
The Shadow of the Bear: Russian Historical Myths in the Context of Russia's Imperial Policy towards Ukraine

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Summary

The article explores Russian historical myths used to justify the aggression against Ukraine. Three main myths are discussed: Russia as the successor of Kyivan Rus, Moscow as the Third Rome, and the myth about Russian historical territories. Putin and the Russian propagandists use these myths to deploy narratives about Crimea, Novorossiia, Kyivan Rus, and to reinterpret Russian history to fit contemporary Russian imperial renaissance. As such, these myths nowadays became part of the Russian World (Русский мир), i.e. Russia's political project that attempts to justify its imperial policy, particularly in the context of negation of the Ukrainian statehood and the war against Ukraine.

Keywords: Russian Historical Myths, Russian Imperialism, Ukraine, Kyivan Rus, Third Rome, Novorossiia

Introduction

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the end of history and the triumph of liberalism (Fukuyama, 1989). However, history itself quickly proved him wrong. First the ethnic conflicts in the 1990s, then the rise of authoritarian regimes worldwide in the 21st century showed Fukuyama's naïveté. Facing globalization, many soci-

eties cling to the past, attempting to recreate and cement it while simultaneously idealizing and “correcting” it, and transforming it into a tool for fulfilling modern needs. Adopting the Victorian historian Edward Freeman’s slogan that “history is past politics, and politics is present history”, societies turn history into a political instrument to promote contemporary ideological agendas (Hesketh, 2014, p. 106). Precisely while we are writing this article, Russia is conducting its open military aggression against Ukraine using its own interpretation of “historical justice” to justify its imperial mission. Russian President Vladimir Putin, in his essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* (2021), and later in his public speeches preceding the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, actively employs historical myths about Ukraine as a foundation of and justification for negation of Ukrainian sovereignty as well as for Russian imperial pretensions. Russian propaganda picks up on these myths, attempting to impose them aggressively both within Russia and in the international arena. While the latter effort yields questionable results, since the international community bases its actions primarily on legal legitimacy rather than historical claims, the active inculcation of mythologized views of the past in the minds of Russian citizens increases their conviction in the legitimacy of the Russian aggression on Ukraine.

Historical myths about Ukraine that the Russian propaganda appeals to are based on the shared origins of the two countries, as well as the long-standing existence within a unified political space – first as part of the Russian Empire, and later of the Soviet Union. Ultimately, Moscow’s claims to the Byzantine legacy, which underpin the modern Russian imperialism, are condemned to failure without justifying territorial claims over Ukraine. As Brzezinski said in 1994 – Ukraine is crucial for Russia’s imperial self-understanding since without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire (Plokhyy, 2017, p. 349). Therefore, it is crucial for Russian propaganda today to prove that Ukraine, as a separate political or even historical entity, never existed in the past, and hence has no right to exist in the present or future. Despite the apparent legal absurdity of such propagandist assertions, the fact is that these claims constitute Russia’s imperialist policy and presuppose a genocidal agenda. This is why we should understand Russia’s historical myths about Ukraine as the shadow of the Russian bear – these fake and often covert narratives are shadows behind Russia’s imperial foreign policy in general, and a justification of the war against Ukraine in particular.

Theoretical Framework of the Russian Historical Myths

To understand the emergence and essence of Russian myths about Ukraine, it is necessary to explore certain theoretical concepts. Central to this narrative are the notions of *historical myths* and *historical fakes*, which, at first glance, appear quite

similar and are often treated as synonyms. However, *historical myths*, which represent a distorted version of real events or figures (Heehs, 1994), generally appear spontaneously and essentially consist of a set of false perceptions about a subject, developed over time, often intertwining and influencing one another. The defining feature of a *historical fake* is its deliberate and intentional nature. It is a specifically crafted false story about an event, person, or process that never existed (Ivanytska and Danyliv, 2020, pp. 143-147). A fake can be a component of a historical myth, but it is generally related to the myth as a part to a whole.

Moreover, when discussing Russia's policy towards Ukraine, one cannot avoid addressing Russia's imperial-colonial discourse. In Russian academic circles, alongside the Marxist perspective on imperialism inherited from the Soviet scholarship, significant attention is given to the political and cultural dimensions of the term. Imperialism is interpreted as an aggressive policy aimed at military conquest of new territories, coupled with the subjugation and exploitation of the local population (Gudova, 2018). Referring to Edward Said's works, Russian scholars also highlight imperialist policies expressed through cultural and ideological means (*ibid.*). However, the Russian political and cultural elite perceive the existence of the Russian state exclusively in the form of an empire, and this view has been widely shared among the public in the previous decades.¹ Moreover, Putin himself declared that "Russia's borders have no end" (BBC.com, 2016). In Russian public discourse there is a prevalent narrative that the space within the former borders of the Russian Empire can only be shaped either through total assimilation of ethnic groups (primarily Ukrainians and Belarusians) or by perpetuating a state of ongoing conflict between pro-Russian and nationally oriented populations on the periphery (Miller, 2024). While colonialism and imperialism are not identical concepts (Vossen and Brennan, 2018, pp. 112-127), they are undoubtedly interdependent phenomena that complement each other. Here the focus is primarily on colonial practices of cultural imposition through media, education, science, intellectual, academic, and linguistic tools (Amsler, 2008).

¹ For instance, Alexandr Prokhanov, an intellectual who has been influential since the 1980s and who has been advocating Russia's imperial revival, argued that "the imperial form is a constant in the history of the Russian state", and after its four historical imperial manifestations, Russia is now advancing toward the "'fifth empire' which he believes should encapsulate all periods of Russian history by combining both the religious and messianic traditionalism of Tsarist Russia with the industrial, technological and military power of the Soviet Union" (Faure, 2022). It should also be noted that the public support for envisioning Russia as an empire was 37% after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that it was on the permanent rise; thus the public poll in 2014, immediately after the Russian forces illegally occupied Crimea, showed that "44% of Russians agreed that it is natural for Russia to have an empire" (Poushter, 2014).

Contemporary Russia continues a colonial pursuit towards the countries of the former Soviet Union. Even prior to the aggression on Ukraine, Russia's hybrid methods based on colonialism and imperialism had been used in order to maintain the former USSR territories (Shymkevych, 2023). In 1991, under the pretext of protecting the Russian-speaking population, Russia unleashed a war in Moldova, forming the separatist republic of Transnistria. Russia initiated the conflict, and then deployed their troops under the guise of peacekeepers. This is an example of Russian imperialism, but also of Russia's colonial methods – changing the ethnic composition of the population, imposing the Russian language and the Russian way of life, investing money in proxy parties and institutions, etc. The same approach was used in Georgia during the occupation of Abkhazia and Ossetia in the early 1990s. Concerning Ukraine, Russia also pursues a colonial and imperial policy, combining models of control, economic pressure, and destruction of the local population, its history, and culture (Grzegorzczuk, 2023). In that respect, Russian historical myths are intricately intertwined with Russian imperialism and the colonial ideology of the Russian World (Русский мир). Based on historical myths, Russia has created false narratives about its history, the history of Ukraine and Ukrainians, and its position in the world (US Department, 2022). Moreover, the danger of Russian “export” of these types of historical myths and revisionist concepts can be seen nowadays in Viktor Orban's “Hungarian World” and Aleksandar Vučić's “Serbian World”. In his imperial pursuit, Putin has set himself the task of bringing back under Moscow's control the nations that the Muscovite state, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union once captured. Precisely when we talk about Ukraine, it is important to emphasize three paradigmatic myths that Russia has been perpetuating in order to legitimize its territorial expansions.

Myth 1: Russia is the Successor of Kyivan Rus

One of the most important myths of Russia, which it uses to justify aggression against Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, claims Ukrainian historical and cultural heritage. This myth was artificially crafted in the 18th century by Feofan Prokopovych, a Ukrainian priest of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. He admired the domestic and foreign policy reforms of the tsar Peter the Great that helped transform the Muscovite state into an empire (Ploky, 2015, pp. 127-129). Prokopovych, like Peter the Great, understood that Moscow was very poorly known in the Medieval world. It was possible to change this by proving the antiquity of Moscow's statehood. For this reason, Prokopovych and other priests of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy created the myth of Moscow as the heiress of Kyivan Rus.

The priests were well acquainted with the Byzantine chronicles, which contained much information about the princes of Rus, the introduction of Christianity there, and trade between Rus and Byzantium. Kyivan Rus had strong political, cul-

tural, economic, and dynastic contacts with medieval Europe. Accordingly, Prokopovych only needed to create an appropriate narrative to connect Rus and Muscovy. In Byzantine sources, Rus was written as *Rossia* (the Greek spelling of Rus). Prokopovych took advantage of this when he proposed Russia to Peter the Great. In addition to the historical, the name had an ecclesiastical component too. At the end of the 10th century, the Great Kyivan Prince Volodymyr baptized Rus and the Ruthenians, establishing his own church and its hierarchy (Snyder, 2022a).

The church began to be called the Ruska Orthodox Church in the sense of the Orthodox Church of Kyivan Rus. The name 'Ruska' indicated the church affiliation to Rus and the Ruthenians. At the beginning of the 14th century, Galycia-Volhynia's metropolis was formed. In 1303, at the next Synod in Constantinople, the name *Mikro Rossia*, i.e. Little Russia, was chosen for the Metropolitanate of Kyiv and Galycia. The term meant ancient, older, or first Rus. *Megale Rossia*, or Great Russia, was selected for the metropolises in Zalissa and Novgorod. This term meant ancient and newly created Rus (Magosci, 2010, pp. 51-65). Thus, with its religious procedures, Byzantium created several terms of ecclesiastical significance in the 14th century, which later Moscow rulers began to use for imperial and colonial expansion. This division between Little and Great Russia existed until Constantinople was captured by the Ottomans in the 15th century (Motsya, 2009, pp. 29-85).

At that time, there was confusion in the Orthodox church regarding the metropolitan areas and territories that called themselves Rus. First, they created the Moscow Metropolitanate at the end of the 14th century, electing a metropolitan that Constantinople did not recognize. Accordingly, Moscow did not receive a *Tomos of Constantinople*, i.e. a formal document to establish an autocephalous Orthodox Church (Pavlyashyk, 2022). The Metropolitan of Moscow entitled himself "the Metropolitan of All Rus", extending his power to the Moscow Principality and illegally taking the Galycian and Kyiv metropolitan areas.

This was the first step of Moscow's colonial policy regarding the lands of Rus, which never belonged to the Moscow princes. The Prince of Moscow, Ivan III, began to implement the territorial expansion project of the Muscovite state at the expense of the lands of former Rus in the 15th century. He proclaimed himself sovereign and autocrat of all Rus (Lubyanov, 2023). Moreover, he appropriated a title belonging to Kyiv and Galycia's princes. Although Ivan III could not implement his project fully, it became the core of the future foreign policy of the Muscovite state. While the princes of Moscow claimed the titles of sovereigns and autocrats of all Rus, they maintained their rule over the state under the name of the Moscow principality (Mikhalkov and Revuk, 2024). Finally, it was the ground for Prokopovych to reanimate Ivan III's project and create an ideological and historical rationale for Peter the Great to change the state's name.

Prokopovych played with two words – Rus and Rossia. The word “Rus” has a Scandinavian origin and refers to the whole of Kyivan Rus’s territories. The inhabitants of Rus were called Rusyns, Russes, Rus people, or Ruthenians (Lubyantsev, 2023). As said above, “Rossia” is the Greek name and version name of Rus (Hrytsak, 2019). Prokopovych combined these words and created his own interpretation of them. His concept was ideal for substantiating Muscovy’s claims. Following that view, Peter the First proclaimed Muscovy as the only legitimate successor of the Rus, Rusyns, and all their territories. In fact, the true successors of Kyivan Rus were the Principality of Galycia and Volhynia (since 1253 Rus Kingdom, Ruthenia Kingdom or Galycia-Volhynia Kingdom; modern western parts of Ukraine) and the Grand Principality of Lithuania (since the second half of the 14th century it was named the Grand Principality of Lithuania, Rus, and Zhemaitia) (Plokhy, 2015, pp. 41-73). The Lithuanian princes ruled this state, but the Old Ukrainian language, the Laws of Rus, and the Ruska Orthodox Church dominated until 1569 (Cherkas, 2021). From the 14th century, the Kyivan Rus and Muscovy had separate ways of political development, languages, cultures, and histories.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the beginnings of Russian statehood. First, the state of Rus emerged in the 9th century (Snyder, 2022b; Plokhy, 2015). In the 10th century, Kyivan Rus turned into a centralized state with a strong ruler, its political system, its own laws, and an apparatus of punishment and coercion. The reigns of princes Volodymyr (960-1015) and Yaroslav (1019-1054) are considered the peak periods of the development of statehood (Plokhy, 2015). Then centrifugal tendencies began in the state, leading to Kyivan Rus’s disintegration from a federation to a confederation in the middle of the 12th century. The role of the Galycian and Volhynia principalities as new political centers was increasing. In the middle of the 13th century, these principalities were united under the rule of King Danylo (Kralyuk, 2024). The state was called the Rus Kingdom, which existed until the middle of the 14th century. Then the statehood of Ukrainian lands continued as part of Lithuania and Poland. The annals first mention Moscow as a city only in 1147 (Plokhy, 2015, p. 45). Moscow was part of the Volodymyr-Suzdal Principality, part of Kyivan Rus before its fragmentation. The Moscow principality had its own rulers from the middle of the 13th century, but only at the end of the 14th century, when Ivan III became the ruler, did the Moscow principality reach a period of centralized development. To be precise, Moscow and the Moscow principality did not exist at the time of the Kyivan Rus foundation. They appeared later and did not have a direct, but only an indirect relationship with Rus.

Peter the Great did not have time to rewrite history under the new name of the Russian Empire. Catherine II had done this in the second half of the 18th century. According to Dashkevych, Muscovy, Peter the Great, and Catherine II stole mo-

der Ukraine's name, history, geography, and ethnicity (Kostenko, 2021) in order to bring the Muscovite state, unknown in Europe, closer to Christian civilization. Also, the Muscovite rulers wanted to emphasize that the Moscow principality had an ancient Rusyn statehood and connections with Byzantium and the dynasties of medieval Europe.

The creation of a new history of the Muscovite state began after the death of Peter the Great, the liquidation of the Ukrainian state (the Cossack Hetmanate), and the occupation of Crimea in 1783. In that year, Catherine II ordered the establishment of the "Commission for compiling notes on ancient history, mainly Russian" (Dashkevych, 2011) which after nine years ended up writing an utterly falsified history of Russia. This process was accompanied by destroying, rewriting, and correcting documents (Kostenko, 2021). The Commission concluded that Russia has a political right to the heritage of Kyivan Rus, that it should be only one Russian people, that Kyivan Rus is the first stage of Russian statehood, and the Romanov dynasty a direct descendant of the ancient Rurik dynasty.

Based on these conclusions and the rewriting of history by Catherine II, Russian 19th-century historians Karamzin and Solovyov wrote their versions of the history of Russia (*ibid.*). Nikolay Karamzin created 12 volumes of "The History of the State of Russia" (1818-1829), and Sergey Solovyov wrote "The History of Russia from Ancient Times" in 29 volumes (1851-1879). These works became seminal in spreading a false version of the history of Russia. They asserted that there are no Belarusians or Ukrainians as separate peoples. According to Karamzin and Solovyov, it is precisely Kyivan Rus that became the first stage of Russian statehood of a triune people.

The first criticism of this view came at the beginning of the 20th century from Ukrainian historian Mykhailo Hrushevskyi (2002), who claimed that Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Russians are not fraternal peoples, and that Kyivan Rus is not the heritage of Russia (Hrushevskyi, 2004), claiming that Ukraine should be called "Ukraine-Rus" during the period of existence of the Kyivan Rus state (Kostenko, 2021). After the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty and the Bolsheviks' coming to power, Russian historians tried to revive the false history of Russia. In the 1930s, the Bolsheviks under Joseph Stalin began to deny the scientific nature of the works of Hrushevskyi. Stalin and the Communist Party continued to develop the idea of three brotherly nations of Russia as the cradle of Orthodox civilization and the homeland of all the peoples of the Soviet Union. Therefore, under Stalin, the concept of Russia as a continuation of Rus was refined. Russia viewed the territory of the USSR as an extension of its own and all the peoples who lived there as part of this new communist empire. In the case of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, it was claimed that they are a triune people with the same language, history and cul-

ture. The textbooks at the time were very tellingly called “History of the People of the USSR”.

Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia did not abandon this narrative. Attempts were made to write a joint history textbook to further promote this view (Kasyanov *et al.*, 2013). With Putin, Russia continued to fuel this historical myth, wrapping it up within the ideology of the Russian World (Hromenko, 2023; EUvsDisinfo, 2024). Putin explicitly claimed that it is only possible to talk about “a single large nation, a triune nation” of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, united by “blood ties”, concluding his recent essay with words: “For we are one people” (Putin, 2021). This essay thus serves as a foundation not only for renewed negation of Ukrainian identity, but also as a pretext for Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the appropriation of historical and cultural values from the occupied Ukrainian territories.

Myth 2: Moscow as the Third Rome

Putin and Russian historians have mixed several narratives in this historical myth. The first fake narrative within this myth is the claim that Prince Volodymyr was a Russian ruler because he was baptized in Crimea, which Moscow perceives as Russian since the ideology of the Russian World considers Crimea to be part of Russia since 1783, followed by its reclaim in the recent illegal annexation in 2014. Accordingly, Crimea is viewed as a sacred place for Russians, and the spiritual center of Russian statehood since, through Prince Volodymyr, Christianity was adopted by Kyivan Rus, then by Moscow. According to the second fake narrative, Russia inherited the heritage of Kyivan Rus and Byzantium (Putin, 2021). In this view, the Russian Orthodox Church and Russia preserve the spiritual tradition of Orthodoxy. More particularly, the concept of “Moscow as the Third Rome” appeared in the 16th century and developed as the fundamental axis for understanding Russian messianism. “The Third Romeism” is a view based on the historical fall of Rome as the centre of Christianity, then on the second fall of the Christian empire, namely Byzantium, and thus it has been argued that Moscow becomes the last stand in defence of Orthodox Christianity. This view was articulated by Russian monk Filofei in 1511 who, in an apocalyptic fashion, claimed after the fall of Byzantium into Ottoman hands that “two Romes have fallen, and the Third stands, and a fourth shall never be, for Thy Christian Empire shall never devolve upon others” (Duncan, 2000, p. 11). Moscow thus adopted the view that it set on the course to follow a messianic mission to save Orthodox Christianity as “the Third Rome”, and that no other Christian empire would ever rise since “a fourth shall never be”.

Although this view was not so widespread until the 19th century, it had been incorporated by Russian emperors and historians into imperial and colonial policy, as-

suming that the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Empire became the sole protectors of Orthodox Christianity throughout the world. This Russian messianism became so prevalent that Berdyaev claimed that “messianic consciousness is more characteristic of the Russians than of any other people except the Jews” (Berdyaev, 1948, p. 8). As Alexander Dugin, contemporary Russian philosopher and ultranationalist, recently wrote: “Every Russian bears the stamp of the Third Rome upon his soul. This is the central paradigm of our historical consciousness” (Dugin, 2023, p. 47). On the one hand, the Third Rome myth contains the important politico-theological assumption of Russia as *katechon* – a concept particularly advanced in Carl Schmitt’s political thought – which means, precisely, the ability to act as a so-called restrainer, or “the one who withholds” against the chaos and the rise of Antichrist in the world. In that sense, “Dugin has essentially reinterpreted the myth of Moscow as the Third Rome, suggesting that Russia’s imperial mission embodies its katechonic identity, the view that Russia is a historical katechon countering emerging forces of evil” (Cvijanović, 2024, p. 187). On the other hand, the Third Rome myth includes an imperialist assumption that Russia has a messianic mission not only to defend Orthodox Christianity, but it became the foundation of a propagandistic reinterpretation of the Russian imperial invasion on Ukraine, where so-called “Special Military Operation” becomes an Orthodox crusade for the Third Rome against the Antichrist embodied in the so-called “nazis” and “globalists” in Ukraine. In that sense, from the very beginning Dugin used the language of political theology to describe the full-scale invasion on Ukraine in politico-eschatological terms:

The way in which the Special Military Operation has begun and how it is unfolded... makes it impossible for the rest of Ukraine to remain under the rule of the Nazis and globalists. (...) Zelenskyy is ready to sacrifice everything in the hope of dragging humanity into a nuclear conflict. He no longer thinks of himself as president of Ukraine, Ukraine is defeated. I think he thinks of himself as the “antichrist”. (...) The fight for Donbas, for Odesa, for Kiev, and even for Lviv is part of the great eschatological battle. (...) It is not us Russians who need Ukraine. It is Christ who needs it. And that is why we are there (Dugin, 2022).

To be the Third Rome means to finally liberate the West from the “decadent” liberal ideology, i.e. to “save Europe from gay Satan” (Snyder, 2018, p. 150). The myth of Moscow as the Third Rome, as the katechon, and the whole katechonization of politics should be viewed as part of Russia’s own “Delphic” quest for its political identity in general, as well as for understanding Russian imperialism and the so-called Russian messianic mission in the world. Yet, recent “katechonization of politics in Russian political discourse does not radiate the powerful perception of the Russian state, but rather a deluded belief in the katechon that should

be understood as tacit fear of Russia's ultimate demise", no matter how The Third Rome myth in its eschatological form has been juxtaposed against Fukuyama's liberal eschatology (Cvijanović, 2024, pp. 189-190). However, "Moscow as the Third Rome", as a politico-theological myth, needed its politico-imperial project of the Russian World. It has been actively promoted since 2000s, understood as "a network of small and large communities, thinking and speaking in Russian" beyond Russia's borders (Laruelle, 2015, p. 5).

Myth 3: Historical Russian Territories

Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia started to promote separatism, claim territories, and interfere in the former Soviet republics, first in Moldova, Georgia, and Belarus (Shymkevych, 2023). Supplemented by fakes about ancient historical ties and the commonality of cultures, traditions, languages and peoples, this imperial encroachment has later been articulated within the concept of the Russian World (Davydyuk, 2016, pp. 28-37). With the rise of Putin in the 21st century, the myth of historical Russian territories began to take shape in 2008 in Georgia, where Russia intervened once again, as it did in the early 1990s, to support separatist pro-Russian proxy entities in Ossetia and Abkhazia under the pretext of protecting the Russian minority there.

In the case of Ukraine, the myth of historical Russian territories consists of several parts. First, the major fake regards Crimea and its so-called "incorrect transfer" to Ukraine (Ukraïner, 2024). Russia began to launch this fake in the early 1990s, trying to reclaim the peninsula. The fake was updated and used for annexation in 2014, holding a referendum on accession after the capture. Crimea has sacred significance for Russia. As mentioned above, the peninsula is an integral part of the myth of Moscow as the Third Rome and Russia as the spiritual center of Orthodoxy. Historically, Russian propaganda has been trying to prove that Crimea has always been Russian.

Before the annexation in 1783, the Crimean Khanate was independent under the Ottoman Empire's protectorate. The Crimean Tatars created their independent state in the early 1440s, recognizing the military protectorate of the Ottoman Empire in 1475 (Hromenko and Haivoronskyi, 2021). From that moment until the annexation by Russia in 1783, the Crimean Tatars independently determined internal and foreign policy and cooperated with the Ottomans. The Ottomans had a tradition of taking wives from the Heray dynasty – the ruling dynasty in the Crimean Khanate. Before the Russians came to the peninsula, the Crimean Khanate formed a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society with its own political and legal system. Russia deployed its troops to Crimea in 1771, even before the end of the Russian-Ottoman War of 1768-1774, which the Ottomans lost. According to the peace treaty of Küçük

Kaynarca in 1774 (Plokhyy, 2015), the Russian forces were to leave the peninsula, and the Crimean Khanate was to remain independent. Nevertheless, Catherine II did not withdraw the troops and, in 1783, issued a manifesto “On the acceptance of the Crimean Peninsula, the Taman Island and the Kuban region to the Russian Empire” (MFA of the Russian Federation, 1783). From that time, Russia started the policy of colonization of Crimea that included the displacement and assimilation of the Crimean Tatars, altering historical names of settlements to Russian ones, and settling ethnic Russians in Crimea.

Crimea was part of Russia until 1954, when the Soviet authorities transferred Crimea to Ukraine for economic reasons. After the Second World War and the deportation of Crimean Tatars, Greeks, Armenians, Bulgarians, Turks, and Albanians in 1944, Crimea was in disarray and crisis, so Moscow wanted to rebuild it with Ukrainian labor (Volvach, 2014; Shurhalo, 2024). At the end of the 1950s, Crimea began to revive, gradually turning into a popular resort. However, in order to reduce the influence of Ukrainians in Crimea, Moscow created a Black Sea Fleet base there with many ethnic Russians coming with their families, and Sevastopol became a closed military city (Mayorov, 2015). In the early 1990s, the Russian government started to prepare a *coup d'état* in Crimea, attempting to rely on Russian soldiers, sailors, and ethnic Russians. In September 1991, the Russian parties announced the formation of the Crimean Republic and elected Yuriy Meshkov as president (Borys-fen Intel, 2013). In 1992, the Crimean parliament adopted the Crimean Constitution (Crimean Constitution, 1992). The Verkhovna Rada canceled its effect only in 1995 (Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 1995). When the first plan for territorial separation of the peninsula failed, Russia started to strengthen its presence through the Black Sea Fleet (Mezentsev, 2011). This was the basis of the 2014 annexation, when Russia violated international law and the internationally recognized borders of Ukraine.

Another Russian fake is the narrative about Novorossiya (New Russia), which, according to Putin, covered Ukraine's eastern and southeastern regions (Turchenko and Turchenko, 2014). This false narrative was not new in the Russian and Ukrainian information and media spaces. Russia started to spread fakes about its Novorossiya project in the 1990s and early 2000s, singling out Donbas as a unique cultural and historical region (Turchenko, 2014). For this purpose, Russia started to finance pro-Russian parties, invest money in local politicians and pro-Russian activists, and strengthen economic cooperation with Donbas. This served as a foundation for introducing separatism in Donbas a couple of months after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. It was particularly clear that the myth of Novorossiya would be relaunched after Dugin and Putin uttered its name in the public space immediately after Russian troops occupied Crimea. In 2022, a new version of the narrative about Novorossiya was promoted (Clover, 2016, pp. 12-13). Novorossiya became part

of the Russian narrative about Russia's historical territories that included not only Crimea and Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk), but also the regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. At the same time, following the Russian World ideology, Putin emphasized the need to include all other areas that could be claimed as Russian historical territories due to the fact that there were people speaking Russian in Odesa, Mykolayiv, Kharkiv, Sumy, and Chernihiv regions, including Kyiv, symbolically perceived from the Russian imperialist viewpoint as a spiritual centre of Russia – “the mother of all Russian cities” (Putin, 2021).

The central aspect of the Novorossiia myth was its historical existence until the 18th century. This region included the territories of Ukrainian Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, Mykolaiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Kropyvnytskyi, and Poltava regions.² They became an essential part of Moscow's territorial conquests and the view that there was no Ukrainian presence there before the 18th century (Zaliznyak, 2014). With the formation of Rus, nomadic peoples settled in the steppes – Polovtsians, Khazars, then Mongols. In the middle of the 14th century, the steppe turned into a border between the Grand Principality of Lithuania, which captured most of the lands of Rus, and the Golden Horde (Plokyh, 2015, pp. 49-63). When in the 15th century the Crimean Khanate arose, Tatars started to settle in the coastal areas of the Black and Azov seas, occasionally raiding the borders of the Grand Principality of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland. The steppe was devastated, but Ukrainian settlements began to appear there anyway. They were peasants fleeing from Polish magnates and nobility. The fugitives lived on the steppe, engaged in farming, and had to fend off Tatar raids. The Polish authorities did not destroy them because they saw them as a barrier that stopped the advancement of Crimean Tatars to Poland. The people who lived there began to be called Cossacks. On Mala Khorlytsia (now called Baida Island), the first Cossack fortress, Zaporizhzhian Sich, arose. Until 1775, the Cossacks created several Sichs in different places because the Tatars constantly destroyed them. Russian troops destroyed the last Sich in 1775 by order of Catherine II (*ibid.*, pp. 133-147), and at the end of the 18th century Russia started to turn these Ukrainian areas into Russian lands. The colonial policy was accompanied by the resettlement of different populations, renaming settlements, introducing the Russian language in schools, and a ban on printing Ukrainian books and using Ukrainian language.

Russia carried out several administrative reforms to destroy the historical names of Ukrainian territories. For instance, in 1764, Catherine II abolished the

² This is the area that stretches from the middle and lower reaches of the Dniester in the west, the lower reaches of the Don and the Siverskyi Donets in the east, from the left tributary of the Dnipro – Samara, and the upper reaches of the Southern Bug – Syniukha and Ingul in the north, to the Black and Azov Seas and Crimea in the south (Shurhalo, 2018).

post of hetman (head of the Ukrainian state from 1648 to 1764) and carried out territorial redistribution of lands. Then the province of Novorossiia arose on Ukrainian lands for the first time. Its territory constantly expanded due to new accessions and colonized lands of Ukraine. Catherine II paid great attention to the assimilation of the population, so she actively encouraged foreigners and Russians to come to these lands. Thus the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine began to increase, especially during the 19th century, when Donbas and the southeastern territories became industrialized. The Russians brought their Russian culture, language, and identity to the area. This was a foundation of the myth about Novorossiia that was revived and promoted in the early 1990s and again in the 2000s. In that myth, it was particularly emphasized that the cities of Odesa, Mykolayiv, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, Dnipro, Donetsk, Sumy, and Luhansk were created by Russians (Kuzio, 2019), although Cossack cities, villages, and fortresses were built there long before the arrival of the Russians.

In 2014 Moscow attempted to politically implement the Novorossiia project not only in Donbas. Attempted separatist movements in Dnipro, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Odesa were suppressed. Nevertheless, Putin switched to promoting the myth about Kyiv as the capital of the ancient Russian nation and about Ukraine as a fake, or non-existent state. Namely, the Kremlin began to actively shape the narrative that it was “the Polish elite and a part of the Malorussian intelligentsia” that promoted the idea of Ukrainians “as a nation separate from the Russians”, following with the view that ultimately Lenin and the Bolsheviks invented Ukraine, the narrative that went hand in hand with the victimization of Russians. As Putin wrote:

The Bolsheviks treated the Russian people as inexhaustible material for their social experiments. They dreamt of a world revolution that would wipe out national states. That is why they were so generous in drawing borders and bestowing territorial gifts... Russia was robbed, indeed (Putin, 2021).

A Network of Promoting False Narratives

In recent years, numerous studies have emerged regarding Russian propaganda and historical myths that Putin has manipulated and utilized against Ukraine. Scientists, experts, analysts, and public activists from various countries are engaged in identifying and debunking narratives related to Ukraine and their respective nations due to their awareness of the dangers posed by Russian propaganda and disinformation. While the increase in scientific and analytical studies is a positive development, these articles, analytical notes, books, and publications often reiterate common themes of Russian propaganda, attributing them solely to Putin and primarily focusing on the realms of media and information. Historical myths targeting Ukraine and the falsehoods constructed upon them are disseminated by Russian propagan-

dists through various media channels, particularly social media, as well as through a network of institutions that encompass Russian studies and public organizations. Through these channels, pseudo-historical narratives that distort Russia's history are propagated, contributing to the creation of a negative portrayal of Ukrainian society, its government, and the state. This dissemination occurs systematically on two levels – overt and covert.

Dealing with propaganda and myths in the statements of pro-Russian politicians is seemingly easier through implementation of sanctions or media closures. In that case, overcoming propaganda at a covert level poses significant challenges, primarily due to its clandestine nature and its operation within Russian cultural organizations. Propagandists and Russian historians are aware that falsified facts, comments, and explanations across diverse subjects are challenging to authenticate. Consequently, they extract genuine events and processes from their original context, distorting and rewriting them to align with the Russian imperial vision and political agenda. An illustrative example is the myth of “Moscow as the Third Rome”, which Russia promotes with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church, including collaboration with the Serbian Orthodox Church and various religious organizations and institutions worldwide.

The Kremlin propaganda spreads its myths of Ukraine and Russia through academic exchange programs, interviews with journalists and political scientists, and Russian Houses and Centers. Moscow involves in this the Russian diaspora, which lives in many Central and Eastern European countries, the USA, Canada, and Israel (Davydyuk, 2016, pp. 90-107). Many of these people are nostalgic for the Russian Empire, the so-called “glory” of the Soviet Union, and the Romanov dynasty killed by the Bolsheviks. Playing on both emotions and nostalgia provides an excellent basis for spreading narratives about Russia as the center of Russian statehood, great Russian literature, fraternal nations, etc.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the number of Russians abroad has increased. Like previous waves of migrants, many of them carry colonial thinking about Ukrainians and Ukraine, considering Crimea as part of Russia or believing that the Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity were the Western backed-up *coup d'état*. One of the features of the Russian diaspora is the myth of a single Russian language, where the Ukrainian language is understood as its dialect.

Conclusions

The success of the Russian colonial-imperial policy against Ukraine depends on the effectiveness of the historical myths and fakes that Russia has been creating for a long time. Myths about Russia as the historical successor of Kyivan Rus, Moscow as the Third Rome, and Russia's historical territories including Crimea

and Novorossiia are all fundamental part of Russia's foreign policy and strategy to achieve its projected imperial goals encapsulated in the Russian World project. These myths have an essential feature of adaptability to different realities and scenarios. The myth of historical Russian territories was used in 2014, but did not achieve the desired result. However, this myth and the related fakes were revised and relaunched in 2021 when Putin wrote his essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, which became the basis for Russia's imperial claims towards Ukraine, providing further justification for the annexation of Crimea, and asserting that Russia is the sole defender of true Orthodoxy – the Third Rome. These historical myths serve as a “shadow of the bear”, in other words, as a vehicle for fulfilling the political project of the Russian World under the guise of “protection” of Russian culture, history, traditions, as well as Russians and Russian-speaking people in different countries, particularly those of the former Soviet Union. Putin launched a small-scale aggression against Ukraine in 2014 under the pretext of protecting Russian-speaking Ukrainians from the authorities in Kyiv, which escalated into a full-scale invasion in 2022, with a justification based on fakes about Ukraine as a failed state and a “Nazi” government oppressing Russian-language speakers.

At the end, all these myths can be aptly summarized by the speech to the Donbas militia given by Pavel Gubarev, a Russian ultranationalist and historian, who became the governor of Donetsk in 2014, and who similarly deployed both religious and political myths to support Russian imperialism when he said: “The Russian church has blessed us for the war that we are waging. It is a war for the Russian World, for New Russia” (Plokyh, 2017, p. 343). Consequently, the fight against old and new historical Russian myths about Ukraine requires not only complex actions in counter-propaganda, but also a thorough awareness of what Russian historical myths are in the first place.

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