
From “the gathering of the Rus’ lands”
to the “Russkiy Mir”:
The origins of Russia’s War
against Ukraine

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History as strategic language

“He has three advisers:
Ivan the Terrible,
Peter the Great, and
Catherine the Great.”

Sergei Lavrov on Putin's foreign-policy thinking

History is everywhere in politics



Tokayev

Golden Horde as national genealogy



Xi Jinping

The “Thucydides Trap” and great-power rivalry



Mieroszewski

Politics is often a discussion about history

We live in an era of self-appointed public historians. Presidents, prime ministers, and ideologues constantly appeal to the past to explain the present, justify policy, and mobilize society.

The use of history is not uniquely Russian. What is specific in Putin’s case is the use of history to deny Ukraine’s agency.

Putin's historical imagination

2021 article:

On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians

- not a historical essay
- a political text written in the language of history
- Ukraine as part of a larger Russian historical space

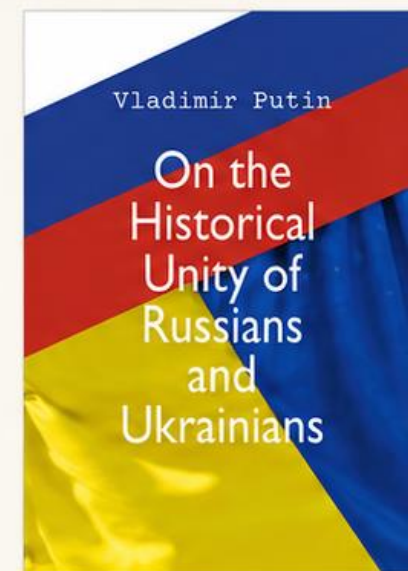
“one people”

“one historical and spiritual space”

“anti-Russia”

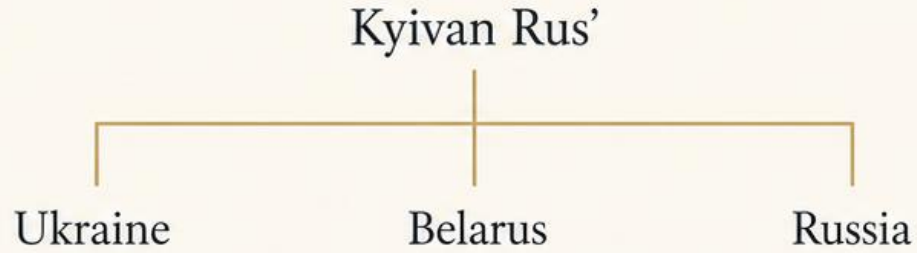


The screenshot shows the website of the Russian Embassy in Poland. At the top left is the Russian coat of arms and the text "AMBASADA ROSJI W POLSCE". To the right, contact information is provided: "Telefon: +48(22) 621 3453" and "Faks: +48(22) 625 3016". Social media icons for Facebook, Twitter, and a search icon are also present. A blue navigation bar contains links: "Główna", "Ambasada", "Rosja – Polska", "Centrum prasowe", "Zwycięstwo 2015", "Kontakty", "Szkola przy Ambasadsie", and "Komunikat: E". Below the navigation bar, the breadcrumb trail reads: "Główna > Centrum prasowe > Newsy > Artykuł Prezydenta Federacji Rosyjskiej Władimira Putina „O historycznej jedności Rosjan i Ukraińców” (opublikowany 12 lipca 2021 roku)". The main content area features the date "12 LIPCA 2021" and the category "OŚWIADCZENIA I WYSTĄPIENIA ROSYJSKICH OFICJELI / ARTYKULY I KOMBRZE". The article title is "Artykuł Prezydenta Federacji Rosyjskiej Władimira Putina „O historycznej jedności Rosjan i Ukraińców” (opublikowany 12 lipca 2021 roku)". The text of the article begins: "Niedawno, odpowiadając w trakcie „Bezpośredniej linii” na pytanie o stosunki rosyjsko-ukraińskie, powiedziałem, że Rosjanie i Ukraińcy – to jeden naród, jedna całość. Te słowa – to nie ktoś dla jakiejś koniunktury, dla bieżących politycznych okoliczności. Mówiłem o tym nie raz, bo jest moje przekonanie. Dlatego uważam za konieczne szczegółowo wyjaśnić swoje stanowisko, podzielić się ocenami aktualnej sytuacji."



Shared past or imperial ownership?

1. Shared inheritance



2. Imperial ownership



Shared inheritance \neq exclusive ownership





Ivan III and the claim to ‘all Rus’

From memory to political title

- Ivan III styled himself ruler of ‘all Rus’
- The claim was not only to Moscow
- It also invoked the wider inheritance of Kyiv

Kyivan Rus’ became a source of Muscovite legitimacy.





Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

Catherine II and the Imperial Claim to ‘Gather the Rus’ Lands’

- Catherine II acted without sentiment in solving the “Ukrainian problem.”
- The abolition of the Hetmanate and the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth drew most Ukrainian lands into the imperial space.
- Imperial expansion was justified through the language of protecting religious dissenters and of “returning” or “gathering” the Rus’ lands.
- After the second partition, this logic received a symbolic form in a commemorative medal.

“Ottorzhennaya vozvratikh” —
“I have restored what had been torn away.”

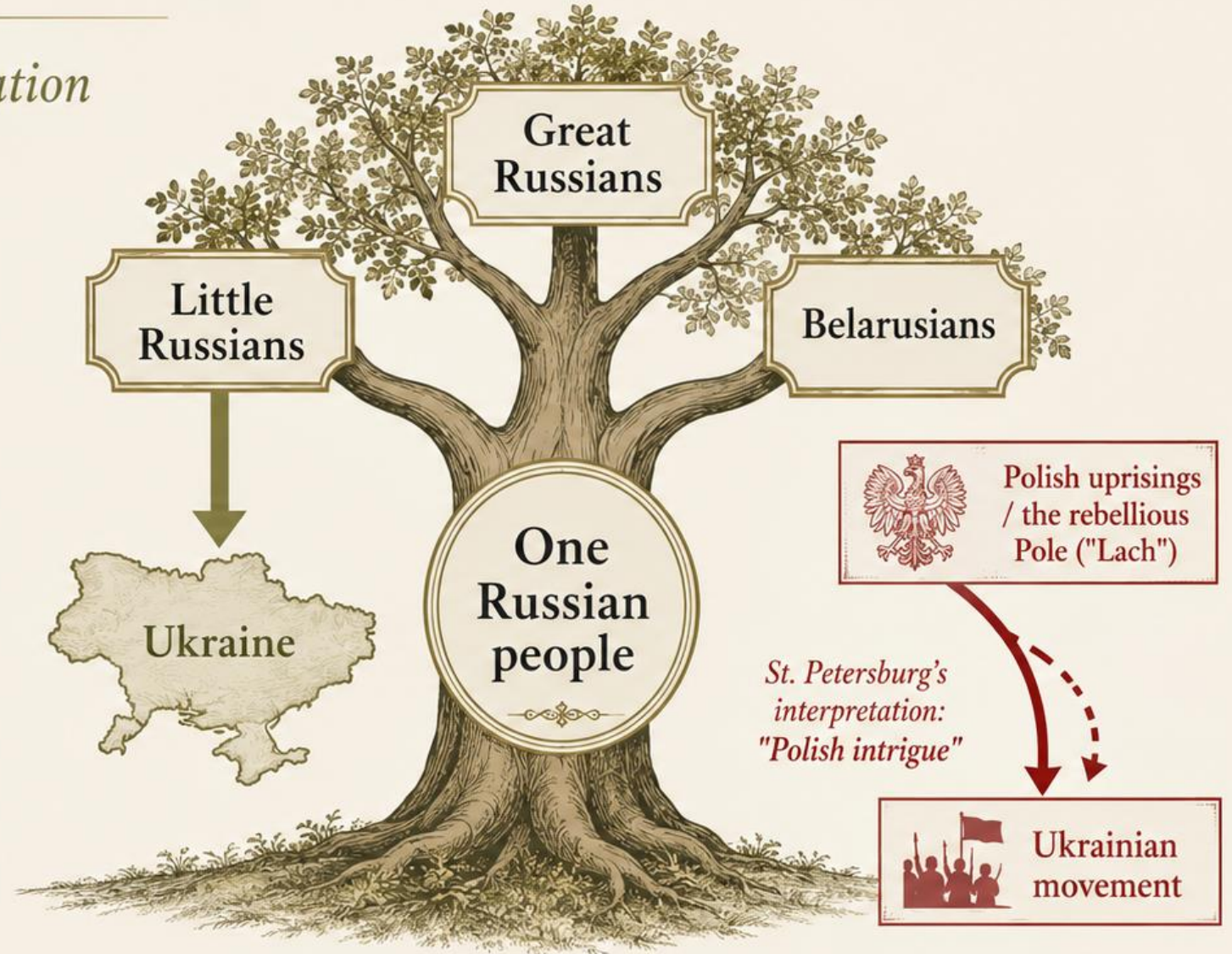


Commemorative medal after the Second Partition of Poland

The 'Triune Russian Nation'

19th-century imperial imagination

- One Russian people
- Three branches: Great Russians, Little Russians, Belarusians
- Ukraine reduced to a branch, not a separate nation
- Ukrainian movement framed as "Polish intrigue"

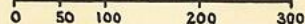




BOUNDARY LINES

- The Soviet Union
- The eleven Union Republics
- Autonomous S.S. Republics
- Adjacent Countries of the U.S.S.R.

SCALE OF MILES



11 CONSTITUENT REPUBLICS OF THE USSR AND THEIR CAPITALS

Republic	Capital
R.S.F.S.R.	Moscow
Ukraine	Kharkov
White Russia	Minsk
Uzbekistan	Tashkent
Turkmenia	Ashkhabad
Tajikistan	Sallabud
Georgia	Tbilisi (Tiflis)
Armenia	Erevan
Azerbaijan	Baku
Kazakhstan	Alma-Ata
Kirghizia	Frunze

AUTONOMOUS REPUBLICS INCLUDED WITHIN THE CONSTITUENT REPUBLICS

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Tatar ASSR | 8. Kalmyk ASSR | 16. Yakut ASSR |
| 2. Bashkir ASSR | 9. Karelian ASSR | 17. Moldavian ASSR |
| 3. Daghestan ASSR | 10. Komi ASSR | 18. Nakhichevan ASSR |
| 4. Duryai-Mongolian ASSR | 11. Mariik ASSR | 19. Abkhazian ASSR |
| 5. Chechen-Ingush ASSR | 12. Mordvia ASSR | 20. Ajarian ASSR |
| 6. Chuvasch ASSR | 13. North Ossetian ASSR | 21. Kara-Kalpak ASSR |
| 7. Kabardino-Balkarian ASSR | 14. Udmurt ASSR | 22. Crimean ASSR |
| | 15. Volga-German ASSR | |



Putin's Soviet formation

KGB, STATE ORDER, AND THE LOGIC OF CONSPIRACY

State as the highest form of order

Society as chaos or conspiracy

External enemy with an internal branch



Ukraine was read through the KGB vocabulary of subversion and betrayal.

Ukraine as the Soviet Union's 'second republic'



- One of the most militarized Soviet republics
- Three military districts and up to a million troops by 1991
- Strategic industries: Yuzhmash, engineering schools, military academies
- Strong Ukrainian presence in the lower and middle officer corps
- Major scientific infrastructure: Kharkiv's Ukrainian Physico-Technical Institute
- Landau in Kharkiv; Korolev and Glushko linked to Ukraine and the Soviet space programme



R-36M (SS-18 'Satan'): designed by Yuzhnoye in Dnipro; produced by Yuzhmash.



Example of the Soviet strategic missile sector linked to Ukraine



SOVIET INFLUENCE IN EUROPE, POST-WWII

The Brezhnev Era and Ukraine

- The ideal of the ‘Soviet people’ and the ‘merging of nations’
 - A period of intensified Russification
 - Ukraine reduced to a folkloric, subordinate identity
 - The USSR increasingly imagined not as a multinational state, but as Russia
-

For Putin’s generation, late Soviet imperial thinking became a formative political language.



*Volodymyr Shcherbytsky with Leonid Brezhnev
at a hunting preserve, Kyiv region, 1976.*

Solzhenitsyn and the language of 'unjust borders'

Late Soviet imperial anxiety

- Soviet republican borders as 'unjust'
- Crimea, Donbas, 'Novorossiya' imagined as not fully Ukrainian
- Ukraine's independence seen as territorial loss

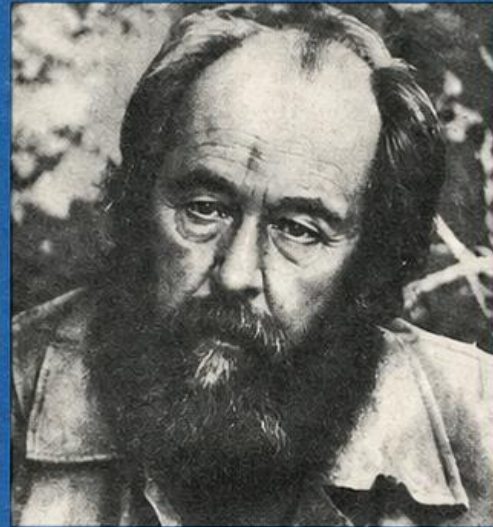


The idea of an 'artificial Ukraine' existed before Putin.

А. И. Солженицын

КАК НАМ ОБУСТРОИТЬ РОССИЮ

Посильные соображения



1991 and the imperial lesson

- Yeltsin sent a delegation to Kyiv to slow Ukrainian independence.
- Anatolii Sobchak was Putin's mentor and political patron.
- Putin absorbed a view of Ukraine's independence as the disintegration of a historical Russian space.
- This helps explain why Ukraine occupied a central place in his idea of the Soviet collapse as a geopolitical catastrophe.



Vladimir Putin and his political patron Anatolii Sobchak

Early Moderation on Ukraine

- After becoming president, Putin initially presented himself as a pragmatic statesman.
- He publicly suggested that war with Ukraine was unthinkable.
- In 2002, he stated that Ukraine had the right to choose its own security arrangements.
- In 2003, Russia signed the treaty recognizing the Russian–Ukrainian state border.

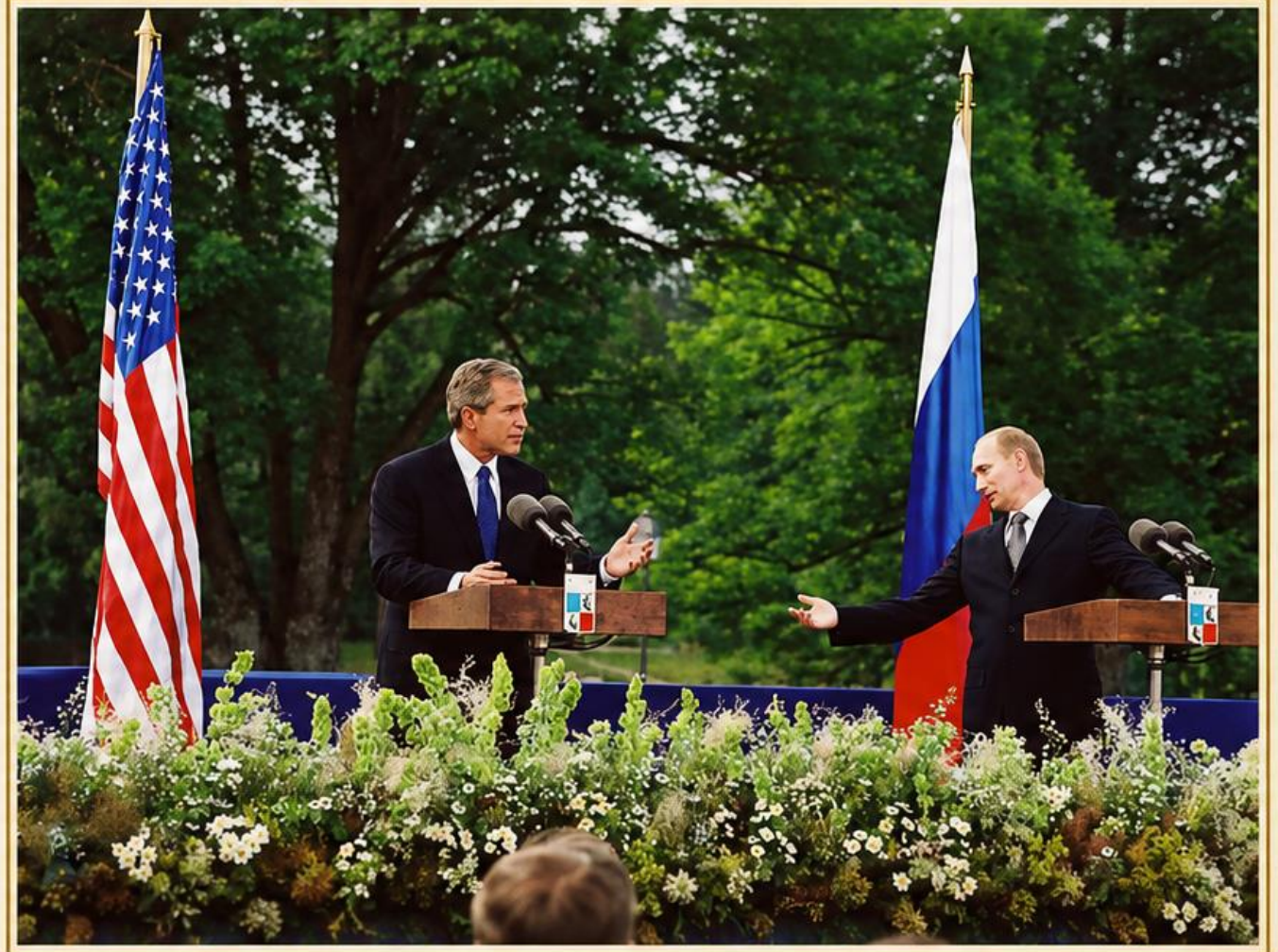


Vladimir Putin and Leonid Kuchma signing the 2003 Treaty on the Russian–Ukrainian State Border.

Slovenia, 2001: Putin's historical lecture

- Russia 'gave away' thousands of square kilometres
- Ukraine was described as part of Russia for centuries
- Historical argument beneath early diplomatic moderation

Ukraine was never only
a security question.



George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin in Slovenia, June 2001.

Sochi, 2008: Ukraine, NATO, and Imperial History

- After the Bucharest NATO summit, Putin warned Bush that Ukrainian membership in NATO would create a long-term conflict with Russia.
- He did not speak only about security. He turned to history.
- Ukraine was described as an "artificial" state, allegedly assembled from lands taken from Poland, Romania, Hungary, and Russia.
- The implication was clear: if Ukraine moved West, Russia would work through anti-NATO forces and keep destabilizing its neighbour.

“ *Ukraine was 'not a nation formed in a natural way'.* ”



George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, Sochi, April 2008.

Russia's imagined Europe

False history, false policy


-  **Russian power core**
Russia and Belarus
-  **Target: destroyed or subordinated statehood**
Ukraine
-  **Neutralized / Finlandized buffer**
Poland, Baltic states, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and neighbors
-  **Outside direct control, but subject to great-power bargaining**
Western Europe
-  **Yalta 2.0? / Spheres of influence**
Informal dividing line




YALTA 2.0?
Spheres of influence

 **1945 / GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR = MORAL LEGITIMACY**

 **YALTA = MODEL OF SPHERES OF INFLUENCE**

 **GREAT POWERS NEGOTIATE OVER THE HEADS OF SMALLER STATES**

 *In this vision, Ukraine is denied full sovereignty, Central Europe is confined to a compliant buffer, and Europe is organized into great-power spheres of influence.*