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## Tsar-struck

How Vladimir Putin uses the history of the Russian Empire



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On February 24, Vladimir Putin shocked the world by starting a war in Ukraine. In the run-up to the Russian invasion, Putin delivered [far-reaching speeches](#) and wrote an [article](#) to legitimise his actions – packed with intense rhetoric on imperial as well as Soviet history.

This is, however, not something new. Putin has consistently instrumentalised history to achieve his policy goals since the day he

became president.<sup>1</sup> Over the years, he has increasingly and repeatedly referred to the history of the Russian Empire, as a discourse analysis of over 500 of his speeches and other sources over the years reveals.<sup>2</sup>

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1 This research was conducted at Utrecht University (UU) in fulfilment of the *MA in International Relations in Historical Perspective*. See the [UU thesis archive](#) for the complete research results.  
2 Much has been written about the ways in which Putin has instrumentalised the history of World War II and the Soviet Union, but less about how he uses the history of the Russian empire.

Putin initially used the past as an inspiration. But in his hands, history gradually transformed into a weapon. Putin wielded this rhetorical sword at home and abroad to justify his actions and secure his power position. His legitimization of the current military operation in Ukraine is the culmination of this strategy.

### “Russians and Ukrainians are one united people”

The roots of Putin’s ideas about Ukraine can already be found in his very first years as president. In the beginning of the new millennium, Putin emphasised what he saw as the “spiritual unity” between Russians and Ukrainians on visits to Kiev and Crimea. As Vladimir the Great baptised ancient Russia from here in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Putin argued in [2001](#),<sup>3</sup> “Orthodoxy began to spread among our peoples and in our countries” and Orthodox values underlie the “unity of the peoples of Russia and Ukraine”. It is important to note that while Putin already saw Russians and Ukrainians as united, he still perceived them to be different peoples.

How different this had become by 2013, which was one of the critical turning points in Putin’s use of history. At a conference in Kiev, Putin started to [claim](#) that Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians are one people.

“**No matter what happens, and wherever Ukraine goes, anyway we shall meet sometime and somewhere. Why? Because we are one nation”**

Putin explained here that many “little Russians” (Ukrainians) served in the upper echelons of Russia, and that Ukrainian lands developed very rapidly after their

“reunification” with Russia in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Later that year, in an [interview](#), Putin argued that “no matter what happens, and wherever Ukraine goes, anyway we shall meet sometime and somewhere. Why? Because we are one nation”. Putin noticeably started to make this claim a few months before the annexation of Crimea, at a time when Ukraine was pursuing an association agreement with the European Union. He repeated this argument in the years that followed on [several](#) different [occasions](#).

In his [article](#) *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* in 2021, Putin outlined all the ideas he had formulated and expressed about a united Slavic identity over the past years – now combined in one detailed essay of over 5000 words. Once again, Putin summed up how the Russians and “little Russian” Ukrainians were one people, how they thrived when they were together in the past, and how “true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia”. He backed up these allegations with extensive historical references to different periods of the Russian Empire.

Most Ukrainians are not convinced by Putin’s argument. In an [opinion poll](#) of September 2021, a large majority of the Ukrainian respondents (70 per cent) indicated that they disagreed. Another Ukrainian [survey](#) showed similar results. Yet, Putin stands indifferent to these outcomes. His claims were aimed at reaching mutually reinforcing goals: to (1) shape a common Slavic identity, (2) praise the times when these peoples were united, which together (3) provides a justification for Russia to be involved in the affairs of contemporary Ukraine, in (4) an attempt to find support for his policy.

### “Crimea had always been Russian”

In a similar fashion, Putin has used imperial Russian history to justify the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. Two weeks before the annexation, Putin justified the

3 While the primary sources have been analysed in Russian, their English translations on the Kremlin website are cited here for reasons of accessibility. However, when such translations are not available, the Russian versions are cited instead.

possibility of using troops on Ukrainian territory by [drawing a parallel](#) between the October Revolution of 1917 and the Maidan Revolution of 2014. This gave him an opportunity to argue that the Russian guarantees in [the Budapest Memorandum](#) to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine were supposedly no longer valid. As there had been an unconstitutional coup in Ukraine, Putin argued, a new country was born in 2014, just like after the revolution of 1917 in imperial Russia.

After the annexation, Putin continued this use of (imperial) history to legitimise this act. On various occasions, his argument tended to go as follows: Crimea had always been an integral part of Russia, but for some incomprehensible reason the Bolsheviks transferred the peninsula and other areas to Ukraine. Putin explained and summarised his assertion on the seventh anniversary of the annexation of Crimea in 2021.

Here, in the middle of a crowded Luzhniki stadium in Moscow, Putin [claimed](#) that Russian ancestors had developed this territory since ancient times: “In the 10th century a large part of [it] was simply incorporated into the Ancient Russian State”, and that “in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries these lands fully returned to their lawful owner, the Russian Empire”. We can see in this quote how Putin paints a picture of Crimea as if it had always been Russian in the past, except for a few interludes.

However, this portrayal does not do justice to historical reality. Only when Catherine the Great annexed the Crimean Khanate in the spring of 1783, [Crimea became part of \(imperial\) Russia](#). Before that, the half-island had been home to different peoples and entities. Even Chersonesus – the Crimean town where Vladimir the Great was baptised and thus constitutes the spiritual roots of Russians and Ukrainians for Putin – [was in Byzantine possession](#) at the time of the ancient ruler’s baptising. Finally, during the times of the ancient Russian state (Kievan Rus) Putin refers to, there was no historical sense of a ‘Great Russia’ as he implies.

Three days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when Putin announced his recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent republics, Putin applied similar rhetoric as with the annexation of Crimea. “Since time immemorial, the people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians. This was the case before the 17th century, when a portion of this territory rejoined the Russian state, and after,” Putin [said](#) for example. Altogether, in this speech the broader point was made that Ukraine has no right to exist as an independent country – laying the foundation for the invasion that followed a few days later.

### A European identity as starting point

Putin has not always instrumentalised history as a weapon. Especially during his first two presidential terms (2000 – 2008), Putin applied history to strengthen both Russian society and international ties. He did so in a constructive way: most of his references in this period were aimed at shaping Russian identity and praising positive examples from the past.

**“ Today basic European values are becoming an integral part of the Russian way of life. By following the European path, Russia will strengthen its position and assert its individuality”**

It was in this period that Putin argued on [different occasions](#) that Russia is a European country with deep European roots. Putin [argued](#) that his country has felt part of the European continent since the time of Peter the Great. “Today basic European values are becoming an integral part of the Russian way of life. By following the European path, Russia will strengthen its position and assert its individuality.” And at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Treaty of Rome in 2007, Putin even [claimed](#) that European integration had been unfeasible if Russia had not “disrupt[ed]

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attempts to unite Europe by force” in the past.<sup>4</sup>

As relations with the West were fairly good during his first two terms, Putin also used imperial history [on different occasions](#) to further strengthen these ties – in particular with the United States. According to Putin, their countries had had a great positive history together.

He underpinned this argument with positive examples from imperial Russian history, such as Russian support for the American Revolutionary War and how both countries fought together in both World Wars. “So”, Putin said in an [interview](#) in 2007, “there is something that objectively leads us to come together in difficult times”. Arguably, these chapters from imperial history were used by Putin as a safer alternative to Soviet history and offered an opportunity for the new Russia to take a step back from its former Soviet identity.

### Consolidating and protecting Putin’s power base

After Putin returned to the presidency for his third term in 2012, he was no longer as pro-European as he used to be. Arguably, this was influenced by the accession of a large number of Eastern European countries to the EU and NATO in 2004.

Putin still praised positive examples from the past from 2012 onwards. Yet, these were increasingly accompanied by condemnations of negative episodes as well, and by efforts to define a (common) Slavic identity serving to justify his policy choices. Now, protecting his power base increasingly became the goal of Putin’s use of history.

This particularly became the case after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Western countries imposed sanctions on Russia. As this happened, Putin painted a picture of Russia being under siege and [argued](#) that Russia had always been restricted in the past whenever it became too powerful. As the president was needed to protect Russia from this threat, this directly contributed to consolidating Putin’s power base.

However, the siege also came from inside Russia according to Putin. Amid a wave of protests between 2017 and 2021, Putin [portrayed](#) the demonstrators as revolutionaries who wanted to destroy Russia from within, using [comparisons](#) to the Russian Revolution of 1917. Again, the underlying message here served to protect Putin’s power position: breaking the system through revolution, rather than developing it via evolution, has had catastrophic results in the past.

### An insight in Putin’s cards

Why is it important to understand how Putin uses history? Although Russia is not a true democracy, the country is neither an applause machine where the leader is blindly followed. The Kremlin needs to have support in public opinion and uses history as an instrument to achieve this. Knowledge of how this works offers an insight into the cards the Russian president holds and plays.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine shows that Putin is willing to turn words into deeds, with potentially catastrophic consequences. Although this does not guarantee that he will also do so in the future, it is a worrisome precedent.

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4 Interesting enough, Putin at the time primarily talked about these European Russian roots abroad or in meetings with foreigners. When he talked to a Russian audience, Putin preserved his rhetoric of strong European origins for people in Saint Petersburg and North-Western Russia.

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