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**From Kyivan Rus
to Ukraine**

Past is Present

Zeitenspiegel Essay

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Kyivan Rus and Ukraine:
Past is Present

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Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Vladimir Putin launched an invasion of Ukraine that shook the world out of a post-World War II stupor in which a future land war in Europe was never envisioned. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had been created to prevent such a war. The United Nations (UN) had been created to prevent such a war. Yet, at the end of February 2022 commentators found themselves scrambling to explain, or even understand, how it was possible that there was once again a land war in Europe. Without claiming any abilities of prognostication, it is possible to walk through the events leading up to the war to understand, as a historian does, the preconditions for it, why Putin invaded, and why the West was so shocked by this action. Revisiting recent history will also demonstrate that this war should not have been entirely unexpected either. This introduction then will attempt to lay out the recent history behind Putin's war in Ukraine and the historical precedents that he is utilizing as a rationale by way of introducing the much larger, and longer, window of history which demonstrates the historical inclusion of eastern Europe in Medieval Europe and the scholarly processes that have contributed to the neglect of this region by modern Western scholars.

The story of the Ukraine war, from the Russian perspective, is a reaction to a variety of policies by both Ukrainian and Western governments. A main villain in the Russian narrative is NATO. This persistent argument from the Russian side has perplexed Westerners who view NATO as a purely defensive organization and thus fail to see how it could be perceived in any other way. To understand Russia's perspective on this, it is necessary to briefly cover the founding rationale of NATO and then more closely the events of the post-1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

NATO was founded in 1949 as a way to defend the Western Allies against the Soviet Union which was viewed at the time as expansion-

ist. Such a view is historically problematic as well, given that Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt agreed with Josef Stalin to divide Europe into spheres of influence, giving the Soviet Union the eastern portion of the continent. In fact, Stalin abided by those terms, allowing the British to demolish a Communist uprising in Greece, as it was not in his sphere of influence. The Soviet response to NATO came only in the 1950s when the Warsaw Pact was created to unify the Soviet satellite states in a defensive alliance of their own. Throughout the Cold War, and a series of proxy wars between the two sides, NATO and the Warsaw Pact never came directly to grips with one another, despite decades of planning for just that eventually.

With the fall of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991, it seemed possible that the organization created to defend against Soviet aggression would go away. Instead, NATO embarked on a campaign of expansion. Expansion which was continually and persistently directed in only one way – to the east, closer to the borders of the newly formed Russia. The first to receive formal acceptance were the Central European states bordering Germany – Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic in 1999. Their priority in admission reflects not just the eastward bent of the organization but its associations with the traditional idea of Europe as we will see in chapter 3 when we discuss the formation of ideas of Europe. The Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) which had been absorbed by the Soviet Union in 1939 as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Stalin and Adolf Hitler led the class of 2004 which included not just them but Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria. The Baltics had historic ties to Western Europe, dating all the way back to the medieval period when German knights brought Christianity, and the sword, to the region during the Baltic Crusades. The other countries were a slow and steady expansion east. Despite repeated assurances by NATO officials and leaders of Western countries that NATO was not targeting Russia, the geographic predestination seemed to indicate a clear goal – of reaching Russia's border.

Amidst these NATO expansions, the organization became embroiled in the dissolution of Yugoslavia and Serbian attempts to create a greater Serbia, including the ethnic cleansing of Muslims. Serbia and Russia have had strong ties dating back to the nineteenth century and the idea of pan-Slavism. Pan-Slavism was a popular idea in which all of the Slavic states were viewed as brothers and Russia, the Russian Empire at that point, was viewed as the big brother to all of them, given that it was the only one independent of another's control. The Serbs were particularly important to Russia as can be seen in the Balkan Wars of the very early twentieth century, as well as the defense of Serbian territorial integrity advanced by Nicholas II for his mobilization of forces in 1914 after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Thus, in the 1990s, Russia protested NATO action against Serbia, but those protests fell on deaf ears and the Russian assumption was that NATO was acting in their sphere of influence. The sphere of influence argument was raised a few years later when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008. The Western countries allowed such an invasion to continue, and Russia created quasi-independent republics in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.¹ The lack of Western mobilization in support of Georgia helped to create the impression that Russia was free to act in their own near abroad.

Returning momentarily to the Soviet Union, Russia was the mainstay country of that organization. It was the largest territorially and it provided the bulk of the members of the Communist Party which ran the country. Nevertheless, Vladimir Lenin attempted to stay away from the idea that the Soviet Union was simply another name for Russia. He acted against what he called "Great Russian chauvinism" even when he found it in such non-Russians as Stalin. Nevertheless, particularly under Stalin and during World War II, Russia and Russian traditions became associated, some might argue coterminous, with the Soviet experience. All of which is relevant to the idea of NATO's primary opposition being the Soviet

Union. If there is no Soviet Union, and yet NATO still exists, the logical conclusion on all parts is that the target of the organization is now Russia – an idea just recently enshrined in the 2022 Strategic Concept drafted by NATO at the Madrid Summit.² Furthermore, the approach of NATO to the borders of Russia in the twenty-first century triggered the Russians into a mode of thinking known as “encirclement.” Beginning with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, when multiple Western powers, including the United States and Great Britain landed troops in Russian territory, the Russians have been concerned that the Western powers were attempting to encircle them and close down any outlets they may have to the wider world. Thus, if one combines the mindsets discussed, briefly, here, it is possible to see that NATO’s target of the Soviet Union is easily transferable to Russia, that Russia is worried about encirclement, and that Russia feels that it has been given permission to act in its own near abroad without consequences. All of which sets the stage for the invasion of Ukraine.

The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine was not the first Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory, it is essential to note. In 2014, Russia invaded Ukraine and created breakaway republics in Luhansk and Donetsk and took the Crimean Peninsula for itself, claiming it as its own heritage, and protesting that its inclusion in Ukraine was only an accident of Nikita Khrushchev gifting it to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954 on the three-hundredth anniversary of the Treaty of Pereiaslavl. While Western countries protested and levied sanctions, Russia was not harmed or shunned for this action, nor was any military organization readied to resist the Russian invasion by anyone outside of Ukraine. Once again, Putin was reassured that while the West might not like his claiming, and taking, territory in his own near abroad, that he was largely free to do so. And in the intervening years, Putin continued to make statements which indicated his desire to claim even more territory for himself. Most notably in

2021 when he issued an article entitled, *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*.

On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians is a long document that lays out what Putin calls the “pivotal moments” which united the two peoples and which have been twisted, in his idea, into divergence.³ Putin begins with Rus, and given that it is the subject of the current book, I will excerpt a large portion of his mention of it, so that we can see what he says, before embarking on our own study of the topic in chapters 1 and 2. To quote:

Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe. Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory – from Ladoga, Novgorod, and Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov – were bound together by one language (which we now refer to as Old Russian), economic ties, the rule of the princes of the Rurik dynasty, and – after the baptism of Rus – the Orthodox faith. The spiritual choice made by St. Vladimir, who was both Prince of Novgorod and Grand Prince of Kiev, still largely determines our affinity today.

The throne of Kiev held a dominant position in Ancient Rus. This had been the custom since the late 9th century. The Tale of Bygone Years captured for posterity the words of Oleg the Prophet about Kiev, “Let it be the mother of all Russian cities.”⁴ These ideas are crucial to remember for numerous reasons, but to highlight just two:

1. They are largely correct. The kingdom of Rus was the largest (territorial) polity in medieval Europe. It stretched from the Baltic Sea in the north with Novgorod as a northern entrepot nearly to the Black Sea in the south. On the west it had frontiers with Hungary and Poland, and its eastern border continued to grow, most notably adding territory in the Volga and Oka River regions which became the eventual home to the cities of Vladimir, Moscow, and Tver which would later become the heartland for Muscovy.⁵ Additionally, Rus was tied together by language, though we often refer to it

in the West as “Old East Slavic” it was a language which forms the root of modern Russian, Ukrainian, and Belorussian, and was mutually intelligible in the middle ages throughout the area under discussion. Similarly, Kiev – or rather Kyiv in modern usage, was the capital. And though the main English translation of the text quoted by Putin says just the same thing “mother of Russian cities,” a better translation would indicate that Kyiv was instead the mother of Russian cities.⁶ Russian, of or relating to Rus, is more historically accurate than Russia, a state which was created in the modern period and should not be read back into time.

2. The view presented by Putin conforms to what we often call “the traditional scheme of Russian history” and which has been widely accepted in the West. Such a view, particularly the idea that the conversion of Rus to Orthodox Christianity sealed their fate as separate from the rest of Europe, but united with the eastern portions, is widely prevalent in modern scholarly work and has been disseminated in classrooms for generations. As we will address in chapter 3, this is a major reason why it is difficult to conceptualize Ukraine as part of Europe, because we were trained to think of it as something else, something other than European.

Thus, while Putin begins his document with Rus and the historical unity, it is both true and not true, though the untruths are themselves widely accepted. The document continues through the early modern period, all the way to the modern, citing instances in which the historical unity of the two groups was assured and noting where it has been, in his opinion, twisted to use again Russian national interests. The article has become part of the compulsory education of Russian schoolchildren and is required reading in the Russian military. Both areas in which the state can, and has, created an image of Russia that stretches beyond its borders to include the other East Slavic states. We can see the impact of this document already on the actions of Russian soldiers in the current war in Ukraine. One Ukrainian woman, evicted from her apartment in

Irpin by Russian soldiers reported that the soldier told her he was retaking the territory of Kievan Rus. Putin's argument on historical unity was not made in a vacuum.

This short book has three main chapters to help illustrate the importance of Kyivan Rus to the modern war in Ukraine and to our understanding of the idea of Europe in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 1 will deal with the formation of the kingdom of Rus. Where did Rus come from, how was it constructed, who ruled it, and how did it interact with the other groups in eastern Europe. Particularly important here will be the story of the conversion of Rus to help establish a better understanding of what that conversion entailed and its impacts in the years to come. A foundational knowledge of Rus will be essential for creating a base of knowledge of what the kingdom was, and was not, in its formative period.

Chapter 2 highlights the interactions of Rus, and especially its ruling elite, with the rest of Medieval Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The ruling family, known traditionally as the Riurikids but called here the Volodimerovichi, were intermarried with the elite throughout the continent. Moreover, trade relations helped bind Rus into continental affairs, well beyond the perennial focus of Russian trade with Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire. Similarly, religious ties continued in this period with groups throughout Europe, not just the Patriarch of Constantinople, demonstrating the importance of broadening our conception of medieval Christianity rather than relying on dated stereotypes about schism and division.

Chapter 3 moves us from history to historiography, from the study of what happened to the study of how we talk about what happened. In this chapter, we will examine the ways that medieval Europe has been constructed over decades, and in some cases, a century or more, of history writing. Specifically, we will see the division of Europe made famous by the Cold War read back into the

medieval past, creating a world in which medieval Europe equals Western Europe and the eastern half of the continent is blank or divided off into its own commonwealth. Similarly, this chapter deals with attempts to remedy this situation and their rebuttal by the Russian narrative of eastern European history.

All of these chapters then lead us to the conclusion and a brief discussion of whether or not Ukraine is part of Europe and what does that mean. It will also attempt to tie all of the threads of the book together to help us understand why medieval events matter in the modern world and how they shape our understanding of current events.