

Putin's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was preceded by a speech in which he argued Ukrainian nationalism was historically illegitimate, and that Ukraine had been merely a region of Russia before it was given national identity in a mistake by the late USSR. In some ways, this is an accurate reflection of the history of the region. Parts of what is now Ukraine were included in Russian territorial boundaries as early as the 1550s and more by the late 17th century, before their large imperial expansion a century later even began, even as it was in part also controlled by Poland (Choonara 2022). As the Russian Empire grew after 1700, it expanded to control most of modern-day Ukraine and Poland both. Westernization of Russian nobility spurred by Peter the Great led to a different character of rule in the West, as the Central Asian territories were, as they are today, regarded with greater suspicion and derision than those in Eastern Europe (Lieven 2002). Up until the Russian revolution, Ukraine was a key part of the Russian state, exporting grains to balance trade deficits and critically expanding the empire's population (Lieven 2002). However, the history of the Ukrainian identity complicates this territory-first narrative. As early as the nineteenth century, consensus over the identity of Ukrainians began to move from Pan-Slavic identification or acceptance of the "Little Russia" marker of the empire to a move for national self-rule (Kiryukhin 2016). These national independence movements were successfully repressed by the state until their brief rise and fall after the collapse of the Russian Empire.

After the Russian Revolution, official policy of the Soviet Union was to encourage national self-identification and struggles for national sovereignty (Choonara 2022). However, Ukraine tested this policy when the Bolsheviks realized the key security and stability the territory would provide their new government, and although intense internal disputes over the policy continued, they went to war to regain the territory. This conflict led to Ukraine divided between

Polish and Russian rule and widespread devastation in the region, including a wide-reaching famine (Rose 2014). This war spurred increased Ukrainian nationalism in both the territory controlled by Poland, where the ruling government ruthlessly suppressed Ukrainian identity, and that controlled by the Soviet Union, where the invasion and subsequent led to widespread distrust of their rule. In the East this culminated in the Stalin-directed state-sponsored famine the “Holodomor” which resulted in millions of deaths. This domination continued after the region’s invasion by Nazi Germany, in which violence was widespread. In this period some prominent Ukrainian nationalists allied with the Nazis, creating the pretext for Putin’s arguments about “de-Nazification” (Choonara 2022). After the war, political maneuvering to gain additional power in the newly-created United Nations finally led to the creation of a Ukrainian nation, even as it had limited independence under the Soviet Union. Putin argues this arbitrary categorization after World War II is the moment when Ukrainian identity was constructed.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, while immediately leaving Russians with a negative view towards territorial expansion, created structural factors that incentivized imperial ambitions. The USSR had intentionally attempted to avoid perception of itself as an empire, and the liberalism of the late 1980s and early 1990s went further to promote western ideals of nationalism and self-determination above all else. The collapse in 1991 led to strong backlash against this and slowly rehabilitated the image of empire (Pain 2016). Yeltsin’s failed reforms and the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine activated strong fears of a lack of economic strength and physical security in quick succession, especially with the predominant belief that the West was secretly puppeteering the revolutions in what Russia still perceived as its sphere of influence (Mankoff 2022). Imperial expansion can be seen as a solution to both economic and physical security in Russia, using Ukraine’s key agricultural bounty and favorable demographics

for economic growth and its territory between Europe and Moscow as a way to insulate the “core” from aggression by foreign powers. Additionally, Putin’s authoritarian takeover incentivized imperial ambitions, as authoritarian governments can more easily maintain popularity without democratic approval through foreign adventurism and successful military campaigns (Rojek 2022).

Finally, even with the role nationalist movements in satellite states played in the collapse of the USSR, Russian imperial expansion was never repudiated with explicitly decolonial revolutions. This provided a limited incentive to come to terms with this ideology of Russian supremacy (Kushnir). It also left what Pain refers to as the “imperial syndrome” (2016, p.59), which rose with the cycle of discontent towards Yeltsin and liberalization and has remained ever since. The “imperial syndrome” encompasses the authoritarian political structure, where, like in empire, citizens are prevented from choosing rulers from their social group. For example, in the current structure of the government of the Russian Federation, states are unable to decide their governors, even in sham elections like those that elect Putin. It includes the political geography where ethnic minorities are constrained to enclaves and territorial integrity is maintained through administration and force rather than consent. Finally, it includes the ideology of imperialism that says Russians are inherently superior people and should be entrusted with government power (Pain 2016). Pain’s reading does not account for how these characteristics are not strictly unique to empires, as authoritarian governments could likely exercise similar powers over their people while still justifying that power through nationalism. However, it does illustrate conditions which are necessary prerequisites for imperial expansion in places like Ukraine.