

ARTICLE

“Kievan Rus¹ Is Ours!”: Ontological Security, National Memory, and Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

To explain why Vladimir Putin launched Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, this article foregrounds a crucial but understudied dimension: national memory. It argues that both discontinuity in national memory and dislocation between national memory and territory threaten states’ ontological security. The Soviet collapse marked a profound break in Russia’s national memory. To restore the ontological security thus shattered, Russia’s ruling elite adopted a narrative of radical continuity of Russian statehood, linking Kievan Rus, the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Romanov Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation into an unbroken thousand-year tradition. Yet by placing its origins in independent Ukraine, this narrative was inherently precarious. While mending the discontinuity in national memory, it produced a dislocation between memory and territory, rendering Russia ontologically vulnerable. By asserting their own claim to Kyiv as the birthplace of Ukrainian nation- and statehood, Ukraine’s ruling elite exposed this dislocation and laid bare both the precarity of the radical continuity narrative and Russia’s resulting ontological vulnerability. The Kremlin’s response was to seek political – and, when that failed, military – control over Ukraine to redress this dislocation and eliminate the sources of ontological vulnerability that flowed from the radical continuity narrative.

Keywords: Ontological Security; Collective Memory; Russian Identity; Russia-Ukraine War; Kievan Rus

Introduction

On February 9, 2024, nearly two years into Russia’s war against Ukraine, Vladimir Putin gave an interview to Tucker Carlson.² The first question was obvious: why had he chosen to launch the invasion? In response, Putin offered “a brief historical background,” as he put it. However, it lasted not “30 seconds or one minute” of Carlson’s (and viewers’) time, as he had promised, but nearly half an hour, with Putin going as far back as 862, when “the townspeople of Novgorod [...] invited Rurik, a Varangian prince from Scandinavia, to reign.” Putin’s not-so-brief historical digression was immediately turned into meme material – users posted dozens mocking his explanation for the war. But don’t Putin’s words deserve more serious attention? Indeed, isn’t it possible that the events of 862 – or more precisely, how they are remembered in Russia – had something to do with the decision to start the war?

Scholarly attention to the role that national memory plays in the politics of Putin’s regime more broadly, and particularly its policies toward Ukraine, has not been lacking. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, researchers have examined in detail the Kremlin’s instrumentalization of the

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memory of the Great Patriotic War (GPW) to explain aggression against Ukraine (Gaufman 2015; Szostek and Hutchings 2015; Kozachenko 2019; McGlynn 2020; Kumankov 2023). These works highlight the power of politics over memory. This article sheds light on a different facet of the memory/politics nexus: the power of memory over politics. Rather than focusing on how memory is employed by politicians to justify war, it considers how it can shape their decision to launch one. By examining the place of Kiev – and Ukraine more broadly – in Russia’s national memory, it explores the war’s mnemonic groundwork.

Building on existing scholarship on ontological security and national memory, this article argues that both discontinuity in national memory and dislocation between national memory and territory threaten states’ ontological security. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked a profound discontinuity in Russia’s national memory, disrupting its identity narrative and shattering its ontological security. To reassert continuity in national memory – and thereby restore ontological security – Russia’s ruling elite under Vladimir Putin adopted the narrative of radical continuity of Russian statehood, linking the Kievan Rus, the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Romanov Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation into an unbroken line of succession spanning centuries.

Yet by placing the origin of continuous Russian statehood in independent Ukraine, this narrative was inherently precarious. In mending the discontinuity in national memory, it simultaneously produced a dislocation between memory and territory, rendering Russia ontologically vulnerable. Rather than affirming the radical continuity narrative, Ukraine’s ruling elite exposed the dislocation at its core by asserting their own claim to Kyiv as the birthplace of Ukrainian nation- and statehood. In doing so, they laid bare both the precarity of the radical continuity narrative and Russia’s resulting ontological vulnerability. The Kremlin’s response was to seek political – and, when that failed, military – control over Ukraine in an effort to redress this dislocation and thereby eliminate the sources of ontological vulnerability that flowed from the radical continuity narrative.

Theoretical Framework: Ontological Security, Identity Narratives, and National Memories

Originally coined by a psychiatrist R.D. Laing (1960) in his work on schizophrenia, the concept of ontological security was employed by Anthony Giddens’ (1991) analysis of the dynamics of self-identity in late modern societies. To be ontologically secure, according to Giddens, “is to possess [...] ‘answers’ to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses” (1991, 47). One of these is the question of self-identity. The feeling of ontological security is sustained in everyday interactions and as long as the conventions of these interactions are observed.

Scholars of international relations often turn to Giddens’ conceptualization of ontological security to explain states’ behavior. Thus, Jennifer Mitzen (2006) suggests that states, essentially collections of individuals, seek ontological security in addition to physical security. Defining ontological security as “security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice,” Mitzen stresses that it is achieved through routinization of relations with significant others (2006, 344). Filip Ejdus (2018) adds that, when critical situations rupture states’ routines, they become ontologically vulnerable.

Importantly, identity is not a thing but a project. While reflexivity – “the chronic entry of knowledge into the circumstances of action it analyses or describes” – is a critical characteristic of late modernity as such, self-identity in late modernity is a reflexive project of an individual (Giddens 1991, 28). It has to be routinely sustained through ongoing reflection. Subject to chronic revision, it presumes self-awareness. It “is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual” but a capacity “to integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self” (Giddens 1991, 53–54). Ultimately, maintaining self-identity implies keeping a narrative about oneself and one’s life going.

Like individuals, states create and sustain their autobiographical identity narratives. It is through these narratives that they create meaning for their actions even when such actions violate existing international norms and principles (Innes and Steele 2014). In turn, scholars of international

relations often turn to the analysis of state identity narratives to make sense of state actions. Thus, many have looked into Russia's identity narratives to explain its policies towards Ukraine (Clunan 2014; Hopf 2016; Tsygankov 2015; Grigas 2016; Kordan 2022).

Memory is critical for identity as reflexive project. It is memory that enables us to create and sustain identities, whether on individual or collective levels. As Jens Bartelson put it, "collective identities are produced out of collective memories as much as individual memories and identities are dependent on each other" (2006, 37). Thus, collective memories are a major source for and carrier of group identities.

In the world of nation-states, state identities rely upon national memories. As Anthony D. Smith famously put it, "no memory, no identity; no identity, no nation" (1999, 9). Given that nationhood is "a tacit premise in almost all contemporary political thinking" (Canovan 1996, 1) and nationalism is a rhetoric in which the legitimacy of modern state is debated (Calhoun 1997), no nation, no state, one might add. Shaping their identities, national memories, thus, are tied to ontological security of contemporary states. If ontological security is the security of being (Steele 2008), national memories provide states with what Kathrin Bachleitner (2021) calls the security of "being-in-time."

As Jelena Subotic (2018) argues, while national memories can be used to resolve states' ontological insecurity, they often also become sources of such insecurity. She focuses on memories of past violence perpetrated by the nation. Subotic contends that memories in which the nation appears as a villain undermine its positive sense of self and thus destabilize state identity. I suggest that discontinuity in national memory pose an equally significant threat to states' ontological security.

Indeed, identity implies continuity despite constant change. This is precisely what national memory allows for – sustaining continuous autobiographical narratives foundational to state identities. Craig Calhoun calls it "temporal depth" – "a notion of the nation as such existing through time, including past and future generations, and having a history" which invests it "with moral and political authenticity" (1997, 5). Discontinuity in national memory – disrupting state identity narratives – become a source of their ontological insecurity.

As Ana Maria Alonso explains (1988), time is only one axis of national imagination, with space being the other. Nations are not only imagined "within the limits of a national territory and across the bounds of a national time," but their historical right to territory and territorial right to history are mutually reinforcing (Alonso 1988, 40). Thus, while the alignment between national time and space enables coherent state identity narratives, a lack thereof, conversely, disrupts them. In other words, not only discontinuity in national memory, but also dislocation between national memory and territory can become sources of state ontological insecurity.³

It would be a mistake to assume that state identity narratives mechanically determine state behavior. First, narratives are plural and coexist in competition with one another, just as different versions of state identities do. For instance, Ted Hopf (2005) identified three versions of Russian identity in the 1990s – a liberal, a conservative, and a centrist one – each competing to control the Russian state. Memories are plural, too. While state autobiographical narratives tend to be unilinear and homogenous, memories are diverse and heterogenous. It is from this diversity and heterogeneity of memories that monolithic state narratives are constructed, whether in democratic or authoritarian regimes (Confino 1997). Furthermore, regardless of regime type, memories are always contested (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003). As a result of these contestations, some memories are publicly articulated and recognized while others are silenced or repressed. Likewise, certain identity narratives are granted official status, while others are marginalized or suppressed.

Among the mnemonic actors – "political forces that are interested in a specific interpretation of the past" (Kubik and Bernhard 2014, 4) – political elites play a particularly significant role in the contestations over national memories and state identities. Moreover, while elites vying for power often face formidable challenges in promoting their preferred identity narratives, for those already in power, this task becomes almost routine (Coakley 2004). Ultimately, ruling elites in all political contexts – and even more so in authoritarian regimes – play an outsized role in sustaining the autobiographical narratives that underpin state identities.

Yet, as Jeffrey Olick (1998) argues, the relationship between politics and memory is far from straightforward: while politicians (attempt to) shape national memories, they are also shaped by them. To explain this dynamic, Eviatar Zerubavel's (1996) concept of mnemonic socialization is particularly useful. It captures the process through which individuals learn what and how they should remember within a given society – as well as what they must forget. While family plays a crucial role in mnemonic socialization, the process continues well beyond it and is most commonly manifested in school history classes. As surprising as it may seem, politicians were once children too – students who attended history classes where they learned which parts of the national past should be remembered and how. These memories, internalized through mnemonic socialization and shaped by specific mnemonic traditions, are what they later rely on to create and sustain identity narratives critical to states' ontological security.

Mnemonic socialization entails the continuous reinterpretation of personal recollections as individuals enter new communities and internalize their mnemonic traditions. A key aspect of such traditions is that they set "historical horizons beyond which past events are basically regarded as irrelevant and, as such, often forgotten altogether" (Zerubavel 1996, 286). To put it differently, beginnings are both essential and arbitrary elements of narratives (Zerubavel 1993b; 1993a).

As just one manifestation of a society's tendency to delimit relevance, beginnings are pivotal in articulating identities at both individual and collective levels. Individual identity presupposes "some existential horizons that help delineate the limits of our selfhood" (Zerubavel 1993a, 411). Similarly, collective identity implies boundaries between those who are included in the group and "the rest." Both personal and collective identity narratives necessarily include a beginning – a moment in time when an individual or group was born. Thus, Zerubavel (1993b, 459) asserts: "[I]f we are to fully understand how individuals and groups perceive themselves, we must know where they think their 'story' begins."

At the same time, beginnings are often contested – a fact that, according to Zerubavel (1993b), underscores their conventional nature. Everything that precedes a chosen beginning – whenever that beginning is set within a narrative – is deemed irrelevant, something that can (or must) be forgotten. Thus, separating a group's "official history" from its "prehistory," beginnings determine how far back its collective memory is stretched (Zerubavel 1993a).

Nations are groups that stretch their memories as far back as possible. As Eric Hobsbawm (1983, 14) notes, while nations are modern inventions, they "generally claim to be [...] rooted in the remotest of antiquity." Echoing this, Benedict Anderson (1991, 5) highlights one of the primary paradoxes of nationalism: "[t]he objective modernity of nations to the historian's eye vs. their subjective antiquity in the eyes of nationalists." Anthony D. Smith (1997) explains why claiming antiquity is crucial for the formation of nations. First, it satisfies the nation's quest for authenticity, allowing to define both its origin and boundaries. It also reminds members of a nation of past greatness and points to a future one. More importantly for this discussion, it establishes a sense of continuity between the generations, linking the national past with the present and future. It is hardly surprising, then, that national memories of distant pasts are critical to state identity narratives, as seen in the memory of the Siege of Masada for Israel (Zerubavel 1994) and the Kosovo Battle for Serbia (Subotić 2016).

Importantly, narratives are shaped by what James Wertsch (2000, 529), who emphasizes their dialogical nature, calls "dialogic responses." The international community, understood as the broader social environment in which states exist, plays a central role in shaping state identity narratives. As Ayşe Zarakol (2010, 6) highlights, "ontological security first and foremost entails having a consistent sense of self and having that sense affirmed by others." Conversely, when a state's identity narrative is challenged by other members of the international community, it becomes a source of ontological insecurity. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the dynamic between ontological security and national memory has been particularly evident in Russia – Ukraine relations.

“The Greatest Geopolitical Catastrophe of the 20th Century”: The Collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia’s Identity Crisis

Piotr Sztompka (2004), famously, conceptualized the collapse of the communist system as a cultural trauma. Involving sudden, rapid, and systemic change that embraced politics, economics, culture, and everyday life, it affected the whole population of former communist societies. Even if “almost universally judged as beneficial and progressive” (Sztompka 2004, 171), it led to a period of cultural disorganization and disorientation. While Sztompka focused primarily on East-Central Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union similarly upended the lives of millions of Soviet citizens, disrupting economic, political, and social routines and triggering a prolonged polycrisis. Catarina Kinnvall (2004) argues that in times of trauma, autobiographical identity narratives can provide comfort and relief. Yet, the Soviet collapse – a “critical situation” *par excellence* (Ejdus 2018) – shattered those narratives, bringing to the fore the questions of self-identities in the newly-independent post-Soviet states. Their ruling elites, thus, faced the challenge of sustaining – or rather, forging – autobiographical identity narratives that could ground their ontological security. In Russia, a country whose profound identity crisis (Urban 1994) was reflected in acute debates over the meaning of the Russian nation and the content of its national memory (Tolz 1998b), this challenge was formidable.

Importantly, for the new Russia, memory was a source of ontological insecurity rather than security. First, the difficult memory of the darkest pages of the Soviet past, uncovered by Mikhail Gorbachev and his team to gain public support for their program of economic and political reforms (Davies 1989; 1997; Sherlock 2007) undermined Russia’s positive sense of self. At the same time, the memory of victory in the GPW, critical to the positive Soviet identity, was compromised by the revelations of the Perestroika era (Tumarkin 1994). More importantly for this discussion, the emergence of independent Russia from the ashes of the Soviet Union marked a profound discontinuity in its national memory. With the narrative foundational to Russia’s identity disrupted, its ontological security was shattered. To restore it, the ruling elite needed to reassert continuity in national memory. Yet, initially, Boris Yeltsin and his team chose a different path, beginning to promote the idea of a “new democratic Russia” (Malinova 2015).

Russians were envisioned as a nation that, having rejected its totalitarian past, was born anew in 1991. As “Russia’s democratic choice” was emphasized, the collapse of the Soviet Union was framed as the founding event of the Russian nation. This was reflected in the establishment of a new national holiday, the Independence Day of the Russian Federation. Introduced in 1992, it was to be celebrated annually on June 12, the day the first Congress of People’s Deputies of the RSFSR voted for Declaration No. 22-1b on State Sovereignty.⁴ Ironically, Yeltsin followed in the footsteps of the Bolsheviks who, in forging the mythology of the 1917 October Revolution, emphasized a rupture with Russia’s pre-revolutionary past to legitimize their rule (Corney 2004; Gill 2011).

A decisive break with the Soviet past was critical to the idea of a “new Russia.” To sustain it, the memories of Soviet-era atrocities – political repression, collectivization, and forced deportations – were instrumentalized. Yeltsin invoked these memories throughout the political struggles of his two presidential terms, including the fight against the August 1991 Putsch, the October 1993 confrontation with the Supreme Soviet, and the 1996 reelection battle against the Communist Party leader Gennadi Zyuganov (Smith 2002; Miller 2006).

One might expect that breaking with the Soviet past would be accompanied by an effort to establish a link with the pre-Soviet one. Public sentiment, best captured in Stanislav Govorukhin’s 1992 documentary *Russia that We Lost* (*Rossiia kotoruyu my poteryali*), which portrayed the Romanov Empire as Russia’s golden age, seemed to support such a development. Yet Yeltsin failed to capitalize on this sentiment. On several occasions, he attempted to present the new democratic Russia as the successor to the Romanov Empire, framing the reforms of the 1990s as “restoring the continuity of times” interrupted by the 1917 Revolutions (quoted in Malinova 2016, 145). However, even more frequently, he criticized imperial Russia, portraying

its shortcomings as the root of many problems the country faced during its post-Soviet transition (Malinova 2011, 110–11).

All in all, having broken with the Soviet past, Yeltsin and his team failed to build a meaningful connection with the pre-Soviet one. Instead of reasserting continuity in Russia's national memory, they repeatedly undermined the link between past, present, and future generations essential to the very idea of the nation. As a result, rather than resolving the identity crisis triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union, they exacerbated it. Ultimately, they missed the mark in building an autobiographical narrative capable of grounding Russia's ontological security. Upon coming to power, Vladimir Putin sought to succeed where Yeltsin had fallen short.

Restoring the Shattered: Vladimir Putin and a Thousand Years of Russian Statehood

That Russia's new president had a very different approach to national memory became clear soon after his election. Less than a year into his first presidential term, on December 25, 2000, Putin signed three Federal Constitutional Laws adopting Russia's national flag,⁵ coat-of-arms,⁶ and anthem.⁷ Introduced by Peter the Great as a flag for the Russian merchant fleet, by 2000, the tricolor – comprising three equal horizontal fields: white on top, blue in the middle, and red at the bottom – had become firmly associated with Russia's democratic forces. The double-headed eagle, known since the 17th century, evoked the grandeur of the Romanov Empire. The anthem, originally composed by Alexander Alexandrov in 1938 as the “Anthem of the Bolshevik Party” and later adopted as the anthem of the USSR, with lyrics by Sergei Mikhalkov—who authored both the 1943 version glorifying Joseph Stalin and the 1977 version praising the Communist Party of the USSR—was a part of the Soviet legacy.

The adoption of the national symbols – that appeared a random concoction rather than a coherent set – is often interpreted as the result of Putin's political compromise with the communists on the one hand and the democrats on the other (see for instance Malinova 2018). And indeed, it was. It was also one of the first moves of the ruling elite under Putin to reassert continuity in Russia's national memory and thus restore its ontological security shattered in 1991. Taken together, the anthem, flag, and coat-of-arms fused the Soviet and pre-Soviet periods of Russia's past with its post-Soviet present, forging an unbroken line of succession spanning centuries.

When explaining his choice of national symbols, Putin emphasized the importance of focusing on “the achievements of our people throughout the centuries” (quoted in Malinova 2016, 147). With the Soviet recoded as Russian – stripped of its “historical specificity as an ideological or social project or as a political and economic alternative to capitalism” and reinterpreted as “an organic part of the historical past of Russian statehood and national tradition” (Kalinin 2011, 157–58) – the identity narrative promoted by Putin's regime linked the Baptism of Rus by Saint Prince Vladimir the Great with Yuri Gagarin's journey into space, the military successes of the Romanov Empire with the Soviet victory in the GPW, Alexander Pushkin with Kazimir Malevich. Centred on the positive aspects of Russia's past, this was the narrative of the *radical continuity* of Russian statehood.⁸ Repeatedly invoked by Putin and other members of Russia's ruling elite, the trope of “a thousand years of Russian history” encapsulated the essence of this narrative. Simple arithmetic underscores Kiev's critical importance to it: it is in Kiev that this narrative begins.

By linking the Kievan Rus, the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Romanov Empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation into a single tradition of statehood, the radical continuity narrative was meant to restore Russia's ontological security. Yet this remedy came with a significant side effect – it placed the origin of Russian statehood in independent Ukraine. While mending the discontinuity in national memory, this narrative produced a dislocation between the two axes of national imagination (Alonso 1988): memory and territory. As a result, it was inherently precarious – a fact made abundantly visible by the Kremlin's increasingly strenuous efforts to shore it up.

Holiday, Ribbon, Constitution: Shoring Up the Radical Continuity Narrative

Indeed, Russia's ruling elite under Putin never shifted away from this narrative. Instead, it invested considerable resources in promoting it. In other words, it engaged in "strategic use of political memory" (Subotić 2018, 297) in an effort to shore it up and thus restore Russia's ontological security. The Day of People's Unity, a national holiday introduced by Putin in 2004,⁹ became crucial in this regard.

The Day of People's Unity commemorates the expulsion of Polish troops from Moscow in 1612 by a militia led by merchant Kuzma Minin and Prince Dmitry Pozharsky.¹⁰ On November 4, 2005, in a speech¹¹ marking the holiday, Putin explained why the events of the 17th century still mattered for Russia. In 1612, he stated, Russia's "patriotic forces" ended the "internal feud and strife" and "the decay related to it." This, he argued, signified "the victory of the tendency towards strengthening the state as a result of unification, centralization, and the joining of efforts." It was then that "the spiritual revival of the Fatherland" and "the making of the great and sovereign state [*stanovleniye derzhavy*]" began.

The holiday serves as a reminder of the dangers of national discord, which inevitably leads to disastrous consequences. It heroizes the Russian people, who overcame their divisions and came together to rescue their state from an existential threat. At the same time, it valorizes the strong, centralized state that emerged from devastation to achieve grandeur through the sacrifice of its people. It also glorifies the re-establishment of the continuity of Russian statehood, which had been interrupted by *Smuta* – the profound political, social, and economic crisis that followed the death of the last Rurikid, Feodor Ioannovich. Immediately celebrating the end of the 17th century *Smuta*, the Day of People's Unity harks back to the 1917 Revolutions¹² and the collapse of the Soviet Union – other times of trouble when the continuity of Russian statehood was under threat. Ultimately, the holiday evokes a link between Putin's Russian Federation and a thousand years of Russian history, connecting present-day Russians to generation of their ancestors.

The Kremlin sought to popularize the Day of People's Unity (Omeličeva 2017). Various events such as concerts, open-air exhibitions, performances, and festivals were funded. Schools were instructed to teach students about the significance of the events of 1612, while TV networks aired feature films and documentaries. Public rallies and demonstrations were organized across Russia. Over time, an official ritual of celebration took shape, involving members of Russia's political, cultural, and economic elites, as well as the heads of "traditional religions." Annual commemorations on November 4 begin with Putin laying flowers at the monument to Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky on Red Square in Moscow. In the evening, a state reception is held at the Kremlin, culminating in a ceremony where state decorations are presented and honorary titles are conferred.

In 2016, the celebrations took an unusual turn. That year, Putin inaugurated a monument to Saint Prince Vladimir the Great, the Baptizer of Rus, on Borovitskaya Square in Moscow.¹³ The monument – created by Salavat Scherbakov and closely resembling the nineteenth-century monument to Saint Volodymyr in Kyiv – connected the Day of People's Unity explicitly to Kievan Rus. In his speech, Putin underscored this connection.

He portrayed Prince Vladimir as "a gatherer and defender of the Russian lands, a farsighted politician who laid the foundations of a strong, consolidated, [and] centralized state that united peoples, languages, cultures, and religions as equals into one immense family." He emphasized that Vladimir's greatest achievement was the Baptism of Rus, which "became a shared spiritual source for the peoples of Russia, Belarus, [and] Ukraine." He concluded by asserting that "today, it is our duty to confront current challenges and threats together, moving forward by drawing upon [our] spiritual legacy, the cherished traditions of unity and cohesion, and ensuring the continuity of a thousand years of our history."

Patriarch Kirill,¹⁴ along with the leaders of Russia's "traditional religions," participated in the ceremony. However, he was the only one to address the audience. If not for the Baptism, "there would be no Rus, no Russia, no Russian Orthodox state, no Russian Empire, no present-day Russia,"

the Patriarch declared, thus tying the very existence of contemporary Russian statehood to Orthodox Christianity and to the medieval principedom of Kiev. Following his speech, Patriarch Kirill consecrated the monument.

The inauguration ceremony, like the monument itself, emphasized that the thousand-year tradition of statehood inherited by present-day Russia originated in Kiev. At the same time, it highlighted another reason why Kiev is central to Russia's state identity narrative – Orthodox Christianity. Indeed, relations between religion and nationalism are complex (Brubaker 2012), with religious concepts, myths, symbols, and metaphors serving as fundamental building blocks for national imaginaries (Marsh 2008). Moreover, national and religious identities are particularly potent, often providing answers to ontological insecurities (Kinnvall 2004).

In Russia, national identity has long been inseparable from Orthodox Christianity (Hosking 1997). Vladimir the Great, a prince of Rus and one of the venerated military saints in Russia's pantheon, embodies this fusion of national and Orthodox Christian symbolism. More significantly for this discussion, the notion of a thousand years of Russian history is inextricably entangled with the concept of a thousand years of Orthodox Christianity (Mjør 2019; see also Griffin 2021). Speaking at the monument to Saint Prince Vladimir the Great in Moscow on the occasion of 1030th anniversary of the Baptism of Rus on July 28, 2018, Putin articulated this entanglement: "Baptism [was] the starting point of the formation and development of Russian statehood."¹⁵ Kiev, of course, occupies the point of origin for both Russian Orthodoxy and Russian statehood, which underscores its importance as a component of the state identity narrative meant to ground Russia's ontological security.

Much of the scholarship on Putin's politicization of national memory focuses on the instrumentalization of the GPW. But the May 9 celebrations also serve another purpose: they buttress the inherently precarious narrative of the radical continuity of Russian statehood.

In 2005, a commemorative symbol was introduced that enables anyone to identify with the Soviet victory over Nazism – the St. George Ribbon. A narrow black ribbon with orange stripes, it has become strongly associated with the Kremlin's GPW memory (Kolstø 2016). The ribbon's official history is outlined in *Rossijskaya Gazeta*, the mouthpiece of the Russian government.¹⁶ It dates back to 1769, when Catherine the Great established the Order of St. George as the highest military award of the Romanov Empire. The Bolsheviks abolished the order in 1917, but in 1942, Stalin reinstated the ribbon as a part of the Order of the Guard, modifying its design by replacing the original yellow stripes with orange. The present-day version of the ribbon merges the tsarist-era name with Soviet-era coloring, fusing the Romanov Empire and the Soviet Union while connecting both to Putin's Russian Federation.¹⁷

The St. George Ribbon exemplifies the aesthetics of what Mikhail Gabowitsch (2016) terms "panhistorical militarism." Representing the country's past as a series of military exploits while disregarding the social, political, and ideological differences between the wars Russia has fought and the soldiers who fought in them, panhistorical militarism links unproblematically the current Russian state to its predecessors. Thus, the St. George Ribbon serves to reassert the radical continuity of Russian statehood, turning military glory into a bolster for the state identity narrative meant to ground Russia's ontological security. In dark irony, since 2022, the St. George Ribbon has become a symbol of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. An emblem of the radical continuity narrative, the ribbon now also marks the war through which the Kremlin seeks to eliminate the sources of that narrative's inherent precarity – and the ontological vulnerability that flows from it.

Ultimately, the radical continuity narrative was enshrined in the Russian Constitution.¹⁸ In 2020, through a multi-step process labeled in Russian media as *operatsija obnulenije*, 206 constitutional amendments were adopted.¹⁹ While some were designed to reset Putin's presidential terms – allowing him to legally remain in office for two additional six-year terms, until 2036 – others formed a so-called "ideological block" (Blackburn and Petersson 2022). Article 67.1 introduced provisions emphasizing a "thousand-year history" that the Russian Federation is united by, the "memory of the ancestors" that it has the duty to preserve, and the "continuity in the development of the Russian state" that it recognizes.²⁰

The reform turned the Constitution into a document that attempted to restore Russia's security of "being-in-time" (Bachleitner 2021) and thus its "security of being" (Steele 2008). This move underscored both the central importance and the precarity of the narrative of radical continuity which, thirty years after the Soviet collapse, still required constitutional reinforcement. Importantly, this precarity had been laid bare repeatedly over the years as Ukraine's ruling elite claimed Kyiv as the birthplace of Ukrainian nation- and statehood.

Kiev or Kyiv? Contested Narratives and Withheld Affirmations

As early as Putin's first term, relations between Russia and its Eastern European neighbors were marked by memory wars, particularly over the GPW and Soviet repressions (Torbakov 2011; Siddi 2017; Koposov 2018; Mälksoo 2021; Episkopos 2023). In Russia – Ukraine relations, disputes over the memory of Kievan / Kyivan Rus became an additional source of tension.

Taras Kuzio (2006) distinguishes between different schools in Ukrainian historiography. While the *Russophile* and the *Sovietophile* recognize the continuity between Kyivan Rus and the Romanov Empire, the *Ukrainophile* refutes it, asserting Ukraine's unequivocal claim to Kyivan Rus heritage. Since 1990s, according to Kuzio, the country's ruling elite have drawn on the latter school as part of an effort to create Ukraine's own state identity narrative. Furthermore, as Lina Klymenko (2022) points out, since 2014, they have leveraged this narrative to propagate Ukraine's European identity and emphasize its distinctiveness from Russia.

Tracing the origins of Ukrainian statehood to Kyivan Rus, Ukraine's identity narrative links the Galician-Volhynian Principality, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Cossack Hetmanate, the 19th century national revival, and the Ukrainian revolution of 1917–1921 to post-Soviet independent Ukraine, thus establishing its continuity (Kasianov 2022; 2025). It portrays present-day Ukraine as the primary – if not the sole – heir to Kyivan Rus. It also frames the Baptism of Rus by Saint Prince Volodymyr the Great as evidence of Ukraine's civilizational proximity to Europe.

In advancing this narrative, Ukraine's ruling elite exposed the dislocation between Russia's national memory and territory, thereby undermining the radical continuity narrative meant to ground its ontological security. In other words, they refused Russia the affirmation that, as Ayşe Zarakol (2006) argues, would have been necessary to restore the ontological security shattered by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Rarely is this dynamic more evident than on July 28, when both Russia and Ukraine celebrate the Feast Day of Saint Prince Vladimir / Volodymyr the Great.²¹ On July 28, 2001, a year into his first presidential term, Putin visited Saint Volodymyr's Cathedral in Chersonesus, allegedly built on the site of the prince's baptism.²² Together with Ukraine's president, Leonid Kuchma, Putin participated in the ceremony of mounting a cross on the cathedral's cupola. The ceremony was a highlight of Putin's visit to Crimea, which also included a stop at the Artek Youth Camp and a joint parade of Ukrainian and Russian Black Sea Fleets.²³ Addressing the participants, Putin referred to Ukrainians and Russians as "brotherly nations" and emphasized that the "imperishable and enduring principles" of Orthodox Christianity were the "spiritual roots" underpinning the "unity of the peoples of Russia and Ukraine."

Rather strikingly, Putin's speech acknowledged that Russia's "brotherly" connection to Ukraine was foundational to its very sense of self. However, this is hardly surprising: this connection both stems from the radical continuity narrative and anchors it. Ultimately, this narrative is unsustainable without such a connection. The speech was therefore an attempt to shore up the narrative meant to ground Russia's ontological security and, simultaneously, to elicit its affirmation from Ukraine's president. Yet Kuchma tacitly withheld it. Instead, he described Volodymyr's baptism as "a pivotal moment in the history of Ukraine and the Orthodox Church," adding that it was "relevant to all the peoples, whose destinies were deeply and forever affected by the Baptism of Rus."²⁴

The tension revealed in 2001 did not dissipate over the years. On the contrary, it grew as the Kremlin's strategic use of memory to restore ontological security became increasingly strenuous. It

surfaced again in 2021, when Putin published his article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”²⁵ In it, he expanded on – and even strengthened – the points he had articulated in Chersoneses almost exactly twenty years earlier and reiterated repeatedly since. Russia and Ukraine, he claimed, belonged to “essentially the same historical and spiritual space.” The “spiritual choice made by Saint Vladimir,” Putin wrote, predetermined the affinity of Russians and Ukrainians as “one people – a single whole.” Emphasizing Kiev’s role as the origin of Russian statehood, he asserted that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians “were all descendants of Ancient Rus.”

And again – this time explicitly – Ukraine’s president refused to affirm Putin’s narrative. On July 28, 2021, Volodymyr Zelensky addressed the nation on the occasion of the Day of Baptism of Kyivan Rus – Ukraine.²⁶ “Ukraine is the successor of one of the most powerful states in medieval Europe,” he declared, stressing that “[i]n its capital, which is the capital of modern Ukraine, the history of Christianity in Eastern Europe began.” He went on: “This is not part of our history, this is our history itself. We do not need to prove it with historical treatises, works, or articles. Because our evidence is not on paper, it is in metal and stone. Not in myths and legends, but in our cities and on our streets.” Zelensky concluded by asserting the “historical unity of all Ukrainians.”

Emphasizing that – unlike Russia’s – Ukraine’s national territory and memory are tightly aligned, Zelensky exposed, in strikingly direct terms, the dislocation between the temporal and spatial axes of Russia’s national imagination. In doing so, he targeted the very core of the radical continuity narrative’s precarity, revealing the ontological vulnerability that flows from it.

While Zelensky’s address directly challenged each of the key premises in Putin’s article, the presidential decree²⁷ he signed two months later, on August 24, 2021, bore a striking rhetorical resemblance to Article 67.1 of the Russian Constitution. Introducing a new national holiday to be celebrated on July 28²⁸ – the Day of Ukrainian Statehood – the decree emphasized the “continuity of Ukrainian statehood,” tracing its origins to “the times when the city of Kyiv was founded.” It further highlighted the “civilizational choice of Kyivan Rus” reflected in its baptism. “We are a young country with a thousand-year history,” Zelensky proclaimed in his address to the nation.²⁹ This indirect exchange between Putin and Zelensky – tellingly occurring just six months before the launch of Russia’s full-scale invasion – highlights the efforts of both states’ ruling elites to sustain their respective identity narratives amid mounting contestation. Both narratives assert the continuity of their traditions of statehood. Both trace their origins to antiquity. And both rely heavily on the nationalized memory of Kievan / Kyivan Rus. As a result, Russia’s and Ukraine’s identity narratives directly contradict one another. More importantly for this argument, the latter exposes the dislocation between memory and territory – and thus the precarity inherent in the former.³⁰

Mother of Russian Cities: Kiev, Ukraine, and Russia’s Mnemonic Tradition

Importantly, the contestation over the memory of Kievan / Kyivan Rus between Russia and Ukraine is hardly a recent development; it stretches back nearly nine hundred years. Jaroslaw Pelenski (1998) traces it in detail. Thus, starting in the second half of 18th century and into 1840s–1860s, Vasily Tatishchev, Nikolay Karamzin, Vladimir Solovyev, Nikolay Ustryalov, and Vasily Klyuchevsky laid exclusive claim to Kievan Rus heritage (Halperin 1980; Pelenski 1998; Usachev 2012). In doing so, they relied on a combination of religious and secular arguments developed in Muscovy from 1330s to 1560s to. Importantly, Kiev was regarded as the origin of Russian statehood in Russian historical writing throughout the modern area, whether it was in the works of the “statist” school of historiography represented by Karamzin and Solovyov or in the “nationalist” one advanced by Ustryalov and Klyuchevsky (Miller 2008; Mjør 2014).

While Russian historians advanced the theory of uninterrupted succession of states from Kievan Rus through Vladimir-Suzdal to Muscovy and finally the Romanov Empire, their Ukrainian counterparts, most importantly – Mykhailo Hrushevs’kyi, employed linguistic, territorial, demographic, and socio-political arguments to establish continuity from Kyivan Rus through Galicia-Volhynia, Lithuania-Ruthenia and Cossack Hetmanate to modern Ukraine (Plokhy 2005; see also

Tolochko 2012). Both sides of the debate attempted “to develop streamlined conceptions of national history and culture and root them, if possible, in the earliest antiquity” (Pelenski 1998, 218).

This clash between Russian and Ukrainian historians over the memory of Kievan / Kyivan Rus was only a part of a much broader contest between the Russian and Ukrainian nation-building projects. When the Romanov Empire – like other European empires at the time – was challenged by nationalism, it responded by attempting to nationalize the imperial core (Miller 2003; 2015). The goal was to build an all-Russian nation, uniting Great (ethnic) Russians, Little Russian (Ukrainians), and White Russians (Belarusians) into a single entity. These three branches of the all-Russian nation were seen as having originated in Kievan Rus, later dispersed under pressure from the Golden Horde in the East and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the West, and eventually reunited within the Romanov Empire. The incorporation of the territories of present-day Ukraine and Belarus into the empire was framed as “the gathering of the Russian lands.”³¹

The all-Russian nation-building project simultaneously “drew a sharp distinction between Russians and other peoples of the empire” and “denied the qualitative character of the differences” between Great, Little, and White Russians (Miller 2003, 26). Ukrainian nationalism threatened this project, contesting its claims over population, territory, and – most importantly for this discussion – history. It challenged the notion of Kiev as “the mother of Russian cities,” where the Russian statehood and Eastern Slav’s Orthodox Christianity were born. Unsurprisingly, it “was soon identified as the most important challenge to the Russian nation-building project, as it was undermining its key element: the concept of unity among Great, Little, and White Russians” (Miller 2015, 330).

During the Soviet period, the centuries-old mnemonic tradition of drawing a linear narrative of continuous Russian statehood originating in Kiev was maintained. In the Soviet Union, Ukrainians were recognized as a separate – though brotherly – nation. Yet, the old pre-Soviet idea of the triunity of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians was preserved. This was reflected, for instance, in the framing of the Pereyaslav Treaty as the reunification of Russians and Ukrainians (Plokhyy 2001).³² Furthermore, beginning in the mid-1930s, Soviet historiography adopted a “thousand-year narrative on the prerevolutionary origins of Soviet statehood” (Brandenberger 2025). This turn was a part of a broader ideological shift among the Soviet ruling elite toward state-building and fostering group identity, driven by the need to popularize Marxist-Leninist ideology, foster popular loyalty to the regime, and reinforce its legitimacy (Brandenberger 2002). At the same time, it can be understood as an attempt by the Soviet ruling elite to mend the discontinuity in memory caused by the 1917 Revolutions and to anchor Soviet identity in remote antiquity.

Thus, Soviet historiography moved away rather dramatically from the 1920s canon epitomized by the works of Mikhail Pokrovsky, which interpreted history through the lens of historical materialism, portrayed Imperial Russia as “the prison of the peoples,” and criticized “Great Russian chauvinism.” While party propaganda and mass culture relied more and more on Russian national heroes, imagery, and myths (Brandenberger 2002), the debate over the relative importance of class and nation in narrating the past – a hallmark of the early Soviet years – was overshadowed by a newly surfaced contradiction “between Russian and Ukrainian patriotic national histories” (Yekelchik 2004, 10). As Serhy Yekelchik (2004, 10) explains, “an unqualified condemnation of tsarist colonialism” was replaced by “an increasing identification with Russian imperial past.”³³

In the new ideological project of “russocentric etatism” (Brandenberger 2025), Kievan Rus was cast as the place where Russian – and thus Soviet – statehood was rooted (Brandenberger 2024). Put simply, the Soviet state identity narrative, just like that of the Romanov Empire, began in Kievan Rus. Thus, when creating an autobiographical narrative for Russia, its post-Soviet ruling elite drew on a centuries-long mnemonic tradition reproduced through the process of mnemonic socialization.

Indeed, the linear narrative of a thousand-year Russian statehood originating in Kievan Rus was central to mnemonic socialization of generations of Soviet people. Putin, just like members of his inner circle, learned it during history lessons in Soviet schools in the 1960s. This helps explain why, when the need arose to forge a state identity narrative for Russia, they selected this one – among the

many options fiercely debated in the early post-Soviet years. When the precarity of this narrative was exposed by Ukraine's claim to Kyiv, Putin sought to eliminate its sources by establishing political – and, when that failed, military – control over Ukraine. His invasion, thus, functioned as an attempted “ontological self-help” (Ejdus 2018): a bid to redress the dislocation between Russia's national memory and territory, and thereby to restore the ontological security shattered by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Conclusion

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has – understandably – sparked intense debate over its underlying causes.³⁴ While some scholars emphasize the broader geopolitical context of the invasion (Mearsheimer 2022), others point to Russia's domestic political dynamics (Ferraro 2024). Putin's personality and his fixation on Ukraine have also been invoked (Freedman 2024). Perhaps the most widely accepted interpretation, however, stresses Russia's pursuit of great power status as the key driver of its aggression against Ukraine (Götz and Staun 2022; Kordan 2022; Marples 2022; Kuzio 2023; Oksamytna 2023; Ryan 2023). Within this framework, the concept of empire frequently emerges: viewing the invasion as a neo-imperial project of territorial expansion, scholars suggest that its roots lay in Russia's enduring imperial identity. The analysis offered above aligns with the view that the invasion is rooted in Russia's identity narrative. However, it suggests a different emphasis, highlighting a nationalist rather than imperial logic as central to Russia's pursuit of domination over Ukraine, where memory is as important as territory.³⁵

The collapse of the Soviet Union marked a profound discontinuity in Russia's national memory, disrupting the narrative foundational to its identity and shattering its ontological security. Efforts by Russia's ruling elite under Boris Yeltsin to restore it proved unsuccessful. This should not be a surprise: Yeltsin's haphazard handling of national memory failed to establish the link between past, present, and future generations that underpins the very idea of the nation. Putin's approach to national memory has been markedly different. From his first months in office, the ruling elite has worked to craft an identity narrative that links Kievan Rus, the Grand Duchy of Moscow, the Romanov Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation into an uninterrupted thousand years of statehood. Importantly, in doing so, they followed Russia's centuries old mnemonic tradition – one they had internalized in the course of their own mnemonic socialization.

Yet, the narrative of radical continuity of Russian statehood was profoundly precarious – a fact made abundantly visible by the Kremlin's increasingly strenuous efforts to shore it up. By placing the origin of Russian statehood in independent Ukraine, it mended the discontinuity in national memory only to produce a dislocation between national memory and territory. Anchoring Russia's sense of self in shifting ground, it left the state ontologically vulnerable. Ultimately, this narrative proved self-defeating.

Rather than affirming the radical continuity narrative, Ukraine's ruling elite exposed the dislocation at its core by asserting their own claim to Kyiv as the birthplace of Ukrainian nation- and statehood. Laying bare the precarity of the radical continuity narrative and, by extension, Russia's resulting ontological vulnerability, this claim undermined Russia's attempt to restore what had been shattered by the Soviet collapse. The Kremlin's response was to seek political – and, when that failed, military – control over Ukraine in an effort to redress the dislocation and thereby eliminate the sources of ontological vulnerability that flowed from the radical continuity narrative.

The contestation over the memory of Kievan / Kyivan Rus between Russia and Ukraine is, at its core, a contestation over the national selves of the two countries. Putin's war of “de-Nazification” was aimed at halting Ukraine's nation-building project, which the Kremlin viewed as a direct threat to the nation-building project of its own. It is within the context of Putin's nation-building – central to his regime and its ideology (Laruelle 2025) – that the invasion of Ukraine should be understood.

More broadly, Russia's aggression against Ukraine can be seen as yet another chapter in its ongoing struggle to nationalize the core of a long-vanished empire. With Ukraine envisioned as part

of this core, Putin's war is not an attempt to dominate an external Other, but rather a bid to assert control over what is imagined as the national Self. In this sense, for Russia – as it is understood by Putin's regime – this war is as existential as it is for Ukraine.

Driven by a specific identity narrative, Russia's invasion of Ukraine underscores the political power of memory. Indeed, states are sometimes willing to compromise their physical security in order to maintain the ontological one – the security of identity (Wendt 1994). As national memory is critical to state identity, controlling it becomes essential in the pursuit of ontological security. Russia's aggression exemplifies a state jeopardizing both its present and future in an effort to assert control over the past – or more precisely, over a specific memory upon which its identity narrative depends.

This by no means implies that the Russia – Ukraine war was inevitable. While national memories influence political decisions, they do not determine them. Political actors do. Behind the invasion of Ukraine were specific individuals who held a particular understanding of Russia's memory and chose to act on it. While analyzing this understanding helps explain their choice, it does not absolve them of responsibility for it. Similarly, examining Russia's mnemonic tradition helps explain why, when Putin first came to power in 2000, the ruling elite chose to promote the narrative of radical continuity of Russian statehood. However, it is important to emphasize that they *did* have a choice – as the acute public debates over Russia's past in the 1990s demonstrated. Should political space in Russia open up once more, the choice of the past to remember – and the future to pursue – will rise again.

Disclosure. None.

Notes

- 1 The very name of the city – Kiev or Kyiv – is a highly politicized issue. To navigate this, I will use Kiev when referring to events that take place in Russia or when citing sources in Russian. Conversely, I will use Kyiv for events in Ukraine and when referencing sources in Ukrainian. I apply the same approach to the names Vladimir and Volodymyr, using each according to the language and context of the source.
- 2 Available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73411>> (accessed April 28, 2025).
- 3 Thus, the loss of territory where a significant part of history claimed as national took place becomes a source of ontological insecurity for a state. Consider, for instance, Serbia's claim to Kosovo: while often perceived as “irrational and unstrategic,” it can be explained by the importance of Kosovo to Serbia, which is rooted in the Serbian state narrative of “victimization and historical injustice” derived from the foundational Kosovo myth (Subotić 2016, 619).
- 4 Declaration of the Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR No 22-1b of June 12, 1990. Available at <http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=LAW;n=39472;dst=0;rnd=189271.9247940215282142;SRDSMODE=QSP_GENERAL;SEARCHPLUS=%E4%E5%EA%EB%E0%F0%E0%F6%E8%FF%20%F1%F3%E2%E5%F0%E5%ED%E8%F2%E5%F2%20%F0%F1%F4%F1%F0;EXCL=PBUN%2CQSBO%2CKRBO%2CPKBO;SRD=true;ts=14810082421892716785868941806257> (accessed January 21, 2025).
- 5 Federal Constitutional Law No 1 “On the Flag of the Russian Federation” of December 25, 2000. Available at <<http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/16406>> (accessed April 12, 2025).
- 6 Federal Constitutional Law No 2 “On the Coat-of-arms of the Russian Federation” of December 25, 2000. Available at <<http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/16414>> (accessed April 12, 2025).
- 7 Federal Constitutional Law No 3 “On the Anthem of the Russian Federation” of December 25, 2000. Available at <<http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/16407>> (accessed April 12, 2025).
- 8 Interestingly, in post-Soviet Russia, the security apparatus led the first attempts to emphasize historical continuity (Fedor 2011). Thus, calls to restore the Felix Dzerzhinsky monument in Lubyanka Square in Moscow were framed as a way to mend the rupture of Russia's historical memory caused by its toppling. Moreover, some Chekist narratives traced the security services' origins as far back as the Scythians, established an antique genealogy (Fedor 2011, chap. 5).

- 9 Federal Law No 201-FZ of December 29, 2004. Available at <<https://base.garant.ru/12138245/>> (accessed April 7, 2025).
- 10 However, the choice of date for the holiday was hardly based on historical chronicles – November 4 was not a particularly pivotal moment in the liberation of Moscow from the 17th-century foreign invasion (Nazarov 2004). Instead, it was predetermined by the fact that on November 4 (October 22 in the Julian calendar), Russia celebrates the Feast Day of the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God, one of its most venerated miraculous icons. Notably, the idea for the holiday originated within the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). It was first proposed in 2004 during a session of the Interreligious Council of Russia (Efremova 2012) and was later publicly endorsed by Patriarch Kirill (Omelicheva 2017).
- 11 Available at <<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/23252>> (accessed May 2, 2025).
- 12 Important to note, the 1917 Revolutions posed a challenge for post-Soviet Russia's ruling elite—interpreting them was not easy for either Yeltsin or Putin. It was not until 2017, the centenary year, that the Kremlin, with the support of the ROC, found a way to tackle this challenge (Klimenko 2021).
- 13 Available at <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53211>> (accessed March 15, 2025).
- 14 Available at <<http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4660396.html>> (accessed March 15, 2025).
- 15 Available at <<http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58123>> (accessed March 15, 2025).
- 16 Available at <<https://rg.ru/2015/05/07/lentochka.html>> (accessed March 13, 2025).
- 17 Combining imperial and Soviet symbolism, the St. George Ribbon also carries Orthodox Christian connotations: St. George the Victorious is one of Russia's revered military saints. As the patron saint of Moscow, he is depicted slaying the dragon on the city's coat of arms – a motif that also appears on the coat of arms of the Russian Federation.
- 18 Notably, Pierre Nora (1989) suggests that state constitutions function as *lieux de mémoire*, where memories are reconstructed and histories are embodied. Constitutions not only envision national futures but also narrate national pasts. As Lourens Du Plessis (2000, 385) observes, “The potency with which it [the constitution] can mold a politics of memory thus equals the authority with which it can shape the politics of the day.”
- 19 Available at <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4389719>> (accessed June 23, 2024).
- 20 Full text of the new Constitution is available at <https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_28399/b57f514e606ee66a6f97d072551b16a416610dfc/> (accessed June 23, 2024).
- 21 President Viktor Yuschenko introduced the Day of Baptism of Kyivan Rus – Ukraine by signing Decree No. 668/2008 on July 25, 2008. Available at <<https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/cgi-bin/laws/main.cgi?nreg=668%2F2008#Text>> (accessed April 1, 2025). On May 31, 2010, President Dmitry Medvedev signed Federal Law No. 105-FZ, adding July 28 as the Day of Baptism of Rus to the list of days of military glory and memorial days. Available at <<http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/31175>> (accessed April 1, 2025). For a detailed overview of the holiday's history and an analysis of its ecclesial and political implications see Griffin (2021). Since 2023, the Day of Baptism of Kyivan Rus – Ukraine has been celebrated on July 15, in accordance with the Revised Julian calendar. See President Volodymyr Zelensky's Decree No. 455/2023 of July 28, 2023. Available at <<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/4552023-47641>> (accessed April 2, 2025).
- 22 Available at <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/42163>> (accessed April 1, 2025).
- 23 Available at <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/trips/45681>> (accessed April 1, 2025).
- 24 Available at <<https://www.newsru.com/world/28jul2001/vstretilis.html>> (accessed April 1, 2025).
- 25 Available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>> (accessed April 1, 2025).
- 26 Available at <<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ukrayina-kiyivska-rus-1033-zvernennya-prezidenta-volodimira-69757>> (accessed April 1, 2025).
- 27 Presidential Decree No. 423/2021 of August 24 2021. Available at <<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/4232021-39917>> (accessed April 1, 2025).
- 28 In 2023, the date was changed from July 28 to July 15. See Presidential Decree No. 455/2023 of July 28, 2023. Available at <<https://www.president.gov.ua/documents/4552023-47641>> (accessed April 1, 2025).

- 29 Available at <<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/promova-prezidenta-volodimira-zelenskogo-z-nagodi-30-yi-rich-70333>> (accessed April 1, 2025).
- 30 This by no means implies that Ukraine's narrative is more authentic or that Ukraine has a more legitimate claim to Kyiv. Rather, it underscores the importance of national memory for states' ontological security; the centrality of beginnings for national narratives; the need for continuity and for alignment between memory and territory in national imagination; and the fact that nation-building projects emerging on the ruins of empires necessarily contest one another over nationalized pasts. For a comprehensive overview of mnemonic disputes between Russia and Ukraine from the 1990s to the early 2020s, see Kasianov (2025).
- 31 As Charles J. Halperin (2022) explains, the Russian Land was a central political myth of Kievan Rus. This myth played a key role in the Muscovite appropriation of Kievan Rus heritage. Between the mid-13th and mid-14th centuries, Muscovite intellectuals gradually stopped referring to Suzdalian Russia as the Suzdalian Land and began to describe it as the Russian Land, thus relocating it from Kiev to Moscow. By the middle of the 14th century, the Muscovites were aware that Kiev was controlled by the growing Lithuanian Grand Principality. Yet, they were able to claim the inheritance of Historical Kiev without possessing Contemporary Kiev. This rupture between history and territory is no longer tenable in the age of nationalism, when the two axes of national imagination are inseparable, and the lack of control over national space undermines legitimacy of control over national time.
- 32 When, in the wake of the Soviet collapse, the challenge of nation-building reemerged with new urgency, various definitions of the Russian nation were suggested. One of them envisioned Russians as a nation encompassing all Eastern Slavs united by common history and culture (Tolz 1998b). Related was the notion that Russia's legitimate borders should encapsulate this Slavic nucleus (Tolz 1998a). At the time, however, these ideas remained relatively marginal, circulating primarily within nationalist circles. They gained broader prominence only after Ukraine's Orange and, later, Euromaidan revolutions (Kolstø 2023).
- 33 Yekelchik traces Ukrainian historians' attempts to reconcile their national historical mythologies with the Soviet grand narrative of "friendship of the peoples," in which Russians played the role of the "elder brother." However, he argues that "Soviet authorities never fully reconciled the Soviet peoples' multiple national histories," which "remained in essence "national histories" disguised by the superficial rhetoric of class and amalgamated into the imperial grand story" (Yekelchik 2004, 12).
- 34 For an overview of the debate, see (Bakalov 2024; Polianskii 2024).
- 35 Whether Russian nationalism is possible is, in itself, a matter of debate. Thus, following Alexander J. Motyl (1990), David G. Rowley (2000) argues that, although often used, the term "Russian nationalism" in fact describes a style of thought more accurately characterized as imperialism. In contrast, Vera Tolz (2001) suggests that as early as 19th century, Russia – despite being an empire – was imagined as a nation-state. More recently, Pål Kolstø (2019), challenging the conventional empire/nation dichotomy, has examined the concept of *imperial nationalism* in the Russian context. His analysis draws on Stefan Berger and Alexei Miller's (2015) groundbreaking study of nation-building projects conceived and implemented in the cores of European empires challenged by nationalism.

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