Putin's case for invading Ukraine rests on phony grievances and ancient myths

The Russian leader doesn't want to believe Ukraine exists. But that's not how modern nations work.

By Timothy Snyder
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Last July, Vladimir Putin supplied the mythical basis for Russian war propaganda in an essay titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." The essential idea is that Russia has the right to Ukraine because of things that happened a thousand years ago in Kyiv. At the time, the city was a trading hub of Viking slavers who were gaining dominance over local Khazars. It takes some fanciful thinking to see here a reason for Russia to invade Ukraine in the 21st century, as it seems prepared to do. The absurd particulars, though, are less important than the principle. If countries can claim other countries on the grounds of millennial myths, the modern state system ceases to exist.

Putin's idea is that Ukraine is a fraternal nation because of how he personally feels about the past. This is known as imperialism. It flies in the face of the basic legal principle of state sovereignty and the basic moral principle of democracy. People who speak of other nations as little brothers wish to be Big Brother. Whether Ukraine is a nation or not is a question for Ukrainians today, not for imaginary Russians in an imaginary past. In Putin's presentation, though, the West is to blame when Ukrainians don't answer the question the way he would like. He seems to believe that Ukrainians would share his view about "historical unity," if only the West would get out of the way.

Russian propaganda depends upon myths and counterfactuals, all spun in the direction of Russian greatness and innocence. Putin writes that when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the principle for deciding the borders of its constituent republics should have been: "Take what you brought with you." In history as it actually happened, however, it was the Russian republic of the U.S.S.R. that brought about the end of the Soviet Union. The whole point was to liberate Russia from what was then understood to be the burden of supporting the periphery. Boris Yeltsin, the man who achieved this, accepted the borders of the Soviet Russian republic as Russia's. As Yeltsin's handpicked successor, Putin knows all this very well. Today he is dreaming of the Russian Empire that the Bolsheviks destroyed. But it "brought" nothing to the U.S.S.R. It no longer existed. And it was never a Russian nation-state. Its dynasty and much of its elite was of non-Russian origin; most of its population spoke languages other than Russian, and few of those who did speak Russian would have known what a nation was before the Bolsheviks made their revolution in 1917.

What Ukraine "brought" with it was the shape of the Soviet Union itself. The Bolsheviks were cosmopolitans aiming for the whole world. The wars that followed taught them the importance of the national question. The U.S.S.R. they founded in 1922 was a communist party-state, but it took the form of a federation with a Ukrainian republic, a Russian republic, a Belarusian republic and Caucasian republics. This reflected a general understanding that Ukraine was a country that had to be acknowledged. As an indirect result of the need to recognize other national questions, Russia was created as a republic of the U.S.S.R. It was this unit that Yeltsin extracted from the Soviet Union 30 years ago.

A politics that begins with myths of innocence is a politics that ends in violent resentment. The propaganda of loss is meant to set up the permanent presumption that Russia is a victim. That Russians suffered in the 20th century is, of course, beyond all doubt. People living in the Russian republic of the U.S.S.R. died in terrible numbers under Stalinism and during the German occupation. Those are incontrovertible facts. But they are exploited by the Kremlin to create a sense that only Russians suffered, and therefore only Russian leaders may judge others. "Genocide" and "fascism" become magic words which, when pronounced, liberate Russians to do whatever they want, including invade their neighbors.

And yet people inside the Ukrainian republic of the U.S.S.R. suffered more in the 20th century, both from Stalinism and from the Germans. Ukrainians today have as much right to remember the past as Russians do. Their idea that the experience of World War II justifies respect for legal boundaries is in harmony with the United Nations Charter and with international law generally.

After World War II, the U.S.S.R. established an outer empire in Eastern Europe. These communist replicate regimes were joined in a military alliance known as the Warsaw Pact. Russian propaganda today uses another family metaphor to describe its former members: Russian diplomats speak of former Soviet republics and onetime satellite states as "orphans." During its existence, the Warsaw Pact was used to invade one of its own members — Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Soviet Union also invaded Hungary all by itself in 1956 and intervened in East Germany in 1953. The Solidarity movement in Poland was crushed by the local communist regime, since the Red Army was bogged down in the invasion of Afghanistan at the time. After the revolutions of 1989, the member states of the Warsaw Pact all applied to join NATO, for reasons that everyone, including Russian leaders, understood perfectly well at the time.

When Russian leaders claim today that NATO has betrayed Russia, they tap that same mythical vein of violated innocence. On May 27, 1997, Russia signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act. It was acknowledged by all parties at the time that NATO would expand and was open to "all emerging European democracies." Just four days later, Russia signed a treaty with Ukraine, recognizing its borders. Moscow may disapprove when former Warsaw Pact members or former Soviet republics apply to join NATO, but such desires are not a result of Western iniquity or broken promises. They are a result of Soviet and then Russian behavior. NATO membership was not popular in Ukraine until Russia invaded the country in 2014. Not surprisingly, most Ukrainians these days wish their country belonged to a powerful defensive alliance.

Now that NATO membership has majority support in Ukraine, former Russian president and prime minister Dmitry Medvedev refers to Ukrainians as "vassals." Russian propaganda made similar moves to solidify a certain mind-set before the last invasion. In early 2014, a major Kremlin theme was the idea that Ukraine was a "failed state" that required Russians to repair it. A state that claims that another state does not really exist is behaving as an empire. Ukraine is as much a state as Russia, a basic fact that Russia itself recognized until it invaded eight years ago. Until then, there was nothing at all in Russian diplomacy to question Ukraine's existence, borders or right to sovereignty.

In invading Ukraine and annexing territory in 2014, Russia violated international law in general and its agreements with Ukraine in particular. Perhaps most poignant among these was the Budapest Memorandum of 1994. At that time, Ukraine was the third-largest nuclear power in the world, based on the number of nuclear weapons in its territory. It agreed to give up all of its nuclear weapons in exchange for security guarantees from the United States, Britain and the Russian Federation. Given this record of invading countries whose security it has guaranteed, it is worth asking if Russia would respect future agreements, especially those it signed while threatening further invasion.

In the Kremlin's thinking, Russia is a victim because Ukraine exists, and a victim again because Ukraine has a foreign policy. The aggressive assertion of innocence goes still further. Putin also claims that Russia is a victim of today's Ukraine because of the diminishing influence of Russian culture in the country. In his article from last summer, he equates the reduced sway of Russian culture and language in Ukraine to an attack on Russia by a weapon of mass destruction. In the real world, the Russian language is in no danger: The globalized Internet favors Russian over Ukrainian in Ukraine, and most television is in Russian. What has changed with time, especially since the invasion of 2014, is the popular attitude toward language: The percentage of Ukrainian citizens who identify as speakers of Russian has declined. Younger people are now more likely to identify themselves as native speakers of Ukrainian. No Ukrainian policy ever led to as much Ukrainization as Russia's war on Ukraine.

The whole notion of invading a neighbor to protect an ethnic group is more than suspect. This was the rationale given by Hitler to dismantle Austria and Czechoslovakia in 1938 and the reason given by Stalin for the invasion of Poland in 1939. If Russia believed that people in Ukraine were threatened because of their culture, it had legal routes it could have pursued before 2014; it didn't.

People who speak Russian in Ukraine are far freer than people who speak Russian in Russia. One such person is the president of Ukraine. Volodymyr Zelensky, whose best language is Russian, defeated his predecessor Petro Poroshenko in a democratic election in 2019. In Russia, a political rise of this kind is impossible. Putin's rival Alexei Navalny, the victim of an assassination attempt by the Russian secret services, is now in a prison that resembles a concentration camp.

So all this Russian propaganda is untrue, but even if any of it *were* true, it would not justify invasions and threatened invasions. Is it meant to serve ideology or strategy? What we know for sure is that Russia's leaders, whatever the ideology or strategy might be, believe in psychology. The one consistent element of Russian propaganda is that Russia has suffered and that it is the West's fault — your fault. When Russia does something inexcusable, you are meant to be shocked, blame yourself and make concessions.

Shock and guilt will not lead to peace. Security cannot be gained by chasing myths into a netherworld where Russians are always innocent, Ukrainians do not exist and Americans should take the blame for it all. If Russia gets what it wants by behaving badly and programming others to take the blame, expect more of the same in years to come.