

WEAPONISING HISTORY IN WAR

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Weaponising History in War :
How the Kremlin weaponises History to justify War.

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Abstract

On February 24, 2022, troops of the Russian Armed Forces entered Ukrainian soil, launching a full-scale invasion with the goal of taking Kyiv within 3 days. Two years later, what Moscow calls its *Специальная Военная Операция* (Special Military Operation) is still ongoing. While the invasion took many Western analysts by surprise, a retrospective look at Moscow's historical narratives surrounding Ukraine reveals a buildup to the conflict. Vladimir Putin's presidential speeches present the argumentation, rooted in historical revisionism, that serves to justify Russia's military agenda in Ukraine. Through the weaponisation of Ukrainian History, starting from the Kyivan Rus up until the Separatist movement in Donbas, Moscow constructs narratives that delegitimise Ukraine's historical existence. Portraying Ukrainians as part of one Russian people, claiming Eastern territories of Ukraine and suggesting that neo-Nazis have taken power with the help of the West in pursuit of the latter's anti-Russian policy, the Kremlin misrepresents history to justify military intervention. This thesis aims to demonstrate how Russia has weaponised Ukrainian, Russian and Global history in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Key words : *Weaponisation, History, Ukraine, Russia, War, Kremlin, Putin.*

List of Abbreviations

UNM - Ukrainian National Movement

UPR : Ukrainian People's Republic

UPA : Ukrainian People's Army

OUN : Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists

OUN-B : Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists - Bandera Faction

WWII - World War II

GPW - Great Patriotic War

TBL : Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

MRP : Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact

USSR : Union of Socialist Soviet Republics

CPSU : Communist Party of the Soviet Union

UASSR : Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic

RAF : Russian Armed Forces

UAF : Ukrainian Armed Forces

SVO - *Spetsialnaya Voenaya Operatsiya* or Special Military Operation

UN : United Nations

UNGA : United Nations General Assembly

OHCHR : United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights

NATO : North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

EU : European Union

ECHR : European Court of Human Rights

MEP : Member of European Parliament

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INTRODUCTION

“Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country. It’s an integral part of our history, culture... modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia”, stated President Vladimir Putin in a Presidential Address 3 days prior to the beginning of the *Special Military Operation* in Ukraine.

As of February 24, 2022, the Russian Federation has launched a military invasion of Ukraine through the North and East of Ukraine, with offensives near Chernobyl, Chernihiv, Sumy, Kharkhiv, Luhansk, Donetsk and Kherson.¹ The invasion has pushed Ukraine and its people to advocate for their independence from Russia and into the arms of the West. Since the beginning of the intervention with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukrainian President Zelensky has been bidding on accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU).² Nonetheless, the Kremlin has adamantly refused to recognise the sovereign identity of Ukraine.³

When referring to the Kremlin or Moscow, I intend to designate the Russian government and its leader, Vladimir Putin. This paper delves into the weaponisation of history by the government as a means to justify and legitimate the actions from 2014 to 2022.

This issue of the Kremlin’s weaponisation of history raises a number of questions, such as how does an authoritarian regime use the politics of memory to advance its political objectives? How can history be used in policies of territorial expansion? How do Putin's speeches legitimise war ? How does the weaponisation of history by the Kremlin aim to shape the collective consciousness ? This thesis aims at demonstrating how the Kremlin weaponises history to justify war between 2014 and 2022.

¹ Rick Westera, “Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” Omniatlas, 2022, <https://omniatlas.com/blogs/stray-maps/russian-invasion-ukraine/>.

² Aleksander Palikot, “‘It Will Perish When I’m Gone’: Russian Language Usage Plunges in Wartime Ukraine,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 20, 2023, sec. Ukraine, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-language-use-plunges-wartime-ukraine/32419351.html>.

³ Rating, “Sixth National Survey: Language Issue in Ukraine (19 March 2022),” Rating Ukraine, 2022, https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/language_issue_in_ukraine_march_19th_2022.html; Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

Historical Background

Claiming that contemporary Ukraine is the result of Bolshevik territorial policies, President Putin demonstrates historical revisionism that can only be deciphered with knowledge of Ukrainian and Russian history.⁴ Knowing the history of Ukraine from its revolutionary aspirations in 1917, to the eve of its invasion in February 2022, is crucial to understanding the historical narrative defended by the Russian government.

In early March 1917, representatives of Ukrainian political and cultural organisations created a body called the Central Rada in Kyiv, demanding territorial autonomy for Ukraine and claiming jurisdiction over much of current Ukraine, including Kyiv, Podolia, Volhynia, Chernihiv, and Poltava.⁵ By the summer of 1917, it became the parliament of Ukraine, composed of representatives of the All-Ukrainian Congresses of Peasants, Workers and Soldiers.⁶ Following the October Revolution, the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR) was proclaimed, claiming new territories in the East and South - Kharkiv, Kherson, Tavrida, Kursk and Voronezh - settled by ethnic Ukrainians.⁷ The proclamation led to a reignited confrontation between the Bolsheviks and the new state. The Bolsheviks attempted coup in Kyiv in December 1917 was halted by the overwhelming support for the Central Rada, forcing them to turn to Kharkiv, where they proclaimed the Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets (UPRS). As early as January 1918, the Red Army entered Ukraine and managed to quickly take control of all industrial cities in Ukraine.⁸

On January 22, 1918, the Central Rada proclaimed the full independence of Ukraine, completely breaking away from Russia.⁹ The Bolsheviks were met with widespread opposition from the Ukrainians in violently repressed uprisings. In May 1918, 27 students were captured and shot by the Red Army, making them the first martyrs of Ukraine's fight for independence against Russia. In February 1918, the UPR signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany and Austria-Hungary, agreeing to an exchange of Ukrainian grain for military

⁴ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

⁵ Paul Robert Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine, University of Toronto Press* (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 1996), <https://utorontopress.com/9781442610217/a-history-of-ukraine/>.

⁶ Serhii Plokhyy, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2015).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Serhii Plokhyy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2023).

⁹ Serhii Plokhyy, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2015).

support.¹⁰ This aid led to the withdrawal of Bolshevik forces from Kyiv by March 1918, and the forced recognition of Ukraine's independence as a condition in the Soviets own treaty on March 3, 1918.¹¹ After the defeat of the Central Powers and the Armistice of November 11, 1918, the UPR was again coveted by the Bolsheviks.¹²

The Ukrainian-Soviet War in 1922 led to the establishment of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UASSR) as the official government from 1922 to 1991. While the Soviet-Ukraine war officially ended, sporadic uprisings remained through guerilla warfare against the Soviets, but brutal repression led to the eradication of Ukrainian nationalism, notably with political purges.¹³ The Holodomor was the implementation of collectivisation and de-keulisation policies on the Ukrainian peasantry and resulted in the starvation and displacement of millions of Ukrainian citizens, totaling to an estimated 3.5 to 7 million deaths.¹⁴ Although a contentious topic, scholars such as Thom, argue that Stalin's policy aimed at imposing his increasing dictatorship, but also targeting peasant independence.¹⁵ It is a crucial element of the Ukrainian separation from Russian common identity, as illustrated by the adoption in the Ukrainian Parliament of the Holodomor Law, recognising it as a genocide of the Ukrainian people.¹⁶ This extremely violent part of the history of Ukrainian integration to the USSR is omitted in the Kremlin's historical narrative.¹⁷ The experience of citizens of the UASSR under the authority of the CPSU has been a central factor in constructing a separate Ukrainian national identity.¹⁸

In 1989, Ukraine saw its first semi-free elections to the new Soviet Parliament of Ukraine.¹⁹ In the summer of 1990, the new parliament declared Ukraine a sovereign state, without seceding from the USSR. Mass mobilisations broke out in Ukraine, notably on

¹⁰ Serhii Plokyh, *Lost Kingdom : The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation*. (Basic Books, 2017).

¹¹ Paul Robert Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine*, University of Toronto Press (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 1996), <https://utorontopress.com/9781442610217/a-history-of-ukraine/>.

¹² Serhii Plokyh, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2021).

¹³ Françoise Thom, "Reflections on Stalin and the Holodomor," *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 23, 2015): 81, <https://doi.org/10.21226/t2tg6w>.

¹⁴ Norman Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides*, Press.princeton.edu (Princeton University Press, 2011), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691152387/stalins-genocides>.

¹⁵ Françoise Thom, "Reflections on Stalin and the Holodomor," *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 2, no. 1 (January 23, 2015): 81, <https://doi.org/10.21226/t2tg6w>.

¹⁶ Lina Klymenko, "The Holodomor Law and National Trauma Construction in Ukraine," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 58, no. 4 (2016): 341–61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26774880>.

¹⁷ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹⁸ Lina Klymenko, "The Holodomor Law and National Trauma Construction in Ukraine," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 58, no. 4 (2016): 341–61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26774880>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

October 2, with a student hunger strike on the October Revolution Square demanding Ukrainian independence. By August 1991, the Supreme Soviet of the UASSR declared the independence of Ukraine, which was then voted by the Parliament and the general population on December 1, 1991, leading to the establishment of the modern state of Ukraine.²⁰

On January 20, 1991, the independence of Ukraine was formally declared, with its first President, Leonid Kravchuk. The newly elected President held a pro-Western foreign policy, signing a cooperation agreement with the EU in June 1994, as well as entering a Partnership for Peace agreement with NATO later that same year.²¹ Kravchuk was then replaced by Leonid Kuchma that same year who held a rather multi-vector foreign policy, striking deals with the EU, NATO, as well as the Russian Federation.²² The 2004 elections declared the pro-Russian candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, the winner, though exit polls showed clear favour for the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko, setting the stage for the Orange Revolution. Ukrainians took to the streets to protest against election fraud, demanding a re-vote, which was organised in December 2004 and saw Yushchenko being elected.²³ The new pro-West president made the accession to the EU his foreign policy priority.²⁴ However, the pro-Russian Yanukovich was elected in 2010.²⁵ The constitutional revision yielding increased power to the Presidency, the 2011 trial of his political opponent Tymoshenko, as well as his backtracking on the 2013 EU deal to be signed in Vilnius, led to the Dignity Revolution or Maidan Protests, where hundreds of thousands poured in the streets to demand reform, increased ties with the EU, and protest government corruption.²⁶ The Kremlin condemned the Maidan protests, claiming that they were a *coup d'état* by nationalists which supposedly pushed Ukraine into the abyss of civil war.²⁷ Moscow's accusations have been made without supplying any evidence, while international observers disproved the claims of a *coup d'état*, providing, on the contrary, evidence of Russian meddling in Ukraine. The

²⁰ Lina Klymenko, "The Holodomor Law and National Trauma Construction in Ukraine," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 58, no. 4 (2016): 341–61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26774880>.

²¹ Karina Skyrokykh, "The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine : External Actors and Domestic Factors," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 5 (2018): 832–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1479734>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Serhii Plokyh, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2021).

²⁴ Serhii Plokyh, *Lost Kingdom : The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation*. (Basic Books, 2017).

²⁵ Karina Skyrokykh, "The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine : External Actors and Domestic Factors," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 5 (2018): 832–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1479734>.

²⁶ Serhii Plokyh, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2021).; Karina Skyrokykh, "The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine : External Actors and Domestic Factors," *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 5 (2018): 832–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1479734>.

²⁷ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

Russian Federation took advantage of the political instability in Ukraine to launch the annexation of Crimea, which Putin justified as the simple "return" of Crimea to Russia.²⁸ The following Ukrainian presidents, Petro Poroshenko, in office from 2014 to 2019, and Volodymyr Zelensky, have implemented pro-Western foreign policy. In February 2022, the Russian Armed Forces (RAF) launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, with the war still ongoing. Having knowledge of Ukrainian history predating the 2022 invasion is essential to understand the repeated references to events in Ukraine in the Russian presidential speeches, and in official statements of the Foreign Ministry and Ministry of Education.

* * *

Relevant Historiography

Crucial in understanding the weaponisation of history by the Kremlin when justifying their aggressive policy towards Ukraine, this thesis also delves into Ukrainian and Russian history with works such as Serhii Plokhy's *Gates of Europe : A History of Ukraine*, or *Lost Kingdom : The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation*, which outlines the history of Ukraine and Russia, and illustrating the complexities of Ukraine's plural identity and historical evolution of relations with Russia.²⁹ Plokhy's works go into minute detail, pivotal in arguing the weaponisation of history by demonstrating the misinterpretation and the disregard for historical accuracy in Putin's speeches. Serhii Plokhy's contribution to the study of Ukrainian history has led to him becoming the Mykhailo Hrushevsky professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University, as well as the director of the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute. Plokhy's works have been awarded the Lionel Gelber Prize, the Pushkin House Russian Book Prize, and the Baillie Gifford Prize. In history, Plokhy has been awarded the Antonovych Prize, as well as the Shevchenko National Prize. Contrary to Putin's claims of unity between Ukrainians and Russians, Plokhy argues for the existence of a distinct Ukrainian national identity that dates back to the ninth century Kyivan Rus.³⁰ The scholar's extensive work on the history of Ukraine and Russia presents itself as a counter narrative to Putin's use of history, highlighting how Ukraine's distinct national identity was recognised by Bolshevik leadership.³¹ When examining the weaponisation of history by Moscow's

²⁸ Serhii Plokhy, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2015).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Howard Davis, "Serhii Plokhy, the Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History," *Society* 60, no. 6 (November 13, 2023): 1040–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-023-00932-y>.

³¹ Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2023).

leadership, Ploky provides an essential historical overview that provides evidence disproving the Kremlin's historical narrative, which in turn demonstrates this weaponisation.

The Kremlin's practice of weaponising history in the pursuit of their foreign policy agenda has been explored in several publications. The fourth volume of the *Journal of Applied History* focuses on "Weaponising History in the Russo-Ukrainian War" and delves into the topic within the context of the ongoing conflict. Composed of articles covering Moscow's narratives on Russia-NATO relations, the Second World War, Russia's anti-fascist rhetoric - weaponisation is analysed from different perspectives, such as the weaponisation of Russia-NATO relations from perspective of the US anti-imperial Left, and analysis of the Second World War and its use by the Zelensky regime. Khislavksi's article analyses Putin's speeches and the rhetoric used by the Kremlin, focusing on 3 speeches, that of September 19, 2013; March 18, 2014; and December 4, 2014. This article provides insights on the etymological debate around the term weaponisation, as well as examining recurring historical narratives. This thesis is based on academic work from historians, but also legal experts, such as Jean-Dominique Giuliani's article "Russia, Ukraine and International Law", which analyses the 2014 annexation of Crimea and questions its conformity to International Law, giving legal insight into Putin's claims of constitutional and international law violations.³² Sources directly published by the UN, such as decisions or reports from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), by the European Court of Human Rights, as well as NATO, are crucial in illustrating the misrepresentations present in the Kremlin's historical discourse. The thesis is based on a diverse number of primary sources, such as the Kremlin's press releases, the Ukrainian Constitution, UN and NATO documents. To illustrate the Kremlin's narrative, this thesis relies on speeches from the Kremlin, publications from Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the Ministry of Science and Education.

³² Jean-Dominique Giuliani, "Russia, Ukraine and International Law," www.robert-schuman.eu, 2015, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/344-russia-ukraine-and-international-law>.

Methodology

Within the framework of this paper, historical narratives published by the Kremlin from 2014 to 2022 will be analysed in their justification and legitimisation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In order to demonstrate the weaponisation of history by the Kremlin, this thesis aims to examine the historical references made by members of the Russian government concerning Ukraine, to demonstrate their misrepresentation, and to illustrate how they form a wider narrative aimed at justifying the war. To this end, the analysis follows a chronological structure, first analysing the weaponisation of the Ukrainian Revolution (1917-1922), then that of Soviet Ukraine (1922-1991), and finally that of Russia in the post-Soviet world order (1991-2022). To demonstrate the weaponisation of history, this thesis cross examines the claims made by the Kremlin and its historical narrative with other reliable sources, such as academic articles and press coverage. Whenever an inaccuracy is highlighted in Moscow's historical portrayal, I will outline how it serves the purpose of legitimising and justifying Russia's aggressive actions, thus illustrating how the Kremlin weaponises history. During the research process for this thesis, four Kremlin documents were particularly useful, perfectly illustrating the historical narrative pushed by Russian authorities: three presidential speeches preceding military action – March 18, 2014 announcing the annexation of Crimea; February 21, 2022 preceding the invasion of Ukraine; and February 24, 2022 announcing the invasion – as well as the controversial article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" published by President Putin on July 12, 2021. These sources give insight into historical argumentation for the war, as well as encapsulating the general rhetoric that is reinforced by the Russian media – owned by close allies of Putin and used as a tool of propaganda – embassies and Ministries of Education, of Defense, and of Foreign Affairs.³³ For the aforementioned reasons, these documents will be referred to throughout this thesis, while also mentioning other Russian governmental primary sources that make use of the same historical argumentation.

³³ Scott Gehlbach, "Reflections on Putin and the Media," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 26, no. 1 (January 2010): 77–87, <https://doi.org/10.2747/1060-586x.26.1.77>.

Theoretical Framework

In order to analyse the weaponisation of history by the Russian government in justifying the invasion of Ukraine, we need to understand the semantics of the term and take account of the theoretical framework that surrounds it. To this end, my analysis is based on several writings on the theory of weaponisation, such as the articles “History as a Weapon” by Edgar Wolfrum and “The Weaponisation of Everything” by Mark Galeotti.³⁴ Weaponisation differs from simple instrumentalisation of history; the latter occurs in the creation of meaning and self-identification in a new geopolitical configuration, as in the case of the European integration of countries from the former Eastern bloc after the collapse of the USSR.³⁵ The term weaponisation answers to a specific set of criteria, as identified by the historian Edgar Wolfrum - history is weaponised when legitimisation of aggressive political decisions, mobilisation and integration of majorities, and the exclusion of minorities take place under the umbrella of politics of history, claiming sovereignty over memory itself.³⁶ In the case of Putin's presidencies, his use of history only responds to Wolfram's criteria as of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, thus this thesis will only cover weaponisation by the Kremlin from March 18, 2014 until February 24, 2022, at the outbreak of the full-scale invasion.³⁷ Additionally, Galeotti argues that the idea that the 2014 annexation of Crimea was the first true ‘hybrid war’ is a falsehood, since many of the techniques deemed as novel hardly are, and he argues that the use of history is not a novel strategy, rather it is very commonly used.³⁸ Another form of weaponised history present in academical debate, is the dehistoricization of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Scholar Ilan Pappé, “Israel had pushed for the definition of anti-Semitism to be expanded to include criticism of the Israel state and questioning the moral basis of Zionism”.³⁹ In addition to the theory surrounding

³⁴ Mark Galeotti, *The Weaponisation of Everything : A Field Guide to the New Way of War* (New Haven ; London Yale University Press, 2022).

³⁵ Grigori Khislavski, “Weaponizing History”, *Journal of Applied History* 4, no. 1-2 (December 12, 2022): 102–25, <https://doi.org/10.1163/25895893-bja10029>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ilan Pappé, “Why Israel Wants to Erase Context and History in the War on Gaza,” *Al Jazeera*, November 5, 2023,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/11/5/why-israel-wants-to-erase-context-and-history-in-the-war-on-gaza>.

weaponisation, this thesis delves into the International Relations theory on the security dilemma. The theory states that when one country increases its security, it can be perceived as an offensive act, and in-turn cause neighbouring states to increase their own security, which can lead to a cycle of increased rearmament and escalating tensions. This theory was elaborated by Herbert Butterfield, John Herz, Robert Jervis, and recently re-defined by Shiping Tang. Putin's vision of Russia's geopolitical position follows the realist theory, illustrated by his demands for NATO members to cease increasing security measures in order to ensure that neighbouring countries aren't threatened. While Realism offers a wide range of contrasting interpretations, depending on the different variables – actors, events, contexts – taken into account, the theoretical framework can be identified in Putin's foreign policy. Soon after the launch of the SVO, realist scholar John Mearsheimer provided an extensive analysis of the conflict from the realist perspective, arguing that Western states' actions, particularly NATO expansion, were largely responsible for provoking Russian aggression.

* * *

Academic Relevance

The Putin regime's historical revisionism serves to delegitimise Ukraine's distinct sovereign identity by constructing narratives, similar to those spread by the Soviet state apparatus, thus demonstrating the necessity of the Special Military Operation (SVO) in Ukraine. Under tsarist Russia, authorities regarded Ukraine as *Malorossiya* justifying the implementation of repressive *Russification* policies. Throughout this thesis, most of the evidence brought forward that directly disproves the Kremlin's claims have been published by Western or Ukrainian organisations, universities or news agencies, information Russian citizens have severely limited access to due to the Kremlin's strict censorship. My rationale is to show that the Kremlin creates historical narratives in order to support its own political and military decisions, through historical revisionism and misinterpretation. These narratives are imposed on Russian citizens through state-owned media, state-controlled education, and state-censored culture. While many academic works have been written on the Kremlin's use of history and the weaponisation of history in the framework of the Russo-Ukraine conflict, this thesis differs in its analysis, taking into account the weaponisation of Soviet and post-Soviet history, specifically surrounding Ukraine, by the Kremlin between 2014 and 2022. Khislavski's aforementioned article delves into the Kremlin's weaponisation of history, analysing three presidential speeches from 2013 to 2014, where this thesis expands on the

narratives constructed from 2014 until 2022. The Kremlin frequently mentions mediaeval and modern history of Russia and Ukraine with the aim of legitimising the war, and an extensive historiography on this weaponisation exists, notably with Niel Drost's paper "Tsar-struck", or Dina Khapaeva's "Putin's Dark Ages". This thesis aims to demonstrate how the Kremlin weaponises Russian and Ukrainian history in order to justify its military aggression, by covering Putin's historical references to events occurring from 1917 to 2022 and contrasting them with accepted academic and journalistic literature. With the Russian authorities' monopoly of information through the stronghold over memory and history politics, illustrated throughout this thesis, Putin has manipulated History against Ukraine within the Russian and pro-Russian public. Analysing the weaponisation of Bolshevik, Soviet and post-Cold War history in Putin's speeches, has allowed this thesis to establish the historical narrative imposed by the Kremlin in a novel way. While speeches of the Russian President have been analysed by scholars, the combined examination of 3 Presidential Addresses and Essay from March 2014 to February 2022 provides a clearer picture of how historical narratives are weaponised, and how they are used to justify specific actions. For instance, the cross-examination of these Presidential documents allow this thesis to highlight recurring historical narratives that serve specific purposes, such as the delegitimisation of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty throughout Bolshevik and Soviet history which serves to justify Russia's territorial annexations. The ultimate goal of this thesis is to provide an explanation to the inaction of the Russian population, demonstrating how effectively the Kremlin legitimises and justifies its policies, with the help of severe censorship and state controlled information.

II

CHAPTER 1 - LENIN'S UKRAINE : HOW THE KREMLIN WEAPONISES THE HISTORY OF THE UKRANIAN REVOLUTION.

“Modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia”.⁴⁰

This chapter delves into the weaponisation of Ukrainian history from the start of the Ukrainian National Movement (UNM) in 1917 until the formal accession of the Ukrainian SSR (UASSR) into the USSR in 1922. By propagating the narrative that Ukraine does not have a separate historical existence, the Russian government legitimises military action as the restoration of historic lands to their rightful owner. Weaponisation entails the use of history to justify aggressive actions and mobilisation, this chapter seeks to illustrate how the Kremlin’s references to early Soviet history in the current conflict corresponds to weaponisation.

The historical reality of Ukraine’s fight for independence and sovereignty is glossed over in the official Russian historical discourse.⁴¹ The fall of the Russian Empire gave Ukraine the conditions for a separate national movement at the time of the Russian Revolution.⁴² The movement marks the birth of the fight for independence present in all circles of Ukrainian society, regardless of political leanings or class. The omission of a Ukrainian identity by Russian authorities dates back to imperial Russia, the region was viewed as a southern province of Russia called *Malorossiya* – Little Russia.⁴³ Any movement toward national recognition was repressed through Russification policies, that is systematic institutional discrimination.⁴⁴ According to scholars, the Russification policies can partly explain the failure of the Ukrainian Revolution.⁴⁵ Through the revision of early Soviet

⁴⁰ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁴¹ Nick Mayhew, “Vladimir Putin’s History War Where Truth Is the First Casualty,” *The Conversation*, February 15, 2024, <https://theconversation.com/vladimir-putins-history-war-where-truth-is-the-first-casualty-223365>.

⁴² Chris Ford, “Reconsidering the Ukrainian Revolution 1917–1921: The Dialectics of National Liberation and Social Emancipation,” *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 15, no. 3 (December 2007): 279–306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09651560701711562>.

⁴³ Chris Ford, “Reconsidering the Ukrainian Revolution 1917–1921: The Dialectics of National Liberation and Social Emancipation,” *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 15, no. 3 (December 2007): 279–306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09651560701711562>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

history, the Kremlin delegitimises the sovereignty of Ukraine, repurposing the historic idea of Malorossiya, thus justifying its ownership over its own historic area.

To do so, this chapter will draw on academic historical literature and compare it to the historical accounts mentioned by the Kremlin. The primary sources will focus principally on presidential speeches published by the Kremlin, publications from the Ministry of Education and of Foreign Affairs, and documents from the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada dated from the 2014 annexation of Crimea to the 2022 full scale invasion. This chapter relies on the works of Serhii Plokyh on Ukrainian History, notably *The Gates of Europe : A History of Ukraine*, as well as *Lost Kingdom : the Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation*.

To this end, this chapter will first delve into the weaponisation of the Ukrainian Revolution (I), followed by an analysis of how the UNM is delegitimised through the highlight of foreign involvement (II), before examining the questioning of Ukraine's territorial integrity emphasised by secessions in the UPR (III).

* * *

I. The Ukrainian Revolution : a unanimous movement ?

Reproducing the historic narrative of Malorossiya, the Kremlin delegitimises Ukraine's sovereignty by minimising the UNM, highlighting internal fragmentation of the movement, and putting an emphasis on occupation of the Ukrainian People's Republic by foreign agents, as well as the secession of different declared states. Through this rhetoric, there is an attempt at depicting the current military action as the legitimate act of recovery of Russia's historic lands.

I.A. The Central Rada: an All-Ukrainian parliament

In early March 1917, representatives of Ukrainian political and cultural organisations created a body called the Central Rada in Kyiv, demanding territorial autonomy and jurisdiction over much of current Ukraine – Kyiv, Podolia, Volhynia, Chernihiv and Poltava – despite Putin's claims that Ukraine's borders were defined by Lenin's policies.⁴⁶ By the summer, the Rada became the effective parliament of Ukraine, composed of representatives

⁴⁶ Arkadii Zhukovsky, "Central Rada," *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* 1, no. 1 (1984), <https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CC%5CE%5CCentralRada.htm>; Serhii Plokyh, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2021).

of an all-Ukrainian congress of peasants, workers and soldiers.⁴⁷ Demonstrating a strong intention for liberation from Russian interference, the Rada representatives issued a report at the third Conference of Nationalities in Switzerland, arguing for their right to statehood, referring to Winston Churchill's statement “we want this war to correct the map of Europe on a national basis, by real desire of the peoples living in these territories... We seek durable peace that restores harmony, liberates races, and is focused on the integrity of nations”.⁴⁸ While historiography illustrates a clear desire on the part of the Ukrainian political elite for independence from Russia, the Kremlin portrays this desire as shared by a minority of Ukrainians, corrupted by anti-Russian Poland, and others wishing to remain in union with Russia.⁴⁹ Petrograd considered Ukraine as *Malorossiya*, an extension of Russian territory that they had authority over, thus the success of a national movement in Ukraine entailed a direct loss of territory and was therefore repressed.⁵⁰ This notion of *Malorossiya* is mentioned in a number of Putin’s speeches, echoing the idea that Russia has legitimate authority over its western neighbour, thus legitimising its military actions in Ukraine. This narrative is furthered in the recently updated national History curriculum by the Ministry of Education, with textbooks referring to *Malorossiya* as an indisputable historic evidence of Russia’s natural authority over Ukraine.⁵¹

I. B. The Ukrainian People’s Republic : a fragmented movement ?

Led by Mykhailo Hrushevsky, the Central Rada proclaimed Ukrainian independence through four Universals. In June 1917, the autonomy of Ukraine in a federal union with Russia was proclaimed. In November, the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UPR) was declared a sovereign federal state, and in January 1918, following the October Revolution, full independence was proclaimed.⁵² The UPR claimed additional territories settled by ethnic

⁴⁷ Arkadii Zhukovsky, “Central Rada,” *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* 1, no. 1 (1984), <https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CC%5CE%5CCentralRada.htm>; Serhii Plochy, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2021).

⁴⁸ Volodymyr Holovchenko, “Obtaining International Sovereignty of the UPR at the Central Rada Period,” *Historia I Polityka* 20, no. 27 (April 6, 2017): 89–100, <https://doi.org/10.12775/hip.2017.014>.

⁴⁹ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁵⁰ Chris Ford, “Reconsidering the Ukrainian Revolution 1917–1921: The Dialectics of National Liberation and Social Emancipation,” *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 15, no. 3 (December 2007): 279–306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09651560701711562>.

⁵¹ Iliia Liapin, “Changes of History and Civics Curriculum and Textbooks in Russia in the Context of the War in Ukraine,” EuroClio - Inspiring History and Citizenship Educators, 2022, <https://euroclio.eu/2023/03/28/changes-of-history-and-civics-curriculum-and-textbook-in-russia-in-the-context-of-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

⁵² Volodymyr Holovchenko, “Obtaining International Sovereignty of the UPR at the Central Rada Period,” *Historia I Polityka* 20, no. 27 (April 6, 2017): 89–100, <https://doi.org/10.12775/hip.2017.014>; Ivan L. Rudnytsky, “The Soviet Ukraine in Historical Perspective,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des*

Ukrainians in the South and East – Kharkiv, Kherson, Tavirida, Kursk and Voronezh – corresponding to Ukraine’s officially recognised borders of 1991, 1994 and 2003, which are at the centre of the current invasion by the RAF.⁵³ Putin’s speeches refer to the UPR “as part of Russia”, completely dismissing the clear efforts of the Central Rada to progressively achieve full independence from their Eastern neighbour.⁵⁴ This fits into the Kremlin’s narrative that there is a triune of a larger Russian people – composed of Velikoruussians, Malorussians and Belorussians – that share a common historic destiny.⁵⁵ Split between the resolving of the national question and the promotion of social change, the UNM was internally fragmented, which quickly led to infighting. This is illustrated by the tension between two early leaders of the UNM, with Prime Minister Volodymyr Vynnochenko’s goal of out-socialising the Bolsheviks by promoting radical social policies, and Symon Petliura’s emphasis on establishing a nation state through state-building.⁵⁶ The Putin regime’s historical revisionism depicts Petliura as having surrendered Western Ukraine to Poland in exchange for military support, insinuating that the UPR was not an effective state. During the Soviet-Polish war, Petliura, acting as Supreme Commander of the Ukrainian People’s Army, had reached a truce in April 1920 with Poland, which led to the re-capturing of Kyiv from the Bolsheviks in May of the same year, with the help of Polish military aid.

* * *

The Kremlin effectively constructs a narrative depicting the UNM as a peripheral movement, plagued by internal fragmentation and lacking a unanimous political programme, thus implying the non-existence of Ukraine as a separate nation-state. This narrative serves to

Slavistes 14, no. 2 (1972): 235–50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40866431>; Анатолій Іванович Козаченко, “Constitutional Process under Ukrainian Central Council (1917–1918),” *Problems of Legality* 0, no. 140 (March 12, 2018): 8–16, <https://doi.org/10.21564/2414-990x.140.121896>.

⁵³ Анатолій Іванович Козаченко, “Constitutional Process under Ukrainian Central Council (1917–1918),” *Problems of Legality* 0, no. 140 (March 12, 2018): 8–16, <https://doi.org/10.21564/2414-990x.140.121896>;

⁵⁴ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁵⁵ Olesya Zakharova, “Putin’s Dream of a ‘Triune People,’” *Riddle Russia*, June 3, 2022, <https://ridl.io/putin-s-dream-of-a-triune-people/>; Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁵⁶ Symon Petliura was a Ukrainian political and military leader in the early 20th century. He played a key role in Ukraine’s struggle for independence after the Russian revolutions of 1917. As head of the Ukrainian People’s Republic (1919–1920), he fought against Bolshevik forces. Forced into exile, he was assassinated in Paris in 1926. Volodymyr Vynnychenko was a Ukrainian politician, writer, and artist. He served as the first Prime Minister of the Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1917–1918 and was a key figure in Ukraine’s independence movement. Vynnychenko was also a prolific author, contributing significantly to Ukrainian literature before dying in exile in 1951. Matthew Kowalski, “The Failure of Nationalism in Revolutionary Ukraine: 1917–1920,” *The Histories* 4, no. 1 (March 18, 2019), https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol4/iss1/4/?utm_source=digitalcommons.lasalle.edu%2Fthe_histories%2Fvol4%2Fiss1%2F4&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages.

delegitimise Ukraine's statehood in turn legitimising military action against what essentially is Russia, and is reinforced by the emphasis on foreign occupation of the UPR.

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II. The foreign occupation of Ukraine : the UPR as a non-state actor ?

Ukraine's sovereignty is consistently attacked by the Kremlin's propaganda machine through the weaponisation of history. In the rewriting of history, Putin repeatedly emphasises the foreign occupation of the first independent Ukrainian state in an attempt to belittle and delegitimise the country's historic fight for independence and right to autonomy.

II.A. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the subsequent Skoropadsky hetmanate : Ukraine's surrender of sovereignty ?

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (TBL) is depicted by the Russian president as a humiliating sacrifice made by the revolutionaries who sought to stay in power at any cost.⁵⁷ In February 1918, the UPR signed the TBL with Germany and Austria-Hungary, agreeing to supply grain in exchange for military support against the Bolsheviks, which proved successful at forcing the Reds to withdraw from Kyiv by March 1.⁵⁸ Forced to sign their own treaty after being unable to stop the Germans advance eastward, Bolshevik Russia had to recognise Ukraine's full independence, and cede the European Possessions of the former Russian Empire as conditions of the treaty.⁵⁹ In the Kremlin's narrative, the transitional period between the 1917 Bolshevik power-grab and the signing of the TBL is depicted as a failure of the Central Rada to effectively control Ukraine, and a betrayal to the Ukrainian people, rather than a strategic move in the fight for independence.⁶⁰ Academic literature argues that the Central Rada was coaxed by the German appeal to Ukrainian delegates'

⁵⁷ Putin, Vladimir. "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

⁵⁸ Aleksandr Shulbin, "The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk : Russia and Ukraine.," *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 13, no. 1 (2008): 75–100, https://brill.com/downloadpdf/view/journals/lhs/13/1/article-p75_7.pdf; Serhii Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom : The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation*. (Basic Books, 2017).

⁵⁹ Serhii Plokhy, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2021).

⁶⁰ Chris Ford, "Reconsidering the Ukrainian Revolution 1917–1921: The Dialectics of National Liberation and Social Emancipation," *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 15, no. 3 (December 2007): 279–306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09651560701711562>; Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; Putin, Vladimir. "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

aspirations of independence from Russia.⁶¹ Unable to sufficiently supply grain to the Central Powers, both the UPR and Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets (UPRS) were deposed in violation with the TBL and replaced by the Skoropadsky regime.⁶² Putin draws a parallel between the Central Rada accepting aid in 1918, leading to the establishment of a puppet regime, and Ukraine's acceptance of Western military aid as of 2022, suggesting that they are surrendering sovereignty as it had done in 1918.⁶³ This depiction aims to delegitimise the current Ukrainian government, creating the narrative that without Russia, Ukraine is vowed to be a perpetual puppet state.⁶⁴ While omitted in the Kremlin's historical narrative, historiography highlights that Ukrainian assessments were far from favourable to the Skoropadsky regime, which was perceived to be handing over power to the capitalist class and wealthy landowners, and attempting to undo the progress of the revolution.⁶⁵ Food requisitioning and the restoration of land to landowners were met with violent militant resistance from the Ukrainian peasantry, as well as the formation of the Directorate in November 1918, an opposition body composed of both Ukrainian Bolsheviks and members of the Central Rada.⁶⁶ Contrary to the Kremlin's narrative that the Skoropadsky hetmanate was consented to in Ukraine, there is no mention of rebellion movements in Putin's speeches, and the formation of an opposition parliament, which he calls the "so-called Directorate", is only mentioned in passing.⁶⁷

II.B. Ukraine the product of Bolshevik territorial policies ?

⁶¹ Serhii Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom : The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation*. (Basic Books, 2017).

⁶² Serhii Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom : The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation*. (Basic Books, 2017). The Skoropadsky regime or Hetmanate, was a Ukrainian government that lasted from April to December 1918, and was led by former Russian military officer Pavlo Skoropadsky, established following a German-backed coup that overthrew the UPR. The regime was characterised by conservative policies favouring landowners and acute centralisation of power and was faced with opposition from Ukrainian nationalists and peasants. However, the regime was essential in Ukraine's state-building, it established Ukraine's first diplomatic relations, and promoted Ukrainian culture and education by creating schools, universities and the Ukrainian Academy of Science. Heavily relying on German support, the regime collapsed soon after it's backers' capitulation in WWI. Immo Rebitschek, "State Building under Occupation. Pavlo Skoropadsky's Hetmanate in 1918," *Revolutionary Russia* 32, no. 2 (July 3, 2019): 226–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546545.2019.1710046>.

⁶³ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

⁶⁴ Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Chris Ford, "Reconsidering the Ukrainian Revolution 1917–1921: The Dialectics of National Liberation and Social Emancipation," *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 15, no. 3 (December 2007): 279–306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09651560701711562>; Peter Kenez, *Red Attack, White Resistance* (New Academia Publishing, 2007).

⁶⁷ Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

In the analysed speeches, there is an emphasis on the idea that Ukraine was entirely created by Bolshevik Russia in a process that started following the 1917 Revolution with the severing of supposedly stolen Russian lands.⁶⁸ By creating a sentiment of historical injustice, the Kremlin weaponises history to gain popular support for their military actions aimed at restoring the Russian lands. The implication that Lenin was behind the territorialisation of contemporary Ukraine contributes to the claim that Ukraine does not exist without Russia, thus depicting the current military actions in Crimea and Donbass as the righting of a historical wrong.⁶⁹ The process that supposedly started in 1917 contradicts the historiographical illustrations of Ukrainian liberation movements that existed well before 1917, including the Cyrillo-Methodius Brotherhood⁷⁰ founded in December 1845 that promoted national autonomy and Ukrainian language revival, or the Tarasovs Brotherhood⁷¹ in 1891 that advocated for independence from Russia and claimed territories corresponding to those of contemporary Ukraine.⁷²

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Putin's narrative that Ukraine was created by Bolshevik policies consisting of stealing and severing Russian territories to form the UASSR, while ignoring Ukraine's historical Ukrainian struggle for liberation from Russian oppression, serves to justify and legitimise the ongoing aggressive military actions, with the aim of restoring past Russian dominance. The secessions from the UPR are highlighted in Putin's speeches as a way to further belittle the

⁶⁸ Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; Putin, Vladimir. "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

⁶⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

⁷⁰ The Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood was an underground political society based in Kyiv that existed from 1845 to 1847. Founded by Ukrainian intellectuals including Mykola Kostomarov, Panteleimon Kulish and Taras Shevchenko, they took inspiration from the Byzantine Greek saints Cyril and Methodius, who wrote Glagolitic and Cyrillic scripts in the 9th century. The brotherhood's aims of promoting Ukrainian national revival were formalised in the *Book of Genesis of the Ukrainian People*, written mainly by Kostomarov. They advocated the abolition of serfdom, education for the masses, a Slavic federation in which Ukraine would be an equal member and democratic reforms within the Russian Empire. The political society was suppressed by the imperial Russian authorities, who arrested and exiled its members in 1847. Ivan Koshelivets, "Cyril and Methodius Brotherhood," Encyclopedia of Ukraine, 2020, <https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?AddButton=pages>

⁷¹ Founded by students Vitaliy Borovyk, Hrinchenko, Ivan Lypa and Mykola Mikhnovsky in 1891, the Tarasovs Brotherhood was an underground political organisation advocating for liberation of the Ukrainian nation from Russian occupation. In their program, they claimed the territories "from San to Kuban, from the Carpathian to the Caucasus mountains" which compose contemporary Ukraine. Repressed by imperial authorities, certain members of the society were arrested in summer 1893 in Kharkiv, but others managed to remain free and spread their ideas throughout Ukraine. Bohdan Halaiko, "Brotherhood of Tarasovs in Political Mobilization of Ukrainians," *Ukrainian Studies* 4, no. 61 (2016), [https://doi.org/10.30840/2413-7065.4\(61\).2016.140950](https://doi.org/10.30840/2413-7065.4(61).2016.140950)

⁷² Serhii Plokyh, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2021).

UNM, thus reinforcing the narrative of unity between Ukrainians and Russians and legitimising the SVO.

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III- Fragmentation of the UPR : delegitimising its historical existence.

Presidential speeches highlight the existence of the Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets, the Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic, and the secession of the Western Ukrainian People's Republic demonstrate the fragmentation and the ineffective control over the territory by the Central Rada and the UPR. These territorial divisions are presented as evidence of the non-existence of a widespread desire for independence from Russia in Ukraine, supporting the idea of common historical destiny of Russia and *Malorossiya*.

III.A. The Soviet Republics : Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets and the Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Soviet Republic.

After a failed coup in Kyiv in December 1917, the Bolsheviks proclaimed the Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets (UPRS) in Kharkiv, which never achieved effective control over much of the Ukrainian territory, only managing to seize industrial cities, and struggled to reach agreements with Petrograd.⁷³ The widespread opposition to the Bolshevik's agricultural and territorial policies, and to the Cheka's terror tactics, halted the Reds advance in the countryside, which was highly agrarian and overwhelmingly supported the Central Rada.⁷⁴ Soviet authorities reported 328 anti-Bolshevik revolts between April 1 and June 15 of 1919, which were coordinated by different attachments into which peasants organised.⁷⁵ Following the defeat of the UPR, partisan movements were the main opposition to Bolshevik rule from 1919 to 1922, counting over forty thousand partisan fighters in early 1921.⁷⁶ Policies implemented by the Bolshevik authorities targeted the peasant opposition through mass deportation, exiling them to the Far-East regions of Russia.⁷⁷ Alongside omissions of

⁷³ Serhii Plokhyy, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2021); Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union : Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁷⁴ Stepan Ripetsky, "Partisan Movement in Ukraine, 1918–22," *Encyclopedia of Ukraine* 3, no. 1 (1993), <https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CP%5CA%5CPartisanmovementinUkraine1918hD722.htm>.

⁷⁵ Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union : Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ WAOP, "Deportations of Ukrainians in the 1920s," WAOP?, January 10, 2023, https://deportation.org.ua/deportations_ofukrainians_in_the_1920s/.

the violent repression against the peasants, the Kremlin minimises the Bolshevik's difficulty to win over Ukraine, downplaying the opposition they faced by reducing it to a simple ideological battle between Bolsheviks and the Whites.⁷⁸ The Kremlin belittles the Ukrainian desire to separate themselves from Russia, furthering the narrative of unity between Russians and Ukrainians, notably by focusing on those fighting for an 'indivisible Russia'.⁷⁹ The Kremlin emphasises the fragmentation of the different declared governments in Ukraine during the UNM, highlighting the existence of pro-Bolshevik and pro-Russian movements. Alongside the UPR and the UPRS, the Donetsk-Krivoy Rog Soviet (DKRS) was declared in February 1918.⁸⁰ Dissolved in March by a decision of the 2nd all-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets, the DKRS aligned itself with the RSFSR over the UASSR, due to its opposition to the UPRS's resolution that recognised the DKRS as part of Ukraine. This fragmentation of the ruling parties at the time of the Ukrainian Revolution is often highlighted by the Kremlin to downplay the legitimacy of the UPR, while academics illustrate that the organisations promoting unity with Russia were sidelined by those that advocated for Ukrainian independence, represented by the Central Rada.

III.B. Secession in the Ukrainian People's Republic : The Western Ukrainian People's Republic

To further delegitimise the UPR's effective territorial control, the Kremlin highlights the secession, in November 1918, of the Western Ukrainian People's Republic (WUPR), which declared itself as separate from the UPR. The power vacuum in the Carpathian Ruthenia following the collapse of the Skoropadsky regime, led to a power struggle between representatives of different ethnic groups. Central Rada representatives had planned to unite Western Ukraine with the UPR, while the Second Polish Republic coveted the region. A group of Ukrainian soldiers, however, seized control of Lviv, and proclaimed the WUPR.⁸¹ The Polish-Ukrainian war, triggered by the territorial claims over Polish land – Carpathian Ruthenia, Galicia and Volhynia – resulted in the Treaty of Warsaw in July 1919, which

⁷⁸ Led by general Anton Denkin and Pyotr Wrangel, the White Army fought against the Bolsheviks as well as Ukrainian insurgents in Ukraine from 1917. By late 1919 and early 1920, they were pushed back to their last stronghold in Crimea where Wrangel's forces held out until November 1920, before being evacuated. Peter Kenez, "The Ideology of the White Movement," *Soviet Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 1980): 58–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668138008411280>.

⁷⁹ Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

⁸⁰ Valeriy Soldatenko, "Donetsk Krivoy-Rog Republic : History of the Separatist Myth," *Istorichiskaya Pravda*, 2011, <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/articles/2011/02/11/23624/>.

⁸¹ Andrzej Chojnowski, "November Uprising in Lviv, 1918," in *Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, 1993, <https://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?AddButton=pages>.

restored the lands to Poland.⁸² While Putin refers to the secession of the WUPR and its surrender to the Polish after the 1919 defeat, the formal recognition of the UPR by the Second Polish Republic as a condition of the Treaty of Warsaw seems to be a missing detail.⁸³ Highlighting the WUPR's actions, and suggesting the UPR abandoned its western regions, serves to minimise the effective control of the UPR had over its own people, to further the narrative that Ukrainians and Russians are part of one Slavic people, thus legitimising the SVO as the restoration of historical justice.

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Through its propaganda ecosystem, Russia propagates the idea that Ukraine lacks genuine historical sovereignty, minimising the gravity of Russian interference. Putin's regime repurposes tsarist concepts like Malorossiya and the notion of a triune people sharing a common destiny to argue that Ukraine rightfully belongs to Russia, and in turn justifying military action as restoring historical justice. To delegitimise Ukraine's historical fight for independence, the Kremlin emphasises political disunity, fragmentation, and foreign occupation when telling the history of the UNM. Russia's historical narrative downplays the UPR's territorial control, the Central Rada's political cohesion, and disregards Ukraine's desire for independence. This historical revisionism features prominently in Vladimir Putin's speeches, both preceding the war and in announcing the military actions against Ukraine, from the annexation of Crimea to the SVO. By asserting that Ukraine never truly existed without Russian involvement and lacks historical precedent for effective independence, the Kremlin aims to portray Ukraine as inseparable from Russia, thus justifying the SVO as the restoration of balance.

⁸² Roman Szporluk, "The Making of Modern Ukraine: The Western Dimension," Harvard Ukrainian Studies, 2024, <https://www.husj.harvard.edu/articles/the-making-of-modern-ukraine-the-western-dimension>.

⁸³ Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

III

CHAPTER II : THE PARADOX OF SOVIET UKRAINE : SIMULTANEOUSLY ROOTED IN NAZISM AND CREATED BY ANTI-NAZI SOVIET RUSSIA ?

The weaponisation of the Ukrainian Revolution's history by the Kremlin demonstrates the will of the authoritarian regime to create and propagate a historical narrative in which Ukraine doesn't exist as a historic entity, but rather belongs to Russia. This historical revisionism, emphasised by the territorial concessions made to the UASSR, serves to legitimise the SVO in Ukraine and is reinforced by the historical narrative surrounding WWII or what the Kremlin refers to as the Great Patriotic War (GPW) and the Soviet era of Ukraine.

Soon after the defeat of the Polish supported UPR formalised by the Treaty of Riga signed March 18, 1921, the Bolsheviks took over Ukraine, ceding Western territories back to Poland and driving the Whites out of Southern Ukraine by November 1921. Delegations of the RSFSR and UASSR, amongst others, signed the Treaty on the Creation of the USSR by December 28, 1922, formalising the Union. After WWII broke out in September 1939, the USSR signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (MRP) with Nazi Germany, dividing Europe into the German and Soviet spheres of influence.⁸⁴ The Germans broke the MRP with the launch of Operation Barbarossa in 1941, commencing the invasion of the Soviet Union. This crucial turn in WWII led the CPSU to refocus all efforts on defeating Nazi Germany, with the Battle of Stalingrad and the war's shift in favour of the Reds. The Berlin garrison surrendered to the Soviet Army on May 2nd 1945, marking the effective end of the GPW, with Russia as the victor – a fact that has been heavily instrumentalised by the Kremlin to glorify Russia and support its political agenda.⁸⁵ Central in Russia's memory politics, Russia's role in defeating Nazism is used in the ideological offensive against Ukraine, legitimising Putin's great-power ambitions, and weaponised as a legacy that the Russian Army has to undertake.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Institute of National Remembrance, "Was the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact 'a Pact between Two Marxist Ideologies'?", Institut Pomeci Narodowej | Polish Gov, 2021, https://ipn.gov.pl/en/digital-resources/articles/8720_Was-the-Molotov-Ribbentrop-Pact-quota-pact-between-two-Marxist-ideologiesquot.html; V. Molotov and J.v. Ribbentrop, "The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact," Fordham Education, 1939, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1939pact.asp>.

⁸⁵ Maria Domańska, "The Myth of the Great Patriotic War as a Tool of the Kremlin's Great Power Policy. OSW Commentary NUMBER 316 31.12.2019," aei.pitt.edu, December 1, 2019, <https://aei.pitt.edu/102465/>.

⁸⁶ Peter Dickinson, "Vladimir Putin's WWII Victory Cult Is a Recipe for International Aggression," Atlantic Council, May 8, 2022,

This chapter considers the weaponisation of Soviet history in the Kremlin's communiqués and by the Russian Ministry of Education, analysing the most used historical arguments, and comparing them to academic literature to illustrate the historical revisionism serving to legitimise military action in Ukraine. The Kremlin's historical argumentation will be contrasted with academic literature on Ukrainian history, with works by renowned authors, including Serkhii Plokyh, Andrea Graziosi, or Maria Domanska. This chapter is supported by legal texts and articles to compare to the argument that Ukraine's sovereignty over Crimea is built on an illegal territorial transfer that violates international law, such as Oleksandr Merezhko's article on the legality of the Annexation of Crimea.⁸⁷

This chapter will analyse the historical narrative of the Soviet period, highlighted by the Kremlin's propaganda efforts, specifically the arguments surrounding the territorial concessions to the Ukrainian SSR (I), Ukraine's and Russia's roles in the Great Patriotic War (II), and finally Russia's anti-fascist legacy (III).

* * *

I: Ukrainian territories : product of Soviet Russia ?

The Kremlin actively builds the narrative that Ukraine lacks historical sovereignty, the notion of Lenin's Ukraine being extended to the Ukrainian SSR, suggesting that the territorial concessions made by the USSR cannot be considered as legally and legitimately Ukrainian territories today.

I.A. Ukraine's territorial gains under the USSR

The Russian President suggested that Ukraine does not have legitimate sovereignty over any territory gained while part of the Soviet Union, referring to a “legal expert”, close friend and former mayor of Saint-Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, who wrote that “the republics that were founders of the Union, having denounced the 1922 Union Treaty, must return to the boundaries they had before joining the Soviet Union”.⁸⁸ The suggestion that Ukraine must ‘return’ territories gained at the time of the UASSR directly legitimises the Kremlin's war

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/vladimir-putins-wwii-victory-cult-is-a-recipe-for-international-aggression/>.

⁸⁷ Oleksandr Merezhko, “Crimea's Annexation by Russia - Contradictions of the New Russian Doctrine of International Law,” *ZaöRV* 75 (2015): 167–94, https://www.zaoerv.de/75_2015/75_2015_1_a_167_194.pdf.

⁸⁸ Lukas Wahden, “Shelling Pandora's Box: Why Russia's Recognition of Breakaway States in Eastern Ukraine Will Aggravate Border Disputes around the World,” *Ratiu Forum*, April 1, 2022, <https://ratiuforum.com/shelling-pandoras-box/>.

efforts and invasion of those same territories – Crimea and Donbass – while simultaneously delegitimising Ukraine’s territorial sovereignty.⁸⁹ The territorial gains of the UASSR included territories that had previously belonged to Poland, Romania, Hungary and Czechoslovakia which were transferred between 1940 along with the 1954 with the transfer of Crimea.⁹⁰ The repeated reference to the territories acquired by Ukraine when it was part of the USSR is intended to demarcate the territorial integrity of Ukraine today, implying that efforts to remove communist influences should be accompanied by the surrender of the territories granted during the Soviet period.⁹¹ While the argument that territories once belonging to neighbouring states should be relinquished by Ukraine lacks a legal basis, Putin's speeches draw on the USSR Constitution and international law to justify the annexation of Crimea on a legal basis.

I.B. Questioning the legitimacy and legality of the 1954 transfer of Crimea

I.B.1. Examining the legality and constitutionality of the 1954 transfer of Crimea

The 1954 transfer of Crimea by the Soviet leadership to the UASSR is subject to debate. Official Presidential documents insist that it violated constitutional norms of the time and was motivated by Nikita Khrushchev’s will to gain support from Ukrainian political elites following the post-Stalin power struggle for the head of the CPSU.⁹² The argument that the transfer violated the Constitution cannot be corroborated, however, as the 1936 Soviet Constitution gave republics formal sovereignty, the right to secede, and stated that the

⁸⁹ Vladimir Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, March 18, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>; Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>; Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 24, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

⁹⁰ Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; Jan T. Gross, *Revolution from Abroad*, *Press.princeton.edu* (Princeton University Press, 2002), <https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691096032/revolution-from-abroad>;

Oleksandr Merezhko, “Crimea’s Annexation by Russia - Contradictions of the New Russian Doctrine of International Law,” *ZaöRV* 75 (2015): 167–94, https://www.zaoerv.de/75_2015/75_2015_1_a_167_194.pdf.

⁹¹ De-communisation refers to the process of dismantling the legacies of communist state establishments, culture, and psychology in post-communist states through the removal of communist symbols and monuments, renaming of streets, cities and other public places, lustration (banning of former communist officials from holding public office), declassification of archives and the cleansing of communist propaganda from literature, academia, etc. David R. Marples, “The Ukrainian-Polish Conflict,” OpenEdition Books (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), <https://books.openedition.org/ceup/548?lang=en>.

⁹² Mark Kramer, “Why Did Russia Give Away Crimea Sixty Years Ago?,” Wilson Center, March 19, 2014, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/why-did-russia-give-away-crimea-sixty-years-ago>; Vladimir Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, (Kremlin, March 18, 2014), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

territory of a Union Republic could be altered only with its consent, which was provided by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, the UASSR, and the RSFSR.⁹³ The claim that the transfer violated constitutional law is another case of Putin’s historical revisionism, spreading the narrative of Russia’s legal ownership of Crimea, which serves to legitimise its annexation in 2014 to the Russian public. Meanwhile, the international community has formally condemned the action for violating international law – UN Charter article 2(4) and UNGA Declaration on Principles of International Law – and Ukrainian domestic law.⁹⁴

I.B.2. Protecting the Russian ethnic minority in newly Ukrainian Crimea

The legal arguments dismissing the 1954 territorial transfer of Crimea as unconstitutional are reinforced by the suggestion that Russia is protecting the Russians in Crimea that had newly become an ethnic minority in Ukraine. To further argue against the legitimacy of Ukraine’s sovereignty over Crimea, Presidential speeches mention the lack of deliberation with the local population before enacting the 1954 transfer. Putin stated that “nobody bothered to ask the citizens of Crimea and Sevastopol who had been uprooted from their historic Motherland”.⁹⁵ Opposition to the transfer, however, rose from prominent Russian political elites only after the 1991 collapse of the USSR, as Russia’s political class was suddenly faced with the loss of sovereignty over the strategic territory. The sudden realisation that Crimeans had been “handed over like a sack of potatoes” and the feeling that reconciliation with this “outrageous injustice” being impossible seems to demonstrate the difficulty of accepting the loss over militarily strategic Sevastopol, rather than a concern for the local population.⁹⁶ Putin’s own annexation of Crimea was enacted following a referendum that lacked compliance with international referendum law.⁹⁷

⁹³ Oleksandr Merezhko, “Crimea’s Annexation by Russia - Contradictions of the New Russian Doctrine of International Law,” *ZaöRV* 75 (2015): 167–94, https://www.zaoerv.de/75_2015/75_2015_1_a_167_194.pdf; USSR, “Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” USSR (Moscow, 1936), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1936/12/05.htm>.

⁹⁴ Christian De Fouloy, “Annexation under International Law,” Association of Accredited Public Policy Advocates of the EU, 2022, <https://www.aalep.eu/annexation-under-international-law>.

⁹⁵ Vladimir Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, (Kremlin, March 18, 2014), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

⁹⁶ Dmitry Sudakov, “USSR’s Nikita Khrushchev Gave Russia’s Crimea Away to Ukraine in Only 15 Minutes,” *PravdaReport*, February 19, 2009, https://english.pravda.ru/history/107129-ussr_crimea_ukraine/; Kyiv Post, “Russia Seeks to Invalidate 1954 Transfer of Crimea to Ukraine,” *Kyiv Post*, March 12, 2024, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/29395>; Jean-Dominique Giuliani, “Russia, Ukraine and International Law,” *www.robert-schuman.eu*, February 16, 2015, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/344-russia-ukraine-and-international-law>; Vladimir Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, (Kremlin, March 18, 2014), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

⁹⁷ United Nations, “UN Security Council Action on Crimea Referendum Blocked,” *UN News*, March 15, 2014, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2014/03/464002-un-security-council-action-crimea-referendum-blocked>

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The historical revisionism employed by the Kremlin can be illustrated by the delegitimisation of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty, depicting certain territories as legally and historically belonging to Russia, thus justifying the military intervention as morally and legally valid. This use of falsified historical arguments demonstrates the weaponisation of Soviet history by the Kremlin, misinterpreting the 1954 transfer of Crimea and 1940-1948 territorial concessions. Moreover, the Kremlin further weaponises history by portraying the GPW as a period in which Ukraine aligned itself with and embraced Nazism through their support for the German invasion, and that Russia's liberation of Europe from Nazism must now be implemented in Ukraine today.

* *

II: Russia's anti-Nazi legacy against Ukraine's roots in Nazism.

Russia's weaponisation of what they call the GPW has been long debated in academia. Its depiction of the Red Army as Europe's great liberator from Nazism has escalated from an instrumentalisation of history, creating a legacy rooted in military greatness to a weaponisation aimed at legitimising military intervention liberating Ukraine from the neo-Nazi usurpation of power.

II.A. Russia's anti-nazi legacy

The Kremlin has long portrayed Russia as the great defender of Europe against the Nazi threat. Inheriting the anti-Nazi cause that Russia has to devote itself to in Ukraine. Putin addressed members of the RAF, stating "your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today's neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine".⁹⁸ In the Kremlin's historical narrative, the USSR had strategically attempted to prevent the outbreak of war by signing the MRP, thus refraining from provoking Nazi Germany, delaying war and preparing itself for the imminent attack. While the alliance effectively stalled an attack against the USSR leaving time for preparation, the Soviet and German leadership agreed on the partition of Poland where massacres and deportations were exacted by both authorities.⁹⁹ Signed in 1939, the MRP authorised the

⁹⁸ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 24, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

⁹⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 24, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>; Claudia Weber, "The Changing Reading

Soviets to annex territories in Eastern Poland, the Baltics, and parts of Romania with no opposition from the Axis members.¹⁰⁰ The Kremlin highlights Soviet unpreparedness to counter the German invasion due to their failure to formally declare war, while Russia never formalised a declaration of war against Ukraine and made it a criminal offence to use the word “war” when referring to the SVO in Russia, punishable by 15 years of imprisonment. Rather, Russian authorities refer to the military action with the term *Spetsialnaya Voyennaya Operatsiya* to avoid bearing responsibility for violating International Law of War.¹⁰¹

II.B. Ukraine : a nation rooted in Nazism ?

The Kremlin has gone to extreme lengths to illustrate the SVO as an effort to cleanse Ukraine from neo-Nazis who would have seized power during the 2014 *coup d'état*, continuing its supposed complicity with the collaborationist regime during WWII under Stepan Bandera.¹⁰² Leader of the radical Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists - Bandera faction (OUN-B) started collaborating with Nazi Germany in hopes of being aided in establishing an independent Ukrainian state, until the June 1941 proclamation of independence was quashed by the Germans, who arrested Bandera.¹⁰³ Archival evidence shows that members of the OUN-B and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) were involved in ethnic cleansing campaigns led by the Wehrmacht against Poles in Volhynia and Galicia from 1934 to 1944. Far from being the only Ukrainian nationalist leaders active during the GPW period, Bandera's legacy has been repeatedly highlighted by the Kremlin as being continued in Ukraine today. Due to the contradiction to the Kremlin's portrayal of Ukraine nationalism as being rooted in Nazism, other prominent Ukrainian nationalists are overlooked within the

of the Hitler–Stalin Alliance | Wilson Center,” www.wilsoncenter.org, August 23, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/the-changing-reading-the-hitler-stalin-alliance>.

¹⁰⁰ Institute of National Remembrance, “Was the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact ‘a Pact between Two Marxist Ideologies’?,” Institut Pomeci Narodowej | Polish Gov, 2021, https://ipn.gov.pl/en/digital-resources/articles/8720_Was-the-Molotov-Ribbentrop-Pact-quota-pact-between-two-Marxist-ideologiesquot.html.

¹⁰¹ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 24, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>; Tarik Solmaz, “Why Russia Has Only Now Declared War on Ukraine,” Lowy Institute, April 3, 2024, [https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/why-russia-has-only-now-declared-war-ukraine](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/why-russia-has-only-now-declared-war-ukraine;);

¹⁰² Vladimir Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, (Kremlin, March 18, 2014), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

¹⁰³ Polish Institute of National Remembrance, “Stepan Bandera - Leader of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists,” Polish Institute of National Remembrance, April 23, 2021, https://ipn.gov.pl/en/digital-resources/articles/8044_Stepan-Bandera-leader-of-the-Organisation-of-Ukrainian-Nationalists.html; Mariana Tsybalyuk, “Who Was Stepan Bandera, Ukraine's Controversial Nationalist Figure? - Geneva Solutions,” genevasolutions.news, June 27, 2022, <https://genevasolutions.news/ukraine-stories/who-was-stepan-bandera-ukraine-s-controversial-nationalist-figure>.

Kremlin's narrative, such as Vasyl Kuk who organised an anti-Nazi underground within the OUN and later led the UPA against Soviet forces.¹⁰⁴

* *

The Kremlin refers to Bandera's legacy in Ukraine as one rooted in Nazism and claims that Ukraine's *héroïsation* of the resistance leader proves Ukraine's contemporary adherence to Nazi ideology, while ignoring Soviet alliance with Nazi Germany through the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

* *

III: Soviet crimes : a sanctimonious legacy ?

The Kremlin has manipulated Ukraine's role in the Second World War, condemning the UPA for their part in the ethnic cleansing exalted by Nazi Germany, notwithstanding the regime's failure to take responsibility for crimes committed by the Soviet Union. President Putin highlights that the West "condemn the crimes of the Soviet regime, listing among them events which neither the CPSU, not the USSR, let alone modern Russia, have anything to do with", denying any wrongdoing.¹⁰⁵

III.A. Soviet Crimes : Russia's refusal to take responsibility for its past ?

The crimes of which the Soviet Union is accused are numerous, among them mass repression and persecution, notably the execution of political opponents, dissidents and those accused of being enemies of the people, the Gulag system, and forced deportations of ethnic minorities.¹⁰⁶ War crimes and crimes against humanity, such as the Holodomor, which have never been recognised or prosecuted by the Russian Federation.¹⁰⁷ The only legal condemnations of Soviet crimes were made in Latvian and Estonian courts against KGB

¹⁰⁴ Lubomyr Luciuk, "Freedom Fighters the World Tried to Forget," www.unian.info, 2007, <https://www.unian.info/society/65406-freedom-fighters-the-world-tried-to-forget.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

¹⁰⁶ Directorate of Intelligence, "The Soviet Forced Labor System," CIA | Central Intelligence Agency, 1982, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP83M00914R001200120005-5.pdf>; Milena Nikolova, Olga Popova and, Vladimir Otrachshenko, "Past Political Repression Creates Long-Lasting Mistrust," Brookings, March 2, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/past-political-repression-creates-long-lasting-mistrust/>.

¹⁰⁷ Serhii Pyvovarov, "War Crimes Are a Common Thing for the Kremlin. We Recall the Mass Murders and Genocide during World War II, for Which Russia (so Far) Has Not Been Punished — a Story in Archival Photos," babel.ua, April 25, 2022, <https://babel.ua/en/texts/78000-war-crimes-are-a-common-thing-for-the-kremlin-we-recall-the-mass-murders-and-genocide-during-world-war-ii-for-which-russia-so-far-has-not-been-punished-a-story-in-archival-photos>.

officers Alfons Noviks in 1995, August Kolk and Petr Kislyiy in 1949, and Vassili Kononov in 2004, to which Russian authorities reacted by accusing Latvian and Estonian officials of hurting Russian interests, infringing on human rights, and rewriting history.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, the Kremlin omits the oppression of local populations in the territories occupied and annexed by Soviet forces, such as the case of Transcarpathia, which saw repression of local leaders, forced Russification of the local population through banning of cultural institutions, and forced conversion of Greek Catholics to Russian Orthodoxy, without forgetting the civilian casualties that resulted from the occupation.¹⁰⁹ The oppression of the local population can be observed in all the European territories annexed by the USSR, while being ignored by the Russian authorities who rather emphasise the successes of the Soviet forces, and portraying them as a heritage to which Russia must aspire, as depicted in the new history syllabus promulgated by the Ministry of Education.¹¹⁰

III.B. The Holodomor : genocide of the Ukrainian People ?

A major part of Ukrainian history is the Holodomor forced famine of Ukraine by the Soviet authorities between 1932 and 1933, which led to the death of an estimated 3 to 7 million Ukrainians.¹¹¹ While the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada has formally recognised the Holodomor as the deliberate genocide of Ukrainians, the academic debate around the Holodomor holds the consensus that the CPSU intentionally organised the famine, while Russian authorities deny it's deliberate nature.¹¹² Despite the consensus amongst scholars on

¹⁰⁸ AP, "Latvia Gives K.G.B. Aide a Life Term," *The New York Times*, December 14, 1995, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/14/world/latvia-gives-kgb-aide-a-life-term.html>; ECHR, "Equipo Nizkor - ECHR Decision on the Case Kolk and Kislyiy v. Estonia." *Derechos*, 2006, <https://www.derechos.org/nizkor/impu/kolk.html>; ECHR, "HUDOC - European Court of Human Rights," HUDOC ECHR, 2008, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/tpk197/view.asp#>; Charles Gurin, "Russians Condemn Latvia for Convicting Wwii-Era Partisan," Jamestown Foundation, May 3, 2004, <https://jamestown.org/program/russians-condemn-latvia-for-convicting-wwii-era-partisan/>; Kremlin, "Acting President Vladimir Putin Sent a Letter to President Vaira Vike-Freiberga of Latvia in Protest against Latvian Court Sentencing a Former Soviet Partisan, Vasily Kononov," President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 18, 2000), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/37949>.

¹⁰⁹ Erzsébet Molnár, István Molnár, and Sándor Dobos, "The Establishment of the Soviet System in the Territory of Transcarpathia (1944-1946)," *Ukraine: Cultural Heritage, National Identity, Statehood* 35 (January 2022): 146–73, <https://doi.org/10.33402/ukr.2022-35-146-173>.

¹¹⁰ Dagmara Moskwa, "The Great Patriotic War in Russian History Textbooks," *Sprawy Narodowościowe* 50, no. 50 (December 31, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.11649/sn.1650>.

¹¹¹ Andrea Graziosi, "The Uses of Hunger : Stalin's Solution of the Peasant and National Questions in Soviet Ukraine, 1932 to 1933," Taylor & Francis Group, 2015, <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315708522-13/uses-hunger-andrea-graziosi>.

¹¹² Lina Klymenko, "The Holodomor Law and National Trauma Construction in Ukraine," *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 58, no. 4 (2016): 341–61, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26774880>; Arturas Rozenas and Yuri M. Zhukov, "Mass Repression and Political Loyalty: Evidence from Stalin's 'Terror by Hunger,'" *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 2 (March 6, 2019): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0003055419000066>.

the deliberate nature of the famine, some, such as Andrea Grasiozi, point to the processes of collectivisation and industrialisation employed by the CPSU as the initial cause for the famine, the results of which were later weaponised by the Soviets.¹¹³ Putin's claims that "the common tragedy of collectivisation and famine of the early 1930s was wrongfully portrayed as the genocide of the Ukrainian people" aim to shift the responsibility from Soviet leadership to a tragic consequence of collectivisation, and condemning those who denounce the famine as an intentional genocide of the Ukrainian opposition.¹¹⁴ This historical revisionism of the Holodomor period, through the denial of Soviet intentionality, serves to downplay the responsibility of the USSR, continuing the historic Soviet censorship of the famine.

* * *

By suggesting the illegitimacy and illegality of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty over territories gained during the Soviet period, portraying Ukraine as a Nazi force against which Russia must fight in continuation with its liberator legacy, and by omitting crimes committed by the USSR, the Kremlin effectively uses Soviet history as a weapon to justify military actions in Ukraine. This historical revision, which aims to share a glorified vision of the Soviet forces in the Great Patriotic War, to which Russia today must aspire, is intended to legitimise the Kremlin's political projects to the Russian population. While the international community, USSR experts, and academics have extensively condemned Soviet crimes, the Kremlin continues to deny them and weaponises the period to justify their military actions.

¹¹³ Andrea Graziosi, "The Soviet 1931-1933 Famines and the Ukrainian Holodomor: Is a New Interpretation Possible, and What Would Its Consequences Be?," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 27, no. 1/4 (2004): 97-115, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41036863>.

¹¹⁴ Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

IV

CHAPTER III : RUSSIA'S SPHERE OF INFLUENCE SEIZED BY THE WEST ?

“A threat absolutely unacceptable for us was systematically created, and right at our borders. Everything said that a clash with the neo-Nazis, the Banderites, on whom the United States and its junior companions had staked their bets, would be inevitable” stated President Putin during his speech at the Victory Parade on the Red Square on May 9, 2022. The weaponisation of the Ukrainian Revolution and Soviet history aimed at delegitimising Ukraine’s territorial integrity, authority and justify Russia’s military ambitions, is further amplified with the weaponisation of contemporary history, specifically targeting the Euromaidan protests and Ukraine’s “Western patrons”.

Ukraine led its first semi-free elections in 1989, declared its sovereignty in 1990 without seceding from the Ussr, which led to mass mobilisation demanding full independence, which was gained in 1991.¹¹⁵ The first President Leonid Kravchuk pursued pro-Western policies, working towards Ukrainian accession to the EU and NATO.¹¹⁶ In 2010, Yanukovich was elected president and implemented pro-Russian policies which led to the 2014 Dignity Revolution calling on increased independence from Moscow and closer ties to the West. The RAF launched the annexation of Crimea amid the unrest, justifying it as a necessary action to protect ethnic Russians against aggression from radical nationalists who gained power following a *coup d’état* in 2014.¹¹⁷ In April 2014, Russian-backed separatists seized government buildings in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, declaring them to be independent republics – Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR).¹¹⁸ Leading to armed conflict in the Donbass region between Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) and the Russian-backed separatists, the official recognition by the Kremlin of the two people’s Republics on February 21, 2022 directly preceded the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the RAF.

¹¹⁵ Serhii Plokhyy, *GATES of EUROPE : A History of Ukraine*. (S.L.: Basic Books, 2021).

¹¹⁶ Karina Skyrokykh, “The Evolution of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine : External Actors and Domestic Factors,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 70, no. 5 (2018): 832–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1479734>.

¹¹⁷ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation.” President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹¹⁸ David Gormezano, “In Ukraine’s Donbas, Ten Years of War and Russification,” *France 24*, April 8, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20240408-ukraine-donbas-ten-years-of-war-russification-russia-donetsk-luhansk>.

In official statements surrounding the annexation of Crimea and full-scale invasion, the Kremlin has referred to Ukraine's post-Soviet history, presenting a narrative in which radical Nazi groups usurped power with the help of international actors – the United States and NATO – against whom Russia is fighting to protect its ethnic minorities and the Ukrainian people. These arguments serve to justify and legitimise Russia's military actions – the annexation of Crimea and the launch of the SVO – supposedly aimed at restoring balance and peace in Ukraine.

In order to demonstrate the Russian authorities' reliance on a revised post-Soviet history, this chapter draws on the presidential speeches mentioned in the introduction, comparing them with academic sources on the post-Soviet period and Russia-NATO relations: official NATO documents; legal documents such as the UN Charter; and press articles covering events between 2014 and 2022. Held under strict censorship, the Russian people have limited access to the sources disproving the narrative used by Moscow to justify their war efforts. The aim of this chapter is to illustrate that, by creating historical narratives surrounding the post-Soviet era to justify war, Russian authorities are weaponising history.

In order to illustrate the weaponisation of post-Soviet history by the Kremlin, this chapter will first analyse references to the anti-Russian policy pursued by the West (I), before discussing how Ukraine is portrayed as a threat to Russian security (II), and finally how the annexation of Crimea, along with the recognition of the DPR and LPR are legally justified (III).

* * *

I. The Kremlin threatened by the West

The Russian Presidents' "warnings" against NATO at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, threatening military action against any attempts at expanding into neighbouring territories of the Russian Federation, demonstrate the Kremlin viewed NATO as a threat. Discussed at length in the academic world, Russian aggression towards the West is presented by realists as the materialisation of the security dilemma theory, which states that increasing the security of a country can provoke an escalation of violence when its neighbours interpret it as a threat to its own security.

I.A. Anti-Russia policy : materialisation of the security dilemma ?

Moscow has long perceived the West as pursuing an anti-Russian policy, stating that “the United States and its allies [are pursuing] a policy of containing Russia” by using “people close to [Russia]” and implanting Russophobia in Eastern Europe.¹¹⁹ The narrative that the US is implementing an anti-Russian policy, with the goal of halting Russia’s development and limiting its zone of influence, serves to justify military action in Ukraine as its protection from security threats. The Kremlin depicts NATO as being a “tool of US foreign policy”, used to pursue America's aggressive geo-political ambitions against Russia, “just because [Russia] exists and will never compromise its sovereignty, national interests or values”.¹²⁰ Authors Makarychev and Morozov have highlighted how the opposing views of the post-Cold War world order have exacerbated tensions. Russia favours a multi-polar system with great power management as the only way to reach balance on the international stage. Contrarily, the model of Western collective unilateralism presents a world order in which actors take unilateral action through international deliberation and agreements.¹²¹ Experts have long highlighted that the divergent views on how to respond to Russian aggression within NATO are at the root of the Alliance’s inability to effectively respond to increased tension.¹²² Scholar Diesen has illustrated that the deterioration in West-Russian relations since the fall of the Soviet Union can be read through the lens of the security dilemma, pointing at how asymmetrical worldviews, and the perceived threat posed by each-other, have led to increased defence spending which, perceived as threatening, has availed in the escalation of violence.¹²³ Putin has actively asserted that NATO’s development actively threatens Russia’s security and any further expansion would inevitably lead to conflict, which ties the Kremlin’s reading of its relations with NATO to the security dilemma theory. The security dilemma can be applied to explain the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict by analysing several key factors. These include the misalignment of perceptions

¹¹⁹ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 24, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

¹²⁰ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹²¹ Andrey Movchan, “Just an Oil Company? The True Extent of Russia’s Dependency on Oil and Gas,” www.carnegiemoscow.org (Carnegie Moscow Center, September 14, 2015), <https://carnegiemoscow.org/posts/2015/08/just-an-oil-company-the-true-extent-of-russias-dependency-on-oil-and-gas?lang=en&er=russia-eurasia>.

¹²² Roland Dannreuther, “Russian Perceptions of the Atlantic Alliance Russian Perceptions of the Atlantic Alliance,” 1995, <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/95-97/dannreut.pdf>.

¹²³ G. Diesen, “Inter-Democratic Security Institutions and the Security Dilemma: EU and NATO Relations with Russia after the Collapse of the Soviet Union,” Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2014, <https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/inter-democratic-security-institutions-and-the-security-dilemma-e>.

regarding both NATO and Russia's aims and interests on the international stage, the competing visions of the post-Cold War world order, the diminished communication between the actors involved, and the prevalence of zero-sum thinking. Together, these elements contribute to the security dilemma, creating a cycle of mutual distrust and escalating actions between the parties involved.

I.B. NATO's eastward expansion : a broken promise ?

“One glance at the map is enough to see to what extent Western countries have kept their promise to refrain from NATO's eastward expansion”.¹²⁴ NATO's supposed promise refers to Gorbachev receiving verbal assurances from Western leaders – German chancellor Helmut Kohl, US Secretary of State James Baker, US President George Bush Sr, and French President Francois Mitterand – that the Alliance would not expand further East, beyond the newly unified Germany.¹²⁵ This claim is supported by declassified documents illustrating that Western leaders had made multiple proposals to secure Soviet approval for German unification, amongst which the Alliance's restraint from expanding further East.¹²⁶ This claim has been rebuked by NATO officials, pointing at the lack of evidence of any formal or legally binding written commitment, and the contradiction of such a pledge with their open-door policy.¹²⁷ Furthermore, scholars argue that any informal assurances were rendered moot following the dissolution of the USSR, which changed the geopolitical landscape of Europe.¹²⁸ The broken promise to refrain from eastward expansion is weaponised by the Putin regime as evidence of NATO's anti-Russian policy, since 11 former Soviet republics have been admitted into the Alliance since 1990, despite Putin's “warnings” at the 2008 Bucharest

¹²⁴ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹²⁵ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>; National Security Archive, “NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard | National Security Archive,” Gwu.edu, December 12, 2017, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-we-stern-leaders-early>.

¹²⁶ Luis Rodrigues and Leitão Tomé, “Russia and NATO Enlargement - Report,” *NATO Fellowship Research Programme*, 2000, <https://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/98-00/tome.pdf>.

¹²⁷ US Department of State, “Memorandum of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and James Baker in Moscow. | National Security Archive,” NS Archive, 2002, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16116-document-05-memorandum-conversation-between>.; Hannes Adomeit, “NATO's Eastward Enlargement: What Western Leaders Said,” *Bundesakademie für Sicherheitspolitik*, January 3, 2018, <https://www.baks.bund.de/en/working-papers/2018/natos-eastward-enlargement-what-western-leaders-said>;

¹²⁸ Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion,” *International Security* 40, no. 4 (April 2016): 7–44, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00236.

Summit.¹²⁹ This expansion is further weaponised with the claims that NATO is intentionally admitting Eastern European states in order to develop military infrastructure on Russia's borders capable of reaching targets on its soil. Putin implies that the West attempted to do so in Crimea before the local population opposition led to their vote to join Russia in 2014.¹³⁰

* *

Putin's portrayal of an anti-Russian policy pursued by the West over the "last three centuries", and exacerbated by the betrayal of NATO's east-ward expansion, serves the purpose of justifying military action as the necessary protection of Russian security.¹³¹ Seen through the lens of the security dilemma theory, the increased defence infrastructure and multiplication of joint military exercises in European NATO member states, are interpreted by Moscow as a direct threat. This interpretation has led to the strengthening of Russia's own military force, ultimately escalating to the break-out of conflict.

* *

II. Ukraine : a threat to Russian security ?

The West's usurpation of Ukraine as a pawn in its anti-Russian policy, and the radical nationalist *coup d'etat* which led to the repression of the Russian ethnic minority, are historical rhetorics weaponised by the Kremlin in its legitimization of its military projects.

II.A. Ukraine : a pawn in the Anti-Russian policy ?

In order to justify military action as a means to preempt Western aggression, the Kremlin argues that Ukraine serves as a pawn in the West's anti-Russia policy, labelling the country as a "springboard" between Europe and against Russia.¹³² To prove this supposed usurpation of Ukraine by the West, Putin claims that Ukraine's political system was set up by its Western patrons who institutionalised enmity with Russia, and is supported by the control of Ukraine's judicial institutions by international organisations.¹³³ The claim that the US

¹²⁹ NATO, "Member Countries," NATO, June 8, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52044.htm; Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹³⁰ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," President of Russia (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹³¹ Vladimir Putin, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," President of Russia (Kremlin, July 12, 2021), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia, February 21, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

“directly controls” Ukraine’s anti-corruption bodies and has priority right on the selection of Ukraine’s supreme judicial court members fails to be corroborated by any tangible evidence.¹³⁴ The Russian President has accused NATO of “deployment of military infrastructure at our border”, without being able to substantiate these claims.¹³⁵ Amongst this infrastructure, Moscow has accused the West of aiding Ukraine to acquire Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in preparation for hostilities against Russia, specifically referring to this claim in Presidential speeches directly preceding the February 2022 invasion.¹³⁶ Lacking the necessary infrastructure, all evidence proves that Ukraine has no intentions of developing WMD, as it has ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty and gave up its nuclear arms in the framework of the Trilateral Statement and Budapest Memorandum of 1994.¹³⁷ Alongside these claims, the “obviously anti-Russian policy” has led to the dispatch of thousands of Western troops and hardware to Ukraine, dismissing the fact that military aid has been provided as a response to Russian aggression.¹³⁸

II.B. Russia’s fight against the repression of ethnic minorities

Moscow has attempted to legitimise and justify its military intervention in Donbas, and the official recognition of the DPR and LPR, as necessary to protect citizens from the “genocide” targeting “the millions of people who live [in Donbass] and have pinned their hopes on Russia”.¹³⁹ These accusations against Ukraine have been debunked by the ICJ, ICC, and delegates to the UN, stating that no evidence of genocide committed by Ukrainian authorities has been observed and have, on the contrary, provided evidence of Russian

¹³⁴ Interfax Ukraine, “Poroshenko Signs Law on High Council of Justice,” Interfax Ukraine, January 3, 2017, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/394662.html>; Ukrainska Pravda, “Ukraine’s High Council of Justice Elected New High Qualification of Judges, One of Requirements on ‘EU Membership List,’” Ukrainska Pravda, June 1, 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/06/1/7404823/>; Network for Integrity, “National Agency on Corruption Prevention - NACP,” Network for Integrity, 2015, <https://networkforintegrity.org/continents/europe/national-agency-corruption-prevention-nacp/>; NABU, “Technical Assessment of the National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) Report,” nabu.gov.ua, October 2023, https://nabu.gov.ua/site/assets/files/47003/tekhnichna_otcinka_nabu_2023_en-1.pdf; Andrii Borovyk, “What to Expect from the HACC Competition,” Transparency International -- Ukraine, March 7, 2024, <https://ti-ukraine.org/en/blogs/what-to-expect-from-the-hacc-competition/>.

¹³⁵ Vladimir Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia (Kremlin, March 18, 2014), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>; NATO, “Statement by NATO Defence Ministers on the Situation in and around Ukraine,” NATO, February 16, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_191931.htm.

¹³⁶ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹³⁷ Susan D’Agostino, “Ukraine Building a Nuclear Bomb? Dangerous Nonsense.,” Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, March 9, 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/2022/03/ukraine-building-a-nuclear-bomb-dangerous-nonsense/>.

¹³⁸ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

violations of International Humanitarian Law and commission of War Crimes.¹⁴⁰ Russian President Vladimir Putin has been formally charged with war crimes, including the forcible abduction of children, by the ICJ and ICC, while he has accused UAF of kidnapping Russian citizens without providing any supporting evidence.¹⁴¹ Alongside accusations of Humanitarian Law violations against the Russian ethnic minority, Moscow also accuses the “illegitimate radical nationalist” Ukrainian government of targeting the Russian minority with discriminatory laws. Specifically, Russian authorities heavily criticise Ukraine’s linguistic policies, such as the 2017 Education Law prioritising Ukrainian as the language of state schools, and the 2019 Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as State Language Law.¹⁴² These laws have been condemned by the international community– OHCHR, Human Rights Watch, Venice Commission– for discriminating against minority languages.¹⁴³ While Ukraine’s language policy tends to undermine the rights of Russian minorities in Ukraine, this in no way can justify, legitimise or excuse Russian military actions against Ukraine.

* *

In order to justify military intervention against Ukraine, the Kremlin has constructed a narrative that misrepresents the 2014 Euromaidan protests as a nationalist *coup d’etat*, depicting Ukraine’s government as usurped by “radicals”, actively targeting the Russian ethnic minority. Portrayed as violating Humanitarian Law and creating discriminatory laws, the Kremlin weaponises post-Soviet history in order to justify military action as necessary to protect innocent citizens from the illegitimate regime.

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¹⁴⁰ Shpend Kursani, “Beyond Putin’s Analogies: The Genocide Debate on Ukraine and the Balkan Analogy Worth Noting,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 25, no. 3-4 (July 11, 2022): 371–83,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2022.2099633>; Nicolas De Riviere, “Ukraine: Russia Persists in Its War of Aggression,” France ONU, 2024, <https://onu.delegfrance.org/ukraine-russia-persists-in-its-war-of-aggression>.

¹⁴¹ Human Rights Council, “Human Rights Council Fifty-Second Session Agenda Item 4 Human Rights Situations That Require the Council’s Attention Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine* Summary A/HRC/52/62 Advance Unedited Version” (OHCHR, 2023),

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/coiukraine/A_HRC_52_62_AUV_EN.pdf;

Julian Borger and Pjotr Sauer, “ICC Judges Issue Arrest Warrant for Vladimir Putin over Alleged War Crimes,” *The Guardian*, March 17, 2023, sec. World news,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/17/vladimir-putin-arrest-warrant-ukraine-war-crimes>.

¹⁴² Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation.” President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹⁴³ Tony Wesolowsky, “Ukrainian Language Bill Facing Barrage of Criticism from Minorities, Foreign Capitals,” RadioFreeEurope, September 24, 2017,

<https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-language-legislation-minority-languages-russia-hungary-romania/28753925.html>;

Venice Commission, “Opinion on the Law on Supporting the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State Language,” *Council of Europe*, December 9, 2019,

[https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2019\)032-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2019)032-e).

III. Arguing the legality of Russia's actions

Recognised by the international community as violating International Law, Russian authorities attempt to justify the annexation of Crimea and the recognition of the DPR and LPR as complying with International Laws despite evidence of the contrary.

III.A. The annexation of Crimea : an act complying with International Law ?

The Crimean referendum held on March 16, 2014, two days before the annexation of the peninsula was done in “full compliance with democratic procedures and international norms” according to the Russian President.¹⁴⁴ Despite this claim, evidence disproves the legality, specifically referring to international standards for referendums – clear yes/no question, presence of domestic or international observers, compliance with domestic referendum law – which led to it being invalidated by the UNGA.¹⁴⁵ The referendum was held amidst the presence of members of the RAF that had seized control of Crimea, international observers were not allowed to oversee the proceedings, instances of coercion were reported, and the ballot only included 2 options, both resulting in a de-facto separation from Ukraine, without a possibility to vote for maintaining the status quo.¹⁴⁶ The ECHR has reported that the number of Russian troops present in Crimea doubled from January to mid-March 2014, violating the 1997 Russian-Ukrainian Partition Treaty on the Status and Conditions of the Black Sea Fleet which legally limited the number Russian troops to 25 thousand, despite claims by the Kremlin that the limit had never been exceeded.¹⁴⁷ In order to illustrate the

¹⁴⁴ Vladimir Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia (Kremlin, March 18, 2014), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.

¹⁴⁵ Marxsen, Christian. “The Crimea Crisis from an International Law Perspective.” *Kyiv-Mohyla Law and Politics Journal* 0, no. 2 (December 28, 2016): 367–89. <https://doi.org/10.18523/kmlpj88177.2016-2.13-36>; European Commission for Democracy through Law, “Compilation of Venice Commission opinions and reports concerning referendums”, *Council of Europe*, May 13, 2022, <https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-PI%282022%29027-e>; United Nations, “General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling upon States Not to Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region | UN Press,” *UN Press*, March 27, 2014, <https://press.un.org/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>; G.A. Res. 11493, U.N. Doc. A/RES/11493 (2014), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/767883?ln=en&v=pdf>; U.N. Charter art. 2, para. 4, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>; Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 217 A (III), U.N. Doc. A/810 (1948), art. 25(b), [https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights#:~:text=Article%2025,-Every%20citizen%20shall&text=\(b\)%20To%20vote%20and%20to,public%20service%20in%20his%20country](https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights#:~:text=Article%2025,-Every%20citizen%20shall&text=(b)%20To%20vote%20and%20to,public%20service%20in%20his%20country).

¹⁴⁶ Harriet Salem, Shaun Walker, and Luke Harding, “Conflict Fears Rise after Pro-Russian Gunmen Seize Crimean Parliament,” *The Guardian*, February 28, 2014, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/24/ukraine-crimea-russia-secession>; Alexander Smith, “Disputed Crimea Referendum Sees 96.8 Percent Vote to Join Russia,” *NBC News*, March 17, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ukraine-crisis/disputed-crimea-referendum-sees-96-8-percent-vote-join-russia-n54326>; Crimean status referendum ballot (Crimean status referendum, 2014).

¹⁴⁷ Ukraine v. Russia (re Crimea) (dec.) [GC], nos. 20958/14 and 38334/18, ECHR 2020, <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22002-13090%22%7D>; Vladimir Putin, “Address by President of

West's unjust treatment of Russia, the accusations of international law violations in the case of the Crimean referendum and subsequent annexation have been repeatedly disputed by Kremlin officials.

III.B The Donbass Crisis : a legal movement for self determination ?

Throughout Russian presidential speeches, the declaration of independence of the DPR and LPR in 2014, the resulting conflict and official recognition of the people's republics by Russia in 2022, are argued to be necessary to protect the Russian ethnic minority.¹⁴⁸ Accusing Ukraine of violating the provisions put in place in the Minsk Agreements, the Kremlin denounces the International Community for not sufficiently imposing the respect of the Agreements on Ukraine.¹⁴⁹ Despite the accusations against Ukraine, evidence shows that Russia has violated the agreements with reports of unlawful backing of separatists, deployment of unmarked troops, and illegal recognition of the two people's republics. These actions violate the Principle of Non-Intervention, the Principle of Territorial Integrity, the Duty of Non-Recognition, the Montevideo criteria of state definition, the prohibition of Use of Force, treaties recognizing Ukraine's borders and sovereignty, and the Minsk Agreements.¹⁵⁰ Despite this, the Kremlin has continuously argued the legality of its actions in order to maintain popular support for its military projects in Ukraine, and to further the narrative of Russia's constant persecution by the West. Justifying and legitimising aggressive policies in Donbass through historical revisionism of the 2014 coup, and falsely claiming the legality of its actions, illustrates the weaponisation of post-soviet history.

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the Russian Federation,” President of Russia (Kremlin, March 18, 2014), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>; Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, Kiev, May 31, 1997, U.N.T.S. vol. 3007, No. 52240, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%203007/Part/volume-3007-I-52240.pdf>.

¹⁴⁸ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation.” President of Russia, (Kremlin, February 21, 2022), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

¹⁴⁹ The Minsk Agreements refer to both the “Minsk Protocol” (or Minsk I), signed in September 2014, and the “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements” (or Minsk II), signed in February 2015. Held in Minsk with the goal of ending conflict in eastern Ukraine between the UAF and Russia-backed separatists, they were brokered by France and Germany and outlined a ceasefire, withdrawal of heavy weaponry, prisoner exchanges, and scheme for political settlement in Donbas.

¹⁵⁰ Sava Janković, “Russia’s Recognition of the DPR and LPR: The Revival of the Constitutive Theory of Recognition?” *Opinio Juris*, March 12, 2022, <https://opiniojuris.org/2022/03/12/russias-recognition-of-the-independence-of-the-donetsk-peoples-republic-and-the-luhansk-peoples-republic-the-revival-of-the-constitutive-theory-of-recognition/>; Russell Buchan and Nicholas Tsagourias, “The Crisis in Crimea and the Principle of Non-Intervention,” *International Community Law Review* 19, no. 2-3 (June 13, 2017): 165–93, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18719732-12341353>.

The Kremlin's manipulation of post-Soviet history, misrepresenting key events such as the 2014 EuroMaidan protests as a *coup d'état* by radical nationalists, NATO's eastward expansion as a betrayal and an encroachment on Russia's security, and the annexation of Crimea and recognition of DPR and LPR as complying with international norms, serves the purpose of justifying military aggression towards Ukraine. Analysed through the lens of the security dilemma, Moscow has created a self-fulfilling prophecy, by using the perceived threat of Western states' policies and NATO expansion, as proof of an imminent attack against Russia. Scholars have analysed NATO-Russian relations in the context of the Ukraine-Russian War, highlighting that discrepancies between Western and Russian worldviews, the lack of transparency and communication, the misperception of each others' aims on the International stage, and the inability of the West to effectively respond to Russian aggression, as factors that led to the escalation of violence. Ukraine's portrayal as a double security threat to Russia, with the development of NATO military infrastructure capable of hitting targets on its territory and the discrimination against the Russian ethnic minority in Donbass by the Nationalist authorities, serves the purpose of justifying the protection of Russian interests through the SVO on Ukrainian territory.

* * *

Conclusion : How does the Kremlin weaponise history to justify War ?

This thesis aimed to illustrate how the Kremlin uses historical narratives in order to justify Russia's military aggressions on Ukraine, by examining the argumentation provided by Presidential Speeches. The analysis demonstrates how Moscow weaponises history against Ukraine – attacking its territorial integrity, delegitimising its national identity, accusing it of violating International Humanitarian Law against ethnic minorities, portraying it as a perpetual puppet state of Anti-Russian regimes, and suggesting its Nazi nature – through historical revisionism and false claims.

Considered to be the standard definition of a state under International Law, the 1933 Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States established 4 criteria of statehood, including the criterion of a defined territory. By attacking Ukraine's territorial integrity throughout history, the Kremlin is attempting to depict its neighbour as never having existed as an effective state. Moscow weaponises history of the 1917-1922 Revolution by claiming that Ukraine's current territories are the result of Lenin's territorial policies and Soviet history, referring to the CPSU's territorial concessions between 1930 and 1954, with the supposedly unconstitutional transfer of Crimea. President Putin points at the separatist movement in Donbass and the decision to join Russia in Crimea to delegitimise Ukraine's control over its territory today. By depicting Ukraine as never having had a defined territory, the Kremlin legitimises its military aggression in Crimea and Donbass, as restoring lands that had never truly belonged to Ukraine, back to Russia, the historic rightful owner.

The century old narrative of a Triune of one true Russian people composed of Belorussians, Malorussians and Velikorussians, is weaponised by the Kremlin, by challenging the historical existence of a truly independent Ukrainian identity. Moscow's weaponising the history of the Ukrainian Revolution, is illustrated by the efforts to belittle Ukraine's National Movement. By suggesting independence was only pursued by a small fraction of the Ukrainian intelligentsia manipulated by foreign Anti-Russian conspirators, Moscow undermined the reality of Ukraine's national effort. The Kremlin portrays the UPR as having

failed to govern effectively, highlighting the internal fragmentation between different political ideologies, as well as the secessions of the WUPR, UPRS and DKRSR. These historical narratives serve to question Ukraine's true intentions to separate from Russia, by delegitimising its historical fight for sovereignty, Moscow attempts to delegitimise Ukraine's willingness to distance themselves from Russia today as demonstrated by the 2013-2014 Euromaidan protests. This misrepresentation of Russo-Ukrainian relations, belittling the Ukrainian fight for increased separation while simultaneously omitting the repression of Ukrainians by Russian authorities throughout history, serves to legitimise Russia's military efforts to draw Ukraine back into its zone of influence.

The Kremlin's weaponisation of history is supported by historical revisionism of key events, as can be seen in the narrative that Russia's SVO aims at ridding Ukraine from neo-nazi control. Weaponising WWII history, the Putin regime has used the Great Patriotic War rhetoric to present itself as fulfilling its legacy of Nazi liberator, and depicting Ukraine as a State rooted in Nazism by pointing at Bandera's collaboration with Nazi Germany. To further justify Russia's military operation in Ukraine, Putin has claimed that the 2014 EuroMaidan protests were led by Radical Nationalists and Neo-Nazis, who gained power through a *coup d'état* aided by the West. Unsubstantiated by any evidence, the claim that Ukraine's government is composed of neo-nazis that must be defeated by Russia, is one of the main arguments used by the Kremlin when attempting to justify military action. Ironically, the historical narrative accusing Ukraine of collaborating with Nazi Germany is made alongside the complete silence on the well-documented Soviet collaboration with the third Reich and exaction of anti-semitic crimes during World War II.

Analysed through the lens of the security dilemma, the escalation of violence and outbreak of war is the logical result of the West's increase in defence infrastructure on Russia's borders in the alleged pursuit of an Anti-Russian policy. The analysis provided in the academic debate, suggests that the deterioration of NATO/EU relations with Russia can be explained by the misalignment in the perception of one another. Russia's perception of NATO as inherently anti-Russian and NATO's view of Russia as an aggressor state that can only be stopped by increasing the West's security, exacerbates tensions. Any and all increase of defence spending from the other actor is perceived as a direct threat against the actor's own security, weakening the stability of the international system, which in turn exacerbates escalations. The lack of transparent communication between Russian and NATO officials and the Alliance's internal disagreement on how to react to Russia's aggression, exacerbate

tensions further, leading to the outbreak of war. The Kremlin's misrepresentation of the West's policy as being anti-Russian serves the purpose of depicting war as necessary to protect Russian interest and security which is continuously threatened by NATO.

Where the Kremlin's references to History could only be qualified as instrumentalisation up until 2014, a shift occurred with the annexation of Crimea and invasion of Ukraine where history became a weapon. Alongside the military interventions in Ukraine, Russia has returned to ideological warfare with historical revisionism serving to reinforce the war effort by providing historically rooted elements that justify the military project in Ukraine. Scholar Edgar Wolfrum has provided a definition of weaponisation where history is weaponised when it is used to legitimise aggressive political decisions or justify military mobilisation, and when it takes place under politics of history claiming sovereignty over memory itself. In the case of Putin's presidential speeches from 2014 to 2022, history is used to legitimise military actions on Ukrainian soil, from the annexation of Crimea, the recognition of the DPR and LPR, to the launch of a full scale invasion. Justified as the restoration of historically Russian Crimea to its rightful owner and as the cleansing of Ukraine's government from neo-nazis, the Kremlin uses history in order to depict its actions as necessary, legal and legitimate. The Kremlin's weaponization of History does not limit itself to the 1917-2022 period discussed in this thesis, the academic community has extensively written on earlier historical periods weaponised by the Kremlin. Putin's misreading of history has been extensively analysed within the scholarly debate on Moscow's justification of aggression, illustrating how Putin repurposes imperialist narratives used to justify expansionism, in his own great power ambitions.

Why is it important to understand how the Kremlin weaponises history ?

When reading this thesis, one may wonder why understanding how the Kremlin weaponises History to justify war is important. The Kremlin's stranglehold on historical politics explains the lack of opposition from Russian civil society, but also poses a threat to the EU.

The Kremlin's censorship of information and its extremely effective propaganda machine allows Moscow to mobilise ideological warfare in all circles of Russian society, thus gaining popular support for its political agenda. The spread of misrepresented history, by the national curriculum in all levels of Education, by state controlled Media, by official governmental institutions, is further accompanied by the strict censorship of any narrative

challenging Moscow's. This illustrates how effective weaponisation of history is in justifying military efforts to the Russian civil society. The criminalisation of criticism against the SVO, exemplified by the condemnation to 15 years of imprisonment for the use of the term "war", further pushes the Russian public to accept the regime's ambitions without demonstrating any opposition. The limitation of freedom of speech and opinion in Russia has attained levels that are hard to grasp by the Western world, where democratic rule has made it extremely easy to have access to contrasting information.

The rise of far-right populism in the EU, has led to pro-Russian leaders to gain power and further the Kremlin's interests. The 2024 Belgian investigations into Russian interference in the European Parliament have reported Moscow's lobbying of pro-Russian Members of the European Parliament (MEP) and meddling in the European elections. This investigation follows the spread of pro-Russian propaganda on the "Voices of Europe" website, with Belgian Prime Minister De Croo suggesting that Moscow's goals are to elect pro-Russian candidates to the European Parliament to reinforce pro-Russian narratives in Europe.¹⁵¹ Unprecedented elections of far-right parties in European elections have led to the accession of power by MEPs who implement political programmes favourable to Russia. Multiple far-right parties – Alternative for Germany, Alliance of the Union of Romanians, the Dutch Forum for Democracy, France's Rassemblement National, Hungary's Fidesz, Slovakia's Republika, and Bulgaria's Revival – have voted against criticism and punishment of Russia.¹⁵² These far-right politicians use Moscow's historical argumentation to justify their pro-Russian stance, thus spreading the misrepresented narrative on their electorate, and limiting the West's ability to take action countering Russian aggression.

Keeping this in mind, further analysis into the workings of the Russian propaganda machine can help better understand its effectiveness and limit its effects on the EU. The Council of the European Union's LibGuides provides many academic articles and official reports on the Kremlin's propaganda machine, delving into the specifics of its operation and effectiveness. In order to better prevent the damaging effects of pro-Russian propaganda within the EU, it is essential to understand not only its domestic effectiveness, but also its international reach. In this respect, the cyber-security threat posed by Russia is critical, and

¹⁵¹ Le Monde and Agence Presse, "Belgian PM Launches Probe into Suspected Russian Interference in EU Elections," *Le Monde.fr*, April 12, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/russia/article/2024/04/12/belgian-pm-launches-probe-into-suspected-russian-interference-in-eu-elections_6668220_140.html.

¹⁵² Tatia Nikoladze, "Who Votes 'Pro-Russia' in the EU Parliament and How," English Jamnews, March 15, 2023, <https://jam-news.net/european-parliament-and-russia/>.

constantly evolving, it must be further researched in order to enforce EU security. This thesis could thus be furthered by an in depth analysis on how the weaponised history is then spread amongst civil society, rendering it an all the more effective weapon.

The weaponisation of history is far from a novel phenomenon; historical narratives have been employed to justify conflicts since the dawn of civilization. However, the contemporary methods of historical manipulation and their dissemination through emerging media platforms present unique challenges that warrant thorough examination to develop effective countermeasures. This paper has elucidated the Kremlin's historical arguments used to rationalise the war in Ukraine, laying the groundwork for further analysis of the propagation mechanisms behind this rhetoric.

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