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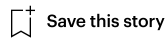
THE WAR IN UKRAINE IS A COLONIAL WAR

*For centuries, the country has lived in the shadow of empire. But its past
also provides the key to its present.*

By Timothy Snyder

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When Vladimir Putin denies the reality of the Ukrainian state, he is speaking the familiar language of empire. For five hundred years, European conquerors called the societies that they encountered “tribes,” treating them as incapable of governing themselves. As we see in the ruins of Ukrainian cities, and in the Russian practice of mass killing, rape, and deportation, the claim that a nation does not exist is the rhetorical preparation for destroying it.

Empire’s story divides subjects from objects. As the philosopher Frantz Fanon argued, colonizers see themselves as actors with purpose, and the colonized as instruments to realize the imperial vision. Putin took a pronounced colonial turn when returning to the Presidency a decade ago. In 2012, he described Russia as a “state-civilization,” which by its nature absorbed smaller cultures such as Ukraine’s. The next year, he claimed that Russians and Ukrainians were joined in “spiritual unity.” In a long essay on “historical unity,” published last July, he argued that Ukraine and Russia were a single country, bound by a shared origin. His vision is of a broken world that must be restored through violence. Russia becomes itself only by annihilating Ukraine.

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As the objects of this rhetoric, and of the war of destruction that it sanctions, Ukrainians grasp all of this. Ukraine does have a history, of course, and Ukrainians do constitute a nation. But empire enforces objectification on the periphery and amnesia at the center. Thus modern Russian imperialism includes memory laws that forbid serious discussion of the Soviet past. It is illegal for Russians to apply the word “war” to the invasion of Ukraine. It is also illegal to say that Stalin began the Second World War as Hitler’s ally, and used much the same justification to attack Poland as Putin is using to attack Ukraine. When the invasion began, in February, Russian publishers were ordered to purge mentions of Ukraine from textbooks.

Faced with the Kremlin’s official mixture of fantasy and taboo, the temptation is to prove the opposite: that it is Ukraine rather than Russia that is eternal, that it is Ukrainians, not Russians, who are always right, and so on. Yet Ukrainian history gives us something more interesting than a mere counter-narrative to empire. We can find Ukrainian national feeling at a very early date. In contemporary Ukraine, though, the nation is not so much anti-colonial, a rejection of a particular imperial power, as post-colonial, the creation of something new.

Southern Ukraine, where Russian troops are now besieging cities and bombing hospitals, was well known to the ancients. In the founding myth of Athens, the goddess Athena gives the city the gift of the olive tree. In fact, the city could grow olives only because it imported grain from ports on the Black Sea coast. The Greeks knew the coast, but not the hinterland, where they imagined mythical creatures guarding fields of gold and ambrosia. Here already was a colonial view of Ukraine: a land of fantasy, where those who take have the right to dream.

The city of Kyiv did not exist in ancient times, but it is very old—about half a millennium older than Moscow. It was probably founded in the sixth or seventh century, north of any territory seen by Greeks or controlled by Romans. Islam was advancing, and Christianity was becoming European. The Western Roman Empire had fallen, leaving a form of Christianity subordinate to a pope. The Eastern (Byzantine) Empire remained, directing what we now call the Orthodox Church. As Rome and Constantinople competed for converts, peoples east of Kyiv converted to Islam. Kyivans spoke a Slavic language that had no writing system, and practiced a paganism without idols or temples.

Putin's vision of "unity" relates to a baptism that took place in this setting. In the ninth century, a group of Vikings known as the Rus arrived in Kyiv. Seeking a southbound route for their slave trade, they found the Dnipro River, which runs through the city. Their chieftains then fought over a patchwork of territories in what is now Ukraine, Belarus, and the northeast of Russia—with Kyiv always as the prize. In the late tenth century, a Viking named Valdemar took the city, with the help of a Scandinavian army. He initially governed as a pagan. But, around 987, when the Byzantines faced an internal revolt, he sensed an opportunity. He came to the emperor's aid, and received his sister's hand in marriage. In the process, Valdemar converted to Christianity.

Putin claims that this messy sequence of events reveals the will of God to bind Russia and Ukraine forever. The will of God is easy to misunderstand; in any case, modern nations did not exist at the time, and the words "Russia" and "Ukraine" had no meaning. Valdemar was typical of the pagan Eastern European rulers of his day, considering multiple monotheistic options before choosing the one that made the most strategic sense. The word "Rus" no longer meant Viking slavers but a Christian polity. Its ruling family now intermarried with others, and the local people were treated as subjects to be taxed rather than as bodies to be sold.

Yet no rule defined who would take power after a Kyivan ruler's death. Valdemar took a Byzantine princess as his wife, but he had a half a dozen others, not to mention a harem of hundreds of women. When he died in 1015, he had imprisoned one of his sons, Sviatopolk, and was making war upon another, Yaroslav. Sviatopolk was freed after his father's death, and killed three of his brothers, but he was defeated on the battlefield by Yaroslav. Other sons entered the fray, and Yaroslav didn't rule alone until 1036. The succession had taken twenty-one years. At least ten other sons of Valdemar had died in the meantime.

These events do not reveal a timeless empire, as Putin claims. But they do suggest the importance of a succession principle, a theme very important in Ukrainian-Russian relations today. The Ukrainian transliteration of "Valdemar" is "Volodymyr," the name of Ukraine's President. In Ukraine, power is transferred through democratic elections: when Volodymyr Zelensky won the 2019 Presidential election, the sitting President accepted defeat. The Russian transliteration of the same name is "Vladimir." Russia is brittle: it has no succession principle, and it's unclear what will happen when Vladimir Putin dies or is forced from power. The pressure of mortality confirms the imperial thinking. An aging tyrant, obsessed by his legacy, seizes upon a lofty illusion that seems to confer immortality: the "unity" of Russia and Ukraine.

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In the Icelandic sagas, Yaroslav is remembered as the Lame; in Eastern Europe, he is the Wise, the giver of laws. Yet he did not solve the problem of succession. Following his reign, the lands around Kyiv fragmented again and again. In 1240, the city fell to the Mongols; later, most of old Rus was claimed by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, then the largest state in Europe. Lithuania borrowed from Kyiv a grammar of politics, as well as a good deal of law. For a couple of centuries, its grand dukes also ruled Poland. But, in 1569, after the Lithuanian dynasty died out, a Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth was formalized, and the territories of Ukraine were placed under Polish jurisdiction.

This was a crucial change. After 1569, Kyiv was no longer a source of law but an object of it—the archetypal colonial situation. It was colonization that set off Ukraine from the former territories of Rus, and its manner generated qualities still

visible today: suspicion of the central state, organization in crisis, and the notion of freedom as self-expression, despite a powerful neighbor.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, all the forces of Europe's globalization seemed to bear down on Ukraine. Polish colonization resembled and in some measure enabled the European colonization of the wider world. Polish nobles introduced land-management practices—along with land managers, most of whom were Jewish—that allowed the establishment of profitable plantations. Local Ukrainian warlords rushed to imitate the system, and adopted elements of Polish culture, including Western Christianity and the Polish language. In an age of discovery, enserfed peasants labored for a world market.

Ukraine's colonization coincided with the Renaissance, and with a spectacular flowering of Polish culture. Like other Renaissance thinkers, Polish scholars in Ukraine resuscitated ancient knowledge, and sometimes overturned it. It was a Pole, Copernicus, who undid the legacy of Ptolemy's "Almagest" and confirmed that the Earth orbits the sun. It was another Pole, Maciej of Miechów, who corrected Ptolemy's "Geography," clearing Ukrainian maps of gold and ambrosia. As in ancient times, however, the tilling of the black earth enabled tremendous wealth, raising the question of why those who labored and those who profited experienced such different fates.

The Renaissance considered questions of identity through language. Across Europe, there was a debate as to whether Latin, now revived, was sufficient for the culture, or whether vernacular spoken languages should be elevated for the task. In the early fourteenth century, Dante answered this question in favor of Italian; English, French, Spanish, and Polish writers created other literary languages by codifying local vernaculars. In Ukraine, literary Polish emerged victorious over the Ukrainian vernacular, becoming the language of the commercial and intellectual élite. In a way, this was typical: Polish was a modern language, like English or Italian. But it was not the *local* language in Ukraine. Ukraine's answer to the language question was deeply colonial, whereas in the rest of Europe it could be seen as broadly democratic.

The Reformation brought a similar result: local élites converted to Protestantism and then to Roman Catholicism, alienating them further from an Orthodox population. The convergence of colonization, the Renaissance, and the Reformation was specific to Ukraine. By the sixteen-forties, the few large landholders generally spoke Polish and were Catholic, and those who worked for them spoke Ukrainian and were Orthodox. Globalization had generated differences and inequalities that pushed the people to rebellion.

Ukrainians on the battlefield today rely on no fantasy of the past to counter Putin's. If there is a precursor that matters to them, it is the Cossacks, a group of free people who lived on the far reaches of the Ukrainian steppe, making their fortress on an island in the middle of the Dnipro. Having escaped the Polish system of landowners and peasants, they could choose to be "registered Cossacks," paid for their service in the Polish Army. Still, they were not citizens, and more of them wished to be registered than the Polish-Lithuanian parliament would allow.

The rebellion began in 1648, when an influential Cossack, Bohdan Khmelnytsky, saw his lands seized and his son attacked by a Polish noble. Finding himself beyond the protection of the law, Khmelnytsky turned his fellow-Cossacks toward revolt against the Polish-speaking, Roman Catholic magnates who dominated Ukraine. The accumulated cultural, religious, and economic grievances of the people quickly transformed the revolt into something very much like an anti-colonial uprising, with violence directed not only against the private armies of the magnates but against Poles and Jews generally. The magnates carried out reprisals against peasants and Cossacks, impaling them on stakes. The Polish-Lithuanian cavalry fought what had been their own Cossack infantry. Each side knew the other very well.

In 1651, the Cossacks, realizing that they needed help, turned to an Eastern power, Muscovy, about which they knew little. When Kyivan Rus had collapsed, most of its lands had been absorbed by Lithuania, but some of its northeastern territories remained under the dominion of a Mongol successor state. There, in a new city called Moscow, leaders known as tsars had

begun an extraordinary period of territorial expansion, extending their realm into northern Asia. In 1648, the year that the Cossack uprising began, a Muscovite explorer reached the Pacific Ocean.

The war in Ukraine allowed Muscovy to turn its attention to Europe. In 1654, the Cossacks signed an agreement with representatives of the tsar. The Muscovite armies invaded Poland-Lithuania from the east; soon after, Sweden invaded from the north, setting off the crisis that Polish history remembers as “the Deluge.” Peace was eventually made between Poland-Lithuania and Muscovy, in 1667, and Ukraine was divided more or less down the middle, along the Dnipro. After a thousand years of existence, Kyiv was politically connected to Moscow for the first time.

The Cossacks were something like an early national movement. The problem was that their struggle against one colonial power enabled another. In 1721, Muscovy was renamed the Russian Empire, in reference to old Rus. Poland-Lithuania never really recovered from the Deluge, and was partitioned out of existence between 1772 and 1795. Russia thereby claimed the rest of Ukraine—everything but a western district known as Galicia, which went to the Habsburgs. Around the same time, in 1775, the Cossacks lost their status. They did not gain the political rights they had wanted, nor did the peasants who supported them gain control of the black earth. Polish landowners remained in Ukraine, even as state power became Russian.

Whereas Putin’s story of Ukraine is about destiny, the Ukrainian recollection of the Cossacks is about unfulfilled aspirations. The country’s national anthem, written in 1862, speaks of a young people upon whom fate has yet to smile, but who will one day prove worthy of the “Cossack nation.”

The nineteenth century was the age of national revivals. When the Ukrainian movement began in imperial Russian Kharkov—today Kharkiv, and largely in ruins—the focus was on the Cossack legacy. The next move was to locate history in the people, as an account of continuous culture. At first, such efforts did not seem threatening to imperial rule. But, after the Russian defeat in the Crimean War, in 1856, and the insult of the Polish uprising of 1863 and 1864, Ukrainian culture was declared not to exist. It was often deemed an invention of Polish élites—an idea that Putin endorsed in his essay on “historical unity.” Leading Ukrainian thinkers emigrated to Galicia, where they could speak freely.

The First World War brought the principle of self-determination, which promised a release from imperial rule. In practice, it was often used to rescue old empires, or to build new ones. A Ukrainian National Republic was established in 1917, as the Russian Empire collapsed into revolution. In 1918, in return for a promise of foodstuffs, the country was recognized by Austria and Germany. Woodrow Wilson championed self-determination, but his victorious entente ignored Ukraine, recognizing Polish claims instead. Vladimir Lenin invoked the principle as well, though he meant only that the exploitation of national questions could advance class revolution. Ukraine soon found itself at the center of the Russian civil war, in which the Red Army, led by the Bolsheviks, and the White Army, fighting for the defunct empire, both denied Ukraine’s right to sovereignty. In this dreadful conflict, which followed four years of war, millions of people died, among them tens of thousands of Jews.

Though the Red Army ultimately prevailed, Bolshevik leaders knew that the Ukrainian question had to be addressed. Putin claims that the Bolsheviks created Ukraine, but the truth is close to the opposite. The Bolsheviks destroyed the Ukrainian National Republic. Aware that Ukrainian identity was real and widespread, they designed their new state to account for it. It was largely thanks to Ukraine that the Soviet Union took the form it did, as a federation of units with national names.

The failure of self-determination in Ukraine was hardly unique. Almost all of the new states created after the First World War were destroyed, within about two decades, by Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, or both. In the political imaginations of both regimes, Ukraine was the territory whose possession would allow them to break the postwar order, and to transform the world in their own image. As in the sixteenth century, it was as if all the forces of world history were concentrated on a single country.

Stalin spoke of an internal colonization, in which peasants would be exploited so that the Soviet economy could imitate—and then overtake—capitalism. His policy of collective agriculture, in which land was seized from farmers, was particularly unwelcome in Ukraine, where the revolution had finally got rid of the (still largely Polish) landholders. Yet the black earth of Ukraine was central to Stalin's plans, and he moved to subdue it. In 1932 and 1933, he enforced a series of policies that led to around four million people dying of hunger or related disease. Soviet propaganda blamed the Ukrainians, claiming that they were killing themselves to discredit Soviet rule—a tactic echoed, today, by Putin. Europeans who tried to organize famine relief were dismissed as Nazis.

The actual Nazis saw Stalin's famine as a sign that Ukrainian agriculture could be exploited for another imperial project: their own. Hitler wanted Soviet power overthrown, Soviet cities depopulated, and the whole western part of the country colonized. His vision of Ukrainians was intensely colonial: he imagined that he could deport and starve them by the millions, and exploit the labor of whoever remained. It was Hitler's desire for Ukrainian land that brought millions of Jews under German control. In this sense, colonial logic about Ukraine was a necessary condition for the Holocaust.

Between 1933 and 1945, Soviet and Nazi colonialism made Ukraine the most dangerous place in the world. More civilians were killed in Ukraine, in acts of atrocity, than anywhere else. That reckoning doesn't even include soldiers: more Ukrainians died fighting the Germans, in the Second World War, than French, American, and British troops combined.

The major conflict of the war in Europe was the German-Soviet struggle for Ukraine, which took place between 1941 and 1945. But, when the war began, in 1939, the Soviet Union and Germany were de-facto allies, and jointly invaded Poland. At the time, what is now western Ukraine was southeastern Poland. A small group of Ukrainian nationalists there joined the Germans, understanding that they would seek to destroy the U.S.S.R. When it became clear that the Germans would fail, the nationalists left their service, ethnically cleansed Poles in 1943 and 1944, and then resisted the Soviets. In Putin's texts, they figure as timeless villains, responsible for Ukrainian difference generally. The irony, of course, is that they emerged thanks to Stalin's much grander collaboration with Hitler. They were crushed by Soviet power, in a brutal counter-insurgency, and today Ukraine's far right polls at one to two per cent. Meanwhile, the Poles, whose ancestors were the chief victims of Ukrainian nationalism, have admitted nearly three million Ukrainian refugees, reminding us that there are other ways to handle history than stories of eternal victimhood.

After the war, western Ukraine was added to Soviet Ukraine, and the republic was placed under suspicion precisely because it had been under German occupation. New restrictions on Ukrainian culture were justified by a manufactured allocation of guilt. This circular logic—we punish you, therefore you must be guilty—informs Kremlin propaganda today. Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, has argued that Russia *had* to invade Ukraine because Ukraine might have started a war. Putin, who has said the same, is clearly drawing on Stalin's rhetoric. We are to understand that the Soviet victory in the Second World War left Russians forever pure and Ukrainians eternally guilty. At the funerals of Russian soldiers, grieving parents are told that their sons were fighting Nazis.

The history of the colonization of Ukraine, like the history of troubling and divisive subjects in general, can help us get free of myths. The past delivers to Putin several strands of colonial rhetoric, which he has combined and intensified. It also leaves us vulnerable to a language of exploitation: whenever we speak of "the Ukraine" instead of "Ukraine," or pronounce the capital city in the Russian style, or act as if Americans can tell Ukrainians when and how to make peace, we are continuing imperial rhetoric by partaking in it.

Ukrainian national rhetoric is less coherent than Putin's imperialism, and, therefore, more credible, and more human. Independence arrived in 1991, when the U.S.S.R was dissolved. Since then, the country's politics have been marked by corruption and inequality, but also by a democratic spirit that has grown in tandem with national self-awareness. In 2004, an attempt to rig an election was defeated by a mass movement. In 2014, millions of Ukrainians protested a President who

retreated from the E.U. The protesters were massacred, the President fled, and Russia invaded Ukraine for the first time. Again and again, Ukrainians have elected Presidents who seek reconciliation with Russia; again and again, this has failed. Zelensky is an extreme case: he ran on a platform of peace, only to be greeted with an invasion.

Ukraine is a post-colonial country, one that does not define itself against exploitation so much as accept, and sometimes even celebrate, the complications of emerging from it. Its people are bilingual, and its soldiers speak the language of the invader as well as their own. The war is fought in [a decentralized way](#), dependent on the solidarity of local communities. These communities are diverse, but together they defend the notion of Ukraine as a political nation. There is something heartening in this. The model of the nation as a mini-empire, replicating inequalities on a smaller scale, and aiming for a homogeneity that is confused with identity, has worn itself out. If we are going to have democratic states in the twenty-first century, they will have to accept some of the complexity that is taken for granted in Ukraine.

The contrast between an aging empire and a new kind of nation is captured by Zelensky, whose simple presence makes Kremlin ideology seem senseless. Born in 1978, he is a child of the U.S.S.R., and speaks Russian with his family. A Jew, he reminds us that democracy can be multicultural. He does not so much answer Russian imperialism as exist alongside it, as though hailing from some wiser dimension. He does not need to mirror Putin; he just needs to show up. Every day, he affirms his nation by what he says and what he does.

Ukrainians assert their nation's existence through simple acts of solidarity. They are not resisting Russia because of some absence or some difference, because they are not Russians or opposed to Russians. What is to be resisted is elemental: the threat of national extinction represented by Russian colonialism, a war of destruction expressly designed to resolve "the Ukrainian question." Ukrainians know that there is not a question to be answered, only a life to be lived and, if need be, to be risked. They resist because they know who they are. In one of his very first videos after the invasion, when Russian propaganda claimed that he had fled Kyiv, Zelensky pointed the camera at himself and said, "The President is here." That is it. Ukraine is here.

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