Introduction

Russia's War on Ukraine – The Four Roots of Putin's Invasion

After 1991, an orientalist image of central-eastern Europe and Eurasia among scholars and political elites in the West persisted, especially towards countries that emerged from the former Soviet Union. Orientalist prejudices were manifested in descriptions of Eurasia as a region where ethnic nationalism, separatism, and extremism was widespread. While Ukrainians demanded to be classified as Europeans, they were relegated to Eurasia and viewed through a Russian lens until the 2003–2004 Orange Revolution, although we believe it took until Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion for the West to view Ukraine as a state fully independent of Russia.

Hans Kohn's framework for understanding 'good civic nationalism' to exist in the West and 'bad ethnic nationalism' to be predominant in the East continued to influence this orientalist paradigm (for a contemporary example see Onuch and Hale, 2022; for critiques see Kuzio, 2002; Shevel, 2024). This prevented an understanding of nation and state building processes in Ukraine and the roots of problem areas in Ukrainian-Russian relations after 1991. Meanwhile, scholars and policymakers exaggerated regional and linguistic divisions in Ukraine, leading most to believe Russian-speakers in southeastern Ukraine would sympathise with a Russian invasion force (Kuzyk, 2019).

Jakob Hauter (2023, p. 29) writes that most of the Western academic writing in 2014–2021 on the causes of the conflict in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine was closer to the Russian 'civil war narrative' than the Ukrainian 'invasion narrative'. Dominique Arel and Jesse Driscoll (2023) were late in defining the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014–2021 as a 'civil war' in their study published after the full-scale invasion (for a different perspective see Hauter, 2023; Larys, 2025). Hauter (2023, p. 31) argued that a 'civil war narrative' is unable to explain the strength and success of Ukrainian resistance and resilience after 2022 if we are supposed to believe Ukrainians were unable to contain a 'civil war' in the preceding eight years. Ukraine's resistance and resilience after 2022 is only explainable by viewing it as a

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response to the acceleration of an existing Russian-Ukrainian war that became full-scale. Hauter (2023) analyses six 'critical junctures' between April and August 2014 and finds Russian intervention in four of them with the two where there is no evidence of Russian intervention experiencing the least amount of violence. Greater violence and evolution of the conflict into a Russian-Ukrainian war from 2014 was a product of Russian escalation at every stage of these six 'critical junctures'.

Western scholars, think tank experts and policymakers who had bought into the 'civil war narrative' viewed Ukraine as a weak and divided state. Western leaders vetoed the supply of military assistance to Ukraine while leading US academics and think tank experts on Russia and Eurasia opposed the sending of military aid to Ukraine.[1] Western policymakers treated the DNR (Donetsk Peoples Republic) and LNR (Luhansk Peoples Republic) as 'independent actors' (rather than Russian proxy entities) and Russia as not a party to the conflict and a peace mediator (Hauter, 2023). The West continued business as usual with Russia (e.g., building Nord Stream II) and imposed weak sanctions against Russia. It is not surprising that in 2022, there was therefore general agreement among Western scholars, think tank experts and policymakers that Ukraine would be quickly defeated and occupied by Russia (Cohen and O'Brien, 2024). In other words, they held similar views to the Kremlin's stereotypes of Ukraine that propelled belief in the 'special military operation' quickly defeating and conquering Ukraine.

The Western orientalist paradigm would look to Russia playing the role of an actor that resolved 'deep-seated problems' in central-eastern Europe, but especially in Eurasia. A good example of this Western approach was President George H. W. Bush's infamous 'chicken Kyiv' speech to the Ukrainian parliament on 1 August 1991 warning about the dangers of 'suicidal nationalism'. In the post-Soviet era, the West did not challenge the Kremlin's hegemonic claim to a Eurasian sphere of influence or seek to resolve frozen conflicts manufactured by Russia in Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan.

In many ways the persistence of a Western orientalist paradigm is unsurprising. After 1991, most Soviet scholars of the Soviet Union and Kremlinologists became Russianists who nevertheless claimed an expertise on Ukraine and all of Eurasia. Most Western journalists continue to write from Moscow about the countries which emerged from the Soviet Union. It is therefore not surprising that research on countries that emerged from the Soviet Union remains dominated by Russianists who,

[1] www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2015-02-24/should-united-states-arm-ukraine

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in the main use primary sources from Russia and thereby practise what we call academic orientalism (Kuzio, 2020, pp. 66–81). Social processes taking place in the non-Russian successor states of the former Soviet Union remained on the margin of 'mainstream' research until decades after 1991. This was especially true in the case of Ukraine until the Orange and 2013–2014 Euromaidan Revolutions, and in many cases even later. For example, Western art galleries and museums ignored requests to change the description of exhibited painters from Ukraine to 'Ukrainian', rather than 'Russian', until after the 2022 full-scale invasion.[2] Ukrainians were only viewed as European by Brussels after Russia's full-scale invasion when the EU offered Ukraine candidate status in June 2022.

Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 produced some good studies but also several highly Russophile and even pro-Vladimir Putin studies (for a survey see Kuzio, 2023, pp. 87–122). The 2022 full-scale invasion led to a second round of books by scholars without expertise on Ukraine, Russian-Ukrainian relations and the roots of Russian imperial nationalist and chauvinistic attitudes towards Ukraine and Ukrainians. Western scholars barely noticed the de-humanisation of Ukrainians in the Russian media and official discourse and dissemination of White Russian émigré thinking and writing, which had been taking place for nearly two decades before Russia's full-scale invasion. Some scholars have provided original studies of the full-scale war and the roots of Russia's military aggression and genocidal goals (D'Anieri, 2019, 2023; Kuzio, 2022; Koval and Tereshchenko, 2023; Hauter, 2023; Popova and Shevel, 2024; Garner, 2023; McGlynn, 2023; Plokhy, 2023; Karatnycky, 2024; Davis, 2024; Ash, 2024; Finkel, 2024; Larys, 2025). Nevertheless, scholars of Russia writing about the war have continued to practice academic orientalism (for two examples see Arutunyan, 2022; Ramani, 2023) or have written about the full-scale war using a Russophile lens or without a deep understanding of the roots of the war (for an overview see Kuzio, 2023).

There has been an absence of scholarly study of White Russian émigrés in Western academic journals and books. The one scholar who has studied the rehabilitation of White Russian émigrés is Marlene Laruelle (see Laruelle and Karnysheva, 2022). Laruelle and Margarita Karnysheva (2002, p. 98), though, have downplayed their influence on Putin's regime, writing that the influence of Ivan Ilyin on the Kremlin's

[2] See the interview with Creative Director of the Ukrainian Institute (https://ui.org.ua/) Tetyana Filevska and co-founder of the civic organisation Ukraine WOW (https://ukrainewow.org/) Julia Solovey on 'Ukraine: The Latest,' *The Telegraph*, 21 February 2025. www.youtube.com/watch?v=6glrov7Z5eU

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ideology 'still awaits verification' while those claiming Putin's vision of Russia is based on Ilyin have yet to show 'any direct connection between the two [which] remain to be traced'. Putin is 'much more cautious' towards the rehabilitation of White Russian emigres, Ilyin and General Anton Denikin, and they therefore do not 'inspire the Kremlin's vision of Russia' (Laruelle, 2025, pp. 8, 37).

Scholars are therefore faced with a conundrum as to the paucity of academic research about two important 'roots' of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The first is the transition from the Soviet recognition of the existence of a separate Ukrainian people to the Tsarist and White Russian émigré denial Ukrainians exist and claim Ukrainians and Russians are 'one people' and Ukrainians are the Little Russian branch of a pan-Russian people (*obshcherusskij narod*). Scholars of Russian nationalism, including Laruelle (2022, 2025), do not provide an explanation as to when this happened and why this took place. The second is when and why did Putin's obsession with Ukraine and Ukrainians radicalise and lead to his decision to launch a 'special military operation' on 24 February 2022?

The deterioration in Ukrainian-Russian relations came about because of two interrelated factors taking place at a similar time after 2012–2014. Firstly, because of Ukrainian nation-building policies under Presidents Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelenskyy (2019) and the marginalisation of pro-Russian political forces. This important transformation of Ukrainian identity has largely been ignored in studies of Russian nationalism and ideology in Putin's regime; Laruelle (2025, pp. 67–68, 106) provides only brief comments on the receipt of autocephaly for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, forbidding of Soviet symbols, Ukrainian language becoming 'compulsory' and the 'banning' of pro-Russian TV channels. In fact, Ukraine adopted these, and many more identity policies after 2014 that angered Moscow, which we discuss in Chapters 6 and 7. Secondly, these developments in Ukraine were taking place at the same time as imperial nationalism was growing in Russia after Putin returned to the presidency in 2012.

We therefore argue that White Russian emigres have been a major influence on how Putin, the Kremlin and the Russian people came to view Ukraine as an artificial construct and Ukrainians as not constituting a separate people. Viewed from Kyiv, therefore, memory politics in Putin's Russia did not resemble a 'centrist and moderate force that refuses all "extremes"' (Laruelle, 2025, p. 8). Russia's new school textbooks, introduced in September 2023, a project led by Vladimir Medinsky, chairman of the Russian Military Historical Society and head of Russia's delegation in peace talks with Ukraine, Moscow State Institute of International

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Relations (MGIMO) Rector Anatoly Torkunov and head of the Institute of General History of the Russian Academy of Sciences Alexander Chubaryan, present Ukraine as an artificial, accidental and hostile formation towards Russia and justify Russian military aggression against Ukraine. From the vantage point of Kyiv, Putin's Russia did not resemble a regime that was 'centrist' and negative towards ethnonationalism (Laruelle, 2025, p. 192) but was turbo charged by imperial nationalism.

This book's eight chapters analyse four roots lying behind Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine: Imperialism and Nationalism; Nostalgia; Divergence, and Xenophobia. Although revanchism is a better definition of Russia's policies of reclaiming lost territory and supporting co-ethnics in Ukraine, this book conflates imperialism and nationalism into the term imperial nationalism.

As this book will show, these four roots are closely linked. For example, a strengthened Ukrainian identity fuels anti-Western xenophobia among Russian imperial nationalists because they view 'Ukrainianism' as a Western-supported and artificial construct aimed at dividing the 'Russian people'. Russia and Ukraine's increasing divergence, with the former following an authoritarian path within Eurasia and the latter a democratic path within Europe, has led to Russian feelings of 'betrayal' by Ukrainians and nostalgia for the Tsarist Empire and Soviet Union when Russia was recognised as a great power and Russians and Ukrainians were united as 'fraternal peoples' in an idealised world. As one Russian media outlet declared: 'Liberal globalists fight Russia with the hands of Ukrainian Nazis'.[3]

Russia's obsession with Ukraine was not invented by Putin but goes back centuries. The Muscovite kingdom became the Russian Empire in 1721, twelve years after the defeat of Ukrainian Cossack Hetman Ivan Mazepa and his Swedish allies at the Battle of Poltava. Russia has since then associated a union with Ukraine as enabling Russia to become a great power, or empire. Zbigniew Brzezinski famously wrote that 'Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire'. Putin (2020) said Russia could regain its status as 'a global rival' to Western powers by uniting with Ukraine. 'Some like dividing Ukraine and Russia. They believe it's a very important goal', Putin complained, 'Since any integration of Russia and Ukraine, along with their capacities and competitive advantages, would spell the emergence of a rival – a global rival for both Europe and the world'.

[3] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/liberal-globalists-fight-russia-with-the-hands-of-ukrainian-nazis/

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The Tsarist Empire sought to block and repress the re-emergence of a Ukrainian identity distinct from Russian. These policies have been condemned by Ukraine but ignored by Putin and Russian imperial nationalists. The Ukrainian language was banned in the Tsarist Empire in July 1863 when Minister of Interior Petr Valuev prohibited public education and religious texts in Ukrainian. In May 1876, Tsar Alexander II issued the Ems Edict, which was far more severe and intended to destroy the development of Ukrainian literature and culture. The Tsarist Empire banned the import of Ukrainian language publications; printing of religious and grammar books in Ukrainian; and the publishing of books in Ukrainian for 'common people' and intellectual elites. Ukrainian-language publications were removed from libraries. Theatre performances, songs, poetry, and readings in Ukrainian were banned.

The Tsarist Empire – like contemporary Russia – claimed there had never been a Ukrainian state or language and culture, Ukrainians had no history, and they were Little Russians, one of three branches of a mythical pan-Russian people. Ukrainian identity distinct from Russian is a challenge to the foundational myth of a 'thousand-year Russian statehood'. Without Ukraine accepting its status as Little Russia, Russia's claim to Kyiv Rus as the cradle of the Russian state and a thousand-year history is challenged by Ukrainian national history. Moscow is 600 years younger than Kyiv and was a small village at the time of the Mongol destruction of Kyiv Rus in 1240. Ukrainian historians and Ukrainian identity views Kyiv Rus as the first Ukrainian state, as most of its territory lay within the borders of contemporary Ukraine. After 1240 the legacy of Kyiv Rus went to the Galician-Volhynian Kingdom. Russian historians and imperial nationalists view 'Kievan Russia' as the first Russian state, which after 1240 transferred to Vladimir-Suzdal, Muscovy, the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, and Russian Federation.

The doyen of Ukrainian history Mykhaylo Hrushevsky had to relocate from Kyiv to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where he was appointed in 1894 to the chair of Ukrainian history at Lemberg (Lviv) University. In 1898 he began publishing his ten volume *History of Ukraine-Rus*, with the final volume published in 1937. Hrushevsky developed a framework which separated Russian and Ukrainian histories, thereby reinforcing a Ukrainian identity distinct from Russian. As we show in this book, contest between Ukrainian and pan-Russian identities and competing views of history lies at the heart of the Kremlin's war against Ukraine. Tsarist Russian policies – in a similar manner to Russian military aggression since 2014 – backfired. In both instances, repression of Ukrainian identity produced the opposite effect of speeding up its flowering and crystallisation.

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The Soviet Union officially recognised a separate Ukrainian identity. However, at the same time, the USSR promoted eastern Slavic unity with Ukrainians and Russians described as having been born together and remaining forever united. Throughout the Soviet era, a Ukrainian identity distinct from Russian continued to compete with an eastern Slavic (pan-Russian) identity whose three peoples – Russians, Ukrainian, Belarusians – were to merge into a Russian-speaking Soviet people (*Homo Sovieticus*).

National communists, popular in Ukraine but not in Russia, were influential during three periods of liberalisation of the Soviet system: in the 1920s during the policies of indigenisation (Ukrainisation); in the 1960s under Soviet Ukrainian Communist Party of Ukraine (KPU) leader Petro Shelest, and from 1985 under Communist Party of the Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev. During periods of Soviet conservatism, a pan-Russian identity and Soviet Russian nationalism was accompanied by greater bouts of political repression and Russification: in 1934–1953 under dictator Joseph Stalin and between 1972 and 1989 under Soviet Ukrainian Communist Party leader Volodymyr Shcherbytsky. In post-Stalin USSR, Ukrainians represented the largest proportional to their population size group of political prisoners.

The two extremes of Ukraine's political spectrum, national communists and integral nationalists, both upheld a Ukrainian identity distinct from Russian. Ukrainian integral nationalist ideologue Dmytro Dontsov's influenced the KPZU (Communist Party of Western Ukraine) and leading national communists such as Mykola Khvylovy in Soviet Ukraine. Dontsov found a 'kindred spirit' in national communist Khvylovy, and they both called upon Ukraine to turn its back on Russia and turn towards Europe. Khvylovy and Dontsov both believed the removal of Russian influences would create an independent Ukrainian culture. Khvylovy, like other leading national communists, committed suicide in 1933, the year Stalin unleashed the *Holodomor*, which murdered four to five million Ukrainians and was followed by the Executed Renaissance and great terror. Shelest was removed in 1971 and was accused of 'national deviationism', because in his writings and statements about Ukrainian history, he analysed Ukraine's past separately from the history of Russia.

Russian Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Putin both viewed Eurasia as Russia's exclusive sphere of influence. They built Russia's post-Soviet relations with its neighbours, especially Ukraine and Belarus, upon the Soviet model of relations between Moscow and the Soviet republics where Russians are the leaders, and the Kremlin dominates and dictates to republics without real sovereignty. In the Kremlin's world view, the three eastern Slavs constituted the core of the Soviet Union, where

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Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians had dominated the Soviet political, economic, military, and security elites. In the post-Soviet era, the Pan-Russian World (*Russkij mir*) would unite the three eastern Slavs through a pan-Russian identity and constitute the core of Russia's 'state-civilisation' and Eurasia (Wawrzonek, 2014).

We translate *Russkij mir* when used by Russian officials, religious leaders and others as the Pan-Russian World. When we are referring to the official organisation, we use the Russian World Foundation. *Russkij mir* is commonly translated as the Russian World, but we believe this leads to confusion, as it suggests the concept only refers to people who consider themselves Russians. But Putin, the Kremlin, and Russian imperial nationalists define the concept of *Russkij mir* as broader to include Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians in an imagined eastern Slavic civilisational community whose political and spiritual centre is in Moscow, and whose identity is grounded in nostalgia for the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union, and which is xenophobic towards liberal values, the 'collective West' and the US-led unipolar world. We therefore use both the Pan-Russian World and *Russkij mir* because the concept incorporates all four roots of the war that are analysed in the nine chapters in this book.

As Paul D'Anieri has shown (2019), since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has had a long-term inability to come to terms with an independent Ukraine outside the Pan-Russian World, and therefore Russia's demands towards Ukraine have remained constant. In 2009, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev (2009; Kuzio, 2015, pp. 438–439) issued demands to President Viktor Yushchenko that were the same as those made by President Putin to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy thirteen years later after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On both occasions, Medvedev and Putin demanded similar changes in Ukrainian memory politics, language, culture, religion and Euro-Atlantic integration. In the Spring 2022 peace talks, Russia demanded the repeal of an old law on TV and Radio (1994), law on Culture (2011), four decommunisation laws (2015), laws on the state service and judiciary (2016), education law (2017), language law (2019), and law on titular nations in Ukraine (2021), as well as a halt to alleged 'discrimination' against the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine and insisted Ukraine never joins NATO (Kuzio, 2024). Russia is disingenuous about not being opposed to Ukraine joining the European Union; in 2013, the Kremlin successfully pressured President Viktor Yanukovych to drop its integration into the EU, which is likely to mean it would oppose Ukraine's future membership. The Kremlin has derailed Georgia's path to EU membership.

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The Kremlin's goal of 'de-nazification' and demands for Ukraine's capitulation include the removal of the Ukrainian president and government and its replacement with pro-Russian proxies. Russia falsely claims Zelenskyy is the illegitimate president of Ukraine and that any governmental body formed under his presidency is by extension illegitimate. The Kremlin is using a false reading of the Ukrainian constitution and Ukrainian legislation to delegitimise Ukraine's government and sovereignty because elections in 2024 could not have been held under martial law. In addition, the Kremlin continues a long-standing claim the Ukrainian government has been illegitimate since the Euromaidan Revolution 'illegal putsch'.

The revival and promotion of White Russian émigré writings deepened Russian belief they and Ukrainians are 'one people', the Ukrainian language is a Russian dialect, and Ukraine is an artificial construct and Western puppet state. The Kremlin's demands, whether Medvedev's in 2009 or Putin's in 2022, lie in how Russian imperial nationalists could only view Ukraine as a Little Russian puppet state, like Alexander Lukashenka's White Russia (Belarus) (Wawrzonek, 2014), and not as an independent state with its own agency. Until 2013, the Kremlin used soft power, energy, and the weaponisation of corruption to influence Ukrainian domestic and foreign policies and the country's trajectory. In 2014, after the second failure to use Yanukovych to achieve its goals in Ukraine (the first being during the Orange Revolution), the Kremlin reverted to military aggression. Russia invaded and annexed Crimea and supported pro-Russian uprisings in southeast Ukraine.

Russian territorial claims towards Ukraine have existed throughout the post-Soviet era. Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and declared its fate decided and not open to future negotiations. From 2014, Putin and other Russian leaders declared southeastern Ukraine to be the 'historical Russian land' of *Novorossiya* (New Russia), and in 2022, four Ukrainian *oblasts* (Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhya, Kherson) were annexed. If the 'special military operation' had gone to plan, Ukraine would have been reduced to a Little Russian puppet state based around its central regions. The Kremlin is offering Western Ukraine, which Russian imperial nationalists have never seen as part of the Pan-Russian World, to Poland, Hungary, and Romania.

The two Minsk Accords to end the Russian-Ukrainian war, signed in 2014 and 2015, were viewed by the Kremlin as a means to transform Ukraine, through its Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples Republics acting as Trojan Horses, into a Little Russian puppet state. The refusal of Presidents Petro Poroshenko and Zelenskyy to implement the Kremlin's

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interpretation of the Minsk Accords, coupled with the widening divergence of Ukraine from Russia after 2014, led to the decision in 2022 to launch a 'special military operation' to effectively teach Kyiv a lesson by quickly subjugating Ukraine and replacing Zelenskyy with a pro-Russian puppet regime led by leader of the Russian Opposition Platform-For Life Party Viktor Medvedchuk or Yanukovych. As this book shows, the 'special military operation' failed because it was premised on a Russian imperial nationalist myth of Ukraine inhabited primarily by Little Russians eager to be 'liberated' from their Nazi yoke.

Therefore, throughout the post-Soviet era, the Kremlin grappled with two interrelated questions. Firstly, whether a Ukrainian *or* (Russia's preference) a pan-Russian identity would dominate Ukraine (Kuzio, 2024). Secondly, whether Ukraine would be part of Europe *or* (the Kremlin's preference) the Pan-Russian World and Eurasia (Wawrzonek, 2014). Between 1991 and 2013, Ukraine found itself in what Michał Wawrzonek (2014) described as the 'grey zone' where two identities and foreign policy orientations competed, with conflict especially acute between the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions (2004–2014). The Kremlin's hopes were pinned on Yanukovych, Ukraine's pro-Russian presidential candidate in the 2004 elections and who as president in 2010–2014 had implemented Medvedev's demands. The Kremlin pressured Yanukovych to reject European integration, which he did in November 2013, and following this support, Ukraine joining the Eurasian Economic Union, after his re-election in 2015, during his second presidential term. The Kremlin's plans collapsed after Ukrainians mobilised the Euromaidan Revolution and, following four months of violence and the killing of one hundred protestors, Yanukovych fled from office. In 2014, with Euromaidan Revolutionaries coming to power, the pendulum swung in favour of Ukrainian identity and Ukraine's European orientation, which widened Ukraine's divergence from Russia. To the Kremlin's chagrin, Ukrainians had escaped from the 'grey zone' and were rapidly moving away from Russia and Eurasia. Growing Russian-Ukrainian divergence after 2014 was an important factor in the Kremlin's decision to launch the 'special military operation'.

If the 'special military operation' had gone to plan, its goals of 'denazification' and 'de-militarisation' would have led to Ukraine's Little Russianisation; that is, Belarusianisation. The Institute for the Study of War has analysed Russia's demands for ending the war in the Spring 2022 peace talks and ever since as Ukraine's capitulation (Institute for the Study of War, 2024a, 2024b, 2025). Medvedev's demands in 2009

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and Putin's since 2022 towards Ukraine bring together the four roots of Russia's war against Ukraine that are analysed in this book: *Imperialism and Nationalism, Nostalgia, Divergence, and the International Dimension*.

Imperial Nationalism: the first root, is an extreme form of nationalism fused with imperialism and revanchism. Since the mid 2000s, the revival and promotion of White Russian émigré ideas, writings, and ideologues, spread among the Russian elites and Russian people a denial of the existence of a Ukrainian people distinct from Russians and a belief that Ukraine was an artificial construct and puppet state of the West. This, in turn, reinforced a long-held Russian view of treating Ukrainians as a Little Russian branch of the pan-Russian people, alongside Belarusians (White Russians) and Russians (Great Russians). White Russian émigré writers and generals have been officially reburied in Russia, and their books have been republished in mass editions and circulated in schools, the armed forces, and among state officials and politicians. Fascist and anti-Semitic White Russian émigré writer Ivan Ilyin, who denied the existence of a Ukrainian people, became Putin's favourite author nearly two decades ago. Ilyin's writings were republished in large editions and assigned to provincial governors and military leaders to study. Two decades ago in 2005, Putin supervised the reburial of Ilyin's remains in Moscow's Donskoy cemetery.

With Belarusians brought back within the pan-Russian people as early as 1994, when Alexander Lukashenka was elected Belarusian president, and especially after the 2020 fraudulent elections, the Kremlin's main target has long been Ukraine (Barros, 2025). The closest the Kremlin came to reintegrating Ukraine came with the election of Ukraine's only pro-Russian president, Yanukovych (2010–2014). His removal from power by the Euromaidan Revolution prevented Russia's goal of Ukraine turning its back on Europe and joining Russia and Belarus as the Pan-Russian World core of Eurasia. Russia's revenge was the annexation of Crimea and first invasion of Ukraine.

History is central to Russia's war against Ukraine and Putin's desire to enter Russian history in the footsteps of earlier great leaders. Returning to the Russian presidency in 2012, Putin believed his destiny was to enter Russian history as the gatherer of the pan-Russian people. Speaking to the World Russian Peoples Council, Putin lamented how in 1917 and 1991 there had been 'artificial' and 'violent divisions' of the great Russian people, 'a *triune* (tripartite) of Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians'. The reunification of the three eastern Slavic peoples in the Pan-Russian World

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and 'Holy Rus' would go some way towards overcoming the trauma felt by Putin and most Russians of the 'major geopolitical disaster of the (20th) century', as Putin described the disintegration of the USSR. On the 350th anniversary of Peter the Great's birth in June 2022, Putin denied Russia had conquered land controlled by Sweden in the Great Northern War: 'He [Peter the Great] was not taking away anything, he was returning'.

The Russian Orthodox Church, which was revived after a period of persecution by the Bolsheviks in 1943, institutionalised Russian imperial nationalism in the Soviet and Russian political systems, sacralising the concept of 'Holy Rus' discourse as one of the core identities of the Soviet Union. Throughout the Soviet era, Ukrainian Churches were banned, and the Russian Orthodox Church held a privileged position as the only canonical Orthodox Church in Ukraine. The Moscow Patriarchate lost this status only in 2018–2019, when Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople removed Ukraine from Russian canonical territory and granted the Orthodox Church of Ukraine autocephaly (independence) from the Russian Orthodox Church. Ukrainian Orthodox autocephaly added to the accelerating dynamic since 2014 of Ukraine's divergence from Russia. Russia's capitulation demands to Ukraine include the reversal of Ukraine's Orthodox autocephaly and the reinstatement of the primacy of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The Russian Orthodox Church's promotion of the quasi-religious cult of the Great Patriotic War and Russian-Ukrainian unity in the Pan-Russian World legitimised anti-Western xenophobia in public discourse under the guise of defending conservative moral values against Western liberalism and secularism. The Russian Orthodox Church was the key institution given the task of institutionalising and legitimising eternal Russian-Ukrainian unity. Russian Orthodox Church structures in Ukraine served as a support base for pro-Russian forces during the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions and for pro-Russian political parties and presidential candidates during election campaigns. The Moscow Patriarchate actively promotes a narrative that sacralises Russia's war against Ukraine by presenting it as a fight between a superior pan-Russian civilisation against satanic Ukrainian Nazis and their puppet masters, the 'collective West'.

The imperial nationalism is very evident in the tone and arrogance of Russia's approach towards Ukraine, which have remained the same as during the Spring 2022 peace talks; that is, a demand for Ukraine's capitulation. The Russian delegation was led by former Minister of Culture and Chairman of the Russian Military Society Vladimir Medinsky, who insisted (but Ukraine refused) the talks be held for symbolic reasons in

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Belovezhskaya Pushcha, the hunting lodge in Belarus where Russian, Ukrainian and Belarusians leaders met in December 1991 to dismantle the USSR. Medinsky has been a major influence over the rewriting of new Russian school textbooks and published a 'gatherers of Russian land' book series where Putin is following in the footsteps of Alexander Nevsky, Ivan III, Peter I, Catherine I, Alexander I, Alexander III and Joseph Stalin (Zygar, 2023). Medinsky was the ghostwriter of Putin's (2021) long essay, which was distributed throughout Russia's armed forces and provided ideological justification for Russia's full-scale invasion.

Nostalgia: the second root is analysed through the quasi-religious promotion of the Great Patriotic War, personality cult of dictator Stalin and revival of Soviet era propaganda against 'Ukrainian nationalists' and 'Nazis'. The main Soviet anniversary during Putin's youth became the Great Patriotic War on 9 May, overtaking the Bolshevik Revolution on 7 November. As president, Putin militarised the Great Patriotic War by returning military parades and transforming the anniversary into a celebration of military victory, rather than commemoration of human suffering. Russia moved from 'Never Again!' to 'We Can Do It Again!' Linked to the quasi-religious Great Patriotic War has been a cult of Stalin through a denial, downplaying and marginalisation of his massive crimes against humanity, including against Russians, and playing up the leader's military victory, and building of a new empire and nuclear superpower. While most Russians hold a positive view of Stalin, most Ukrainians view him as a tyrant. Russia was angered by Ukraine's movement away from celebrating the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) to the Second World War (1939–1945) and denouncing communism and Nazism as twin evils.

The term – Nazis – was frequently used by the Soviet regime and continues to be used by Russia as a derogatory label applied to all those, irrespective of their political views, who did not see Ukraine's future in the USSR and who do not see Ukraine's future in the Pan-Russian World and Eurasia. Of all the countries, Ukraine leads in being condemned as 'Nazi' by Russian propaganda. Russian war atrocities and war crimes are justified because Ukraine is a 'Nazi' state. A lack of introspection of Russian and Soviet crimes against humanity, cult of Stalin and de-humanisation of Ukrainians prepared the ground for the committing of war crimes and genocide by Russian forces against Ukrainians. Ukrainians fighting against Russia are allegedly not representative of most Ukrainians who desire to live within the Pan-Russian World.

Throughout Putin's quarter of a century in power, directly and indirectly, the Kremlin has always been hostile towards Ukraine's de-Stalinisation

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and de-communisation and, as part of its wide-scale demands for Ukraine's capitulation, is insisting on a reversal of Ukrainian memory politics. Throughout the post-Soviet era, Russia and Ukraine have especially diverged in their memory politics. Russia's Tsarist and Soviet nostalgia and Ukraine's denunciation of Tsarist and Soviet rule placed the two countries on a collision course. Medinsky's new school textbooks praise Stalin 'as a wise and effective leader thanks to whom the Soviet Union won the war and ordinary people began to live much better' leaving the reader 'feeling that Stalin's victims were guilty and suffered a well-deserved punishment' (Zygar, 2023). The new school textbook's twenty-eight pages on the war in Ukraine 'contain, of course, no history and only outright propaganda – a set of clichés recycled from Russian television' (Zygar, 2023). Soviet propaganda campaigns against Ukrainian 'nationalists/fascists/Nazis' underpin Russia's demand for Ukraine's 'de-nazification'.

Divergence: the third root lies in Russia and Ukraine's divergence in identity and political systems since the early 1990s, and especially since the Orange and Euromaidan Revolutions. Since 1991 Russia repeatedly intervened in domestic Ukrainian politics in support of pro-Russian forces, a catch-all term that included support for Russian memory politics, the Russian language as a state language, primacy of the Russian Orthodox Church, and integration into the Pan-Russian World and Eurasia. Support for these policies was always weaker in Ukraine than in Belarus; for example, only one of six Ukrainian presidents – Yanukovych – was pro-Russian.

Russian military aggression in 2014 had the unintended consequences of marginalising pro-Russian forces in Ukraine by removing 16 per cent of voters in Russian-occupied Ukraine who traditionally voted for these forces. If in the two decades prior to 2014, divergence had been gradual, after 2014, Ukrainian memory politics began to radically move away from Tsarist, Soviet and Russian views and perceptions. This was taking place alongside the removal of the influence of Russian soft power in the media, language, and religion. The election of Zelenskyy did not change this trend, as he not only continued the memory politics, religious, and media policies of his predecessor, Poroshenko, but radicalised them further by banning five pro-Russian television channels and criminally charging pro-Russian politicians. Russia's full-scale invasion made the same mistake as in 2014: military aggression, this time even more brutal, eviscerated what remained linked to Russia by leading to the banning of twelve pro-Russian political parties and legislation circumscribing the Russian Orthodox Church's ties to Moscow.

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Since 1991, Russia and Ukraine have diverged politically into an authoritarian dictatorship and democracy, respectively. The Kremlin's military aggression against Ukraine is an outgrowth of a cult of war; for example, surrounding commemoration of the Great Patriotic War and cult of Stalin; nature of Russia's regime which transformed from authoritarianism into a fascist dictatorship after constitutional changes in 2020 made Putin de facto president for life, and widespread political repression. Ukraine's democratisation naturally took it on a path to Europe.

Xenophobia: the fourth root has been fanned by Russia since the mid 2000s but became particularly shrill after 2014 when the Kremlin's xenophobia is linked it to Ukrainian identity and Kyiv's desire to break free from Russian control. After 2014, Ukraine's conflict with Russia and the West's increasingly confrontational relationship with Moscow were now tightly bound together. Denying the existence of a Ukrainian people distinct from Russians, Russia must attribute Ukraine's resilience and determination by describing the 'special military operation' as a war against the West and NATO.

Russia has expanded its war goals to destroying the US-led unipolar world by replacing it with a multipolar world. Russia has expanded its holy war against Ukraine through military alliances with countries who hold similar anti-Western goals – China, Iran, and North Korea. Russia is a revolutionary power pushing back against the US-led unipolar world, no longer accepting the international order which emerged after the Cold War.

Russian messianism about the 'liberation' of *Novorossiya* (New Russia) and imperialism towards Ukraine is evident in the Kremlin's capitulation demands for Ukrainian forces to completely withdraw from Ukrainian-controlled territory in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhya, and Kherson *oblasts* (which Russia illegally annexed in September 2022), none of which it fully controls. The Kremlin is demanding Ukraine, and the West recognise the four illegally annexed *oblasts* as part of Russia.

The Kremlin's capitulation demands include Ukraine must officially abandon its goal of ever joining NATO before Russia can agree to a ceasefire and peace negotiations; Russia is in effect demanding a veto over the addition of new members of NATO. The Kremlin demand for Ukraine's capitulation includes the proviso it signs a peace treaty independently and not on the orders of its 'Western masters', reiterating a long standing and false Russian imperial nationalist claim Ukraine is a US and Western puppet state. Putin seeks a summit with US President Donald Trump, which would agree on a second Yalta agreement which, as on the first occasion in 1945, would recognise Western and Russian spheres of influence; Ukraine

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and Eurasia would, of course belong to Russia's exclusive domain. The Kremlin's capitulation demand for Ukraine's full 'de-militarisation' limiting the Ukrainian armed forces to 85,000 soldiers (down from their current number of 980,000) and destruction of Western military equipment would complete the transformation of Ukraine into a Little Russian puppet state.

These four roots of Russia's war against Ukraine – Imperialism and Nationalism; Nostalgia; Divergence, and Xenophobia – came together on the eve of the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. Russian imperial nationalists had come to the realisation Ukraine was being 'lost' forever and had to be forcibly returned to the Pan-Russian World through a 'special military operation'. Putin echoed Stalin in fearing the 'loss' of Ukraine. Believing – wrongly – that most Ukrainians would act as Little Russians by welcoming the Russian army, the Kremlin was convinced 'artificial' Ukraine would be defeated quickly, Kyiv captured in a few days and Zelenskyy replaced by a Russia-friendly puppet ruler. Ukraine would come to resemble the Russian puppet state of Belarus (Barros, 2025). The Russian army and security forces would implement 'de-nazification' to destroy Ukrainian identity and return Ukrainians to their Little Russian roots.

As we have witnessed from three years of full-scale war, Russian imperial nationalist myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians had nothing to do with reality. The Kremlin's plans for a rapid 'special military operation' became a long-drawn-out full-scale war with Ukraine and its Western allies that has expanded into a global war between the West and the anti-Western Axis of Upheaval.

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