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Metaphysics, History, and Politics

Many different explanations have been offered for the Russian invasion of Ukraine over the past year. One of the more interesting explanations has been John Mearsheimer's insistence that the invasion was a direct and ostensibly predictable result of the American-led expansion of NATO into eastern Europe, including prospective incorporation of Ukraine into the alliance. Operating from within a rigorously conceived and, perhaps, idiosyncratic realist framework, Mearsheimer reduces almost all aspects of international relations to the material relations of raw military power. In Mearsheimer's view, there is only one important trans-national category implicated in the study of international relations: the material fact of military capability in a world in which each nation is fully aware that every other nation is fully aware of that fact. In his framework, Russia invaded Ukraine in order to prevent that nation from joining NATO, something that would have led to the encirclement of Russia's eastern frontiers by a hostile alliance. I will not attempt to offer a counter argument to his interpretation but, instead, will begin this essay with the explanations that Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, has given for the invasion. After that discussion, I will briefly return to Mearsheimer's interpretation.

About seven months before he ordered Russian troops to invade Ukraine, Putin published an article entitled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."[1] Although this article clearly anticipated the invasion, the timing makes little or no difference for the purposes of the analysis I will attempt. I will begin by noting that there is one passage that, somewhat remotely, suggests a prominent role for raw military power in the making of Russian state policy in international politics: "…we will never allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia." However, most of the article sets out other and very different cultural and historical reasons why Russia must intervene in Ukrainian affairs. While Putin is not entirely consistent in his argument, that, too, need not concern us…at least at the moment.

Putin begins his essay by claiming that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people—a single whole" constituted of "parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space." The separation of these parts is a "consequence of our own mistakes made at different periods of time." These are, in Putin's interpretation, "mistakes" that have run counter to the true course of history (what we might term "historical destiny" although Putin does not use that phrase). In order to retrace the evolving content of the "historical and spiritual space" shared by the Ukrainian and Russian peoples (Putin is not entirely consistent in his usage here…these are sometimes one and sometimes two peoples in the essay), he goes back "more than a thousand years" to a time when "Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus." This was a period when "Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory…were bound together by one language (which we now refer to as Old Russian), economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and—after the baptism of Rus—the Orthodox faith."

[1] The article is officially archived by the Russian state and can be accessed at: Article by Vladimir Putin "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" | Presidential Library (prlib.ru). I will refer to it as (Putin, 2023). The article has no pagination.

There are several things of interest in Putin's rendition of history. First, this period in the distant past constitutes, for him, the original formation of pan-Russian (my term) identity and that original formation constitutes the only true and valid conception of that identity. Put another way, pan-Russian identity is forever and irremediably anchored in this formative period and events that have ensued over the last millennia have operated upon but never significantly altered that identity. This premise is combined with a second postulate: that this primordial identity should be the motive principle driving international and domestic policy-making. That postulate, however, is not made explicit although Putin emotionally expresses its implications. This pan-Russian identity is not the same thing as patriotism or nationalism, although those complexes are almost always connected to history and described in emotional terms as well.

Putin identifies several criteria that should be used to demarcate the "historical and spiritual space" shared by Ukrainians and Russians: language, political rule, and religion. With respect to political rule, for example, Putin contends that "the nobility and the common people perceived Rus as a common territory, as their homeland." Although "Russia," the name of Putin's nation, is not problematic, "Ukraine" is clearly impaired by the fact that the "name…was used more often in the meaning of the Old Russian word `okraina' (periphery), which is found in written sources from the 12th century and referred to various border territories. And the word `Ukrainian,' judging by archival documents, originally referred to frontier guards who protected the external borders." Those "external borders" marked the borders between pan-Russian territory and the rest of the world, and the juxtaposition of the names clearly identifies "Russia" as the "core" territory of pan-Russian identity. Putin does recognize that this pan-Russian territory expanded through conquest and settlement into, for example, "Crimea and the lands of the Black Sea region." However, the "incorporation of the western Russian lands into the single state was not merely the result of political and diplomatic decisions. It was underlain by the common [Russian Orthodox] faith, shared cultural traditions, and—I would like to emphasize it once again—language similarity." In effect, these new territories were added without altering this primordial pan-Russian identity.

Putin, as many others before him, recognizes that collective identity can be manufactured by self-serving political leaders. In the last half of the 19th century, for example, "the leaders of the Polish national movement" exploited "the `Ukrainian issue' to their own advantage…At the same time, the idea of Ukrainian people as a nation distinct from the Russians started to form and gain ground among the Polish elite and the Malorussian [Ukrainian…Malorussian means "Little Russia"] intelligentsia. Since there was no historical basis—and could not have been any, [these] conclusions were substantiated by all sorts of concoctions." Putin then states that such "`hypotheses' became increasingly used for political purposes as a tool of rivalry between European states" for furthering, for example, late-nineteenth century Austro-Hungarian policy in Galicia and German recognition of a Ukrainian state during World War I. Because they were not grounded in a true and valid identity, the "quasi-state formations that emerged across the former Russian Empire at the time of the Civil War and turbulence were inherently unstable." After the civil war following the Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union ratified a constitution in 1924 that included a "right for the republics to freely secede from the Union." By placing that provision in the Constitution, "the authors planted in the foundation of our statehood the most dangerous time bomb, which exploded the moment the safety mechanism provided by the leading role of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] was gone."[2]

[2] In the December 7, 2022, number of the New York Review of Books, Cristina Flores provides a very nice, succinct overview of the respective histories of Ukrainian and Russian national identity. In many ways, her account can be seen as compatible with

After constructing this narrative history (the above is only a sketch), Putin concludes that the "Bolsheviks treated the Russian people as inexhaustible material for their social experiments" and it is "crystal clear" that "Russia was robbed" in that, among other things, "modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era." Although their ostensible nation is an artificial construction, Ukrainian political leaders have seized this historical moment "to mythologize and rewrite history, edit out everything that united us." They even "refer to the period when Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as an occupation." These false understandings of the past have "dragged" Ukraine "into a dangerous geopolitical game" involving the increasingly intense rivalry "between Europe and Russia" in which Ukraine has now become "anti-Russia." The ideological material out of which this high-stakes political game is played is mainly provided by past historical foreign interventions by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Austria-Hungary, and Nazi Germany. At this point, Putin describes Ukrainian leaders and their supporters as "neo-Nazis" for this and other reasons.

Although the details need not concern us, Putin subsequently distinguishes the Russian peoples living in eastern Ukraine from the rest of that country and states that "the most despicable thing is that the Russians in Ukraine are being forced not only to deny their roots, generations of their ancestors but also to believe that Russia is their enemy…The anti-Russia project has been rejected by millions of Ukrainians. The people of Crimea and residents of Sevastopol made their historic choice…the residents of Donetsk and Lugansk took up arms to defend their home their language and their lives." While the beginning of his essay suggests that the legitimate goal of Russian intervention in Ukraine would be annexation of all of its territory, the concluding sections only suggest a defense (and probable incorporation) of Crimea, Donetsk, and Lugansk. Annexation of the entirety of Ukraine would be more consistent with his general interpretive framework but partial incorporation may be more tactically pragmatic. In any event, both policies share many normative and conceptual elements.

In the January 2023 issue of Perspectives, William Partlett, an historian at the University of Melbourne, offers a rather scathing critique of Putin's theory of history. Describing Putin's narrative as "ideological history," Partlett states that it fails to critically engage the source materials that are mobilized in support of its arguments and, separately, interprets "history of as a repository of immutable truths that must be preserved or restored today." With reference to the latter, Partlett asks: "Even if we accept Putin's historical narrative of civilizational unity, why must this unity continue into the present?" In place of this "ideological history," Partlett prefers that "history…help us to understand why the revolutionary reconstruction of society can have unintended and deeply problematic consequences." While the problem-oriented focus is welcome, Partlett also makes several suggestions that appear problematic. For one thing, he suggests that the "conceptual categories [of] superstructure and class" are superior to "an emotional fantasy of restoring an imperial past." He also suggests that Putin failed "to perceive the deep roots of Ukraine's independent identity."

These two suggestions are problematic for different reasons. The suggestion that superstructure and class are superior to "emotional fantasy" has a rather positivist ring to it in the sense that we should be able to "objectively" conduct a class analysis and, if so, apply these categories in trans-national analysis.

Putin's version, particularly with respect to external manipulation of collective identity when it assumes a reflexive response to political repression. However, Flores also makes a case for the authenticity, such as it is, of Ukrainian nationalism as the product of history.

That may be so, but it would not explain why Putin's "emotional fantasy" appeals to so many people and, in fact, has become the public rationale for the largest military conflict in the last seventy years or so. The second suggestion that Ukrainian identity has "deep roots" also seems to contradict this preference for class analysis because, as far as I can tell, no one has yet suggested a class explanation for what has become a rather ferocious resistance to the Russian invasion. In fact, any explanation for the "deep roots of Ukraine's independent identity" that have underpinned this resistance would necessarily be historical in nature and would entail interpretations of past events and processes that would only slightly differ from Putin's analysis. Those differences might, for instance, involve the critical interpretation of archival sources and offer, from time to time, alternative explanations. Other than that, a narrative construction the origins of Ukrainian identity would almost certainly have to rest upon the same kind of historical and cultural materials that Putin has mobilized. There would be different facts and varying interpretations of events, but the form of the claims and the general shape of the argument would be similar.

On the one hand, we can ask when and how "history" (as a purposeful construction of the past) might create and confer legitimacy upon a collective identity. For that purpose, there is certainly enough raw historical material in the form of archives, historical narratives, and personal recollections and reports. The problem for the analyst is how to focus all this material on the theoretical problem at hand: the origin, strength, and content of collective (usually national) identity. The litmus test for screening out irrelevant or tangential material is whether or not, in fact, this particular identity exists. And this test almost invariably produces a very strong confirmation bias into the analysis. For example, before the Russian invasion began, most observers (including, I think, most international relations specialists), believed that Ukraine would be decisively defeated in a matter of days. Most of these analyses appear to have assumed a rough parity in the strength of Ukrainian and Russian collective identity (with perhaps an edge enjoyed by the latter) but a huge advantage in military capability for the Russians. While both assumptions appear to have been incorrect, I am more interested in the predicted comparison of collective identity. I suspect, for example, that many analysts' perception of "the deep roots of Ukraine's independent identity" is of fairly recent vintage, part of the harvest of blood that has been spent by Ukrainians on the battlefield and in their cities. This is not to say that research could not make a case for a distinct Ukrainian identity out of the historical materials available to us. But the experience should remind us that we know very little about how "history" produces collective identity.

On the other hand, Putin's narrative raises questions concerning the viability of trans-national concepts and categories precisely because his mobilization of history has so much in common with many other cases (e.g., see Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities). Keeping in mind that trans-national concepts and categories are only useful if they help us explain comparative political and social events and processes, that is the perspective from which we should interrogate Putin's mobilization of language, ethnicity, and religion (as well as, of course, "history"). Is there, for example, enough "similarity" (Putin's term) between the Ukrainian and Russian languages to suggest a common "historical and spiritual space"? We can easily cite cases in which language similarity is much more striking and, yet, claims of a common "space" do not arise. Ethnicity is even more problematic as a trans-national category in that ethnic identity is almost always a construct motivated by instrumental intentions of one sort or another. In this case, Ukrainian and Russian leaders are pursuing very different political projects with respect to ethnicity. The Russian Orthodox Church is a more unified and durable institution than ethnicity but has the same limitations as language similarity in that there are societies sharing a common religious affiliation (of one sort or another) that do not give rise to political incorporation in one nation. (The Russian Orthodox

Church's influence in Ukraine may be significantly weakened by the war with Russia, something that Putin did not anticipate before the invasion.)

The "history" of a nation is an amalgam of particular notions of language, ethnicity, religion, and cultural heritage, as well as political events. All of these things take on their particularity within their mobilization by national institutions and political leaders. They thus owe much of their relevance to social and political behavior after they have been specifically shaped by these institutions and leaders (including, as in the present case, the claims and contentions of competing national institutions and leaders). I would thus tentatively propose two conclusions. First, with respect to the comparative study of nationalism, there is no basis for constructing trans-national categories of language similarity, ethnic identity, and religion. All these things must be interpreted as the historically specific constructions of particular situations and politics. Second and more contentiously, any attempt to construct trans-national categories would inevitably legitimate particular claims and conceptions associated with some nations over those of other nations by suggesting, for example, that the Russian "people" were somehow more "real" than the Ukrainian "people." There is a paradox here. We must foster concepts of "peoplehood" in order to construct stable and peaceable societies. In order to do that, we must pretend that these concepts refer to real things. But they do not.

I have not forgotten Mearsheimer! We can, as he would urge us to do, count the tanks, artillery, and infantry divisions available to combatants. And, in many cases, an extreme disproportion in material military capability would enable us to predict which nation will prevail. But the war in Ukraine also tells us that tanks are not useful when soldiers abandon them to the enemy and that the relative number of troops is not particularly significant when those on one side refuse to fight. Collective identity is a real thing in the sense that people will subscribe to and pledge their lives in its defense. But it is also a mythical construction.