Sorry, Mr. Putin. Ukraine and Russia are Not the Same Country

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In 2003, the pro-Russian president of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma published a ghost-written book called "Ukraine Is Not Russia." Last summer, Russian President Vladimir Putin authored a long historical article making the opposite argument — it was called “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” — and many a Ukrainian heart sank. Sure enough, in less than six months, Russian troops and tanks started massing near the Ukrainian border.

If you don’t want to live in interesting times, as the alleged curse goes, best to avoid the parts of the world where heads of state write history treatises.

In trying to make the case that Ukraine and Russia are historically “one people,” Putin (or his scribes) did not go back to the Soviet version of history; instead, they reached for the most reactionary tsarist one. That’s because the Soviets *did* recognize Ukrainians as a separate ethnic nation with their own language and the (theoretical) right to self-determination, which in practice meant they were granted a Ukrainian republic within the Soviet Union. Unlike the Soviets, the Russian tsars saw Ukrainians as part of the Russian nation, representing no more than its “Little Russian tribe,” and their language a mere regional dialect. They also believed that over the centuries the West had attempted time and again to undermine Russo-Ukrainian unity. Putin borrowed this point, adding NATO and the EU to the list of Western offenders.

As it happens, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine also has some connection to history writing. A popular comedian, he starred in a sitcom about an ordinary history teacher who accidentally becomes the president and finds himself trying to fix a corrupt political system. He was believable in the role and, incredibly, without any previous political experience, ended up being elected Ukraine’s real president at the age of 41.

Zelenskyy’s television role depicted his character teaching children about the dark pages of Ukraine’s history when it was part of the Russian and Soviet empires, but the producers did not dwell on that. They wanted to attract a wider audience, including those Ukrainians who spoke Russian at home and were nostalgic for Soviet times, as well as those who were unconcerned about history or identity. And they succeeded, as Zelenskyy’s stunning run-off victory in 2019, which saw him winning 73 percent of the vote over the incumbent Petro Poroshenko.

Zelenskyy came into office as the opposite of a Ukrainian nationalist — he’s a Jewish Russophone who struggles when he speaks Ukrainian and a perennial optimist who asserts that easy, common-sense solutions to major problems can be found. Yet even he could not please Russia. After a brief window of uncertainty, the Russian state-controlled media began denouncing him as the West’s obedient servant. More recently, he has been portrayed as a Western flunky willing at any moment to attack Russia on the West’s behalf.

That, of course, would not occur to Zelenskyy even in his worst nightmare. But since he took office, it’s true that his rhetoric has indeed changed notably. He sounds more patriotic now, and yes, he often talks about history, particularly about Ukraine’s difficulty in bidding farewell to its former imperial master with whom it still shares a border. For Zelenskyy’s transformation, the Russian leadership has only itself to blame.

Many Russians today share Putin’s delusion that Ukraine has always been part of Russia. The truth is much more complicated.

In the mid-9th century, when a group of Vikings calling themselves “Rus” (pronounced “Roos”), established control over the Slavs living in what is now central Ukraine and northwestern Russia, they made Kyiv their capital. Moscow would not be established for two more centuries, and when it was, it was a minor settlement deep in the forests on the distant frontier of medieval Rus. The local Slavs, who in the long run came to identify as the people of the Rus land, called themselves Rusyns — a name that in some parts of southwestern Ukraine survived well into the 20th century. Today, the three East Slavic nations of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia claim

Kyivan Rus as their heritage, although the ancient Rus heartland and its capital, Kyiv, are encompassed in modern Ukraine.

It is disquieting for a former empire like Russia to realize that what it regards as its medieval capital and the seat of its first dynasty is now "abroad." The greatest legendary knight of Russian epic poetry, Ilya Muromets, lies buried in Kyiv, and it was there that Grand Prince Volodymyr the Saint baptized the Rusyns as Orthodox Christians in the waters of the mighty Dnipro River. Known as Vladimir in Russian, both Lenin and Putin owe their first names to him.

But just as the medieval Franks of Charlemagne's time were neither French nor German, it would be misleading to try and assign to the Rusyns any modern ethnic designation. They spoke many East Slavic dialects from which the modern Ukrainian, Belarusian and Russian languages would develop centuries later. The language of the church and state, Old Slavonic, was borrowed from the Balkan Slavs and few in Rus knew it well. That Rus accepted Eastern (or Orthodox) Christianity from the Byzantine Empire would later mark it as different from the Catholics and Protestants in Europe, but this schism remained undeveloped in Kyivan times.

It was only after the Mongol conquest in the mid-13th century that cultural differences between the principalities formerly under the grand princes of Kyiv crystallized. These differences soon became political, especially after the western Rus principalities found themselves under Lithuanian and Polish rule. Meanwhile, among the eastern principalities, the princes of Muscovy grew in power as vassals of the Mongols before ultimately rejecting their masters' authority.

When the two worlds centered on Kyiv and Moscow met again in 1654, they could not understand each other — not because of language, but because of drastically different political models. A new social group, Zaporozhian Cossacks, had emerged from the East Slavic population living freely in the southern steppes of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, initially tolerated by Polish governors as a military bulwark against Ottoman incursions and Tatar raids, aimed at providing captives for slave markets in the Crimea or Istanbul. The Ukrainian Cossacks also came to see themselves as protectors of the Orthodox Rus people against Catholic Polish landowners. After many Cossack rebellions against Poland, the one led by Hetman (Cossack general) Bohdan Khmelnytsky in 1648 turned into a massive peasant and religious war, which resulted in the Polish king granted effective independence to the Cossack region in what is now central Ukraine. When the war quickly resumed, Khmelnytsky asked the Orthodox Muscovite tsar for "protection." Upon the Muscovite envoys' arrival in 1654, the Cossack officers expected both sides to take an oath: they, to recognize the tsar's authority, and the envoys, to promise on the tsar's behalf to respect Cossack rights and freedoms. However, the Muscovites resisted, insisting that their tsar was an autocrat not accountable to his subjects. In the end, the Cossacks took the oath, but historians still argue about what they meant by accepting Moscow's "protection."

There is no doubt as to what the tsars meant. Soon they established Russian garrisons in major Ukrainian towns and started curtailing the autonomy of the Cossack administration, especially after a desperate bid in 1709 to seek Swedish protection against the Russians. In her drive to streamline Russian imperial governance, Catherine II focused on absorbing Ukraine, which she wanted to assimilate into Russia. In 1764, Catherine II forced the last Hetman to resign and then erased the last vestiges of Cossack autonomy. During the partitions of Poland, she also acquired the Ukrainian lands that Poland had kept after its wars with Khmelnytsky. By 1793, on the occasion of gathering most of the former Rus lands under her sceptre, Catherine had a medal minted with the words, "What Was Torn Away I Restored."

But then the age of modern nationalism arrived.

The American and French revolutions, as well as the ideas of German Romantic philosophers, encouraged 19th-century Ukrainian intellectuals to see sovereignty as vested in the people and the people as represented by the peasants. Rather than seeking the return of Cossack autonomy, they developed a new notion of Ukraine as a territory in which linguistic and ethnic criteria identified the majority population as Ukrainian.

Publications in the modern Ukrainian language followed, most notably the poetry of the national bard Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861). The Russian Empire did not meet the challenge of modern nationhood particularly well; it focused more on cultivating loyalty to the dynasty and the Orthodox religion. In the Ukrainian lands, however, Russian authorities identified modern Ukrainian culture itself as a challenge to the Russian-Orthodox core of imperial power. In 1876, Alexander II completely banned the publication of books in Ukrainian. Almost simultaneously, local Rusyns (or "Ruthenians," in Austrian terms) in the Hapsburg Empire took their first steps toward political participation and began mobilizing peasants to the national cause. In the 1890s Ukrainian activists in both empires switched to using the ethnic designator, "Ukrainians" instead of the names derived from Rus that could result in their being mistaken for Russians. The name Ukraine, which means borderland, has been applied to what is now central Ukraine since at least the 16th century.

One of Russia's main aims in World War I was to capture the Habsburg Ukrainian territories, thus crushing Ukrainian nationalism and completing the gathering of the ancient Rus lands. Instead, the war resulted in imperial collapse and the creation of two Ukrainian republics — one on either side of the former Russian-Austrian border. Those republics unified in 1919 in the short-lived Ukrainian People's Republic. No matter how brief, that reunification showed that any "gathering" of Rus lands could now only take place from the position of recognizing the existence of a modern Ukrainian nation. Indeed, the Bolsheviks, who soon managed to reconquer most of the former Russian Empire's Ukrainian territories, felt obliged to establish a puppet Ukrainian Soviet Republic, which was one of the founders of the Soviet Union in 1922.

Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, who had participated in the Bolsheviks' efforts to recover Ukraine, never forgot the threat that the notion of an independent Ukraine represented for the Bolshevik project. He also interpreted the Ukrainian problem as primarily a peasant problem. The final battles of the 1917 revolution in the Russian Empire played out in Ukraine as late as the early 1930s. Stalin first imposed collective farming on the Ukrainian peasantry and then crushed the Ukrainian resistance with the double blow of a state-engineered famine of 1932–33, which killed some four million, and simultaneous mass repressions against Ukrainian intellectuals. Taken together, these events are known in Ukraine as the Holodomor ("murder by famine"), a genocide against the modern Ukrainian nation that came of age during the revolution. Tellingly, Russia, as the legal successor of the Soviet Union, refuses to acknowledge the Holodomor.

When Stalin concluded a pact with Hitler in 1939 to divide Poland, he was guided by the same great-power logic as Catherine II, but he bid on the new territories not in the name of ancient Rus, but in that of modern Ukraine. It was the Ukrainian SSR that was to receive Poland's Ukrainian territories — some of them inherited from the former Habsburg Empire and others wrested from the Bolsheviks during the revolution. Between 1939 and 1945 Stalin managed to unite in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic practically all the ethnographic Ukrainian lands and launched efforts to assimilate them into Russian culture.

His successor, Nikita Khrushchev, continued this drive with enthusiasm. Yet, every Soviet leader had to grapple with the strength of Ukrainian identity in the westernmost regions, which had never been part of the Russian Empire and had only a brief experience of Soviet communism. By the early 1950s, the Kremlin managed, with great difficulty, to suppress the nationalist insurgency there.

When seen through a Russian nationalistic lens, Khrushchev's transfer in 1954 of the Crimean Peninsula from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic appears to be a major injury to Russian national pride. However, Soviet leaders freely modified borders between the republics when economic and political rationality so dictated. In 1924, for example, they moved the Taganrog district (the birthplace of the playwright Anton Chekhov) from Ukraine to Russia despite the Ukrainian majority there, and in 1940 they created a new Moldovan republic from autonomous Moldovan territory in Ukraine. In the case of Crimea, however, Khrushchev had an ulterior political motive — to make Ukraine more "Russian," since ethnic Russians had recently become a majority on the peninsula as a result of Stalin's genocidal deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944.

The Soviets' failure to extinguish Ukrainian national identity became clear during Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms in the late 1980s, when Ukraine followed the Baltic republics in their decisive rejection of the Soviet Union,

which was formally dissolved at the end of 1991. Many Western commentators expected a war between Russia and Ukraine at that time, a prospect aggravated by the presence on Ukrainian territory of the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal — a decaying Soviet one, over which Ukraine never had operational control.

Yet, no Yugoslav-style meltdown happened after the Soviet collapse, in part because President Boris Yeltsin initially positioned his newly independent Russia as the opposite of the oppressive Soviet empire. He, too, eventually embraced imperial nostalgia, but not before Ukraine had relinquished its nuclear weapons in keeping with the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, under which three nuclear powers — Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom — also guaranteed Ukraine's sovereignty and the integrity of its borders. Back then, Russians and Ukrainians could still dream together of a democratic and prosperous future as neighbors.

What can you do when your former imperial master declares that it cannot live without you? Putin's historical article from last summer is essentially a statement of unrequited love and illustrates Russia's core problem vis-à-vis Ukraine: It thinks of itself not as a nation but as an empire.

After three decades of independence, fewer and fewer Ukrainians can now imagine themselves living in the same political space with authoritarian Russia. The two popular revolutions in Ukraine — the Orange Revolution (2004–05) and the Revolution of Dignity (2013–14) — were aimed not simply against pro-Russian politicians, but against the political model that Putin's Russia best represents. Now that Russia has annexed Crimea and de facto controls a part of the Donbas industrial region, the share of Putin supporters in Ukraine has decreased drastically, partly because those regions were the most pro-Russian in Ukraine, but also because Russia's military occupations have has resulted in a long, drawn-out war and a massive displacement of the population.

In other words, as a result of Putin's moves in Ukraine, the country has become even more anti-Russian.

Ukraine's separate ethnic identity challenges Russia's very vision of itself as an empire, and Ukraine's political identity defies Putin's authoritarian political model. A successful Ukraine next door could serve as an example to the Russians, who are now deprived of all political freedoms in part because the two recent Ukrainian revolutions have scared Putin so much. If the West helps build a democratic and prosperous Ukraine, its very existence can one day bring about a democratic Russia.

That is what Putin really fears. And that is why Zelenskyy has no choice but to dust off his history books.