FT Magazine War in Ukraine

‘Not one inch’: unpicking Putin’s deadly obsession with the details of history

Russia’s justification for the invasion of Ukraine is based on a wilful misreading of agreements made with the west — and offers warnings for the future

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As a professor, I teach how and why history matters. Yet, over the course of the past year, even I was unprepared for just how much it mattered.

By using a twisted version of history as conceptual undergirding for his invasion of Ukraine, Russia’s president Vladimir Putin is weaponising the past. History, he claims, justifies his years-long attempt at subordinating Ukraine through violence — an effort that intensified exponentially on February 24 2022, when he ordered a 190,000-strong force to attack.

The decision has been catastrophic for both invader and invaded. The estimated number of Russian troops killed and wounded in Ukraine is nearing 200,000. The number on the Ukrainian side is probably more than 100,000, in addition to an immense number of civilian displacements, injuries and deaths.

In the face of this self-inflicted disaster, Putin has tried to convince his own populace — with apparent success — that his actions are not only essential but justified by history. In his

recounting, western leaders are "saying openly now that in 1991 they managed to split up the Soviet Union and now is the time to do the same to Russia". Coupled with violent repression, such claims have enabled the Russian president to head off anti-war protests at home. Instead, as the world prepares to mark a year of conflict, chances of a ceasefire in either Putin's military or propaganda campaigns remain heartbreakingly tiny.

Yet if twisting history is one of Putin's weapons, then untwisting it can serve as a small but achievable act of disarmament on a dismal anniversary. What are the major aspects of history that obsess Putin? He fixates on 1991 when, rather than acting as dupes in a western plan, the Ukrainians themselves chose to hold a referendum on whether to split from the Soviet Union.

With a turnout of 84 per cent — about 32 million voters — more than 90 per cent chose independence, every region returning a majority in support. International observers certified the December 1991 vote as "free and fair". Recognition and statehood followed swiftly. But in Putin's view, this divorce from Moscow represented an unforgivable abandonment, one that created new risks on Russia's border to boot. In 2014, he began his campaign to undo that split by annexing Crimea and starting other military incursions on Ukrainian soil.

Anger at Kyiv is the foundation of Putin's bitterness. Resting precariously on that foundation is a haphazard and dangerous pile of accessory grievances, including an obsession with Nato enlargement in its smallest historical details.

Those details happen to be my area of scholarly expertise. In 1989, I was an American exchange student, living in what was then West Berlin. Coincidentally, the East German city of Dresden was at the same time home to a KGB officer called Vladimir Putin. We were both foreigners with front-row seats, watching the crumbling of Moscow's power in Europe. To this day, Putin regards these events as a "major geopolitical disaster".

For me, 1989 was an exhilarating, life-changing year. It inspired me to earn a PhD in history from Yale, and it was during research for my book *The Collapse: The Accidental Opening of the Berlin Wall* (2014) that I unexpectedly discovered documents on Nato's role in the post-cold war world. That find led to my years-long, international quest to declassify even more evidence so that I, other scholars and the public could gain access to it.

In 2018, I won appeals for the records of President Bill Clinton's talks with Russian leaders to be declassified. I was shocked when Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, complained publicly. But I was also pleased. If the Kremlin was unhappy, then the mountain of materials being released must be good. The next three years were spent mining that mountain (and others) for a subsequent book about Nato enlargement, published in November 2021.

Just three months later, the Russian invasion of Ukraine began. Like others, I watched televised coverage with horror and helplessness. But gradually I realised that, while it would

not be much compared to the suffering of Ukrainians, there was at least a small way I could help. As one of his justifications, Putin was using a doctored version of details from Nato history that I knew well. Suddenly everyone was interested in those details. My hope was that, by responding to that interest — whether through briefings to government authorities in multiple countries, public lectures or consultations with affected business leaders — I could set the record straight on the events that fuel Putin's historical obsession.

If the places where I was asked to speak changed frequently, the main question remained constant: What history is Putin instrumentalising, and what does the reliable historical evidence say? The Russian president is obsessed with four Nato-related events, as shown not only by his comments and writings but also by the December 2021 "treaties" that he sent to both Washington and Nato. Each so-called treaty was in fact an ultimatum, demanding in essence that the recipient sign as-is, or else he'd invade Ukraine.

Putin's version of events runs as follows. First, he asserts that Moscow, in exchange for permitting German unification in 1990 — by ceding its rights from Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender of 1945, and by removing Soviet troops still in East Germany — received a binding promise that Nato would not expand eastward. Second, Putin claims that the Atlantic alliance reaffirmed this promise with the Nato-Russia Founding Act of May 27 1997; in one of the December 2021 "treaties", Putin specifically demanded that Nato forces return to their positions as of that date.

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Vladimir Putin, at a December 2021 press conference

Third, he believes the alliance showed its true colours when it bombed Serbia in the 1999 Kosovo conflict. Fourth, in Putin's eyes, the 2008 Bucharest summit declaration — stating that "Nato welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership" and that "these countries will become members of Nato" — created intolerable risk for Russia, not least because of the "colour revolutions" that had already occurred in those countries. In short, he claims these moments revealed the alliance to be both dishonest and thirsty for Slavic blood. As Putin raged in a press conference on December 23 2021: "'Not one inch [of Nato enlargement] to the east' they told us in the '90s. So what? They cheated, just brazenly tricked us!"

Those three words — "not one inch" — are both a quote from a senior US diplomat and my book's title. Every time Putin invokes them (which he does often), I'm inundated by a fresh

wave of queries about the evidence I've collected. Those sources tell a different history from Putin's.

They do show that, early in the 1990 negotiations that overcame the division of Germany, speculation about Nato's "jurisdiction" not moving one inch eastward arose. US secretary of state James Baker, and his West German counterpart, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, spoke about such an idea with each other and with Soviet leaders in February 1990, thinking it might make German unification more tolerable to Moscow.

Crucial to any accurate account, however, is the knowledge that this discussion was speculative and highly contingent — and that, by the end of February, Baker's boss, US president George HW Bush, made clear he did not see a limit on Nato's future as desirable or necessary. He insisted that the Secretary of State cease using such phrasing. Obeying, that month Baker wrote in confidence to his German colleagues that discussion of Nato's range of jurisdiction should "be avoided in the future".

Genscher's boss, Chancellor Helmut Kohl, had come to agree with Bush. But despite that, Genscher kept a version of the concept alive, and lower-level diplomats echoed his thinking. Matters came to a head in September 1990, when the two Germanies and the four victorious powers of the second world war fought over the wording of the Final Settlement on German unification. Genscher's allies ultimately overcame his resistance. They insisted the treaty's language allow Nato to extend Article 5 — the guarantee that an attack on one will be treated as an attack on all — eastward across the former cold-war frontline into former East Germany, and also explicitly permit foreign troops to cross that line with the permission of the German government. Crucially, there was no clear prohibition on Nato adding more members.

The Soviet Union, desperate for western financial support at a time when the country was crumbling, agreed to these terms. Its representatives not only signed but ratified the Final Settlement, and President Mikhail Gorbachev took receipt of German financial support as a de facto carrot for Moscow's signature. As the successor to the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation remains bound by this ratification — but Putin ignores that.

Russians used missiles relinquished to Moscow by Ukrainians in the 1990s to attack Ukrainians in 2022

Throughout the 1990s, even before Putin became president, the memory of those early negotiations continued to plague western relations with Russia. All sides agreed that the

Final Settlement applied exclusively to Germany. The problem was that they did not agree on what that meant. Nato member-states understood the settlement as allowing continued enlargement, because it both set the precedent of extending Nato's Article 5 across the former cold war frontline and did not explicitly preclude the addition of new alliance members. Russia, by contrast, understood the settlement as prohibiting continued enlargement east of the newly united Germany, largely because of the speculative comments made during negotiations.

One of the goals of the Nato-Russia Founding Act of May 27 1997 was to address Moscow's concerns on the issue. Instead, the act became a source of more confusion when the then-Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, publicised it by saying, inaccurately, that it prohibited Nato from using any former Warsaw Pact military infrastructure in central and eastern Europe. It did not.

During the signing ceremony with Nato member-states, Yeltsin created yet more confusion by announcing he'd order subordinates to carry out a massive disarmament: "Everything that is aimed at countries present here — all of those weapons — are going to have their warheads removed." But his subordinates knew nothing about, and did not intend to implement, Yeltsin's stunning declaration. The comments created a false sense of what had been agreed in 1997. And they later intensified the outcry over both Nato's 1999 Kosovo actions and its 2008 statement about Ukrainian membership, both of which worsened western-Russian relations.

Absent from Putin's rants is the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which also had its origins in Soviet collapse. Upon becoming independent in 1991, Ukraine was born nuclear, thanks to the Soviet arsenal on its territory. Although that arsenal was designed to be commanded from Moscow, Kyiv's physical possession of missiles, silos and warheads made it the world's third-largest nuclear power, bigger than France or Britain.

Neither the west nor Moscow wanted that status to persist, so Kyiv was persuaded to make a deal. Under the Budapest Memorandum, in exchange for dismantling, destroying or relocating those weapons to Russia, Ukraine received assurances of its territorial integrity — with Moscow as one of the guarantors.

The memorandum proved to be toothless. There was no significant response to Russia's 2014 violations of Ukrainian territorial integrity, despite Ukraine having fulfilled its obligations. One particularly bitter aspect of the current conflict is evidence that Russians used some of the non-nuclear missiles relinquished to Moscow by Ukrainians in the 1990s to attack Ukrainians in 2022.

These events are particularly tragic given that western policymakers recognised the larger significance of Ukrainian independence as soon as it happened. To President Clinton, "the

strategic importance of Ukraine to all of Europe in the 21st century" was obvious. In his view, "peace in a broad area" depended in large part on its future. Clinton's national security adviser, Tony Lake, even urged Clinton as early as 1994 to consider the option of Nato membership for Ukraine. This idea came to nothing.

Concern about both Russian reactions and its aggression in Chechnya combined instead with a desire to begin alliance enlargement with the smallest possible number of new member states in the opening round. The consequence was a new Nato front line that fell well short of Ukraine. Even as Kyiv now receives extensive western military assistance, the prospects of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy's September 2022 appeal for "accelerated ascension" to Nato remain limited.

If this history can be a weapon, is there a silver lining? Can it also be a guide, warning us of dangers ahead? A comparative view suggests that the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine did more than escalate an on-going regional conflict. Instead, it escalated great-power military competition as well, creating new uncertainty about what comes next. Thanks to courageous Ukrainian resistance and strong support from western countries, the outcome of the fighting remains — in a way that seemed scarcely possible last February — still open.

Though it launched the first major European land war of the 21st century and is one of only two strategic nuclear powers to arise in the 20th, Moscow has failed at a quintessentially 19th-century challenge. It has botched the imperial incorporation of a proximate territory. As the Yale historians Paul Kennedy and Arne Westad have argued, states that over-extend themselves in such a profound way tend to meet unhappy fates in the long run. But they do a lot of damage on their way down.

A year has made it apparent that Moscow has already caused outcomes it did not want for itself: more rather than fewer Nato activities, munitions and even members on its borders. Sweden and Finland will become Nato members, Turkish objections notwithstanding. Finland alone will add 830 more miles to the Nato-Russian border. Germany and other European states are, together with the United States, sending tanks — while also increasing their energy independence from Russia.

The greatest damage has, of course, been done to Ukrainians. They have faced unspeakable war crimes and immense suffering with bravery and dignity. Further from the front, others will be forced to adapt to bitter new realities as well: a new generation of western policymakers will have to learn the rigours of great-power military competition in Europe. Sadly, the European past provides abundant examples for them to study. As I will be telling my classes again this week: history matters. And so does the unravelling of twisted tales.

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