A short history of Russia and Ukraine
Seven maps that illustrate Vladimir Putin's distortion of history

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In July 2021 Vladimir Putin published an essay with arguments he would later use to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It raced through 1,000 years of history to argue that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, cruelly divided by "external forces" with an "anti-Russian" agenda. Mr. Putin's war was supposed to fix that. Three and a half years into the conflict, Russia controls almost 20% of Ukrainian territory. On August 15th Mr. Putin met Donald Trump in Alaska to discuss a possible ceasefire. No deal was reached, but American leaders have suggested that "land swaps" might be part of a future agreement.

There is truth in Mr. Putin's claim that Ukraine and Russia are close kin, as the following maps demonstrate. What is nonsense is Mr. Putin's assertion that their separation into two countries is the result of some external plot, imposed on the Ukrainians against their wishes.

*On modern borders
Source: "The gates of Europe: a history of Ukraine", by Serhii Plokhy

For Mr. Putin the origin of Russian-Ukrainian identity is Kyivan Rus, a confederation of princedoms that lasted from the late 9th to the mid-13th century (see map 1). Its centre was Kyiv, now Ukraine's capital. Its rulers were the Rus, Scandinavian Vikings who gradually established dominance over the region and merged with local Slavic tribes. ("Rus" is the origin of the word "Russia".) When it comes to political and cultural tradition, Kyivan Rus is indeed the cradle of Russia and Ukraine, as well as the country now called Belarus. It was a refined European civilisation with roots in the Byzantine empire and its Orthodox Christian religion.

In the mid-11th century, however, Kyivan Rus began to fragment into semi-autonomous principalities (see map 2). These included Galicia-Volhynia, which covered parts of modern Ukraine and Belarus, Novgorod in north-western modern-day Russia, and Vladimir-Suzdal, in western Russia. In 1240 the Mongol empire besieged Kyiv, finally destroying what remained of Kyivan Rus as a single entity.

When the Mongol empire and its successors began to decline in the 14th century, rival polities rose to fill the vacuum. In the east of the region power eventually accumulated in Moscow, leading to the creation of the Grand Principality of Muscovy. To the west, what had become the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania joined forces in 1569 to create the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

1650 Cossack Hetmanate* [3]

*On modern borders.
Source: "The gates of Europe: a history of Ukraine", by Serhii Plokhy

In 1648 the Cossacks, settlers on the steppe who amalgamated into disciplined military units, led an uprising against the commonwealth. This led to the formation of their own state, the Hetmanate (see map 3). Many Ukrainians look back to the Hetmanate as the origin of their identity as an independent state. Indeed, the original Cossack lands were often called "Ukraine", a Slavic word meaning "borderland".

Early Cossack warriors practised a limited form of democracy, a contrast to Muscovy's autocratic regime. That the Hetmanate came about as an act of resistance to larger neighbouring powers is a history that resonates with Ukrainians today. In the 19th century, the folk memory of the Cossacks' state helped inspire the birth of a recognisable form of Ukraine's cultural nationalism.

But the Cossack state had a hard time. In 1654, threatened by the Poles as well as the Ottomans to the south, Cossack leaders pledged allegiance to the tsar of Muscovy. A few decades later intellectuals in Kyiv wrote what is believed to be one of the oldest texts outlining the basis of a "Slavo-Rossian" nation. They hoped to convince the tsar to defend them, not only because of their shared history and Orthodox religion, but also in the name of ethno-national unity.

By the end of the 17th century the Hetmanate's territory had split into two: Muscovy took control of the east bank of the Dnieper river, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth seized the west. In 1708 Ivan Mazepa, a Cossack leader, led a failed uprising against Tsar Peter the Great. (Russia regards Mazepa as a traitor; in Ukraine he is a hero.) Peter went on to become Russia's first emperor in 1721.

In the late 18th century the Russian empire broke up the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, with help from Austria and Prussia. The Russians also seized territory in what is now southern Ukraine from the Ottomans. This included Crimea, annexed to Russia by Catherine the Great in 1783. She oversaw the final dismantling of the Cossack Hetmanate.

On the eve of the first world war the Russian empire stretched from the Sea of Japan to the Baltic (see map 4).

1914 Maximum extent of the Russian Empire [4]

Source: "Mapping the international system, 1886-2017: the CShapes 2.0 dataset", by G. Schmitz et al., *Journal of Conflict Resolution*

In 1917, weakened by the war, Russia experienced two revolutions. The first overthrew the Romanov dynasty. The second was the seizure of power by Vladimir Lenin and his Bolsheviks. Officials in Kyiv founded the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR), a state in union with Russia. In January 1918 the UPR declared independence. Eventually Lenin took the UPR by force. But the strength of Ukrainian national identity compelled him to create a socialist Ukrainian republic, and to allow the use of the Ukrainian language. In 1922 Ukraine became one of the four founding members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) - or Soviet Union.

1922-89 Soviet expansion into eastern Europe*

1945 Soviet Union

1922-38 Soviet Union

1949-89 Eastern bloc

*On modern borders †Albania left the Warsaw Pact in 1968

Ukraine's territory expanded during the Soviet period. Under the Soviet Union's non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany, signed in 1939, the two countries carved up eastern Europe. In the ensuing fighting, what had been parts of Poland that were settled by Ukrainians were added to Soviet Ukraine. In 1954 the Soviet Union transferred the administration of Crimea from Soviet Russia to Ukraine.

But Ukraine also experienced great suffering. In the 1930s Josef Stalin's policy of forced collectivisation of agriculture led to a famine, known in Ukraine as the Holodomor, which killed millions of people. In the mid-20th century Ukraine found itself part of what Timothy Snyder, a historian at Yale, later called the "bloodlands": territory in which Hitler and Stalin, though enemies, enabled each other's crimes against locals. Co-operation between some Ukrainian nationalists and the Nazis during the war is adduced by Mr. Putin as evidence for his claim that the Ukraine of today is run by fascists. In 1986, in the dying days

of the Soviet Union, the world's worst-ever nuclear accident took place at Chernobyl in Ukraine. The damage, and the ensuing cover-up, heightened Ukrainians' anger towards the Kremlin.

In the 1980s Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, set out to reform the Soviet Union through openness and reform - glasnost and perestroika. But eastern Europeans, subject to Soviet control through the framework of the Warsaw Pact, took the opportunity to demand their freedom. In 1991 the Soviet Union itself collapsed, bringing independence to its 15 constituent republics (see map 6). Mr. Putin has called this the biggest geopolitical tragedy of the 20th century.

1991 Fall of the Soviet Union   6

Ukraine suddenly became home to the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal. In 1994 it agreed to denuclearise in exchange for security assurances from America, Britain and the Russian Federation. (Ukraine used this agreement, known as the Budapest memorandum, to ask America and Britain for aid on the eve of Russia's invasion in 2022.)

In 2004-05 the "Orange revolution" highlighted Ukraine's democratic ambitions. Thousands protested against a rigged presidential election that gave victory to a pro-Russian candidate. Ukraine's democratic resolve was even more visible during the "Maidan revolution" in 2013-14. This was a reaction to the refusal by Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine's president, who was chummy with Russia, to sign an association agreement (an extensive free-trade deal) with the European Union. Thousands of Ukrainians took to the streets; Mr Yanukovych fled to Russia. Ukraine's new government signed the agreement, infuriating Mr Putin.

2014-present Russo-Ukrainian war [7]

*Declared independence as the People's Republic of Donetsk and the People's Republic of Luhansk in 2014

Sources: Institute for the Study of War; AEI's Critical Threats Project

His response to the Maidan marked Russia's first military incursions into independent Ukraine. In 2014 the Kremlin illegally annexed Crimea and sent troops into the Donbas, a predominantly Russian-speaking region in eastern Ukraine (see map 7). Russia's separatist proxies—led by the Russian intelligence officers— declared "people's republics" in Donetsk and Luhansk. By December 2021, just before Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, the conflict had killed more than 14,000 people. The war continues. ■

Correction (January 30th) The borders in maps 3 and 4 have been updated since this story was published. The chronology of the founding of the Ukrainian People's Republic in 1917 has also been clarified.

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