

WEEKEND ESSAY

Ukraine is being wiped out with a history of lies

Putin's rambling justification for rebuilding the Russian empire is based on megalomania, myth and nostalgia. In truth, Ukrainians are a proud and distinct people with a tradition of sharing western values, says **Ben Macintyre**



Ukraine is under a hail of Russian missiles but another softening-up bombardment started many years ago, on the battlefield of history. Two diametrically opposed versions of the past are at war in Ukraine: one is represented by Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelensky, the other is espoused by Vladimir Putin; one is based on factual evidence and scholarship, the other is enforced by the repressive organs of the Russian state, buttressed by propaganda and imposed by force of arms. One is true, and the other is a lie.

Putin's falsification of history as a pretext for the invasion and re-colonisation of Ukraine is complex and long-running, but it can be simply summarised: Ukrainians and Russians are one people; the Ukrainian nation is a mistake, a "gift" made in error by Bolshevik Russia, and now being rightfully reclaimed; Zelensky's Ukraine is a fascist state with no right to an independent existence, and is bent on oppressing a beleaguered Russian minority, joining Nato, installing nuclear weapons and threatening Russia herself; Putin's troops come not as invaders but as liberators, to right an ancient wrong.

None of this is true. There is no evidence that Putin has ever read a book, let alone any of the dense works of history that accurately depict Ukraine's past. His revisionism is based on megalomania, myth and nostalgia for Russian greatness, imperial as well as Soviet. Over the last decade, his views have grown increasingly extreme, to the point where they bear no relation to history as it is understood outside Russia. His vision of the past is not historical, in any meaningful sense, but a political weapon. It is as artificial and inflated as Putin's facelift.

Yet he believes it. So do many Russians, swamped in the televised propaganda that permeates every home, shop and schoolroom in Russia. That is the only audience it is aimed at. Phoney history provides pseudo-intellectual scaffolding for Putin's war of reconquest, and if the invasion succeeds this fake story will be used to prop up whatever puppet regime he establishes in the ruins of Ukraine.

Putin's version of history cannot simply be brushed aside. Its basis and origins must be understood to be refuted. His armies may be unstoppable but his distorted version of the past can be rolled back. A debate over distant events may seem arcane at a time when Ukrainians and Russians are dying in an utterly unnecessary war but reasserting the truth about Ukraine's history is an important act of resistance.

On February 21, the day he announced that Russia would recognise the independence of the "people's republics" of Luhansk and Donetsk, occupied by pro-Russian forces since 2014, Putin gave a 56-minute speech laying out his conception of history.

"I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia," Putin declared. Lenin, he argued, had created Ukraine with a bureaucratic stroke of the pen at the birth of the Soviet Union. Ukrainians voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence in a 1991 referendum following the

break-up of the USSR, but in Putin's eyes the very existence of Ukraine as a separate entity is a "mistake". "Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us," he insisted. "It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space." Two days later, Russian tanks rolled into that space: in Putin's words, to "demilitarise" and "denazify" a country he insists has no right to be. In this simplistic take on the past, just as the Soviet Union triumphed over Nazi Germany, so Russia would now vanquish the imaginary fascist forces in Ukraine.

This address is believed to have been written by Vladimir Medinsky, former culture minister, head of the Russian Military History Society and chief exponent of the revisionist school of Russian history. Chillingly, Medinsky leads the Russian delegation in the negotiations that have taken place with Ukraine on the Belarus border. Immediately before the invasion, Medinsky described Ukraine as a "phantom state". Medinsky has built his career, in large part, on rejecting Ukraine's right to self-determination. Unsurprisingly, the talks have yielded little progress.

Back in 2005, Putin famously described the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, but the clearest exposition of his views came in July last year in a 7,000-word essay, again thought to have been penned by Medinsky, entitled *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*. "Russia was robbed," Putin claimed, asserting that the Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians are "one people... brother nations". It ended with the bald assertion that Ukrainian statehood depended on Moscow's assent: "True sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia." Anders Aslund, senior fellow at the Free World Forum in Stockholm, called it "a masterclass in disinformation... one step short of a declaration of war".

The Russian colonising stance is based on the notion that Ukrainians and Russians are jointly descended, culturally and religiously, from the Kievan Rus, the Viking dynasty that founded a medieval kingdom in the ninth century stretching from the Black Sea to the Baltic. Vladimir the Great (958-1015) converted to Christianity in 988, creating the first East Slavic Orthodox state. A statue of Vladimir has stood in Kyiv since 1853. In 2016, in a highly symbolic and sinister move, Putin erected a second statue of the medieval king beside the Kremlin.

Ukrainians point out that Moscow did not even exist at the time of the Kievan Rus realm, and that whatever links may have existed a millennium ago are irrelevant to modern nationhood. An equivalently preposterous assertion would be for the people of Normandy to lay claim to England on the basis of the events of 1066.

The Kievan Rus empire disintegrated with the Mongol invasions of the 13th century. Present-day Ukrainian territories fell under the control of successive external powers: the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Kingdom of Poland, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Under four centuries of Polish rule, Ukraine opened up to western influence in a way that Russia never did: the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, all reached it and



A symbol of division

The domes of Kyiv's Saint Sophia Cathedral are a symbol of shared religious heritage in Russian eyes, and of national pride to the Ukrainian resistance. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church traditionally looked to the Patriarchate of Constantinople. But the Russian Orthodox Church claimed that Ukraine's worshippers owed obedience instead to the Russian Patriarchy. Moscow's determination to enforce that religious submission formed a central plank of 'Russification' in Ukraine

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influenced the emergence of Ukraine.

In the 18th century, the eastern portion of what is now Ukraine came under Russian imperial rule, while the Habsburg Austrians controlled the area around Lemberg (Lviv) which they called "Galicia". Under Tsarist rule, the Ukrainian language and culture were suppressed in a programme of Russification and the region under Russian control was referred to as "Little Russia" — an odd appellation for somewhere that was neither little nor properly Russian. As in Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus, national movements began to evolve long before independence became a possibility, let alone reality. By the 19th century, Ukrainian nationalism had emerged as a distinct movement. Russian cultural repression saw an exodus of Ukrainian intellectuals to the west of the region.

The national poet of Ukraine, Taras Shevchenko, wrote in both Russian and Ukrainian, and helped to forge a swelling national identity based on a shared culture, language, and heritage. In *The Caucasus*, written in 1845, Shevchenko ridiculed Russian expansionism and mourned the way that Tsarist Russification eroded indigenous voices: "From the Moldavian to the Finn/ All are silent in their languages". In a passage with strong modern redolence, he called on Ukraine's fighters to resist the forces of colonial domination: "Keep fighting; you are sure to win/ God helps you in your fight/ For fame and freedom march with you/ And right is on your side!"

The break-up of the Russian and Habsburg empires after the First World War brought a period of political chaos but also Ukraine's first, short-lived taste of national independence — not through the Bolshevik revolution but eight months earlier with the collapse of the Russian empire in February 1917. The Ukrainian People's Republic was proclaimed, and recognised by Russia's provisional government.

Over the next four years, with the former Russian empire embroiled in civil war, various armies battled



ALAMY; GENYA SAVILOV/APP VIA GETTY IMAGES

over Ukraine: Ukrainian, Bolshevik, White Russian, Polish and anarchist. Kyiv changed hands five times in under a year. By 1921, the Red Army had conquered most of the country. A year later, it was incorporated as one of the four original national republics within the Soviet Union: this is what Putin refers to as Lenin's "generous gift" of statehood; in reality Ukraine was subjugated to Moscow, in a new communist empire built on the wreckage of the Tsarist one.

A map shown on Russian state television last week purported to illustrate the various "gifts" of territory from Russia and the USSR that make up Ukraine: the eastern region "given" to Ukraine by Lenin in 1922; the Crimea "given" by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954; a swathe of the nation's northern territory "gifted" by the Russian tsars. What the map really shows is different periods when Ukraine's borders were redrawn by dominant outside forces.

Stalin's oppression of Ukraine was most clearly demonstrated during the Soviet famine of 1932-33, when four million citizens of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, at least one tenth of the population, perished in the man-made disaster known in Ukrainian as the "Holodomor", or "extermination by hunger". The policy of collectivisation created the conditions for mass starvation in the fertile land that had been the "breadbasket of Europe". In a deliberate act of state aggression against part of the Soviet Union he regarded as disloyal, Stalin banned the population from leaving Ukraine; roadblocks were set up to stop peasants moving to cities to seek work or beg. "There is no famine," insisted the foreign minister, Maxim Litvinov.

The Holodomor is central to Ukraine's sense of nationhood. In 2006 the Ukrainian parliament formally recognised the events as a genocide. Putin's Russia, however, insists the famine was a politically neutral "common tragedy" that affected the whole of the Soviet Union, the result of bureaucratic error, not a policy of deliberate starvation aimed at the Ukrainian

people. The Russian propaganda website Sputnik has described the famine as a "hoax".

Stalin accelerated the process of Russification in Ukraine, repopulating the east with ethnic Russians and relocating the Crimean tatars to make way for Russian-speakers. When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, some Ukrainians welcomed the Germans as liberators from the Soviet yoke but others formed partisan groups to fight the invaders. The Ukrainian Insurgent Army battled both Soviet and Nazi troops.

The Nazi occupation saw the murder of 1.5 million Ukrainian Jews, aided at times by forces recruited from the local population. It is this element of Nazi collaboration that gives Putin's claims to be "denazifying" the country emotive power, even though the neo-Nazi far right is a negligible force in modern Ukraine and Zelensky himself is Jewish. The Ukrainians who fought on the German side in 1941-45 were far outnumbered by the one million or more Russians who fought in the "Russian Liberation Army" led by captured Red Army General Vlasov and made up of Russian PoWs and White Russians willing to fight on the Nazi side.

Ukraine made a huge contribution to the Allied victory. Some eight million Ukrainians died fighting with the Soviet army. Zelensky's grandfather served in the Soviet infantry. The Germans occupied the whole of Ukraine and only a sliver of Russia; hence, the great majority of civilian deaths occurred in Ukraine not in Russia. None of these inconvenient truths feature in Putin's account of events.

A pivotal and polarising figure in the wartime story is the Ukrainian nationalist partisan Stepan Bandera, whose Organisation for Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) declared Ukraine an independent state immediately after Germany attacked the USSR. Bandera undoubtedly saw the Nazis as useful allies in the struggle against Soviet domination but Hitler was no supporter of an



Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv. Inset, victims of the Holodomor famine, and Ukrainians paying tribute to the nationalist partisan Stepan Bandera. Above, President Putin with his revisionist historian Vladimir Medinsky. Below, the Monument to Vladimir the Great in Moscow

independent Ukraine and Bandera and much of the OUN leadership were sent to concentration camps.

Among some nationalists in western Ukraine, Bandera is revered as a patriotic freedom-fighter, a martyr in the struggle for independence from the Soviet Union; among Russian separatists in the east of the country he is reviled as a fascist traitor. Bandera was poisoned with cyanide by a KGB hit squad in 1959 but his toxic legacy is what enables Putin to accuse Ukraine's government of "Banderite" atrocities.

Putin's desire to recreate a Soviet past is tinged, confusingly, with nostalgia for Tsarist Russia's imperial heyday. The Crimean War is hailed in Putin's potted history as a glorious moral victory, a Russian Orthodox crusade led by Tsar Nicholas I in which Russia heroically defended her interests, people and religion. When the Russian president announced the annexation of Crimea in 2014, he did so in semi-mystical terms, with a direct reference to the Crimean War and Russia's religious stake in the peninsula as the cradle of Russian Orthodox Christianity: "Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride." Visitors to Putin's office in the Kremlin must wait in an antechamber beneath a vast portrait of Tsar Nicholas.

Putin is not the first politician of the modern era to seek political advantage by appealing to a glorious past. Indian nationalists stoke pride in India's history to disparage modern secularism. Viktor Orban of Hungary laments the territories the country lost after the First World War. Boris Johnson wants to be seen as Churchillian. Donald Trump vowed to make America great again. The key word is "again". But Putin's appropriation, mangling and weaponisation of history is on an altogether greater scale, a peculiar soup of imperial and Soviet wistfulness, resentment of the West and twisting of events to justify a war of re-colonisation. It is backed and enforced by the state and apologists such as Vladimir Medinsky.

The idea that some version of a Russian empire should be resurrected is, of course, ludicrous and ahistorical. Reviving the Habsburg empire, for example, would mean nailing back together Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, parts of Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, Italy, Poland and bits of western parts of Ukraine. Using Putin's logic, Britain could be invading the Republic of Ireland, because our two nations speak a similar language and London once ruled there, often by force.

The contrast with Zelensky's rational approach to the past is striking, even moving. Appealing to ordinary Russians, he said: "Neighbours always enrich each other's cultures but that does not make them one entity... We are different but that does not make us enemies. We want to build our own history, peaceful, calm and fair."

Thirty years ago, after centuries of Tsarist and Soviet repression, Ukrainian identity was weak and confused. Three decades of freedom have strengthened it greatly. In the words of British historian Norman Davies: "The present ordeal by fire is finally forging steel". Zelensky came to prominence in Ukraine as an actor playing the part of a history teacher who accidentally becomes president. In the grim history war that underpins the real war, there are two distinct sides: a Ukrainian president telling the truth who was once a fictional teacher of history, and a Russian president presenting fiction as if it were really history.