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The Return of History in Russia's Foreign Policy

Introduction

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The publication of Russian president Vladimir Putin's essay 'On the historical unity of Russia and Ukraine' in the summer of 2021 barely raised an eyebrow in the West. Some observers wondered why a president would undertake the effort to pen down his selective view on Russia's common history with Ukraine, if not for the sole objective to remove all *raison d'être* for Ukraine. What stood out in any case, was that history obviously had started to play a major role in Russian foreign policy. Yet, few fathomed that this would be the prelude to a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and war in 2022. Since 24 February 2022, we have seen an even quicker intensification in Russian historical discourse, from the claims of 'denazification' of Ukraine to Putin referencing the eighteenth-century general Ushakov during a March 2022 rally in the Luzhniki stadium to mark the anniversary of the annexation of Crimea.

History is back in international politics. But was it ever gone? Hardly, although it seems to have disappeared under the radar for a while. Over the past two decades, history mainly played a major role in Russian domestic and regional policy. Already in 2005, Putin remarked in an interview that 'in any case, we will take our decisions based on our history, our specificities, and we will take our decisions independently.'¹ Since the inception of Putin's

1 V.V. Putin, "Interview with Egyptian Newspaper Al Ahram." en.kremlin.ru/d/22930, April 25, 2005 (accessed November 5, 2022).

presidential rule, a clear instrumentalization and later weaponization of history has taken place.

In this special issue, we have tried to bring together a series of papers that delineate how Putin has put history to a political, radical and ultimately military use. The Russian state's 'search for a usable past' has unfolded in different phases and on different levels in Russia. A first dimension (since 2000) concerns the reintroduction of a unified, top-down view on history in Russian society. A second dimension (since 2010) entails the 'mental' mobilization of the Russian people around the traditionalist, conservative, Russian historical narrative that is linked to the "Russian World" (Russki Mir) discourse. And a third dimension (since 2014) regards the weaponization of history by military means, starting with the annexation of Crimea and followed by the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. All papers deal with these three dimensions of a 'usable' past, and tackle them via different angles, as we will describe briefly in the following paragraphs.

1 Imposing History-as-Propaganda from Above

The first dimension of reintroducing history from above happened through media projects aimed at a wider domestic audience and through education directed at indoctrinating the youngest generation, like the publication of new history books and the nomination of a historical commission.

Tatsiana Astrouskaya masterfully explains how the history of Ukraine and Ukrainians in Belarusian memory politics was rewritten as ordained from above. This editing of educational texts did not only take place in school textbooks, but was also spread out, since 2020, on Telegram. From Astrouskaya's thorough analysis of schoolbooks, it transpires how strongly the mythologization of the Second World War shaped the official Belarusian historical narrative, and how distinctly this determined the repositioning of Ukraine. Where Belarusian's southern neighbour was until recently described as a 'brotherly people', the suffering caused by German 'fascists' now was appropriated and turned into a weapon by which Minsk chastised the 'collective west', NATO, but also Ukrainian and Belarus nationalists and its émigré diaspora as enemies or even 'fascists' themselves.

Niels Drost and Beatrice de Graaf follow with a close reading and comprehensive analysis of over 11,000 of Putin's speeches and statements. They demonstrate how between 1999 and 2022, Putin increasingly channeled elements from Russian imperial history and from the Russian Orthodox Christian tradition to 1) formulate a new state ideology, 2) to mobilize the Russians

behind this mission of a Holy Russian Empire, 3) to demonize his enemies and legitimize their planned destruction, and 4) to embed his goals in an overarching apocalyptic scheme, in which death and war are noble goals for Russians to embrace, in order to obtain their place in heaven. The invasion in Ukraine is in this description the latest stage in a sustained process of radicalization by means of weaponizing the past, which is imposed upon the Russian society from above.

Interestingly, *Sam Edwards* shows how imposition of a usable past is not a prerogative of the aggressor country alone. By focusing on speeches by the Ukrainian President Zelensky, Edwards examines how the Ukrainian government also put the past to a masterful use. Kyiv has skillfully—and very deliberately—deployed historical memory in speeches addressed to audiences abroad, in the United States and the United Kingdom predominantly, to mobilize diplomatic, financial and military support for its defense efforts.

2 The Mental Mobilization

A second dimension entails the ‘mental’ mobilization of the Russian people around the traditionalist, conservative, Russian historical narrative that is linked to the “Russian World” (Russki Mir) discourse. The commemoration of the Great Patriotic War played an important role in what the Russian government saw as a unifying discourse within the Russian World, that extended well beyond Russia’s borders into other (post-Soviet) countries with a high ethnic Russian presence. This discourse was reinforced by an active promotion of Russian history through film projects, historical theme parks, and a sharp rise in publications. What stood out in this phase was how selectively the Russian government approached the past. Not unlike the nineteenth century’s ‘official nationalism’, Russia’s diversity was dealt with under the aegis of this unifying Russian identity and reinforced with the importance of a strong state and traditional orthodox values.

Olivia Durand compounds this point by explaining how claiming Southern Ukraine as historically and uniquely Russian was not only factually inaccurate, but could be considered a completely modern assertion that only served recolonizing purposes. Durand points out how the resurgence of a centuries-old imperial terminology in the context of current warfare should be a prompt to reassess the history of the region on its own terms.

In line with Durand, *Georgi Verbeeck* continues the historical arc, and analyzes how the ‘antifascism’ rhetoric provided the crucial link between the old Soviet historical narrative and contemporary Russia’s politics of memory.

Verbeeck argues how ‘antifascism’ serves as a concept ‘frozen in time’ and demonstrates how the current Russian leadership espouses an essentially cyclical world view that caters to its own policies of expansion and aggression, and is aimed at mobilizing Russian society around its political and military claims.

In a more comprehensive overview, *Lien Verpoest* assesses how discourses of humiliation and historical greatness intersect with Russian foreign policy, and how this evolved from reactive frustration to a more pro-active discourse of contestation. In the current context, Russia has used this humiliation rhetoric for the internal legitimation of its military invasion of Ukraine. Russia’s civilizational nationalism, instrumentalization of history and mainstreaming of ultranationalist views are all important securitizing moves that cannot be overlooked in studying the long history of Russia’s complex foreign policy.

3 The Weaponization of History

The third dimension of the way in which Moscow has operationalized a ‘usable past’, touches upon the factual and military weaponization of history. With the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian historical narrative that had by now fully taken ground on the domestic level spilled over onto the international level. Russia’s foreign policy discourse became permeated with historical references and a discourse of frustration, humiliation and increasing contestation of the West. This went hand in hand with an active policy of monumentalization, not in the least concerning historical figures with links to the Crimean peninsula. In 2016, a statue of Vladimir the Great was inaugurated next to the Kremlin, and in 2017, a massive statue of tsar Alexander III was erected in Yalta, stressing his efforts in developing the region.

Grigori Khislavski, for example, describes in great detail how different historical narratives were used by Russia. Whereas the disputed medieval Korsun legend was predominant in the legitimation of the annexation of Crimea, president Putin has mainly reverted to mentions of the Great Patriotic War since the full scale invasion of Ukraine. This narrative sees Crimea as the cradle of the Russian nation, and thereby proclaims it to be a sacred place. *Carl Mirra* then explains how Putin’s historical myth-making also serves to frame Russia as a perennial victim of an ever-expanding existential threat in the West. NATO is just another recurring object of this framework, that provides Putin with a screen to project his evolving redemptive, expansionist worldview on to.

Sadly, in 2022 Russian weaponization of history reached its apex. Carefully doctored myths about the Ukrainian government being compiled of ‘neonazi’s’

and 'banderovtsy' now became a *casus belli* in Russia. History was being securitized, with Ukraine and the West as the subject of the threats, and the *Ruski Mir* as the redemptive purpose for a sustainable secure future.

Importantly, *Olena Betlii* describes how the way in which the Kremlin has weaponized and securitized history, can come back to haunt the aggressor. Since March 2022, Ukraine started to counter-securitize the Russian myths and identity politics. Her article shows how Kyiv and Ukrainian national authorities dealt with material memorial objects associated with Russian or Soviet heritage. Where the Kremlin appropriated history as a weapon, Kyiv set out to destroy and alienate exactly these weapons through decommunization, decolonization, and derussification of their tangible and intangible heritage.

4 Contesting the Use of the Past

This special issue intends to venture beyond mapping the instrumentalization and weaponization of history by also addressing pertinent questions that Russia's neighbours have been confronted with in recent years, and more than ever in recent months. How does one respond to military actions that are intertwined on so many levels with historical narratives and myths that go directly against the truth? How does one bring attention to one's own national perspective? Should historical narratives be answered with counternarratives? These questions are equally relevant for the public audience globally. We do hope that this special issue offers some context and guidance in making sense on how the weaponization of history is unfolding, what the challenges are, and how we can start to respond to them and contest specific forms of this usable past.