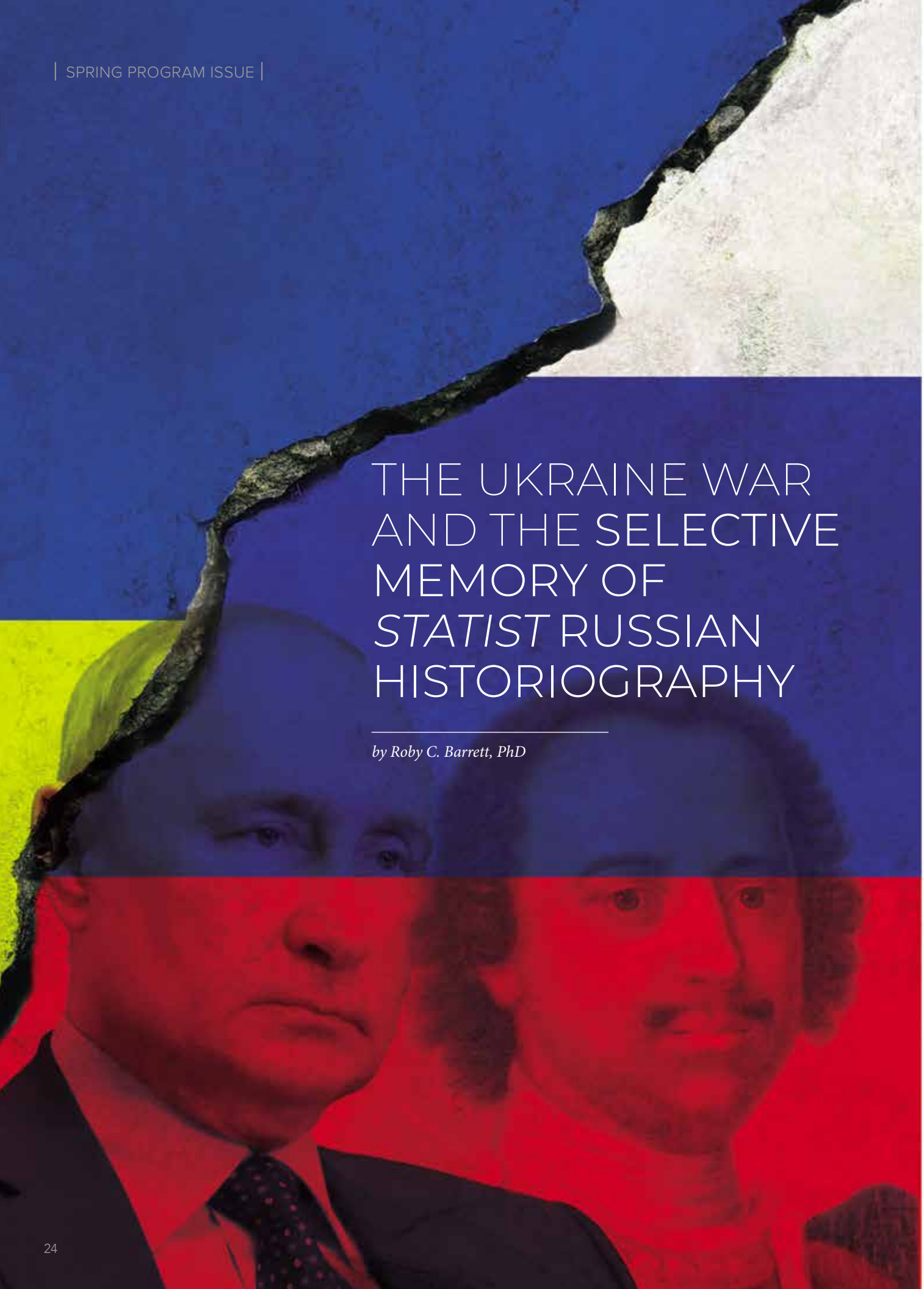

THE UKRAINE WAR AND THE SELECTIVE MEMORY OF *STATIST* RUSSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

by Roby C. Barrett, PhD

In February 2023, Russia invaded Ukraine and shocked much of Western World. Conventional wisdom in Europe had postulated that given Russia's growing economic power, an attempt by Putin's Russia to absorb Ukraine by force was not only unthinkable but also irrational and unnecessary—so much for convention and rationality.

In the fall of 2022, US and British intelligence predicted a full-scale Russian invasion, but a more nuanced strategic understanding of the Russian capabilities and likely tactical outcomes was blatantly off base. Senior US military officials briefed Congress, stating that Kyiv would fall in three days, and the Ukrainian government would collapse in three weeks. The Pentagon focused on supporting a Ukrainian guerilla war that would follow the Ukrainian collapse. They were shockingly misinformed about both the actual Russian military capabilities and the Ukrainian determination to resist, despite billions spent on analyzing just that.[1]

Following the invasion, it became apparent that hubris and misconceptions about Russia's global clout blinded Vladimir Putin to the politics of an invasion and Russia's lack of military capability. In addition, the Kremlin leadership also misjudged the level of latent hostility with which Ukrainians viewed Moscow's attempts at political, economic, and military intimidation. In point of fact, the West should not have been surprised—either that Putin would launch an overt territorial grab or that Russian ethnocentric ignorance would cloud their judgment. This was not the first time, nor will it be the last, that Russia's imagined self-image and flawed perceptions of reality led to catastrophic decision making with disastrous consequences.

The questions now should be: Why does Russia repeat these mistakes? How could the leadership of a "modern" state be so misinformed? Is there some socio-cultural explanation for what the West views as irrational behavior? The Russian historical context and more importantly how state-sponsored Russian historians have presented that context created a fractured prism through which Russian leaders and, to a certain extent, Russians in general, view themselves.

As a general rule, perceptions of historical context provide the background in which political elites perceive their identity and make decisions. These perceptions, which ideally would reflect a nuanced, broad-based understanding of history, instead can be simplistic and narrow or totally flawed and irrational. In the case of Russia, they have been historically fundamental to the national self-image and shockingly influential regarding even contemporary policy. Much of the current situation reflects the distorted self-percipience that informs Russian nationalism and Russian governments—it is not a new phenomenon.[2] In Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, he argues that national identity is fundamentally an artificial reality that emerged in the 19th century to support state unity. "Nationalism is the pathology of modern developmental history…and largely incurable." Anderson points out that every "Nationalism" writ large also contains "sub-nationalisms," each of which view their own nationalist self-determination as a right or even destiny. "Nationalism" writ large and "sub-nationalisms" are usually in conflict.[3] Of course to be more precise, groups classified as "sub-nationalisms" do not see themselves as

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such, but rather view themselves as "subsumed nationalisms"—there is a difference. In the post-1789 world, "no modern state could afford to be without it (nationalism)," and the "hapless fumbling" of the Romanovs proved what could happen when it collapsed. "The myth of national brotherhood and ethnic unity mattered."[4] In the 20th century, pressure from ethnic and racial subgroups and external adversaries undermined the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, while the Russian state theoretically embraced an ideology that espoused socialist brotherhood and the façade of a post-nationalistic state. Nevertheless, the fundamental ideas that underpinned the Soviet state were little different from those of Imperial Russian (or for that matter, the post-Soviet Russian) political and military elites. The themes and *statist* theories of 19th century Russian historical writing—the historiography of Imperial Russia—carried forward through the Empire and Soviet eras into the contemporary Russian state.

What is historiography, and how does 19th-century Russian historiography pervade contemporary Russian policies, including Putin's decision to invade Ukraine? This discussion focuses on three Russian historians, pillars of Russian historical writing, whose works established history as an academic discipline in the 19th century and transitioned it into the 20th and 21st centuries. In contemporary Russia, Putin and his supporters have consistently attempted to justify their policies in terms of interpretations put forward by *statist* historians, of which Sergei Mikhailovich Solovyev (1820–1879), Vasily Osipovich Klyuchevsky (1841–1911), and Sergei Fyodorovich Platonov (1860–1933) are preeminent examples. The interpretation of history has consequences, particularly when those utilizing it have an unsophisticated grasp of the essentials or a distorted view of the historical context; it is quite simply asking for trouble. In Russia, "history isn't dead; it's not even past."[5]

Published between 1851 and 1879, Solovyev's *History of Russia from Earliest Times*, a monumental work of 29 volumes, was the first truly comprehensive work tackling the entire scope of Russian history.[6] He graduated from Moscow University in 1842 and joined the history faculty there in 1845 during the reign of Nicholas I (r. 1825–1855) who was arguably the one of the most repressive czars in Russian history. The idea that Russia's special role as the protector of traditional monarchy and Christian Orthodoxy from the revolutionary movements in the West and the threat of Asian influences in the East consumed the Czar, who backed up his rule with the Third Department, the first Russian internal security service. In this regimented system, admission to the university, a teaching position, and the ability to publish were all dependent on adherence to interpretations of Russian history found acceptable under the mantle of "Official Nationality."[7] The glorification of the state, and particularly the Rurik and Romanov dynasties' roles in the "gathering of Russian lands", and the idea of Russia's special place as the protector of Christianity and the bulwark against Asian domination and revolutionary Western ideas and movements, meshed perfectly with the Czar's reactionary regime. Solovyev's writings centered on the idea that Russia's historical contribution and mission was the expansion and consolidation of control over other Slavic and non-Slavic peoples and its special role as the arbiter of political orthodoxy and Christianity—albeit state-controlled Orthodox Christianity. He wrote extensively on the Time of

Troubles (1598–1613), in which political instability brought social, economic, and religious chaos that threatened Russian identity, and on Peter the Great's contribution to modernization and the expansion of the Russian state. Solovyev believed that Peter the Great dragged Russia into the modern era by force of will—the great man theory of history. (The fact that Solovyev served as the tutor to Nicholas I's second son, the future reactionary Czar Alexander III, underscored his acceptability to the regime.) These ideas became the basis for the official state ideology through the 19th century and into the 20th, including becoming the *de facto* mantra of the Soviet state, with Marxist-Leninist theory replacing Russian Orthodoxy as the ideological component of Soviet policy.

Solovyev's student, Vasily O. Klyuchevsky, emerged as the most prominent Russian historian of the late 19th century. His collected works *Sochineniya* were republished during the Soviet era in an eight-volume set.[8] Classified as a "populist" historian, Klyuchevsky viewed great men more as a byproduct of social movements and economic change rather than as a singular driving political force. He viewed the role of Peter the Great in terms of the need to supplant the ineffective, corrupt ruling Boyar class. He argued that prior to the Mongol invasion, the Eastern Slavs represented a single group, but after the 13th century, the "Great Russian" and the "Little Russian" (Ukrainian) identities emerged, an aberration that had been corrected by the "gathering of Russian lands" in the 18th century.[9] These interpretations are *statist* views with the acceptance that it is social change—the people—that brings about the conditions from which the leaders of Russian history emerge. For example, Klyuchevsky viewed Peter the Great's administrative reforms as one of his greatest achievements, but he argued that those were brought about by social and governmental changes that necessitated increased tax revenues.[10] Klyuchevsky took over Solovyev's chair in history at Moscow University in 1879, where he taught for the next 30 years during the repressive reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas I and contributed, inadvertently, to the rise of semi-mystical Slavophile philosophies. His views on the "gathering of Russian lands," the special role of the Russian people, the unity of the Eastern Slavs under the "Great Russians", and Russian social and economic dynamics bringing about the emergence of great leaders like Peter the Great fell in line with sanctioned state policy. Klyuchevsky would flirt with democratic ideas and movements but only in the era between the 1905 Revolution and his death in 1911.

Sergei M. Platonov studied and taught at the University of St. Petersburg, and his career survived the Revolution, extending into the Soviet era; hence, there are those who would set his interpretations of Russian history apart from those of Solovyev and Kluchevsky. The core of his work—the interpretations of the Oprichnina, the Time of Troubles, and Peter the Great—despite nuanced differences, consistently follow interpretations that were acceptable within official Russian *statist* history. Platonov explains as rational everything from the "gathering of Russian lands" to the necessity of autocratic leadership and the use of terror. His career spanned the revolutionary period, and his works, *The Time of Troubles* and the *Oprichnina* during the reign of Ivan IV (the Terrible), became classics. Platonov argued that the terror of the Oprichniki did not reflect bouts of insanity but rather were "rational and deliberate" acts supporting "reform."[11] Despite his refusal to embrace Marxist interpretations, he remained in relatively good stead with the Bolshevik regime before being caught in the early Stalinist purges of the 1930s and forced into internal exile. That said, his interpretations of historical Russian state development and the threat of chaos and disorder fed the idea of Russia as requiring an authoritarian political system that was acceptable to Soviet authorities. Given his views on autocracy and the use of terror, it was neither surprising that the Soviets rehabilitated Platonov's writing nor difficult to see the relationship between Platonov's ideas and the policies of contemporary Russia.[12]

Since the early 19th century, Russian historiography has been a fundamental product of

state control and has fed historical and nationalistic narratives that were acceptable to the state. This approach promulgated several simplistic, ethno- and dynastic-centric narratives. Perhaps first and foremost, they elevated the importance of "Great Russians" over "lesser" Slavic groups in the formation of the Russian state. *Statist* historiography viewed non-Slavic minorities as groups to be ruled and enlightened by their "Great Russian" betters. Closely coupled with this notion of socio-cultural and even racial superiority is the assertion that great autocratic leaders, like Ivan IV and Peter the Great, had a special mission, an almost mystical calling backed by Russian Orthodoxy as an ideology to physically expand the Russian state and exert control over the "lesser" subsumed nationalities.

In contemporary Russia, the official view—i.e., Putin's view—is that the collapse of the Soviet Union was "the greatest disaster of the 20th century," and despite the enormity of his crimes, Stalin was a great authoritarian leader; but there is a caveat. Marxist-Leninist ideology, in theory at least, erased the distinctions between Great Russians and other groups. This opened the door to separate socialist republics which *de facto* recognized latent subsumed nationalisms in the USSR. Stalin himself and his most trusted security officials were Georgians, who could hardly take the position that they were culturally and racially inferior to the Great Russians. The current Russian nationalists and Putin see this as a flaw in Communist ideology because it fed Ukrainian nationalism, and that of other subsumed nationalisms, at the expense of Great Russian preeminence. Soviet authoritarianism and other dubious "accomplishments" of Stalin's rule are acceptable, but the results of racial and ethnic leveling are not. The recognition of separate identities such as Belorussian, Ukrainian, and others was a historical mistake; it did not fit the 19th-century Russian *statist* narrative nor that of Putin and his ethno-centric Great Russian nationalists.

Despite this nuanced contradiction, the pervasive themes of 19th-century *statist* historical interpretation informed two centuries of Russian leaders through a controlled educational system; and these views, of course, filtered down to the population at large. Institutionally, within the Russian political system—Imperial, Soviet, or Putinist—the 'official' version of history has precluded the inclusion of interpretations that challenge or contradict the *statist*, authoritarian, and quasi-Messianic Russian narrative. In Russia, a healthy, meaningful debate about history is simply not possible because it threatens the legitimacy of the rulers.

This lack of intellectual freedom and debate brings us to Vladimir Putin and the contemporary Russian reaction to stagnation and instability since 1990, culminating in the Ukraine War. Two parallel historical issues are at work here. The first is the "imagined" past of official Russian *statist* history, and the second is a more objective view of the Russian historical context—the imperatives and pitfalls of authoritarian rule in the face of the constant threat of instability and chaos. Since 2023, the principal focus has been on Vladimir Putin as a leader from a dysfunctional, disadvantaged Leningrad background, and a product of an educational system that indoctrinated him with the unquestioned maxims of the imagined Russian past. His acceptance into the Second Directorate of the KGB might have been the biggest opportunity of his life, but intellectually, it likely served to reinforce narrow views of Russia's past. He is a classic example of the "Hedgehog" in Russian political leadership, knowing 'one thing well.' In the post-Soviet era, after working for the mayor of St. Petersburg, he managed to attach himself to Boris Yeltsin, who succeeded Mikhail Gorbachev as president. Putin's meteoric rise resulted from the fortuitous combination of opportunity and luck, but his personal interpretation of that rise flows directly from the systematic propagation of the *statist* interpretation of "official" Russian history. There is a straight line from Solovyev through the Soviet era to the truncated Russia of today.

Putin's speeches, interviews, and his so-called written manifesto echo the 19th-century themes.[13] He believes in "the gathering of Russian lands," which were in fact not Russian at all, and embraces

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the concept of the "Great Russians" and the "Little Russians"—the Ukrainians. He argues that the Ukrainian identity is artificial. His Slavophile-like obsession with the "moral superiority" of the Russian spirit and/or Russian Orthodoxy and the decadence of the West echoes Nicholas I and "Official Nationality." He likens Russia of the 1990s and the dominance of the oligarchs to *Boyar* nobility during the early 17th century's Time of Troubles, borrowing the arguments of *statist* historiography. Fear of and revulsion toward Western liberalism mirrors that of Nicholas I, and his obsession with the victimization of Russia at the hands of the West is borrowed directly from official 19th-century Russian doctrine. The glorification of Peter the Great and his self-identification with Michael Romanov, who saved Russia from the chaos of the Time of Troubles, are foundational to his own self-image and in lock-step with the *statist* histories of the 19th century.[14] In fairness to Vladimir Putin, his superficial interpretation of Russian history and grandiose self-image are more manifestations of the Russian environment as opposed to his personal hubris or accomplishments. Putin did not invent a narrow interpretation of Russia's historical context; his thinking is merely a product of it. Undoubtedly, there were other Vladimir X's out there who would have done as well.[15] Authoritarian leaders often attach themselves to simplistic, useful narratives and surround themselves with sycophantic admirers and underlings. Russia does not have a corner on this market; however, historically, in authoritarian Russia, no one comments on the emperor's lack of clothes and survives.

Had the Russian political tradition included a more balanced approach to 'official' history, another Russian leader might have considered that the price of Petrine stability was a system of autocratic rule in which incompetent and unstable rulers created extended periods of political instability. Historically, Russian leaders have nurtured a corps of minions who support ruinous policies for the sake of personal survival. This ultimately led to the destruction of the Romanov dynasty in 1917. A different historical narrative might have argued that the greatest "gatherer of Russian lands" was not Russian at all but rather Catherine the Great, a German princess. Had the historians not been creatures of the state, the official history might have included an analysis of Nicholas I's injudicious obsession with his role as protector of Orthodoxy—which if he could have forborne, would have allowed Russia to avoid the ruinous Crimean War of 1853–1856 that exposed Russia's backwardness and lack of military capability, a humiliation that further isolated Russia from the mainstream of Western development.

The parallels to the delusional decisions that led to the contemporary war in Ukraine are stunning. A more introspective understanding of the problems created by Nicholas I's rule and that of his successors, particularly Alexander III and Nicholas II, might have led to a more nuanced approach to the exercise of power and a cautionary tale about imagined power and influence. A more sophisticated interpretation might have resulted in a better understanding of the relationship between the Ukraine and Russia and, for that matter, the Russian Empire or Soviet Union and their component republics in central Asia, with the subsequent realization that invading Ukraine might not be a walk-over.

Whether a result of the Imperial system, the Soviet structure, or the contemporary state, the imagined Russian past coupled with unchecked, unaccountable rulers creates the conditions for periodic disasters that undermine Russia's ability

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to take a sustained positive role in the global community. In Russia, a grievance-driven leadership fueled by hubris, paranoia, and deep-seated insecurity complicated by political and economic incompetence and social dysfunction are givens. The decision to invade Ukraine is a prime example. Russia had Western Europe dependent on cheap natural gas. Putin's popularity at home and his image abroad had soared. The US was convinced that Russia's military was the second most powerful in the World—a near peer. Putin had the economic resources to play the long game and dominate his neighbors. NATO membership for Finland and Sweden was virtually unthinkable. The Russian economy reaped the benefits of increased Western investment, and key technological sectors were growing. Why risk throwing it all away? The answer is straightforward—the imagined Russian historical context created by officially approved history contributed to a distorted perception of reality. Autocratic power and a limited understanding of inherent weaknesses of the Russian system and Putin's own limited grasp of global dynamics brought a catastrophic mistake.

If this misunderstanding of the Russian historical context contributed significantly to Russia's current strategic fiasco, what does a more objective appraisal of Russian history tell us about the future? The past informs the present, providing the basis for predictions about the future. In the case of Russia, this does not bode well for the ability of the West, or perhaps for anyone else, to maintain a long-term constructive relationship. The Russian leadership simply cannot help itself, and any improvement merely awaits the arrival of the next autocrat. Perhaps more importantly, the Russian people, the *narod*, have proven over the centuries that they cannot help themselves either. Whether it was the incompetence of the Crimean War, the embarrassment of the Russo-Japanese conflict, the slaughter of World War I, or the catastrophic experience of World War II, Russian leaders have proven themselves adept at making ill-informed, irrational decisions, and, from a historical perspective, the Russian people as a whole have proven themselves almost incapable of doing more than following orders and marching to the slaughter. Russia has bought into the distorted narrative of its official history and combined it with unrestrained autocracy, a malignant victimization complex, and xenophobic paranoia—it simply cannot escape its imagined past. For the West, finding a rationale for pursuing relations with Russia on anything other than a hard-nosed transactional basis is preposterous.[16]

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under Kennedy and Eisenhower *(2007),* The Gulf and the Struggle for Hegemony: Arabs, Iranians, and West in Conflict *(2016), the nine-article "Series on Gulf Security" for* Manara Magazine *at Cambridge University (2020–2022), and nine monographs for US Special Operations Command. He has held research grants and fellowships at the Ludwig-Maxilians University of Munich, Oxford University, and the Eisenhower Foundation. He has a Ph.D. in Middle East and South Asian history from the University of Texas at Austin.*

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[1] Phillips Payson O'Brien, "How Defense Experts Got Ukraine Wrong." *Atlantic* (September 27, 2024): https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/09/how-defense-experts-got-ukraine-wrong/680045). This article discusses another issue that plagues the US military, namely the weakness of their organic capabilities in intelligence analysis. In February 2023, General Miley found himself relying on "experts" with inbred attitudes and lacking any in-depth contextual perspective on Russian capabilities, while his organic military capabilities were weak. It was hardly surprising that General Miley's report to Congress was off base. This resulted in an over reliance on technical collection that could count vehicles, amass signals intelligence, and predict that an invasion was coming; but, beyond that, the US military understanding of real Russian capabilities was woefully inaccurate.

[2] Anthony J. Constantini, "The Russian World Gorbachev, Putin, and Russian Nationalism," *Foreign Affairs* (May 2024): https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2024/05/reforging-the-russian-world-gorbachev-putin-and-russian-nationalism/.

[3] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Press, 2006): 3–5.

[4] William H. McNeill, *Poly-Ethnicity and National Unity in World History* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1986): 33–56.

[5] William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*.

[6] S.M. Solovyev, *Istoriia Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*. (Moscow: Izd. Akademiia Nauk, 1961). This is a Soviet-era consolidation of Solovyev's 29-volume work into 16 volumes, underscoring the acceptability of his historical arguments in the Soviet era.

[7] Nicholas Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and the Official Nationality in Russia*, 1825–1855 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967): 73, 124–125. The policy of Nicholas I's regime became known as "Official Nationality." The state was to be regimented on the basis of "Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality." In this system the term "Russian people" acquired a "supreme metaphysical" and "mystical importance" that promoted the idea that the "people" owed total "devotion and obedience" to the Orthodox church and the ruler.

[8] V.O. Klyuchevsky, *Sochineniya* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izd., 1958).

[9] Klaus-Detlev Grothusen in *Die Historische Rechtsschule Russlands* (Giessen: Wilhelm Schmitz Verlag, 1962), 59–61) offered an elaboration on Klyuchevsky's idea. "The great man is a monument of the people and the more meaningful the people, the greater their historical personalities."

[10] Klyuchevsky, *Peter the Great*, translated by Liliana Archibald (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), 181–191.

[11] Sergei M. Platonov, *Ivan the Terrible*, translated by Joseph L. Wieczynski and Richard Hallie (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic Press, 1923): xviii, xviii–xxiii, 10, 16. While extolling the importance of the ruler, Platonov rejects interpretations of Ivan IV's insanity, including the killing of his son, an act that effectively ended the Rurik line, arguing that such outbursts "do not constitute his historical significance" and were "personal weaknesses."

[12] Brian Whitmore, "The New Oprichniki," *Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty* (June 8, 2017): https://www. rferl.org/a/the-new-oprichniki/28536410.html.

[13] Peter Dickinson, "Putin's new Ukraine essay reveals imperialistic ambitions," *The Atlantic Council* (July 15, 2021): https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-new-ukraine-essay-reflects-imperial-ambitions/.

[14] Sarah Rainsford, "Putin and Peter the Great: Russian leader likens himself to 18th century Czar," BBC (10 June 2022): https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61767191.

[15] An early opponent of Putin in the 2000 presidential election who became his advisor and political ally, Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, was a highly sophisticated politician, diplomat, and KGB chief who would have likely avoided the mistakes that led to the Ukrainian War and at the same time achieved Russian goals through a more sophisticated approach using economic leverage. Primakov as a successor to Yeltsin was problematic. He was half-Jewish and born in the Ukraine. Given "Great Russian" prejudices, it is hardly surprising that both viewed Primakov's popularity and competency as a threat. For example, Yeltsin authorized Putin, who had risen to head the FSB, to bug Primakov's office and phones and then refused to let Primakov remove him from the FSB. "Obituary: Yevgeny Primakov," The Guardian (June 28, 2015): https://www.theguardian. com/world/2015/jun/28/yevgeny-primakov. Robert O. Freedman, "Russian and the Middle East: The Primakov Era," Middle East Review of International Affairs (May 1998): https://ciaotest. cc.columbia. edu/olj/meria/meria598_freedman.html.

[16] Beth Daley, "Ukraine War: What is the Budapest Memorandum and Why Has the Russian Invasion Torn it Up?" *The Conversation* (March 2, 2022): https://theconversation. com/ukraine-war-what-is-the-budapest-memorandum-and-why-has-russias-invasion-torn-it-up-178184. On point, ask the Ukrainians about the 1994 Budapest agreement in which Russia recognized their territorial integrity in return for giving up Kyiv's nuclear arsenal, obviously a big mistake on Kyiv's part, and a black mark on the US and other Western powers who encouraged it.