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English 1101

29 November 2022

Russia's Third Reich:

History's Role in Russia's Modern Foreign Policy

In the early weeks of 2022, the world watched with dread as the Russian Federation mobilized troops and armaments on its border with Ukraine, signifying an escalation of tension between the two countries. Eight years prior, Vladimir Putin's regime had annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea after claiming it was a part of Russia. But Putin couldn't be so audacious as to invade the entirety of Ukraine, could he? On February 24th, 2022, Putin did the unthinkable when he moved troops into Ukrainian territory, thus beginning the Russo-Ukrainian war. The prospect of a European war in the twenty-first century may have seemed distant, but a close examination of Russia's history of irredentism[1] and expansionism prompts the stark realization that this inconceivable act was an inevitable one in line with Putin's vision of a Greater Russia.

To understand why Russia would implement irredentist policies, one must take a closer look at Russia's expansionist past and how Russians have conquered much of the Asian continent and beyond. The first centralized Russian state was established at the end of the fifteenth century with the end of the Golden Horde, a Mongol regime (Miholjcic, 2019). Under Mongol rule, Russians

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[1] Irredentism is defined as a state's use of military force to advance a claim of ownership over territory in a neighboring state based on co-ethnicity, and to create a greater congruence between the ethnic group and the state (Gellner 37, in Siroky & Hale 2017).

endured the harsh culture of the steppe nomads, who made plundering and enslaving a norm (Miholjcic, 2019). Out of fear of foreign invasion, the newly independent Russians believed their only path to security was through territorial expansion and dominance over neighboring nations (Miholjcic, 2019). Beginning in the sixteenth century, the tsardom's aggressive expansionist policy facilitated the spread of Russian influence. By the latter years of the nineteenth century, the Russian empire encompassed roughly 15 percent of the Earth's landmass and had spread westward to the borders of central Europe, southward to India and Afghanistan, and eastward to the Pacific and beyond, stretching all the way to Alaska. Russia was at the fullest extent of its territorial gains, and this paved the way for an irredentist future. The 20th century, however, would prove to be a time of significant restructuring of Russian territories.

Amid the Russian Revolution, Russia implemented its first irredentist policies, a precursor to the policies that Vladimir Putin has implemented in recent history. In 1917, the revolution boiled in the motherland, and Russia was sidelined from the First World War as the Russian White Army was forced to switch their focus to defending the tsardom, headquartered in Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg). The Russian tsardom fell in February as the Bolsheviks took control of Petrograd amid the revolution, establishing the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. This change of rule didn't completely remove Russia from the Great War, however; after signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the newly formed USSR ceded Finland, Poland, Estonia, Livonia, Kurland, Lithuania, the Ukraine, and Bessarabia to the Central powers (Funk & Wagnall 2020). Now under Bolshevik rule, the Soviet Union was significantly smaller than its parent empire. Shortly after, the Soviet Union employed its first irredentist policies. According to Matsuzato, Terry Martin describes the USSR as an 'affirmative action empire,' as he describes the Bolsheviks' endeavor to reintegrate the former territory of the Russian Empire by their voluntary concessions to non-Russians. Under Vladimir Lenin, the Soviet

Union began reclaiming its lost territories as the Russian revolution raged on. After years of civil war, Lenin's Red Army prevailed, and the Soviets retook most of the land they had ceded in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk through irredentist revolutionary ideas (see Zelikhman). The first of Russia's great empires was founded based on expansionism and imperialism, and in a sense, the Soviet Union was established on irredentist policies aimed at re-establishing their former empire.

With this sizeable portion of reclaimed land, the USSR began to implement governing policies analogous to those that Putin uses to justify his irredentist policies today. Under Soviet control, the reclaimed territories were run under what Matsuzato refers to as ethnoterritorial federalism, or policies by which nationality groups are granted their own administrative territories and subnational governments. Matsuzato writes that the Communist Party monopolized the authority to define nationalities and determine their administrative units. This monopolization meant that the Soviet government had full say in the classification of ethnic groups as well as their governments, often grouping several ethnic groups together and disregarding historic ethnic classifications. Furthermore, the Soviet government didn't trust these ethnic groups to run themselves, so they implemented their version of federalism to prevent potential revolutions, according to Matsuzato. These faux federalist policies made it difficult for ethnic minorities to retain their identities. To this day, the Russian Federation fails to respect the ethnic identities of its former territories.

The 1991 collapse of the USSR posed the question of whether the succeeding Russian government would implement irredentist policies, and initially it seemed as though the answer was no. The USSR's dissolution led to the subsequent formation of fifteen independent states, including the Russian Federation. These states held the same borders as they did under the Soviet Union, though now they were fully autonomous. Russia remained a behemoth despite this massive loss of

territory, dominating Siberia and eastern Europe. Still, 25 million ethnic Russians were no longer

within the new borders of the territory (Miholjcic 2019). Despite this significant population outside

the motherland, the initial years of the Russian Federation saw no irredentist policies under the

leadership of Boris Yeltsin. In fact, Yeltsin showed no desire whatsoever to breach the sovereignty

of Russia's former territories. This is evident in the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation,

and Partnership, a bilateral agreement between the fledgling Ukraine and Russia which ensured the

acknowledgement of each other's borders and the respect of each other's sovereignty. It wasn't

until Vladimir Putin came to power that Russia would go back to its irredentist ways.

Under Vladimir Putin, Russia has employed irredentist policies and international response

has been weak, ultimately failing to deter future irredentist advances. The first of such policies was

aimed at the Transcaucasian territories, specifically South Ossetia in Georgia. Historically, Russia has

controlled Transcaucasia in an effort to suppress the north Caucasian tribes (Rasizade 2009). In

August 2008, Russia and Georgia went to war over Georgia's territory of South Ossetia. Within days,

the two nations called a cease-fire, but South Ossetia remains under Russian military control to this

day. The international reactions to this incursion were meager, indicating to Putin that he could

continue to chip away at the former Russian territories with few repercussions. The next victim of

Putin's irredentism was Crimea, a small peninsula on the Black Sea in the south of Ukraine. Under

the precedent set by the Soviet Union after the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Russian Federation

moved troops into Crimea in 2014 and annexed the territory within months. This move prompted

the US and the EU to impose sanctions on Russia, but these proved ineffective in preventing

another invasion. The limited ramifications that Putin faced after his first irredentist incursions

paved the way for the invasion of Ukraine proper.

Putin's words after his Crimean invasion made it clear that a full-on invasion of Ukraine was coming in due time, especially given the feeble international response this irredentist strike. Shortly after invading Crimea in 2014, Putin said of the 1954 transfer of Crimea from Russia to Ukraine, "The Bolsheviks incorporated considerable parts of Russia's historical south into Soviet Ukraine, without taking account of the ethnic compositions of those regions-" (Socor 2014). In that same speech, he said of the Ukrainian people, "We are not just close neighbors, we are essentially, as I have said more than once, a single people" (Socor 2014). These words attempt to justify Putin's previous irredentist incursions, and they foreshadowed the 2022 Ukraine invasion. In late February 2022, Putin said of Ukraine, "It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space. These are our comrades, those dearest to us – not only colleagues, friends, and people who once served together, but also relatives, people bound by blood, by family ties" (Putin 2022). Just three days after saying this, Russian troops moved into Ukrainian territory.

As the Russo-Ukrainian war drags on, it has become increasingly apparent that Russia's past has strongly influenced Putin's present-day foreign policy. Tsarist Russian expansion manufactured a ticking irredentist time bomb that simply needed the right conditions to explode into policy. The early USSR established the first irredentist policies, which set the precedent for Putin's irredentism. What we see in Russia today is the culmination of a long history of fallen empires.

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