

Oleksiy Radynski  
**The Case  
Against the  
Russian  
Federation**

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In the morning hours of February 24, 2022, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation launched an invasion of Ukraine. It started with an aerial bombing of Kyiv and simultaneous troop movements across the Ukrainian border (including its border with Belarus, where Russian military units had been placed to allegedly conduct a military drill). In its first days, the plan for a Russian blitzkrieg on Ukraine definitely failed, with the occupying force only managing relatively minor advances.

I'm writing this on the fifth day of war from a suburb of Kyiv, a city now preparing for a full-scale assault by the Russian army. By the time you read these words, many things may have already changed – and not just on the ground in Ukraine, given Putin's recent announcement that he had put the Russian nuclear arsenal on alert in response to "hostile declarations" from the West regarding the invasion. Literally anything is possible now, including the seemingly outlandish scenario of Putin's regime being toppled by the growing antiwar movement in Russia, supported even by a couple ultrarich oligarchs from Putin's own circle. It seems like an especially bad moment to write an essay, when unfolding events could render it completely irrelevant in a matter of hours. Still, there's an irresistible urgency for a case to be made against the Russian Federation.

### **Becoming Ukrainian**

I can perfectly remember the moment when I first felt a sense of belonging to the Ukrainian people. It was in spring 2000 when I was spending my school vacation with relatives in Moscow, as I always did. Full disclosure: I was born in Kyiv to a Russian mother and a Jewish Ukrainian father. I attended Russian-language school and didn't even speak Ukrainian until I was in my teens.

The moment when I started becoming Ukrainian looked like this. Not far from the Kremlin, we were walking down a street full of bookstalls devoted to conspiracy theories, Orthodox Christianity, anti-Semitism, and Russian neofascist ideologies of all stripes. I'm sure anyone familiar with street life in large post-Soviet cities has seen these kinds of stalls. What stayed in my memory was one bookseller who promoted his merchandise with a loud tirade of slurs against a quite long list of targets: Jews, Germans, Westerners, Bolsheviks, liberals, punks, foreigners, homosexuals, and – to my complete surprise back then – Ukrainians.

I remember being quite impressed that

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Maria Primachenko, *Our Army, Our Protectors*, 1978.

Ukrainians were included in this fascist type's list of the most despicable things – especially because the rest of the list was mostly made up of things I thought were fun, curious, or progressive. Being Ukrainian had never seemed fun or curious at all to me before. Growing up in the 1990s in Ukraine, I associated the place more with things like poverty, grimness, and radiation. But suddenly Ukrainians were among all these other nice things that this scumbag happened to hate so much. That made me feel proud to come from Ukraine, for the first time in my life.

Twenty-something years later, I was reminded of that moment as I read the transcript of a lengthy historical lecture by Vladimir Putin, which turned out to be a declaration of war against my country. Only this time, the kind of nonsense I remembered from the random fascist lunatic on a Moscow street was coming from the president of the Russian Federation. At the center of his argument was a deep ethnic and political hatred towards Ukrainians. And it was easy to discern the fascist lunatic's list of nice things being implied in Putin's speech as well, but under the generic empty signifier of "the West." The ideology of your racist uncle has not only gone mainstream, but has become a pretext for declaring war. The "Eurasianist" pseudo-philosopher Aleksandr Dugin's books have been prominent on the aforementioned bookstalls, and he has had an immense influence on Putin's trajectory.

I fully understand that it's senseless to engage with Putin's ignorant, imperialist mythologizing, just as there's no sense in arguing with a petty fascist bookseller on a street in Moscow. But it is tempting to turn some of those myths against themselves to show the inconvenient truths they distort and discredit, and to see how this mythology can be subverted and possibly even redirected towards progressive ends.

### **What If Ukraine Is a Radically Different Russia?**

At the core of Putin's argument is a conviction that is shared, implicitly or explicitly, by a great number of Russians (and other people across the globe who never cared to study the history of Eastern Europe): that Russians and Ukrainians are actually part of the same nation. Ukrainian identity, the argument goes, was constructed artificially by the Austro-Hungarians (or Poles, or Jews, or Prussians) in order to disorient a core part of the Russian Empire's population. An obvious response to this argument is that every modern national identity

is an artificial construct to some degree, including the Russian one.

Still, for an autocratic Russian mind that has persuaded itself that Ukraine *is* Russia, the mere existence of a Ukrainian state separate from Russia poses an existential threat. If Ukrainians are actually Russians, how can they be allowed to rebel against their authoritarian governments, toppling them twice in the last seventeen years? If Ukrainians are actually Russians, how can they be allowed to have elections without predetermined results? If Ukrainians are actually Russians, how can their state not persecute "homosexual propaganda"? If all these things are possible in Ukraine, for an autocratic Russian mind this automatically means they're possible in Russia, which means they must be prevented at any cost.

The truth is that all of these Ukrainian things are actually possible in Russia because, after centuries of shared colonial history, Russians have become a little bit Ukrainian. What Putin calls the "historical unity" of both nations refers to centuries of imperial domination by Russia, which did actually also make millions of Ukrainians a little bit Russian. Most Ukrainians know Russian, in addition to our own language. We share with Russians a history of serfdom (a form of de facto slavery in the Russian Empire), worker movements, revolution, industrialization, and war. Generations of our families have mixed with each other. But any relationship between metropole and colony – like any master-slave relationship – is dialectical and reciprocal.

By absorbing the colony politically and culturally, the metropole subjects itself to a creeping takeover from within by the very alien forces it incorporated. By colonizing Ukraine, the Russian metropole had unwittingly swallowed a political culture based on horizontal forms of democracy – even if they seem brutal, like the Cossacks' councils, the anarchist armies of Nestor Makhno, or the Maidan uprisings. And this alien presence will disintegrate the metropole from within. In a way, the Putinist fear of a "Russian Maidan" uprising in Moscow is totally justified – but not because, as Russian propaganda suggests, it will be organized by NATO-trained Ukrainian terrorists. The fear is justified because, if Russians are a little bit Ukrainian, they might also be able to topple an authoritarian government. Like Ukrainians, Russians might also have an election without predetermined results. It is this "historical unity" that today's autocratic Russia is trying by all means to exorcize from within itself by turning

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Russia into a police state and preempting the popular uprising. But this effort is now turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy reminiscent of the fate of Laius, the father of Oedipus.

Russian engagement with Ukraine during Vladimir Putin's rule has been a long series of stubborn, utterly hopeless failures. In 2004, the Kremlin made a political bet on a presidential candidate who was a twice-convicted gangster, yet they thought he could be put in power by massive intimidation and election fraud. This led directly to the Orange Revolution that cancelled their plans. In 2014, after the occupation of Crimea, the Kremlin tried to launch an irredentist movement in Eastern Ukraine, convincing itself that millions of Ukrainian Russian-speakers would automatically support secession to Russia. But then the movement turned out to be so marginal that Russia had to bolster it by sending undercover operatives, and later its army. Finally, in 2022, the Kremlin convinced itself that the Ukrainian army would not resist a military invasion, and the occupying forces would be met as liberators. You probably know what happened next.

For some time now, I've been wondering why every Russian political project in Ukraine has been so fundamentally flawed. At least until a certain moment, Putin's regime seemed efficient at manipulating politics in Russia, the West, and pretty much everywhere except Ukraine. But suddenly, the simple reason for these failures became clear to me: in Ukraine, the Russians operate as if they are dealing with Russia itself. Whatever works in Russia, they think, must work in Ukraine. Because, you know, it's one and the same. Today, there's no need to even bother arguing against this. Russia's protracted failures in Ukraine say it all.

### **Kyiv's Historical Responsibility**

My claim that Russians are in fact a little bit Ukrainian is not a vengeful joke, nor is it dictated by resentment. It stems from the founding myth of modern Russia itself. As the myth goes, the brotherly Eastern Slavic peoples cofounded a powerful medieval state called Kievan Rus towards the end of the first millennium AD, with Kiev as its capital. (This entity in fact originated as a Scandinavian colony, and the word "Rus" itself initially translated to something like "the men who row," referring to the way its rulers reached the area from the north via Europe's eastern rivers.) The fact that the medieval city of Kiev (now Kyiv) was a capital of this semi-mythical entity is a cornerstone of Russian

imperialist discourse. In Russian colonial jargon, Kyiv is referred to as "the mother of Russian cities," because this city, founded roughly half a millennium before Moscow, was the starting point of an eastward expansion of Slavic tribes, resulting in what is now known as the Russian state.

But this expansion needs to be scrutinized. In popular history, it is imagined in a way similar to the "discovery of the New World" by Columbus before the advent of postcolonialism. The Slavs, it's been claimed, somehow discovered the plentiful lands in the East, where they founded Moscow and other cities and settled there. In reality, these lands had already been populated by numerous peoples, mostly Ugro-Finnic, who were then brutally conquered and at times exterminated. In short, the eastward expansion of Slavs from Kiev was an early case of settler colonialism, with all the usual attributes: the genocide of indigenous populations, the extraction of resources, and the emergence of autocratic governance.

What we now know as the Russian state is an outcome of this tragic process that can be seen as parallel to the westward expansion of white Europeans into their own colonies. Maybe it's high time to account for all of that. As Western European nations gradually take responsibility for their own settler colonialism, in Eastern Europe this is still a blank slate. Which is a shame, given that some Eastern European nations, conquered in that same eastward expansion, still suffer under the yoke of the Russian colonial government. In the popular, inherently racist self-image of the Russian Federation, the "non-Russian peoples" populate its far north, Siberia, and Caucasus, while the so-called "European" part of Russia (west of the Ural Mountains) historically belongs to the Slavs. This is simply not true. Ugro-Finnic peoples like Mordvins, Karelians, Udmurts, Mari, and Komi are indigenous in areas that are just a stone's throw from Moscow or Saint Petersburg, while Tatars, Chuvashs, Bashkirs, and many other Turkic peoples populate the regions that make up large swaths of the allegedly "European," "Slavic," "white" part of Russia. The decolonial discourse that has been only nascent in the Russian Federation now has every opportunity to gain ground at an unprecedented pace – if successfully coupled with the antiwar movement.

By trying to occupy, with brutal military force, its imagined imperial heartland, the Russian Federation initiated a destructive process that may lead to the gradual loss of

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many more regions and peoples still subjected to its colonial rule. Of course, Ukrainians will fight against Russian imperialist frenzy by any means whatsoever. But merely fighting back is not enough. The growing anti-colonial struggle of the indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation should become the focus of the global antiwar movement. To start with, I suggest that Kyiv accept its thousand-year-old historical responsibility towards the colonized nations oppressed in today's Russian Federation by belatedly acknowledging itself as the unfortunate origin of a despotic, colonialist Russian state – a state that oppresses every people with the misfortune of being within its territory, including the Russian people. For the sake of all these peoples – and the rest of humankind – the Russian state in its current form should cease to exist.

This, in short, is my case against the Russian Federation.

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