian Presidency, *Vladimir Putin Answered Questions*, cit.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Snyder, “How to Think about War in Ukraine. Start with the Ukrainians”, in *Thinking about...*, 18 January 2022, <https://snyder.substack.com/p/how-to-think-about-war-in-ukraine>.

Instead, the document is interesting as a source about Putin’s world view and that of his inner circle and should be analysed as such.

The underlying approach, centred on the vindication of an essentialist, middle-age origin of Russia’s nationhood that is somehow reminiscent of late 19th-century/early 20th-century nationalist pamphlets, seems to be a step further in Putin’s gradual turn to ethnocultural nationalism with imperialist undertones.<sup>11</sup> So, in Putin’s narrative, “Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus”, bound by “spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and hav[ing] their origins in the same sources”.<sup>12</sup>

While acknowledging that “some part of a people [...] can become aware of itself as a separate nation at a certain moment”, the Russian president supports the idea that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people” and that Russia, Ukraine and Belarus together are “a single large nation, a triune nation”<sup>13</sup> – a concept Putin reasserted again in the Q&A, highlighting that “the triunity of our people has never been and will never be gone”.<sup>14</sup> Of course,

<sup>11</sup> This shift to various forms of ethnic nationalism has been in the making in Russia for at least a decade; see the essays collected in Pål Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (eds), *The New Russian Nationalism. Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Russian Presidency, *Article by Vladimir Putin*, cit.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Russian Presidency, *Vladimir Putin Answered Questions*, cit.

this reading of Russia's nationhood is accompanied both by a benign reading of Russia's imperial past (when "the south-western lands of the Russian Empire [...] developed as ethnically and religiously diverse entities") and by a rejection of competing ethno-nationalist narratives, such as 19-century Ukrainian nationalism, which according to Putin had "no historical basis"<sup>15</sup> and was part of an "anti-Russia project" started as far back as the 17th century.<sup>16</sup>

The implications of such an approach with regard to today's Ukraine are clear in Putin's article. While paying lip service to respect for "Ukrainians' desire to see their country free, safe and prosperous", Putin explicitly claims that, due to their common historical legacy, "true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia".<sup>17</sup>

In territorial terms, this is also linked to a substantial diminishment of Ukraine's integrity. The essay obviously supports the annexation of Crimea ("Crimea and residents of Sevastopol made their historic choice") and a secession of Donbas ("Kiev simply does not need Donbas"); but remarkably, its potential implications seem to go further. This is the case, for example, when Putin refers to his mentor Anatoly Sobchak's opinion that "the republics that were founders of the Union, having denounced the 1922 Union

Treaty, must return to the boundaries they had had before joining the Soviet Union", or when he complains about the annexation of Carpathian Ruthenia to Ukraine in 1945.<sup>18</sup>

This highlights another notable aspect of Putin's discourse: his firm distancing from Russia's Bolshevik past. The Russian president was adamant on this in his address: "the disintegration of our united country was brought about by the historic, strategic mistakes on the part of the Bolshevik leaders and the CPSU leadership".<sup>19</sup> It was the Bolsheviks who "shaped [modern Ukraine] – for a significant part – on the lands of historical Russia", that is, in Putin's view, 17th-century and later imperial Russia; in doing so, they "chopp[ed] the country into pieces" and "Russia was robbed".<sup>20</sup>

Putin referred to the USSR's founding father directly, citing Lenin as responsible for having laid "a slogan about the right of nations to self-determination [...] in the foundation of Soviet statehood". This original act, described as "worse than a mistake" by Putin, was followed by many others, leading to "the collapse" of what Putin significantly calls "the historical Russia known as the USSR".<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Russian Presidency, *Article by Vladimir Putin*, cit.

<sup>16</sup> Russian Presidency, *Vladimir Putin Answered Questions*, cit.

<sup>17</sup> Russian Presidency, *Article by Vladimir Putin*, cit.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. On Anatoly Sobchak see Ian Traynor, "Anatoly Sobchak", in *The Guardian*, 21 February 2000, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/gtt7>.

<sup>19</sup> Russian Presidency, *Address by the President*, cit.

<sup>20</sup> Russian Presidency, *Article by Vladimir Putin*, cit.

<sup>21</sup> Russian Presidency, *Address by the President*, cit. Emphasis mine.

Overall, Putin's discourse on history seems to point to a rejection of the Soviet (especially Bolshevik) past, with the notable exception of the USSR's participation in World War 2. The narrow focus on Russia's history and "national interests" and the lack of references to notions traditionally exploited in Soviet propaganda such as 'humanity', 'progress' or 'future' are telling in this respect: notably, the only (three) times that Putin used the word "future" in his presidential address on 21 February were in relation to past Communist policy choices ("nobody gave any thought to the future"; "against the backdrop of the superficial and populist rhetoric about democracy and a bright future") or possible threats coming from the US and NATO ("they are going to behave in the same way in the future").<sup>22</sup>

Instead, Putin's present vision seems to be steeped in a late 19th-century mentality, shaped by raw geopolitical thinking combined with an *à-la-carte* reading of the past, whereby the Russian 'Motherland' encompasses in an imperial embrace a variety of "historical territories" and peoples based on very dubious claims about history and identity. As historians know, such speculations are easily fabricated and reshaped at one's convenience – and they are very likely to create animosity and exacerbate tensions between and within states.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> As Eric J. Hobsbawm famously wrote, "We must resist the formation of national, ethnic and other myths, as they are being formed". See *On History*, lecture given in 1993 at the Central European University in Budapest, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/>

Once the inevitable need to reopen dialogue with Moscow materialises, it will be necessary that the Russian president abandon his fictional history books. To do so, Putin must be confronted with present international realities, hundreds of years away from the Russian imperial past. This implies full respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states according to international law, acknowledging the possibility for the peaceful coexistence of communities within them, as well as abandoning the toxic language of 'national questions' and 'civilisational heritages'.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, a path must be traced to a different future, one in which Russia can again have a place and a role in the international system.

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[books/chap1/onhistory.htm](https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/onhistory.htm).

<sup>24</sup> See also the quickly deleted article by Petr Akopov apparently celebrating Russia's victory in Ukraine cited in Alistair Coleman, "Ukraine Crisis: Russian News Agency Deletes Victory Editorial", in *BBC News*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-60562240>.

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