Violence and Power in Ukraine and Russia

HOW GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY, AND IDENTITY DEFINE THE CONFLICT

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Abstract: Russia's actions against Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 are intricately linked to Russian (triune) identity, historical and narratives, as well as to its rejection of Ukrainian sovereignty and borders. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian state actors and population believed the country remained a great power, like its main rival, the U.S.A., due to its intrinsic quality within the Russian national identity. Without great power status, Russia cannot legitimate its existence or actions domestically and internationally. The domination of Ukraine is required by Russia’s view of its ethnic identity and international status. The loss of Ukraine to Western powers like the U.S. illustrates a fissure within the Russian identity and state. By looking at the actions and rhetoric of Russian institutions and elites, we can see the war against Ukraine as rooted in the great power narratives, ontological security, as well as imperial irredentist claims.

Keywords: history, geography, political science, Ukraine, Russia, conflict, identity.
Introduction:

Ukraine and Russia have linked their nation and people over millennia to the same national-building myth of Scandinavian princes (Kyivan Rus) in modern-day Kyiv. Beyond the intertwinement of their national myths, the empire and later the state of Russia has seen Kyiv as the cradle of Slavic civilization. Utilizing national myths to distinguish themselves, despite the tension inherent in what it means to be Ukrainian or Russian, allows leaders and other elites to create a coherent collective identity that subsumes smaller identities. Historical memories, particularly those that resonate with the imagined community, are constantly being reinterpreted by elites to fit certain narratives and state goals. These rival historiographies overlap and generate conflict between competing loyalties.\(^1\) While contemporary identities seem solidified and self-determination well-established as the norm, these qualities were only emphasized after the First and Second World Wars. Prior to this point, people identified themselves by their localities – overarching identities meant to encompass masses of people were rare – and not by the empire or other state configurations under which they lived.

The issue that underlays the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is an intricate one with pieces that expand across different disciplines and have done so for centuries. The paper begins with a short overview of the identity problem viewed by the two states and its place in the conflict. The literature review section establishes the foundation provided by previous research to investigate the issue of identity-driven war on the domestic and international levels for Russia. In addition, the literature review underscores the current gap in the research that this paper seeks to bridge. To overcome this lack of scholarship regarding Russia and Ukraine, this paper utilizes

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several international relations theories to explain the reasoning behind the 2014 Crimea annexation and the Ukraine-Russia war that has been ongoing since February 2022. By utilizing existing scholarship and relevant theories, the analysis section connects discourses and the history between the two states to demonstrate routine and insecurity on the part of Russia. Lastly, the conclusion highlights the need to utilize outside scholarship to explain the current trends and tensions between states with conflicting identities.

The eighteenth through twentieth centuries saw the emergence of conflicts between Ukrainian and Russocentric ‘Little Russian’ nationality and identity. Little Russians was a historical term that denoted the people and territory of what is now Ukraine, but now the term features heavily in Russian nationalist and irredentist discourse. The term Little Russia originated during the thirteenth century from Greek-speaking Byzantine scholars, the word was introduced into Russian and increased in popularity after the Cossacks regained what is now modern-day Ukraine in the seventeenth century. Following the term’s Russianization into the eighteenth century, the concept of Little Russia became integral to Russian identity and nation. At the same time, Ukrainian intellectuals and other elites pushed for the idea of the Ukrainian nation. Russian elites viewed Ukraine or ‘Little Russians’ as a lesser ‘other’ to be brought into the Russian empire. In the ideology of the Cossack elites, Ukrainians were subsumed into the triune identity of the Russian people (Velikorussy) alongside Belarus (‘White Russians’) and Russia (‘Great Russians’). While the revolutions of the early twentieth century seemed to change this fraternal and paternalistic unequal relationship, the chauvinistic triune identity once again emerged during the

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Josef Stalin’s rule in the Soviet Union as Ukrainian identity and culture were oppressed and outlawed.

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is compounded by shared histories and geographies. The two states have remained deeply linked for centuries through empire and proximity. While Ukrainian identity faced severe oppression and illegitimacy under the empire, a more distinct identity and nation solidified with the advent of Ukrainization and nation-building in the early Soviet Union under Vladimir Lenin. These Ukrainization activities culminated in the eventual independence of Ukraine from the rapidly disintegrating Soviet Union in 1991. Although Ukrainian identity and statehood post-independence strengthened self-determinist claims of sovereignty and a new domestic order distinct from the Soviet Union, this ‘sovereignty’ has remained vulnerable to the Russian government, elites, and the Russian population. The Ukrainian state and nation remain subject to Russian ideals of command-obedience power and the state’s tenet of violence as an axiom of statehood. Ukraine, apart from some eastern areas, remains an outlier from the possessive power of the state and rejects the dominance of the ‘superior’ Russian state and identity.

The modern-day relationship between Ukraine and Russia and the accompanying conflicts in the twenty-first century convey the complex origins of identity and state formation. This thesis seeks to explain the war since 2022 through the lens of identity and history, and how these frameworks influence Russia’s ‘Great Power’ narrative and its ontological insecurity. While focusing primarily on the aggressor’s actions and rationale against Ukraine, this paper will underscore the problems inherent in the two states’ identities and overlapping communities. Issues of Russian identity and insecurity require the state’s domination and subjugation of Eurasia. Through war-making and international intervention, Russia attempts to assert itself as a
dominant world superpower like China or the United States. The Ukraine represents a danger to Russian supremacy and the propagated ‘triune identity’ that has characterized the two for centuries. Russia seeks to eliminate the danger to its identity and state security through the imperial conquest in addition to the rejection of Ukrainian sovereignty and identity.

**Literature Review**

**Introduction**

In the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century, nationalism and irredentism manifested in forms of revolutions, secessionist movements, and processes of identity reification. Nationalism arguably manifested in its strongest form through the French Revolution, as the idea of the state was formed and solidified alongside the definition of who was a citizen of that state. While articulated strongly in the revolutions of France and the burgeoning United States in the late seventeenth century, irredentism did not appear until there were more concrete perceptions of ethnic communities and the nation-state. Identity, due to its complexity and multifaceted foundation, finds a multitude of explanations across different disciplines to explain its formation.

This narrative literature review highlights relevant prior scholarship in international relations regarding the self/other distinction, identity, irredentism, imperialism, and hierarchy of identity. Each respective section highlights an aspect of the complex nature of identity in the discipline and the multi-faceted nationalism utilized by Russian elites. The constructed nature of modern state identities and communities has led to ample research, but there remains a gap in the literature in the case of Ukraine and Russia. Building upon the literature within international relations and other disciplines, this paper hopes to bridge that gap and shine a light on the imperialist irredentist claims against Ukraine in pursuit of a better position in the global hierarchy.

**Self/Other**
Identity construction relies upon the fundamental distinction between the self and the other. Three scholars highlighting the use of the self/other distinction within the discipline are Iver B. Neumann, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, and Anthony Marx. The three scholars approach the binary of self/other in international relations through different methodologies, yet all illustrate the social nature of the self and its creation. Neumann aims to convey the wide breadth of research in other disciplines that international scholars can utilize. Adler-Nissen’s work, in turn, expounds on the social creation of the self through symbolic interactionism. Marx builds on Neumann’s work to convey the use of institutions and states in creating the exclusionary ‘other.’

The self defines itself immediately against the existence of an external other. The self/other distinction is “not a consequence of integration [in a globalized world], but one of its necessary a priori ingredients.” The requirement of an external other to create the self is inextricable from identity creation. But while relational state ontologies seem obvious, Neumann notes that international relations lacks a clear foundation to articulate how exclusion takes place in an increasingly integrated world. The implications of self/other creation and maintenance should not be taken as givens but as deliberate creations of relations between two human collectives that “resides in the nexus between the collective self and its others.” Within the discipline, it is understood that “identities in the modern nation-state system rest on the construction of clear and unambiguous inside/outside and self/other distinctions.” There cannot be an articulated self without a definable other, yet international relations seems to have largely taken this binary as an intrinsic part of the international world system.

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5 Iver B. Neumann, “Self and Other in International Relations,” 168.
While identity creation within international relations lacks depth, the exclusionary nature of states’ self/other distinctions is clear in both civic and ethnic nationalism. For Marx, the nationalistic self - juxtaposed against an ‘other’ - is structural and “constructed exclusively, not according to fixed categories but instead demarcated by emergent states seeking to manage diversity by manipulating and reinforcing difference.”\textsuperscript{8} The origins of the self constantly change in response to external stimuli that necessitate an ‘othering’ response. The manifestations and salience of exclusion have varied according to the context of who is excluded and why they are excluded.\textsuperscript{9} Community identity and differences are deliberately preserved to maintain the homogeneity of the self. While the basis of the common identity changes in response to states’ desires or goals, there must always be a delineated other whether this collective be internal or external.

Despite the homogeneity the state requires to create a collective self, there may be (un)authorized further subdivisions of self. While Marx focuses on institutions and their articulations, it remains that the institutionalized nature of nationalism neglects the broad requirements of contingency and incompleteness of the self.\textsuperscript{10} The intersections of identity make it difficult to create just one ‘self’. This is more common in multiethnic states that base their idea of the nation on an ethnic definition. While racialized ideas of self/other have enjoyed interrogation in international relations, there remains a deep need for more literature on the organization of like-groups.

\textbf{Identity}

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid, 119.
Identity, despite the rich literature depicting its strength as a myth of primordial belonging and ability to articulate imagined communities, is loosely articulated in international relations scholarship. Nationalism and its impact on international politics are well articulated, but the concept at its center remains undertheorized. As Anthony Burke highlights: “There is no identity without difference, and no world politics without identity, no people, no states, no international system.”

The importance of identity is highlighted by scholars like Andrew Burke, Ted Hopf, and David Campbell to illustrate the centrality of identity in international relations. Despite the emphasis, international relations scholars typically omit identity as a central aspect of communities and the state, according to Felix Berenskoetter. Due to the fluid nature of the concept, identity is deeply contextual and rooted within contingencies of shared or opposed geographies and histories. Identity, as a result, is mainly articulated within international relations as nationalist manifestations.

Identity can only be understood using scholarship from other disciplines like sociologist historian Anthony Smith. Rather than focusing on the self/other distinction or the creation of identity, scholars like Smith take these concepts as a priori rather than something continually recreated and necessary to reinforce. Smith, instead of elaborating on the importance of geography to nationalism, portrays such ideas as almost fixed. Perceived through the lens of nationalism, the concept is portrayed as inseparable from ‘sacred territory’ that ties the past and future of a group together. Articulations such as Smith’s convey identity as something that can

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only be understood through collective articulations of nationalism or through narratives propagated through elites.

While power is certainly a factor in identity and a subsequent consequence as well, as Andrew Burke points out, it is also socially constructed. Identity and how actors use it varies greatly across different temporal and spatial considerations. Identity is never fixed as entities but in permanent need of reproduction. For David Campbell, the ontological basis of identity is “always in a process of becoming.” Identity, as a result, lacks fixed tools to investigate within international relations. Instead, identity allows for a reorganization of perceiving international politics. As Bruce Cronin highlights, identity can instead provide “a frame of reference from which political leaders can initiate, maintain, and structure their relationships with other states…the way in which one defines self and other can influence the nature of the relationship.” Identity, through the framework of the nation-state, is fairly recent and has largely been stifled in the past century due to the dominant ideas of sovereignty and the nation-state.

Yet it should be highlighted that identity manifests at the site of the body. While identity is primarily concerned with macro-level structures, identity manifests at the micro-level or at the individual. As identities are not primordial but instead socially constructed, the individual is the

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16 Ibid, 353.
basis on which conflicting loyalties battle for domination. While states or communities impose narratives or group cohesion, their successes rely on individual subjectivity. This is particularly illuminative in the case of Russia and Ukraine in which both states attempt to impose group identities and nationalism on multiethnic societies with shared histories and myths. It is this subjectivity that lends strength to irredentism and mutually enforcing identities.

**Irredentism**

Irredentism, like the idea of the nation and the state, is a modern idea that emerged in nineteenth-century Italy following unification. While irredentism enjoyed broad scholarship in the early to mid-twentieth century, the ideological focus of the Cold War pushed the concept of irredentism to the fringes of international relations and historical literature. Irredentism (derived from the Italian *irredenta* or “unredeemed”), within its original context, was the desire to annex nearby Italian-speaking regions into the newly unified state. In this context, the people were more important than the territory being annexed. Irredentism, beyond its historical context, has become loosely articulated to mean the reclamation of lost ethnic kin, lost historical territory, or both.

The concept has enjoyed limited scholarship despite its reputation as one of the most intractable forms of conflict due to its nature of fusing intrastate and interstate conflict. Irredentism, as scholars like David Siroky and Christopher Hale highlight, “is of significant scholarly and policy interest for the danger it poses to international order and human security.”

Despite its highlighted importance in the context of an increasingly globalized world still

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23 Ibid.
characterized by nations, irredentism has largely been neglected in recent academic literature. This neglect of irredentism in modern literature can be traced to the rather limited definition, but there is a consensus that irredentism revolves around territory dispute(s) with or without ethnic kin in those areas. Yet this consensus neglects the fundamental human aspect of irredentism: the absorption of ethnic kin and/or primordial ideas of territory. The existing literature on the topic of irredentism extends into several disciplines, but this broad nature leads to an incomplete picture when understood by some scholars as simply a “territorial dispute.”

Irredentism requires one state to conquer what it perceives to be a less powerful one. While other scholars seek to differentiate between irredentist conquest and imperialist conquest, the nature of land ‘reclamation’ is inherently imperialist. While legitimate to the Russian people and elites, irredentism requires the “illegitimate annexation of ‘lost’ territory.” Irredentist claims and annexation is not unique to Russia and can be viewed as similar to Nazi Germany’s annexation of Austria. While there are vast differences in the responses of the annexed states, most literature fails to capture the complex underlying issue of identity and its constant fluctuation. Russia, like Nazi Germany in the 1930s, makes a wide identity claim – that may be regarded as valid by the aggressors or the annexed – to increase state power. The idea of creating a unified state, an irredentist goal, “is considered one of the clearest signs of imperial nationalism and imperial mass consciousness.”

Irredentism and imperialism are heavily intertwined in an international system characterized by self-determination and nation-state.

25 Ibid.
Imperialism

The concept of imperialism, due to its broad nature and wide array of disciplines, can best be understood by drawing upon the term and the concept’s history. Imperialism, a practice several centuries older than nationalism and irredentism, can be divided into two different periods and forms in Europe. The first articulation of the ‘old’ European imperialism was tied to the empire and resource conquest. “Old Imperialism” occurred between the late fifteenth and mid-seventeenth century with the Age of Discovery and Conquest. The “New Imperialism,” tied to the nation-state and coalesced with the idea of the nation and greatness, materialized in the mid-nineteenth until the end of the First World War.28 Imperialism, in its modern usage, is highlighted by the movement from ‘empire’ to ‘imperialist’ in the later part of the twentieth century.29 Imperialism has largely come to be defined as “‘the practice, theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory.’”20 While old imperialism had a more succinct tie to the expansion of the (usually) multiethnic empire, new imperialism – particularly with the scramble for Africa – had a greater tie to the progress, power, and strength of the state.

“New Imperialism” was largely influenced by racialized ideas of hierarchy and white supremacy, and these ideas of hierarchical identities and subjugation remained central to the idea of European conquest. Imperialism, as scholars Jordheim and Neumann note, is better conceived as a ‘cluster of concepts’ that allows it to manifest in a variety of different ways.31 While neglected by current scholars of international relations and ethnic conflict, irredentism remains a

serious challenge to global stability as well as the sanctity of international laws and borders. Irredentism, in its requirement to annex historical territory or absorb ethnic kin from another state, is intrinsically imperialist. In contemporary international relations, irredentist imperialism requires a binary of dominating power and a subjugated other. The rejection of one state’s sovereignty to ‘correct’ borders implies a self-identification as more powerful and, therefore, superior. “New Imperialism,” as a result, can be understood as an extension of the state and its routine actions to reinforce itself and its identity in the world system.

**Hierarchy of Identity**

Since 1991, when Ukraine entered the Commonwealth of Independent States alongside Russia and Belarus, the state has been continuously subject to Russian-imposed hierarchy. Hierarchies can be understood to be structured as either broad (vertical organization of states’ relations as super- or subordinate) or narrow (legitimate orders defined by some material, functional, and or/social interest). These structures, according to scholar Ayse Zarakol, are not only ubiquitous inter- and intra-state but also “generate social, moral and behavioral dynamics.” For Russia and Ukraine, the hierarchy of the triune identity situates Russians on top and mixes other actors, Ukrainians and Belarusians, within a single structure of differentiation juxtaposed against the West. The triune structure, a discursive system, presupposes Russia as superior and the ‘righteous’ entitlement to dominate. The triune identity ties in closely to issues of Russia’s loss of its deserved great power status and the need to rectify and reify its hierarchy regionally and internationally.

**Conclusion**

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Despite the knowledge of the fractured, all-encompassing Russian identity and centrality of subjugated Ukraine to the ‘triune’ Russian identity, there has been little written on irredentist ideology and the imperialist tendencies central to Russian nationalism articulated in state-building since the nineteenth century. The existing literature on the topic of irredentism extends into several disciplines, but this broad nature leads to an incomplete picture when understood by some scholars as simply a “territorial dispute.” The work available on Russia and Ukraine primarily focuses on the imperialist and chauvinistic aspects of reclaiming ‘lost’ territory and ignores the necessity of the ‘triune’ Russian identity and irredentism to the Russian Federation’s articulation as a regional and world hegemon.

**Theory Section:**

Constructivist international relations theory can help answer questions that revolve around the Russian identity and the maintenance of its ontological security in a globalized world. Constructivism “describes the dynamic, contingent, and culturally based condition of the social world.” Constructivism allows international relations theorists to understand the world as embedded within socially understood ideas of the nation, the world system, and perceptions of relations among states. The theory, unlike realism or liberalism, is not based on predetermined principles of democracy or anarchy but instead contingent on the epistemology of what set of relations or nations are in question. As Ted Hopf argues, constructivism’s “meaningful behavior, or action, is possible only within an intersubjective context. Actors develop their relations with, and understandings of, others through the media of norms and practices.”

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and Great Power Narrative are two intersubjective ways of perceiving international relations and policies at the domestic and international levels.

**Ontological Security**

The intersubjective context of constructivist theories allows for a narrower investigation into the reasoning and contingencies taken by states and their actors. Unlike realist theories that depend on material power and a fixed anarchical system, constructivist theories utilize qualities intrinsic to the state’s existence. Identity, for instance, informs the present through thinking of the past and generating a sense of consistency rather than blind articulations of power. Ontological security in international relations is heavily interlaced with the perception of identity that is extrapolated from the individual level to the state. “Ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency.”37 As Brent Steele highlights, the concept of ‘ontological security’ requires a sense of continuity and order in events to understand the process that produces states’ domestic and international decisions.38 Ontological security, through making consistent decisions or routines that adhere to a certain perception of one’s self or place in the world, reinforces identity.39 Beyond identity reinforcement, actions are taken to protect the identity and the existence of the state from external and internal threats. These actions may help to constitute recognition of a certain identity or status for states either internally or in the world system.40

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39 Ibid, 520.
States’ interests and identities are ‘co-constituted’ and mutually reinforce one another. Ontological security requires a sense of security in one’s identity, which, in turn, requires the concept of narrative.\textsuperscript{41} It is through the use of narrative that states can belie a foundation for their actions as part of an overarching goal and strengthening of identity and the national story. Narrative plays a key part in the formation of ontological security “by meaningfully situating individuals in a community, and, by extension, the world by defining the spatio-temporal parameters from and towards which they can act as a community.”\textsuperscript{42} Ontological security, through the lens of narrative and political community, allows theorists to evaluate what constitutes a “threat to being-in-the world.”\textsuperscript{43} This can be underwritten by domestic needs as well as international status seeking.\textsuperscript{44}

Ontological security, while uniquely individual to each actor, also requires the existence of other actors and relationships.\textsuperscript{45} The being of a state requires an ‘other’ in which to define one’s self externally but also internally. For instance, “states seek to maintain consistent self-concepts, and the self is constituted and maintained through routines that affect other states. Structures must consistently provide answers that states have about themselves and others.”\textsuperscript{46} The routine action serves to either reinforce or destabilize one’s identity or narratives through the response of others. While seemingly at odds with state security, the need for war can be part of

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\item Ibid, 280.
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the ‘routine’ for determining state identities and can be seen in the last century with the
imperialist notions central to fascism.47

States that require war-making to maintain their ontological security are among the most
unstable state and identity. As Mitzen points out, “states might actually come to prefer their
ongoing, certain conflict to the unsettling condition of deep uncertainty as to the other’s and
one’s own identity.”48 This is particularly true in states lacking cohesive ‘oneness’ and are
constantly dealing with internal dissent or dissatisfaction. To maintain a cohesive identity and
state, the externalization of an enemy or problem to go to war against may generate security. For
these states, breaking free from war or other negative routine actions may generate ontological
insecurity and, therefore, place the state and identity at risk.49

**Grand Power Narrative and Legitimation**

States, like in the case of identity creation, utilize events or series of events in the past in
addition to stories of people to generate an identity of the present.50 Identity, constructed through
the creation of accepted collective memory of the past, has influenced modern domestic and
international policies. States *know* their identities through reconstruction of the past that
generates “deeply held and shared narratives about the state’s identity, cultural framework,
beliefs, and purpose.”51 The consensus of the collective allows for states to generate their identity
and form a narrative that is fundamental for generating legitimacy of the state, identity, and
action. Without legitimacy grounded through the collective recognition of the state or identity,

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49 Ibid, 343.
the state’s power to engage in actions or create narratives is weakened. Legitimacy is tied up with viability in addition to mutual expectations at the national level.\textsuperscript{52}

As political scientists Carolijn van Noort and Thomas Colley convey, “narratives are a mode of discourse that concerns how events play out over time.” It is through the manipulation by states and the pursuit of certain interests that strategic narratives are created to justify identity, status, and also policy. Strategic narratives, such as the Grand Power Narrative, are a “means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.”\textsuperscript{53} Actors are “heavily constrained by dominant discourses” in what they can say and generate action.\textsuperscript{54} Narratives are selectively activated by actors in order to overcome certain challenges like threatened ontological security.\textsuperscript{55} The strength of the narrative typically decides political outcomes at both state and international levels. Strategic narratives can be utilized to affect world politics by convincing or attempting to influence others to “adopt a certain understanding of reality.”\textsuperscript{56} Although strategic narratives work to shape the behavior and generate legitimacy, this theoretical framework also allows for the questioning and characterization of ‘the other.’\textsuperscript{57} These strategic narratives can include negative (mis)information in order to harm the ‘other’ or further the international status of the actor state.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
Narratives within ontological security can be understood as tools of soft power within international relations theory. Strategic narratives “directly addresses the formation, projection and diffusion, and reception of ideas in the international system.” Narratives are meant to sway target audiences as well as allow actors to interpret responses to such narratives. While a soft power tool, strategic narratives can bridge the gap between soft power (verbal communication) and hard power (actions intended to send a message). Further, narratives can be utilized for “gaining political legitimacy as well as for discursively bolstering authoritarian practices.” The intertwining of narratives and ontological security is central to the idea of “great power narratives.” Actions that are taken solely by the domestic belief that a state is a great power may be at odds with the international expectation of what ‘kinds’ of behaviors are expected from a state. Some states, such as China or Russia, perceive their actions through the lens of (self-perceived) great power as absolute and, therefore, think themselves permitted to violate formal rules.

Great power narratives revolve around the perception of a state domestically by its population and its need to be perceived as great or powerful by others in the international system. This type of strategic narrative requires status and recognition. To achieve this desired identification, states will challenge the rules of the international system and pursue revisionist

60 Ibid, 74.
61 Ibid, 74-75.
62 Ibid, 75.
agendas to achieve this.\textsuperscript{67} Those not regarded externally as a great power will engage in actions to ‘correct’ the world system and pursue ontological security. These narratives are strategically crafted with the “aim of directly appealing to people’s emotions and thus seek to nurture political legitimacy by means of collective meaning-making and evoking feelings of belonging or pride…[they] are interwoven with nationalistic references, nostalgic ones to times of past blossoming…”\textsuperscript{68} While accepted as valid domestically, such states may be trapped in ‘historical narratives.’\textsuperscript{69}

**Theory for Russia and Ukraine**

In the case of Russia and the conflict with Ukraine, constructivist theories allow the identities and history of the two states to inform the current conflict. Instead of focusing on the material power of army capabilities or nuclear weapons, the use of identity and conflicting historiography weaponized by both states generate a valuable lens to inform why Russia engages in seemingly irrational actions like war-making and infringing other’s sovereignty. The ontological security theory utilized in this paper grounds both the 2014 Crimea annexation and 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine in the need to secure Russian hegemony and dominance in the Eurasian region. Ontological security allows the ideas of Russocentrism and Russian supremacy to inform the choice to go to war and maintain the conflict despite heavy losses. The loss of Ukraine to the Russian sphere of influence would erode the unifying quality of the triune identity utilized domestically and against Belarus, but it would also cripple any future attempts at rectifying the loss of great power status internationally. For the state’s institutions and actors, the


country can only exist if it maintains the continued greatness of imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. Without this legitimating quality, the Russian state cannot exist and cannot maintain its hegemony over its surrounding states.

**Research Design:**

The thesis seeks to find a qualitative answer to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the Russia-Ukraine war that has been ongoing since February 2022. To understand the interpretation of the international system and the ongoing threats to Russia’s ontological security, I will be evaluating the state’s elite actors, such as Vladimir Putin and Sergei Shoigu, the main political party Russia United, as well as major state institutions and the Russian Orthodox Church. I will be examining the actions, policies, and rhetoric of these actors to understand which actors create these narratives, how they are implemented, and how they ground them in history and identity. I will be looking at government speeches, Duma discourses, institutions’ history and intentions, education, as well as Russia’s actions in the United Nations. I will also be examining the reactions and legitimation of the Russian public at large through social media and outside polling.

Beyond explicit discourse and policy, I will examine Russian ideas of subjugation, dominance, and Western corruption/influence in Eurasia, as well as revisionist ideas of history and geography. By connecting these major themes to contemporary Russian actions and Soviet history, this paper seeks to emphasize the imperialistic irredentism central to Russian ideas of great power and hegemony. To avoid essentialist ideas of authoritarianism, Soviet and Russian history will be utilized to convey the undercurrent of domestic apathy and nationalism in addition to authoritarian leanings.

**Analysis:**
While identity lies at the heart of the conflict domestically and internationally, as can be viewed through Putin and other elites’ rhetoric of ‘one people’, it also obscures the Russian need for imperialism as part of its identity. While Russia ties its people and nation back to the Kyivan Rus like Ukraine and Belarus, it differs by also identifying itself formally and informally as an empire. The Russian Empire was proclaimed in 1721, and it is imperial land grabs of the tsarist era that inform the conflicts prevalent today. The Kyivan Rus, for instance, never claimed sections of Ukraine that Russia is currently fighting in (Donbas, Luhansk, etc.) or in the entirety of Georgia.\textsuperscript{70} Despite the contradictions and revisionist history at work, the concept of the ‘triune’ and hierarchy of identities remains critical to the Russian imperialist case of conquest and today’s international relations.

For Russia and ordinary Russians, the default status of the country in modern history has always been that of a great power empire. This view, held by Russian actors and the state, has not consistently coincided with the international perception. The Russian empire, under the tsarist and Soviet rule, has depended on reification by the West of its great power status. Russia was recognized regionally as a great power at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 after years of being at the fringes of European society.\textsuperscript{71} But this identification was soon undermined by the inability to change internally in liberalizing international system in what is referred to as the ‘long nineteenth-century.’\textsuperscript{72} Shortly before the end of the First World War, the newly implemented Soviet government had ceded a part of its empire to a liberalizing Germany in the Treaty of Brest Litovsk to withdraw.\textsuperscript{73} From 1918 until the end of the Second World War, the newly formed


ideology-driven Soviet Union was marginalized and anything but a great power. The Soviet Union sought international legitimacy and reestablishment as a great power. The rejection by then-great powers in Europe ultimately led to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Nazi Germany in 1939. By entering a pact with Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union was able to reestablish its influence on the European stage in some capacity.

The nullification of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the eventual siding with the Allied Powers (United States and the United Kingdom) allowed the Soviet Union to not only increase its material power but also establish a routine of war-making to reify its status as a great power. This routine was only furthered by the Cold War that followed the Second World War. The then-great powers that the early Soviet Union sought legitimacy and status from receded from the world stage as they declined in power. It was only after the Soviet Union-assisted victory of the Allies that the international system developed into a bipolar system with the new great powers United States and the Soviet Union at odds. The Soviet Union’s great power status during the Cold War was bound up with a decades-long struggle with capitalist powers and particularly with the United States. The routine of war-making was established in the decades following the Second World War as the Soviet Union, and thus Russianness, could only be coherent through a prolonged crisis with an ‘other.’ In modern Russia, the breakdown in ideological differences has led to the ‘otherization’ of non-Russians in the context of war-making and/or discrimination.

The years leading up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union were beleaguered with problems unbecoming of a great power. Internationally, the Soviet Union – and therefore Russia – was seen as a great power in retreat. Not only was the state receding from the world stage as

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74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
troops retreated from proxy wars like that in Afghanistan, but the Soviet Union also faced consecutive secession movements. Boris Yeltsin, the instigator of the Belovezha Accords that allowed for the secession of Ukraine and Belarus, still believed that Russia was a great power despite these losses. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian government officials would still proclaim the country as a ‘great power’. For Yeltsin and other elites, the newly created Commonwealth of Independent States would maintain the same degree of hierarchy and power.

The loss of territory and great power status was and remains irreconcilable to the fundamental identity of Russia and its people. The Russian state and its people can only exist as a great power. Derzhavnichestvo, or the idea that Russia is a great power or is nothing, is central to Russian policy and existence. The word, also articulated as derzhava (great power) or derzhavnost (the belief that Russia is always destined to be a great power), conveys a danger to the ontological security of the state. The loss of territory to newly independent sovereign states, in addition to the loss of recognition, generated instability in the last years of the Yeltsin presidency and into the early years of the Putin regime. The Russian state and its people can only exist by maintaining ontological security and imperial empire: “The country’s status as one of the great powers is intertwined with the very notion of what constitutes the national identity.”

The term derzhava is even manifested in the post-2000 Russian national anthem: “The first line of

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81 Ibid, 15n.
Russia’s (post-2000) national anthem puts it succinctly: *Rossiya svyashchennaya nasha derzhava* (‘Russia – our sacred Great Power’).\(^8^3\) In this articulation by the state, Russia has always been a great power – and one of divine right to exist.

*Derzhava* literally translates as “great power” but denotes something deeper and more intrinsic to Russia. The Russian root of the word is *derzhat* or “holding, keeping, or possessing.”\(^8^4\) *Derzhava* or *derzhavnost* (great power complex) befit for Russia is not continual over the past 1,000 years as Russian elites would propose, but “born by Russia’s historical record of harsh imperialism and Soviet isolationism.”\(^8^5\) Despite the recent nature of the term (which increased in popularity in the 1990s), the strength of the concept and its impact on routine are insurmountable. This is best conveyed by a former Russian Foreign Minister in 1996: “‘Russia’s foreign policy cannot be the foreign policy of a second-rate state. We must pursue the foreign policy of a great state…. the ‘leader-led’ configuration is not acceptable to us.’”\(^8^6\) This belief and its entrenchment in the ontological security of the state has only intensified under Vladimir Putin.

At the turn of the millennia, after Yeltsin selected Putin as his successor, the latter established what is considered his ‘Millennium Manifesto.’\(^8^7\) In this manifesto, Putin singled out Russian patriotism along with *derzhavnost* and state-centeredness as primordial, traditional Russian values.\(^8^8\) The acceptance of state-centeredness and the importance of *derzhavnost*


\(^8^8\) Ibid.
allowed actors like Putin and other political elites to create a top-down hierarchy that placed Russians at the center. The actions taken domestically and internationally “contain implicit—and sometimes explicit—justifications of hierarchy through claims of Russian superiority in a specific civilizational sphere with a perceived shared history—the near abroad.”

Ideas of dominance and subjugation inform Russian policies at various levels, for Russian ‘great-poweredness’ allows the state to take actions against those who are perceived as inferior.

The view of Russian supremacy is clearly articulated domestically and internationally through discourse and policies. The belief in superiority has continually legitimated and allowed Russia to interfere in Ukraine. Even before Putin, the Friendship Treaty of 1997 between the two countries never actually established an agreed border between the two countries. While Russia agreed that de jure borders existed, the constant postponement of demarcating the border conveyed a lack of regard for Ukrainian statehood and identity. This is only exacerbated by Russian domestic perceptions of Ukraine. Ukrainians were perceived in official state media as “backwards, apathetic, and self-interested” and the state as one of chaos.

It was not only the Putin regime that evoked such feelings, as pro-democracy advocates like Alexei Navalny referred to Ukrainians as kookily as recently as 2014. Khokly is a derogatory slur in Russian to denote the ‘lowly’ Ukrainians in terms of Russian supremacy. This term and the idea of Russian supremacy over near-abroad has been articulated for centuries and has hardened, resulting in violent responses when the hierarchy is threatened. Even under Pro-Kremlin Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine inched closer to the European Union through Euromaidan. Ukraine was “viewed with “envy, anger, dislike, and

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92 Ibid.
hatred” throughout Russia for enjoying a privilege denied to the supposedly ‘superior’ Russia. Following the ousting of Yanukovych and the only delayed Ukrainian-EU agreement, Vladimir Putin sought to reassert the hierarchy with Russia at the top by invading and annexing the Crimean Peninsula.

Since the age of the tsar, imperialism has maintained its importance in the Russian state and among its people. The idea of Russia as a great power necessarily coexists with the acquisition and maintenance of imperial landholdings. “Imperialism is not just a land grab or subversion of another country’s independence: it is an exercise of supremacy.” By attempting to bring Ukraine into its sphere of influence – whether governmentally with the existence of Party of Regions in eastern Ukraine or territorially – Russia has been engaging in imperial actions to subjugate it to the Pan-Russia imperial culture. Not only has Russia manifested power through its objection of Ukrainian sovereignty and annexation, but Russia has also even gone as far as to flood the country with Russian people, goods, and cultural products. The previous articulations of war between Russia and Georgia and between Russia and Chechnya convey the use of war to correct an existing or emerging hierarchy that “does not recognize the superiority of Russianness, the Russian nation, culture, history and language…[and] belonging to the sacred-cum-political community of the Russkii Mir, ruled by Russia and its cultural-linguistic dominance.” Those who oppose this given hierarchy are portrayed as the historic enemy of Russia – or fascist Nazis. Russia takes a rather

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97 Ibid.
paternalistic approach in the case of the near-abroad, especially with Ukraine, as the state and its people view Ukrainians as incapable and, therefore, in need of guidance and protection.\textsuperscript{98}

Russia’s concept of \textit{dershavnost} not only generates legitimacy for imperialism but also establishes responsibility on behalf of Russia. The triune identity, with Russians placed on top, generates a duty on behalf of the Russians to lead the fraternity. Yet \textit{dershavnost} enables Russia to go even further. In taking an implied pan-Slavic viewpoint, President Vladimir Putin has warned “that he reserves the right to use force to defend Russian-speaking citizens.”\textsuperscript{99} In engaging in violence on either the Crimean Peninsula or eastern Ukraine, the necessity of Russian interference evokes a sense of paternalism. Those in Ukraine – whether Russian speakers or Ukrainians – are incapable of acting on their own behalf. Therefore, Russia must act for them. As scholar Oksana Dudko aptly argues, the Russian paternalist view of Ukraine “empowers Russians to save Ukrainians by killing them without evoking any feeling of contradiction.”\textsuperscript{100} For Russia, the ‘otherness’ must be eliminated to save Ukraine and reclaim Russia’s lost territory and/or kin.

The loss of the Soviet Union was regarded by the likes of Yeltsin and Putin as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century.”\textsuperscript{101} For Putin, however, the Russian president goes further by linking the loss of the Soviet Union with the loss of what he calls “historical Russia.”\textsuperscript{102} Not only was the loss of territory inconceivable, but the loss of 25 million Russian

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people in newly independent countries was “a major humanitarian crisis.”

Definitively felt across Russia by elites and ordinary Russians was the loss of empire. Nearly half of all Russians, according to the Pew Research Center, view it as natural for Russia to have an empire. This potent loss has been at the center of Putin’s ideology and reasoning for actions taken near-abroad and internationally. Russia cannot exist with independent Belarus or Ukraine, and thus must engage in actions such as aggressive expansion, revisionist history, as well as manipulation.

The paternalism found in Russian foreign policy is not limited to reincorporating lost territory and/or kin but has created a domestic mass dependent on government handouts and indifferent to actions taken beyond their immediate being. “The regime has a vested interest in buying the loyalty of its core supporters…the authorities are able to sustain public calm and indifference.” Without any real dissent or vocal opposition, the Russian government and elite are enabled to maintain the conflict in Ukraine. Government paternalism silences the potential opposition into indifference, whilst Russian national identity and imperialism mobilize the patriotic. In the case of Russia, paternalism is so deeply embedded in society that there seems to be a “clear conviction that the state must bear the burden of social obligations – that the state owes its citizens something.”

The apathy of the Russian masses coincides with the collective understanding that Russian citizens cannot change the political system but can benefit from the

103 Ibid.
104 “Many Russians agree that it is natural for them to have an empire.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., March 4, 2014. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/03/04/many-russians-agree-that-it-is-natural-for-them-to-have-an-empire/
results of imperialism. As long as the Russia-Ukraine war does not interfere with the daily lives of most Russians, the apathetic indifference will continue to allow the war’s existence.

The apathetic indifference of Russians is not intrinsic to Russian history or society but, rather, is a deliberate top-down mentality that has roots in the harsh Stalinist eras of randomized terror and executions. The cultural impact of violent repression under Stalin manifested in isolation and the devaluing of the public space. The devaluing of the public space is then exacerbated by the power vertikal, a vertical chain of power of hierarchical authority that is mostly concentrated at the top and divvied out, which disallows for any individual level political action for or against the regime. Further, indifference or patriotism is cultivated by state-level policies such as changing the education curricula to match the regime. The lack of political options beyond those tied to the regime conveys the limited options that breed apathy in Russia. Previous work by scholars has linked a lack of political involvement with apathy, and this is prevalent within Russia as ordinary Russians cannot engage in the political system or evoke any changes.

Actors opposing the imperial empire identity – whether internal or external – of Russia are necessarily repressed and/or othered. While this is primarily identified with the West, especially in the case of the United States, Ukraine’s denial of the triune identity and deposing of the traditional Russian hierarchy has led to othering of opposing Ukrainians as ‘neo-Nazis’ and has been met with violent repression. Violent repression from opposing the Russian will has been

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seen in the wars with Chechnya in the early 2000s, the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, and twice in Ukraine with the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 Russian invasion that continues today. The deliberate move away from Moscow towards the European Union and/or the United States is perceived as a threat to the ontological security of Russia. Putin, alongside other Russians, views the West not only as a threat on the state level but “also on the level of society and the Russian way of life.”\(^{114}\) Therefore, Russia must maintain its sphere of influence to maintain not only its identity but also the existence of over 1,000 years of Russian statehood propagated by the Kremlin.

Russia’s identity as a great power is fundamental to the strength of its ontological security in communication with the ever-infringing Western institutions and values appearing in the state’s sphere of influence. The great-power and imperialistic aspirations of Russia are seen in its treatment of Ukraine with the rejection of EuroMaidan and funding of separatist groups in the east.\(^{115}\) As Ukraine has inched closer to both European Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization memberships, Russia has taken decisive actions to “counterbalance and oppose” the West.\(^{116}\) The loss of Ukraine not only threatens the triune and Russia’s pan-Slavic supremacy, but could also ultimately lead to the retreat of Russia as a great power.\(^{117}\) To squash opposition and destabilization of great power identity against Russia, some scholars argue, has led the state to engage in a war for Ukrainian extinction.\(^{118}\)

War-making, although perceived as irrational, helps legitimate Russian supremacy and its self-proposed identity as a great power. War-making, as Condoleezza Rice argues, “is a way for

\(^{116}\) Ibid.
Russia to become recognized as a great power.”

Through war, Russia not only seeks to remove Western European and American influences from its sphere of influence but also convey the ability and capabilities to engage in prolonged conflict materially and ideologically. By engaging in war, Russia asserts its dominance within its sphere of influence and delegitimizes the existence of post-Soviet states. Through conveying the violability of once supposed inviable state sovereignty, Russia has effectively threatened the foundational basis of the international order.

The rules, according to Russia, of the liberal order do not apply to them. Rather, the state has left the international system to create a different one with more autocratic and imperialist norms. By questioning sovereignty and re-engaging in imperialist practices, Russia has sought to reestablish its place at the top of the hierarchy. Yet the actions of Russia generate dangerous consequences for all.

Russia’s desire to be viewed as a great power and maintain its ontological security can only be understood in the context of other states – especially the United States. While Russian officials were still referring to Russia as a great power after the fall of the Soviet Union, various international powers no longer viewed Russia as an equal. After the fall of the Soviet Union, then diplomat William J. Burns described the relationship as one of turmoil. “American power and diplomacy were at their peak then [the 1990s]. Russian hopes jostled with uncertainty and lingering humiliation.”

These feelings of uncertainty and humiliation were worsened with increasing resentment against the United States as later President Bill Clinton’s continued NATO encroachment toward Moscow in 1996. The later NATO bombing of ally Serbia over

121 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
humanitarian concerns (genocide) in Kosovo was viewed as a humiliation – and representative of the West’s ideational supremacy that must be eliminated. The bombing was viewed as a serious affront to not only Serbia but Russia and its sphere of influence in the Balkans. “Russia perceived NATO’s actions as a deliberate humiliation and a denial of Russian status in the region and beyond.” The United States and NATO’s action to bypass Russia and interfere in its sphere of influence conveyed a lack of equality unthought of amid the Cold War decades before. For Russia, this humiliation acted as a negation of their great power status.

After the Cold War, the United States became the sole hegemon in the international system. While there are arguments to be made as to whether the United States remains the sole hegemon in 2024 in the context of rising power China, the United States largely informed world politics for the past thirty years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As the sole hegemon, the United States enjoys leadership in international institutions and establishes the highest importance on issues that directly concern them. The United States, however, also acts as a ‘sheriff’ against states it views as non-aligning with American ideals. As a result, the United States’ actions to police the international system, in the context of the ‘disruptor’ Russia, are viewed as challenges to the great power status that Russia maintains that it still has. While Russia views itself as acting within rights as a great power and in its sphere of influence, the United States has been vocal in their backsliding view of Russia. The Bush administration, despite the efforts of Russian elites, the United States viewed the Russian Federation as a declining power. In the next decade, President Barack Obama downgrades the American

125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
perception of Russia as a “regional power.” After the annexation of Crimea, President Obama made it clear that the United States did not view Russia as an equal but as a weak power.

The lack of recognition is not only ascribed to the hegemonic United States but also applies to the European Union (EU). Moscow has concerns regarding the United States’ corrupting influence on the EU and blames escalation on the West. But the EU also presents a problem for Russia as their policies illustrate a lack of great status given to Russia. It is the infringement of the EU into the Russian sphere of influence (post-Soviet states) that destabilizes Russian ontological security and great power status. The inclusion of post-Soviet states in interstate institutions like the EU represents a danger to the future existence of the nation and undermines the country’s regional dominance in the region. Russia’s status as a dominant power is not questioned among its neighbors and remains dominant in various interstate institutions such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

As Vladimir Putin illustrated in his speech at the 2007 Munich Conference, Russia and its elites do not see the world as a unipolar system. The post-Cold War system – led by the American liberal order – was viewed as “no interest or value to Russia.” Rather, it imposed a will on the state that led to actions that are considered aggressive, dangerous, and disagreeable. Following this conference, Putin dismantled structures designed to keep peace in post-Cold War Europe. Russia formally announced in July 2007 that it would no longer adhere to the Conventional Armed Forces

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in Europe treaty. It continued to reject the principle of host-nation consent for its troop presence in Georgia and Moldova, and began ignoring Vienna Convention limits on troop concentrations, exercises, and transparency.\(^{134}\)

For Putin and other Russians, these actions were meant to rightfully assert the place of Russia at the top of the hierarchy. The rhetoric used by Putin and the resultant policies implemented demonstrated that Russia did not follow but established its own international path rather than follow another. By breaking the mold of increasingly universalized American ideals, Russia sought to assert its equal status on the world stage once more. The rhetoric and actions taken by Russia were viewed as correcting the balance of power and reestablishing Russian greatness. The actions taken in retaliation are thus perceived as threats to Russian power but also its existence as an empire – one that Russian elites and ordinary citizens claim has been ongoing for thousands of years and rightfully so.

Vladimir Putin and other elites view states in its sphere of influence, or “near abroad,” not as sovereign states but as “instruments in the hands of great powers.”\(^{135}\) It is clear to Russia, like others in the international system, that the United States is a great power. This has, in turn, informed his view that Ukraine is under “complete external control” by elites in Washington, Berlin, and Paris.\(^{136}\) Therefore, the Russian Federation must act in defense to ensure its own security and reiterate its position as a great power. Putin believes the world consists of large, great powers and smaller states acting as proxies or “colonies.” As Ukraine moves away from the Russian sphere of influence politically, it promotes the view that if “Russia cannot control Ukraine, then the West will.” As a result, Putin has acted *defensively* rather than aggressively. By

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\(^{134}\) Ibid.

\(^{135}\) Ken Moskowitz. “Did NATO Expansion Really Cause Putin’s Invasion.” American Foreign Service Association, n.d.

limiting the influence and outreach of the West by invading Ukraine, Russia is reclaiming its “lost lands” from the imperial influence of the United States and its colonies, big and small.\textsuperscript{137} Not only is Russia attempting to reassert its stolen status, but it also sees itself as removing the “anti-Russia project” of Ukraine that the West has been pushing to destroy Russia and turn it into a colony of the United States. Putin, viewing Western imperialism as inching towards the Russian great power, claims that Russia “will never allow our historical territories and people close to us living there to be used against Russia.”\textsuperscript{138} As the historical leader of the Slavic world, Russia will therefore act defensively to eliminate Western influence and imperialism that aims to ultimately subjugate Russia.

Although Russia and its elites seek to reinforce and maintain the Federation’s stolen Great Power status that has been overlooked in the accepted American-led liberal order, the conflict in Ukraine remains one of identity. Not only is the Russian identity as a great power at risk of becoming subjugated to the West, but it also represents a break in the narrative propagated by Putin and other elites that Russia is an empire with its sphere of influence in the Slavic world and Balkans that has existed for over a thousand years. This is a central reason why Russia continuously draws parallels between its invasion of Ukraine and that of Serbia and Kosovo. Not only did the United States and NATO intervene in a sovereign state – Serbia – by bombing, but the liberal order also sought to lift their own liberal objectives over that of identity and history central to identity.

\textbf{Power in Russia:}

Hannah Arendt published \textit{Origins of Totalitarianism} in 1951, shortly after the Second World War, in the context of Stalinist Russia and a divided Germany. Although it has been over

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\textsuperscript{137} Andrew Fink. “How to Read Putin’s Latest Comments on ‘Sovereignty.’” The Dispatch, June 14, 2022.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
seventy years since her book was published, the ideas throughout the book remain a problem in modern international relations and the domestic policies of several states. While the country attempted democracy after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the election of Boris Yeltsin, the country has been characterized as one of “recurring totalitarianism.”

While the *Origins of Totalitarianism* provides us with the foundations of totalitarianism, Arendt’s other works – including *Crises of the Republic* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil* – are also useful in articulating the totalitarianism and indifference of the Russian Federation.

Arendt splits the *Origins of Totalitarianism* into three parts: Antisemitism, Imperialism, and Totalitarianism. Antisemitism was fundamental in the creation of National Socialism in Nazi Germany, but the Soviet Union and later the Russian Federation differed in their formation of totalitarianism. In the case of the modern Russian Federation, the beginnings of totalitarianism began to harden with the re-emergence of imperialism. Russia under Vladimir Putin can be characterized as an imperial state driven by irredentist claims towards Ukraine (and, to a lesser extent, Belarus). The desire to expand, even historically articulated by movements like nineteenth-century Pan-Slavism, demonstrated the triviality of the individual and focus on the economy. Imperialism, in its constant conquest to expand, treated the individual as an indistinguishable part of the masses. The community, further, is viewed as insignificant fluid capital waiting to be utilized.

It is the disintegration of the individual and community into the rootless and lonely masses that leads to another aspect of Arendt’s articulation of imperialism. The masses are

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defined by sheer number, or indifference, or a combination of both. The ‘blob’ “cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest…they exist in every country and form the majority of those large numbers of neutral, politically indifferent people.” The lack of recognition for others deployed in imperialist conquest is articulated inwards to generate the masses. Within the masses, existence is reduced to “being just a number and functioning only as a cog.” These apathetic and indifferent masses, characterized by their isolation and misery, allow for totalitarian regimes to exist. The atomistic misery that characterized pre-totalitarian society led to the downfall of institutions and fury capable of being articulated by leaders of the violent ‘mob.’

This decline in the importance and viability of the individual and community, in addition to atomistic misery and isolation, led to the second articulation of imperialism: racism. While Arendt’s articulation of racism falls short, she does highlight the ‘race thinking’ central to civilizational hierarchies. In imperial conquest, as Arendt points out, there must be a sense of superiority promoted by the ‘conquerors’ to justify their rule over others. Although Ukrainians and Russians are viewed as racially similar internationally and domestically, the civilizational hierarchies articulated by Arendt are still prevalent. Ukrainians, within the triune identity, are viewed as in need of guidance by the chauvinistic Russian government and society. Ukraine, in straddling a part of the triune identity in addition to Russia’s contradicting claim of

\[143\] *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 311.
\[144\] *The Origins of Totalitarianism* 311.
\[145\] *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 329.
\[146\] More articulations on Arendt’s failure to properly account for racism in imperialism and prior can be found in *Racism in the Theory Canon: Hannah Arendt and ‘the One Great Crime in Which America Was Never Involved.’* Patricia Owens, *Racism in the Theory Canon: Hannah Arendt and ‘the One Great Crime in Which America Was Never Involved’*, 409.
\[147\] Patricia Owens, *Racism in the Theory Canon: Hannah Arendt and ‘the One Great Crime in Which America Was Never Involved’*, Millennium, 45(3), 2017
\[148\] *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 195
nonexistence, is perceived by Russian elites like Putin as being led astray by “nationalist propaganda.” Although it is not articulated as racism or as severe as the imperial conquest of African nations, the principles that guide racism or hierarchy more broadly can be applied to ethnically similar peoples.

For imperial conquest to succeed, a certain foundation of bureaucracy was required. While explicit imperialism did not appear until the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Russia has continuously attempted to impose its will on Ukraine through various institutions and even the implementation of a pro-Russian Ukrainian president several times. This further engrained the idea of Russian superiority over the perceived ‘confused’ Little Russia. Pro-Russian candidates were seen as the ideal leaders of ‘Little Russia,’ and only these Kremlin-approved leaders could assist Ukraine in avoiding corruption and infighting. Although this worked for Russians within the Russian Federation, the lack of mass support on the western border of Ukraine undermined the attempt to inaugurate the state back into the reemerging totalitarian state. Rather, it seems that Russia attempted to re integrate Ukrainians into tribal nationalism that required their acceptance as inferior and subjected to the central Russian identity and state.

Through the lens of reemerging Russian totalitarianism, imperialist conquest is legitimated by the domestic masses within the federation. The masses are fundamental in imperial conquest, which can only be accomplished through bottom-up regime legitimation. According to Arendt, totalitarian regimes can only exist through continued mass support. While it is difficult to know just how many Russians support Vladimir Putin and his regime, his

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151 The election of 2004 was rigged for Viktor Yanukovych to win. After the 2004 Orange Revolution, Viktor Yushchenko was elected after a revote. Yanukovych later won in 2010.
152 *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 306
over twenty-year rule suggests a degree of mass support and legitimacy among the Russian people. For Arendt, “it is the people’s support that lends power to the institutions of a country…All political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them.” The power that allows Putin and other elites and oligarchs to maintain their hold on power finds its roots in the apathetic legitimacy of the Russian masses.

Ideas of legitimation that Arendt utilizes in her analysis of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel in 1963 are relevant in characterizing the current Russian regime. Arendt, in Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, focuses on the justification given by the Schutzstaffel (SS) officer for his participation in the Holocaust. Eichmann described himself as an “idealist” devoted to his “cause” or idea. For Arendt, Eichmann did not blindly follow orders but submitted to the regime. For Arendt, when an individual obeys, “[they] actually support the organization or the authority or the law that claims ‘obedience.’” While Eichmann actively engaged in the regime, the basis outlined here by Arendt in addition to the general apathetic masses articulated in Origins of Totalitarianism generates a quiet consent of legitimacy of the current regime and its war against Ukraine.

Most Russians, according to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, are “apathetic, and simply passively and automatically ‘mostly supports’ what the regime is doing while waiting for ‘all this’ to end…their condition can be referred to as ‘learned indifference.’ Putin is a legitimate leader…so his ‘special military operation’ must be too.”

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156 Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov, “Alternate Reality: How Russian Society Learned to Stop Worrying About the War,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 28,
Condition, Arendt establishes the public sphere as – ideally – a space of appearance where citizens can partake in political freedom and equality in the context of a shared common world.\textsuperscript{157} The public sphere and political sphere are in tension throughout the world, but in the context of Russia, the public has withdrawn from the public space entirely. Without the natality of creation in the public sphere, the Russian people cannot partake in the human right to action and establish their right to have rights. The political, operated by elites, continuously infringes on the private sphere and generates state-operated action instead.

The destruction of the public sphere as an area for community and creation leads to loneliness and distrust of others. Totalitarianism cannot “exist without destroying the public realm of life, that is, without destroying, by isolating men, their political capacities.”\textsuperscript{158} The ebbing of the public sphere has allowed for the state to grow and fill the gap. The brief breath of fresh air during President Boris Yeltsin following the receding of state power under Mikhail Gorbachev’s \textit{perestroika} and \textit{glasnost} enjoyed little expansion of the public sphere. Those who engaged in the natality of the burgeoning public sphere were those fortunate enough to become oligarchs. Since the advent of the Putin presidency, the state’s expansion has made it the only possible purveyor of change.\textsuperscript{159} Russians, for the most part, view themselves as having no real influence in the current political system.\textsuperscript{160}

\textsuperscript{158} \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism}, 475.
\textsuperscript{160} Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov, “Pragmatic Paternalism: The Russian Public and the Private Sector.”
The acceptance of their current conditions illustrates the totalitarian masses articulated by Arendt in *Origins of Totalitarianism* in addition to the lack of a bottom-up common will.\textsuperscript{161} Rather than articulating the desires of the masses, elites like Putin create the will to advance the state internationally or generate narratives to remain in power.\textsuperscript{162} Although Putin is ‘in power,’ he can be understood to be empowered by the people of Russia to act in their name and owes his legitimacy to their indifference. As long as the state improves the quality of life of its citizens, other objectives are forgotten.\textsuperscript{163}

The general apathy and indifference of the Russian people allow Vladimir Putin and other elites to remain in control of the regime. By engaging in disinterest in the actions of the central government, the people of Russia are largely left alone.\textsuperscript{164} Yet, it is this very acceptance of their current conditions that grounds the regime’s legitimacy and strength. Unlike the concentration camps, Russians enjoy limited agency that could be construed as analogous to that of the post-Stalin years. Repressive measures taken against the regime’s opposition generate propaganda of terror in the forced exiles or isolating imprisonment. This selective punishment of the opposition has illustrated the high individual cost of protesting and opposing the current regime. Rather than the widescale terror of the earlier Stalinist Soviet Union, propaganda of ‘terror’ has instead sought to curb the expression of domestic dissatisfaction.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation had the possibility of becoming a pluralistic democratic republic. However, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, the former authoritarian state became an easy target for widespread corruption and autocrats. In his

\textsuperscript{162} Jürgen Habermas and Thomas McCarthy, 4.
\textsuperscript{163} Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov, “Pragmatic Paternalism: The Russian Public and the Private Sector.”
\textsuperscript{164} https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90327
final year in office, Yeltsin appointed then-unknown Vladimir Putin as his successor. By establishing an enemy in the form of Chechnya, Putin utilized the existing infrastructure to consolidate power around himself and select Kremlin elites and oligarchs. By painting himself as a legitimate ruler and earning the consent of the masses through war-making, Putin was able to gradually reinstate totalitarianism in Russia.

**Conclusion:**

The Russian Federation has made it clear in the last two decades under the Putin regime that actions taken by the United States and the European Union are infringing on Russia’s status as a great power, but also interfering in its sphere of influence. The westernization and movement towards Western institutions like NATO are viewed as deliberate attacks on Russian identity and its Pan-Slavic leadership role. Identity is central to the Russian issue – as can be viewed through the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 – and any indication of straying away from Moscow is met with violent repression. The Russian Federation finds itself acting defensively to maintain its empire of subjugated “colonies” in its “near-abroad” that is defined by elites historically.

The actions taken by Russia and separatist movements promoted in areas like eastern Ukraine and Transnistria in Moldova convey the uses and strength of primordial movements emerging on the world stage. While the West has been focusing on the maintenance of the liberal order and American ideals in institutions, actions have been taken by actors like Russia that imply the reemergence of ethnic conflict and “sacred land” that has not been seen since the Second World War. Understanding Russian actions requires examining actions and policies historically and through the framework of maintaining ontological security. Identity is not only constructed by elites in Moscow, but belies an intense self/othering process that is constantly in
flux. Primordialist identity is not unique to Moscow or its sphere of influence, but the conflict displays the inaptitude of Western liberal states to contend with the strength and malleability of identity on the world stage. Identity disintegrates when thoroughly examined, but the ideas that emerge through the process of identity formation and ‘othering’ are enough to mobilize individuals to go to war for.

The uncertainty surrounding next steps for the international system and the U.S.-led liberal order is exacerbated by the authoritarian nature of Russia. Since Americans are much more vocal and can participate in their political system at all levels, they enjoy more responsive policies and actions at all government levels. For Russians, as conveyed before, lack the same opportunities to participate and make their voice heard. The authoritarian nature undermines practically all western ideas of how Russians will react to seemingly unpopular policies or government actions – yet the regime change that American and other western scholars push for never seems to come. Any successor will largely follow in Putin’s footsteps.¹⁶⁵

If Russia succeeds, and it most likely will succeed in obtaining some territory, it evokes a question of ‘what if.’ in the international system. What does Russian success spell for Taiwan/China, Kosovo/Serbia, Israel/Palestine, and Northern Ireland/Ireland? These questions remain unanswered, but the precedent established by Russia seems to indicate a need for drastically different institutional and state responses. A new diplomatic and military playbook is necessary, and international relations scholarship must break from realist perspectives to describe the insecurities faced by Russia and their defensive actions.
