Russia's creation lore, not NATO expansion, prompted Putin's cynical invasion

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Understanding the main cause of the Russian-Ukrainian war is important because how we perceive it determines how we understand and influence its course, and how it may be expected to conclude.

Two years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and 10 years after Russia's initial invasions of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and Donbas regions, debate continues about why war came.

University of Chicago political science professor John T. Mearsheimer has promoted the idea that it was all the West's fault and avoidable because it was caused by NATO expansion that had raised Russia's security concerns. Mearsheimer urges people to see things from Russia's perspective.

What matters most is the historical myths that inform Vladimir Putin's perspective, and that of the Russian elites and propaganda machine. In 2014 Putin's former chief economic adviser, Andrei Ilarionov, revealed that in 2003 Putin had told him privately that it was intolerable that Kyiv, which he considered the cradle of Russian civilisation, and Sevastopol, where St Volodymyr accepted Christianity, should lie outside the Russian state. The first statement is false and the second is disputed, but both are illustrative of Putin's unhealthy obsession with a mythological imperial history.

We saw it again last month when Putin stunned his US interviewer, Tucker Carlson, with a half-hour-long historical diatribe. Carlson could barely mutter "What century are we in?" halfway through it, and only on his later prompting did Putin finally mention NATO. Putin led with history because that is the most important issue for him.

In his July 2021 essay titled On the Historical Unity of Russian and Ukrainians, Putin declared Ukraine did not exist, that it was created by Lenin and that Ukrainians were actually Russians who had been invented or manipulated by the Austro-Hungarian Empire (which ceased to exist in 1918).

The insistence by the NATO expansion school of thought that all Putin wants is for Ukraine to guarantee its neutrality and act as a buffer between Russia and the West has been shown to be false by the war crimes and other genocidal actions of the Russian occupation forces, and by what its leading propagandists now say openly.

Putin knows that with every passing year of Ukrainian sovereignty and independence the Russian creation myth becomes more and more unsustainable. His idea is that Kyiv was a Russian city when it accepted Christianity in 988 and hence the people who lived there must have been Russians. If that's what they really think, Yale University history professor Timothy Snyder says, then Russians "don't know who they are".

What Putin and other Russian imperialists cannot stomach is the stark reality that Ukraine's premier church, Kyiv's St Sophia Cathedral, is about 400 years older than Moscow's St Basil's Cathedral.

Moscow was founded in 1147, in an outer borderlands region of the Kyivan Rus empire, which was populated by the Slavic Viatichi tribe. Even at that time there was not one Old Russian language, as asserted by Putin, but an array of related Slavic languages and dialects. Kyivan Rus was a loose agglomeration of principalities that had no sense of community and no sense of attraction and interest.

The Viatichi did not automatically adopt Christianity when Kyiv did in 988. More than a century later, in 1114, a monk from Kyiv called St Kuksha led an expedition to the Viatichi to convert them from paganism and was beheaded.

After centuries of Moscow's suppression of the Ukrainian church, in 2018 the Patriarch of Constantinople (worldwide head of the Orthodox Christian Church) decided to restore the Tomos of Autocephaly (decree of self-governorship) to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which promptly precipitated the Moscow-Constantinople Schism.

When Patriarch Kirill of Moscow went ahead with the 1030th anniversary of Christianity celebrations that year, Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople wrote to inform him that "this is not your celebration". That is, 988 belongs to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.
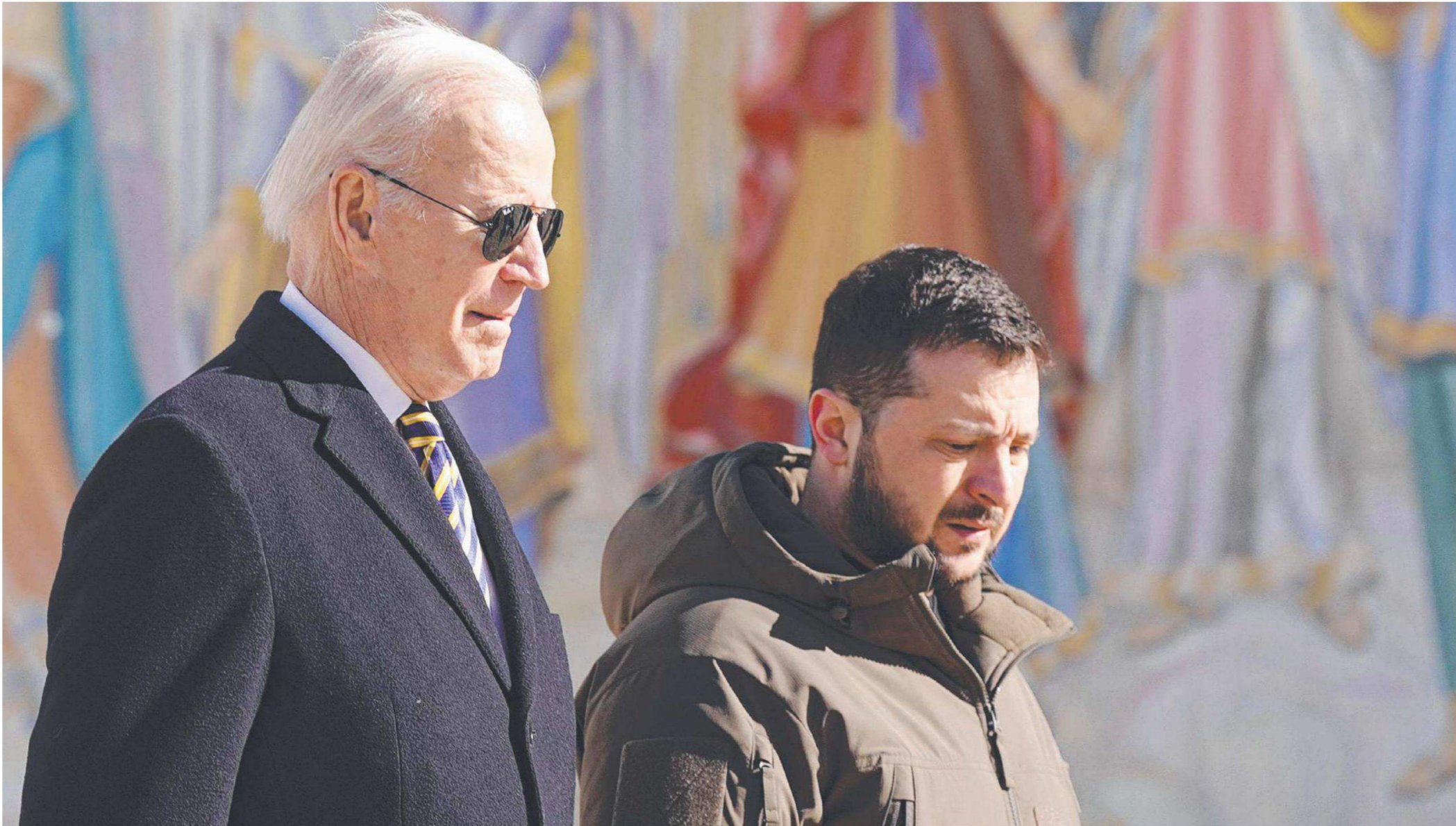
MYTHS BEHIND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Clockwise from top, US President Joe Biden walks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Kyiv in February last year; pro-Kremlin activists in Stavropol celebrate Russia's incorporation of Crimea in 2014; St Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, which is about 400 years older than Moscow's St Basil's Cathedral; and Vladimir Putin (centre) and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu (left) walk to watch military exercises in the Leningrad region in 2014

PICTURES: AFP

It is in this sense that the existence of Ukraine creates an existential threat to Russia – not to Russians physically through the placement of missiles, men and military equipment, but to the mythical imperial history that Moscow has propagated for the past three centuries.

Speaking on Moscow propagandist Sergey Mardan's show, Russian political scientist Rostislav Ishchenko recently declared: "As long as Ukraine continues to exist in any state the threat to Russia will also continue to exist ... (While you can agree with others) you can't agree on anything with Russian people who call themselves Ukrainians on the basis of rejecting everything that is Russian. This is an eschatological enemy (and) all efforts should be devoted to make sure that there is not even a memory left of it (that is, Ukraine)."

The NATO school likes to talk about Ukraine's rampant corruption, presumably to dent the appetite of Western nations to continue their military and humanitarian support for the country.

Yet it is the civilisational chasm between Ukraine and Russia – born in history, not external manipulation – that caused Ukrainians to launch two revolutions against large-scale corruption in their country: the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity (Maidan Revolution) of 2014.

Historical inertia is the reason ordinary Russians have not risen up against the massive corruption of Putin and the 110 oligarchic clans that control a large proportion of Russia's wealth. Ukraine, by contrast, has a flatter income distribution than Australia has.

One reason Ukrainians are drawn to democracy and European values is that Ukraine retained the Kyivan Rus tradition.

Not long after Kyiv fell to the Mongol Golden Horde in 1240, most Ukrainians (then referred to as the Rus or Ruthenians) were absorbed into the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which allowed them to maintain Kyiv's traditions. There and as part of the subsequent Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth Ukrainians were exposed to European developments such as humanism, republicanism, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in ways that Russians (then referred to as Muscovites) were not.

The Rus (Ukrainians) and Viatichi-Muscovites (Russians) were distinct as to language and culture in 1240, but the latter were then subjected to 240 years of vassalage to the Mongol-Tatar horde, where they were influenced not by Europe but by autocracy and a tradition of imperial conquest and subjugation of surrounding peoples. In 1721 it was Tsar Peter the Great who, having conquered Kyiv,

began to promote the myth of Kievan Russia, appropriated the Rus name from Ukrainians by rebranding Muscovites as Russians, and spread the lie that they were the "older brother" of Ukrainians, who were recast as "Little Russians".

One year into the current full-scale invasion Putin was talking openly about his conquests in Ukraine and comparing himself to Peter the Great.

The civilisational divide was discussed by Samuel P. Huntington in his 1995 book The Clash of Civilizations, which presented Ukraine as a "cleft country" that did not fit neatly into the West or his inappropriately defined "Orthodox civilisation" dominated by Russia.

However, Huntington incorrectly drew his civilisational divide along the line between Ukrainian regions won by Leonid Kuchma and Leonid Kravchuk respectively in the 1994 presidential election.

His thesis was that Kuchma voters (east and south) were Orthodox Russian speakers who therefore would be pro-Russian, while Kravchuk voters (centre and west) were Catholic Ukrainian speakers and therefore pro-West.

This characterisation was blindingly incorrect, but later neatly dovetailed into the false Russian propaganda narrative about a need to "liberate Russian speakers" in Ukraine. The notion of divided Ukrainians also has been vigorously promoted by members of the NATO school, who know little about Ukraine.

Orthodox Russian-speaking Ukrainians dominated on both sides of Huntington's fictional civilisational line, and the vast majority on both sides voted for Ukrainian independence in 1991. Nor could Huntington's thesis explain why both the western and southern/eastern regions united to vote for Kuchma in the 1999 election – it was to oppose a socialist candidate.

Famously, Huntington stated: "If civilisation (the central thesis of his book) is what counts, however, violence between Ukrainians and Russians is unlikely." Such was the level of understanding that the head of Harvard University's Centre for International Affairs had of Ukraine and Russia.

The question of whether NATO expansion provoked Russia to invade Ukraine was raised a week ago at an Australian Institute of International Affairs seminar in Melbourne. The speaker, Paul Monk, a consultant and former analyst at the Defence Intelligence Organisation, replied that NATO "didn't invade any of those countries, insist or twist their arms. They clamoured – as Finland and Sweden did after Putin invaded Ukraine – to be admitted to NATO because they fear Russia ... because they know this is a brutal dictatorship that wants domination."

While members of the NATO school point to Russia's right to retaliate against NATO expansion based on invasions by Napoleon and Hitler in centuries past, they discount and ignore the fears of Ukraine, Poland, Finland and the Baltic States – all of which had been invaded, brutally occupied and colonised by Russia for centuries.

What were they to make of Russia's 1992 short war against Moldova, where the Russian army has occupied its Transnistria region to the present day? What were Ukrainians to make of Putin's speech at Sochi in 2002, where he stated: "At the end of the day the decision (on Ukraine joining NATO) is to be made by NATO and Ukraine."

In his recent book, Russia's War Against Ukraine: The Whole Story,

University of Melbourne Hansen professor in history Mark Edele concludes his analysis, which places emphasis on historical inertia – the failed decolonisation of Russia and the historical megalomania of "Vladimir the Great" – with the following: "The whole issue of NATO expansion was a red herring to justify Russia's aggression."

In my view the real reason Putin later opposed NATO membership for Ukraine was that it would remove degrees of freedom – his option to invade. As he built up the Russian armed forces through the 2000s on the back of the energy price windfall, Putin carried out a clandestine "soft power" attack to undermine Ukrainian unity, denude its armed forces and install a compliant leadership in Kyiv.

In keeping with that plan, late in 2013 Yanukovych reneged on his EU promise to voters and announced an intention to pivot to Moscow instead. The resulting Maidan Revolution and ousting of Yanukovych in 2014 demonstrated to Putin that soft power was not going to work any more. He cynically described the broad Ukraine-wide revolution as a Western-backed coup – which the NATO school duly picked up and ran with.

But he was still cautious about world opinion and opted for the "green men" (Russian soldiers in unmarked green army uniforms) charade when he ordered an invasion of the Crimean Peninsula. Later that year, rather than an all-out invasion by the regular Russian army we watched as Russian volunteers, the Wagner Group, Vostok Battalion, Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechens, various "Cossack battalions" and "lost" regulars launched a hybrid war in the Donbas region.

The Kremlin's promotion of a false narrative of civil war in the Donbas also has been widely adopted by the NATO school. However, the evidence – including the small but often violent anti-Kyiv demonstrations bolstered by bussed-in Russian agents – shows that while there were disaffected elements, the number of traitors willing to take up arms to destroy Ukraine was tiny. Without the Russian invasion nothing would have happened in Donetsk and Luhansk, just as nothing happened in Odesa and Kharkiv. Without the spontaneous mobilisation of more than 40 Ukrainian volunteer battalions, mostly comprising Russian speakers, the Russian plan to sweep through from the Donbas to Odesa might have succeeded.

As the contact line in the Donbas froze, Putin thought he could reapply soft power via the Minsk

accords process under his interpretation of them. It would have re-inserted a Moscow-controlled Trojan Horse into Ukraine to halt its westward march. But that failed, too. During the 2019 presidential elections Putin backed Zelensky against Petro Poroshenko. Zelensky was a Russian-speaking Jewish comedian with zero political experience and hence a person Putin thought would be weak and accommodating (especially as he had run on the "I will conclude the Donbas war" platform).

Zelensky won almost every region in Ukraine with a record vote of 73 per cent, having benefited from the rapid development of a Ukrainian civic society that increasingly identified as Ukrainian citizen rather than as ethnic Ukrainian or ethnic Russian (the latter falling to less than 2 per cent).

By 2021 Putin saw that Zelensky was not who he thought he was, and that Zelensky's popularity had plummeted to close to 20 per cent. FSB agents assured Putin in his splendid Covid-19 isolation that the Ukrainian population was divided, disenchanted and ready to capitulate to a full-scale invasion. In February 2022 he discovered Zelensky was definitely not who he thought he was when he stood his ground in Kyiv under siege and uttered his iconic response to President Joe Biden: "The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride."

Since 2014, and even after 2022, Mearsheimer and his followers have maintained "there is no evidence that Putin ever wanted to conquer Ukraine". They question why Putin would have attacked with a force of only 190,000 troops if that were his goal.

The answer is Russian imperial hubris. According to Edele, in February 2022 the bulk of Ukraine's standing army was positioned along the Donbas contact line, so the 70,000 Russian troops that converged on Kyiv via two pincers from the north outnumbered Ukrainian defenders by a ratio of 12:1. To borrow the Duke of Wellington's famous quip, the Ukrainian victory was "the nearest run thing you ever saw in your life".

Mearsheimer's 2015 lecture, titled Why is Ukraine the West's Fault?, has attracted 29 million (Russian bot-propelled) YouTube views. In it he claimed Putin would not try to conquer Ukraine because he is "much too smart for that".

Even after the recent declaration by Russian Security Council deputy chairman and Putin ally Dmitry Medvedev that "the goals of the special operation require that we capture Kyiv", Mearsheimer the "realist" remains defiant when confronted with reality.

Replying to Aaron Mate, host of the Grayzone conspiracy theory site, he is now suggesting Putin might occupy only the whole of eastern Ukraine up to the Left Bank suburbs of Kyiv. However, the idea that Putin's armies would occupy the apartment block suburbia of eastern Kyiv, then stop, and from there merely observe the 11th-century Pechersk Lavra monastery and, not far beyond it, St Sophia on the other side of the river – the most potent symbols of what Putin sees as the birth of Russia – is naive in the extreme. Putin and the Russian elite do not consider Ukraine to be the buffer that Mearsheimer imagines, but "core Russia".

Mearsheimer and his followers tend to ignore that the International Criminal Court has indicted Putin for the war crime of kidnapping at least 20,000 Ukrainian children and downplay Russia's widespread war crimes in Ukraine.

Jon Richardson, a visiting fellow at the Australian National University's Centre for European Studies, recently enumerated the following war crimes: up to 100,000 civilians killed; destruction of 3600 schools, kindergartens and universities; destruction of 1500 healthcare facilities; destruction of 4800 sites in the cultural, heritage and tourism sector; the environmental disaster caused by blowing up the Kakhovka dam; and "an ambitious program to change the (occupied) regions' ethnic composition, erase their Ukrainian identity and potential resistance, and integrate them into the Russian Federation".

When Anthony Albanese toured Bucha (an outer suburb of Kyiv) after its liberation, he was told by survivors that Russian troops went door-to-door asking people's occupations. Intellectual workers such as teachers were immediately taken out and shot. Imagine if they had captured Kyiv.

Thus, the logical conclusion of Putin's historical mythology – if we listen closely to Putin – is not just elimination of the Ukrainian state but a genocide of Ukrainians and the total destruction of Ukrainian culture.

The NATO argument cannot explain what is happening now, why Ukrainians are distrustful of any peace negotiations with Putin's regime and why they are striving to win back the occupied territories.

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These measures included cheap gas, control of major TV networks (owned by Viktor Medvedchuk, who later would be arrested by Volodymyr Zelensky for treason), oligarchs bought with gas and other contracts who would then buy MPs, and the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, which was laced with FSB agents while euphemistically calling itself the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate).

In 2010 Russian soft power succeeded in making Viktor Yanukovych president (whom the Moscow narrative describes as a "democratically elected pro-Russian president"), who ironically ran on a (decidedly not pro-Russian) policy of seeking EU membership for Ukraine. As Yanukovych amassed billions through corruption, Putin was hoping that matters would proceed as they had in Belarus – where Putin's support of authoritarian leader Alexander Lukashenko bolstered the latter's hold on power in the wake of protests over the rigged 2020 election – eventually drawing a thoroughly corrupted Ukraine into a union with Moscow.