

Ukraine's Quest for Mature Nation, Statehood Roundtable XXIV: Forging A Strong Yet Forbearing National Identity – Future Initiatives, October 05, 2023, University Club, DC

Theme: Finding Ways to End the Kremlin's Endless Memory Wars with Ukraine [and Everyone Else].

ENDING THE KREMLIN'S MEMORY WARS AGAINST UKRAINE

To rephrase the title somewhat: Russia's justifications for absorbing, dominating, or destroying its neighbors particularly Ukraine and how to defeat Moscow in the informational and intellectual spheres. I will address three main points:

1. What are Russia's "memory wars" and why does Moscow conduct them?
2. What impact do they have on neighbors and more broadly?
3. How do we turn the tables on Russia's false memories, questionable narratives, and historical blank spots?

What are Russia's "memory wars" and why does Moscow engage in them?

The core of the problem is that Russia has failed to develop into either a russki nation state, an authentic multi-ethnic federation, or a civic democracy. It is stuck in a failed imperial experiment that perpetuates Moscow's mythology about Russia's greatness and uniqueness. In this "Russian World," history is a flexible weapon that can erase events and people from memory and create false narratives about its own existence.

History is constantly changed to suit the regime's requirements and we should stop simply blaming the communists for this practice, as it is embedded in Russian historiography and culture over many generations and centuries. It is not simply a question of weaponizing history and memory against adversaries. Above all, the purpose is to perpetuate the all-pervasive Russian legend of a great culture with a long history and unique civilization in a strong and expanding state in which everyone should be happy to serve the rulers and in which Moscow's neighbors should be beholden to its avowed superiority. This is the Muscovite equivalent of the "white man's burden" – the racist policy that undergirded European colonialism.

Since the beginning of its expansion in the 15th century Russia has been an imperial state in search of an identity and a legitimate history. Russian identity much like Soviet identity is an imposed imperial construct. It was assembled principally through the erasure, amalgamation, and appropriation of the history and identity of

neighbors. Even the “Rus” stem of Russia is based on a historical heist. It is believed to be of Scandinavian origin and referred to the whole territory of Kyivan Rus in which Moscow was a minor periphery. Subsequently, through its military conquests and subjugation of neighbors Muscovy monopolized the use of the words "Russky" (an inhabitants of the lands of Rus) and Rossia or Russia (which became the expanding empire) coined in the 14th century. This allowed Muscovy to claim the mantle of the only legitimate successor of Kyivan Rus and all of its territories.

Moscow routinely ignores the history and longevity of any nation before their annexation by the Russian Empire. Appropriating and rewriting foreign history has been a key aspect of Russia's imperialist narratives. This is especially true about Ukraine, which Russia has sought to subjugate for centuries. I would add that it is remarkable that Ukraine has survived this onslaught for so many generations given that for most of that time it had no complete and integrated state and no effective protectors or supporters outside of the Russian empire.

Russia has appropriated Ukrainian writers such as Gogol to depict them as representatives of classical Russian literature. It litters its conquered lands with monuments of allegedly great Russians, whether military or political leaders or cultural figures such as Pushkin to symbolize the alleged superiority of Russian culture and to claim the land as Russian. Russia’s Ministry of Education has recently issued new history textbooks virtually eliminating any references to Ukraine and justifying Russia’s current war as the elimination of a neo-Nazi Western puppet state.

Russia’s expansionist policies consider anyone who has any link with the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union to be Russian. Indeed, the “Russki mir” concept promulgated by the current regime explicitly claims anyone born in any iteration of Russia or speaking Russian as part of this Russian world from which they can never escape. And from cradle to grave, state propaganda inculcates the notion of superiority over other states and nations – one has only to listen to interviews especially with older Russians about what they think of Ukraine. In my Polish family who were deported to Siberia to have their identity eradicated, we used to call the Moskale “barefoot imperialists” who are much poorer than the people they conquer but are convinced that they are bringing the benefits of high civilization.

Russia is unique in exhibiting a combination of superiority and inferiority complexes. The more its political and religious leaders and propagandists assert that they represent a higher civilization, the more anxiety they demonstrate that their colonial expropriations will be revealed and reversed. The manic charges and

genocidal threats of Russian officials and their television mannequins as Ukraine liberates its lands reveals the fear of historical facts overcoming historical myths.

What Impact do memory wars have on neighbors and more globally?

Claims of Russia's greatness and its unique civilization serve to justify Moscow's policies of imperial assimilation, cultural eradication, enforced russification, mass deportations, elite imprisonment, and collective murders. In essence, Russian racism claims that it must either educate and russify the inferior cultures with no real history or exterminate them if they resist. Russia supposedly brings civilization to its neighbors and conquered peoples. And over the generations this has had an impact where some of the most ardent Russian imperialists were not actually ethnic Russians but assimilated non-Russians seeking to prove their loyalty to the state. We see this today with officials like Defense Minister Segei Shojgu, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and the head of Moscow propaganda RT Margarita Simonyan.

And unfortunately, this narrative is perpetuated by too many Western diplomats and academics who are driven by this bizarre compulsion to publicly express their love and admiration for Russian history and culture, without distinguishing between literature, music, or other expressive forms and the mass culture and history of statism, colonialism, appropriation, and cultural eradication of neighbors that is also a core element of Russian society and culture. By failing to point out the negative and destructive underpinnings of Russian culture and history foreigners serve to reinforce the arrogance of its rulers.

Ukraine is now rejecting not only Russian conquest but also Russia's culture, or that part of it which is based essentially on racist foundations and in which Ukrainians and other nations are depicted as inferior and as allegedly benefiting from cultural, linguistic, and political russification. Ukrainians are discovering how deeply they have been penetrated by Russia. It is not simply a question of derussifying institutions but confronting the broad array of colonial impositions many of which have been accepted over the generations as normal and immovable. Language, vocabulary, education, literature, monuments, place names, museums, libraries, art, music, and other cultural markers are in the process of transformation and rediscovery. Shedding the imperial heritage, which has deeply impregnated and distorted Ukrainian identity, history, culture, and literature, will be a mission for several decades but it has no reversals given the mass resistance against intensified Muscovite attempt to eradicate Ukrainian identity and its history.

How do we turn the tables on Russia's false memories and historical distortions?

Two brief answers: the Ukrainian lesson and the importance of Russia's coming rupture.

1. Western and Eastern democracies have the capabilities to broadcast and disseminate historical facts and counter the false Kremlin and Muscovite narratives. Ukraine's resistance can be emulated by other subject nations, whether Chechens, Circassians, Tatars, Bashkirs, Buryats, and numerous others to rediscover and disseminate the authentic history of their people so that Muscovite memories are no longer their realities. Over the past year I have interacted with representatives from several nations trapped in the Russian empire and they talk about growing national awareness of their colonized history and identity. There is a similar process in some of Russia's diverse regions in Siberia and the Far East where resentment is growing over the exploitation of local resources while the regional budgets are squeezed. In sum if we are serious about democracy building, the core of any democracy is a nation and without national identity and national sovereignty there is no democracy.
2. Russia itself needs deep structural transformation and rupture into several new nation-states or smaller multi-national federations. Russian citizens themselves will also need historical and identity therapy to tackle the most egregious imperial, colonial, and racist prejudices. This will be a long inter-generational process but can be helped by giving them a stake in new institutions and countries rather than leaving them simply mired in military defeat, intensifying repression, and economic decline.

This is why the message from Washington and European capitals to Russia's citizens during the current war and the process of state rupture needs to be positive, with clear backing for pluralism, democracy, federalism, civil rights, and the autonomy of republics and regions. The population will also need information that Moscow suppresses, especially the advantages of independence and the cultivation of peaceful and productive relations with neighbors. This can help embolden citizens by demonstrating that they are not isolated from the prosperous Western and Eastern democracies. Supporting republican and regional self-determination, independence, and statehood will provide hope to citizens in the midst of uncertainty, chaos, and conflict.

In conclusion, the identity of Russia as an imperial and colonial construct needs to be much more widely known at a global level, stressing both its past and its continuity

to this day. It is time for Western officials and diplomats, including the Pope to stop the cringe-worthy genuflections to the alleged great Russian culture and its avowedly great history but to speak truth to lies. And above all, the notion that Russia is invincible, an essential part of Moscow's imperial mythology, needs to be finally retired and we can all thank Ukrainians for hastening that process. We should not fear Russia's rupture but look at all the benefits. Moreover, we will not be directing the process, but we will have to manage it as it will affect numerous allies, partners, and regions and will herald a new era in global security. Every empire rises and falls and Russia is no exception. Every major colonial power is eventually de-colonized and Russia is not an exception. These messages must be spread not only to Russian citizens but throughout the Global North, South, East, and West.