

Putin's Home Front: A War on Time

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The Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert—born in what is today Ukrainian Lviv—famously dubbed Iosif Stalin the “Great Linguist,” a derisive [reference](#) to the Soviet dictator’s intellectual pretensions. Despite marked differences between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his communist predecessor, there are also discomfiting similarities. Conspicuously, Putin—who is [said](#) to keep part of Stalin’s library in his Kremlin office—likewise fashions himself a scholar, with his armchair forays into interpreting the past dating back to the early days of his presidency. Moreover, he too is fixated on Ukraine and exquisitely concerned about his legacy, [viewing](#) himself as the latest incarnation in a long line of Russian empire builders.

But Putin has no desire to genuinely understand the complexities of Russia’s past, instead [distorting](#) it to serve present-day purposes. This instrumentalization of history was on full display well before he ordered the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, with the Russian president [claiming](#) in August 2019 that Western perfidy in appeasing Hitler left the USSR little choice but to conclude the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Subsequently, Putin [penned](#) a factually tendentious missive in July 2021, disparaging the very existence of a Ukrainian nation. These two narratives, when combined with the uncritical adulation, increasingly accorded the Soviet Union’s defeat of fascism in the Great Patriotic War, directly set the stage for the present conflict.

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Using and Abusing History: Ukraine and Beyond

The Kremlin's attempt to justify its invasion of Ukraine constitutes a glaring example of how the past may be utilized for political ends. In his speech [broadcast](#) on February 21, 2022, Putin invoked a highly dishonest reading of history to argue that Ukraine was an artificial state "entirely and fully" created by Bolshevik Russia that now found itself a "colony" of the West with a "puppet regime" that did not reflect the will of the people, but rather the interests of oligarchs and far-right nationalists, the latter supported by "the leading NATO countries."

In making this argument, Putin transposed linguistic tropes associated with World War II onto the current geopolitical situation, accusing Ukrainian "Nazis" of committing "genocide" in the Donbas and claiming that Kyiv was planning a "blitzkrieg" against separatist enclaves in the Donbas. He went even further in the address he gave [heralding](#) the start of Moscow's offensive on February 24, 2022. Drawing from a deep well of historical resentment and humiliation, he equated the United States and NATO to Nazi Germany in referencing Stalin's failed attempts at appeasing Hitler and vowed that "we will not make this mistake a second time." The connection between the past and present could not have been clearer: "Your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers," the Russian president emphasized, "did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland so that today's neo-Nazis could seize power in Ukraine."

This propaganda reflects the misuse of historical analogies as well as language. Reality has succumbed to euphemisms, with terms like "special military operation" and "de-Nazification" obscuring the truth and banalizing the evil of German fascism, just as phrases like "extraordinary events" and "liquidation" did in the USSR. Even the pretext Putin gave for launching the war in 2022—to defend the cultural and political rights of Russian speakers in Ukraine—echoes Stalin's proffered rationale for sending the Red Army [into Poland](#) on September 17, 1939, an act of aggression cast as a mission to protect "fraternal" Ukrainians and Belarusians.

Such statements have transformed the recall of history into a matter of national security and made it an integral part of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy. It is not surprising that the Kremlin has employed them, as propagandistic appeals are most effective when they echo core assumptions that their intended audience is predisposed to believe. Recollecting the sustained effort Putin's regime has undertaken to [promote](#) "patriotic" education, it is obvious the pump was already being primed a long time ago for what we are witnessing today. Speaking at a national teacher's conference in June 2007, Putin made clear that he saw the writing of history as a form of ideological combat, stressing that while Russia certainly had "problematic pages" in its past, other countries had even more of these to contend with. Engaging in classic "whataboutism" during this talk, Putin excoriated U.S. involvement in Vietnam before asserting that Russians cannot permit themselves "to be saddled with guilt" over their history.

The past, of course, always serves the state to some degree. Social media and now-perpetual news cycles have fundamentally altered the mode through which information is delivered and consumed, but the underlying manner in which historical legacies are deployed in Russia largely mirrors precedent. For example, the Kremlin has in recent years sought to [limit](#) the range of permissible statements that can be made about the Soviet era, notably by [adopting](#) punitive memory laws of the sort that have burgeoned throughout Eastern and Central Europe since the 2000s. Nonetheless, one respect in which Moscow's propaganda campaign has proven innovative concerns its bid to control how the present-day situation in Ukraine will be depicted going forward. This future-oriented development renders Russia's instrumentalization of the past far more pernicious and authoritarian than it had previously been.

During the first two post-Soviet decades, the Kremlin's politics of history was primarily [reactive](#). Russian leaders responded with increasing ire to what they perceived as overly negative depictions of the Soviet Union and its accomplishments, which generally emanated from the former Warsaw Pact states (engaged in their own political struggles over the past, the latter capitalized on the EU as a forum to air historical grievances after their accession to it). Gradually, however, this progressed to promoting Moscow's preferred narratives through [commissioning](#) school textbooks that elided the crimes of Stalinism and inaugurating commemorative practices that lauded the USSR's role in World War II, shifting the emphasis away from the victims of communist totalitarianism. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine brought about yet another stage in its evolution: Russia has begun to limit how one may speak about still-unfolding events. The immediate goal of this censorship is to suppress dissent at the domestic level. But the underlying agenda goes far beyond the current crisis, its intent being to prophylactically [shape](#) how Russia is viewed in a broader historical continuum. Questioning the state's historical narrative – even a narrative that is still coming into existence – is now tantamount to treason, which Putin [terms](#) the “the gravest crime possible.”

Memory Laws (and Why They Matter)

In March 2022, the Russian legislature [passed](#) a series of administrative and criminal statutes designed to prevent the dissemination of “deliberately false information” about the armed forces, which includes referring to the war in Ukraine as anything but a “special military operation.” They likewise criminalize supporting Western sanctions and prohibit the “discrediting” of the military and other state organs operating beyond the country's borders. Penalties range up to five million rubles (about \$90,000) and fifteen years of imprisonment, with legal experts speculating that these laws may be [enforced retroactively](#) (e.g., for internet content posted prior to their promulgation).

This legislation [represents](#) a corollary to an earlier May 2021 statute that forbade drawing comparisons between Nazism and Stalinism. It also has antecedents in two 2019 laws that respectively [banned](#) the online publication of “fake news” and statements deemed

“disrespectful” to the state or public, as well as Article 67 of the Russian constitution, amended in July 2020 to [protect](#) “historical truth.” Specifically, the 2021 law prohibits denying the decisive role the Soviet people played in countering the Third Reich and the “humanitarian mission of the USSR in the liberation of European countries.” This law, in turn, is an outgrowth of a 2014 statute [designed](#) to protect the reputation of the Red Army.

Unlike in countries where such prescriptive laws are primarily symbolic, in Russia, their violation is actively, if selectively, prosecuted. For example, in 2014, blogger Vladimir Luzgin was fined 200,000 rubles (about \$5,900 at the time) by the Perm Regional Court for [sharing](#) an article on his VKontakte page that jointly blamed the USSR and Nazi Germany for the start of World War II and challenged “communist myths” about the Ukrainian Insurgent Army and its leader, Stepan Bandera. Luzgin was found guilty of intentionally disseminating false information. More recently, in November 2021, a 19-year-old student, Matvei Iuferov, was [sentenced](#) to three years’ incarceration for uploading a video to Instagram that showed him drunkenly urinating on a Red Army veteran’s portrait. Although the veteran’s son did not seek damages, and Iuferov quickly took down the video and issued an apology, he was nonetheless found guilty of “rehabilitating Nazism.” Meanwhile, Amnesty International reports that as of March 2022, prosecutors had already opened dozens of cases against Russian anti-war protestors, including [at least ten](#) for “discrediting” the military.

As a consequence of this latest intervention into free speech, Russia has veered from mandating a particular way of recalling disputed legacies into promoting outright disinformation. The past is now thoroughly securitized, which also [explains](#) why it is so important to control how present-day events are discussed. Historical narratives are set against a backdrop of civilizational contestation. Ukraine is painted as an inalienable part of the Russian ethno-cultural complex, and depictions of the ongoing conflict are shaped to fit this overarching account. The EU, in turn, is portrayed as a hedonistic and morally enervated pawn of the United States, a declining hegemon intent on brainwashing Ukrainians into accepting worldviews and geopolitical alliances that are alien to them.

Embracing this narrative not only permits Moscow to position itself as the embattled guardian of Europe’s “traditional” values but also allows it to self-righteously remind the West that, as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov [put it](#), “Russia has more than once saved Europe from itself.” Drawing on Russian experiences dating back to the Napoleonic Wars, this historical logic has been weaponized to argue that a heroic nation—especially one that sacrificed more than any other to free Europe from Hitler’s scourge—could not possibly be complicit in an unprovoked act of aggression against the Ukrainian people.

Reasoning in this manner makes sense from the perspective of Moscow. Russians, by and large, reject criticism of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War. Framing the present hostilities in terms of 1941-1945, therefore, resonates domestically, no matter how bizarre [invoking](#) “Nazi” boogymen or [juxtaposing](#) the pro-Kremlin “Z” logo against the orange-

and-black of the St. George's Ribbon – the quintessential emblem of Victory Day – may seem to outsiders. Moreover, doing so permits Russian losses in Ukraine to be equated to the sacrifices required to defeat German fascism.

Moscow's actions underscore that publicly commemorating historical legacies in Russia is never simply about the past. Rather, the goal is to establish the legitimacy of Putin's regime as the undisputed guardian of a sanitized and statist vision of history. But these Kremlin-led interventions encompass more than just attempts to memorialize the state while [modeling](#) Russia's future trajectory. Limiting how people may speak about Ukraine affects not only political discourse but also the wider societal fabric.

Young people and educators have increasingly been [pressed](#) into supporting the Kremlin in recent years, including through the Young Army Cadets, a state-sponsored organization created in 2016 that [combines](#) elements of scouting with military training and features a strong emphasis on memorializing Russia's martial accomplishments. Manifestations of this sort of jingoistic propaganda have gone into overdrive since the invasion of Ukraine, with the last few months witnessing a proliferation of social media posts featuring children and teachers, as well as various [youth groups](#) and even residents of a [cancer hospice](#) in Kazan, displaying full-throated support for Moscow. The conflict has also made pedagogical institutions overtly complicit in the Kremlin's misdeeds, whether this be the Ministry of Education in Murmansk Oblast "recommending" educators teach a blatantly pro-Russian [version](#) of Ukrainian history or the Union of Rectors [issuing](#) a statement endorsing Putin's invasion.

Implications: Past, Present, and Future

The sheer breadth of these prescriptions is what makes them so troubling. Their reach and vagueness render ordinary citizens, journalists, and academics potentially liable for a wide variety of speech acts, prompting self-censorship, if not outright persecution. As a result, most of Russia's independent [media](#) outlets have moved abroad or shut down, and access to social media has been [severely restricted](#). Meanwhile, a recent [poll](#) found that nearly half of Russians have never heard of VPN clients, which would permit circumventing internet restrictions; even among 18- to 24-year-olds, less than a quarter regularly use them. Consequently, engaging in any critical reflection on the war in Ukraine – and past wars – requires a significant effort from Russians.

The long-term implications of this are dire. First, the Kremlin's propaganda machine has inculcated a siege mentality in society, fostering the [perception](#) that Russia is under perpetual attack and has always been on the right side of history. Second, the threat of domestic repression has increased markedly in recent months. On March 16, 2022, Putin sounded positively Soviet when he [referred](#) to pro-Western Russians as "scum and traitors" and asserted that Russia will undergo "a natural and necessary self-purification of society." (He had already previously [proposed](#) elaborating conditions for "citizenship

termination.”) Third, fear of the state is once again beginning to grip Russians, as [indicated](#) by the growing willingness to inform on those deemed disloyal. As Russia becomes an increasingly closed society, the propagation of a warped version of the past – and the war in Ukraine – will only prove easier to achieve.

Conclusion

Russia has not yet regressed into a political condition comparable to Stalinism, but today it is closer to it than at any other time since the USSR’s dissolution. Linking the Great Patriotic War to the conflict in Ukraine allows the Kremlin to tap into a reservoir of historical imagery that remains profoundly meaningful to Russians; it also provides a convenient distraction, one that Putin’s regime has adroitly exploited to curtail the rights of citizens. This mendacious mnemonic behavior has been rewarded: As of May 2022, 77 percent of Russians surveyed [supported](#) the armed forces’ actions in Ukraine, while the number who [wanted](#) Putin to remain in office after his current term expires in 2024 rose from under 50 percent in September 2021 to 72 percent. More recently, a June 2022 [poll](#) found that 81.3 percent trust Putin and 78.9 percent approve of his performance in office.

The securitization of history, however, is a dangerous gambit. When the destruction that Moscow has wreaked on Ukraine is finally acknowledged, the moral and practical repercussions will affect Russia for generations to come. And then, as Yevgenia Albats [observes](#), “the myth of the liberators, which was the most important component of our self-identification, what lay at the very root of national memory – regardless of whether you are a supporter of the regime or not – will finally be destroyed.” Given this, the [words](#) of the dissident Russian academic Yuri Pivovarov ring prophetic: “What version of the past we get will determine our future.”