

THE CONVERSATION

Analysis and insight from experts

A special
collection
for donors



The historical roots of the war in Ukraine



March 9, 2022

theconversation.com

Introduction


I'm old enough to remember when Ukraine was referred to as "the Ukraine" and just one in the constellation of states in the USSR. Now, using the Soviet-era manner of referring to the country is considered both incorrect and problematic because it refers back to a time when Ukraine and Russia were joined in a single country.

It's a small but significant example of how history – some as recent as the early 1990s and some far older – looms large in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. How one views the events of the past and what they mean for the present and future are very much in dispute.

At The Conversation, we view history as a crucial way to understand today's news – and it's particularly relevant in our coverage of Ukraine. The articles collected here provide some of the historical scaffolding to help you make sense of the current conflict. They include articles (some of which were published before the actual invasion) on the Cold War, on Vladimir Putin's claims of "historical Russia," and the close ties between the countries. They're all written by academics who are experts in their fields and edited by journalists with deep experience in covering international news.

Martin La Monica
Director of Editorial Projects
and Newsletters





Russian President Vladimir Putin attends the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. Alexei Druzhinin / Sputnik/AFP via Getty Images

The Cold War, modern Ukraine and the spread of democracy in the former Soviet bloc countries

By Michael De Groot, Assistant Professor of International Studies at Indiana University

Ukraine has emerged as ground zero of what some pundits have dubbed a new Cold War between Russia and the West.

In my view as a Cold War historian, this comparison distorts the Cold War and misrepresents the stakes of the current crisis.

Yet reviewing the Cold War is important because its legacy shapes Russian President Vladimir Putin's policy toward Ukraine.

While Ukraine was a Soviet republic during the Cold War, it has become the front line of a post-Cold War tug-of-war between Russia and the West. By insist-

ing on NATO's withdrawing its forces and weapons from former Soviet bloc countries, Putin would like to turn back the clock to the mid-1990s, before NATO expanded into Eastern Europe

From my reading of public accounts, Putin views NATO as a relic that retains its Cold War purpose of containing Russia. In response to NATO expansion, Putin seeks to carve a buffer zone of his own, much as former Soviet leader Joseph Stalin did in response to American assistance in Europe after World War II, and consolidate a Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

What was the Cold War?

The Cold War was a global struggle of the United States and democratic capitalism against the Soviet Union and

communism. It erupted in the mid-1940s after both nations emerged from World War II as superpowers and viewed each other as existential threats.

During World War II they had cooperated to defeat Nazi Germany and Japan. After the war, both agreed to occupy Germany jointly with Britain and France and wanted to continue the alliance once the fighting stopped. But irreconcilable disagreements about the postwar international order rose to the surface.

The Soviet Union asserted control over Eastern Europe – the nations of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania – which the Soviet Army had liberated from the Nazis. Stalin supported local communists and intimidated their opponents, and the countries rarely held free elections. U.S. President Harry Truman's administration accused Stalin of betraying an agreement at the wartime Yalta Conference to respect European democracy.

Yet what terrified U.S. officials most was the possibility that Soviet ideology would resonate with the Western European and German people who were struggling to



President John F. Kennedy discusses the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 with Gen. Curtis LeMay and other military leaders. Charles Phelps Cushing/ClassicStock/Getty Images

recover from the war. U.S. policymakers feared that the desolate masses might elect communist governments that would ally with the Soviet Union against the United States.

Winning hearts and minds

In one of the turning points of the early Cold War, U.S. Secretary of State George C. Marshall announced an economic assistance initiative for Europe in June 1947. Congress authorized the program in April 1948. The Marshall Plan, as it became known, provided more than US\$12 billion to aid European reconstruction during its three years of operation.

But the Marshall Plan's logic worried the Western Europeans. Fresh off two traumatic wars against a belligerent Germany, Western Europeans feared any effort to rebuild western Germany and place it

on the path to statehood.

Breaking a long-standing tradition of avoiding entangling alliances, the United States joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in April 1949 to guarantee Western Europe's security against West Germany, which became independent the following month.

Alarm bells flashed in Moscow. The Soviet Union had lost 27 million soldiers and civilians during the Second World War. And the United States wanted to rebuild postwar Germany.

In response, Stalin ordered the Eastern European communists to crack down on their domestic rivals. Moscow also created East Germany to counter West Germany. It now had a buffer zone of loy-

al communist countries to protect itself from the West.

The Cold War began in Europe, but it soon spread to Africa, Asia and Latin America. Each superpower feared that a setback in a developing country could give the other the advantage in the Cold War. Although their forces did not square off directly, the United States and Soviet Union confronted each other through proxies in bloody conflicts such as the Korean and Vietnam wars.

The high stakes of the Cold War also brought the world close to nuclear annihilation. The Cuban Missile Crisis, for example, erupted in October 1962 when the Kennedy administration discovered that the Soviets had deployed missiles in communist Cuba. The United States and Soviet Union averted nuclear war after striking a bargain: The Kennedy administration promised never to invade Cuba and to withdraw American missiles in Turkey in exchange for the Soviet removal of the weapons from Cuba.

Soviet Ukraine

Ukraine joined Russia, Belarus and Transcaucasia, a federation consisting of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as the Soviet Union's founding republics in December 1922.

Ukraine suffered greatly under Stalin's rule in the 1930s. A famine in the early 1930s, known as the Holodomor, killed close to 4 million Ukrainians. Today,



Premier Joseph Stalin and President Harry S. Truman smile during the 1945 Potsdam Conference, where they negotiated terms for the end of World War II. Library of Congress/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images

many Ukrainians refer to the event as an act of genocide.

Thus, when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, many Ukrainians initially welcomed them. The nationalist Stepan Bandera collaborated with the Nazis with the aim of establishing an independent Ukrainian state.

In a move whose significance contemporaries could not foresee, the presidium of the Supreme Soviet transferred Crimea from Russia to Ukraine in 1954. Crimea was important because the Soviet Union's Black Sea Fleet had headquarters there. The Soviet Union stationed one-third of its nuclear weapons on Ukrainian soil. When the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, Ukraine ranked as the third-largest nuclear state.

Ukraine transferred its nuclear weapons to Russia in the mid-1990s in exchange for Russian promises to respect Ukraine's sovereignty. The United States and Britain were also parties to this agreement, known as the Budapest Memorandum.

After the fall of communism

The Cold War ended more than three decades ago, when West Germany and East Germany unified and communism collapsed across Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

NATO has since expanded to 14 countries that had been part of the Soviet bloc. This number includes three former

Soviet republics: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, all of which border Russia.

NATO declared at its 2008 Bucharest Summit that Ukraine and Georgia, also former Soviet republics, also would become members sometime in the future. Where NATO has expanded, membership in the European Union has usually come as well.

In my view, Putin fears Ukraine's joining NATO and becoming a springboard for the United States to destabilize his regime. It is also my view that Putin believes Washington already uses the current Ukrainian government as a proxy for American interests.

The Russians annexed Crimea in March 2014, reversing what they claimed was a historical injustice. They have supported Ukrainian separatists in the eastern part of the country, which is known as the Donbass. These moves help prevent Ukraine from joining NATO because countries are not permitted to join the alliance if they have unresolved territorial disputes.

Putin's fears are not without basis. The momentum of a democratic, prosperous and secure Ukraine could spill over into Russia and empower domestic challenges to Putin's hold on power. By precipitating a crisis over Ukraine, Putin wants to make sure that never happens.

The author's father, Wolodymyr 'Mirko' Pylyshenko, pictured in an ID card at a German displacement camp for Ukrainians. Provided by Katja Kolcio



Mr. Mrs: Miss Pylyshenko Wolodymyr
Пан-
Born 28.7.1934
уродж.
Profesion Discipel Pysni
Професія ученьк писат
Address Aschaffenburg/Main 190 DP Camp
Адреса и.г. 309 "Artillery" бл. 17/17
is member of Ukrainian Y.M.C.A./Y.W.C.A.
at Aschaffenburg Reg. Nr. 228
є членом Української І.М.Е.А./І.В.Е.А.

Why Ukrainian Americans are committed to preserving Ukrainian culture – and national sovereignty

By Katja Kolcio, Associate Professor of Dance and Environmental Studies at Wesleyan University

As a child, I would wait with anticipation for my parents to return from trips to the Soviet Union. Often they brought gifts like a few loaves of hearty brown bread, or a wheel of briny, homemade cheese. Sometimes they also brought back notebooks, or bits of paper with verses scribbled in Ukrainian.

These were the writings of dissidents and political prisoners whose work was banned in a systematic attempt to erase Ukrainian history and political expression.

Throughout the 20th century, czarist

and then Soviet policies banned publication and education in the Ukrainian language.

Under Joseph Stalin's rule, the Soviet Union killed at least 750,000 artists, writers, scientists and intellectuals, as well as regular citizens, between 1936 and 1938. The Great Purge, as it is known, has since been well documented. But Soviet persecution of Ukrainians and other Eastern European nationals continued through the rest of the 20th century.

Ukrainians who fled felt responsible for preserving their native country's intellectual and cultural heritage. My parents were among those in the Ukrainian diaspora who did so.

I am a Ukrainian American and a professor who studies the role of art in society; my work is a patient act of political defiance against centuries of cultural genocide.

Russia invaded Crimea, a Ukrainian peninsula, in 2014. Since then, I've worked closely with a Ukrainian nonprofit organization, the Development Foundation, to build community health and trauma programs in response to the Crimean conflict.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's escalating threat to invade Ukraine again does not come as a surprise to most Ukrainian Americans.

U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said on Feb. 18, 2022, that East-West tensions are at their highest point since the Soviet Union's collapse, as Russia has amassed between 160,000 and 190,000 troops along Ukraine's border.

Many Ukrainian Americans fear for the lives and safety of family and friends in Ukraine, and for Ukraine's future.

What it means to be Ukrainian American

Ukraine is home to about 42 million people. There are between 12 million and 20 million more people with Ukrainian

heritage around the world. Many of these people fled political persecution or are descendants of those who did.

The Ukrainian American diaspora includes over 1.1 million people. Ukrainian Americans live primarily in big cities like New York, Chicago and Philadelphia.

Participating in Ukrainian arts and culture is a conscientious act of preserving national identity and culture for Ukrainian Americans, including my own family.

My father arrived in Rochester, New York, in

1950 and joined a community that had Ukrainian language schools, social clubs and an extensive credit union system specifically for the Ukrainians.

Members of this community published newspapers and created makeshift libraries in the basements of churches and social halls. They gathered Ukrainian language publications that were forbidden under Soviet law. These materials tell the story of people who identify as Ukrainian but whose history was actively suppressed.

Being Ukrainian American often means attending Ukrainian-language school on Saturdays, joining a Ukrainian choir

“I am a Ukrainian American and a professor who studies the role of art in society; my work is a patient act of political defiance against centuries of cultural genocide.”

or bandura instrumental ensemble or memorizing verses of Ukrainian poetry and literature.

The idea of what it means to be Ukrainian American has changed since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

The Ukrainian diaspora pivoted from preserving history to helping build a future for Ukraine. Ukrainians are now free to express themselves as Ukrainians without fear of government reprisal. Many Ukrainian Americans maintain strong connections with family in Ukraine, and some have returned to live in Ukraine.

Preserving Ukrainian history

Ukrainians first came to the U.S. because of poverty and lack of land in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Another wave of Ukrainians followed between World War I and World War II, after the rise of the Soviet Union in 1922.

More Ukrainians migrated to the U.S. following World War II, which forcibly displaced 200,000 Ukrainians. The latest wave came after the fall

of the Soviet Union in 1992.

My father, Wolodymyr “Mirko” Pylyshenko, was among the Ukrainian American community leaders who worked to collect Ukrainian literature, through informally circulated materials known as “samidav,” or “samizdat” in Russian.

As an editor and librarian at the Rochester branch of the Ukrainian Federal Credit Union, my father encouraged people to write their life stories. When a Ukrainian American died in Rochester, the family knew to bring their mementos to the credit union, or to him.

My father died of COVID-19 in February 2020. But in his final years he organized his archives. His extensive collection preserving the first 100 years of



The author's father, Mirko Pylyshenko, is pictured on a trip to Ukraine – then part of the Soviet Union – in the 1970s. Photo courtesy of Katja Kolcic

Ukrainian American life in Rochester is housed at the University of Rochester, and his archive of previously banned materials is now in Dnipro, Ukraine.

Schools in Ukraine, meanwhile, are teaching Ukrainian literature, political thought and history dating from the 1800s. Ukrainian schools previously omitted major events like the Holodomor genocide, when Stalin starved an estimated 3.9 million Ukrainians to death in the 1930s.

Russia's attempts to suppress Ukrainian identity

In part because of their shared history dating back to the 9th century, Russia sees Ukraine as inherently linked. Putin published an article in July 2021, writing that Ukraine's sovereignty is "possi-

ble only in partnership with Russia."

"For we are one people," Putin wrote.

Ukraine and Russia share a complicated history, both tracing back to Kyivan Rus', the first East Slavic state, which existed from the 9th century to the mid-13th century. The territory was centered in what is today Kyiv, Ukraine's capital city.

But for Ukrainian Americans, the potential threat of a Russian invasion is a direct attack on the national identity they and their ancestors have passionately defended.

"Knowing that you have family and friends that are under the threat of the Russian invasion, you feel obligated to do something," said Andrij Baran, president of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of North American Capital Region, in a Spectrum News 1 article on Feb. 8, 2022.

Ukrainian Americans have closely followed the news, called their congressional representatives to support Ukraine, and prayed for peace – while also mentally preparing for a potential war.

Roman Bodola, a Ukrainian-born parishioner in Riverhead, New York, explained this public interest in a local news article on Feb. 16, 2022: "Ukrainian people are strong. And they know they must stay strong and stop the Russians."



Ukrainian Americans attend a New York City rally on March 2, 2014, protesting Russia's annexation of Crimea. Bilgin Sasmaz/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images



An abandoned fun fair, two kilometers from the Chernobyl power station. Martin Godwin/Getty Images

Famine, subjugation and nuclear fallout: How Soviet experience helped sow resentment among Ukrainians toward Russia

By Emily Channell-Justice, Director of the Temerty Contemporary Ukraine Program at Harvard University and Jacob Lassin, Postdoctoral Research Scholar in Russian and East European Studies at Arizona State University

Ukraine and Russia share a great deal in the way of history and culture – indeed for long periods in the past, the neighboring countries were part of larger empires encompassing both territories.

But that history – especially during the Soviet period from 1922 to 1991, in which Ukraine was absorbed into the communist bloc – has also bred resentment. Opinions of the merits of the Soviet Union and its leaders diverge, with Ukrainians far less likely to view the period favorably than Russians.

Nonetheless, President Vladimir Putin continues to claim Soviet foundations for what he sees as “historical Russia” – an entity that includes Ukraine.

As scholars of that history, we believe that an examination of Soviet-era policies in Ukraine can offer a useful lens for understanding why so many Ukrainians harbor deep resentment toward Russia.

Stalin’s engineered famine

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, Ukraine was known as the breadbasket of Europe and later of the Soviet Union. Its rich soil and ample fields made it an ideal place to grow the grain that helped feed the entire continent.

After Ukraine was absorbed into the Soviet Union beginning in 1922, its agriculture was subject to collectivization policies, in which private land was taken over by the Soviets to be worked communally. Anything produced on those lands would be redistributed across the union.

In 1932 and 1933, a famine devastated the Soviet Union as a result of aggressive collectivization coupled with poor harvests.

Millions starved to death across the Soviet Union, but Ukraine felt the brunt of this horror. Research estimates that some 3 million to 4 million Ukrainians died of the famine, around 13% of the population, though the true figure is impossible to establish because of Soviet efforts to hide the famine and its toll.

Scholars note that many of the political decisions of the Soviet regime under Joseph Stalin – such as preventing Ukrainian farmers from traveling in search of food, and severely punishing anyone who took produce from collective farms – made the famine much worse for Ukrainians. These policies were specific to Ukrainians within Ukraine, as well as Ukrainians who lived in other parts of the Soviet Union.

Some historians claim that Stalin's moves were done to quash a Ukrainian independence movement and were specifically targeted at ethnic Ukrainians.

As such, some scholars call the famine a genocide. In Ukrainian, the event is known as “Holodomor,” which means “death by hunger.”

Recognition of the full extent of the Holodomor and implicating Soviet leadership for the deaths remains an important issue in Ukraine to this day, with the country's leaders long fighting for global recognition of the Holodomor and its impact on modern Ukraine.

Countries such as the United States and Canada have made official declarations calling it a genocide.

But this is not the case in much of the rest of the world.

Just as the the Soviet government of the day denied that there were any decisions that explicitly deprived Ukraine of food – noting that the famine affected the entire country – so too do present-day Russian leaders refuse to acknowledge culpability.

Russia's refusal to admit that the famine disproportionately affected Ukrainians has been taken by many in Ukraine as an attempt to downplay Ukrainian history and national identity.

Soviet annexation of Western Ukraine

This attempt to suppress Ukrainian national identity continued during and after World War II. In the early years of

the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian national movement was concentrated in the western parts of modern-day Ukraine, part of Poland until the Nazi invasion in 1939.

Before Germany's invasion, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany entered into a secret agreement, under the guise of the Molotov-Ribbentrop nonaggression pact, which outlined German and Soviet spheres of influence over parts of central and east Europe.

After Germany invaded Poland, the Red Army moved into the eastern portion of the country under the pretense of stabilizing the failing nation. In reality, the Soviet Union was taking advantage of the provisions laid out in the secret protocol. The Polish territories that now make up western Ukraine were also incorporated into Soviet Ukraine and Belarus, subsuming them into the larger Russian cultural world.

At the end of the war, the territories remained part of the Soviet Union.

Stalin set about suppressing Ukrainian culture in these newly annexed lands in favor of a greater Russian culture. For example, the Soviets repressed any Ukrainian intellectuals who promoted the Ukrainian language and culture through censorship and imprisonment.

This suppression also included liquidating the Ukrainian Greek Catholic

Church, a self-governing church that has allegiance to the pope and was one of the most prominent cultural institutions promoting Ukrainian language and culture in these former Polish territories.

Its properties were transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church, and many of its priests and bishops were imprisoned or exiled. The destruction of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is still a source of resentment for many Ukrainians. It stands, we believe as scholars, as a clear instance of the Soviets' intentional efforts to destroy Ukrainian cultural institutions.

The legacy of Chernobyl in Ukraine

Just as disaster marked the early years of Ukraine as a Soviet republic, so did its final years.

In 1986 a nuclear reactor at the Soviet-run Chernobyl nuclear power in the north of Ukraine went into partial meltdown. It remains the worst peacetime nuclear catastrophe the world has seen.

It required the evacuation of nearly 200,000 people in the areas surrounding the power plant. And to this day, approximately 1,000 square miles of Ukraine are part of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, where radioactive fallout remains high and access is restricted.

Soviet lies to cover up the extent of the

disaster – and missteps that would have limited the fallout – only compounded the problem. Emergency personnel were not given proper equipment or training to deal with the nuclear material.

It resulted in a heavy death toll and a higher than normal incidence of radiation-induced disease and complications such as cancer and birth defects among both former residents of the region and the workers sent in to deal with the disaster.

Other Soviet republics and European countries faced the fallout from Chernobyl, but it was the authorities in Ukraine who were tasked with organizing evacuations to Kyiv while Moscow attempted to cover up the scope of the disaster.

Meanwhile, independent Ukraine has

been left to attend to the thousands of citizens who have chronic illnesses and disabilities as a result of the accident. The legacy of Chernobyl looms large in Ukraine's recent past and continues to define many people's memory of living in the Soviet era.

Memories of a painful past

This painful history of life under Soviet rule forms the backdrop to resentment in Ukraine today toward Russia. To many Ukrainians, these are not merely stories from textbooks, but central parts of people's lives – many Ukrainians are still living with the health and environmental consequences of Chernobyl, for instance.

The presence of Russian soldiers on Ukraine's soil serves as a reminder of past attempts by its neighbor to crush Ukrainian independence.

Why church conflict in Ukraine reflects historic Russian-Ukrainian tensions

By J. Eugene Clay, Associate
Professor of Religious Studies at
Arizona State University

Two different Orthodox churches claim to be the one true Ukrainian Orthodox Church for the Ukrainian people. The two churches offer strikingly different

visions of the relationship between the Ukrainian and the Russian peoples.

Two Orthodox churches

The religious history of Russia and Ukraine has fascinated me since I first visited Kyiv on a scholarly exchange in 1984. In my current research I contin-

ue to explore the history of Christianity and the special role of religion in Eurasian societies and politics.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea in 2014, relations between the two countries have been especially strained. These tensions are reflected in the very different approaches of the two churches toward Russia.

The older and larger church is the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate. According to Ukrainian government statistics, this church had over 12,000 parishes in 2018. A branch of the Russian Orthodox Church, it is under the spiritual authority of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. Patriarch Kirill and his predecessor, Patriarch Aleksii II, both have repeatedly emphasized the powerful bonds that link the peoples of Ukraine and Russia.

By contrast, the second, newer church, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, celebrates its independence from Moscow. With the blessing of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, a solemn council met in Kyiv in December 2018, created the new church, and elected its leader, Metropolitan Epifaniy. In January 2019, Patriarch

Bartholomew formally recognized the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as a separate, independent and equal member of the worldwide communion of Orthodox churches.

Completely self-governing, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine was the culmination of decades of efforts by Ukrainian believers who wanted their own national church, free from any foreign religious authority. As an expression of Ukrainian spiritual independence, this new self-governing Orthodox Church of Ukraine has been a challenge to Moscow. In Orthodox terminology, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine claims autocephaly.

“The Orthodox Church of Ukraine has over 7,000 parishes in 44 dioceses. It regards Russians and Ukrainians as two different peoples, each of whom deserves to have its own separate church.”

Unlike the Catholic Church, which has a single supreme spiritual leader in the pope, the worldwide Orthodox Church is divided into 14 universally recognized, independent, autocephalous or self-headed churches. Each autocephalous church has its own head, or kephale in Greek. Every autocephalous church holds to the same faith as its sister churches. Most autocephalies are national churches, such as the Russian, Romanian and Greek Orthodox churches. Now, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is claiming its place among the other autocephalous churches.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine has over 7,000 parishes in 44 dioceses. It regards Russians and Ukrainians as two different peoples, each of whom deserves to have its own separate church.

The independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine

The chief issue separating the Orthodox Church of Ukraine from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate is their relationship to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate has substantial autonomy in its internal affairs. Ultimately, however, it is subordinate to Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, who must formally confirm its leader. The church

emphasizes the unity that it enjoys with the Russian Orthodox believers.

By contrast, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is independent of any other religious body. For the church's proponents, this independence allows it to develop a unique Ukrainian expression of Christianity.

A common Orthodox Christian tradition

In both Russia and Ukraine, Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religious tradition. According to a 2015 Pew survey, 71% of Russians and 78% of Ukrainians identified themselves as Orthodox. Religious identity remains an important cultural factor in both nations.

Orthodox Christians in both Russia and

Ukraine trace their faith back to the conversion in A.D. 988 of the Grand Prince of Kyiv. Known as Vladimir by Russians and Volodymyr by Ukrainians, the pagan grand prince was baptized by missionaries from Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire. Kyiv became the most important religious center for



An Orthodox priest takes part in a rally in protest against an official visit of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople to Kyiv, Ukraine in August 2021. Anna Marchenko \ TASS via Getty Images

the East Slavs.

Destroyed in 1240 by the Mongols, Kyiv fell into decline even as its northern neighbor, Moscow, became increasingly powerful. By 1686, Russia had conquered eastern Ukraine and Kyiv. In that year, the patriarch of Constantinople formally transferred his spiritual authority over Ukraine to the patriarch of Moscow.

In the 20th century, a growing nationalist movement demanded Ukrainian independence for both the church and the state. Although Ukraine became an independent country in 1991, its only universally recognized national Orthodox Church remained subject to Moscow.

Some Ukrainian Orthodox Christians tried to create an autocephalous church in 1921, 1942 and 1992. These efforts largely failed. The churches that they formed were not recognized by the worldwide Orthodox community.

Ukrainian autocephaly

In April 2018 Petro Poroshenko, then the president of Ukraine, again tried to form an autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church. No fewer than three different churches claimed to be the true Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Poroshenko hoped to unite these rival bodies.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate was the largest

church, and it enjoyed the recognition of the worldwide Orthodox community. However, it was and is subject to the Patriarch of Moscow – an unacceptable status for many Ukrainians.

Two other churches, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Kyiv Patriarchate, had failed to gain recognition from other Orthodox churches.

Support for Ukrainian church

The ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, supported Poroshenko's project. As the leading bishop of the ancient capital of the Byzantine Empire, Bartholomew enjoys first place in honor among all of the heads of the Orthodox churches.



A prayer service of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, held on the hill of St. Volodymyr in the center of Kyiv, Ukraine, in July 2019. Maxym Marusenko/NurPhoto via Getty Images

Although Eastern Orthodox Christianity has no clear method of creating a new autocephalous church, Bartholomew argued that he had the authority to grant this status. Because Ukraine had originally received Christianity from the Byzantines, Constantinople was Kyiv's mother church.

In December 2018 a unification council formally dissolved the other branches of Orthodoxy in Ukraine and created the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. In January 2019, Bartholomew signed a formal decree, or tomos, proclaiming the new church autocephalous.

Support and rejection

So far, the Orthodox Church of Ukraine has received recognition from four other autocephalous Orthodox churches. The churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Greece and Cyprus have each welcomed the new church.

Three other autocephalous churches have explicitly rejected the new church. The Moscow Patriarchate even broke communion with Constantinople over its role in creating the new church.

Nadieszda Kizenko, a leading historian of Orthodoxy, has said that Bartholomew has shattered Orthodox unity to create a church of dubious legitimacy. By contrast, the noted theologian Cyril Hovorun greeted the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as a positive "demonstration of solidarity with ... the Ukrainian peo-

ple who suffered from the Russian aggression."

Two visions of history

Today, the two major rival expressions of Orthodoxy in Ukraine reflect two different historical visions of the relationship between Russians and Ukrainians. For the Moscow Patriarchate, Russians and Ukrainians are one people. Therefore a single church should unite them.

President Vladimir Putin of Russia has made this very argument in a recent essay. He characterizes the Orthodox Church of Ukraine as an attack on the "spiritual unity" of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples.

The Orthodox Church of Ukraine holds a very different view. In an interview with the British Broadcasting Corp., Metropolitan Epifaniy firmly rejected "Russian imperial traditions." As a separate people with a unique culture, Ukrainians require an independent church.

The future of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine is unclear. It enjoys the support of several of its sister churches, but faces fierce opposition from Moscow. For now, it remains a source of controversy between Russia and Ukraine.

A historian corrects misunderstandings about Ukrainian and Russian history

The first casualty of war, says historian Ronald Suny, is not just the truth. Often, he says, “it is what is left out.”

Russian President Vladimir Putin began a full-scale attack on Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022 and many in the world are now getting a crash course in the complex and intertwined history of those two nations and their peoples. Much of what the public is hearing, though, is jarring to historian Suny’s ears. That’s because some of it is incomplete, some of it is wrong, and some of it is obscured or refracted by the self-interest or the limited perspective of who is telling it. We asked Suny to respond to a number of popular historical assertions he’s heard recently.

By Ronald Suny, Professor of History and Political Science, at University of Michigan

Putin’s view of Russo-Ukrainian history has been widely criticized in the West. What do you think motivates his version of the history?

Putin believes that Ukrainians, Belarusians and Russians are one people, bound by shared history and culture. But he also is aware that they have become separate states recognized in international law and by Russian gov-

ernments as well. At the same time, he questions the historical formation of the modern Ukrainian state, which he says was the tragic product of decisions by former Russian leaders Vladimir Lenin, Josef Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev. He also questions the sovereignty and distinctive nation-ness of Ukraine. While he promotes national identity in Russia, he denigrates the growing sense of nation-ness in Ukraine.

Putin indicates that Ukraine by its very nature ought to be friendly, not hostile, to Russia. But he sees its current government as illegitimate, aggressively nationalist and even fascist. The condition for peaceful relations between states, he repeatedly says, is that they do not threaten the security of other states. Yet, as is clear from the invasion, he presents the greatest threat to Ukraine.

Putin sees Ukraine as an existential threat to Russia, believing that if it enters NATO, offensive weaponry will be placed closer to the Russian border, as already is being done in Romania and Poland. It’s possible to interpret Putin’s statements about the historical genesis of the Ukrainian state as self-serving history and a way of saying, “We creat-

ed them, we can take them back.” But I believe he may instead have been making a forceful appeal to Ukraine and the West to recognize the security interests of Russia and provide guarantees that there will be no further moves by NATO toward Russia and into Ukraine. Ironically, his recent actions have driven Ukrainians more tightly into the arms of the West.

The Western position is that the breakaway regions Putin recognized, Donetsk and Luhansk, are integral parts of Ukraine. Russia claims that the Donbass region, which includes these two provinces, is historically and rightfully part of Russia. What does history tell us?

During the Soviet period, these two provinces were officially part of Ukraine. When the USSR disintegrated, the former Soviet republic boundaries became, under international law, the legal boundaries of the post-Soviet states. Russia repeatedly recognized those borders, though reluctantly in the case of Crimea.

But when one raises the fraught question of what lands belong to what people, a whole can of worms is opened. The Donbass has historically been inhabited by Russians, Ukrainians, Jews and others. In Soviet and post-Soviet times, the cities were largely Russian ethnically and linguistically, while the villages were

Ukrainian. When in 2014 the Maidan revolution in Kyiv moved the country toward the West and Ukrainian nationalists threatened to limit the use of the Russian language in parts of Ukraine, rebels in the Donbas violently resisted the central government of Ukraine.

After months of fighting between Ukrainian forces and pro-Russian rebel forces in the Donbas in 2014, regular Russian forces moved in from Russia, and a war began that has lasted for the last eight years, with thousands killed and wounded.

Historical claims to land are always contested – think of Israelis and Palestinians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis – and they are countered by claims that the majority living on the land in the present takes precedence over historical claims from the past. Russia can claim Donbass with its own arguments based on ethnicity, but so can Ukrainians with arguments based on historical possession. Such arguments go nowhere and often lead, as can be seen today, to bloody conflict.

Why was Russia’s recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics as independent such a pivotal event in the conflict?

When Putin recognized the Donbass republics as independent states, he seriously escalated the conflict, which turned out to be the prelude to a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. That invasion

is a hard, harsh signal to the West that Russia will not back down and accept the further arming of and placing of weaponry in Ukraine, Poland and Romania. The Russian president has now led his country into a dangerous preventive war – a war based on the anxiety that sometime in the future his country will be attacked – the outcome of which is unpredictable.

A New York Times story on Putin's histories of Ukraine says "The newly created Soviet government under Lenin that drew so much of Mr. Putin's scorn on Monday would eventually crush the nascent independent Ukrainian state. During the Soviet era, the Ukrainian language was banished from schools and its culture was permitted to exist only as a cartoonish caricature of dancing Cossacks in puffy pants." Is this history of Soviet repression accurate?


Lenin's government won the 1918-1921 civil war in Ukraine and drove out foreign interventionists, thus consolidating and recognizing the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. But Putin is essentially correct that it was Lenin's policies that promoted Ukrainian statehood within the USSR, within a Soviet empire, officially granting it and other Soviet republics the constitutional right to secede from the Union without conditions. This right, Putin angrily asserts,

was a landmine that eventually blew up the Soviet Union. The Ukrainian language was never banned in the USSR and was taught in schools. In the 1920s, Ukrainian culture was actively promoted by the Leninist nationality policy.

But under Stalin, Ukrainian language and culture began to be powerfully undermined. This started in the early 1930s, when Ukrainian nationalists were repressed, the horrific "Death Famine" killed millions of Ukrainian peasants, and Russification, which is the process of promoting Russian language and culture, accelerated in the republic.

Within the strict bounds of the Soviet system, Ukraine, like many other nationalities in the USSR, became a modern nation, conscious of its history, literate in its language, and even in puffy pants permitted to celebrate its ethnic culture. But the contradictory policies of the Soviets in Ukraine both promoted a Ukrainian cultural nation while restricting its freedoms, sovereignty and expressions of nationalism.

History is both a contested and a subversive social science. It is used and misused by governments and pundits and propagandists. But for historians it is also a way to find out what happened in the past and why. As a search for truth, it becomes subversive of convenient and comfortable but inaccurate views of where we came from and where we might be going.



Small stones placed on the photos of victims of the 1941 massacre where the Nazi killed tens of thousands of Jews during WWII, in Kyiv, Ukraine. AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky

Putin's claim to rid Ukraine of Nazis is especially absurd given its history

By Jeffrey Veidlinger, Professor of History and Judaic Studies of University of Michigan

Russian President Vladimir Putin justifies his war on Ukraine as a peacekeeping mission, a “denazification” of the country.

In his address to the Russian people on Feb. 24, 2022, Putin said the purpose was to “protect people” who had been “subjected to bullying and genocide ... for the last eight years. And for this we will strive for the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine.”

The victims of the genocide claimed by Putin are Russian speakers; the Nazis he referenced are the elected representatives of the Ukrainian people. While

Ukraine's new language laws have upset some minorities, independent news media have uncovered no evidence of genocide against Russian speakers. In fact, as the historian Timothy Snyder has pointed out, Russian speakers have more freedom in Ukraine than they have in Russia, where Putin's authoritarian government routinely suppresses political dissent. And while far right groups have been growing in Ukraine, their electoral power is limited.

As the author of a recently published book on anti-Jewish violence in Ukraine and a historian of the Holocaust, I know why the accusations of Nazism and genocide have resonance in Ukraine. But I also understand that despite episodic violence, Ukrainian history offers

a model of tolerance and democratic government.

Ukraine's Jewish leadership

First, it is worth pointing out that Ukraine today is a vibrant, pluralistic democracy. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy won a five-year term in the 2019 presidential election with a landslide majority, defeating 39 candidates. His Servant of the People party then swept the parliamentary elections in July 2019, winning 254 seats in the 450-seat chamber, becoming the first majority government in the history of the modern Ukrainian state. Zelenskyy was well-known as a comedian and star of the popular sitcom "Servant of the People," from which his party's name was derived.

The fact that Zelenskyy is the grandson of a Holocaust survivor and was raised in what he told *The Times of Israel* was "an ordinary Soviet Jewish family" was barely noted during the election. "Nobody cares. Nobody asks about it," he remarked in the same interview. Nor did Ukrainians seem to mind that the prime minister at the time of Zelenskyy's election, Volodymyr Groysman, also had a Jewish background.

For a brief period of time, Ukraine was the only state outside of Israel to have both a Jewish head of state and a Jewish head of government. "How could I be a Nazi?" Zelenskyy asked in a public address after the Russian invasion began. "Explain it to my grandfather."



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy speaking at a news conference. AP Photo/Efrem Lukatsky

The pogroms against Jews

Sporadic episodes of violence against Jews, or pogroms, began well before the Holocaust. In 1881, for instance, after the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, ordinary churchgoers, laborers, railway workers and soldiers attacked Jewish-owned shops, mills and canteens, resulting in the

deaths of dozens of Jews in what was then considered the south of Russia, but is now Ukraine. During another wave of violence following the Revolution of 1905, workers, peasants and soldiers, egged on by Russian right-wing paramilitary groups, murdered 5,000 Jews in the region.

During the unrest that followed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, about 100,000 Jews died as a result of attacks perpetrated against them by soldiers fighting to restore a united Russia, as well as by the armies of the newly established Ukrainian and Polish states.

Finally, during the Second World War, German soldiers murdered 1.5 million Jews in the areas that are now Ukraine, often with the collaboration of Ukrainian militias established in the diaspora and with the help of local auxiliary police. The role of ethnic Ukrainians in the Holocaust remains contentious in Ukraine today, where nationalist heroes who collaborated with the Nazis continue to be honored.

Yet at the same time, millions of non-Jewish Ukrainians lost their lives under the

Nazis or were exploited as slave laborers. The occupiers treated Ukrainian lands as little more than Lebensraum, living space for ethnic Germans.

A pluralistic state

Forgotten in this history is the period between 1917 and 1919 when an independent Ukrainian state offered a different model of multiculturalism and pluralism. The Ukrainian state that declared its independence from Russia in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolutions, envisioned a Ukraine for all ethnicities and religious groups living within its territory.

One of its first acts was passing the Law on National Autonomy in January 1918, which allowed each of the major ethnic minority groups – Russians, Jews, and Poles – broad autonomous rights, in-

cluding the right to use their own language.

The cabinet included a Secretariat of National Affairs, with vice-secretariats for Russians, Jews and Poles, and, briefly in 1919, even a Ministry of Jewish Affairs. The legislative body, as well, included proportional representation from each of the national minorities. The

“Putin’s selective telling of the past exaggerates the legacy of Nazism in Ukraine while ignoring the state’s historic struggle for pluralism and democracy. There is a good reason for this: he fears democracy more than he fears Nazism.”

state issued declarations and currency printed in four languages: Ukrainian, Russian, Polish and Yiddish.

However, this state, hailed by Jews around the world as a model for the new nation states then emerging in eastern and central Europe, never managed to hold the capital for more than a few months at a time. By April of 1919, the government was being run from a moving train and could barely claim more land than the tracks beneath it.

From its inauguration in January 1918, Ukraine found itself enmeshed in a bloody war on multiple fronts. The Soviet Red Army attacked it from the east, while Moscow sought to ignite Bolshevik revolutions throughout Ukraine.

A Russian White Army led by officers from the old tsarist army attacked from the south, hoping to reestablish a version of the Russian Empire. From the west, the army of the newly established Polish Republic attacked with the goal of restoring historic Poland's borders.

At the same time, a range of insurgent fighters and anarchists formed militias to seize land for themselves. In the midst of this chaos, the dream of a pluralistic state devolved into inter-ethnic violence.

In March 1921, the war ended with the Treaty of Riga, incorporating much of the territory claimed by the independent

Ukrainian state into the Soviet Union.

Putin's selective telling of the past exaggerates the legacy of Nazism in Ukraine while ignoring the state's historic struggle for pluralism and democracy. There is a good reason for this: he fears democracy more than he fears Nazism.

Get our newsletters
Read news coverage
that provides vital
context

Go to:
bitly.com/tcus-nls

