


ROUNDTABLE

Putin's Histories

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One day in December 2019 I knew something was badly amiss. Russian President Vladimir Putin had called a meeting with the leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States – the vague post-Soviet association of former Soviet republics that semi-defer to Russia – in order to discuss history. Not just discuss: he actually brought a thick stack of archival documents to the meeting, which, he said, demonstrated certain truths about the history of the Second World War. These had allegedly been forgotten or perhaps deliberately ignored in the West. He then selectively cited from these documents (most, if not all, of which are well-known to historians) to prove that, effectively, the West, and especially Poland, were responsible for the war.

This particular spin on the history of the Second World War had been coming through in piecemeal statements for a while. For instance, around the time of the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in August 2019, the Russian propaganda machine began to peddle stories justifying the division of Poland and the annexation of the Baltic States. And, later in the autumn, we witnessed a fiery exchange of accusations between Russia and the EU concerning the Second World War. At the time, I thought that such an overtly political use of history was ill-advised. This led me to oppose not just Putin's take on history but also the unwarranted resolution by the European Parliament to assign Stalin and Hitler equal responsibility for the outbreak of the Second World War.¹ I believed that singling out the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact without, for example, talking about Munich, was as ahistorical as singling out Munich without also talking about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Yet, as this battle of narratives continued, what really struck me was how personally invested Putin himself was in historical debates. It is reasonable for political leaders to be avid consumers of history. Often, politicians write history. What are memoirs but efforts to put a particular spin on historical events one has lived through? Politicians even author popular histories (Winston Churchill is perhaps the best-known example). But this was something different. What we had with Putin was an effort to draw on historical evidence in order to legitimise current policies as historically inevitable. Stacks of archival documents thus came to represent Putin's connection to History in a timeless, Hegelian sense. The content of the stack was less important than the performative act of commanding History.

Aspiring historians – those, for instance, enrolled in PhD programmes at Western universities – are introduced to the profession through specially designed methodology courses. They learn to understand the difference between the past as it happened and history as it is written. They scrutinize the nature of evidence. They think about the different kinds of history that can be written: political, economic, social, cultural, military, etc. They learn how to ask research questions, and they are encouraged to embrace history as, to quote E.H. Carr, 'a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past'. After spending years in meticulous archival research, they produce peer-reviewed books and articles that shed light on this or that aspect of history or, as we like to claim, 'advance the historical debate'.

¹ 'European Parliament resolution of 19 Sept. 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe', https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.html.

But what historical debate do Putin's interventions advance? He is not a trained historian. He does not understand historiography. He has no conception of historical methodology. Putin the Historian therefore is not at all a historian in the professional sense of the word. Instead, he turns to history to legitimise a particular worldview. In this sense, history serves merely a utilitarian function; it is the foundation for present-day narratives. This clearly precludes disagreement. After all, it is hard to contest Putin's historical enunciations when the historical evidence he deploys is seen as the foundation for Russia's national interests, and, indeed, its very reason for existence. To offer any opposing historical interpretations would be tantamount to betraying the Motherland.

Given the significance of history to Putin's worldview, it seems important to ask what history matters to Putin and why. Let me discuss three particularly relevant strands.

The first is what one might call the history of the Russian nation. Putin sees Russian statehood as going back a thousand years or more. In any other context, it would be faintly amusing to hear a Russian president defend anti-Normanism, but Putin is very serious when he maintains that the Rurik dynasty, which ruled over Kievan Rus and various related principalities of Rus from the ninth century onwards, was not of Norman origin. By taking sides in a 300-year-old debate about Russia's ethnic origins, Putin has set the parameters of politically acceptable 'history'. Discovering or discussing evidence that contradicts this point of view becomes unpatriotic and dangerous. The same of course applies to any other historical 'debate' in which Putin has taken sides. Debate becomes meaningless and history is replaced with History.

Of course, it is not unusual for nations to seek anchoring in historical myths; it is part and parcel of nation-building, especially in a region that has been brutalised by wars of imperial conquests, with borders drawn and redrawn, and entire ethnic groups being displaced. Ukraine, among others, has worked hard at building a usable history since securing independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. But none of the Ukrainian leaders have ever matched Putin's obsession with self-legitimation through History.

To put it simply, Putin's view of Russian history runs as follows: Russia grew bigger and defeated external enemies, which always sought the country's demise, until it spanned Europe and Asia, achieving the height of its imperial grandeur in the nineteenth century. In this way, empire and nation have become one in Putin's mind, and he endows with Russian-ness all peoples of the far-flung empire, including, most poignantly, the Ukrainians. Quite contrary to the claim that Putin seeks to re-build the Soviet Union, he has been consistently critical of the Soviet project, precisely for this reason: he feels the Soviet leaders – Lenin in particular – committed an unforgivable crime by setting up titular republics, and thus allowing non-Russian nationalism to take root. Unsurprisingly, Putin justified his invasion of Ukraine by decrying how Lenin, Stalin, and finally Khrushchev created modern Ukraine by carving out parts of historical 'Russia' and giving up Crimea. He thus presents his aggressive imperialism as historically necessary because it merely seeks to reclaim territories that have been lost by Putin's predecessors by folly or by accident.

When observers speak of the 'ideological' underpinnings for Putin's invasion of Ukraine, they refer to this particular interpretation of Russian history as the basis of Putin's denial of nationhood.² For him, Russians and Ukrainians are the same people, and should therefore be reunited under the protective wings of Moscow. Those who resist are described in Putinist propaganda as 'nationalists', though of course the entire Putinist narrative is itself underpinned by extreme Russian nationalism. Russian imperialism in its present form is driven by toxic Russian nationalism, which in turn plays a key role in the Ukrainian nation-building effort.

The second strand of history with which Putin preoccupies himself concerns the Second World War. This, as we have seen, entails blame-shifting. Holding Poland responsible for the outbreak of the war is an especially cynical ploy. More broadly, Putin is keen on presenting Moscow as the liberator of Europe from the scourge of Nazism. At the same time, he is unwilling to acknowledge Stalin's

² See, for example, Dmitry Adamsky, 'Russia's Menacing Mix of Religion and Nuclear Weapons', *Foreign Affairs*, 5 Mar. 2022; Timothy D. Snyder, 'Don't Let Putin Grab Ukraine', *New York Times*, 3 Feb. 2014.

responsibility for the war, or the crimes committed by the Soviets in ‘liberated’ Europe. There is no place in his black-and-white discourse for the rape of Berlin, the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe, or the invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Acknowledgement of such historical facts would cast a shadow on the self-righteous view of history and so erode the foundations of Putin’s current policies.

In recent years, Russia has succumbed to what has been described as a Second World War cult.³ This cult is very popular in the population at large, providing Putin with a much-needed source of legitimacy. Victory Day, with its now inescapable marches of the so-called ‘immortal regiment’ across Russian cities, offers a useful way of co-opting the Russian people into Putin’s deformed historical narratives. Russians’ immense pride on account of their (now mostly dead) ancestors’ victory has filled the ideological vacuum of their present-day lives, compensating for the realisation that today’s Russia, mired in corruption and growing inequality, has no purpose to defend, no *raison d’être*. Moreover, the story of fighting against the Nazis in the Second World War has been conflated with the war in Ukraine, which is presented, improbably, as an effort at Ukraine’s ‘de-Nazification’. Such misuse of history helps Putin justify an otherwise unjustifiable war.

The third strand of Putin’s history pertains to the collapse of the Soviet Union and, in particular, NATO’s enlargement. Here Putin’s grievances go back at least to his 2007 Munich speech, when he first mentioned the allegedly broken promises of non-enlargement. He cited from an arbitrary selection of documents, including the famous conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and James Baker on 9 February 1990, where Baker spoke of NATO not moving ‘even one inch’ to the east. Historians have written extensively about this episode, providing the relevant context. We know, for instance, that while Baker did indeed utter the words about NATO not going ‘even one inch’ to the east, this referred to the specific context of German reunification.⁴ More importantly, no agreement was reached on this occasion or later. Indeed, as historian Mary Sarotte notes, what the Soviets ultimately agreed to was precisely the opposite – they *permitted* NATO’s enlargement to the east.⁵ Putin’s history, in other words, is deeply flawed. His main interest is in framing the argument in a very particular way: promises were given; promises were broken; therefore, Russia is now justified in whatever complaints it has in relation to NATO enlargement.

The end of the Cold War, which Putin greeted in Dresden, East Germany, clearly adds a very personal element to his historical musings. For him, the collapse of the Soviet Union is lived history. He feels that his country – and he personally – was humiliated by the West. He revels in this perceived humiliation because it serves to legitimise his present-day policies of ‘bringing Russia up from its knees’. In this, Putin is not at all unique. For example, the idea of humiliation is also at the core of the Chinese Communist Party’s narrative of self-legitimation. In their case, humiliation refers to the roughly one hundred years that passed between the First Opium War and the Chinese Communist Revolution (called, fittingly, ‘the century of humiliation’). During this period, China was under pressure from colonial powers, not least Russia. Mao Zedong proclaimed in a well-known speech in September 1949 that ‘We, the Chinese people have stood up!’. Putin draws on similar tropes.

All of Putin’s favoured historical interpretations reinforce each other. Thus, the narrative of Russia’s historical continuity in the face of repeated humiliations endows Putin with a sense of timelessness and raises him above criticism by his contemporaries. Putin sees himself standing high in glory in proximity to History’s most famous personalities. It is for this reason that he has repeatedly compared himself to figures like Peter the Great and Mahatma Gandhi. By contrast, the narrative of the Soviet victory in the Second World War plays a different role – that of righteousness. Russia saved Europe; therefore, Russia is a messiah nation. But, like all messiahs, it has been unjustly hounded by the

³ Leonid Ragozin, ‘Victory Day and Russia’s War Cult’, *Al-Jazeera*, 9 May 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/5/9/victory-day-and-russias-war-cult>.

⁴ See, for example, Mark Kramer and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, ‘NATO Enlargement – Was There a Promise?’, *International Security*, 42, 1 (2017), 186–92. doi: https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_c_00287.

⁵ Mary Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

ungrateful West. Hence, the third strand, which is the idea that Moscow was tricked by the wily Americans in relation to NATO enlargement. This helps Putin portray himself as the aggrieved party.

Timeless, righteous but aggrieved, Putin presents a formidable façade of defiance. He lives in a make-believe world where the past and the present have become indistinguishable. Russia fought wars, and it is still fighting wars, and it will always fight wars, because there is an arrogant enemy out there. This enemy is the ‘Nazi-America’ of Putin’s imagination, which seeks Russia’s – and his – demise. Unfortunately, too many Russians buy into this ideological garbage.

The Russians are not unique in such sentiments. It is not uncommon to peddle highly one-sided national historical narratives that downplay dark pages of history or promote the feel-good themes of national greatness.⁶ What is unique is the combustible mix of sentiments, and their intensity and pervasiveness within the Russian society. The most common explanation of why Putin’s history seems to stick with so many Russians is the shock of Soviet collapse, and ensuing chaos, which, though now thirty years in the past, continues to cast a long shadow. Svetlana Alexievich probed such thinking in her masterful oral history *Second-Hand Time*, exploring not so much the economic consequences of the collapse – dire as these were – but the ideational consequences, the disorientation, the ontological insecurity of the homo post-Sovieticus in the face of key existential questions: what is Russia, and who are the Russians? In the words of one of her (anti-)heroes: ‘How I envy the people who had an idea! And now we live without an idea. I want Great Russia. I don’t remember it, but I know it existed.’

Their identities suddenly in question, many Russians have turned to history, seeking reassurance in past glories, in timelessness, in righteousness, and in the sense of humiliation. Putin’s histories have resonated with a societal need to mean something ‘good’, to be owed something by someone. At the same time, the regime’s control of the media space has constrained the scope for counter-narratives. Those who might question Russia’s imperial and Soviet pasts, or flip the narrative of humiliation to reveal Russia’s own unsavoury record of aggression and conquest, are inaudible. Putin the Historian is widely embraced not just because his interpretations are psychologically appealing to an uncritical domestic audience, but because his critics have been marginalised or silenced. In the absence of alternatives, Putin’s histories are accepted as truth by default.

⁶ Consider the recent example involving the former UK prime minister, Liz Truss, who claimed that the UK ‘became great through its embrace of free trade, free enterprise and free markets’. There is not much here in the way of the acknowledgement of Britain’s brutal imperial past.