

Unraveling the Legacy: The Impact of Soviet-Era Political Violence on the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict

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This paper attempts to answer the research question: To what extent has the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict since 2014 been catalyzed by the legacy of political violence in the USSR under Bolshevik leaders like Lenin and Stalin? The research explores historical events, such as the Ukrainian-Soviet War, the Holodomor famine, and systemic Russification during the Stalin era, and how these have nurtured anti-Russian sentiment and far-right elements within Ukraine. Through historical analysis, this study identifies how the rejection of Ukrainian identity and the forced assimilation into a Soviet identity have contributed to the present-day conflict. Ultimately, the analysis argues that these historical grievances have fueled Ukraine's drive towards EU and NATO membership, exacerbating tensions with Russia and contributing to the escalation into all-out war. However, the paper also acknowledges the role of contemporary geopolitical factors, such as NATO expansion, in driving the conflict. The findings suggest that while Soviet-era political violence has played a significant role, modern dynamics, and NATO activities are also to blame. The implications of this research underline the importance of forming inclusive alliances focused on limiting territorial expansion and competition and understanding the risks inherent to state relations shaped by significant power imbalances.

Keywords: Soviet Political Violence, Russo-Ukrainian Conflict, Russification, Ukrainian Nationalism, Far-right politics, NATO, Genocide

Introduction: Historical Background

The historical roots of the modern-day Ukrainian and Russian state date back to the 9th-century medieval federation of Slavic tribes known as Kievan Rus [1]. Following the Mongol invasions in the 13th century, however, this federation fragmented, and the territories of modern-day Russia and Ukraine began to develop different trajectories. Most of what is today western Ukraine came under the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 14th century, which shaped its distinct culture and identity in contrast to territories in the east. Meanwhile, the Grand Duchy of Moscow expanded his territory, and by the end of the 18th century, much of eastern and central Ukraine was incorporated into the Russian Empire after the decline of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth [1]. The 19th century brought a wave of Ukrainian nationalism spearheaded by intellectuals who emphasized distinct Ukrainian identity and heritage, even as the region remained under foreign rule. With the Russian Revolution in 1917, movements for autonomy emerged in modern-day Ukraine, resulting in the creation of the Ukrainian Central Council, which advocated for autonomous governance of Ukraine without separation from the Russian Republic [1]. This council announced the creation of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR), which was recognized by the Russian Provisional Government. However, with the Bolshevik seizure of power, the UPR rejected Soviet ideals and vowed to combat coup attempts within Ukraine. Soon after, Bolshevik groups in Kharkov declared war against the UPR, announcing the creation of the

Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets, thereby commencing the Ukrainian-Soviet War [2]. The war eventually led to Bolshevik victory and integration of Ukraine into the USSR by 1922. Under Lenin, while the Ukrainian language and culture was allowed to exist, economic turmoil swept through. Then, under Stalin, conditions worsened. Political repression, forced labor, man-made famine, and deportation followed [2]. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Ukraine decided to become a non-aligned state, seeking closer ties with the European Union (EU) and undergoing periods of tense relations as well as cooperation with Russia.

In 2014, the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine resulted in the ousting of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich from power, catalyzing a political vacuum which led to significant political instability and eventually culminated in the Donbas conflict [3]. During this, separatist forces, supported by the Russian government, marched into the eastern regions of Ukraine and captured key infrastructure. Soon after, Russia annexed Crimea in a referendum in 2014 and the Donbas War transformed into a static war [4]. This was sustained for the next eight years until February of 2022, when the small-scale conflict descended into an all-out war between Russia and Ukraine. This was prompted by the entry of Russian forces into Ukrainian territory on the pretext of "denazifying" [5] Ukraine and conducting a special military operation to support the Donbas separatists. International condemnation followed swiftly, demanding complete Russian withdrawal from the region. Despite this, Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to espouse irredentist views,

pointing to the historical and “spiritual” [5] proximity that binds Ukraine to Russia, alongside claims of a *volonté générale* to realign with Russia given recent ‘referendums’ in the nation’s eastern provinces. In this way, underpinning the operation are arguments grounded in democratic legitimacy and historical fraternity, both of which make the war rage on with no clear end in sight.

In this light, this paper posits that, to some extent, the Russo-Ukrainian war has been catalyzed by the Soviet legacy of political violence. This will be illustrated through two main components. First, that anti-Russian sentiment and far-right presence in Ukraine which initially justified the need for Russian invasion was catalyzed by a reaction to the USSR’s undermining of the former Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Second, the rejection of Ukrainian identity as a means of inculcating a Eurasian Soviet identity has produced a modern-day Russophobic nationalist movement. This has subsequently propelled EU and NATO membership talks with Ukraine and thus prompted the military invasion. These two points will proceed in the order outlined above, by firstly examining the atrocities committed by the Soviet regime and their impact on fostering anti-Russian and far-right sentiment within Ukraine. Then, the Soviet Union’s systemic suppression of Ukrainian identity will be discussed, along with how it has shaped modern-day Ukrainian policy towards the Russian government. Finally, the role of contemporary geopolitical tensions between NATO and Russia will be expounded upon, offering a more nuanced understanding of the several factors that have fueled the war beyond historical sentiments. With this, it will be argued that while the legacy of Soviet political violence has played a fundamental role in shaping the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, its influence has been limited to some extent, as current geopolitical dynamics have acutely triggered the conflict.

From Famine to Genocide – Producing Discontent in Contemporary Ukraine

Firstly, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has been catalyzed to a significant extent by the legacy of Soviet political violence, as the atrocities under the USSR cultivated Russophobic sentiment within Ukraine and consequently fomented hostility between the states. This is exemplified particularly by two famines: the 1921-1923 Ukrainian famine and the Holodomor famine. In 1921, along with other regions of the USSR, the region of Ukraine suffered from severe drought, leading to widespread starvation and thousands of deaths. During this, the Soviet government, led by Lenin, decided to provide food aid to other regions by transferring grain from Ukraine. The Ukrainian regional government, “starving themselves, were called upon to supply grain to relieve the Volga region” [6]. Similar to this, again, in 1932, the famine known today as the Holodomor famine was not only ignored in Ukraine by the Soviet government but also manufactured by it. Stalin’s government had embarked on rapid collectivization, and this caused a food shortage due to declining agricultural output. Between 1932 and 1933, the Soviet regime attempted to provide relief, but doing so while discriminating against Ukrainian ethnic regions as “Ukrainian populated areas were given a lower number of tractors” [7] and simultaneously implementing policies that historian Timothy Snyder labeled as “administrative measures...to kill” [7] rather than aid the population. As such, the Bolshevik administration actively discriminated against the Ukrainian regions in two significant

instances of political violence, carrying out a Russocentric agenda instead. The long-term legacy and consequence of this has been the development of radical anti-Russian sentiment and fragmentation of Russia-Ukraine relations [8]. This hatred of Russia has been “set in stone” [9] to such an extent that the Svoboda and Right Sector, which are far-right ultranationalist groups with Neo-Nazi elements, played a significant role in the 2014 Revolution of Dignity because of a general dislike of “any civilized relationship with “Russia” [9]. During protests, they tore down a Lenin statue, and yelled anti-Russian slogans alongside the famous “Hang the Commie” [9] chant. This demonstrated the hatred possessed by specific Ukrainian groups against the Soviet regime, but more significantly, displayed the “trauma” [10] which “haunts” [11] Russia-Ukraine relations. This Russophobic and ultranationalist presence with fascist ideology has provoked Russia to claim that Ukraine is run by “Neo-Nazis” [12] who pose a threat to Russian existence and therefore must be defeated [13]. With this, the legacy of political violence in the USSR can be seen, as the discrimination of the Ukrainian regions sowed long-lasting resentment towards Russian influence, so much so that extremist right-wing groups gained traction in Ukraine. In turn, Russia responded by framing its military operation as a necessary measure to protect Russian-speaking populations from these ‘fascist’ elements. While it is difficult to comment on the legitimacy of all Russian claims, it is clear that escalating tensions rooted in historical grievances played a prominent role in triggering the conflict. Therefore, it can be argued that political violence under Bolshevik leaders of the USSR has left lasting trauma, fostering the emergence of far-right elements in Ukraine, subsequently contributing to heightened hostility between the Russian and Ukrainian states. As such, the legacy of Soviet political violence has catalyzed the Russo-Ukrainian conflict to a significant extent.

West or East? – The Ukrainian Dilemma

Secondly, the rejection of Ukrainian identity as a means of inculcating a Eurasian Soviet identity under the USSR has had a significant role in propelling EU and NATO talks with Ukraine, thereby instigating the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The evidence of this lies in the systemic elimination of the Ukrainian language and identity in the 1930s and 1940s under Stalin, who embarked on a policy of Russification. This was exemplified by his telegram titled “Stop Ukrainization” [14] which coincided with the expulsion of 84,653 members of the Ukrainian branch of the Communist Party and their replacement with Russians from other regions [14]. Alongside this, Russian became the primary language for administrative tasks, and the usage of the Ukrainian language was condemned in schools and offices [15]. Moreover, later on, the regime deported around 571,000 Ukrainians between 1940 and 1953 on the basis that they were “enemies of the people” [16]. The consequence of such repression and violence was the fomentation of “strong anti-Soviet sentiment that persisted through generations” [17]. The resentment directed towards the “Muscovite, Russian rule” [17] was exacerbated by the feeling that said violence was carried out less for “their behavior than for their identity as [...] Ukrainians” [17]. As scholars Rozenas, Schutte and Zhukov illustrate, this bitterness has sustained to this day, given that “anti-Russian political preferences” [17] are most intense in regions where Soviet repression and violence was the most extreme. Consequently, it would be reasonable to state that the legacy of the

USSR has given rise to hostile Ukrainian attitudes towards Russia. The culmination of this was most notable in 2014, when President Yanukovich was ousted predominantly because of his decision to choose closer ties with Russia and not sign an Association Agreement with the EU [18]. With his downfall, the new Ukrainian administration moved even closer to the EU, marked by the signing of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and multiple amendments to the constitution to make Ukraine suitable for EU membership. Furthermore, Ukraine also renounced its non-aligned status and made joining NATO a main foreign policy objective despite Russian condemnation [19]. The Russian administration demanded NATO ban Ukraine from joining and “end any further NATO moves eastward” [20]. With the rejection of such demands, tensions escalated to the point of full-scale war in 2022, a war which became feasible partly due to Ukraine's desire, fueled by its historical animosity towards Russia from the Soviet era, to move incrementally closer to the EU. That said, while there were several causes of the conflict, the historical legacy of political violence in the USSR transformed the political landscape in Ukraine, nurtured anti-Russian elements and encouraged Ukraine to look westward, making it a significant factor in catalyzing the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

Putin and NATO's War

On the contrary, it can be said that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict since 2014 has been catalyzed not so much by the legacy of political violence in the USSR, but by a clash between Russian and NATO expansion. Proponents of this view contend this in light of the fact that the majority of Russian claims regarding the presence of Neo-Nazis in Ukraine have been labeled false or gravely exaggerated [21]. Ukraine does have “right-wing extremists and violent xenophobic groups” [22] but that is the case for almost every country in the world, including states bordering Russia. Adding to this, historian Timothy Snyder has presented the perspective that the Russian regime makes such statements in order to “justify unprovoked war” [23] through political aesthetics that could be accepted in the western world. This would demonstrate that the legacy of political violence in the USSR has had little real influence in catalyzing the Russo-Ukrainian conflict because the reasons pushed forth by Russia have not prompted the invasion. Rather, Russian jingoism, driven by Putin's government, could predominantly be at play. Moreover, the expansion of NATO appears to be significant in provoking Russia, a provocation having little to do with the legacy of political violence in the USSR. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia, under both Vladimir Putin's administration as well as his predecessor Boris Yeltsin's, claimed that informal assurances had been made by NATO leaders to not expand eastward, which they had consistently violated by adding more Eastern European countries to the fold [24]. While the legitimacy of these informal assurances has been debated, scholar Marc Trachtenberg has suggested that the Russian argument was “by no means baseless” [25]. At the same time, in response to said NATO enlargement, Russia has expanded its own territory, participating in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and annexing Crimea in 2014 [26]. Since then, the geopolitical importance of Ukraine for both NATO and Russia, as well as its historical and cultural significance for Russia, has led to Ukraine becoming a battlefield for both these parties. This perspective was supported by close advisor of President Putin Sergey

Karaganov, who stated that NATO exclusion of Russia “automatically put Russia and the West on a collision course, eventually sacrificing Ukraine” [27]. Additionally, recent developments have shown Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is willing to forgo some of Ukrainian territory to Russia in exchange for NATO membership [28]. The mere fact that Ukraine is considering such a concession highlights the extent to which NATO membership and long-term security have been central to Ukraine's playbook. Meanwhile, Russia has made clear its dissatisfaction with any future plans for Ukraine's NATO integration [29]. This shows that the confrontation between Ukraine and Russia since 2014 has not only stemmed from anti-Russian sentiments in Ukraine or the overall legacy of political violence in the USSR, but also from NATO expansion, which has bolstered its sphere of influence in Eastern Europe with little regard for Russian concerns. As such, the Russo-Ukrainian war has been catalyzed by the legacy of Soviet political violence, but only to some extent.

Conclusion & Implications

Overall, this paper argues that to some extent, the Russo-Ukrainian war has been catalyzed by the legacy of Soviet political violence under leaders like Lenin and Stalin. This is primarily because of two factors: first, the historical repression and atrocities committed under the Soviet regime entrenched deep-seated anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine and bolstered Ukrainian nationalism. This was demonstrated through the 1921-23 Ukraine famine as well as the Holodomor famine, during which Ukrainian regions were not only discarded but deliberately targeted. The historical trauma and legacy of these tragedies has shaped Ukraine's hostility towards Russia and empowered far-right nationalist elements within the country; second, the inculcation of Eurasian identity during the Soviet era distanced Ukraine from Russia and instigated its push towards the Western bloc, further compounding geopolitical tensions. Russification policies during Stalin's rule aimed at systematically eliminating Ukrainian identity and language, left long-lasting bitterness which consequently fueled Ukraine's desire to actively reject Russian influence. However, these historical factors did not solely determine the trajectory towards conflict. The clash of NATO expansion with Russia's strategic interests also played a prominent role. NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe was perceived as a betrayal of informal assurances and most importantly a threat to Russia's sovereignty. In such circumstances, the justifications based on Neo-Nazism or far-right extremism, which have been invoked by the Russian government to rationalize their actions in Ukraine, become less conclusive. As such, while the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is a culmination of historical grievances and political violence during Soviet times, it is also significantly shaped by contemporary geopolitical struggles involving Russian and NATO forces.

This investigation yields two primary implications. Firstly, it underscores the vulnerability of newly formed states not only to political instability, but also unintended manifestations of unresolved historical grievances. In the case of post-Soviet Ukraine, a history of violence, along with the lack of mutual and egalitarian cooperation, guided strong anti-Russian sentiment and created internal discord. At the same time, relentless competition between NATO and Russia engulfed Ukraine and fractured relations in the region for decades to come. This implies the need of inclusive coalition-building and cooperation between Russia and the Western

bloc to address issues of territorial expansion in order to ultimately resolve the conflict. A definitive mutual agreement to eliminate interference in the domestic affairs of other states and cease territorial expansion on both sides could be effective in de-escalating tensions and ameliorating historical grievances. Secondly, this paper demonstrates the risks of asymmetric power dynamics in diplomacy, where one state asserts considerable influence over another both economically and culturally. This indicates the need for a more cautious approach focused on equitable negotiation and respect of absolute sovereignty, especially when dealing with newly created states that could perceive external influence as a threat to their autonomy.

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