Putin’s Thousand-Year War

The reasons for his anti-Western enmity stretch back over Russia’s entire history—and they will be with us for a long time.

Michael Hirsh March 12, 2022, 6:00 AM

Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a ceremony marking the 1,030th anniversary of the adoption of Christianity by Prince Vladimir, the leader of Kievan Rus, in Moscow on July 28, 2018. ALEXANDER ZEMLIANICHENKO/AFP via Getty Images

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Whether or not Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine ends any

time soon, what is certain to continue is the Russian president's abiding hatred and mistrust of the United States and other Western powers, which he believes left him no choice but to launch an unprovoked war.

It's not just Putin. These views are shared by the many Russian elites who have supported him for two decades. They have also been a chief reason for Putin's domestic popularity—at least until recently, when his invasion ran into fierce resistance—even as he has turned himself into a dictator and Russia into a nearly totalitarian state reminiscent of the Soviet Union at its worst. It is an enmity worth probing in depth, if only to understand why Washington and the West almost certainly face another "long twilight struggle" with Moscow—in former U.S. President John F. Kennedy's words—rivaling the 45-year Cold War.

The Russian president's enduring antagonism toward the West is a complex tale, one compounded of Putin's 69-year-old personal history as a child of World War II and career Soviet spy as well as the tangled, thousand-year history of Russia itself—or at least Putin's reading of it. At the bottom, Putin and the many right-leaning Russian officials, elites, and scholars who support him not only don't want to be part of the West and its postwar liberal value system but believe their country's destiny is to be a great-

power bulwark against it.

Even if Putin is somehow ousted from power, the generals and security mandarins who surround him are just as vested in his aggression as he is. And already, Russia is almost as isolated economically as it was during the Soviet era.

Indeed, Putin may have been preparing for this moment longer than people realize: After the Russian leader annexed Crimea in 2014, the Kremlin's longtime ideologist, Vladislav Surkov, wrote that it would mark "the end of Russia's epic journey to the West, the cessation of repeated and fruitless attempts to become a part of Western civilization." Surkov predicted that Russia would exist in geopolitical solitude for at least the next hundred years.

"Putin has no path back," said Anna Ohanyan, a political scientist at Stonehill College and the author of several books on Russia. Like other Russia experts, Ohanyan believed at one point during Putin's 20 years in power that he was seeking a way to wield Russian influence within the institutions of the international system while trying to build new, countervailing ones, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Now most of those initiatives have turned to ashes. "By challenging territorial norms, he's throwing out the prospect of the path he's been building," she said.

Biden administration officials are still grappling with the

implications of the new long-term struggle. To do so, they have already delayed publishing their new national security strategy slated for the spring. While the administration expects to maintain its Indo-Pacific focus, officials say Putin's aggression is leading to much more intensive effort to pursue what was already one of U.S. President Joe Biden's key goals: the revitalization of NATO and the Western alliance, especially the new militarization of major European Union nations such as Germany, which hitherto had been reluctant to play a leading defense role.

Left: Putin lights a candle unveiling a monument to legendary medieval prince Alexander Nevsky, a key figure in Kievan Rus, in the village of Samolva, Russia, on Sept. 11. 2021. ALEXEY DRUZHININ/SPUTNIK/AFP via Getty Images Right: Ukrainian Orthodox priests, monks, nuns, and believers gather near of the St. Vladimir statue during a prayer service in downtown Kyiv, Ukraine, on July 27, 2016, to mark the 1,028th anniversary of Kievan Rus Christianization. Vitaliy Holovin/Corbis via Getty images

Ukraine became the touchstone of Putin's anti-Western attitudes in large part because the Russian leader and his

supporters saw their historical brother nation as the last red line in a long series of Western humiliations. Putin, in his speeches, has repeatedly called this the West's "anti-Russia project." These perceived humiliations go back a long, long way—not just in the 30 years since the Cold War ended, nor even in the 100 years since the Soviet Union was formed in 1922. They reach all the way back to the European Enlightenment of more than three centuries ago, which gave rise to liberty, democracy, and human rights. To Russian nationalists like Putin, these developments have gradually come to eclipse Russia's distinct character as a civilization.

By his own account, Putin sees himself not as the heir to the Soviets but as a champion of Russian civilization and Moscow's Eurasian empire, whose roots extend back to a much earlier Vladimir—St. Vladimir, the Grand Prince of Kyiv from about 980 to 1015. St. Vladimir was ruler of what the Russians consider their first empire, the Slavic state known as Kievan Rus—based, of course, in Kyiv, the capital of what is now Ukraine. St. Vladimir's conversion to Christianity in 988 later gave rise to the idea that Russia would be the "third Rome"—the heir to the fallen Roman and Byzantine Empires following the surrender of Constantinople to the Ottomans. It is why, like Putin, many Russians refer to Kievan Rus as "the cradle of Russian civilization" and Kyiv as "the mother of Russian cities."

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All this history is key to understanding Putin's delusional view that Ukraine is not, and can never be, a separate country and "never had a tradition of genuine statehood." Putin made this plain in a Feb. 21 speech, three days before the invasion, and in a 6,800-word essay from July 2021 titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." In that essay, he reached back more than 10 centuries to explain why he was convinced that "Russians and Ukrainians were one people—a single whole." He claimed it was important to understand that Russians and Ukrainians,

along with Belarusians, "are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe." Putin wrote: "The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir … still largely determines our affinity today."

Some scholars believe this obsession with long-ago history is why Putin, who during his two decades in power was often thought to be a wily and restrained tactician, made the biggest miscalculation of his career in invading Ukraine. In doing so, he united, in one reckless move, the Ukrainians and the Europeans as well as the rest of the world against him. "He didn't realize that even most of the Russian-language speakers in eastern Ukraine see themselves now as Ukrainian—that over the past 30 years, the Ukrainians had formed their own country. He didn't realize that their sense of identity had changed," said Peter Eltsov, a professor at National Defense University and author of the new book *The Long Telegram 2.0: A Neo-Kennanite Approach to Russia*. "He also killed all the progress he was making in dividing Europe. Even Finland and Sweden, which had been neutral, are now talking about joining NATO. He achieved the 100 percent opposite result of what he wanted."

Putin (left) and then-Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma attend a ceremony marking the end of the Year of Russia, a program of intensive cultural exchange, in Kyiv on Jan. 23, 2004. ALEXANDER NATRUSKIN/AFP via Getty Images

Putin's historical focus is also meant to convey his deeply entrenched belief that Russia is a distinct civilization that

has little in common with the West. This is a key element of "Eurasianism," a Russian imperial ideology that is more than 100 years old but today has been directed at what Putin and his supporters see as the "philistinism" of the West and the corruption of its democracies, said Kelly O'Neill, a historian of Russia at Harvard University. She suggested that Putin's reluctance to fully integrate modern Russia into the global economy—beyond selling it a lot of oil and gas—is based on the Eurasianist belief that Russia and its dominions are "distinct economies that belong to this beautiful imperial whole. It's a defensive mechanism. If you integrate, then you become more vulnerable. Their view is, 'We're fortress Russia. We don't need anyone else.'"

This attitude also has profound roots in Russian history, especially the Russian belief that Orthodox Christianity is superior to the West's liberalized Christianity, which Putin and other conservative Russians view as corrupted by Enlightenment ideas. In the early 19th century, the Russian answer to the French Revolution's Enlightenment creed, "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité (Freedom, Equality, Fraternity), was "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality"—which Sergey Uvarov, minister of public education to Tsar Nicholas I, formulated as the conceptual foundation of the Russian Empire. This tripartite credo isn't mentioned in Putin's speeches and writings—he still likes to pretend Russia is a democracy—but it has been invoked by the far-right

thinkers said to influence Putin, including Aleksandr Dugin, Lev Gumilev, Ivan Ilyin, Konstantin Leontiev, Sergei Petrovich Trubetskoy, and others dating back 200 years.

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“Uvarov’s formula explains why Russia always seems to resuscitate an autocratic empire in periods of crisis—as it did after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and is now doing following the fall of the Soviet Union,” Eltsov said. Putin’s Eurasianist goals can also only live or die through autocracy and imperial power, Eltsov and other scholars said. “Eurasianism is an imperial idea because it offers a way to reconcile the unity of the people as a whole and their diversity,” O’Neill said. “It’s difficult to do that if you don’t have an empire.”

For Putin, the idea of rebuilding a Eurasian empire under his rule—of which Ukraine must be a part—seems central to his sense of destiny as a leader. Russia, a vast land straddling Europe and Asia, is a civilization that has never been able to decide whether it is more European or Asian—a dilemma made more confusing by the fact that Mongols ruled it for 240 years, leaving behind millions of Tatar descendants. Russia also can’t agree on what its borders ought to be, not even after a thousand years.

“In Europe, borders have been set by rivers and mountain ranges, but that is not the way Russia looks at how boundaries are set. They have fluctuated over time,” based in large part on Moscow’s fears of invasion, said Thomas Graham, a former senior U.S. diplomat and Russia expert now at the Council on Foreign Relations. “People have long said that there’s never been a Russian nation state in history—that it’s always been an empire of one sort or another. The borders of Russia today are pretty much the borders of Russia in 1721, the year the empire was founded. The way they see it now, [the Soviet collapse of] 1991 undid some 200 to 300 years of geopolitical advances.”

Putin’s main goal in office has been to reverse that trend as much as possible. Or as Surkov, the Kremlin ideologist, wrote in 2019: “Having collapsed from the level of the USSR to the level of the [Russian Federation], Russia stopped crumbling, began to recover and to return to its natural and only possible condition as a great land, combining and augmenting the commonality of its peoples.” As a result, Surkov concluded, Russia will soon return to its past glory and the top rank of geopolitical struggle.

Graham and other Russia experts said it is a mistake to view Putin merely as an angry former KGB apparatchik upset at the fall of the Soviet Union and NATO’s encroachment after the Cold War, as he is often portrayed by Western

commentators. Putin, himself, made this clear in his Feb. 21 speech, when he disavowed the Soviet legacy, inveighing against the mistakes made by former leaders Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin to grant Ukraine even partial autonomy. On the contrary, Putin and other Russian nationalists today see Marxism-Leninism as just another regrettable Western import.

Putin and Kuchma light candles during a service at the Kievo-Pecherskaya Lavra cathedral in Kyiv on Jan. 24, 2004. VLADIMIR RODIONOV/AFP via Getty Images

Putin is rather a messianic Russian nationalist and Eurasianist whose constant invocation of history going back to Kievan Rus, however specious, is the best explanation for his view that Ukraine must be part of Russia's sphere of

influence, experts say. In his essay last July, Putin even suggested that the formation of a separate, democratic Ukrainian nation "is comparable in its consequences to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us."

As Putin has shown by transforming post-Soviet Russia's brief experiment with democracy under former Russian President Boris Yeltsin into his personal power structure, he also has never demonstrated any sympathy for the Western postwar order of liberal democratic capitalism. Instead, for him, the post-Cold War period has been mostly about redesigning borders and power. Putin has been driven mainly by an old strategic concept, embraced by dictators Napoleon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler, and other traditional strategists from recent centuries, of the need for "strategic depth" or buffer zones to defend one's borders. For Putin, whose father fought in World War II (Putin carries his picture every year in the national parade commemorating what Russians call the Great Patriotic War), and for many other Russians, the defining event of their lives was the trauma of Hitler's invasion and the deaths of tens of millions of their countrymen. That was likened at the time, and still is, to Napoleon's calamitous war on Russia the century before.

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“Russia has been repeatedly invaded. That’s something that’s very difficult for us in the United States to understand because we never faced a catastrophe of those dimensions,” Graham said. “It is a sense that goes back centuries: In order to survive, you need strategic depth, so you need to push borders out as far away from the heartland as possible—not so much physical as geopolitical barriers. You just push until you meet something that can resist you.”

Putin’s strange promise to “de-Nazify” Ukraine to justify his invasion—especially odd because Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is Jewish—is better understood if one considers that he may actually believe he’s still fighting World War II, when substantial numbers of Ukrainians joined the Nazis. Ukrainian national hero Stepan Bandera—whose name adorns many streets in Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital, and other cities and whose statues can be found across the country—was himself a far-right nationalist who allied with the Nazis and oversaw Jewish pogroms. In his speeches, Putin has often recast the allied fight against the Nazis as a largely Russian triumph. “He probably genuinely believes he’s reproducing the war, fighting against Nazism again,” said Marlene Laruelle, a Russia scholar at George Washington University.

Putin’s consolidation of power and attempts to take back

bits of the former Soviet bloc, starting with his incursion into Georgia in 2008, are also a result of what Eltsov calls "Weimar syndrome"—a burning sense of defeat and humiliation after Soviet Russia's defeat in the Cold War. One reason Putin has been so popular until now is many ordinary Russians share his sense of national injustice, Eltsov said. It is analogous to what happened in Germany after World War I, when popular outrage over the Treaty of Versailles and weakness and chaos in the Weimar Republic precipitated a right-wing reaction and, ultimately, the rise of Hitler.

A replica of the famous Russian painter Repin's picture "The Federal Assembly Session," created by Sergey Kalinin and Farid Bogdalov with a detail

of it showing Putin dressed as a tsar in Moscow on Sept. 16, 2004. MLADEN ANTONOV/AFP via Getty Images

Not every Russian, of course, shares these anti-Western views—even going back hundreds of years. Great figures in Russian history, especially two of its most lionized tsars, Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, often sought to embrace the West and Russia's European identity. Peter, who ruled from 1682 to 1725, was so enamored with the West that he ordered his boyars, or lords, to educate their children in Europe and even imposed a "beard tax" to force them to look like clean-shaven Europeans. Catherine corresponded with Enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot, called French writer Voltaire her hero, and initially sought to set up a parliament and free the serfs. Many royal and aristocratic Russian families eagerly interbred with their European counterparts; Catherine herself was Prussian-born.

But both Peter and Catherine were conquerors as well. And these reformist efforts at integration, while they helped modernize Russia and gave rise to all those French-speaking Russian aristocrats who populated the works of Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov, were almost always eclipsed by deeper conservative Russian fears. Today, Russian nationalists deride the Western reform efforts of Peter the Great as a seditious "fifth column." Even Boris Nemtsov—a liberal opponent to Putin's regime who was

murdered on a bridge near the Kremlin in 2015— suggested that Russia could benefit from a constitutional monarchy back in 1993.

To a degree little understood by many Westerners, Russian literary figures they revere, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, were also devotees of this idea of a "greater Russia" under an absolute autocrat. Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize-winning author best known for writings that exposed the horrors of the Soviet gulag, later became one of Putin's favorite intellectuals. Before his 2008 death, Solzhenitsyn wrote in an essay: "All the talk of a separate Ukrainian people existing since something like the ninth century and possessing its own non-Russian language is recently invented falsehood." Shortly before his death in 1881, Dostoevsky wrote: "To the people the Czar is the incarnation of themselves, their whole ideology, their hopes and beliefs."

Putin, many Russia experts say, is only Russia's latest tsar, and that's the way he should be viewed by the Western strategists now searching for ways to stop him. The answer, in the end, may be to understand that Putin is acting more out of weakness than strength. In other words, Putin is riding the tiger of democratic self-determination in Ukraine and other former states of the Russian sphere—all of which now want to join the West—and he may not know how to

get off. Eltsov argues that as a result of its centuries-long effort to control so many ethnic nationalities within its ever-shifting borders, Russia cannot survive for long as a true liberal democracy.

If it embraced the West and its democratic values, he said, “Russia would probably disintegrate.”

Correction, March 14, 2022: A previous version of this article misstated the exact location of Boris Nemtsov’s death.