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All the Russias

Modern Russia's Ancient View of Its Neighbors

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There is a certain undeniable temptation to regard the present Russian adventures in Ukraine as a revival of Soviet-era territorial ambitions. Major news outlets have speculated about it. Armchair political scientists across the Internet are convinced of it. Even observers very close to the action, such as the Russian-born Ukrainian author Andrey Kurkov, have taken note of the idea: in his *Ukraine Diaries*, Kurkov described the Russian foreign policy imperative behind the annexation of Crimea as "the restoration of historical legitimacy, otherwise known as the reconstruction of the Soviet Union."[1]

There is ample intuitive basis for this conclusion—Russia's current president, Vladimir V. Putin, generally supposed to be the architect of Russia's behavior of late, is well-known for his involvement with the KGB and in municipal politics during the last days of the USSR. As president, he heads a government steeped in closed-circuit cronyism of a kind reminiscent of the old *nomenklatura*; the time-honored Soviet principle of "one law for the masses, another for the government" is very much still in play in Putin's Russia. However, tracing the Russian attitude toward its nearest and largest neighbor back only as far as the Soviet era misses a key point of Russian—and Ukrainian—history that goes back much, much farther than a mere ninety-odd years.

Before the current unpleasantness in Crimea and the Donbas, the Ukrainian involvement in the Soviet experiment was merely the most recent in a long series of political evolutions that, in one way or another, involved Moscow asserting, implicitly or explicitly, its self-perceived right to govern Kiev.

The irony is that, from the Ukrainian perspective, this historically persistent idea could be viewed as inverted. After all, what we might now consider the Russian civilization

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[1] Andrey Kurkov, *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev* (New York: Random House, 2014), 194.

began not in Moscow, but in Kiev, first taking on a recognizable form in the early tenth century AD.

As with most nations of such an age, the precise origins of the state now known as Kievan Ruś are obscure, buried in layers of questionable history and outright myth.[2] The early rulers of the Kievan Ruś, like the ancient kings of England, may or may not have really existed, and if they did, may or may not have done many of the things that are popularly attributed to them today. Where the Ruś (both the people and the name) even came from is a topic of much debate today, with popular legend holding that the original Ruś princes weren't Slavs but Scandinavians, eastward-ranging Vikings who, in one still-highly-disputed legend, were *invited* by the Slavs of the Dnieper valley and its surroundings to "civilize" them.[3]

Regardless of the Kievan state's precise origins, by the mid-tenth century it was well enough established and documented that the rest of its history can be known with some confidence. By the middle of the eleventh century, the Kievan state was a confederation of princedoms ruled by members of Kiev's ruling dynasty. These princedoms were arranged in a sort of precedence order, similar to the various tiers of "feeder" leagues in organized sports; the princes' custom was to advance through the state's various territories as more senior princes died, with the most senior reigning over the whole assemblage from Kiev. While logical, this system was unwieldy and brittle, and grew ever more so as generations passed and the pool of eligible princes expanded, while at the same time their links (and loyalties) to the old clan system became more and more attenuated. This led to what

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[2] Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, Mark D. Steinberg, *A History of Russia, Eighth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9-25.
[3] Riasanovsky-Steinberg, 23.

Riasanovsky and Steinberg described as "a frightening record of virtually constant civil wars," leaving the country ever more vulnerable to outside invaders—of which the Eurasian boundary region had no shortage in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries. Finally, in 1240, Kiev would fall to the Mongols, bringing the tottering Kievan Ruś nation down with it.[4]

One of the lasting effects of the Mongol-catalyzed breakup of Kievan Ruś was the emergence of one of Kiev's obscure eastern outposts as a new center of power. This rural nowhere was known by the name of the river it was on: Москва, *Moskva*, customary rendered "Muscovy" in the Western records of the time, but more lately known to us in the West as Moscow. So minor was Muscovy in Kievan Ruś times that it was not even one of the traditional seats in the succession of princes; Riasanovsky and Steinberg date its founding as a walled city to 1156, not long after the first documented appearance of the name in 1147.[5] In the wake of the Mongol sack of Kiev in 1240, Moscow—which was itself sacked several times—emerged as an administrative and economic power in the region largely thanks to the willingness of its princes to deal with, and for, the Mongol overlords. Ivan I, prince of Moscow from 1328 (or 1332; accounts vary) to 1341, was known by the epithet *Ivan Kalita*—"John Moneybag"—not because he was rich, but because he was in the business of collecting tribute from other local potentates on behalf of the Mongol Khan.

Another of Ivan I's important maneuvers was to convince the heads of the Russian Church (which, like Kievan Ruś itself, had fragmented with the fall of Kiev) to make Moscow their seat. In their self-appointed title, "Metropolitan of Kiev and All Russia", we

[4] Riasanovsky-Steinberg, 33-34.
[5] Riasanovsky-Steinberg, 90.

may be looking at the first appearance of the familiar phrase on which Moscow and its rulers[6] have been banking ever since.

The Russian national impulse to reconsolidate the old Kievan lands—but under *Muscovite* rule—is thus far older than the relative yesterday of the Soviet period. It is for this reason that to say Putin's goal is "the reconstruction of the Soviet Union," as Kurkov suggested, or to call the post-Soviet Russian hunger for central-Eurasian influence and dominion "Russia's new imperialism," as van Herpen does, is slightly off the mark. At the least, the former does not reach back far enough to find the root of the issue, and the latter is a mild misnomer, since the Kievan territories are not an "empire" by Russian standards. To the self-appointed "Great" Russians, heirs of the Muscovites, they are *Russia*, plain and simple. Russia may well *also* be indulging in a new form of imperialism—a cultural and economic one—but its political and territorial ambitions in places like Ukraine and Belarus are, at least to the Russian mind, a much more insular affair, no more imperial than Washington's assumption that it controls Ohio or California. When the princes of Muscovy eventually started calling themselves *tsar* (emperor, literally "Caesar"), the empire they had in mind was the territories *beyond* the ancient Kievan lands. "Autocrat of All the Russias" was only the *first* of the Tsars' almost interminable lists of titles; the rest catalogued the lands they considered to constitute the "imperial" part of the Russian Empire.

The Ukrainians and Belarussians, one may assume, see the matter somewhat differently. After all, the age of Kievan Ruś was long ago, and they may be forgiven for

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[6] We may also include the period when the Russian Empire was ruled from St. Petersburg/Petrograd under the Muscovite rubric, though geographically inaccurate, since the Tsar who founded that city moved his capital there *from* Moscow.

having assumed that—having been so long apart, politically and culturally, that they have developed their own distinct languages—their status as separate countries might by now be a settled matter. From that perspective, Moscow, a former backwater outpost, asserting a historical right to rule Kiev and Minsk is somewhat akin to Ottawa or Canberra declaring itself the true seat of English-speaking culture and expecting dominion over London.[7]

Unfortunately for the "lesser" Russias, the rulers of Moscow were very effective not only at controlling their neighbors militarily, but also at convincing the rest of the world that they had a perfect right to do so. Travel literature provides useful insights into the view, not just within Russia but among outside observers, that "the Russias" were all one place. In Laurens van der Post's 1964 travelogue *A View of All the Russias*, there is a passage in which the author discusses, not to say marvels at, the autonomy of Soviet Ukraine (his phrase is "its sense of cohesion and self-respect"[8]), but even in that instance, the sense given is that Ukrainian autonomy is merely a cultural echo of an earlier time, and the terminology is weighted accordingly toward Russia as the seat of the overall *national* identity. Van der Post even refers to the Ukrainian language as "Ukrainian Russian", in a passage in which one can almost hear his British Imperial bemusement (van der Post was a white South African) that such a thing should be allowed in a properly run empire. He, like many a modern scholar, seems to have mistaken the character of Moscow's hegemony over "all the Russias".

A few paragraphs later, he seeks to sum up the cultural differences between the two, and comes up with: "The Greater Russian deduces his idea of his rights from the idea of

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[7] Albeit on a much smaller geographical scale, though a commensurately larger scale of time.
[8] Laurens van der Post, *A View of All the Russias* (New York: William Morrow, 1964), 220.

public welfare, whereas the Ukrainian takes as his starting point the exigencies of his individual rights."[9] It is at the doorstep of this basic difference that van der Post lays the lingering distrust he perceived between Ukrainians and "Greater" Russians during his visit, and it is by that difference that he explains the disaster of agricultural collectivization visited on the former people's country by the Soviet government in the 1930s; but the latter is a topic which he declines to explore in depth, declaring, "I have no intention of nor indeed any qualifications for writing a detailed history of these things."[10]

In fairness to van der Post, he would have been working with incomplete information had he tried, since the full extent of what the Ukrainians now call the *Holodomor* (the Terror Famine, or more literally, the "Hunger Extermination") would not be known to Westerners until the 1986 publication of Robert Conquest's *Harvest of Sorrow*, more than two decades after *A View of All the Russias* was written.[11] Van der Post himself notes in that same passage, "Conversation tends to be a protracted euphemism in Russia," by which—once again tellingly—in this context he really means the Soviet Ukraine. All the same, the impression one takes away from van der Post's musings about the differences, and the unpleasant history, between what he always calls "Greater" Russia and the Ukraine is that the author regards them as matters of settled history which shape, but do not portend anything for, the present or future.

Looking back to a similar work of travel literature from a few decades earlier reveals a potentially informative inference, and one which argues strongly against the view that Russia's designs on Ukrainian territory strictly represent an ambition to reassemble

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[9] Van der Post, 221.
[10] Van der Post, 222.
[11] More about this in due course.

the Soviet Union. In British Member of Parliament Henry Norman's 1902 travel memoir *All the Russias*, there is *no mention* of the Ukraine by name. Twenty years before the establishment of the USSR, fifteen before the Russian Revolutions, an educated English observer could undertake a monumental work of travel literature encompassing the vast sweep of the Tsar's empire, and do it without a single reference to Ukraine or Belarus.

Even in the book's charmingly unwieldy Edwardian subtitle, *Travels and Studies in Contemporary European Russia, Finland, Siberia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia*, neither merits a name check. The subtitle, and indeed the book, spends a good bit of time discussing Finland—a country which, in 1902, was part of the Russian Empire in rather the same way that Canada was part of the British one, as a separate nation ruled by the same head of state—and none at all on two of the three territories implied by its main title. "All the Russias" must content themselves with being lumped, undifferentiated, into "European Russia".

From these two travelogues, it can be inferred that even among internationally savvy foreign laypeople, the conflation of "all the Russias" into a single entity considerably predates the Soviet Union, and indeed was so thoroughly entrenched by Soviet times that few outsiders gave it much thought in the decades before 1917. In fact, it appears superficially as though the identities of both the Ukraine and Belarus (or, as it was then usually rendered in English, Belorussia) were *more* visible in the Soviet era, when the existence of each at least received lip service, and appeared on maps, as Soviet Socialist Republics within the Union thereof. (In the Soviet era, the two even had their own representatives to the United Nations, although this can also be read as a cynical fiction by which the USSR gamed the UN's system to get three seats for one country. Had the United

States done something similar, we'd have had 49: one for each of the states at the time of the UN's founding and one for the District of Columbia.)

The truth, however, was far from the illusion. In fact, both Ukraine and Belorussia made bids for independence after the collapse of the Empire in 1917. Ukraine, already experiencing a surge of nationalistic sentiments at the time, positioned itself as an ally of Kerensky's Provisional Government in Petrograd, but sought to establish its own political identity.[12] Belorussia, likewise, demanded autonomy from Petrograd, with a separate legislative system.[13] Both nationalistic movements were crushed by the Bolsheviks in the course of the ensuing Civil War, and both "independent Soviet republics" were "voluntarily" integrated into the USSR in due course.

By the 1920s, the Belorussian government had endured a series of purges as brutal and arbitrary as any of the Soviet era's more historically famous bloodbaths, and by the early 1930s had undergone a process the Soviet government, with its usual finely tuned ear for euphemism, called "cultural cleaning" to make certain that it only *looked* individualized.[14] The terror of agricultural collectivization visited Belorussia as well, though its toll seems not to have been as massive as it was in Ukraine, where the *Holodomor*—the Terror Famine—is still seen as Moscow's most brutal and successful effort to crush Ukrainian nationalism and bring "Little Russia" to heel.

As for modern Russia's sense of accountability, it is perhaps worth noting that, though the Russian government has acknowledged the Ukrainian famine of 1932, its own

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[12] Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2001), 357.
[13] Nicholas P. Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956), 96.
[14] Vakar, 148.

accounts of the disaster (as reported by, e.g., the BBC in its coverage of last year's *Holodomor* Remembrance Day) are curiously vague about what may have *caused* the disaster. Reading the official Russian line, one might get the impression that it simply *happened* for no apparent reason. The Russian government continues to object to Ukraine's outright characterization of the famine as a deliberate act of the Soviet state, and to deny the legitimacy of its Ukrainian name.[15]

In the light of the above, then, to characterize Vladimir Putin as a Soviet reconstructionist is—while possibly correct—not a sufficient explanation for his government's conduct, nor for that conduct's popularity among the rank and file of ordinary Russians. Modern Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine; its annexation of Crimea; its reduction of Belarus to a virtual satrapy;[16] and its constant insistence that the international community recognize its right to bully its neighbors in this way all stem from a much more ancient and, to the Western mind, much more baffling *Weltanschauung*.

If Putin is, as Hill and Gaddy tell us, a keen student of history, he is surely more consciously aware of this than the Russian citizens who so overwhelmingly support his policies,[17] but nevertheless, its presence in the nation's cultural background hum shapes both his actions *and* his people's reactions to them. Though none may acknowledge it aloud and few may even be fully cognizant of it, the political DNA of what many modern observers take for a return to Soviet imperialism is in fact something far older: the impulse to reconstitute—into a single, Moscow-ruled body—all the Russias.

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[15] BBC News, "Holodomor: Memories of Ukraine's silent massacre", Nov. 23, 2013. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25058256

[16] Marcel H. van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* (Lanham, England: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 64.

[17] If one can believe opinion polls about the Russian government compiled by the Russian government.

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