FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The War Over Ukrainian Identity

Nationalism, Russian Imperialism, and the Quest to Define Ukraine's History

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Europe's first twenty-first-century war is very much about the past. Russian President Vladimir Putin has ventured on wild forays into the depths of history to insist that Russians and Ukrainians are a single people, that Ukraine never truly existed as a sovereign entity until the Bolsheviks mistakenly brought it into existence, and that the territories of Ukraine are fundamentally Russian lands. He published an essay in July 2021 making this case at length, a bloated historical exegesis that few expected would lead to an actual war.

Russian forces have been smashing their way through Ukraine for over two months now, spurred in large part by historical fiction. But history also propels the fierce Ukrainian resistance. Ukrainians, too, harbor a particular understanding of the past that motivates them to fight. In many ways, this war is the collision of two incompatible historical narratives. Putin's desire to restore an imperial Russia (of which Ukraine is but a

constituent part) has crashed into a Ukrainian nationalism that imagines a sovereign Ukrainian state and a distinct Ukrainian people persisting in various forms for over a thousand years. Like all grand narratives, both have their share of mythology. But for Ukrainians, the stakes are more existential: Putin's reading of history would deny them the very right to exist.

ITS OWN NATION

In 1903, Mykhailo Hrushevsky, an academic based in Lviv, published an article that remains powerful today. Weightily titled "The Traditional Scheme of 'Russian' History and the Problem of a Rational Organization of the History of the East Slavs," the essay insisted that Ukrainian history was not a province of an overarching Russian story. Ukraine was not Russia. A coherent and distinct Ukrainian national history, he argued, stretched back over a millennium.

Hrushevsky sketched the story of Ukraine in the following way. Ukraine, as both a nation and a state, had its roots in the Kievan Rus'—a conglomerate of peoples ruled by a warrior elite that traced its ancestry to Scandinavia—that emerged on the banks of the Dnieper River in the late ninth century. Various Ukrainian polities followed, including the principality of Galicia-Volhynia and the kingdom of Ruthenia in the medieval period and a Cossack state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But by the nineteenth century, the territory of Ukraine was largely divided between the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. Ukrainians did not surrender to this imperial domination; just as other eastern European intellectuals turned to national liberation and self-determination in the nineteenth century, so, too, did Ukrainian thinkers and writers seek to revive their nation by constructing a modern language and a master narrative of their nation's history. That revival set the stage for a modern, independent Ukraine to join the family of nations in the twentieth century. Hrushevsky's vision of Ukrainian identity had much in

common with similar schemes in eastern Europe: it was ethnocentric, teleological (insofar as it treated Ukrainian nationhood as the inevitable outcome of centuries of history), and powerful in its ability to mobilize broad swaths of people.

Hrushevsky was not just the father of modern Ukrainian nationalism and history but also a key political actor, the inaugural president of the first Ukrainian parliament from 1917 to 1918, and the spiritual leader of the national revolution that led to the creation of an independent Ukrainian republic between 1917 and 1920. Today, many Ukrainians imagine their country through the framework that Hrushevsky put in place. They see Ukraine as the successor to not just the briefly independent republic but to a thousand years of kingdoms, principalities, and other forms of states. They note that Ukrainians have a culture, a language, and religious traditions distinct from their neighbors. This narrative has become the basis for contemporary Ukraine's school curriculum, civic education, and official historiography.

This vision of Ukrainian history is full of striving dreamers, Ukrainians who sacrificed for their country and fought against many external oppressors. Few notions of national identity exist without some kind of other, an opposing force against which the nation can be defined. For Ukrainians, the principal other, of course, has been Russia. In its imperial and Soviet guises, Russia looms over Ukrainian history as a colonial force of exploitation, assimilation, repression, and humiliation. In this narrative, the Russian state lords over its citizens and imbues them with a false sense of pride and greatness, whereas Ukraine appears as the antithesis of Russia. It embodies the values of democracy, freedom, individualism, private initiative, and national pride. Where the Russian state oppresses, the Ukrainian state should guarantee security and independence for the Ukrainian people. At the broadest level, Ukrainians insist that Ukraine belongs to European civilization, not a Russian one.

FOREVER TOGETHER, FOREVER APART

For around 70 years, the Soviet Union attempted to dull the distinctions between Russians and Ukrainians. The Soviet version of history admitted ethnographic and cultural differences between the two peoples while insisting on their unity and shared historical destiny. Soviet officials coined the slogan "Forever together!" in 1954 to commemorate the Treaty of Pereyaslav of 1654, when Cossacks in what is now Ukraine declared allegiance to the Russian tsar. The Soviet historical myth still upheld Russia as the big brother in this tandem of fraternal countries.

But this brotherliness came to an end after an independent Ukraine emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet Union in 1991. In the ensuing decade, both Russia and Ukraine adopted pre-Soviet historical narratives that rejected the convivial Soviet reading of the past. Russian officials tried to overcome the surge of local and ethnic nationalisms in Russia that followed the crackup of the Soviet Union by harking back to the imperial past. Many Russian scholars and public figures acquiesced to this return to an imperial version of history, one that enshrined a supranational state as the protector of a greater Russia.

When it came to Ukraine, Russian elites and state-backed historians sought to trace a chronology that would reinforce the notion that Russians and Ukrainians were one people. There should be no schism between the two: both shared descent from the Kievan Rus', and their union was reaffirmed by the 1654 Pereyaslav treaty. This Russian account demonized or downplayed figures and events that suggested the uniqueness of Ukraine. For instance, Russians vilified the seventeenth-century Cossack leader Ivan Mazepa, who sided with Sweden against Muscovy. They dismissed the Ukrainian revolution of 1917–1920 (and the accompanying independent republic) as a fleeting and unfortunate civil conflict within a single community. They portrayed the great famine of 1932–33, which killed as many as four million Ukrainians, as a shared

tragedy of all the peoples of the Soviet Union—a view contrary to the one held by Ukrainians, who called the event the Holodomor ("death by starvation") and saw it as a genocide perpetrated against them. The Ukrainian nationalist movement that followed in the 1930s and 1940s was, in the Russian view, merely the work of anti-Russian collaborators with Nazi Germany.

Many Ukrainian historians saw the same events differently from how their Russian counterparts saw them. They perceived the Kievan Rus' as the progenitors of the Ukrainian people alone and the founders of Ukrainian statehood. The supposed reunification of 1654 only inaugurated three centuries of Russian colonial oppression. The Cossack leader Mazepa was a hero of national revival and resistance to imperial rule. The Ukrainian revolution and Ukraine's brief statehood between 1917 and 1920 was the culmination of centuries of struggle against Russian imperial dominance. The Holodomor was an act of genocide committed by Moscow. And the Ukrainian nationalist movement of the 1930s and 1940s, including its heroic partisan guerrilla campaigns against the Soviets, was the apogee of the national liberation struggle against Moscow's totalitarianism.

In 2003, a joint Russian-Ukrainian commission of historians tried to discuss these historical events with the goal of "harmonizing" their narratives, but it ended up underscoring the gulf between both sides. The Ukrainian historians involved produced a book that synthesized the history of Ukraine by recapitulating the standard Ukrainian national narrative in gentler, more academic terms. Russian members of the commission drafted their history of Russia, which followed all the prescriptions of the official statist narrative. The scholars found common ground only in their acceptance of the fundamental difference of each other's position.

That same year, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma, whose political opponents consistently accused him of being pro-Russian, published a book titled *Ukraine Is Not Russia*. The volume was written in Russian, printed in Moscow, and addressed to Russian readers. The title spoke for itself. Kuchma emphasized that Russians and Ukrainians have separate historical experiences, identities, languages, and cultures. Perhaps not coincidentally, the book came out exactly 100 years after Hrushevsky published his seminal essay on Ukraine's claim to its own identity.

THE COLLISION OF PASTS

In the years following the publication of *Ukraine Is Not Russia*, the two countries increasingly clashed over history. In international organizations such as the United Nations and UNESCO, Russia effectively blocked all Ukrainian initiatives to recognize the Holodomor as an act of genocide targeting Ukrainians. Russia's foreign ministry routinely accused Ukrainian authorities of glorifying Nazi collaborators and disseminating anti-Russian propaganda. In 2008, Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev refused to pay an official visit to the opening of a memorial in Kyiv to the victims of the Holodomor, accusing Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko of politicizing the shared tragedy of Soviet citizens. Russia's state-controlled media caricatured Ukraine as a zoo filled with rabid nationalists.

These claims fueled Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Russia repeatedly invoked historical arguments to justify its annexation of Crimea and its long-running proxy war in Donbas, in eastern Ukraine, claiming that these lands were illegally passed to Ukraine by the Bolsheviks between the 1920s and 1950s. It has frequently invoked World War II in the messaging around its interventions in Ukraine. The breakaway republics in Donbas have described their military actions as part of a similar struggle against the "Kyiv junta" and have adopted the Saint George

stripe, a symbol that commemorates the Russian defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945.

For their part, Ukrainians have developed a more bristling and uncompromising understanding of their country's history in the wake of the 2014 invasion. In 2015, the government launched a massive campaign to purge the evidence of the Soviet era, razing several thousand Soviet monuments and renaming about 50,000 streets and around 1,000 villages and cities. The parliament passed legislation that equated Soviet symbols to Nazi ones and criminalized their public use.

A cult of heroism and military sacrifice gained new importance, adding to the Holodomor's tragedy of victimhood. Ukrainians trumpeted the rugged resistance of the Cossacks to foreign rule, the bravery of the war for independence between 1917 and 1920, and the heroism of two controversial World War II–era militant organizations: the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), a radical right-wing group founded in 1929 that sought to secure Ukrainian independence, and its military wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (known by its Ukrainian initials, UPA), which fought against the Poles, Soviets, and Germans during and after the war. New state-sanctioned politics of memory ignored the darker aspects of the OUN and the UPA, including their collaboration with Nazis, their xenophobic and totalitarian nature, and the participation of their members in the Holocaust and in massacres of Polish and Ukrainian civilians. A special law passed in April 2015 obliged citizens to respect all Ukrainians who fought for the country's independence and declared public disrespect or criticism of the OUN and the UPA to be unlawful.

Unsurprisingly, the OUN and the UPA grew increasingly popular during wartime: the share of Ukrainians who held positive attitudes toward these organizations increased from 27 percent in 2013 to a peak of 49 percent in 2017, according to the Ukrainian research organization Rating. But

that did not translate into actual support for the far-right nationalist block in Ukraine, which received less than two percent of the vote in the 2019 presidential election and won only one seat in parliamentary elections that year.

Nevertheless, Putin readily presented Ukraine's commemoration of the OUN and the UPA as a festival of nationalism and what he called "Nazism." At least in this sense, the Ukrainian right-wingers, who tried to impose the history of their political party on the whole of Ukraine, and the populists who supported them were unwitting allies of Putin's propaganda; evoking the memory of World War II, Putin could point to the checkered legacy of the OUN and UPA to frame his "special military operation" as a continuation of the struggle against Nazism. This rhetoric points to the abiding power of history and memory in shaping the modern politics of the region. Many Russians and Ukrainians see the battles of the present as echoes of the battles of the past.

THE PAST AS FUTURE

Analysts are rightly distrustful of politicians who use history as a manipulative tool for pursuing political, social, or military ends. History, however, is an inescapable part of how people see the world, structure their beliefs, and determine their actions. It shapes and affects the lives of millions in this conflict and cannot be dismissed.

Ukraine as a nation-state finds its legitimacy in the history distilled by such figures as Hrushevsky. Ukrainians see their existence in time and space as resting on this vision of a sovereign history, emancipated from Russia. Putin and his allies use history to claim that Ukraine is not a legitimate country; denying Ukrainians their sovereign history was the first and decisive step in rejecting the right of Ukraine to exist. Both Russia and Ukraine are obsessed with the past and are guilty of distorting the historical record for modern purposes. But there is a fundamental

difference in their positions. Russia turns to the past to justify expansion, aggression, and domination, to resurrect an empire. Ukraine does it in self-defense and self-determination to preserve and nurture an independent republic. Russia fights for the past. Ukraine fights for the future.

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