

Popular and Scholarly Primordialism: The Politics of Ukrainian History during Russia's 2022 Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

While nationalism theorists have mostly rejected primordialism, politicians and the wider public typically have a primordialist and essentialist understanding of national history. On the eve of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin invoked several primordialist tropes so as to justify military action, which is unsurprising in a politician. Yet Western scholars criticizing Putin's historical narratives in newspaper editorials or in scholarly talks posted to YouTube only rarely suggest modernist or social constructivist historical narratives. Several posit counter-primordialisms instead. Primordialism, then, enjoys more support than is widely realized, even among scholars who ought to be familiar with its problems. Meanwhile modernist theorists of nationalism, however popular among nationalism theorists, require more vigorous promotion in academic circles.

Keywords

Ukraine; Putin; primordialism; modernism; 2022 war

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused, among other things, a spirited international discussion about Ukrainian history, and specifically about the origins of Ukrainian nationalism. Russian president Vladimir Putin, in various public pronouncements, has discussed the history of Ukraine's relationship with Russia and the origins of a distinct Ukrainian national consciousness. In the Anglophone world, and indeed in for what for lack of a better term might be called "Western" countries generally, a host of political scientists, historians, and other scholars, including this author (Maxwell 2022), have written editorials for journals or newspapers, delivered public talks on YouTube, or otherwise addressed the public on this subject. This essay contrasts Putin's remarks with the commentaries academic pundits presented in the first month of the Ukrainian war, that is, between February 24, 2022 and March 24, 2022. It focuses particularly on how Western academics contested Putin's historical narrative of Ukrainian nationhood, and

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the alternate narratives they proposed. Western academic pundits, horrified by both the invasion and Putin's justifications for it, have almost uniformly criticized Putin. When viewed through the lens of nationalism theory, however, a dispiriting number of Putin's Western critics have shared Putin's essentialist and primordialist assumptions about how nationhood arises. Public debates over the Russian-Ukrainian war thus illustrate the continued popularity of primordialist theories of nationalism, and the continuing need to debunk them.

Primordialism, as a school of thought in nationalism studies, holds that contemporary nations arise from deep historical roots. Several scholars have summarized primordialism as the theory that nations are "ancient and natural" (Zubrzycki 2002, 279; Akopov 2012, 283; Demmers 2016, 36). Primordialism resembles essentialism, the notion that ethnicity is fixed, immutable, and inherited; indeed primordialism and essentialism are often conflated. Since this analysis focuses on contested narratives of historical origins, it will discuss "primordialism" rather than "essentialism": the former term seems to address the question of historical origins more clearly.

Among specialists in nationalism theory, primordialism gets little respect these days. During the 1980s, several influential scholars of nationalism persuasively argued that nations and nationalism are actually modern phenomena. Ernst Gellner's influential *Nations and Nationalism* concluded that nationalism arose in tandem with the industrial revolution which generated it (Gellner 1983, 40). Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, easily the most cited work of nationalism theory, claimed that nationalism first arose in the colonial Americas and dated its global emergence to the period "between say, 1760 and 1830" (1983, 64). In the context of nationalism theory, the social constructivist approaches pioneered by Gellner, Anderson, and others are usually described as "modernism" or "modernization theory."

Modernization theory attracted critics (e.g., Smith 1986; Hastings 1997; see also the discussion in Özkırımlı 2000, 145-68), but has mostly deprived primordialism of its intellectual legitimacy. Hardly any nationalism theorists espouse primordialism. Robin Cohen (1999), one of the rare exceptions, offered in his own words only "a modest defence of primordialism" (Cohen 1999, 3). More typically, Donald Horowitz (2003, 72) dismissed primordialism as "the straw man of ethnic studies," while Rogers Brubaker (1996, 15, n.4) dismissed it as "a long-dead horse that writers on ethnicity and nationalism continue to flog." Spencer and Wollman's survey of nationalism theory dispensed with primordialism in a single page (Spencer and Wollman 2002, 27). Umut Özkırımlı, the leading historiographer of nationalism

theory, discussed it at greater length, but also criticized it harshly (Özkırımlı 2000, 49-71). Nationalism theorists who object to modernization theory usually propose alternative models, even if those models sometimes amount to neo-primordialism in practice (Maxwell 2020).

Nationalism theorists, however, form only a tiny percentage of the world's total population. Indeed, they are not even a majority of professional academics: most political scientists and historians have concentrated on other themes. Unreconstructed primordialism remains widespread among nonspecialists since, as Gellner rightly noted, "commonsense popular belief is on the side of the antiquity of nation" (Gellner 1997: 92). The wide gulf separating popular and specialist conceptualizations of nationalism sometimes results in ugly confrontation. Ronald Suny, for example, found that when he presented "a more constructivist understanding of nationness in place of the primordialist convictions of the nationalists" at a Yerevan conference, an angry crowd gathered to shout insults at him (Suny 2001, 864).

Some of the social forces generating popular primordialism are easy to identify. School textbooks promote historical narratives that various scholars have characterized as "openly primordialist" (Shnirelman 2009, 117), or as espousing "a primordialist, ethno-culturally essentialist vision of national identity" (Vickers 2009, 27). Historical atlases similarly propound "the myth of a centuries-long tradition of national statehood" (Kamusella 2010, 128). Yet insofar as state-sponsored historical narratives involve "attempts to recover a serviceable past" (von Hagen 1995, 666), official primordialism not only reifies popular primordialism, but caters to it. Indeed, some scholars have argued that deep psychological roots underlie "the human propensity to think about ethnicity or nationality in primordialist terms, when historical evidence provides many counterexamples of fluidity and change" (Weinreich, Bacova, Rougier 2003, 116; see also Gil-White 1999).

Primordialism, in any event, suffuses political rhetoric generally (Allahar 1996; Wieland 2005), and specifically Vladimir Putin's public statements on Ukraine. On July 12, 2021, the Kremlin website published the article "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," which, according to Andrew Wilson of University College London, "Putin is widely assumed to have actually written ... himself, which isn't always the case with these kind of things" (Wilson 2022, 0:52). The article concludes with various demands related to current politics, but opens with a historical narrative of Russian-Ukrainian relations. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu subsequently made the essay obligatory reading for Russian military officers (Leszczenko and Tarnavska 2021, 24).

Putin's 2021 essay argued that Ukrainians and Russians were a single people until the twentieth century. It repeatedly proclaimed the religious and linguistic unity of East Slavs in historic times. In the earliest chronicles dating back to the era of Kyivan/Kievan Rus', Putin argued, "Slavic and other tribes across the vast territory – from Ladoga, Novgorod, and Pskov to Kiev and Chernigov – were bound together by one language." During the early modern period of rivalry between Muscovy and the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, "people both in the western and eastern Russian lands spoke the same language," and when Orthodox faced persecution from Catholic leaders, Orthodox Slavs looked to Muscovy as "people who spoke the same language and had the same faith." As recently as the eighteenth century, the "incorporation of the western Russian lands into the single state was not merely the result of political and diplomatic decisions. It was underlain by the common faith, shared cultural traditions, and – I would like to emphasize it once again – language similarity" (Putin 2021).

Somewhat contradicting these repeated claims to linguistic unity, Putin acknowledged Ukrainian linguistic distinctiveness when discussing recent events. When he criticized Ukrainian laws that "cut the Russian language out of the educational process" and defended Donbas separatists who "took up arms to defend their home, their language and their lives," Putin implicitly posited separate Ukrainian and Russian languages. Indeed, in a rare acknowledgement that Russian-Ukrainian relations have ever been anything other than warm and friendly, Putin even conceded that various nineteenth-century tsarist laws had "restricted the publication and importation of religious and socio-political literature in the Ukrainian language" (Putin 2021).

According to Putin, linguistic divergence between Russian and Ukrainian occurred because the experience of "living within different states naturally brought about regional language peculiarities, resulting in the emergence of dialects." By depicting Ukrainian not as a "language" but as one of many "dialects" of a Pan-Russian or All-Russian "language," Putin presented a polemical claim as an objective linguistic fact.

Invoking the language-dialect dichotomy is inherently political, since it is a value judgment about the importance of linguistic diversity. Leading theoretical linguists have repeatedly insisted that the language-dialect dichotomy has no objective linguistic meaning. Noam Chomsky, considering "the definition of a language or a dialect," declared that the question was "political, not linguistic" (Chomsky 1977, 195; English translation in Chomsky 1979, 190). Joshua Fishman, founder of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, similarly insisted that "the dialect/language issue ... is not resolvable on objective linguistic

grounds alone” (Fishman 1985, 6). One sociolinguistics textbook published by Oxford University Press insisted that the language/dialect distinction was “social and political rather than purely linguistic” (Spolsky 1998, 30); another published by Cambridge University Press emphasized the point with italic type: “*there is no real distinction to draw between language and dialect*” (Hudson 1980, 36). Peter Trudgill’s sociolinguistics textbook, finally, not only declared that “there is no way to answer these questions on linguistic grounds,” but complained that “it seems that it is only linguists who fully understand the extent to which these are not linguistic questions” (Trudgill 1995, 145). These scholars, in short, view language/dialect arguments as political posturing.

The political posture implied by Putin’s linguistic arguments, however, suggests a stance that might be summarized as “unity in diversity.” Russians and Ukrainians can acknowledge their differences, Putin argued, but ought to prioritize their commonalities. Both Russians and Ukrainians should see themselves as part of a greater whole. He adduced as evidence Ukrainian literary hero Taras Shevchenko, who “wrote poetry in the Ukrainian language, and prose mainly in Russian,” and famed novelist Nikolai Gogol, who included “Malorussian folk sayings and motifs” in his novels. “How can this heritage be divided between Russia and Ukraine?” asked Putin, “and why do it?” (Putin 2021).

Putin argued for unity in diversity not only in linguistic contexts, but when discussing what many scholars like to theorize as “national identity.” He specifically advocated the concept of a “triune people comprising Velikorussians, Malorussians and Belorussians.” This triune concept of All-Russian nationhood denies the existence of a separate “Ukrainian nation,” instead classifying Malorussians (Малороссы), “Little Russians,” as part of a greater All-Russian nation. “Our kinship has been transmitted from generation to generation,” Putin wrote, and is maintained “in the blood ties that unite millions of our families. Together we have always been and will be many times stronger and more successful. For we are one people” (Putin 2021).

Both the triune national concept and its linguistic counterpart have a long tradition in Russian nationalist thought (Miller 2003; Plokhly 2006a 299-353; Kravchenko 2019). Both concepts, furthermore, once also enjoyed support both in Eastern Galicia (Sereda 2001; Zayarnyuk 2010) and in Romanov Ukraine (Plokhly 2006b; Korolov 2021). Indeed, European Slavists generally classified Ruthenians, Little Russians, and Ukrainians as a subcategory of Russians until the end of the First World War (Maxwell 2015, 35-36, 43-45).

Putin contended that “the idea of Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians” initially arose due to foreign meddling. Putin argued “the Polish elite” and “Austro-Hungarian authorities” first devised the idea of Ukrainian distinctiveness, and blamed NATO and “Western authors of the anti-Russian project” for perpetuating it. He acknowledged that notions of Ukrainian distinctiveness have been “used for political purposes as a tool of rivalry between European states,” but argued that “there was no historical basis” for them (Putin 2021). Note that by linking the legitimacy of national sentiments to some “historical basis,” Putin presupposed a primordialist theory of nationalism.

According to Putin, the notion of “three separate Slavic peoples: Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian” only became widespread during Soviet times. He blamed Lenin for federalizing the Russian Empire into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and encouraging citizens of the various constituent Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), including the Ukrainian SSR, to view themselves in particularist national terms. Putin, building on a longstanding trope of Russian victimhood (e.g., Ilyin 1950; Solzhenitsyn 1990), depicted the Soviet system of ethnic federalism as Russia’s dismemberment:

It is no longer important what exactly the idea of the Bolshevik leaders who were chopping the country into pieces was. We can disagree about minor details, background and logics behind certain decisions. One fact is crystal clear: Russia was robbed, indeed (Putin 2021).

Putin also condemned early Soviet nationalities policy, and specifically Lenin’s policy of *korenizatsiya* (коренизация), literally “putting down roots,” but glossed in the official English translation of Putin’s essay as “localization.” According to Putin,

[t]he localization policy undoubtedly played a major role in the development and consolidation of the Ukrainian culture, language and identity. At the same time, under the guise of combating the so-called Russian great-power chauvinism, Ukrainization was often imposed on those who did not see themselves as Ukrainians.

The Soviet policy of *korenizatsiya* meant that “ideologists of Ukrainian nationalism” who “had been supported by Austria-Hungary” received important posts. Putin specifically mentioned the appointment of Ukrainian historian and politician Mykhailo Hrushevsky to the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, though Putin’s English translator rendered his surname as “Grushevskiy” (Putin 2021).

Putin even more forcefully derived Ukrainian nationalism from the Communist era in an address of February 22, 2022, during which he announced the invasion of Ukraine. In his February address, Putin blamed Ukrainian statehood on Lenin, apparently as a strategy of delegitimization: "Soviet Ukraine is the result of the Bolsheviks' policy and can be rightfully called 'Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine'." By founding the Ukrainian SSR, Putin wrote, "Lenin and his associates" harmed Russia "by separating, tearing away from it part of its own historical territories." Putin then declared Ukraine "an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space" (Putin 2022a).

Putin, of course, is primarily a politician. American sociologist Rogers Brubaker, in a landmark article describing how to study "ethnicity without groups," noted that "to criticize ethnopolitical entrepreneurs for reifying ethnic groups would be a kind of category mistake. Reifying groups is precisely what ethnopolitical entrepreneurs are in the business of doing" (Brubaker 2002, 167). Primordialist national narratives are effective tools for popular mobilization. Putin, as a politician, is in the business of popular mobilization, and thus also in the business of espousing primordialism. So, for that matter, is Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who has employed similarly primordialist narratives tracing Ukrainian statehood back to the days of Kyivan / Kievan Rus' (Zelenskyy 2021). Putin, as a political leader, presumably posited the triune concept of Russian nationhood as a strategy for promoting it. Similar considerations explain why he described Ukrainian as a "dialect."

Though devised by a politician for political ends, Putin's historical narrative superficially resembles the work of many leading Western historians of the Soviet Union. Several Western historians, for example, have also emphasized the importance of Soviet nationalities policy in the development of Ukrainian nationalism. Kate Brown's outstanding *Biography of No Place* has perhaps most evocatively described the early Soviet Ukrainian countryside with its illiteracy, national indifference, and syncretic religious mysticism. During the 1920s, the inhabitants of Ukraine, in Brown's account, typically did not belong to "a particular ethnic group or religious faith," even if the region's histories have subsequently "been nationalized into separate narratives" (Brown 2009, 60, 74). Nor was Ukraine's lack of nationalist zeal unusual: a significant literature explores and documents national indifference throughout the nineteenth century (Zahra 2010; Van Ginderachter and Fox 2019), not only in Eastern Europe, but also in the most "advanced" countries of Western Europe (e.g., Weber 1976; Carol 2019).

Soviet authorities, furthermore, did indeed promote Ukrainian national feeling, even if only as an unintended consequence of policies designed for socialist modernization. Soviet governance first encouraged and then compelled nationally indifferent peasants to choose a nationality, often a non-Russian nationality. The existence of the Ukrainian SSR helped consolidate a sense of Ukrainian nationhood, since, as Sheila Fitzpatrick has noted, “incorporation into the Soviet Union as one of its original constituent republics was an important milestone on the path to national sovereignty” (Fitzpatrick 2022). Perhaps more importantly, however, Soviet identity cards formalized the nationality of individual Soviet citizens in their daily lives (Zaslavsky and Luryi 1979). In myriad ways, the Soviet Union acted, in Brubaker’s memorable phrase, as a “nationalizing state” (Brubaker 1996, 63-76; see also Slezkine 1994; Suny and Martin 2001). Several scholars of Ukraine have propounded constructivist narratives with similar chronologies (Yekelchuk 2007; Plokhyy 2015, esp. 230-33; Hirsch 2014).

Putin’s claim that Soviet authorities foisted Ukrainization on an unwilling Ukrainian populace also finds some support in Western scholarship. Francine Hirsch provided evidence of triune feeling among the twentieth-century peasantry while documenting how frustrated early Soviet officials became because “peasants often did not distinguish among Belorussians, Great Russians and Ukrainians, but simply called everyone ‘Russian’ or named the town they were from” (Hirsch 2004, 130). Terry Martin’s excellent work on early Soviet nationalities policy similarly described popular resistance to Ukrainianization, finding for example that “Ukrainization inspectors reported strong hostility to the use of Ukrainian” in Ukrainian factories, even from supposed ethnic Ukrainians. Martin also found that “in Ukraine, as in other republics, the policy of promoting Ukrainian culture had led to the appointment of former Ukrainian nationalists to important positions” (Martin 2001, 90-95; 122), even if *korenizatsiia* was subsequently abandoned because Stalin became “increasingly concerned about Russian resentment” (Martin 2001, 271; see also 216, 293, 393).

Putin’s vision of Ukrainian history nevertheless differs fundamentally from the narratives of Western scholars, because Putin’s narrative rests on unstated primordialist assumptions. When Putin declared “that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia, more precisely, Bolshevik, communist Russia” (Putin 2022a), he sought to deny the legitimacy of Ukrainian nationalism. Western constructivist narratives arise from wholly different motives. When Brown wrote that “independent Ukraine is a creation” and assigned twentieth-century events responsibility for “creating the unambiguously

Ukrainian nation-space,” she insisted that “in making this argument I do not wish to call into question the viability of independent Ukraine” (Brown 2009, 230). Brown wanted to explain what she had found in the archives; I imagine that she wrote to satisfy her personal curiosity. More generally, constructivist scholars propound modernist narratives of Ukrainian nationalism because Ukrainian nationalism, like Russian nationalism, like all nationalism, is in fact a modern phenomenon. Scholars writing in the modernist, constructivist tradition study the early twentieth-century Soviet era because of its far-reaching significance. The early Soviet period was indeed a turning point in Ukrainian history: it explains how and why Ukrainian nationalism turned out as it did.

By contrast, when Putin argued that “since time immemorial ... people living in the south-west of what has historically been Russian land have called themselves Russians and Orthodox Christians” (Putin 2022a), he wrote as if the Soviet era somehow does not count. He sneered about “Vladimir Lenin’s Ukraine” in the hope that disparaging Soviet leaders would undo their impact on Ukrainian history. Putin’s arguments rest on the unstated assumption that legitimate or genuine nationalism derives only from conditions valid “since time immemorial.” He assumed that a vigorous national loyalty can only emerge from a deep primordial past.

Putin’s assumption is false. The emergence of modern nations from the ruins of an imperial state is a routine event. The post-colonial world is filled with novel nationalisms constructed from premodern, nonnational societies (Tamir 2020). Australian and Argentinian nationalisms exist, even though there are no medieval precedents for Australian or Argentine nationhood. Just as political legitimacy derives from the consent of the governed, so do national projects derive legitimacy from popular assent. The legitimacy of Ukrainian nationalism does not depend on antiquity. No authority resides in ancient primordial pasts.

Indeed, the war in Ukraine illustrates the practical harm caused by popular primordialism. The cost of primordialist self-deception has obviously been high for Ukrainian civilians, but the soldiers of the invading army have also paid a high price, since primordialist self-deception has probably contributed to the surprisingly poor battlefield performance of the Russian army. All military planners make assumptions about the conditions soldiers will face. Did Putin plan the invasion on the assumption that modern Ukrainians espouse the triune nation concept, reject Ukrainian particularist nationalism, and thus would welcome Russian soldiers as brothers and liberators? In other words, does Putin believe his own propaganda? If so, then it explains why

he and his generals failed to anticipate the resistance Russian forces actually faced. As Stephen Kotkin put it,

if you assumed that the Ukrainian people were not for real, were not a nation; if you assumed that Zelensky was just a TV actor, a comedian, a Russian-speaking Jew from Eastern Ukraine – if you assumed all of that, then maybe you thought you could take Kyiv in two days or four days. But those assumptions were wrong (Remnick 2022).

However abundant support for the triune concept of Russian nationalism may have been in centuries past, that past proved irrelevant in 2022. If Ukrainian nationalism is the legacy of Soviet policy, that legacy proves enduring. Particularist Ukrainian nationalism is vigorous and widespread.

Indeed: if fantasies of triune Russian nationalism contributed to the current war, those fantasies seem likely to destroy any vestigial hopes for the restoration of a greater all-Russian nationalism. When Putin declared on March 3, 2022, that he would “never abandon [his] conviction that Russians and Ukrainians are one nation” (Putin 2022b), he perhaps hoped to impose the triune national concept through the sheer force of his own conviction. His remarks instead create the impression that Putin has lost his grasp of contemporary political realities. Violence and destruction, meanwhile, have embittered countless Ukrainian citizens, including many of those who before the current war claimed Russian ethnicity (Національність) or preferred to speak in Russian (Afanasiev 2022).

Putin’s narrative of Ukrainian history has attracted considerable criticism from Western scholars. Journalistic articles or public lectures composed less than a month after the war’s outbreak, admittedly, may not represent academic thought at its most subtle or profound: the shock of war left little time for reflection. Newspaper editors, furthermore, may simplify submissions from prolix professors. Nevertheless, academics-turned-pundits invoke their expertise when speaking to the public. Contributors to the online journal *The Conversation* identify themselves not only by name, but list their academic titles and affiliations; introductions to YouTube lectures also typically summarize the speaker’s accomplishments. Academic pundits who criticized Putin for promoting triune Russian nationalism, or who provided an alternative-origin Ukrainian nationalism, posed as experts in nationalism and thus ought to be familiar with nationalism theory. How exactly did scholars criticize Putin’s historical narrative in the first month of the war?

A few academic pundits provided a nuanced critique of Putin’s primordialism. Ronald Suny of the University of Michigan, for instance, argued that only during the Soviet period did “Ukraine, like many other nationalities in

the USSR, became a modern nation, conscious of its history, literate in its language” (Suny 2022), and while Suny conceded that “Putin is essentially correct that it was Lenin’s policies that promoted Ukrainian statehood within the USSR,” he rightly denied the observation’s relevance to current events: “Russia can claim Donbass with its own arguments based on ethnicity, but so can Ukrainians with arguments based on historical possession. Such arguments go nowhere” (Suny 2022). Discussing the Russian Revolution, Victoria Smolkin of Wesleyan University characterized the Ukraine of 1921 as “not yet firm in its national form or identity,” but argued that Lenin’s nationality policy explains why “of the German, Hapsburg, and Russian empires, only the Russian empire managed to survive in any guise” (Smolkin 2022). James Headley of Otago University, responding to “Putin’s argument is that Ukraine is an ‘artificial’ state, created by the Bolsheviks,” rebutted Putin’s conclusion while noting the essential validity of Putin’s premises: “it is true that Ukraine has not existed as an independent state in its 1991 borders before in history. But all states are ‘artificial’, their borders the results of accidents of history” (Headley 2022).

Other scholars, however, have countered Putin’s triune Russian primordialism with an equally problematic Ukrainian particularist primordialism. Yuval Harari of Hebrew University in Jerusalem flatly declared that “the most crucial thing to know is that Ukrainians are not Russians, and that Ukraine is an ancient, independent nation. Ukraine has a history of more than a thousand years” (Harari 2022, 1:20). Olivia Durand, a postdoctoral associate at Oxford, denounced Putin’s “imperial ideology” on the grounds that

[i]n reality, Ukrainian aspirations for statehood predated revolution by at least two centuries. From the Ukrainian Hetmanate’s 1710 Bendery Constitution to the 1917 establishment of the West and Ukrainian People’s Republics and appeals at the Paris Peace Conference for status, Ukrainians have continuously asserted themselves as a distinct people (Durand 2022).

An editorial jointly written by Oxford’s Félix Krawatzek and Harvard’s George Soroka, declaring that “Putin’s historical distortions are chaotic and jumbled,” accused Putin of ignoring “the reality that the development of a Ukrainian national identity and political consciousness significantly predates the formation of the Soviet Union” (Krawatzek and Soroka 2022). As evidence, Krawatzek and Soroka cited not historical studies, but Durand’s punditry.

Primordialism’s appeal to academic pundits ought to give nationalism experts pause. Many academics are apparently unfamiliar with both nationalism theory and the social constructivist narratives found in Brown, Hirsch,

Martin, and other Soviet historians. It is also sobering to realize that Putin has acknowledged social constructivism more than some of his Western critics. “Things change,” Putin wrote at the end of his 2021 essay, and

some part of a people in the process of its development, influenced by a number of reasons and historical circumstances, can become aware of itself as a separate nation at a certain moment. How should we treat that? There is only one answer: with respect! You want to establish a state of your own: you are welcome! (Putin 2021)

Putin’s respect for Ukrainian statehood, of course, ultimately did not extend very far. Only nine days into the invasion, facing the unexpected fierceness of Ukrainian resistance, Putin threatened that the Ukrainian leadership was “calling into question the future of Ukrainian statehood” (Karmanau 2022). Nevertheless, in 2021 Putin acknowledged the possibility that national loyalties can change, a possibility that Harari, Durand, Krawatzek and Soroka did not consider.

Linguists pontificating about the Ukrainian invasion have proven equally primordial when discussing Ukrainian linguistic distinctiveness. Neil Bermel of Sheffield University wrote that “Russian and Ukrainian diverged from each other ... less than a millennium ago.” He admitted they “still share a lot of basic and core vocabulary – but not enough to be considered dialects of a single language” (Bermel 2022). Corinne Seals of Victoria University of Wellington proclaimed that “Ukrainian and Russian are not the same language,” since “Ukrainian is its own language with a history going back to the 17th century” (Seals 2022). “[A]s a matter of linguistic history, Ukrainian and Russian emerged as distinct languages from a common source language spoken around A.D. 500,” declared Philipp Carter of Florida International University, even if “Russian nationalists long sought to classify it [Ukrainian] as a dialect of Russian” (Carter 2022). Bermel, Seals, and Carter articulate a consensus currently shared both by contemporary Slavic philologists and most Ukrainians. Yet by discussing Ukrainian language-hood as a linguistic fact rather than a consensus opinion, they contradicted Trudgill: they evidently failed to understand the extent to which these are not linguistic questions but political arguments.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of Western punditry, however, is the number of scholars who responded to Putin’s historical narratives not with argument or analysis, but with insults or scorn. Matthew Sussex of Australian National University dismissed Putin’s “shaky grasp of history” (Sussex 2022) without engaging with it, while a report from University of Wrocław’s Institute of International Studies criticized Putin’s article for containing “imperial and

Soviet myths and lies about Ukrainian history and identity” (Leszczenko and Tarnavska 2021, 24). Matthew Pauly of Michigan State University dismissed Putin’s “recent public distortion of history” (Pauly 2022), while Joshua Kroeker, a doctoral student at the University of Heidelberg, condemned Putin’s “polemical history of Ukraine” (Kroeker 2021). William Partlett of the University of Melbourne branded Putin’s essay both “a fantastical version of history” and a “one-sided, neo-imperial interpretation of history” (Partlett 2022). Nichole Jackson of British Columbia’s Simon Fraser University alluded to the Russian elite’s “extreme nationalist and imperialist ideas,” characterizing Putin’s speeches as “an angrier and more delusional version of these narratives” (Jackson 2022). Mark Galeotti of University College London scorned Putin’s “rambling speeches and pseudo-historic essays,” and his colleague Andrew Wilson dismissed Putin’s “slightly deranged rants, speeches, whatever you want to call it” (Wilson 2022, 3:59). Such epithets do not qualify as analysis.

Insulting Putin’s historical narrative is ultimately a form of virtue-signaling: academics are displaying their disapproval of Putin’s invasion. While the term “virtue-signaling” is itself often used pejoratively, Neil Levy recently defended such signaling on the grounds that “a central function of moral discourse is signaling commitment to norms” (Levy 2021, 9555). If denigrating Putin signals disapproval of Russia’s military aggression and support for peace in Europe, then perhaps there is social utility in the indiscriminate abuse of Putin’s historical narrative? Peace in Europe is surely worth supporting.

Such reasoning, however, uncomfortably justifies Putin’s own rhetorical insistence that the Russian army in Ukraine is “fighting neo-Nazis” (e.g., Putin 2022b). The ubiquitous habit of insulting one’s political opponents as Nazis, though devalued by overuse both in Russia and in Western countries, articulates collective horror of the Holocaust and other Nazi atrocities, and by extension acts as a general condemnation of racism and genocide (Johnson 2010; Webber 2011; Fine 2012, 183-206; Kuznetsova 2014). By attacking the Ukrainian leadership as Nazis, has not Putin also opposed racism and genocide, at least at the rhetorical level? Western historians, understandably, have proved unwilling to give Putin any moral credit for his Nazi imagery; indeed, several Holocaust scholars have signed an open letter condemning “the Russian government’s cynical abuse of the term genocide, the memory of World War II and the Holocaust, and the equation of the Ukrainian state with the Nazi regime to justify its unprovoked aggression” (Tabarovsky & Finkel, 2022). Nazi comparison is indeed one of the laziest tropes in modern political rhetoric. On the other hand, the indiscriminate abuse directed

against Putin is lazy slander. Putin's historical narrative, I suggest, calls for a principled rebuttal, not insults.

The politics of lazy slander, furthermore, may even cede the moral high ground. Jeffrey Herf from the University of Maryland thought "the stench of antisemitism is very much present in this attack on Ukraine," suggesting that "to declare a country a Nazi country is another way of saying you plan to engage in mass murder" (Ziegler 2022). Herf's suggestion inadvertently bolsters Putin's claims of Western conspiracy, given how many Western pundits and politicians have compared Putin to Hitler or the Nazis (see, e.g., Ballentine 2022; Herman 2022; More 2022; Ruane 2022; Tiene 2022). It is hard to avoid the impression that Herf, a Jewish-American historian who publishes on Nazi-related topics, is simply projecting his expertise on twentieth-century German history onto twenty-first century Russia. Putin's apologists, meanwhile, could theoretically point to instances where Putin extolls Russia's ethnic diversity, including the Jewish element of Russia's population. In a speech of 3 March 2022, for example, Putin expressed pride in "the multinational people of Russia" and, while announcing a posthumous medal to a fallen soldier of non-Russian nationality, declared:

I am a Russian. As they say, all my relatives are Ivans and Marias. But when I see heroes like this young man, Nurmagomed Gadzhimagomedov, a resident of Dagestan and an ethnic Lak, and our other soldiers, I can hardly stop myself from saying: I am a Lak, a Dagestani, a Chechen, an Ingush, a Russian, a Tatar, a Jew, a Mordovian, an Ossetian (Putin 2022b).

What sort of anti-Semite proudly declares himself a Jew? Contemporary Russian nationalism has more than the normal share of anti-Semitism, racism, chauvinism, and authoritarianism, often drawing on conspiracy theories or extremist white-Russian émigré literature (Clover 2016; Kuzio 2017; Yablokov 2019). Nevertheless, Putin's comments imply a more complex attitude toward ethnic diversity than Herf's accusation might suggest.

Opposing the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, I suggest, does not require anybody to slander Putin. The unembellished facts suffice to condemn the Russian invasion. This essay is not meant to exonerate Putin. Instead, it seeks to encourage more precise thinking about what exactly is objectionable about Putin's historical narrative, as a necessary first step to devising alternate narratives.

Putin's historical narrative is false primarily because of its unstated primordialist assumptions. The legitimacy of Ukraine depends on the popular assent of Ukrainians, not on bygone antiquity. The primordialism of Western critics, however, demonstrates primordialism's continued vitality. Far from

being a straw man or dead horse, primordialism is vigorously alive and full of strength. Nationalism scholars must do more to combat it.

The politics of competing national concepts, meanwhile, is and should be seen as banal, routine, and unextraordinary, even when Putin pursues it. Putin is a politician, and it is normal for a politician to propose an alternative national concept. Putin has not outraged international norms by intermittently characterizing Ukrainian as a dialect of Russian, or by espousing a triune theory of Russian nationalism. Putin has outraged international norms because he has attempted to impose his preferred national concept with tanks and bombs.

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