

Patrick J.  
Geary

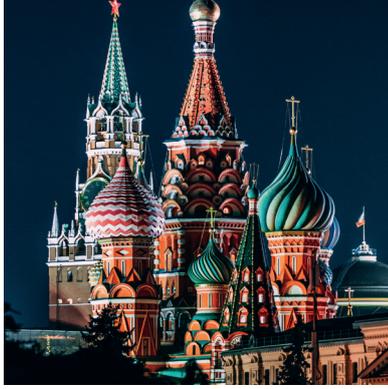


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## The “history” of Putin

# The origins of ethnic nationalism in Europe

***The Russian invasion of Ukraine rests on a romantic nationalist ideology of the 19th century aimed at updating the project of ancient Rus'. These are historical forcings by the president of Russia. For example, the ancient population of Rus' was not of Slavic but Scandinavian origin. And therefore an overall design oriented by a misunderstanding of the sense of belonging to a people. It would be good for Russia, Ukraine and other European nations to discard these toxic ideas of antiquated ethnic nationalism in favor of recognizing the proven ability of modern nation-states to integrate a multiplicity of national, ethnic, and religious groups. Dialogue nation-states in the context of a Europe liberated from nationalism.***

Western military experts have been perplexed that the initial phases of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have followed not the latest strategic doctrine of the Russian military but rather one from the middle of the twentieth-century. The ideological justification of the invasion, as presented in an article purporting to be authored by Russian President Vladimir Putin published in July of 2021<sup>1</sup> is even more archaic, repeating as it does nineteenth-century myths about nation and people, the type of myths that contributed to the catastrophic wars of the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century and that have been revived since 1989 by ethnic nationalist ideologues across Europe.

Putin's article, entitled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” argues that “to have a better understanding of the present and look into the future, we need to turn to history.” But Putin's (or his ghost writer's) understanding of history is right out of nineteenth-century romantic nationalist ideology, which posited “peoples” as eternal unified linguistic, cultural, and political units having their unchanging national character and identity. These peoples, whose origins were typically traced to the early Middle Ages, inhabited their sacred fatherland which would forever define their territorial rights. No previous polities, population movements, or cultural changes were legitimate, and no subsequent historical change invalidated these claims. As Putin writes, “Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe.”

He goes on to say that they were bound together by a common language and by a common Orthodox faith since the baptism of Vladimir in 988. The rest of the article describes the disintegration of Ancient Rus and its suffering until “Moscow became the center of reunification, continuing the tradition of ancient Russian statehood. Moscow princes – the descendants of Prince Alexander Nevsky – cast off the foreign yoke and began gathering the Russian lands.” Throughout his telling of this long and tortuous history was the struggle against western powers, primarily the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and then the Habsburgs, who sought to perpetuate the division of “Malorossia” and to introduce Roman Christianity. He does pay lip

1. [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On\\_the\\_Historical\\_Unity\\_of\\_Russians\\_and\\_Ukrainians](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_the_Historical_Unity_of_Russians_and_Ukrainians)

service to the idea that “some part of a people in the process of its development, influenced by a number of reasons and historical circumstances, can become aware of itself as a separate nation at a certain moment.” However ultimately, he concludes: “I am confident that true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia. Our spiritual, human and civilizational ties formed for centuries and have their origins in the same sources, they have been hardened by common trials, achievements and victories. Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation. It is in the hearts and the memory of people living in modern Russia and Ukraine, in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people.”

One could easily deconstruct Putin’s version of history, beginning with his failure to recognize that the Rus’, including Vladimir (Valdemar) were of Norse, not Slavic ancestry, that the language which he terms “Old Russian” is better termed Old East Slavic since Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian represent later dialectal divisions, and that the populations of what would become Ukraine included not only Slavs, but Tatars, Zaporozhian Cossacks, Jewish and Armenian communities, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Romani, and Poles. Indeed, some well-meaning defenders of Ukrainian sovereignty do just that, attempting to construct a similar historical argument to demonstrate that Ukraine and the Ukrainian people have always existed apart from Russia and Russians. However, to attempt to argue on a basis of history the legitimate rights of Ukraine to nationhood would be to fall into the same error as that committed by Putin in his historical justification for denying the separate identity of Ukraine and the Ukrainians. This is exactly the kind of argumentation that developed in the course of the nineteenth century and that continues to haunt much of Europe until today.

Prior to the last decades of the eighteenth century, a sense of belonging to a “people” was but one, and not necessarily the most significant, form of social identification. It certainly did not carry any necessary claims to political independence or legitimacy. Religion, kindred, lordship, region, legal status, and social stratum provided most of the overlapping ways by which politically active elites identified themselves and organized for political action. Certainly, national, linguistic, or ethnic identity did not unite lords and peasants into some common sense of belonging. Beginning in the Renaissance, some intellectual elites, particularly in Germany, began to look to the past and to see in resistance to Roman imperialism a common source of identity. The rediscovery of the Roman historian Tacitus’s *Germania* was fundamental to this ideology, since German humanists interpreted it as a confirmation of the purity and unity of a German people existing already in the first century. However, this common history and cultural identity did not imply political identity, which continued to be understood in terms of lordship, kingdom, and empire. The politicization of strategies of identification took place within the political context of the French Revolution and especially of the Napoleonic Wars. Already in the eighteenth century, opposition to the privileges of the nobility in France, who had claimed to be the “true French” because they were descendants of Frankish conquerors, took the form of proclaiming the rest of society, the Third Estate, as the descendants of the indigenous Gauls, thus characterizing the nobility as a foreign and illegitimate element in society.

During the Napoleonic Wars, as the French Empire expanded at the expense of the Rhineland principalities and Prussia, both some Prussian ministers such as the Freiherr von Stein and, more significantly, British agents hoping to open a “second Vendée”, sought to generate opposition to Napoleon by inculcating a sense of popular solidarity against the occupying French. This meant mobilizing and politicizing the elements of earlier cultural nationalist feeling. The German intellectuals enlisted in this effort, most notably Johann Gottlieb Fichte, evoked very much the same tropes of unity as Putin: the importance of a common language (whether or

not the Germanic dialects spoken across Europe did in fact constitute a single language) and a common history of self-defense against the alien. For German speakers, the key moment of this history was the story of Arminius, the Cheruscan chieftain and Roman equestrian who destroyed Varus's three legions in 9 CE. The fiery rhetoric of Fichte and others began the process of connecting cultural identity to political identity, suggesting that by nature of its cultural and linguistic identity, the German people likewise merited political sovereignty and thus should oppose French rule. Such claims were initially rejected by rulers in Prussia, Russia, and the Habsburg Empires, precisely because these were multi-cultural polities whose foundations had nothing to do with ethnic identity or social solidarity.

The new French empire itself unwittingly contributed to the development of a discourse of ethnic polities. The French carved out of conquered regions such as the former Habsburg and Venetian empires semi-autonomous regions such as the province of Illyria, which encompassed portions of what are today Slovenia, Italy, and Austria. Along with introducing French language and administration, the occupiers also encouraged a new national self-identification to unify these regions in order to break their ties with their former rulers. These movements, after the defeat of Napoleon, gave rise to a new national movement in this and other regions.

### Early annals studies

Long after the Napoleonic period, the successful mobilization of the nascent twin disciplines of scientific history and philology as foundations of a new, national consciousness became a formula for the aspirations of ethnic nationalists across Europe. Historians sought the origins of Europe's nations in the earliest records that documented the names of peoples. In some cases, as that of Greece, this meant a return to Antiquity. However, for most of western and Central Europe, this led directly to the so-called Migration period and the early Middle Ages. Thus the French saw the origins of their nation with the Franks and the baptism of the first "French" king Clovis, in early sixth century (reminiscent of Putin's use of the baptism of Vladimir); the English looked to the arrival of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes as described by the early medieval historian Bede; Spain revived its Visigothic past; Hungary celebrated the arrival of the Magyars in the Carpathian Basin at the end of the ninth century; while in the Balkans intellectuals turned to the medieval kingdoms of Serbia and Croatia.

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Advances in Indoeuropean philology made it possible to project nations, seen as cultural, linguistic, and social unities even further into the deep past. Philologists constructed the deep histories of languages with the assumption that common speech also implied a common culture and identity. The foundation of early medieval kingdoms was interpreted as the creation, once and for all, of the eternal homelands of these peoples and implied their right to political as well as cultural autonomy. Fundamental to such an ideology was that it was seen as "scientific" and inescapable: One was born with an ethnic identity which was fixed and determined.

The goal of intellectuals was to reveal to the people this identity and to awaken in them the recognition that this identity necessarily implied the need to liberate the people from outside dominance. Ethnic nationalist movements across Europe then strove to create polities based on these common, objective, and eternal factors, just as in Putin's appeal to the ultimate unity of Ukrainians and Russians.

Of course, the reality was that it was impossible to draw geographical boundaries of states so broadly that they would include all of the members of a given ethnic group while at the same time being sufficiently narrow so as to exclude those who did not identify with this group. Ethnic boundaries had never coincided with geographical boundaries, and thus the mission of the state became the task of homogenizing identity, either through massive public education that included the suppression of minority languages or dialects in favor of the (often invented) national language, or by exclusion or expulsion of those not identified with the nation. It could also mean wars to "recover" those portions of the people who had somehow been lost to the motherland but who, by virtue of their language, culture, and deep history were eternally part of it.

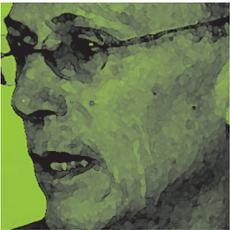
### **What makes a nation**

Precisely this is the program of Vladimir Putin, as it was in the Franco-Prussian War to recover Alsace and Lorraine in 1870. At that time, the great German historian Theodore Mommsen, in a series of essays, justified the conquest of these regions because their population was Germanic and their language German. The response of the French historian Fustel de Coulanges directly challenged this dominant ethnic nationalist ideology, and is still, in the twenty-first century, worthy of remembering: "Neither race nor language make a nation. Men feel in their heart that they are one people when they have a community of ideas, of interests, of affections, of memories and of hopes. And do you know what makes [Alsace] French? It was not Louis XIV, it was our Revolution of 1789. From this moment Alsace has followed all of our destinies, it has lived our life. All that we think, it thinks; all that we feel, it feels. It has shared our victories and our defeats our glory and our faults, all our joys and all our sadnesses. It has nothing in common with you. For it the patrie is France. The foreigner is Germany."

Neither the baptism of Vladimir nor the long-intertwined history of Ukraine and Russia nor supposed linguistic similarities justify the political conquest and absorption of a sovereign state. On December 1, 1991 over 82% of the electorate went to the polls to determine whether Ukraine should exist as an independent state, and over 90% voted that it should. This is what matters, just as does the willingness of the present population to defend this new state with all its force. As a professional historian, I am convinced that "arguments from history" are usually false and self-serving. History, after all, is not some moment frozen in time, but rather the study of change in human societies across time. The study of history can, nevertheless, help us avoid the fatal errors of the first half of the twentieth century. It would be well for Russia, Ukraine, and other European nations to discard these toxic ideas of outmoded ethnic nationalism in favor of recognizing the proven capacity of modern nation states to integrate a multiplicity of national, ethnic, and religious groups. In effect, they must recognize the difference between the past and the present.



*photo Gwengoat*



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