

Food for Thought Lecture
Russia and Ukraine: Historical Context
Trinity University, November 15, 2022
Dr. Bruce Holl

Modern Languages and Literatures

- As Cole said, my name is Bruce Holl. I am in my 32nd year as a teacher of Russian language, literature and area studies at Trinity University and my 8th as chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures.
- This year marks the 120th anniversary of our department, so I would like to start by telling you a little about it.
- For much of its history our department was the Department of Foreign Languages, which included French, German, and Spanish, as well as Latin and Classical Greek.
- Latin and Greek later became a part of Trinity's excellent Classical Studies Department
- Our department, renamed Modern Languages and Literatures, added Russian in the 1960s and Mandarin Chinese in the 1990s.
- Both of those languages began with a single professor teaching a handful of language courses, and both now offer a major and a minor and a full slate of language and content courses.
- Russian and Chinese are now designated as critical languages by the US government, and many of our students have received Critical Language scholarships from the State Department.
- I currently have several former Russian students working in the State Department and serving in all branches of the military.
- As for our Modern Languages and Literatures as a whole, Trinity's Pathways general education curriculum was initiated in the year that I became chair in 2015.
- This curriculum places a strong emphasis on global awareness and international studies.
- As a result, our department in recent years has experienced significant growth and is by far the largest on campus.
- In addition to Chinese, French, German, Russian, and Spanish, we now offer two years of Italian and Japanese and individual courses on Portuguese and Yiddish.
- We have 25 faculty members, and we offer 75-80 sections per semester that typically serve between 850-900 students.

- Now I will get to the subject on my talk, which is Russia's February, 2022 invasion of Ukraine in historical context.
- The working title was "The Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Historical Context," but I did not mean to suggest that Ukraine was in any way culpable.

Putin's view of history

- My point of departure is Vladimir Putin's view, as he puts it, of "the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians." This is the title of an article that he published on the subject in June, 2021. He has expanded his views several times since, including in an address on February 21, 2022, on the eve of the invasion of Ukraine; and in remarks to historians two weeks ago on the occasion of Russia's "National Unity Day."
- I will not, of course, cite Putin's views because I endorse them. The United Nations and virtually all nations of the world recognize Ukraine as a sovereign nation whose borders include all of the territory that was in the country at the time of the dissolution of the USSR in 1992.
- I have two reasons for examining them:
 - First is the concept "Know Your Enemy," which was the rationale for the creation of government-funded Soviet and Russian area studies centers at American universities in the 1940s and '50s. (It is also the name of a recent book on the subject by David C. Engerman)
 - Since the dissolution of the USSR there has been a decline in the number of Slavic studies specialists and Slavic language students in the US, and I must admit that this sometimes seemed evident during the period before the invasion, when US officials were unable to address the specific things that Putin was saying
 - Second, Putin was educated in the USSR and trained in the KGB, in which he achieved a high rank. His remarks on history are in the tradition of Soviet historiography – revisionist history designed to justify current policies
 - We could ignore them, but the fact is that they are the only view of history that many Russians now hear
 - In Soviet times the government would remove books from libraries and even pages from reference works
 - Today the Russian government shuts down organizations like Memorial and media outlets like Novaya gazeta and Ekho Moskvyy that base their views of Russian history on evidence
 - The government's views, meanwhile, are aired to massive television audiences on the national newscast "Vremya," the nightly talk show "Evening with Vladimir Solovyev," the Sunday news magazine "News of the Week" with Dmitii Kisilev, and many other similar shows
- And so I am going to discuss Putin's view of history
- First I will address his motives in citing history as justification for his actions. He says that his sole motive for the invasion of Ukraine is to fulfill his mission of helping Russia to achieve its historical destiny. In a response to this, opponents of the invasion will sometimes write on their pickets "Putin is not Russia." But he has at least two other

motives. The first is to enrich himself, his family, and his friends. Aleksei Navalny, the creator of a WikiLeaks-style Russian website, has documented Putin's acquisition of vast wealth.

- The other motive is to retain power. Elections in Russia are not legitimate, and Putin's power therefore rests on his ability to retain the support of the military and a few wealthy oligarchs who might try to depose him. Throughout his career he has funneled a high percentage of the Russian budget to the military. When he was term-limited and left office for a short period of time his temporary successor, Dmitrii Medvedev, took some tentative steps toward reducing military spending, but he quickly reversed course, presumably because of pressure from the military. All of this means that Putin is in a difficult situation now. He has ramped up spending on the military, but at the cost of at least 8,712 killed, according to an article in Novaya Gazeta. Evropa that appeared last Friday, November 11, and the opprobrium of virtually the entire world

The Historical context of Russia's invasion: Putin's thesis (June 2021 article):

"[...] the wall that has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space, to my mind is our great common misfortune and tragedy. These are, first and foremost, the consequences of our own mistakes made at different periods of time. But these are also the result of deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity."

- He goes on to list, in twelve single-spaced pages, all of the main arguments that he believes substantiate this thesis.
- He focuses mainly on external forces who have led a small number of Ukrainians astray over the centuries and continue to do so to this day.
- The internal enemies that he mentions are by and large accused of collaborating with external forces.
- For each item that I about to discuss, I will mention Putin's theory, the basic problems with it, and in two cases, his glaring omissions.
- At this point I will mention my web site, RussianNotes.com. At one time it contained regular blog posts and student materials, but now, for the most part, it includes links to articles from a variety of online sources.
- For today I have posted a bibliography of sources that I have used in preparation for this talk and for my two classes, "The History of Russia" and "The Peoples of Russia," that deal with tonight's topic.
- I also provide links to President Putin's history article in Russian, Ukrainian., and English, as well as a number of reactions and refutations of the article.

The Eastern Slavs

- Putin asserts that the Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians of today are derived from one Eastern Slavic people that lived in the region from at least the 6th century and were united by a common language and religion. The region was called Rus', and it consisted of several cities, the most important of which was Kiev. He believes that despite subsequent attempts to disunite these people they are still one people. They speak essentially the same language and their proper religion is Eastern Orthodox Christianity.
- In reality many Russians, Ukrainians and Belorussians are descended from common ancestors in Rus' but the region was not monolingual and not all East Slavic tribes were subsumed under the control of Rus'. Moreover, there was a fundamental split beginning in the early 13th century, when the Mongols and Tatars gained control of much of Rus'. The languages diverged several hundred years ago and are quite distinct today. Similarly, Eastern Orthodox Christianity was adopted by the residents Rus' in the late 10th century, but subsequent events resulted in a great diversity of religious confessions. It may be that in some cases this diversification came about because of political reasons, but none the less it did occur and the original prominence of Eastern Orthodox Christianity is not a rationale for making Russia and Ukraine into one country.

Bohdan Khmelnitsky and the Cossacks

- In the 16th century another group emerged: the Cossacks. They are described by Ukrainian historian Serhii Plokhy as "the original Ukrainians." They formed independent communities both in Ukraine and elsewhere. To quote Plokhy, "In 1654, one of their leaders, Bohdan Khmelnytsky, and a hastily gathered group of Cossack officers swore allegiance to the new sovereign of Ukraine, Tsar Aleksei Romanov of Muscovy. The long and complex history of Russo-Ukrainian relations had begun. In 1954, the Soviet Union lavishly celebrated the tricentennial of the 'reunification' of Ukraine and Russia. The implication was that all of Ukraine had chosen at Pereiaslav, where the treaty was signed, to rejoin Russia and accept the sovereignty of the tsar. What actually happened at Pereiaslav in 1654 was neither the reunification of Ukraine with Muscovy (which would be renamed 'Russia' by Peter I) nor the reunion of two 'fraternal peoples,' as suggested by Soviet historians. (Plokhy *Gates of Europe* 124).
- During that celebration of 1954, the leader of the USSR, Nikita Khrushchev, who was from Ukraine, placed Crimea within the territory of the Ukrainian SSR. This has been interpreted in two ways: Putin claims it was illegal, but Ukrainian historians point out that Khrushchev changed the emphasis of economic development from heavy industry to agriculture, which raised the Ukrainian standard of living.

The incorporation of Eastern Ukraine and Crimea

- These are regions, as Putin points out, on the border of Ukraine and Russia historically. The population is very diverse and does include many Eastern Orthodox Russian speakers. These regions share much in common with the southern Russian regions on the other side of the border. They were incorporated into the Russian empire at a relatively late date. However they were in the Ukrainian SSR during Soviet times and remained in Ukraine after the dissolution of the USSR. They are therefore part of Ukraine, notwithstanding the fact that some residents are native Russian speakers and Russian Orthodox Christians.

The Russian revolution and civil war

- Putin considers Lenin and the Bolshevik party at the time of the revolution the chief culprit in the division between Russia and Ukraine. He asserts that Lenin, in order to retain power, ceded territory to other countries and planned “to form a union state as a federation of equal republics. The right for the republics to freely secede from the Union was included in the text of the Declaration on the Creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and, subsequently, in the 1924 USSR Constitution. By doing so, the authors planted in the foundation of our statehood the most dangerous time bomb” that exploded in 1991. Putin acknowledges that this right was fictional, but he believes that dividing the USSR into separate republics fostered nationalism. This is the source of his oft-quoted comment that Ukraine is entirely a creation of the Soviet Union.
- The reality is that Lenin never envisioned “a union state as a federation of equal republics,” nor was such a state implemented by Bolshevik leaders.

The Great Patriotic War

- Putin considers the Great Patriotic War, meaning that portion of the second world war that took place on Soviet or Soviet-controlled territory, as the great unifying event of modern Russian history. It is discussed continuously in the press in Russia, it is the subject of historical research and artistic productions, and it permeates political discourse in the form of constant comparisons. Putin invariably speaks of the united effort of the Russians, Ukrainians, and all other nationalities of the USSR, to defeat the Germans. He is not entirely incorrect.
- The Soviet Union, aided by massive American financial support, played by far the largest role in fighting the Germans on the ground. It suffered some 65% of allied military deaths during the wars (as against 2% by the Americans). However he ignores two salient facts. First, the Ukrainians in the 1930s had suffered tremendously as a result of Stalin’s policies (of which more in a moment). And when the war began, it was fought on Ukrainian territory. Ukrainians were subjugated by the Germans and suffered disproportionate losses. The reason for this is that Stalin failed to heed warnings of Hitler’s attack and at first did not even believe that the attack had occurred.

Post-Soviet Ukraine

- Putin refers to the immediate post-Soviet period, when Boris Yeltsin was president of the Russian Federation, as the “Chaos of the ‘90s.” He now claims that Yeltsin’s elections, heretofore thought to be honest, were actually rigged. He believes that the countries of the former USSR, having renounced the Union treaty of 1922 that formed the USSR, should revert to pre-1922 boundaries. He claims that NATO promised not to expand beyond the border of Germany when it reunited, then reneged on its promise. (There is some evidence to suggest this is true, but the agreement, if any, was verbal.) He believes that Russia was the victim of attempts by western governments, and in particular the United States, to create a monopolar world (as he often says) and reduce Russia to a regional power.
- For this reason he believes that Russia is within its rights to abrogate any agreement or treaty that it signed prior to 2000. This includes the Budapest Memorandum of the mid 1990s, according to which Ukraine would retain all of its current 1992 territories. It also stipulated that Ukraine would give up all nuclear weapons. Russia has since maintained that Memorandum is not valid insofar as Ukraine’s territory is concerned, but is valid with respect to nuclear weapons.
- He believes that Ukraine, whose people by and large wanted to be a part of Russia, were thwarted by leaders in 1992 who did not sign or ratify the agreement to form the Commonwealth of Independent States. He further believes that the events of January, 2014 in Kiev, when there were mass protests and the Ukrainian parliament replaced pro-Russian president Yanukovich, led to the establishment of a neo-fascist government. He and his followers in the press repeatedly refer to them as “bandertovtsy,” meaning adherents to the Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera, who during the Great Patriotic War collaborated with the Germans as he attempted to form a Ukrainian state.
- He has thus justified his invasion of eastern Ukraine and Crimea in March of 2014. One more item bears mentioning: During the period prior to the invasion of February, 2022, he referred constantly to the Minsk agreements, signed under duress by Ukraine in late 2014 and early 2015, which did not address the Crimea but did specify that Luhansk and Donetsk would remain in Ukraine but would receive “special status” to be negotiated later.

Omissions

- There are undoubtedly many omissions in my talk, but two of them remain in the living memory of people today.
- First is the Holodomor. Putin makes one comment in his article:

[After the USSR collapsed] “The common tragedy of collectivization and famine of the early 1930s was portrayed [by Ukraine’s ruling circle] as the genocide of the Ukrainian people.”

- It is true that regions outside of Ukraine experienced famine as a result of Stalin's collectivization of agriculture. I lived for 16 years with a Russian victim of the famine, my mother-in-law, who was from in a small village in Kursk Oblast about 11 miles from the Ukrainian border. None the less, Ukraine, the United States, and many other countries recognize that the famine was a genocide deliberately carried out against the Ukrainian people.
 - Second is Putin's virtual omission of the Jews from his narrative. He makes reference to many individuals in Russian and Ukrainian history who have been accused of carrying out pogroms and mass murder against the Jews, including Bohdan Khmelnytsky in the 17th century, Symon Petliura during the Russian revolution, and Stepan Bandera during the second world war.
 - He mentions the collaboration with the Germans by the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and Ukrainian Partisan Army during the war. He does not mention the alleged crimes of any of these individuals, nor does he mention the Holocaust, one quarter of whose victims lived in the USSR.
 - He makes only one statement, about territories of the Russian Empire and that were ceded to Poland in 1921 and became, in his words, Polonized:

“Later, during World War II, radical groups of Ukrainian nationalists used this as a pretext for terror not only against Polish, but also against Jewish and Russian populations.”
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