

WHY RUSSIA INVADED UKRAINE

Taras Kuzio

DURING the 2014 Ukraine crisis, influential Western scholars and think-tank experts blamed the West, the United States, NATO, and even the EU for the crisis and deflected the blame from Russian President Vladimir Putin. In 2022, following Russia's invasion, this group of scholars and experts are suspiciously quiet. Why? Because blaming the West never had any facts to back it up in the first place. Western policymakers and experts began to change their minds after Putin's long 6,000-word article published in July 2021, which brought together arguments that he and other Kremlin leaders had been making since the mid-2000s. Still, these arguments had been noticed by a small number of scholars, such as this author in his 2017 book *Putin's War Against Ukraine*. Putin's July 2021 essay is his ideological treatise for the February 2022 invasion.

Russia invaded Ukraine because Putin has held a long-term obsession with Ukraine as a Little Russian part of the pan-Russian nation (*obshcherusskij narod*), together with Great Russians and White Russians (Belarusians). This stagnation in Russian attitudes to Ukrainians came about as a consequence of the rehabilitation of White Russian emigres, which took place from the mid-2000s. White Russian emigres believed the Bolsheviks had created an "artificial" Ukrainian nation, a view upheld by Putin who is an arch critic of Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin. According to this conspiratorial mindset, Ukrainians were artificially built by the Austrians in the late nineteenth century; Poles and Lenin in the early twentieth; and the United States, CIA, and the EU in more recent times. Ukraine is, in the minds of the Kremlin, a U.S. puppet state that is preventing Little Russians from fulfilling their destiny of uniting

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Photo: Guliver Image

Destruction and disintegration: an Orthodox church in Ukraine

with Russians. Hence, Putin believed that Russian troops would be welcomed by Little Russians as 'liberators.' Needless to say, nothing of the kind has happened to this day.

Most Western experts on Russian nationalism ignored this. Two major books, one edited by Pal Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud and entitled *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000-15* (2016), and another authored by Marlene Laruelle and published under the title *Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields* (2019), are both glaring examples of the

same mistake. The lack of understanding of the Kremlin's military aggression against Ukraine since 2014 was the reason I published my book *Crisis in Russian Studies* (2020). Putin's obsession is center-stage in my book entitled *Russian Nationalism and the Russian-Ukrainian War* (2022), published only three weeks before the invasion. Ignoring Putin's obsession with losing Ukraine is surprising, as he said in his first year in power in 2001, "we must do something, or we'll lose it." A senior Russian official told *The Financial Times* "we will not allow Europe and the U.S. to take Ukraine from us." Russia's leaders believe that Ukrainian history and

territory belong to Russian history and the Russian state.

Putin's obsession and unwillingness to recognize a Ukrainian state and nation is a step backwards from the Soviet regime, for which he has deep nostalgia. The Soviet regime recognized Ukraine as a

'sovereign' republic within the USSR, successfully lobbied for it to be a founding member of the UN (the USSR had three seats) and recognized the Ukrainian language. In Soviet historiography and propaganda, Ukrainians were separate to but close to Russians. In Putin's world, Ukrainians do not exist and are a branch of the pan-Russian people.

Putin's deep obsession with Ukraine means

that as long as he is Russian President, the Russo-Ukrainian war will continue. There are three major reasons for this. The first is that Putin is de facto president for life following the summer 2020 changes to the Russian constitution that extended his term in office until 2036. The second is that Putin is not the *only* problem, it is also Russian chauvinism—specifically a denial of the existence of Ukraine and Ukrainians. Such beliefs are commonly held across the political spectrum in Russia and among

most Russian elites. After all, even jailed opposition leader Alexei Navalny said that Russians and Ukrainians are 'one people,' and has supported Russia's annexation of Crimea. Thirdly, the root origins of the annexation of Crimea and Russo-Ukrainian war are Russian national identity, and we know from his-

torical examples in other countries that these do not change over-night.

Negotiating peace will be nearly impossible because compromise is not something Russian leaders will contemplate towards what they regard as a renegade "Russian province." The Kremlin demands that Ukraine acts like Belarus, and its future presidents mimic Russian satrap Aleksandr Lukashenka.

Russian "normality" in Ukraine would be achieved once Little Russia acts like White Russia. For this to happen, Russia needs to change Ukraine's identity to an eastern Slavic (i.e., Russian-Ukrainian) identity similar to the Russian-Belarusian which exists in Belarus.

Russians and Ukrainians have looked at the annexation of Crimea in starkly different terms. Since 2014, there was a constant level of Russian support for Crimea's annexation

of between 84-86 percent, with only 10 percent opposed. The Moscow-based Levada Centre, Russia's last remaining independent pollster, said this was the most stable polling figure they had. In contrast, Ukrainians have never accepted Russia's occupation of Crimea and a high 68 percent of Ukrainians supported using all means necessary to return Crimea.

Ukrainians and Russians have also looked very differently at the question of Russian speakers in the Donbas and Southeast Ukraine. No Ukrainian opinion poll has ever had more than 5-10 percent complaining about the alleged persecution of Russian speakers. A poll after Russia's invasion

found that only 2 percent of Ukrainians believed the Kremlin's claim of genocide of Russian speakers as the reason for the invasion.

High proportions of Russians have supported separatism in Ukraine, in both Crimea and the Donbas, believing Kremlin propaganda about the alleged persecution of Russian speakers. Fifty-three percent of Russians supported the detachment of the so-called Donetsk

and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) either as "independent" states or annexed by Russia, with only 26 percent supporting them remaining within Ukraine. In 2014-2015, during the height of the Russian-Ukrainian

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war, an average of 60 percent of Russians supported "volunteers" (i.e., nationalist mercenaries) fighting for the DNR and LNR. Fifty-two percent of Russians believed the Kremlin's disinformation, which claimed that there are no Russian armed forces in Ukraine, with only 3-4 percent believing the war is due to Russian military intervention. Russians had bought into the conflict as a "civil war" between Russian and Ukrainian speakers. Seventy percent of Russian citizens

supported the distribution of Russian passports to Ukrainian citizens with only 22 percent opposed. These polling results explain why such a high proportion of Russians support the invasion.

THE ROLE OF WHITE RUSSIAN ÉMIGRÉS

There are two inter-related drivers of Russian policy towards Ukraine. The first is chauvinism, which I define as a Russian unwillingness to

accept the existence of a Ukrainian independent state and a Ukrainian nation. The second is that Russian policy seeks to prevent “losing” Ukraine, which the Kremlin sees as belonging within the *Russkij Mir* (Russian World) under Russia’s elder brother leadership. In the Kremlin’s eyes, the eastern Slavic Russian World is the core of the Eurasian Economic Union in a similar role to how the eastern Slavs were the core of the Soviet Union.

Since 2005, Putin has supported the rehabilitation of White Russian émigré writers and military officers and their re-burial in Russia. The reburials were personally supervised by Putin. In 2007, the Russian World Foundation was created which used soft power and covert means to subvert Ukraine and Russia’s neighbors. The Russian World was defined by Russian culture and the Russian language; state boundaries were irrelevant.

In the same year the domestic and émigré branches of the Russian Orthodox Churches were re-united. The émigré Russian Orthodox Church’s chauvinism towards Ukraine and Ukrainians

had been frozen in time since the 1920s and through its alliance with white Russian émigré groups. The émigré Russian Orthodox Church had close relations with the National Alliance of Russian

Solidarists, an émigré Russian nationalist party founded in Belgrade in 1930, and upheld the Tsarist Russian imperialist nationalist belief in a pan-Russian nation.

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sian history as the “gatherer of Russian [i.e., east Slavic] lands.” Kirill and Putin became closer in 2019, when Constantinople issued a Tomos granting autocephaly to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The Russian Orthodox Church had lost 40 percent of its parishes and was no longer the largest Orthodox Church (that was now Romania). Kirill has supported Putin’s invasion even to the detriment of the Russian Orthodox

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Church in Ukraine, which has since disintegrated. Tellingly, a July 2022 poll found only 4 percent of Ukrainians were his believers compared to 54 percent who were believers of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Putin has drawn closer to the views of White Russian émigrés and former dissident nationalists, such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who had returned to live in Russia. In 2007, a year before he died, Solzhenitsyn received the Russian Federation National Award for his work. As an alternative to the USSR, Solzhenitsyn presented the “Russian Union” (1990), which would be a state composed of the pan-Russian nation. Putin’s Russian World is de facto Solzhenitsyn’s Russian Union of Great, Little and White Russians. After returning to the presidency in 2012, Putin began implementing policies towards the “gathering of Russian lands,” of which Ukraine was the central prize. Crimea was annexed in 2014 and Belarus turned into a satellite dependency after the 2020 presidential elections in which Lukashenka was defeated. Ukraine was the next (and main) target as there could not be a Russian Union without the city of Kyiv, the birthplace of the medieval Kyivan Rus’.

Russian chauvinistic views have been coupled with longstanding territorial claims to Ukraine’s southeast. Solzhenitsyn’s denial of Ukraine’s right to

its southeast was taken up by Putin as early as April 2008, when he questioned Ukraine’s territorial integrity during his speech to the NATO-Russia Council in Bucharest. Without using the term “New Russia”—the tsarist name for southeastern Ukraine that Putin revived in the spring of 2014—he declared this region to be inhabited by “Russians” which had been wrongly included by Lenin within Ukraine. Putin and other Russian leaders repeated this on countless occasions after 2014 and acted on it during the 2022 invasion.

The most important influence of White Russian émigrés came from Ivan Ilyin whose remains, together with another émigré writer Ivan Shmelev, were reburied in Russia in 2005. Despite Ilyin’s controversial praise for Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese fascism, Putin was impressed with his writings which were recommended for use in Russian schools, the army, and state governors. Putin first cited Ilyin in his 2005 state of the nation address that built a bridge to Russia’s imperial past. In addition to Putin, his senior adviser Vladyslav Surkov, former President and Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Liberal Democratic Party of the Russian Federation and Russian Orthodox Church all sang the praises of Ilyin. Ilyin was promoted in history programs on Russian television that provided a positive reflection on the Tsarist era during the

100th anniversary of the 1917 revolution.

Similar to all White Russian émigrés, Ilyin believed there is no Ukrainian nation and the very concept of a Ukraine separate to Russia was a Western conspiracy to divide the so-called pan-Russian nation. Ilyin's "organic model" of Russians and Ukrainians as "one people" has been repeated many times by Putin, as has the belief that the United States and the West are seeking to "divide the Russian [i.e., east Slavic] nation." The White Russian nationalist émigré conspiracy of the West seeking to split the pan-Russian nation had been an article of faith among White Russian émigrés. A century after White Russian émigré Prince Alexander Wolkonsky denied the existence of Ukrainians in his 1920 book, these views have become dominant among Russian leaders and have led to the invasion of Ukraine.

The return of White Russian émigrés negatively influenced Russian-Ukrainians relations prior to the invasion. General Anton Denikin died in 1947 in the United States and was reburied in 2005 in Russia. Putin asked a *Komsomolskaya Pravda* journalist if he had read Denikin's diaries. He hadn't so Putin recommended the entries about Ukraine where Denikin had written that "no Russian, reactionary or democrat, republican or authoritarian, will ever allow Ukraine to be torn away." During Denikin's White Russian occupation of Kyiv in 1919, Ukrainian schools were closed, and Ukrainian language

signs were replaced by Russian. Denikin viewed Ukraine as "Little Russia" and supported the "Little Russian" dialect to be only used in elementary schools. Putin agrees with Denikin.

PUTIN'S MISCALCULATED INVASION

Vladimir Putin's speech to the Russian Security Council on March 1st, 2022, was another example of the Russian leader "living in a parallel universe," as French TV presenters said. Putin showed himself, again, to be a sociopath with no remorse for the suffering that his invasion is bringing to Ukraine. Putin stressed again that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" and that Ukrainians have been led astray by "nationalist propaganda."

Putin outlined his goal as destroying the "anti-Russia" created by the West. Putin's anger with the West for the alleged lack of respect for Moscow is manifesting itself through Russia's indiscriminate destruction of Ukraine.

The best way to understand Putin is to dissect his personality into three components.

The first is Putin's career as a KGB officer, which he joined in the 1970s at a time when most Soviet people had given up on communism. This was after all the Breznevite "era of stagnation." But stagnation was not the way Putin re-

membered the USSR, whose demise he has lamented as a "geopolitical disaster." Putin is visibly nostalgic for the USSR and has incorporated the Soviet national anthem and Soviet historical mythology about the Great Patriotic War into his understanding of Russian national identity. Putin's Russia continues to fight "Nazis," who are understood as any Ukrainians that do not accept their Little Russian identity.

The source of Putin's xenophobia and paranoia about Western conspiracies behind color revolutions and opposition protests lies in his KGB background. Putin, for example, believes that Russian forces have failed to make progress in the invasion of Ukraine because Americans and other NATO members are fighting alongside Ukrainian nationalists.

Putin's second personality trait is the adoption of Tsarist Russian imperial nationalism, which believed that the three east Slavic peoples were branches of a single pan-Russian nation. Putin has repeatedly denied the existence of Ukraine and Ukrainians, said that Ukraine is a Russian land and Russians and Ukrainians are "one people." Putin's personality cult has massively increased the Tsar's narcissism and his belief in a historical mission to "gather the Russian Lands."

Putin is literally obsessed with returning the "Russian Land" of Ukraine to the Russian World, which is best understood as a twenty-first-century reincarnation of the medieval "Kievan Russia" (Kyivan Rus'). In 2016, Putin unveiled

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a huge monument next to the Kremlin to Grand Prince Vladimir (Volodymyr), who ruled Kyivan Rus' over a century before Moscow was founded. Putin's Tsarist imperial nationalism believes the three East Slavs were born in "Kievan Russia" and should always remain together in the pan-

Russian nation. Ukrainians who do not wish to be part of the Russian World are traitors and "Nazis." "De-Nazification" of Ukraine is to be undertaken by the incarceration and murder of pro-Western and Ukrainian nationalist (which he considers to be one and the same) politicians, Church leaders, civil society activists, academics, think-tankers, and journalists.

Putin's third personality trait is that of a corrupt kleptocrat. Because politics and money are closely connected in Putin's political system, the ultimate leader must have the most money to receive respect from his lower oligarchs. The Russian "Blackmail State" allows its oligarchs to plunder the country and not be prosecuted

only if they remain loyal to the Tsar. Corruption and kleptocracy reinforce the cynicism that pervaded Soviet peoples during the “era of stagnation,” and which deepened during the chaotic asset-stripping of the Russian state in the 1990s.

Following constitutional changes in July 2020, there are no more balances of power in Russia; there is only a Tsar who has conflated the Russian state with his inflated ego. Putin and Russia have become one. The extreme concentration of power is a sign of Putin’s megalomania. This is coupled with his extreme isolation from the outside world during the COVID pandemic. Surrounded by sycophants stroking his ego, Putin is uninformed and never takes advice while at the same time believing he is all knowledgeable. This trait is made even worse when dealing with Ukraine. As most Russian elites think similarly to Putin about Ukraine, there are no academics, think-tankers, and especially journalists in Russia who understand Ukraine. Hence the mistaken view of Ukraine as a country of Little Russians eager to welcome Russian liberators.

Russia’s dictatorship cannot exist without internal and external enemies. The origins of this paranoia lie in KGB attitudes to dissidents and the opposition, who

were viewed as agents of foreign powers. These Soviet attitudes are reflected in Russian legislation requiring registration for independent media and opposition and civil society groups as “foreign agents.” The opposition in Russia are working on behalf of foreign interests. Color revolutions are CIA operations directed against Russia. A Ukrainian people is a conspiracy devised by Austrians, Poles, and Ameri-

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cans to divide the “Russian nation.” Transposed to Ukraine, the Kremlin believes Ukraine is an American puppet state run by West Ukrainian “fascists,” who came to power in the Euromaidan Revolution. As justification for his invasion, Putin claimed Russian speakers were being subjected to “genocide” by the U.S. puppet regime. Russia’s “special military operation” thus aimed to “liberate” Little Russian Ukrainians from the American and Ukrainian “drug addicts and Nazis.”

DIAMETRICALLY OPPOSITE VIEWS

Between 2014 and the 2022 Russian invasion, nearly three quarters of Ukrainians believed that Russia and Ukraine were at war. Seventy-two percent of Ukrainians, including 62 percent in the south and 47 percent in the east, believed Ukraine was at war with Russia. This was not the case in Russia where the predominant view was that of a “civil

war” between Russian and Ukrainian speakers, which had nothing to do with reality as most Russian speakers were fighting on Ukraine’s side. The region of Dnipropetrovsk, for example, to the west of Donetsk is Russian-speaking with an influential Jewish community from which Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky hails. Dnipropetrovsk was staunchly pro-Ukrainian from the first days of crisis in 2014, and the name “Ukraine’s Outpost” testifies to that.

In reality, Russian leaders are unable to fathom the concept of Russian-speaking Ukrainian patriotism. Russian primordial nationalism means they believe Russian speakers constitute the Russian World spiritual union, whose primary loyalty is to Moscow, not Ukraine or Belarus. This author has travelled five times to the Donbas war zone between 2015 and 2019, and found numerous Russian-speakers fighting for Ukraine. This patriotism has been evident since the invasion began. In fact, not a single region of Ukraine’s southeast has welcomed Russian troops, who are seen by all Russian-speaking Ukrainians as occupiers.

Between 2014 and 2022, Russian leaders and a majority of Russian citizens always denied Russia’s involvement in the war in Ukraine, and instead alleged a “civil war” was taking place there. Since the invasion, over 80 percent of Russians have

From 2014 to 2021, most Ukrainians differentiated between Russian leaders, which they despised, and the Russian people, which they did not. A major change brought on by the invasion is that most Ukrainians no longer differentiate and believe that most Russians support the invasion. As a consequence, Ukrainians will hate Russians for decades to come.

bought into the Kremlin’s propaganda claim that it is undertaking a ‘special military operation’ to “de-nazify” and “de-militarize” Ukraine. All Ukrainians believe Russia is undertaking a full-scale invasion of their country and is committing genocide against Ukrainians. Putin’s invasion has wiped out all previous regional divisions over Ukrainian attitudes towards Russia.

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Western governments and international organizations always viewed the so-called

DNR and LNR as being under Russian occupation. The First and Second Corps of the DNR and LNR respectively, which numbered 35,000 troops, were under the jurisdiction of the Russian Southern Military District. Prior to the invasion, Russia always denied it was militarily involved in Ukraine. The fiction of a “civil war” was perpetuated by Russia’s membership in the Normandy Format, which allowed Moscow to act both as the military aggressor and the supposed peacemaker. A major obstacle to peace talks prior to the invasion had been Russia’s demand the First and Second Corps be transformed into a local security force in charge of the DNR-LNR “special status” region, which would be a Russian Trojan Horse inside Ukraine.

SIX ROADBLOCKS TO PEACE

There are six factors that prevent an early end to the Russia-Ukraine War. The first is that Putin will remain in power until 2036. Because of his obsession, there will be war with Ukraine for as long as he remains in office. The second is the influence of White Russian emigres who have convinced Russian leaders and people into viewing Ukraine as an “artificial” state, and Russians and Ukrainians as “one people.”

The third is the problem with Russian national identity, irrespective of who is

in power in the Kremlin. Even if Putin were to be replaced because of military defeat in Ukraine, it is likely his successor will hold similar chauvinistic views of Ukraine and Ukrainians. The fourth is the popularity of Crimea’s annexation which makes it impossible that Russia under any leader, imperial nationalist or (unlikely) a democrat, would end Russia’s occupation. The fifth are the diametrically opposite views of Russia and Ukraine over a war or “civil war” waged between 2014 and 2022 and full-scale invasion or “special military operation” since February 2022.

Putin is obsessed, paranoid, angry, and bitter. His 22 years in power have revealed him to be a sociopath with no feeling for the loss of Russian or non-Russian lives. His invasion of Ukraine has already killed 50,000 Russians, triple the number the USSR lost in a decade in Afghanistan.

The crisis that began in November 2021 is completely artificial, a product of Putin’s three personality traits and obsession with “gathering” the “Russian lands” of Ukraine. Putin’s badly planned invasion is disastrous for Russia, will turn Ukrainians against Russians for decades to come, and lead to the biggest deterioration in Russia’s relations with the West since the Cuban missile crisis. ●

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