

Putin's retelling of the Great Patriotic War myth and the construction of Russian national identity

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Abstract

Political elites often use the nation's past to construct the nation's present identity. In his speeches about the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin frequently uses the Russian national myth of the Great Patriotic War to construct Russia's present duties, values, and identity. Charges of neo-Nazism and fascism against Ukraine are made to construct the Russian national identity as one that fights proactively against Nazism. However, by using a myth set in the Soviet period, the status of Ukraine as either part of the Russian Self or constituting the foreign Other is highly ambiguous. Although cynical and deeply offensive, Putin's use of Nazi imagery therefore has a purpose deeper than causing shock and offence.

Keywords: identity, myth, Putin, Russia, Ukraine.

Introduction

Vladimir Putin's accusations of neo-Nazism in Ukraine have been described as a deployment of "one of the laziest tropes in modern political rhetoric" (Maxwell, 2022, p. 164). In this article, I will argue that Putin's charges of neo-Nazism and allusions to the Second World War in his speeches about the 2022 invasion of Ukraine are more than just lazy political rhetoric. By using the Russian national myth of the Great Patriotic War, Putin is reconstructing Russian national identity as one that has a duty to proactively fight against resurgent Nazism. However, by using a myth about the Soviet Union's activities in the Second World War to justify a present war against Ukraine, Putin constructs Ukraine as both 'another' part of the Russian nation whilst simultaneously being 'an Other' to the Russian 'Self'. Ukraine therefore has an ambiguous position in Russian national identity. Hence, Putin's comments are cynical and inflammatory, whilst also being a considered, deliberate attempt to use the past to interpret the present. To label its use as 'lazy' is to neglect important negotiations of national identity, and to trivialise the potency that this Second World War narrative holds both in Russia and Ukraine.

National myths and national identity

Although the definition of a 'nation' is contested, a classic definition is Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as "an imagined political community" (Anderson, 1983, p. 5). The shared imagining, or creating, of a nation's past is an important part of nation-building. A central way a nation's past is interpreted and told is through national myths (Bell, 2003, p. 64; Smith, 2002, p. 19). A national myth is a potent way to unify members of a nation and distinguish the national Self from a foreign Other,

because myths offer a shared understanding of past events. This shared understanding in turn “suffuses a nation’s past, present, and future with a set of values, ideals, and beliefs” (Bouchard, 2013, p. 277). In contrast to the lived experience of memory, national myths are top-down impositions of meaning on the nation’s past (Bell, 2003, p. 74). Mythmaking is an elite endeavour to forge a national community by locating members of the nation within a shared history. However, national myths are not static and not a given. They are constantly being reconstructed and renegotiated (Bell, 2003, p. 75).

The term ‘myth’ may imply that national myths are falsehoods or fictions. However, they are connected to reality (Brunstedt, 2021, p. 7), and are lived as “true and meaningful” by the nation’s members (Bouchard, 2013, p. 277). A myth connects to reality, or history, through both what is remembered by and what is forgotten in the myth. Remembering historical victory or trauma is important for the construction of the nation’s duties or values, and the establishment of some moral or political authenticity (Bouchard, 2013, p. 278). Although a national myth follows the unfolding of history, it also contains omissions of and ‘amnesia’ regarding “deeds of violence” (Renan, 1996, p. 45). As Ernest Renan famously explained, forgetting or omitting parts of history in a nation’s ‘history’ “is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (Renan, 1996, p. 45). The retrospective forgetting, remembering, and reinterpreting of certain histories can serve the needs of the nation’s present by legitimising traditions, symbols, and actions (Bouchard, 2013, p. 277; Klymenko, 2016, p. 39).

Myths are necessary for the construction and persistence of a national identity because they provide a “temporally extended narrative” that represents a “privileged and valorized” nation (Bell, 2003, p. 69). The present national Self, and the foreign Other, is constituted by the myth’s interpretation of the past (Greene, Lipman, & Ryabov, 2010, p. 5). This ‘past’ is understood as both a specific time and within a specific place, and so a national myth includes a temporal and spatial dimension. Temporal dimensions of national myths follow the years past, describing the nation’s founding, and pivotal events in the nation’s ‘life’. Spatial dimensions identify the nation’s territory. They therefore construct the ‘inside’ feeling of the nation within its territory, and the ‘outside’ feeling of foreign territories. When the two dimensions are combined into one national myth, national identity is framed as an exclusive identity that is specific to this history and territory. Hence, when political elites narrate and allude to these national myths, they are telling the ‘story’ of the nation and so are constructing national identity (Bell, 2003, p. 76).

The Russian national myth of the Great Patriotic War

In the late 1990s, the “unthinkable” became the “inevitable”, and the Soviet Union dissolved (Beissinger, 2009, p. 3). All the post-Soviet successor republics had to construct new, post-Soviet, national and state identities (Laruelle, 2018, p. 55). While political elites of the successor states of the Soviet republics could externalise Sovietism as an “alien regime” forced on the nation, the political elites of the Russian Federation could not externalise the Soviet regime, as it was seen as a ‘homegrown’ regime and the new state was the official successor of the Soviet Union (Malinova, 2017, p. 45).

In Russia, the task of creating a new national identity and identifying the nation’s historical foundations was difficult due to the “ideologically loaded” legacy of the past (Edele, 2017, p. 93; Malinova, 2017, p. 93). The Second World War was the most

useable historical moment for reconstructing modern Russia and its national identity, mainly because of the intense popularity of acceptance, commemoration, and the versatility of the memories of the war (Malinova, 2017, p. 44). In turn, Russian political elites utilised the national myth of the 'Great Patriotic War' from the Soviet Union's experience and activities in the Second World War to construct the modern Russian national identity. Top-down measures were and continue to be complemented by the popularity the Great Patriotic War has with the Russian public, who live the myth as meaningful and true (Alexseev & Hale, 2016, p. 210; Edele, 2017, p. 107).

In the post-1945 Soviet Union, the myth of the Great Patriotic War recast the Second World War as an event with unparalleled "meaning and sanctity" (Brunstedt, 2021, p. 7). In post-Soviet Russia, the Great Patriotic War became the central myth in Russian national identity, highlighting the "persistent currency of the old myths" of the Soviet era (Bouchard, 2013, p. 278). This myth tells the story of how the Soviet people defended their native land with valour, in a patriotic war of liberation against the total evil of Nazi Germany (Edele, 2017, p. 95). Since 2000, the central narrative of the Great Patriotic War myth has focused on "the theme of the heroism of the Russian people who won a triumphant victory, brought freedom to half of Europe, and made the USSR a world superpower" (Malinova, 2017, p. 46). Russian political leaders have frequently used this triumphalist narrative of the national myth to highlight how 'passing of the baton' from the Soviet period to modern Russia has imposed a duty on Russia to continue opposing and fighting against Nazism. This duty to act against resurging Nazism, or the lesson of cooperating with other states for the security of the international system constructs the Russian national Self as the guardian and guarantor of the modern international order that is free from Nazism (Malinova, 2017, p. 59).

Yet, forgetting the past is just as important as remembering the past for the construction of national identity. This is true for Russia in the post-Soviet era, as the remembrance of the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany involves the forgetting of Stalin's internal repressions and the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the downplaying of the role of the Allies, and the little mentioning of the Holocaust (Greene, Lipman, & Ryabov, 2010, p. 6). By framing the myth as the triumph of good over evil, the Soviet victory need not be evaluated or "sullied by any guilt by association with Stalin" (Greene, Lipman, & Ryabov, 2010, p. 6). The myth has also been 'Russified', where despite the huge number of people of other ethnicities were killed, the victory in the war has been framed as specifically 'Russian' and the multi-ethnic character of the Soviet force is often neglected (Edele, 2017, p. 98).

The narrative of Russian heroism and triumphant victory over Nazism, and the framing of modern Russia's duty to maintain this order, has been increasingly used as a framework for Putin's narrative on Russian military involvement in Ukraine. In the early 2010s, the myth was framed as a moment where the Russian people fought against both Nazi Germany and Ukrainians who aided Nazi Germany (Edele, 2017, p. 98). This sits alongside the recognition of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic fighting united with the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (Klymenko, 2016, p. 37). During the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, Putin used the myth of the Great Patriotic War to justify Russia's actions as a reaction and response to the pleas of the Crimeans. According to Putin, Crimea was under attack by the "ideological heirs of Bandera, Hitler's accomplice during World War II" (Putin, 2014, p. 5). Putin claimed that "the residents of Crimea and Sevastopol turned to Russia for help ... naturally, we

could not leave this plea unheeded” (Putin, 2014, pp. 5-6). This emphasises how the myth of the Great Patriotic War informs Russian national identity by imposing a duty on Russia to respond to allegedly resurging Nazism, no matter if this Nazism is found in Russia’s ‘brother’.

Russia in 2022: From reactive to proactive

From February 2022, through to Victory Day in 2023, Putin has evoked the national myth of the Great Patriotic War to frame the current war in Ukraine. Firstly, the national myth of the Great Patriotic War is used to maintain the Russian national identity as one enduring from the Soviet period. “The great liberating mission of [the Russian] nation” in the present is constructed as deriving from the successes of the Soviet past (Putin, 2022d, p. 4). Putin emphasises the endurance of the Russian nation despite the change in state structure, from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation, by depicting modern Russian people as the direct descendants of the Soviet army. In Putin’s words, “Russia will always be Russia” (Putin, 2022d, p. 6).

This perceived endurance of the nation, or succession from the Soviet Union, is important because it endows the present Russian nation with a specific duty. As the “successors” of the “unconquered courageous generation of the victors” (Putin, 2022a), the Russian nation exists with the “duty to preserve the memory of those who defeated Nazism” and to be “vigilant and do everything to thwart the horror of another global war” (Putin, 2022a). This is clearly evoking the triumphalist narrative of Russia’s predecessors having “crushed Nazism” and providing modern Russia with “an example of heroism for all ages” (Putin, 2022a). This highlights Putin’s vision that while the Russian state may change from the Soviet period to the modern, the Russian nation will remain the constant opponent to Nazi and fascist ambitions.

The duty to fight against Nazism is called upon when Putin depicts Ukraine as constituting the same existential threat to Russia as it was faced with in the Second World War. Russians have a duty to defend what “your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers fought for” (Putin, 2022a). The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a continuation of this fight, as “today, as in the past, you are fighting for the security of our Motherland, for Russia” (Putin, 2022a). He links this to the historical defence of the Russian nation during the Second World War, explaining that “the defence of our Motherland when its destiny was at stake has always been sacred” (Putin, 2022a). On Victory Day in 2023, Putin commended the Russian soldiers at war in Ukraine for defending “the future of our statehood and our people”, an act that is “faithful to our ancestors’ legacy” (Putin, 2023). Hence, Putin applies the Russian national myth to the war in Ukraine to continually construct a sense of national duty.

Putin has used the pre-existing ‘script’ of the national myth in his comments about the war in Ukraine to maintain Russian national identity. However, neither national myths nor national identity are fixed. They can be reconstructed, particularly through a top-down imposition of a new story line within the myth (Bell, 2003, p. 74). In the 2020s, Putin uses the triumphant narrative of the Great Patriotic War to construct the national identity of Russia in the present. He does this by introducing a new dimension of the Great Patriotic War myth, through ‘remembering’ a new part of Soviet history. The “liberating mission” that Russia takes up as the myth’s imperative changes slightly. While the Soviet Union did defeat Nazi Germany, Putin laments that:

The USSR sought not to provoke the potential aggressor until the very end by postponing the most urgent preparations it had to make to defend itself from an imminent attack. When it finally acted, it was too late... the country was not prepared to counter the invasion by Nazi Germany... this came at a tremendous cost (Putin, 2022b, p. 4).

This lack of preparation by Stalin is often forgotten in the national myth of the Great Patriotic War. Putin is now remembering this event, to introduce a new lesson. This lesson is that Russia cannot “make this mistake the second time”, having “no right to do so” (Putin, 2022b, p. 5). This is an important extension, as it marks Russian leadership’s new confrontation with the failures of the Soviet leadership during the Great Patriotic War. Importantly, he ‘remembers’ Stalin’s response to Nazi incursions as purely reactive to highlight the urgency for a proactive, preventative response. This is quite significant, because Stalin’s role in the Soviet victory has been “bitterly debated”, and the myth itself was used in the post-war Soviet Union to suppress the trauma of Stalinist repressions (Fedor, Lewis, & Zhurzhenko, 2017, p. 18). Putin is introducing a new memory to the national myth, that while it doesn’t speak to the Stalinist repressions, it does speak to Stalin’s role in the victory as providing important lessons for modern Russia.

This lesson is then applied to Ukraine, as Putin depicts an invasion or clash with Ukraine as inevitable. Therefore, Russia will not make the same mistake twice, by acting proactively and invading instead of being unprepared and reactive. This contrasts with the narrative about the Crimeans’ ‘pleas’ for help, as there is no narrative of reaction or response to the pleas of Ukrainians, including the people in Donetsk and Luhansk, in Putin’s 2022-2023 rhetoric. Instead, he flips the script and frames Russia’s invasion as a proactive, preventative measure that makes good on the nation’s liberating mission. He explains that “there was every indication that a clash with neo-Nazis and Banderites backed by the United States and their minions was unavoidable. Russia launched a pre-emptive strike at the aggression” (Putin, 2022a). The ‘demilitarising and denazifying’ of Ukraine is therefore presented as an active response to Ukraine’s and the West’s apparent Nazism (Putin, 2022b, p. 7). This is quite a decisive shift, as the modern Russian nation’s duty is changed from being the reactive force against resurging Nazism, to being the proactive force.

Putin’s use of the Second World War in regard to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine represents a turning point in the use of the national myth of the Great Patriotic War. The idea of proactive strike is integrated into the lessons of World War II, highlighting the new ‘remembering’ of the war Putin is promoting. This is a clear use of the past to interpret the present, as Putin is using the Soviet Union’s history to legitimate his decisions about how Russia should act in the present day. The narrative of Russia’s military invasion in Ukraine being the continuation of the fight against Nazism provides a clear construction of the Russian Self, as a nation that has a sacred “liberating mission” in Europe to rid it of Nazism and fascism. This duty is reconstructed to include proactive measures against Nazism compared to the Soviet reactionary fight. Russian national identity is therefore reconstructed by the new framing of this myth.

In the literature about Russian identity and its military involvement in Ukraine, Russian identity tends to be treated as a ‘given’. For example, Edenborg explains how in the dominant Russian political narratives in 2014, the depiction of Ukraine as proto-

fascist or neo-Nazi established a “historical continuity” between the Soviet Union’s war against Nazi Germany, and Russia’s annexation of Crimea. This provided ontological security for the Russian state, as its anti-Nazi identity is reaffirmed (Edenborg, 2017, p. 306). While this argument is compelling, Edenborg argues that Russia has a particular identity and so acted a particular way, taking this identity as a given. When looking at the 2022 conflict through the theme of national, and not state, identity, the relationship can be seen in reverse. By acting in a particular way, invading Ukraine, Putin constructed Russian national identity. This is important because the former perspective neglects the important reconstructions that Putin is attempting with his use of the Great Patriotic War myth. Understanding how Putin uses the Soviet Union’s past to understand Russia and Ukraine’s present as nations, not states, helps to illuminate the changes to Russian national identity that are being forged by the invasion of Ukraine.

Ukraine in 2022: Another or an Other?

National identity construction involves not only defining the national Self, but also defining the out-group, or the Other (Klymenko, 2016, p. 38). I introduce the concept of ‘AnOther’ to frame how Ukraine occupies an ambiguous space between the Russian Self and the Other. ‘AnOther’ refers to the dual role Ukraine plays in Putin’s construction and maintenance of Russian national identity. Ukraine is simultaneously depicted ‘another’, an additional people of the one united nation, and as ‘an Other’, different and distinct to Russia. In turn, the position of Ukraine is highly ambiguous. It is unclear whether Ukraine is ‘another’ people part of the same Russian nation, or if it is ‘an Other’, a separate nation.

Putin’s use of a myth set in the Soviet period frames Ukraine as a nation as sharing the same history and territory as Russia. This constructs a sense of unity between Russians and Ukrainians, establishing Ukraine as ‘another’ part of the same nation. Both Russia and Ukraine experienced the same pivotal moment, shaping their shared nation and its shared duties. As Putin tells the story of the Russian nation during the Second World War, he is telling what he establishes as the story of the Ukrainian nation as well. Ukraine is included in the “privileged and valorised” nation – it is not excluded as the foreign Other in Putin’s telling of the myth.

One of the main ways this is done is through the depiction of Ukraine as sharing in the liberating mission of the Russian nation to fight against Nazism. Putin explains that “the great liberating mission of our nation” is to “ensure the safety of our people” from neo-Nazi repression (Putin, 2022d, p. 4). According to Putin, it is both Russia and Ukraine’s “sacred duty to prevent the retaliation of the ideological heirs of those who were defeated in the Great Patriotic War” (Putin, 2022c). Therefore, it is a duty to the present nation, and to its predecessors, as Ukrainians’ “fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers did not defend [Russia and Ukraine’s] common Motherland to allow today’s neo-Nazis to seize power” (Putin, 2022b, p. 8).

A more direct construction of Russians and Ukrainians belonging to the same nation is when Putin identifies the Great Patriotic War as the moment where both peoples’ existence was guaranteed. “The common Victory became a guarantee for our life and freedom”, and so Russia and Ukraine share a “great and common holiday” of Victory Day (Putin, 2022c). The defence of the same Motherland against Nazism is therefore the central moment of Russia and Ukraine’s shared “invaluable heritage” (Putin,

2023), that they still celebrate today. This remembering of the multi-ethnic character of the victory and the duties it imparts on Russia and Ukraine highlights the unity of the two countries in one nation, because they share heritage, histories, and the lessons from this past. Ukraine is therefore endowed with the same national duty as Russia is, to fight against Nazism proactively and preventatively.

Yet, the use of a Soviet-era myth simultaneously depicts Ukraine as ‘an Other’, as Ukraine is presented as Russia’s neo-Nazi opponent. Ukrainian national identity is depicted as one predicated on “hatred for Russia”. This identity is top-down, as such hatred was generated by a “criminal policy” of the “Kiev regime” (Putin, 2022b). He is othering the Ukrainian nation as a fiction created by neo-Nazi hatred for Russia, in the face of the “ancestors who lived in a single country for centuries” (Putin, 2022d, p. 3). Ukrainians “ruthlessly and cold-bloodedly destroy memorials to Soviet soldiers, demolish monuments, create a real cult of the Nazis and their proxies, erase and demonise the memory of true heroes” (Putin, 2023). Putin frames this as Ukraine rejecting their Soviet heritage and in turn, their historical duty to fight Nazism. Ukraine moving on from the Great Patriotic War myth as Putin tells it, as a part of its turn away from Slavic identity and towards the West, is depicted as a turn away from Russia and a betrayal of their shared past.

The Ukrainian ‘Other’ is furthered by Putin’s depiction of an inevitable invasion or clash with neo-Nazi Ukraine, just as Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Ukraine’s ‘profaning of the victorious generation’ is depicted as a ‘revanchism’ of those who are “preparing a new march on Russia and who brought together neo-Nazi scum from around the world for this” (Putin, 2023). He alleges that Ukrainian nationalists are acting in the same way as “Hitler’s accomplices” did, by facilitating the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union (Putin, 2022b, p. 6).

By drawing on a myth of the Soviet period where Ukraine was part of the ‘Self’, Putin maintains that the Ukrainian nation is part of the Russian Self. However, the accusations of Nazism construct a Ukrainian Other, which poses a threat to Russia. Understanding this blurred construction of Ukraine, as either a ‘brother’ or a ‘betrayer’ (Fedor, Lewis, & Zhurzhenko, 2017, p. 13), is important because like Putin’s construction of Russia, the construction of the Ukrainian Other is not a given. Edenborg argues that the identity of the Russian Self is constructed as masculine and totally good, in opposition to the feminised, evil Ukrainian Other (Edenborg, 2017, pp. 304, 306). Russia’s invasion of this Other provides ontological security for the state, as they are fighting against the demonised and feminised opponent. On the other hand, when we look at national identity, rather than state identity, there is far more ambiguity, and the construction of the Other is highly flexible. Both the Self and the Other is attributed to Ukraine, highlighting the dynamic nature of national identity construction.

Conclusion

The narrative of Russia’s military invasion in Ukraine being the continuation of the fight against Nazism provides a clear construction of the Russian Self, as a nation that has a sacred “liberating mission” to fight Nazism and fascism. Putin includes a new memory of Stalin’s unpreparedness to shape modern Russia’s duty to be proactive in this mission. Meanwhile, the position of Ukraine is highly blurred and ambiguous. It is unclear whether Ukraine is ‘another’ people part of the same Russian nation, or if it

is ‘an Other’, a separate nation. Putin’s use of Second World War imagery is therefore not merely a ‘lazy’ trope deployed as a sloppy justification of the invasion. It is a sustained, powerful, and deliberately flexible narrative employed by Putin to retell the story of the Russian nation for his instrumental purposes.

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