

NATO, Neutralizing the Threat of a Baltic Conflagration

A Historical and Strategic Argument for Why Swedish & Finnish NATO Membership Increases Stability Around the Baltic Sea

By Andreas B. Olsson, Board Member of Center for War/Peace Studies

Finland and Sweden have now submitted their applications for joining NATO. Only half a year ago, key political segments of Sweden were resistant to abandoning a long time policy of freedom of alliance. By all indications the two nations are on the cusp of denying Vladimir Putin an opportunity for a preemptive strike. Such a strike could be swift, so the effort has to be well coordinated between NATO and the applying parties¹. We know in retrospect from Putin's behavior during his ascension to tsardom that he does not hesitate to use war to restore what he sees as being in Russia's interest.

It's imperative that the free world fully support Sweden and Finland in their last journey to a momentous and long overdue shift in their foreign policy of neutrality. An impulse persists in some quarters to use Putin's military bellicosity to continue opposing NATO expansion. To understand why the world is a safer place with Sweden and Finland in the alliance, we have to establish the countries geostrategic importance. We also need to delve into motivations beyond geopolitics for why Putin might be so bold as to engage in a Baltic conquest, the repercussions of which would make the deadly war against Ukraine seem impossibly contained. Finally, we need to show that Russia's military has a viable path for invading and neutralizing Finland and Sweden despite Russia's current setbacks in Ukraine, and that neutrality provides little if any protection.

These questions will force us to take on Vladimir Putin's inchoate historical claims whilst understanding that what will ultimately matter is not our counter narrative but how the tsar sees

¹ Mehta, Aaron. "[NATO Should Begin Planning for Finland and Sweden to Join the Alliance.](#)" *Breaking Defense*, 4 Mar. 2022.

it. Before we address the ideological and strategic aspects, we need to go back in time and set the stage for Putin's possible historical mindset.

We can gain a glimpse of his mindset by studying Putin's historical claims in preparation for his latest war. In July 2021, Putin published an essay titled *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*². The reasoning is incomplete³, includes mythic statements about what happened a long time ago, and ignores critical elements of more recent events. His selectiveness is telling and crucial in understanding his beliefs and what could motivate him to do something that seemed inconceivable just a year ago: Russia attacking Finland and Sweden.

Putin's essay forces us at gunpoint into a history lesson. His essay should not be seen as one off and disingenuous justification for invading Ukraine. His pseudo tractat is part and parcel of Vladimir's airing of grievances about a post-Soviet world. We should believe him. He is dead serious when he makes claims about Kievan Rus and the supposed significance of other historical events. Isolated in his Kremlin fortress, he has come to believe over the years in an increasingly messianic version of Mother Russia.

Putin came of age in a nominally egalitarian but largely ethnocentric Russia that was at the height of its empire. His standards for what Russia should be were formed as a student of the Soviet system, and a lieutenant colonel of the KGB projecting its authority into East Germany. Despite the seeming incongruity between the USSR and the Tsardom, their disposition towards Russian providence is on closer examination strikingly similar. Putin has further fortified and rationalized any actual incongruity through selective historical study.

The rationalizations now demonstratively drive his decision making. He has made egregious errors because he acts on his mythological beliefs. We should not assume he has seen the deeper reasons for his errors. More likely is that he has come to believe that the supposed rot of Western decadence and neo-Nazism is far deeper than he assumed. We have to examine his historical claims and consider how it might affect his future actions and his justifications of their

² “[On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians](#).” *Presidential Executive Office of Russia*, 12 July 2021.

³ “Fact-Checking Putin's Claims That Ukraine and Russia Are 'One People'.” *NewsCenter*, University of Rochester, 5 Mar. 2022, <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/ukraine-history-fact-checking-putin-513812/>

righteousness.. Additionally, we need to respond to his deceptive justifications with evidenced counterclaims so that at the very least we can expose them as nonsense to the world beyond Russia's media bubble that is prone to blame the West for all that is wrong in this world. Crucially, his claims should serve as a warning for Swedes and Finns who still think it inconceivable that Putin would ever invade their countries.

The first portion of our historical outline would not matter much if it were not for how they have been used by Putin and others to generate dangerous myths based on inchoate historical claims, half truths that are often connected into fallacious propaganda that the perpetrators come to believe themselves. We will not convince Russian proponents of a mighty Mother Russia that their historical narratives and myth making are wrong. But we should construct as accurate and true a counter narrative as we can in order to inoculate ourselves and others outside Russia's closed infosphere against Putin's inchoate version. We need to show that despite the fact that some claims can be archaeologically corroborated and historically confirmed through cross referencing of various sources, the claims are strung together by Putin into a deceptive tale about ancient Russian providence.

If it were not for *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* having been given as justification for a brutal war, I would probably bypass the first half a millennium outlined in the essay. The nations we know as Sweden, Russia, and Finland did not yet exist and therefore ought to be at best marginally important for the context of our current geopolitical tensions. Nonetheless, to understand the Russian ultranationalist mindset that now threatens us all, we have to understand the veracities versus falsehoods of their claims.

It's a dangerous exercise. When sweeping quickly across a millennium we are bound to create our own inaccuracies and mythologies. I will therefore do my best to differentiate between what is historically Sweden and what is not, what could count as Russia and what is only a kernel from which something quite different emerged. Historical accounts of the past will frequently and dangerously conflate modern political entities with those of yesterday.

This is in part an effort to sort these entities out, and break apart a neat and dramatic but otherwise false narrative. You can assume that the historical shores around the Baltic Sea are even muddier than I present here. Yet we need to disassemble as best we can Putin's triune state, and identify what other mermaids and monsters lurk in his shadows that might again infest the once blood infused sea along Russia's north western border.

The Blood Bucket: A Short History of the Baltic Sea and Beyond

A year ago the Baltic Sea was in most eyes a brackish backwater of geopolitics. The well informed knew about Russia's tension with the three countries that because of the sea's name almost invariably come to mind in the English speaking world: the Baltic nations and NATO members Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. For those of us who speak other West Germanic languages, the association between these nations and the sea is weaker, even non existent. We call the body of water the *East Sea*.

To the east of the East Sea, and beyond the three Baltic countries along the sea's eastern seaboard, stretches the wide Eurasian territories of Russia. The Russian Federation is a transcontinental giant that extends for about 9,000 km from its most western to eastern points. Traversing this distance by way of the trans-Siberian railway takes a whole week. The railway's easternmost terminus is Vladivostok, a major port along the mighty Pacific Rim.

From north to south the giant is about 4,000 km, stretching from the warm Black Sea to the cold frigid and partially ice capped Arctic Ocean. For comparison, Russia is larger than Antarctica, and almost the size of Europe and Australia combined. It might seem like Putin would have no interest in a small enclosed sea like the Baltic. However, it's not just that the Baltic Sea is strategically important as we shall see later. The Baltic Sea is historically significant for those who buy into a mythic image of Mother Russia as being rooted in ancient Kievan Rus.

We should remark that it's not just Putin. Many in Russia mythologize their nation as rooted in Kievan Rus, and there is a very small grain of truth in this claim. But it's as relevant as claiming

that Sweden or even Finland are rooted in the realms established by Birger Jarl in the mid 13th century. Nonetheless, the history of Kievan Rus and how it relates to Russia has become relevant simply because of the role it demonstrably plays in Putin's decision making.

By the mere mention of Kievan Rus as a relevant construct, Putin pulls Fennoscandinavian history into the mythology that he leans on for inspiration. Kievan Rus was supposedly founded by Varangians, people from either Scandinavia or the nearby island of Gotland⁴ who used the river systems of central and eastern Europe for trading goods. Their trade routes extended all the way across the Black Sea and as far as Constantinople (present day Istanbul).

Kievan Rus was founded by the warrior Rurik according to the chronicles *The Tale of Bygone Years* written in Kiev around 1118. There is no evidence older than this document - written centuries after the alleged founding – that there actually was a Rurik who supposedly established a long lived dynasty. What we can corroborate from other historical and archeological evidence is that Kievan Rus was a society where people with Norse heritage intermingled with a Slavic majority.

The very name *Russia* is thought to be derived from *Rus* which is believed to have been one of the Varangian tribes. The etymology of Rus is debated, but there is strong and legitimate reasoning for inferring that the name stems from the Old Norse *Roþrslandi*⁵ meaning “The land of Rowing”. The name *Roþrslandi* is also the etymological root for *Roslagen*, which today refers to the northern part of Stockholm's Archipelago in Sweden. Just as the proper name New York intimates a connection to England, Russia's name seems to intimate a connection to Sweden.

If claims about Kievan Rus being something that unites Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus into a singularity have legitimacy, then the triune state is at its historical heart also partly a Scandinavian nation. A shiver goes up my spine just making such an outlandish statement.

⁴ Whinfrey, Hugh R. “[An Inquiry into a Scandinavian Homeland for the Rus.](#)” *Viking Archeology*, Dec. 1993.

⁵ “[rootsi.](#)” *Wiktionary*.

Totalitarian states with nightmarish global aspirations have been justified on even more circuitous and highly dubious claims about ethnic connections⁶.

Such historical claim have had real devastating effects. Putin justified his failed attempt to take over the capital of Ukraine by quoting the *Tales of the Bygone* years, according to which Oleg the Prophet said:

“Let [Kiev] be the mother of all Russian cities.”⁷

What he omits in his myth making is that Oleg the Prophet could equally well be called Helgi the Son of Rurik, and that Kievan Rus probably evolved from a Norse trading post by Lake Lagoda known in Old Norse as *Aldeigjuborg*⁸ and the fortification they called *Holmgarthir* a few kilometers away from the city with the Slavic name *Novgorod* (which roughly translates into English as “Newcity”).

We should be very careful in inferring too much from any of these claims or we would be committing the same error as Putin. *The Tale of Bygone Years* has been shown to contain erroneous information, and was written three centuries after the Norse warrior Helgi is said to have conquered Kiev. Putin’s myth is based on a myth.

The Norse connection can be severed by emphasizing that despite their heritage, the Rus and the Rurik Dynasty of which Helgi was supposedly a member fully amalgamated into the culture of the Slavic people over which they ruled. By the time *The Tale of the Bygone Years* was written, Old East Slavic was the author's language of choice. Critically, Putin sees the Chistian conversion of the Kievan Rus ruler Valdamarr Gamli as, in his own words, “determining the affinity of [Ukraine and Russia] today”.

⁶ “[When Nazis Tried to Trace Aryan Race Myth in Tibet](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-58466528).” *BBC News*, BBC, 14 Sept. 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-58466528>.

⁷ *The Russian Primary Chronicles, Laurentian Text*. Translated by Samuel H. Cross, Olgerd P. Sherbovits-Wetzor. Mediaeval Academy of America, 1953.

⁸ Hartmann, Jacob Wittmer. *The Gøngu-Hrólfssag, A Study in Old Norse Philology*. Columbia University, p. 59, 1912.

The baptism of Valdamar Gamli, the pagan ruler of the Rus – known in the Orthodox Church as St. Vladimir – accordingly marks the beginning of the triune state (Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia). “Ancient Rus” according to Putin's own words became “bound together by one language [...], economic ties, the rule of the [...] Rurik dynasty, and [...] the Orthodox faith.”

Putin admits that his perceived triune state in the form of the “Ancient Rus” eventually faced a “decline in central rule” but insists that the “people perceived Rus as a common territory, as their homeland”. Of course, he does not substantiate this (or any of his other) claims. He merely states that in his research he “relied on open-source documents that contain well-known facts rather than on some secret records.” As if there is some Illuminati like trove in the Kremlin that provides the few initiated with a clear historical picture; as if a substantial number of classified records did not leak into the ether after the collapse of the massive Soviet Union.

Putin blames the first geopolitical fragmentation of his Rus nation on outside factors. In Putin’s world it’s almost always the outsiders' fault, and when the insiders bear any responsibility it’s marginal, the result of a series of unfortunate circumstances, or more frequently because the guilty insiders were simply corrupted by foreign elements. The most devastating blow to the Rus was inflicted by the Mongol invasion led by Bahtu Khan.

The Golden Horde – the Mongols that ruled over much of present day Russia for two centuries – is dismissed in a few sentences despite having left deep and lasting influence. He acknowledges some divisions among the Rus upper strata but is keen to emphasize their alliances and victories against the Mongols.

Members of the princely and “boyar” clans would change service from one prince to another, feuding with each other but also making friendships and alliances. Voivode Bobrok of Volyn and the sons of Grand Duke of Lithuania Algirdas – Andrey of Polotsk and Dmitry of Bryansk – fought next to Grand Duke Dmitry Ivanovich of Moscow on the Kulikovo field [against Mamai of the Golden Horde]. At the same time, Grand Duke of Lithuania Jogaila – son of the Princess of Tver – led his troops to join with Mamai. These are all pages of our shared history, reflecting its complex and multi-dimensional nature.

He claims to recognize the many complexities of our geopolitical realities and yet presents a very flat and simplistic view of eastern Europe. He clearly emphasizes the Rus as the ethnic basis of the eastern European sphere: “both Lithuanian Rus and Moscow Rus could have become the points of attraction and consolidation of the territories of Ancient Rus.” In his mind something ethereal holds them together. He seems to believe the people of these regions naturally want to be reunified since St. Vladimir’s baptism. Germans, Balts, the Polish, Finns, Scandinavians, Mongols, they are all peripheral actors around territories that are inherently Rus.

Putin claims to be a man of the Orthodox faith. The cultural element of orthodoxy clearly plays a prominent role in his thinking regardless of whether he is genuinely devout. Catholics were always in his view a foreign element, and oppressors of the common Slavic people. To try to substantiate his claim he mentions the Union of Brest in 1596, which he views merely as an act of state oppression. Though there is evidence of religious persecution having occurred, it should be noted that religious persecution occurred in both directions and was so common in the 16th and 17th century that it eventually led to a conflict spanning much of the globe.

Instead of an act of oppression, the Union of Brest could be seen as a compromise to ease tensions and heal the East-West Schism. This schism had since the 5th century gradually split the Christian church into a Catholic and Eastern Orthodox branch, and had ultimately been formalized in 1054. The two factions had been slowly emerging as institutional antagonists for half a millennium in how to embody the Christian faith, which was at the time of the Union of Brest undergoing yet another even more violent schism with the rise of Protestantism. From a more positive perspective, the Union of Brest was a noble Christian and long overdue eucamanical act.

But instead of an attempt at reconciliation along the central European border splitting the territories where each branch dominated, Putin sees the Union of Brest as a violent imposition that resulted in the “liberation movement of the Orthodox population”. Never mind that the

Ruthenian Uniate Church⁹ tracing its roots back to the Union of Brest and beyond still exists. Never mind that the Ruthenian Uniate Church against the spirit of solidarity that both it and Marxism embraces was liquidated by the Soviets, its communion with Catholics revoked by the Soviets, and its property transferred to the Moscow Patriarchate

Putin instead valorizes Bohdan Khmelnytsky as a savior of persecuted Orthodox Ukrainians. Khmelnytsky is the controversial Cossack who led a rebellion against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, established the Cossack Hetmanate, and made it a vassal state of the Tsardom of Russia¹⁰. Of course he valorizes him. Anyone who subjugates others under Russia is a hero in his book. What Putin leaves out is any mention of how the rebellion marks the beginning of The Ruin, a blood soaked period of inner turmoil among the Cossacks. He makes no mention of the massacres during The Ruin of tens if not hundreds of thousands of Jews and equally many others. If anything, Khmelnytsky deserves the same conflicted attention as Oliver Cromwell. In Putin's book Khmelnytsky is presented in the facile and farcical light of a hero so frequently present in ultranationalist accounts.

Of course, the Cossack Ivan Mazepa is portrayed plain and simple as a traitor. There is little nuance in the ultranationalist picture book of history. Never mind that many Ukrainians see Mazepa and not Khmelnytsky as the tragic hero who struggled for their independence¹¹. It's in the context of Ivan Mazepa that Putin alludes to an age-old conflict between Sweden and Russia:

“During the Great Northern War with Sweden, the people in Malorussia were not faced with a choice of whom to side with. Only a small portion of the Cossacks supported Mazepa's rebellion. People of all orders and degrees considered themselves Russian and Orthodox.”

⁹ “[Chapter 12: The Czar's Rule in Galicia, 1914.](#)” *Ukraine's Claim to Freedom, An Appeal for Justice on Behalf of Thirty-Five Millions*, Ukrainian National Association and The Ruthenian National Union, 1915, pp. 24, 116.

¹⁰ United States, Congress, Cong. House, Select Committee on Communist Aggression. [Communist Takeover and Occupation of Ukraine](#), pp. 3–4. 83rd Congress, 2nd session, Resolution 346 and 438.

¹¹ “In Ukraine, a Film's Hazy History Lesson.” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 2 Oct. 2002, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2002/10/02/in-ukraine-a-films-hazy-history-lesson/bd3c8b23-baf1-4e31-8d6e-58b927a03091/>.

Is this true? Was Sweden the invader and Russia the liberator of Ukraine (which he derisively refers to with the historical Russian term Malorussia, “Little Russia”)? Who are the Swedes, who supposedly lured a treasonous Mazepa into an unholy alliance? If the Swedes are not Rus – and if I am right that the Rus are not the Russians – then who are the Russians?

If we consider the eastern realms of Scandinavia to be the proto-Swedish state, and Kievan Rus the proto state of Russia, then Sweden and Russia have been at war on and off since at least the 12th century. However, this notion is complicated by the fact already covered that the Varangians established several settlements along their trading routes in Eastern Europe, and that with all likelihood the Kievan Rus themselves partially originated from people tracing their roots to areas in present day Sweden.

Svaerike - one of the kingdoms from which Sweden evolved and which gave the modern state its name – began warring with Novgorod located in present day Russia already in the 10th century before Novgorod expanded into Kievan Rus. But the cultural and political unit Novgorod – and hence Kievan Rus, the realm into which it evolved – might have been at least partially constructed by people from *Svearike* who moved to trading posts and fortifications along old Varangian routes passing through the region, and who likely dispersed outwards and settled in its many villages.

If we are to believe the *Tales of Bygone Years* that Putin quotes, then the Slavs in the region invited the Norse warrior Rurik to put an end to their internal warfare and rule over the land. Rurik is then at the heart of Russian nation building . He is likely to have relied on many of those who traced their origins to east central Scandinavia even if Rurik himself was not from that particular Norse region. So who was at war with whom?

Here is where downstream names for modern nations to their older namesakes can create false narratives and dangerous impressions of continuity and providence. Unfortunately, Putin relishes in the exciting dramatic arc that such errors allow.

Granted, the Norse and their north westerly descendants living in the present day Sweden and Finland may be of no particular historical interest to Putin. It seems that the baptism of Valdamar in 988 marks the beginning of what Putin conceives of as Russia. However, being Christian is not enough if one examines his essay. One must be an Eastern Orthodox Christian, which introduces yet another problem with labeling the early Rus as Russians. Although Valdamar supposedly was taken in specifically by the splendor of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, he cannot strictly have been of the Orthodox faith. The religious faith in Eastern Europe was still in transition¹².

The Great Schism would not happen until six decades later. It's fair to assume *The Tale of Bygone Years* is full of embellishments since it was written another six decades after the formal schism, and 125 years after the conversion of Valdemar into St. Vladimir.

It is equally dubious to trace anything too far back that reasonably can be called Sweden. If we generously count the debated beginning of Sweden to the time that a single king – Olof Skötkonung – ruled over the Svear and the Geats sometime around the year 1000, then the first war between Novgorod and “Sweden” was in 1142. Arguably, Kievan Rus expanded from Novgorod, and Kievan Rus is supposedly early Russia according to people like Putin. But Novgorod seceded from Kievan Rus in 1132 and became the Novgorod Republic.

The secession of Novgorod put the northern region on a different historical track, which puts Putin's claim about the “Ancient Rus” into even more serious question. The Novgorod Republic was a substantial part of present day northern Russia. Although it was as stratified a society as any other in medieval Europe, power was not as concentrated in a single individual or two as in the tsarist model that would emerge from the Duchy of Moscow under the shadow of their protector the Golden Horde.

So not only is a more appropriate nomenclature for the political entity located at the time in east central Scandinavia *Svearíke* and not “Sweden” (or its Swedish variant *Sverige*). The Republic

¹² Reisman, Edward S. “[The Cult of Boris and Gleb: Remnant of a Varangian Tradition?](#)” *The Russian Review*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1978, pp. 141–57.

of Novgorod cannot be considered Russia. *Svearike* and *Novgorod* were in conflict, not Sweden and Russia.

Their conflict was about who would control what today is called the Gulf of Finland, a part of the Baltic Sea. The gulf provided merchants in the Baltic region access to the rivers forming the most easterly trade routes leading to the distant Black and Caspian Seas. The Sveas of *Svearike* launched attacks against the Novgorodians, who in return launched raids against the Scandinavian Peninsula.

During the 11th and 12th century *Svearike* consolidated their power in Scandinavia and began expanding outwards. By this time Christianity was firmly established in the region. Conflicts in the Baltic began to take on a religious tone. Erik Son of Jedvard – a legendary early Christian king of *Svearike* – supposedly launched the First “Swedish” Crusade against the Finns in the 12th century¹³. Putin is not a crusader but his grievances are tinged with cultural arguments, and he considers Eastern Orthodox Christianity a critical element in defining Russian culture.

Archaeological evidence suggests that Christian Varangians had already established a presence in what we now call Finland, and they may have followed Eastern Orthodox practices. An East-West conflict about the nature of Christianity in the region may already have been emergent since this time coincides with the East-West Schism becoming institutionalized. Whether this would irrelevantly be pulled out as a justification for Russian belligerence towards Finland, who knows given the historical time frames across which Putin constructs his justifications.

We often reduce conflict to violent economic transactionality. Yet ideology may be a more important motivator for open warfare. There is clear evidence that the attacks in the region in the middle ages were not just economically motivated, but had ideological underpinnings. A papal bull about the Finns from around the 1170’s to the Archbishop of Uppsala in *Svearike* reads:

¹³ Lind, John H, et al. “[The Second Crusade, Holy War on the Periphery of Latin Christendom](#).” *Outremer, Studies in the Crusades and the Latin East*, vol. 2, Brepols Publishers, Turnhout, Belgium, 2015, pp. 303–322.

[When] an enemy army threatens [the Finns, they] promise to observe the Christian faith [...] But when the army retreats they deny the faith, scorn the preachers and persecute them severely. [...] beware of their duplicity and falseness so that they cannot [...] obtain help and security from you unless they surrender their fortresses to you, if they have any, or otherwise provide sufficient warranty and security, so that they later in no way are able to retract or deceive you, clever persons, but are forced without fail to uphold and observe the Christian creed.

Arguably, the ideological directives of the Papacy sent to Christianized Scandinavians augmented their determination to control the East Baltic. *Svearíke* firmly established their territorial control of present day Finland after a period of wars with the neighboring Novgorod Republic. At the Treaty of Nöteborg¹⁴ in 1323 the two realms agreed on a border that largely remained in place for the next five centuries.

It is during this half millennium that the Baltic rivalry emerged between what we can confidently call Sweden (Sverige) and Russia. I emphasize again - since the present day city Veliky Novgorod has been called the cradle of Russia – that the Novgorod Republic was not Russia despite that sources frequently refer to it as such. And herein lies one of Putin's central historical distortions outlined in his essay: Kievan Rus was not the root of present day Russia, nor was Novgorod; if any one single place was its cradle, it's the Duchy of Moscow.

Despite the myth widely held in Russia that the cities of Kiev and Veliky Novgorod are its cradles, it is from the city of Moscow that the multiethnic empire we know today emerged. Moscow may be younger in age than the other two, but it's more likely and more reasonable to infer that the imperialism that Putin espouses emerged from a Mongol and Slavic sociopolitical amalgamation as some ultranationalists but also academics have claimed¹⁵. We have to acknowledge that this imperialism has, despite the tremendous cost, maintained Russia's size and weight to date. Arguably, it stems at least in part from early Moscow syncretizing with some of

¹⁴ Gallén Jarl, and John Lind. *Nöteborgsfreden Och Finlands Medeltida östgräns*. Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, 1968.

¹⁵ Ostrowski, Donald. "[The Mongol Origins of Muscovite Political Institutions](#)." *Slavic Review*, vol. 49, no. 4, 1990, pp. 525–42.

the efficiencies and centralized rigors of the tremendously successful Mongol Empire, brought down only by its own internecine conflicts.

Putin does not bypass the fact that the Mongols established political domination in eastern Europe, but makes a point to mention that the Rus “retained limited sovereignty”. This is true, but what he does not care to dwell on is how power politics and alignment with the Golden Horde helped Moscow to not only rise to power but establish long lasting hegemony over northern Eurasia. Reading Putin’s words it would seem more as if the Rus struggled for a while under the yoke of the foreign Mongols, and then cast them off:

Moscow became the center of reunification, continuing the tradition of ancient Russian statehood. Moscow princes – the descendants of Prince Alexander Nevsky – cast off the foreign yoke and began gathering the Russian lands.

Kievan Rus had split into principalities that were vassal states of the Golden Horde. Notably, Ivan the First of the Moscow Principality sought the approval of the Khan of the Golden Horde by crushing a brewing rebellion against the Mongols in the nearby Tver Principality. This is not quite what would be expected of a supposed liberator. But it is what we would expect from Putin as evidenced early on in Chechnya. As with Ivan, it is force and not skillful political and diplomatic maneuvering that is Tzar Vova’s way.

Ivan the First sets the stage for Moscow’s future dominance that has really lasted now for over seven centuries since it remains Russia’s present day power center. Having endeared himself with his Mongol overlords, a *jarlig* – an executive order of the Khan – was issued that made Ivan solely responsible for collecting tributes from all the other Slavic principalities under Mongol control, and passing them on to the Khan of the Golden Horde.

1478 comes closer to a year we could call the beginning of Russia. This is when Ivan’s grandson Ivan the Third, prince of The Grand Duchy of Moscow, wiped away the Novgorod Republic from future maps.

Before Invan's invasion Novgorod had had a *veche*, a Slavic structure similar to the Germanic *thing*. Free men could participate and call a meeting by ringing a bell in the center of the city. The *veche* elected various officials and designated or dismissed their prince at will. Sometimes the Prince of Novgorod was the Prince of Kiev, and sometimes it was the Prince of Moscow or Tver. In effect there was a balance of power, and if the *veche* was dissatisfied with a Prince they would change Novgorod's allegiance. Thereby the other Slavic principalities in the region would vie for the position of Prince of Novgorod.

When Ivan the Third attacked and destroyed the *veche*, he firmly set the region on its course towards a Muscovite tsardom with highly centralized power that would last to the present day despite extreme swings in Russia's surface ideology. Thanks to the Mongols the only institution with any influence that remained independent was the Orthodox Church. The Khan had issued a *jarlig* that bestowed protection on the church¹⁶. The Orthodox Church would remain a powerful social institution until Peter the Great, and it would finally be forced into complete subservience of the state after the Russian Revolution. The Russian Orthodox Church of today is not so much a moral counterweight to self-interested political maneuvering as an instrument of state power. We can assume it will support Putin's bellicosity against its Baltic neighbors and even infuse it with a more dangerous ideological tinge.

Attempts were made to concentrate power in Scandinavia as well. Whereas their kings had once been elected and dismissed by the *thing* - an assembly with deep roots in Norse Society - power gradually became concentrated in a monarch and emerging nobility. However, three royal power centers emerged in Fennoscandinavia: *Norike*, *Svearike*, and *Danmark*. They compensated for the gradual loss of a meaningful *thing* by creating a churning blood bucket in the Baltic. Their power was also held in check in the east by Novgorod until its destruction.

Most importantly, the powerful Hanseatic League eventually formed a countermeasure against the blood lust of wannabe absolute monarchs in the region. Gradually, as the river systems of central Eutope became less important, trading power shifted away from the island of Gotland

¹⁶ Ephimenko, A. R. "[The Mongol, or Tartar, Yoke.](#)" *A Short History of Russia*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, New York, 1920, p. 29.

from where the Rus may have originated, and away from the coast of Novgorod in the northeast. Power around the Baltic Sea shifted substantially towards its south shores during the middle ages since the rivers to the west were more connected to places like Venice that were experiencing an economic and cultural boom. Gotland remained an important trading hub, but eventually trade guilds in Lübeck became the spoke of a merchant empire held together by laws.

The League was an association of cities specifically organized to maintain peace in the Baltic blood bucket. The merchant league raised their own navies and armies to protect themselves against theft and piracy, and passed laws to enforce contractual obligations. The system was somewhat analogous to the present day European Union, which was also formed from trading agreements meant to keep the peace and allow goods to flow. The importance the Hanseatic League played in establishing what we now call “Western” culture has received short shrift and been eclipsed by the so-called “Age of Discovery” and the liberalism that evolved on the British Isles and in France. Because of its association with Germany the importance of the Hanseatic League was also eclipsed by the disastrous Thirty Year war, and later the horrors of German totalitarianism.

Putin is not entirely wrong to seek answers in history. It’s his eagerness to create clear narratives that is most egregious and poses such a danger to Swedes, Finns, and the rest of the world. We are equally vulnerable to constructing narratives that are simplified at best, and self-deceptive at worst. We have ignored the historically positive effect the German speaking world has had on “Western” culture and could have had on Russia if the Hanseatic League ‘s influence on Novgorod had not been thoroughly extinguished by the Duchy of Moscow.

The Hanseatic League was not a direct precursor to modern European political institutions and organizations. There was no clear discrete overlap between national and supranational entities since the modern notion of a state had not yet emerged. Some Hanseatic cities were technically under the authority of another political power, and others were more fully independent. All had a degree of autonomy that allowed them to act as a united force against both their nominal superior authority and their direct adversaries. Their power structure was in some way the inverse of the present day EU.

The autonomy of some of these cities survives in their present day name and even current political status and do demonstrate the persistence of some historical constructs. For example, the *Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg* is still the official name of the famous German port, and the city is one of the sixteen federal states within present day Germany. Like Lübeck – the heart of the league – Hamburg was part of the imperial structure of the Holy Roman Empire. However, their autonomy was extensive and the type of government established by the Lübeck Laws spread throughout the region and became the de facto laws of the Baltic Sea and many of the Hansa Cities.

Stockholm, the seat of the king of *Svearike*, was a Hansa city as well. German presence was so strong that today Stockholm still has a street in the old town called *Tyska Brinken* (the German Slope), and a nearby church (*Tyska Kyrkan*) that till this day performs most of the sermons in the German language.

The League wielded its military power mainly to protect its merchants against theft and piracy, and battle the privateers that were employed by various adversarial geopolitical power players. But it also fought full fledged wars with Denmark from 1426 to 1435, and England from 1469 to 1474. These wars were not wars of territorial conquest but violent trade wars fought to establish control of the Baltic Sea and the northeastern Atlantic Ocean.

Being sea merchants, the league established local outposts in cities at the edge of their naval influence. These outposts were called *kontor*, which in several languages still spoken around the Baltic Sea is still a common word that simply means “business office”. There were prominent *kontors* in Novgorod, Bergen, and London amongst others.

Importantly, the power of the Hansa was a major counterbalance against violent geopolitical conquest driven by ideology, violence like the earlier unchecked ideological Northern Crusades into lands along the Baltic’s eastern seaboard. It’s not always if ever possible to neatly separate commercial from ideological interests, especially when natural resources are concerned. But if there was any geopolitical union that was mostly interested in protecting their commerce as

opposed to their mythic ideas, then it was the Hanseatic League. The legacy of the Hanseatic League – the idea that a distinct economic alliance can exist below and between nominal powers – has persisted in Europe, but faded from Russia with the complete subjugation of Novgorod and the destruction of the Veche that, like the Hanseatic League, exercised partly power from below rather than always from above.

Russia remains almost entirely power from above. Had it not been for the Hanseatic League it's possible that the same fate would have befallen Fennoscandinavia. During the middle ages the mythic ideologues and narcissists, the kings of the Baltic kept churning the blood bucket as they fought just like the Duchy of Moscow to expand their petty kingdoms into great empires. Their battles against each other, and the commercial interests of the Hanseatic league kept them in check and often at bay along the ports of the Eastern Sea; at least until the Reformation and the European Age of Discovery.

The Hansa were devout Christians but foremost and above all merchants, sailors, fishers, and tradesmen. I would argue that – had Ivan the Third not crushed Novgorod – Russia could have had a very different character. This argument has been made before, and I want to emphasize that I am not upholding the Novgorod Republic as some liberal wonderland¹⁷.

Like all European proto-states at the time Novgorod was stratified and social mobility limited, perhaps even more so than in Imperial Russia. Even commercial sectors in medieval Europe were not highly fluid. Trade guilds dominated, protected their interests, and promoted people from apprentice to master mostly from within their own familial circles. Nonetheless, whatever seed Novgorod could have planted in the metaphorical Eurasian soil, Ivan the Third made sure none ever germinated.

What did not happen for a long time in northwestern Europe despite the aspiration of wannabe absolute monarchs was the consolidation of power into a single political office. The Moscow Principality, on the other hand, gradually concentrated more and more power in their prince. When the Golden Horde faded from history due to its internecine wars, the prince took the

¹⁷ Case, Nelson. [*European Constitutional History*](#). Jennings & Pye, 1902.

functional place of the Khan. The Russia that Finland and Sweden now have to deal with is the legacy left behind in part by Ivan the Third and those who sustained and reinforced his hegemonic legacy.

In 1547 prince Ivan of Moscow was crowned Tsar and Grand Prince of All Russia. We have to note here that in some sense old Russia – and it is here, in the crowning of Ivan that we can begin to really speak in a meaningful sense of *Russia* – was more of a meritocracy than other European countries at the time. Ivan reformed how military commanders were appointed, basing appointments more on merit than familial ties. Sweden would later emulate, modify, and expand such changes. Also there was not a clear imposition in Russia of people being broken into estates although serfdom persisted in Russia for much longer¹⁸. It's possible that for a long time this is what sustained the empire.

Certainly, we can't speak of any great social mobility but being noble in Russia seems to not have imparted any great advantage. What mattered was how much land you possessed, how educated you were, and what military prowess you had. The difficulty of attaining any of those with limited means and in a state dominated by the particularly patriarchal Eastern Orthodox Church is of course extremely noteworthy.

Svearike's successor states could have evolved into far more centralized states as well if it had not been for their losses on the European battlefields. In 1397, *Svearike* and the other Scandinavian realms became part of the Kalmar Union. The Treaty of Kalmar united Fenoscandia, the Danish isles, and Iceland under a single monarch: Queen Margaret the First of Denmark. The union was a largely failed attempt to counter and limit the powerful Hanseatic League.

Margaret fortified a hereditary model and her successors tried continuously to strengthen the power of the monarch. At first, the ideology of absolute monarchy was almost constantly countered by the union's nobility, spread out across vast northern territories. The Kalmar Union

¹⁸ Confino, Michael. "[The Soslovie \(Estate\) Paradigm](#)." *Cahiers Du Monde Russe*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2008, pp. 681–704.

managed to last for almost a century and a half, but was finally torn apart by a man who can with greater legitimacy be called the first real King of Sweden: Gustav Vasa.

Christian the Second of Denmark should be considered someone who also helped birth Sweden. Like many who become known in due time as tyrants, he may have been well intentioned. Based on what I have read, I would classify Christian as an ideologue. He seems to have been inspired by the greater freedom he witnessed in the Netherlands. He seems to have blamed the less dynamic structures of Nordic society on the nobility and their petty conflicts. His solution was to attempt to diminish the power of the nobility by passing laws that would have ended what remained of serfdom, and by forcing the Kalmar Union into becoming an absolute monarchy. He failed in both his efforts.

In Sweden he has over the last half millennium been frequently referred to as Christian the Tyrant. He was blamed for the so-called Stockholm bloodbath, when anywhere from ten to a hundred people were publicly executed (the numbers depending on the bias of the source). It is actually quite likely that Christian's ally the archbishop of Uppsala Gustaf Trolle deliberately falsified accusations levied in a trial against those executed.

Much like Putin - through his oversized ego and by misjudging societal trends – Christian can be said to have solidified an emerging national sentiment amongst rivaling petty kingdoms in Fennoscandinavia into something that can with some confidence be called Sweden. Gustav the Son of Erik and member of the Vasa family led a successful rebellion that ended the Kalmar Union in 1523. Over the next two centuries, Swedish ambitions would grow into the same heady notions of imperial hegemony emerging from the Duchy of Moscow, setting the two on a collision course.

After Martin Luther's excommunication in 1521 kicked the Reformation into high gear, Europe began to descend into ideologue arguments that quickly found their ways into almost every nook and granny of society. Luther's excommunication coincided with the actions of Christian and Trolle, who had received backing from the Catholic Pope in the Vatican. When the Kalmar

Union broke apart and Vasa became regent, Sweden's relationship with the Vatican failed to recover.

At the same time as the schism between Sweden and the Vatican emerged, the ideas underpinning the Reformation began to spread throughout Fennoscandia. Gradually, Sweden became a protestant nation. The Reformation in Sweden was finalized when the Archbishop declared at the Uppsala Synod in 1593 that the Holy Scriptures were the sole legitimate source of God's word, and that Sweden now was "one man", and had "one Lord and God." It's important to realize that Sweden and Finland were one and the same at this time, so Protestant reformation affected the land of Finland as much as the land on the Scandinavian Peninsula.

The Uppsala Synod put Sweden in direct conflict with its pious Catholic regent and grandson of Gustav Vasa. Sigismund the Third Vasa ruled over the short lived union between Poland and Sweden. Whereas Sigismund was engaged in turning Poland (and Sweden while he was its king) into a strictly Catholic nation, his uncle Karl the Ninth – Gustav Vasa's youngest son – embraced the Lutheran faith and instigated a civil war against his nephew. In 1604, Sigismund was defeated, and the Polish-Swedish union was broken up. Karl became sovereign of Sweden, whereas Sigismund ensured that Poland would remain devoutly Catholic till this day.

Again, history matters but history is also a mental construct. Actual geopolitical evolution does not synergize into clear and natural organizational taxonomies. Sharp descriptions of ethnic, religious, and national divisions and unions are – until they fall apart and catastrophically fool us – only useful generalization and somewhat arbitrary tools of the mind. The Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestants divisions were and are real and yet bely the true complexity of love, hate, cordiality, and suspicion around the Baltic Sea.

Americans and even many European do not realize the wounds left behind by arguably the greatest ideological conflict before Marxism spilled on to the world. In many ways we still live with the scars of left behind by those wounds. Even the existence of the United States can partly be traced to the massive conflagration we today call the Thirty Years War. The very structure of our nation states and our preoccupation with national sovereignty can be traced to

transformations that occurred over the three decades that European neighbors turned on each other, when sister and brother found themselves on opposite sides of ideological cracks forming across the continent.

Had Putin not delved into the half mythic past of the Rus, it is here that I might have begun. It is here that I see many of today's international troubles forming. It is here that the rivalry between Russia and Sweden takes shape. It is here that the modern age began, and the somewhat arbitrary borders of the 21st century began to coalesce. Sweden played a central part in this process through the imperial ambitions of one of its most well known historical characters, often known by his latinized moniker *Gustavus Adolfus*.

Gustav Adolf succeeded his father Karl. From his ambitious military campaigns emerged a rivalry between Sweden and Russia that escalated into centuries of ferocious warfare. It would drastically alter the power balance around the Baltic Sea. Perhaps their shared interest in controlling the Baltic Sea – worth mentioning in today's context – inevitably lead to their deep animosity in the absence of regulatory bodies to which both were willing to subdue their sovereignty.

As is quite usual in international geopolitics ruled by coalitions of the willing, Moscow and Sweden formed a short lived alliance of convenience during the last years of Karl the Ninth's reign. However, before Gustav Adolf was seated on the throne their relationship quickly turned hostile again when new geopolitical opportunities presented themselves for dominating the Baltic Sea and its surroundings.

Before Karl's death, a dynastic shift had threatened to put an end to the Tsardom of Russia before it had had a chance to prove itself worthy of a self-selected imperial name. Ivan the Fourth, the first to declare himself Tsar, was allegedly a descendant of the legendary Rurik. True or not, it was a powerful myth. As Putin's invasion of Ukraine proves in conjunction with Putin's prior claims such myths are motivators for deeply consequential actions. Therefore Fennoscandinavians, beware of the history outlined here and how it could be strong into a neat mythic narrative by an aggrieved party like Putin.

Ivan, who could supposedly trace his dynastic roots to the 9th century Rurik, was succeeded by his youngest and less ambitious son Feodor the First. Feodor died childless in 1598, thereby ending the dynasty. A power vacuum occurred after Feodor's death. It left the young Russia without a strong leader. It was a realm inured to autocratic governance for centuries and lacking effective checks on power and protocols of succession.

Ivan's tsardom did nominally have a realm of the estates, representing the nobility, the Orthodox Church, and the commoners: the Zemsky Sobor. It also had a privy council of the Boyars (the highest nobility). The privy council had only an advisory and administrative role and the Boyars had no governing authority that provided any meaningful counterbalance to the will of the tsar. The Zemsky Sobor was initially called to address major issues once a year, but would eventually be called into session less and less frequently until it was abolished in the 1680's.

The power vacuum left by Feodor the First's death is often referred to in Russia as the Times of Trouble. It occurred around the same period as Sweden became embroiled in its war of secession under Sigismund the Third Vasa. When Karl the Ninth defeated Sigismund and assumed power over a relatively young Sweden, Karl temporarily aligned himself with Vassily Shutsky who a faction in Russia had declared tsar. Swedish mercenaries marched towards Moscow with forces supporting Shutsky, triggering Sigismund – who had for a short time been the Swedish monarch – to declare war on Shutsky's Russia. Sigismund tried to use the political disarray to extend his Polish territory, but it needs to be noted that he did have the support at the time from some powerful Russian Boyars.

After Sigismund's declaration of war, an opportunistic expeditionary force led by the Swedish Field Marshal Jacob De la Gardie invaded Ingria and then captured Novgorod which for more than a century had now been a part of a Muscovite Russia expanding outwards from its power center.

Simultaneously, Sweden was at war with Denmark, a conflict that would eventually make most of Scandinavia a Swedish peninsula. In October of 1611, Karl died and was succeeded by his 16

year old son Gustav Adolf who was already personally accustomed to war. His first direct war experience had been a few months earlier on the southeastern coast of Scandinavia which at the time was Danish. Gustav Adolf assumed a Swedish throne that was at war with nearly all its neighbors: Poland, Russia, and Denmark. He would keep it that way, and prove an astute military commander during a time of brutal European conflict.

He did not himself fight on the Russian battlefields since the conflict in southern Scandinavia posed a more immediate threat and consumed most of his resources. Whereas the war with Denmark eventually ended in a near stalemate, De la Gardie's campaign in northwestern Russia marks the first substantial victory of Gustav Adolf's relatively young Sweden.

I want to be clear that the Sweden of Gustav Adolf was not the Sweden of today and should never be used to wistfully imagine what Sweden could be if it asserted itself more militarily. Ending its neutrality is not about war mongering. On the contrary, as I hope to show it is about keeping the peace through a morally justified military alliance that would protect civilian rights and responsibilities in the Baltic region. An alliance with NATO would provide far better protection to its form of liberal democracy than a policy of neutrality, and a disingenuous "freedom of alliance" touted in the political platform of Sweden's Social Democratic Party until just a few days ago when they suddenly made a U-turn in their defense policy.

I mention this caveat before outlining Sweden's imperial times in broad strokes because using mythic tales of bygone years is exactly what Putin is doing when making devastating and murderous geopolitical decisions. This period known in Swedish history as the Age of Great Power should be a cautionary tale, not a stirring narrative for ultranationalist Scandinavian fervor.

I also pause for a moment here to emphasize that this short history of the Baltic Sea and beyond is an attempt at a researched counter narrative to Putin's myth making, and to show why Fennoscandinavian citizens should be very concerned about Putin who is demonstrably driven by inchoate historical claims. There are aspects in this account that could selectively be used by

Putin to disassemble and justify further egregious and violent actions in the region in hope of fulfilling his grandiose views.

Even if Swedes are not moved by historical conquest described here, Putin could portray its increased defensive military posture – which both sides of the Swedish NATO debate pretty much believe are necessary – as a sign of a resurgent threat from Sweden against Russia's core territorial integrity. Sweden did once rule over lands that few if any today would not consider as central to a modern Russian identity as Moscow.

The later Treaty of Stolbova that ended Jacob De la Gardie's incursion into Novgorod made the region where St. Petersburg is now located Swedish territory, and forced Russia to renounce any claims on Estonian lands. The realms now known as Estonia had been under a Swedish protectorate since 1561 when the local nobility requested its assistance against continuous belligerence by the Tsardom. St. Petersburg embodies the Tsardom of Russia perhaps more than any other city, even more than Moscow. The city was built from the ground up after the Tsardom had finally proven itself worthy of its chosen imperial name.

With the loss of Ingria, which the Swedes called Ingermanland, Russia lost all access to the Baltic Sea. For a sense of proximity: the spot where the Tsardom's new capital would be built a century later is 691 kilometers almost directly east of Stockholm. By ferry it takes about 39 hours, and by air only around an hour and a half. Helsinki, Finland's capital, is only about half a day away by ferry and half an hour by air. At the time of Gustav Adolf, Finland and Sweden were one and the same. Finland should not be considered a Swedish conquest except insofar that all modern nations are in part a result of warfare, territorial expansion, and eventual syncretic peace. This is driven home by the fact that today Swedish has equal status with Finnish as a language of the Finnish state despite that only about five percent of its population today – a group which seems to have achieved population stability – have Swedish as their primary language.

Gustav Adolf would by conquest turn Sweden into a Baltic Empire during his reign and for a brief time eclipse any Russian designs on controlling the Baltic Sea. Sweden did not become a

short lived empire by brute force. Instead, the concept of a socially well organized and tightly united modern nation has some of its roots in Gustav Adolf and Axel Oxenstierna's policies and actions. Together they introduced social and military reforms that would be emulated across Europe. Oxenstierna was the highly esteemed and pragmatic administrative leader in the king's privy council. Rigorous census taking was introduced to improve the taxation system; education was expanded beyond the nobility so as to increase the pool of candidates for various state functions; military conscription was introduced.

Gustav Adolf for his part transformed the military into a fighting force that would become the model until mechanization and the evolution of aerial warfare. He equalized status amongst his armed units and reduced the use of mercenaries, thereby increasing their psychological cohesion; clunky armor and weaponry was discarded in favor of mobility and interoperability; instead of deep squadrons pushing through the battlefield by force, shallow mobile formations were used to outmaneuver the opponent.

Gustav Adolph expressed strong Lutheran convictions but did not use them in justifying war. His justifications for war were couched in defending Sweden against enemy aggression. However, a substantial portion of his wars were eventually conducted at a great distance from the territory over which he initially reigned. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that his motivation just like Putin's today was a mix of ideologue conviction, a desire for territorial expansion, and dreams of personal historical aggrandisement.

The Lutheran protestants in the Holy Roman Empire – at war with the Catholics who were still faithful to the Holy Roman Emperor and the Vatican – welcomed Gustav Adolf as their savior and “Lion of the Midnight” when he joined the Thirty Years War. Oxenstierna – who's consult the king always sought – advised against getting embroiled in the conflict, but deferred to the king as the ultimate authority of the state. Seeing Gustav Adolf's intervention as an act on behalf of protestants and their rights is perhaps not entirely wrong, but considering it exclusively a benevolent act would be quite an enormous stretch if not outright deceitful.

Gustav Adolf, who frequently fought along with his soldiers at the very front line, predictably died on the battlefield in 1632. Though it took some air out of the protestant cause, the king had trained and inspired key Swedish commanders in his innovative tactics and strategies.

Oxenstierna remained in power of the privy council and continued their reforms on the homefront. When the Westphalian Peace was signed in 1648 – arguably marking the birth of the modern nation states – Sweden was at the head of the table and secured control of key German provinces along the Baltic Sea. For the next century, Sweden remained an imperial force and the Baltic Sea’s dominant power.

Compared to Gustav Adolf’s role in creating a Swedish identity, Pyotr Aleksyevych (a.k.a Peter the Great) was perhaps even more instrumental in forming a Russian identity. Pyotr sought to bring the intellectual and scientific advances emanating mainly from Western Europe to Russia, and though he was pious he was at odds with the highly hierarchical and rigid structure of the Eastern Orthodox Church which was the only counterbalance left to the tsar’s authority over the Tsardom.

Putin elevates the Orthodox Church along with language as the cultural binding essence of the Russian *narod* (folk). However, the transformation of the Grand Duchy of Moscow into what we think of as Russia really begins by the subordination of the church to the state. When the Patriarch of Moscow died, Pyotr refused to name a successor to lead the Orthodox Church. The position remained vacant for two decades until Pyotr abolished the patriarchate and replaced it with a Holy Synod of ten high priests. The Holy Synod was placed under the control of a state functionary, and the tsar appointed all bishops. The one institution that had been able to temper and on rare occasions rise above the tsar’s power was reduced to an instrument of the state. The evidence of this persisting legacy is shown by the fact that the Patriarch Kirill of Moscow “and all Rus” was quick to bless Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.

Pyotr turned Russia’s upper strata into a modern 18th century European country. He encouraged intermarriages with other European nobility; he literally taxed traditional long beards and robes to encourage a look more in line with fashions outside Russia’s borders; his state sponsored the

construction of new and modernized buildings, In fact, he built a whole new city that he declared the Tsardom's new capital: Saint Petersburg.

His most enduring geopolitical legacy was to turn Russia from a nearly landlocked duchy centered on Moscow into a global power with ample maritime access. When Pyotr was seated as tsar, Russia had only one major port that it had incorporated into Russia through the conquest of Novgorod: Arkhangelsk. The port is located along the subarctic coast of the White Sea, and prior to icebreakers it was closed to maritime traffic during the coldest months of the year.

In the south of Russia, Pyotr managed to wrest control of a small slice of the coastline along the Azov Sea from the Ottoman Empire. There, he founded the naval base Taganrog in 1696. Russia now had access to the Black Sea. Next, he set his sight on the Baltic which had once been intimately linked to Novgorodian identity. His ambition put him in direct conflict with Sweden that had established uncontested supremacy over the sea.

Sweden had conquered Livonia (present day Latvia) by 1629. By 1658, Sweden was the victor in yet another war against its former brethren and now Baltic archenemy Denmark. A treaty was signed in Roskilde that transferred the territory of Scania at the southern tip of Scandinavia from Danish to Swedish governance. Sweden now controlled the entire western and northeastern Baltic shoreline, as well as the east side of Kattegat, the straits opening up the sea to the Atlantic.

The Great Northern War that Putin refers to in his essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* began when Russia, Denmark, and Saxony formed an alliance in 1700 and attacked Sweden in order to break apart its imperial stronghold over the Baltic. The ensuing conflict would last for 21 years. The conflict marks the decline of Sweden as a European power, and the beginning of Russia's rise to a global geopolitical behemoth.

There are a few moments in history that we recognize as pivotal turning points. One of them is Poltava. Anyone who went to school in Russia, Ukraine, or Sweden and paid any attention whatsoever in history class is familiar with Poltava. In various ways it's as meaningful to

Ukrainians¹⁹, Russians²⁰, and Swedes as Ticonderoga or Yorktown is to Americans and the British. In 2009, a monument was unveiled with the words “Time Heals Wounds” inscribed in Ukrainian, Russian, and Swedish²¹.

Sweden had defeated all its opponents in 1707 except Russia. Their king and military commander Karl the Twelfth is perhaps the first in a series of world leaders who made the fatal decision of launching a campaign against Russia that would drag into the winter. Swedes were familiar with winter logistics, but the European winter of 1708 to 1709 would turn out to be the coldest in half a millennium. “The Great Frost” as it’s called has yet to be understood as a climate event, and is indicative of how unpredictable events ought to temper any military confidence in swift victories.

Weakened by a harsh winter in an unfamiliar land deliberately scorched by Pyotr’s Tsarist army, the Swedish Carolean Army and its Cossack allies suffered a decisive defeat at Poltava²². We can’t do a doubleblind study in geopolitics, but it seems reasonable to consider the possibility that Russia would have been on a very different trajectory if it hadn’t been for its somewhat surprising victory at the Battle of Poltava.

The Great Northern War would drag on for more than a decade, but from that point onwards Russia and its allies had the advantage. As the Carolean army lost more and more ground and as the victors began to squabble about the spoils, the alliance against Sweden broke apart.

Through successive peace treaties Sweden lost key dominions along the southern and eastern Baltic seaboard. Sweden submitted to its most important loss in the Treaty of Nystad, which returned Ingria, the territory that had formerly been part of the Republic of Novgorod, to Russia, and transferred governance of Estonia and parts of Livonia to the Tsardom. Pyotr had regained and even expanded Russian access to the Baltic Sea. He proceeded to found the city of Saint

¹⁹ Marson, James. “[Where Russia Once Triumphed, Ukrainians Prepare to Resist Putin](#).” *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 Dec. 2021

²⁰ “[Ukraine Commemorates Defeat of Sweden at Poltava](#).” *The Local*, 28 June 2009.

²¹ Plokhyy, Serhii. “[Poltava: the Battle That Never Ends](#).” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 31, 2009.

²² Platonov, Sergei Fedorovich. [History of Russia](#). United Kingdom, Macmillan, 1925, pp. 224-226

Petersburg, which today is a Russian port city of over five million people at the terminal end of the Gulf of Finland. St. Petersburg is the birthplace of Putin himself.

War between Sweden and Russia did not end. Sweden tried to recuperate some of its lost territory, only to suffer an even greater loss. In the last major war between the two that lasted barely two years, what had been one single realm for half a millennium was split into two. A new entity was born in 1809 as the Duchy of Finland, and would remain under tsarist rule for over a century. Russia and Sweden would not again engage in a direct armed conflict. However, their antagonistic relationship did not end with the Swedish surrender of Finland. Whereas many Swedes mythologize themselves as having a two century old history of neutrality, they somehow overlook the Winter War as just a Finish conflict, when in truth – although Sweden’s military did not officially and directly fight an invading Soviet army – Sweden played a major supporting role.

We have finally gotten to the last most virulent phase of the churning Baltic blood bucket that is spilling into the 21th century. This last phase begins at the heart of Russia in the 19th century, where two intellectual trends came to a head. One trend was a romantic belief in the purity and beauty of the Russian *narod* (folk) which had been soiled by outside influences²³. The other was a belief in using outside inspiration to turn Russia into a modern nation similar to states in North America, the British Isles, and the rest of Europe. Those who followed the latter trend were called *zapadniki* (westernizers).

Pyotr himself would have partially qualified as a *zapadnik*, although his means to push through social change was not in line with the emerging liberal philosophy in Great Britain and France. Instead, he concentrated more power in his own office. He was following another separate trend in Central and Western Europe towards absolutism. In Russian and the German realms this political trend would prove catastrophic when combined with the thinking of *narodniki* (folkists), and eventually turn into totalitarianism

²³ Paramonov, Boris. “[Historical Culture: Russia in Search of Itself](#).” *Center For Democratic Culture*, University of Las Vegas, 2012.

The tsars after Pyotr also tended to be *zapadniki* if we use the term broadly and in less of a sociopolitical and philosophical sense. They were reluctant to abdicate too much power but sought to leverage the scientific and technological mindset and advances emanating from Great Britain, France, and other industrializing countries.

The tsars adopted only a veneer of the more modern socio-political institutions meant to balance power from below with power from above. Some of the reasons they retained substantial authority over the representative assemblies that they agreed to institute was not just because people are unwilling to give up what they have. Russia by this time was a vast multiethnic empire with a long authoritarian history. Tensions were frequent, and the number of revolutionaries willing to commit acts of violence was increasing. Adopting liberal reforms seems to have been difficult without destroying Russia's precarious social equilibrium.

The tsar most willing to ease Russia into a liberal age was Alexander the Second, who abolished the ancient system of serfdom in Russia. Peasants had been bound by societal norms and laws to the ownership of land. Peasants could not be individually sold, putting serfs above slaves, but only by a tiny step in the descending hierarchy of human suffering and loss of agency. If ownership of a piece of land was transferred, the transfer included authority over the peasants working that land. Someone born to indentured parents inherited their indenture from them. Serfdom shut a whole segment of the people off from any social mobility.

Local representative assemblies (*zemstvos*) were set up, but their power was extremely limited, being restricted to fiscal and administrative tasks. The *zemstvos* had no legislative function beyond taxation, and provincial governors could veto their decisions. The governors had little power since in theory they were just an executive extension of the tsar. Only the vastness of the empire provided any level of actual autonomy. At the top, right below the tsar, there was an Imperial Council of ministers with various agency functions, but they were appointed by and served at the discretion of the tsar. Despite various reforms the tsar alone retained absolute authority over the state.

Alexander was arguably slowly moving the nation towards a constitutional form of government. At least that is what he claimed before his death. But he deployed a peculiar autocratic violence for a “liberal” man. A rebellion in the territories that had formerly been the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was at least partially caused by an unwillingness to extend liberal reforms to all peoples within the Tsardom. After the rebellion was quashed, Alexander suppressed the printing of books in anything but the Russian language and dialect. This included Ukrainian – referred to at the time as “the Little Russian dialect” – which had been banned through the secret imperial decree known as Ems Ukaz for fear of a growing separatist movement centered around Kiev.

Putin acknowledges this oppressive act, but waves it away with a *tu quoque*. Any existence of a separatist movement is ignored. Tensions at the time are white washed as external meddling, a justification for Alexander’s linguistic suppression.

I am not going to idealize anything. [There was] the Ems Ukaz of 1876, which restricted the publication and importation of religious and socio-political literature in the Ukrainian language. But [...] these decisions were taken against the backdrop of [...] the desire of the leaders of the Polish national movement to exploit the “Ukrainian issue” to their own advantage.

Putin forgives the means of his predecessor because of the ends. Like Putin today, Alexander was no great liberator. There were tactical reasons for why Alexander reformed Russia. It was an act of *realpolitik*. He understood that without drastic social reforms Russia would remain a lagging agrarian nation. He also understood the danger of the many ethnic tensions tearing at the massive empire.

Alexander’s reforms were primarily designed and hatched by Nikolay Milyuti, who does actually seem to have had a *zapadni* moral and psychological motivation. He had witnessed his father cruelly punishing their serfs, and the punished being obliged to thank their master after a severe flogging. He also seems to have been opposed to ethnic oppression, yet as a functionary of the state he was an effective agent of its execution. Presumably, the oppression stemmed from higher up and Milyutin was a good Russian.

Alexander was subject to numerous assassination attempts that gradually reduced his taste for significant reform. It was a successful assassination that ultimately brought an end to his reign. His successor Alexander the Third did not have his father's taste for pragmatic reform, reversing some of them, and opting instead for turning Russia further into a modern police state.

Anyone who is just a little bit familiar with Russia knows what happened to the Tsardom. The first blow came in 1905 when wide unrest forced Tsar Nikolai the Second to essentially transform Russia from absolute to a constitutional empire. Less than a decade later the First World War wreaked havoc on Russia and ultimately the tsar abdicated in 1917. After a brutal civil war a new socialist state – the Soviet Union – replaced the Tsardom originally proclaimed four and a half centuries earlier in 1547 by Ivan the Fourth.

During this time Sweden had retreated to a foreign policy centered around the Scandinavian Peninsula. It had lost Finland in 1809 to Russia, but in a bizarre twist a former Napoleonic officer became head of the Swedish state, and allied Sweden with Russia after Napoleon invaded Sweden's last territory along the southern Baltic coast. Whereas Sweden joined the anti-Napoleonic coalition, Denmark joined Napoleon's side.

After Napoleon's defeat, Denmark was forced to cede Norway to Sweden. Norway attempted to exert autonomy and a short war broke out which was resolved through what became known as the Swedish-Norwegian Union. Denmark lost its last territory in Scandinavia, and was for the first time since the Viking age not a geopolitical force on the peninsula or around much of the Baltic Sea.

Each territory of the Union had its own government headed by one and the same monarch. However, there is little doubt that Sweden was the dominant force of the Union and that a pseudo-romantic and folkish Norwegian nationalism was brewing below the surface. The playwright, poet, and linguist Ivar Aasen left the most persistent mark from this period. He constructed a new "language" by amalgamating and systematizing Scandinavian dialects along the central Atlantic coast around his native Sunnmøre: Nynorsk.

Nynorsk is today used by about 20% of Norwegians, whereas the “language” Bokmål is used by the Norwegian supermajority. Both are official “languages” of the state (or “language forms”). It should also be said that most modern Swedish and Norwegian dialects remain mutually intelligible, arguably making Swedish another “form” of the same language. In Putin’s world there would be ample reason for war in Scandinavia.

Parliamentarianism established itself in both countries of the Scandinavian Union, and their common king became the constitutional monarch we know of today. Norway’s shipping industry grew dramatically in the 19th century, and the country began asserting its right under the Union agreement to appoint foreign consuls. The two member states began saber rattling as tensions over foreign policy grew in the final years of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. Sweden seems to have learnt its lesson, and the Union was ultimately peacefully dissolved in 1905.

Out of the Baltic blood bucket evolved something new and exemplary. Norway and Sweden agreed to henceforth resolve its differences not with war but through the Permanent Court of Arbitration established in 1899. The court that had been convened in the Hague by none other than Tsar Nicholas the Second to address concern over European armament. Swedes should, however, realize that peace through law is predicated on all parties being willing to abide by legal norms, and if not institutions need to be sufficiently powerful to enforce jurisprudence and its conclusions. Russia is unwilling and internally beyond the reach of any international institutions.

With the dissolution of the Union in 1905 the Scandinavian countries we know today were finally born. Both countries have complex roots stretching into ancient times. They are deeply intertwined culturally and linguistically with their own flavors and quirks, and like Russia and Ukraine they are distinct and yet in some ways a continuum.

But however deep Norway and Sweden’s roots go, 1905 marks their beginning as 21st century states. It is not until 1905 that we can truly speak of them as two nations peacefully coexisting along a 1,600 km long border, resolving their disputes not by the dunking each other in soiled

blood but before a court of arbitration²⁴. Their evolution is not over, and there have been key moments in the last century that have in some ways set them further apart, and in others joined them back together. Importantly, Norway is a member of NATO but not the EU. Sweden is a member of the EU but not of NATO. Both are members of the Nordic Council.

Whereas the Scandinavian Peninsula settled into an equilibrium, the rest of the Baltic region kept churning and releasing buckets of blood into the sea. One of the first new nations born out of the Tsardom's turmoil at the end of the First World War was Finland, which asserted its independence²⁵ in 1917 shortly after the Bolsheviks came to power.

The Russian revolution was sudden but not swift. The ensuing civil war lasted from 1917 to around 1923. It was part of a larger imperial collapse across Europe in the wake of the First World War. The Austro-Hungarian Empire split into its largely ethnic components as a wave of nationalism and a policy of self-determination swept across the globe. Russia, the other vast multiethnic European empire, fought hard against these forces tearing at its unity.

Socialists had struggled with the issue of how to address emergent nationalist sentiments even before their revolutionary victories. Karl Marx had considered nationalism a temporary necessity to create a common unified market after a state evolved from a feudal to a capitalist nation. Joseph Stalin before the outbreak of the First World War captured Bolshevik thinking in letters and essays.

It might seem as if the socialist revolution in the Tsardom would have inaugurated an era not marked by an ethnocentric mentality²⁶. But Joseph Stalin's 1913 essay titled *Marxism and the National Question*²⁷ – when combined with other statements he made – hints at why the multiethnic Soviet Union was at best a masquerade for ethnic tolerance. Stalin argued that a successful nation required four elements: a common language; a single market; territorial integrity; a common psychological makeup (i.e. culture).

²⁴ The Permanent Court of Arbitration. [The Grisebåarna Case](#). 23 Oct. 1909.

²⁵ Upton, A. F. [The Finnish Revolution, 1917-1918](#). United States: University of Minnesota Press, 1980.

²⁶ David George Anderson, et al, editor. [Life Histories of Ethnos Theory in Russia and Beyond](#), Open Book Publishers, 2019.

²⁷ Stalin, Joseph. [Marxism and the National Question](#). Prosveshchenie, 1913.

Stalin was born as Ioseb Besarionis dze Jughashvili in Georgia. He made no secret of his Georgian cultural heritage, but avoided its mention when promoting the cult of personality that characterized his rule. Importantly, he had immense respect for Russia and its intellectual life. When asked once by an Armenian journalist why he supported the Turkestani but not the Iranian socialist movement Stalin supposedly answered “Because in Turkestan there is a small Russian intelligentsia”²⁸.

In his essay *Marxism and the National Question* he strongly criticized the proposed Austromarxist notion that the divergent forces of nationalism could be countered and converged towards common socialist goals by apportioning representatives for various sociocultural groups to non-territorial assemblies. It was proposed that these assemblies should have a degree of legislative autonomy as long as their legislative acts did not contradict a common body of laws and a shared socialist constitution. They would be able to levy taxes on their constituents much like the zemstvos of imperial Russia. What nation any single individual belonged to would purely be a matter of personal and free choice.

Stalin’s objection was that a nation could not exist without territory because “a nation is formed only as a result of lengthy and systematic intercourse, as a result of people living together generation after generation“. Without the proximity provided by a contiguous territory, a nation could not exist.

Stalin pointed out that the “common psychological makeup” arising from interaction across multiple generations was subject to continuous change. Here his writing contradicts Putin’s seeming belief that there is something almost immutable about Russian culture since its conversion to Christian Orthodoxy. However, if we assume – as seems apt to me – that Putin does not believe in a biosocial origin of ethnicity, we can consider the immutability to be a metacognitive development towards the supreme. What is considered the supreme is just a bit differently flavored in Stalin’s versus Putin’s world.

²⁸ Paramonov, Boris. “[Historical Culture: Russia in Search of Itself](#).” *Center For Democratic Culture*, University of Las Vegas, 2012.

The supposed supreme is actually closer between the two than it may seem at an initial glance. Like Stalin, Putin believes something within Russia's psychological makeup sets it apart. Both clearly belong to those who think the ends justify the means. Anyone who challenges Russia's destiny must be dealt with severely. Putin believes as Stalin believed that Russia's territorial integrity needed to be aggressively safeguarded if not outright expanded.

The first step for the Bolsheviks was to thoroughly defeat the White Army in the civil war. By 1922 the remnants of the anti-Bolshevik coalition had been pushed all the way to Vladivostok. The city fell to the Red Army by the end of the year, making the entire former Tsardom the first socialist state and empire: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. For a while ethnic diversity under a common ideological umbrella was celebrated.

Stalin was put in charge of dealing with policies relating to national identity prior to Lenin's death and Stalin taking full control of the Soviet state. His policy was initially one of cultivating a federation of soviet nations through a policy called *korenizatsiya* ("putting down roots"). Stalin set into practice his beliefs about what constituted a nation, and carved the socialist state into discrete contiguous territories that more or less fit his notion of being populated by people who had a shared historical framework.

The celebration of the Soviet Union's multiethnic nature would gradually be reduced to a Muscovite charade²⁹. It's important to emphasize that Stalin believed in dynamic change even if he believed that nations formed through historical interactions; was a Marxist with a distinctly deterministic belief expressed in his work *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*; upheld Russian intellectual life as being at a higher developmental stage than other intellectual spheres in the former Tsardom.

His beliefs led him to quickly reverse *korenizatsiya* as it proved to counteract his socialist aspirations. The Soviet Union soon returned to the same deliberate suppression of linguistic and

²⁹ Ponomaryov, Vitaly. "[Internationalism or Russification?](#)" in the *History of Ukraine and Its People*." Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, 28 July 2006.

meaningful culture differences as their predecessor The Tsardom of Russia. The change in policy began in 1928 in Crimea with the execution of Veli Ibrahimov who had promoted a Tatar identity for the local variant of the Communist Party.

The Bolsheviks also had to deal with the strong counter influence of Islam in the Caucasuses. Islam had been able to coexist with the Tsardom due to some religious communalities with the Eastern Orthodox Church and a shared history rooted in the centuries of rule by the Golden Horde. That coexistence began to crack as soon as the Bolsheviks came to power, the Bolshevik ideology being firmly rooted in Marxist writing which included the infamous line "[religion] is the opium of the people".

Islam as a subservient extension of socialist state institutions was tolerate just as the Orthodox Church was allowed to continue operating. As long as religion was not practiced in the open, a few select churches and mosques were allowed to exist. Both these religious institutions were fully and completely subservient to the socialist state.

In retrospect, the issue with the Causauses was never solved despite the violent and cruel actions taken early on by Stalin. Stalin began a forced relocation of ethnic groups in Crimea and the Caucasus that would eventually spread across the Soviet Union. Languages were forced to adopt the Cyrillic alphabet just as the Tsardom had forced Ukrainian writers to use only Russian orthography.

Russification had already been a contentious policy in the Baltic when a large portion of Sweden became part of the Tsardom as the Duchy of Finland, and Estonia and parts of Livonia were transferred from the Swedish to Russian realms. When the First World War and revolution destroyed the Tsardom, Finland declared its independence and became a nation for the first time in history. Finland plunged into a short civil war.

The Red Army waged a war to keep Estonia a part of the Soviet Union but failed and in 1920 the Treaty of Tartu was signed making Estonia an new independent nation. The Latvian nation came into existence around the same time through a similar dynamic involving Russia and imperial

Germany. Lithuania, on the other hand – unlike Finland, Estonia, and Latvia – had a history as old as Russia and Poland of being a geopolitical concept before becoming part of the Tsardom.

Lithuania's existence had been fraught with tension and constantly morphing borders. Through the Union of Lublin – a treaty signed in 1569 – Poland and the Duchy of Lithuania had become a commonwealth that included much of present day Ukraine. The commonwealth then ceased to exist in the late 18th century after a series of partitions incorporated its western half into Prussia and the Habsburg Monarchy and its eastern half into the Tsardom. Nonetheless, a proto-national identity was present throughout Lithuania's changing geopolitical circumstances.

Lithuania and Poland were reinstituted as separate nations after Russia's withdrawal from the First World War in 1917 and its subsequent revolutions. The Baltic nations we know today had finally emerged but their exact borders would be established through further even more violent churning of the blood bucket since ruthless totalitarianism was on the rise.

The Great War – as the First World War was originally called – had left Europe in tatters. The Austro-Hungarian Empire had splintered into many small nations; Germany had been bankrupted as it was pressured into paying huge reparations; the tsardom had been transformed into a cruel social experiment.

At first both Germany's and Russia's future seemed hopeful, but with Stalin's rise to power the methodology of socialist transformation took on an increasingly brutal nature and costly toll. Germany would soon follow along at the helm of Adolph Hitler, and in just over a decade outdo even Joseph Stalin's vicious cruelty.

The Baltic and the rest of Europe did not experience any substantial peace or great liberalism³⁰ in the interwar years. By 1938 the danger of another great war was obvious to anyone even occasionally reading a newspaper or listening to that new explosive invention called the radio. The Baltic nations were now squeezed between two territorially hungry totalitarian giants spewing agitating propaganda over the airways: The Third German Reich, and the Soviet Union.

³⁰ Luce, Henry R, editor. "[Poland](#)." *Life*, 29 Aug. 1938, pp. 47–56.

On August 23 in 1939, the two giants signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, an agreement of nonaggression and a promise not to enter into alliances with the enemies of the other. The pact contained a secret protocol of how to partition the Baltic into spheres of influence. Nine days later, Germany attacked Poland from the west starting the Second World War. Sixteen days after the German invasion, the Soviet Union attacked Poland from the east. At the heart of what caused the Second World War in the European theater was a conflict about who would control the Baltic Sea.

With the invasion of Poland, a pincer attack was under way in a move to eliminate the last few vestiges of democratic republicanism in the southern Baltic. On November 30, just over two months later, the Soviet Union opened up another front in the north and attacked Finland. Soon, Sweden and Russia were in renewed confrontation after a century of peace.

Sweden never officially joined in what has become known as the Winter War, declaring itself non-belligerent (as opposed to neutral). However, Sweden provided substantial support: a third of its armaments was transferred to Finland's military; a volunteer corp³¹ of around eight thousand were allowed to join in direct combat; volunteer Swedish pilots formed Flying Regiment 19 of the Finish Airforce; two billion Swedish crowns were provided to the Finnish defense budget, more than twice Finland's own allocation.

There were no real victors in the aftermath of the Winter war that ended in 1940. Although Finland was forced to surrender Karelia to the Soviet Union, about a tenth of Finland's territory. The estimated Soviet losses were anywhere between twice that of Finland, and up to as high as one hundred and sixty thousand; about twenty five thousand Fins lost their lives. The Soviets paid an enormous price for a relatively small territorial gain with marginal geostrategic importance.

³¹ Sprague, Martina. [*Swedish Volunteers in the Russo-Finnish Winter War, 1939-1940*](#), McFarland & Company, 2010.

Unfortunately – and this could matter in rising tensions between Russia and its Baltic neighbors – Finland tried to regain its lost territory by aligning themselves with the Third Reich, and starting what in Finnish is known as the Continuation War and in Russian the Finish Front of the Great Patriotic War. From 1941 to 1944, Finish forces fought alongside the German Wehrmacht.

As part of the secret protocol The Red Army annexed Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia in 1940, and Stalin began implementing purges and deportations as a means to suppress opposition like he had done within the socialist republics of the Soviet Union. But when Nazi Germany broke its pact with the Soviet Union and initiated Operation Barbarossa, the east Baltic quickly fell to the Wehrmacht and remained under brutal German occupation until 1944.

When the Red Army turned the tide and reconquered the east Baltic in 1944, their advance and occupation was as terrifying as that of the Wehrmacht had been. The violent retribution committed against Germans in the Baltic was especially brutal . It was reported that soldiers of the Red Army “raped every girl and woman between the ages of 8 and 80”³². Germans in the old East Prussian city of Königsburg who could not flee were either killed or forcefully deported. Köninbsburg was renamed Kaliningrad and repopulated with Russian-speaking citizens of the Soviet Union³³.

The forced deportation of people in the other east Baltic territories³⁴ resumed. By the time Stalin died in 1953, Operation Priben, Osia and other crimes against humanity had removed an estimated half a million people from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania under the pretext they were collaborators. Many of them were young children. Tens of thousands of those exiled to far flung areas of the Soviet empire died as they struggled to eke out an existence in the wilderness.

The Swedish government led by Per Albin Hansson of the Social Democratic Party did not object against Soviet occupation. On the contrary, they were among the first to recognize the new

³² Beever, Antony. “They Raped Every German Female from Eight to 80’.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 1 May 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/may/01/news.features11>.

³³ Galeotti, Mark. “[Kaliningrad: a fortress without state](#).” *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin* 1.2, pp. 56-9, 1993.

³⁴ Blum, Alan, and Emilia Koustova, “[A Soviet Story: Mass Deportation, Isolation, Return](#)” *Narratives of Exile and Identity: Soviet Deportation Memoirs from the Baltic States*, edited by Tomas Balkelis, Violeta Davoliūtė, Central European University Press, 2018.

Soviet republics established and incorporated into the Socialist Union by Stalin. Balts who had fled to Sweden because they had joined the German SS to fight the Soviets were extradited to Russia. Sweden's guilt-ridden wound inflicted by its acquiescence has festered quietly in the collective Swedish psyche for so long that in 2011 the Swedish Prime Minister Fredrick Reinfeldt finally apologized on behalf of the nation to the Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian people at an official ceremony in Stockholm³⁵

After Nazi Germany was defeated, communist regimes were installed in Poland and East Germany. Finland was pressured to sign an *Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance* with the Soviet Union³⁶ in 1948. Finland promised to not interfere with or even object against Soviet foreign policy, and to come to the Union's assistance if it were attacked. In exchange, Finland was guaranteed its quasi independence. Russia had finally under the red banner of the hammer and sickle achieved what the Tsardom had only partially managed to accomplish: total control of not just the eastern but most of the southern Baltic seaboard as well.

Sweden – Russia's longtime geopolitical opponent – controlled the entire west coast of the Baltic Sea. To oppose the threat of the behemoth to the east, an attempt was made to form a Nordic military alliance in 1948, but when the effort faltered Sweden's Scandinavian sibling Norway finally took a stand and abandoned its neutrality. Denmark followed suit, but Sweden passed after a fierce debate that was won by the left side of the political spectrum. The Swedish opposition to NATO was spearheaded by Foreign Minister Östen Undén.

Despite being faced with the growing threat of the Soviet Union, Sweden doubled down on its policy of neutrality. Undén was very much a practitioner of realpolitik and believed that the best means to maintain peace was for Sweden to not provoke the Soviet Union whilst quietly and independently improving Sweden's defenses. He did not believe that foreign policy should be

³⁵ Local, AFP/The. "Sweden 'Indebted' to the Baltic States: Reinfeldt." *The Local Sweden*, The Local, 16 Aug. 2011, <https://www.thelocal.se/20110816/35570/>.

³⁶ "Soviet Alliance System 1942-1948." *Documents & State Papers*, vol. 1, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948, pp. 237–238.

driven by public moral outrage, which would only further inflame sentiments and be detrimental to peace³⁷.

As the cold war progressed Sweden became more and more vocal in its criticism of the United States. Sweden increasingly criticized America's unwillingness to give the Soviet Union the benefit of doubt when the Soviet Union took steps towards a détente. Foreign Minister Undén had himself privately leveled this criticism to representatives of the U.S. government. But when Olof Palme became Prime Minister, the critique of both U.S. and Soviet policy became far more vocal and public, taking on a strongly anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist tone. Sweden positioned itself as the world's peacemaker, and neutrality became a defining characteristic of its national identity.

Finland was in a more precarious situation during the Cold War. It shared a 1,340 km land border with the Soviet Union, and had through a legally binding international treaty agreed to not oppose Soviet foreign policy. Finns began practicing self censorship to appease the Soviet Union and prevent another costly war. They learnt as the cartoonist Kari Soumalainen³⁸ put it “how to bow to the east without mooning the west”.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union Russian dominance in the Baltic Sea rapidly came to an end. With Germany's reunification Russia lost its first Baltic vassal. The Warsaw Pact was dissolved in 1991, and its former key member Poland joined NATO in 1999. In 2004, the three Baltic states and former Soviet Republics Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania followed suit. Suddenly, the Russian enclave Kaliningrad was completely surrounded by the military alliance. Today, all the former Warsaw Pact members except Russia are part of NATO.

To date Finland and Sweden – who never had to endure official or de facto occupation by the Soviet Union's Red Army – have maintained their neutrality. As in the rest of the world, there was great hope in the post Cold War years that Russia would become a fully integrated part of

³⁷ Molin, Karl, et al. *[Peaceful Coexistence? Soviet Union and Sweden in the Khrushchev Era](#)*. Södertörns Högskola, 2010.

³⁸ “Kari Suomalainen.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 23 Feb. 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kari_Suomalainen

Europe. For a short while even the possibility was entertained that it should join NATO. But below its avowed commitment to liberalize simmered the type of resentment that Vladimir Putin has come to exemplify.

Fermenting in that resentment was an old messianic sentiment about Russia's historical sui generis importance which has sometimes been called *Slavophilia*. However, this term belies that the *Slavophiles* pushed what was really a Muscovite movement that sought to suppress any Slavic narratives deviating from its select mythology. I will avoid the term *Slavophile* as I explore the dangerous thinking that should cause Fennoscandinavians to be extremely concerned. When demonstrating why they should not continue to believe that warnings about a Russian attack are overblown and pure hyperbole, I will opt to use the term *narodnik*.

The New Narodniki: The Ideology of Putin and His Supporters

It is blatantly clear that Putin is reverting Russia to its old ways. He has reneged on the many promises during the chaotic upheavals in the 1990's, when a modern liberal state appeared a possibility. This should be of great concern to Fennoscandinavians. They can not count on a socio-political transactionality directed at the common welfare of all nations around the Baltic Sea. At best they could count on a pragmatic strategy to secure Russia's continued existence along the lines of policies implemented by Alexander the Second. Putin, however, has literally and with extreme impunity blown up any hope that this is merely about securing a Russian status quo and current equilibrium. Today's situation is about something far more messianic.

The word *narodnik* has historically been used for a socialist who idealized agrarian life and sought to protect peasants from usurpation by a capitalist industry. However, *narod* can be translated into English as "folk", "people", or "nation". Notably, *narodnik* is used in the same sense as the English word "populist", but importantly "people" lacks the folkish connotation it has in Russian. Consider also that it's possible to refer to Russians using the phrase *russkiye lyudi*, meaning "Russian people". Yet the English phrasing "*the Russian people*" would usually be translated as *russkiy narod*. The Russian language lacks the positive English ambiguity that

arguably tempers drawing ultranationalist distinctions. It seems linguistically clear that the term *narod* is closer in usage to the term *Volk* in German.

Based on Putin's use of *narod* in his essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, the appropriate contextual translation into English would in my view be “folk” in its German, and slightly archaic English meaning. This translation highlights its usage along the same lines as the German *Volk* and *völkisch* during the 19th and 20th century. I’m not fluent to any extent in Russian, but the little I know informs me that calling Putin a narodnik is apt not because of its association with past pro-agrarian socialists but because of the frequent use of the word by Putin and other Russian ultranationalists in the same vein as German’s historically used *Volk*.

Folkism is hard to define since it is based on a sentiment that there exists a somewhat amorphous and natural social entity that is historical and cultural. Every nation has to some extent been formed by the simplification and reinforcement of shared sentiments. Compare this to constitutionalism or even many conversion based religious groups which are based on the idea of a covenant. To be an American has traditionally meant to believe in the social construct created by written declarations and laws combined with universal and natural rights and responsibilities.

Americans too have a sentimentalism formed around their national identity. Unless rational understanding of the need for balance, consensus building, fairness, and the rule of law are not reinforced with psychological and emotional commitments, our national sentiments will frequently devolve into a narodny character. The land, the soil, the blood, the faith, the raw symbols. The United States has struggled lately in grounding its sentimentalism in constitutional principles, and has shown similar narodny tendencies to those present in Russia. However, a series of sociopolitical developments seem to have prevented eastern and western influences that reinforce such constitutionalist sentiments to take hold in Russia to begin with.

Some narodniki have perceived Russia as more Asian than European. Putin does not allude to himself having been strongly influenced by thinkers that see Russia as more northeastern Asian in its roots, and any evidence that he holds such beliefs are circumstantial³⁹. Many of these

³⁹ Laruelle, Marlene. “[In Search of Putin's Philosopher](#).” *Riddle Russia*, 19 Apr. 2018.

claims are as shaky as legends about Kievan Rus. The grandiose and mythic claims about a Russia's uniquely Eurasian character implies that the militaristic and autocratic influence of the Golden Horde has been and continues to be very strong in Moscow, the undisputed power center of the massive transcontinental nation we know as Russia.

The Mongol army was highly respected by those who were defeated by its lightning efficiency, flexibility, and discipline. It's no wonder that those who were defeated sought to emulate its success. If there is one characteristic that was historically consistent across various geopolitical structures influenced by the Golden Horde then it would arguably be respect for strength and absolute authority. These characteristics do seem to have taken a strong foothold in the Moscow Principality.

The Mongol influence is substantial but the claim seems to reduce Asian culture and thought to an authoritarian and paternalistic simplification. If Russia is to be viewed as rooted in Asian influences, these influences seem implausibly frozen in Mongolia dating from before the fall of the Golden Horde. Somehow Vedic thinking and Confusion, Daoist, and other branches emanating from the Hundred Schools of Thought seem to never have synergized sufficiently with Russian intellectual life; despite that some who we now strongly associate with literate Russian showed a lifelong interest.

There is a paradoxical curiosity about Leo Tolstoy that he took a deeply centering philosophy – Buddhism – and turned it into something radical. He is not alone in this in the two and half millennia since he half mythic Siddharta Gautama put forth his teachings. Tolstoy lived in a time of radicals when old stagnant orders were being challenged by new understandings. Power was so concentrated by the 19th century in the Tsardom, and dissent so forcefully suppressed that calling the nation a police state seems apt.

Viewing Russia on an East-West polarity seems wrong. Like all large nations, Russia is somewhat a *sui generis* even if its unique predetermination and providence is imagined. All nations have similarities since humans are inherently similar. But a *narod* – which can also be translated as “nation” – is not universal, or it would be synonymous with *chevoliestovo*

(humanity). There must be some type characteristic that is not common to all humans and all nations that determines whether one is part of the nation or not. The primary aspect of a human that sets them apart is the language by which they communicate. Therefore, a shared language is the first pillar of a *narod*.

However, language does not mean we will feel bound together. We must share a positive sentiment about something distinguishing that we believe sets us apart from others. This is the common psychological mind set of which Stalin speaks. People must feel kinship about this shared mindset. If someone is not positively inclined to their communalities with a select other, they will drift away from the *narod*. Therefore, the second pillar of the *narod* is pride in a shared something.

If we cannot communicate these common sentiments and demonstrate our pride, then how can the *narod* exist? A shared infrastructure for exchange must exist. Stalin and even Marx recognized this, but their understanding was distinctly rooted in an industrial and materialist conceptualization of exchange. They could not foresee how the Internet would fundamentally alter the immediacy of exchange, or how virtual and intellectual products would dominate the future. The third pillar is a social network, not territorial continuity and integrity.

Stalin thought territory was of higher importance than it is because he failed to realize the power embedded in the radio. He understood how to use it for one-way propagation of ideas, but not how it would evolve into a bidirectional information channel that reinforces the psychological mindset of belonging.

Of course, unless we have means to organize ourselves, come to agreements, and act in unison the *narod* cannot organically regulate itself and survive. The fourth pillar is shared regulatory institutions. With this fourth pillar, the “nationalist” connotation of *narod* has grounding and the nation can exist. But the folkish meaning has connotations and implies beliefs we have not addressed.

The folkish *narod* implies a belief that there are natural and organic processes by which the nation arises and differentiates itself. The romantic socialists of 19th century Russia seem to have believed that this process was active within the peasant community of Eurasia. It behooves us to consider the Völkish movement in 19th and 20th century Germany that are known for their belief in a blood and soil ideology. The claim of the Ancient Rus forming the basis of the Russian *narod* would seem to imply similar beliefs. So how much soil does Putin claim for his *narod*? Clearly, they are not to be found by examining the borders that existed during the Soviet Union. Putin blames Stalin's policies regarding nations for the creation of supposedly fictitious geopolitical entities.

Perhaps the perceived boundaries of the *narod* may be expounded from Putin's disingenuous commitment to legal principles, and that past agreements should be honored; disingenuous because he has violated just about every Russian commitment to international law and jurisprudence through his multiple wars.

As a legal expert who believed that every decision must be legitimate, in 1992, [first mayor of Saint Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak] shared the following opinion: the republics that were founders of the Union, having denounced the 1922 Union Treaty, must return to the boundaries they had had before joining the Soviet Union.

The territorial claims of the *narod* are therefore somewhat established. But the period between 1917 and 1922 is a confusing period in which factions of the former Tsardom were actively at war with each other, including people in territories of the former Duchy of Moscow.

Ukraine was a signatory to the treaty of 1922, but Putin has declared it a made-up nation. Belarus was a signatory, but again Putin establishes it as an integral part of his triune state just as he does with Ukraine. This leaves only Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. Where this leaves Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, or even Finland is unclear.

Putin does make the concession that "things change: countries and communities are no exception". But given that there has supposedly been a Rus continuity since the founding of

Kievan Rus to today, something according to Putin must be hard to change. Is it the Rus blood? But the Rus were syncretically formed between the Varangians and the Slavic people who welcomed them. The soil and blood in which Russia grows should probably be interpreted more metaphorically than literally. The exact borders and biological backgrounds may be irrelevant. I'm not sure this is any less distasteful than a literal blood and soil ideology.

Perhaps it is providence that better describes what Putin believes in, and that this providence is best expressed through the Slavic language as it has evolved in Russia. If so, the cumulative literary sphere defines the narod. Putin does make a point that many of classic Russian oeuvres were written by people in areas that constitute present day Ukraine.

The Eastern Orthodox version of Christianity features heavily in his writing. We can assume this is a defining communality across time and space. The narod speaks Russian and is a member of – or at least culturally associates itself with – the Russian Orthodox Church.

That, of course, complicates what to do with the Bolshevik interlude. But a clue for resolving this may be found in a story told by Putin about his mother. She supposedly practiced her Christian faith secretly in her home, and she wore a hidden necklace with a cross during those Marxist years. According to Putin the necklace was rescued from their burnt down dacha, and Putin now himself wears that cross.

The immutable is bestowed on people by cultural conversion, not the blood coursing through their veins. The non-biological assumptions of narodni thought may be historically reinforced by the Russian mythology that Kievan Rus evolved from Varangians who syncretized with the Slavic people, and willingly accepted baptism into the eastern branch of the Christian church.

Additionally, we can assume Soviet thinking left traces of their disposition in ex-KGB lieutenant Putin. The de-emphasis on a biological component of the narod can thereby be explained by the socialist commitment to a theory of the blank slate. The idea of the blank slate is that we are born extremely malleable and can be thoroughly transformed by our environment, our upbringing, and

even deliberate indoctrination. It's a belief in near infinite human potential. Something transcendental can be fixed upon us by the Russian language and faith.

Clearly, Russian culture is thought to be superior to other cultures and destined for greatness. This is akin to the manifest destiny that prevailed in America during the 19th century. However, the exceptionalism that grew out of manifest destiny once stripped of any white supremacist views was directed at a specific set of written legal documents and discrete intellectual arguments about universal rights and responsibilities. These beliefs included a fundamental notion that the state was not to interfere with individuals expressing their ideas as long as there was no immediate proveable harm.

Russia has few if any guardrails against its form of exceptionalism, guardrails baked into the notion of what makes constitutional and representative democracies exceptional. The Russian state's historical suppression of dissent has quashed and continues to quash its ability to confront egregious past state policy and actions with honest, open, and public debate. There is little tempering of the mythology resulting from its agents' sense of being part of something bigger and more ancient than their limited selves.

This is what makes Sweden's neutrality since 1949 so vexing. It effectively places the U.S. and Russia on moral parity by holding out the possibility that Sweden could align itself with present day Russia as opposed to any of the liberal democracies around the world (the biggest and most powerful of them being the U.S).

Olof Palme made that assumption about moral parity crystal clear by his public statements in the 1970's. Such statements disregard that NATO – by its Article 2 – is fundamentally committed to safeguarding the key and core principles on which modern day Sweden is built. Article 2 does not explicitly spell out those principles but they are historically embedded in its simple phrasing. I cut Cold War Finland a little more slack here than Cold War Sweden given its precarious situation during the post-war years, and the speed with which the political spectrum in Finland became eager and committed to correcting their past mistakes.

Portraying both Russia and the U.S. as hegemonic empires as some Fennoscandinavians have done is part of the problem of moral parity. The misplaced *tu quoque* of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan comes to mind. Few if any in Scandinavia are so crass as Hungary's leader Victor Orban to intimidate that Ukraine is at fault for the current war. Swedes generally strongly condemn Putin's invasion. But when they point to Iraq they are at best saying that citizens of Iraq should by the principle of self-determination have been left to deal with their own terrible suffering under Saddam Hussein.

At worse, they are implying a justification for Putin's invasion and that his crazy talk about Nazi control of the Ukrainian government has some merit. My point here is not whether the U.S. invasion of Iraq was a good idea, but that there is no suitable analogy to be drawn between these superficially similar cases. I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop and hearing misplaced comparisons to Russian actions in Bucha and American Drone strike as well as the runaway actions of U.S. Unit Alpha.

I say preemptively that we have to remember that actions of Unit Alpha have been exposed and are being openly investigated by the U.S government, just as many drone strikes that went horribly wrong continue to be investigated. Raise your hand silently if you think Russia is making any efforts to place a lawyer beside any of those who pull the trigger in airstrikes as the U.S has made efforts to do. I think Mariupol's current state belies any such notion.

Unlike America, Russia strives to return to a framework of imperial hegemony that it seems to have a hard time shaking off. I'm not saying it cannot. I would be committing the same error as narodniki who believe in something culturally immutable. In fact, as mentioned, Russia has a two century old tradition of zapadniki, which is as long as or longer than some of the key members of the "western" world (for example Germany and Japan).

Putin dangerously claims that anything not pro Russia is caused by western meddling. Ukraine in his view would be Russian if it were not for the E.U. and America interfering. The notion is inconceivable that what Ukraine might be experiencing is a delayed blooming of old zapadni trends present in some of Russia's earlier intellectual life.

Mikhail Speransky. Konstantin Kavelin, Boris Chicherin, Pavel Milyukov. These are people who could have set Russia on a different course. They were not champions of a liberal democratic state as we conceive of it today, and their path to today would have been as filled with strife and injustice as ours yet not the totalitarian brutality instituted by the Bolsheviks.

Boris Chicherin (1828-1904) advocated a constitutional monarchy more in line with Sweden than the French or American republican models. Importantly, he was. a vociferous critique of Marx before most intellectuals in Russia knew who Marx or Engels were.

There is nothing inevitable about the grand course of history. Yet when advocating for change that goes against the grain of history, the efforts required to change a society are far greater. Marxism may seem like a diametrically opposed concept to the Tsardom, but this fails to see some deep authoritarian concepts embedded in both. The tsarist model is simply more aware of its authoritarianism.

First, both espouse a dogma about inevitable predestination. For the tsarist this is the communion between a lived life and the divine. For Marxists it's the communion between the people and the commune. Marxists perceive a future utopia, as do devout Christians, a grand Mir stretching deep into interstellar space.

This ideologue notion of a righteousness of cause is what Social Democrats in Sweden seem to have found so hard to grasp until recently. Whether one agrees with the domestic policy initiatives of the Social Democrats or not, they clearly are not strident revolutionaries, reactionaries, or ill intended narcissists. I would describe them as idealistic pragmatists, flawed in their thinking that projecting good intent will inevitably lead to good outcomes. Their U-turn on NATO that they resisted for so long despite Putin's monstrous behavior supports the notion of an idealistic yet pragmatic party.

I do not think that with people like Prime Minister Margareta Andersson the ends justify the means. If anything my assumption is the opposite. They tend towards a deontology which can sometimes compromise⁴⁰ their otherwise sound pragmatism. Faced with someone like Putin, they were caught off guard because they couldn't easily conceive of the risk the "righteous" are willing to take, and the extremes they are willing to push up against, however pragmatic these "righteous" ones are in their strategies and tactics.

Narodniki are not transactional. They can certainly be sly and deceptive – since the ends justify the means – which can come across as transactional. But there's a bee in their bonnet about safeguarding the sacred, always buzzing and reinforcing their sense that what they do for the narod is justified by the mere sanctity of the narod. They are guardians of the holy, the utopian, the supreme. Whether the supreme is a kingdom on earth or in heaven is merely a superficial difference.

Modern narodniki clearly see themselves as both a continuation of Soviet and tsarist history. The mythic image of Stalin has been resurrected and popularized, and the enemy is depicted as Nazi's in a throw back to the Great Patriotic War. Blatantly false claims of ethnic genocide have been made, harkening back to the worst horrors of the 20th century in central Europe.

It is made to seem as if Russia is continuing a brave moral and existential fight that began in 1941 when the Third Reich invaded the Soviet Union. Any clear mention of injustice committed by Stalin is white washed by making it seem as if the Bolshevik crimes against humanity were little more than misplaced malfeasance. As Putin himself puts it:

[The leaders of Ukraine and their external "patrons"] do not miss a chance, however, both inside the country and abroad, to condemn "the crimes of the Soviet regime," listing among them events with which neither the CPSU, nor the USSR, let alone modern Russia, have anything to do.

⁴⁰ Knutson, Mats. "Analys: Magdalena Andersson Säger Nej till NATO-MEDLEMSKAP." *SVT Nyheter*, Sveriges Television, 8 Mar. 2022, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/magdalena-andersson-sager-nej-till-nato-medlemskap>.

Russia in this telling is continuing to fight Our Father Stalin's heroic battle against Nazis. Terms like Banderas are used frequently by Russian narodniki in reference to Stepen Banderas, a Ukrainian ultranationalist during the Second World War. The complex life of and unseemly and erroneous ethnic beliefs of Banderas is reduced to fascist Nazi collaboratorion. It's ignored that Banderas spent time in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp before being released as a last ditch effort to counter Soviet advance, and that the crimes against humanity committed by Ukrainian ultranationalists occurred during his internments.

The way history is being mythologized into half truths and false narratives seriously matters as Sweden considers NATO membership and Finland proceeds with its intentions to join. I predict that with Finland application for NATO membership, the Russian blogosphere will eventually bring up claims of a Nazi Finland. Colorful images will pop up of not too distant times when Finnish air force units proudly raised banners with swastikas. What will be conveniently omitted is that the swastika used by the Finnish air force predates its use by the German Nationalist Workers Party (i.e. Nazis).

The swastika was supposedly adopted because the Swede von Rosen had painted a swastika on one of his airplanes that he donated to the nascent Finnish airforce in 1918. The story could be made more salivating since von Rosen's ex-sister-in-law later married Herman Göring⁴¹. Compound all this with the Continuation War. A false narrative could be constructed about a persisting Nazi column in Finland since the last vestiges of a swastika⁴² were removed from the Finnish airforce only as recently as 2020.

Ultrnationalist ideology is committed to communal strength through sentimental unity, not individual strength through consensus, and deep personal self examination. A dramatic and meaningful narrative takes precedence over parsing out the overall long term impact from a set of confusing and irrational behaviors. Feelings rise above intellectual pursuits. The group dynamic that makes us gravitate towards sentimental unity is strong.

⁴¹ Luce, Henry R, editor. "[Göring](#)," *Life*, 11 Sep. 1939, p. 56.

⁴² "Finland's Air Force Removes the Swastika from Logo after Almost a Century: DW: 02.07.2020." *DW.COM*, Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/finlands-air-force-removes-the-swastika-from-logo-after-almost-a-century/a-54020470>.

Humans can survive on their own if circumstances force them to, but their yearning for social connection is biologically deep. It requires mental effort to effectively and respectfully critique and engage with those who have different sentiments. The journey of narodniki is more immediately rewarding, and seemingly purposeful. It would be wrong to think people avoid controversy or strife. What people tend to avoid is being the only one to stand against others, which requires enormous fortitude.

Note that this disposition is not unique to the right or left of the political spectrum. The difference is that the right polarity conceives of the nation as a group determined by externally imposed conditions whereas the left polarity conceives of it as a personal choice. Both can descend into simplified and destructive polarization of us versus them, a battle of the righteous versus the degenerate.

Narodniki are highly aware of their divisive disposition, and the narod is real insofar as any conceived social grouping has real psychological effect and alters our behavior. Ethnicity (and race) exists not because there is an underlying biological reality significant enough to warrant behavioral differentiation, but because sufficient numbers believe they ought to behave differently based on some perceived characteristics.

Again, here is where Stalin was correct about cultural malleability: culture is largely a psychological phenomenon. But he was wrong because it is extremely hard to eliminate the existence of recorded materials reflecting commonly held cultural beliefs. For some other deep psychological reason, once people are exposed to historical and genealogical information and begin to believe their supposed ancestral origins, they frequently adopt a mythological disposition of belonging that begins to shape their dispositions.

There are superficial aspects that make such changes more or less difficult to justify (e.g. complexion, facial musculature, etc). However, with sufficient conviction a narrative will be spun that rationalizes perceived and incongruous characteristics into something non-contradictory. Ethnic division is therefore real and persistent. It is less malleable than Stalin

appears to have assumed. He could not entirely engineer it away despite his violent industrious efforts. The reality of ethnic divisions has resulted in continuous tensions in what is arguably the world's last multiethnic empire.

50% of the population identified as ethnically Russian in the Soviet Union. That number has risen to 80% in the Russian Federation because of territorial losses. Nonetheless Russia is vast and in many areas Russians still constitute a small minority. For example, in Dagestan less than 4% identify as Russian. The Russian Federation remains a country of many ethnic backgrounds subsumed and unified under a Russian intellectual and cultural life. In the view of narodniki, Russia holds its supreme position by the nature of its historically proven superiority that justifies often brutal subjugation.

Putin blames the Soviets on one hand for drawing artificial borders, and on the other points out that the Soviets themselves did not think of these as actual borders between sovereign territories. Here Putin is correct. It would be more accurate to consider the former Soviet Republics created to reflect some ethnic realities as internal administrative units rather than semi independent nations under a united supranational structure. Putin is decisively neo-Stalinist in his views. Putin's national policies – short of deporting millions en masse – have been post-korenizatsiya from the day he came to power and began waging a brutal war to prevent Chechnia's secession. Note that Putin has in some small measures himself used forceful relocation as a tool to suppress potential resistance.

Stalin's mythology has been resurrected in Russia by not just Putin. He is not the single culprit, for no authoritarian can hold power without the consent of others in such a vast country as Russia. Many other Russians have espoused a neo-Stalinist disposition and elevated what they see as the proven strongman to his rightful place. Like the revolutionary Second World War mythic hero the man of Steel, Putin is the savior of Mother Russia against a decadent West corrupted by neo-Nazi ideology.

It would seem better for Putin and his cadre to avoid war if we assume Adam Smith's invisible hand and a cohort of rational actors. However, the adrenaline and emotional reward caused by

purposeful commitment can trump the benefits of peaceful exchange. We can endure enormous suffering for a higher cause.

Putin and his fellow narodniki can not construe an ethnic justification for invading Sweden or Finland, since despite the distant potential link of the Rus there is no significant minority of Russian speakers in either region nor has the Eastern Orthodox church historically had any substantial influence. Russia, however, has built a very long narrative as an imperial multiethnic empire, where internecine strife is righteously held in check by a strong Mother Russia prepared to wield her stick and belt.

Unlike Sweden, Finland was for a time under Russia's imperial control and of the two faces the greater threat. If Finland is seen to threaten Russia, those in power in the Kremlin could very well claim a historical justification for violently bringing Finland back under its control simply to – as is now claimed about Ukraine – protect Mother Russia against a neo-Nazi threat. For Swedes to think they can avoid being pulled into such a war would be delusional. They would have to bend themselves into a Gordian ethical pretzel.

Sweden for its part can easily be resurrected in the narodni mind as the preeminent enemy, which can finally be crushed once and for all by the Mighty Bear now fourteen times the size of the Nordic Elk. Poltava would loom large in the Russian blogosphere. If Putin can make claims about an imagined triune state that reach back a thousand years, then we should not doubt that going back three centuries for justification is much of a stretch. Grueling research about tenable veracity is not the narodni way. Moving tales about grand arching destinies is the narodni spiel.

Fennoscandinavian should weigh heavily the messianic nature of the narodniki currently seated inside the Kremlin and those upholding its walls around the Muscovy imperial exterior. When faced with those fulfilling destinies, neutrality is a very weak shield.

The Neutral Ally and the Baltic Price

Politically important segments of the Swedish population have fashioned the nation as a champion of neutrality and the enemy of none. This mythology upholds a long history of “freedom of alliance” that served them and the world well during the Second World War and the Cold War. But the protective shield of neutrality has been a mirage.

Starting with the Second World War, Sweden did not just sell substantial quantities of iron ore and other resources to the Nazi war machine⁴³. It even acquiesced to the transport of Wehrmacht soldiers through its territories. If these transits are ethically justified as supporting Finland in its Continuation War against the Soviet Union, then Swedish neutrality was admittedly as meaningful as being a non-belligerent during the Winter War. Sweden was then in effect an ally of Finland as well as the short-lived and monstrous thousand year Third Reich.

If Swedish policy vis a vis Nazi Germany is justified as *realpolitik*, then it is the same as admitting that neutrality presents a serious ethical problem. Neutrality is bared and made naked, exposed for what it is when stripped of its false morality: a self serving protective nationalist shield.

Those who continue to insist on Sweden maintaining “freedom of alliance” are either nationalists with a non-interventionist disposition, or those who think of themselves as ethically moored in peaceful proletariat justice (Vänsterpartiet). At best neutrality is an amoral position, and at worst it is an outright immoral practice. Those Social Democrats⁴⁴ who have not reconsidered their past foreign policy are in effect just good Swedes, failing to live up to their own ideals. They need to be reminded of their pragmatic internationalist roots. The remaining pockets of resistance on the left need to wake to the true implications of a neutral stance.

If people on the left of the political spectrum around the world have a Swedish hero then it is Olof Palme⁴⁵, who took a strident internationalist position that was distinctly anti-nationalist.

⁴³ Medlicott, William Norton. “[The Economic Blockade](#).” *United Kingdom*, H.M. Stationery Office, 1952, pp. 173-210.

⁴⁴ “Alliansfrihet.” *Socialdemokraterna*, <https://www.socialdemokraterna.se/var-politik/a-till-o/alliansfrihet>.

⁴⁵ Suhonen, Daniel. “[Today's Social Democrats Should Be More like Olof Palme](#).” *Jacobin*, 28 Feb. 2020.

Those who uphold Palme as a hero should in spirit follow his past examples, join the modern day Swedish Social Democrats, and publically take a moral stance against all forms of oppression by supporting Finland's and Sweden's application for NATO membership. This often means taking sides and risking one's own skin for far away places, even engaging militarily against overt international aggression.

I suppose the way the camel could be passed through the eye of the needle is by emphasizing active civil disobedience and non-violence. Palme is most known for his open support of resistance to Apartheid in South Africa, which culminated in Mandela's release and the subsequent reconciliation process. Albeit Mandela's release was after Palme's murder and he had little to do with Palme in the end.

I suppose in this pacifist view, Ukraine should have brought flowers to the Russian soldiers and then refused to fall in line. But non-violent disobedience really only works when there is a significant sympathetic wing amongst those who hold power, and the powerful are confronted with untenable contradictions between their stated beliefs and the reality of their actions. For example, it is untenable in the long run to be a Christian and yet flog your serfs for minor infractions. Or uphold that all men are created equal, and then carve out all sorts of exceptions based on erroneous claims. It's difficult to perform any meaningful civil disobedience as explosive Hyacinths and Peonies⁴⁶ rain down over your cities.

Those still mythologizing Sweden's past and finally jettisoned foreign policy should be reminded of Sweden's financial support of the Sandinistas, when facile and ill informed moral clarity led a Social Democratic government in Sweden to support the leftist junta led by Daniel Ortega⁴⁷. A continued policy of non-belligerence is a more apt description for Swedish foreign affairs than neutrality. The oxymoronic label "neutral ally" comes to mind that Great Britain imposed on Norway⁴⁸ during the Great War of 1914 to 1918. Notably, Norway's neutrality proved completely

⁴⁶ "[Explainer: Weapons Used in the Russia-Ukraine War](#)," *AP NEWS*, Associated Press, 4 Mar. 2022.

⁴⁷ Djurfeldt, Anders, and Klara Jamison Gromark. "[Sweden, Nicaragua and the Sandinistas: An Analysis of Swedish Foreign Policy on Nicaragua 1979-90](#)." Lund University, Department of Political Science.

⁴⁸ Tenold S. "[The First World War: The Neutral Ally](#)." *Norwegian Shipping in the 20th Century*, Palgrave Studies in Maritime Economics. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

ineffectual against the Germans desire to control the Atlantic coast along the Scandinavian Peninsula.

Neutrality is not what saved Sweden from a Soviet invasion during the Cold War. Those who experienced the so-called Great Patriotic War understood viscerally the brutality of war, and despite their glorified victory the defeat of the Third Reich came at enormous cost to their own and the next generation. Faced with a mutually assured destruction that was projected by NATO from member state Norway, Soviet decision makers stayed clear of Scandinavian and testing whether NATO would defend the whole peninsula and not just Norway. The closest the Soviets came were submarine incursion into Swedish coastal waters⁴⁹, and the regular Cold War taunting of sovereign airspace. The Soviets, fearful of another deadly European conflict, protected Sweden.

Swedes crassly – as observed by Mark Falcoff in 1984⁵⁰ – assumed NATO would militarily intervene if the Soviet Union ever did something so seemingly outlandish as invade Sweden. This assumption provided a false sense of security. What is more likely to have happened is what is actually happening in Ukraine. We are not standing by because we agree with Putin's inchoate narodni claims about a triune state, but because we fear an all out nuclear war. Putin has finally tested the limits of MADness in Europe and exposed the real nuclear impotence of NATO in projecting security even an inch beyond the territorial borders of its member states.

At the core of concerns should be whether Finland and Sweden are of any strategic importance beyond punishing countries for considering NATO membership. Here it needs to be stated that the Baltic Sea itself remains strategically crucial for Russia.

The control of Finland is a price in itself. St. Petersburg – a major metropolitan area and port city of around five million people – is located at the eastern end of the Gulf of Finland. To access the rest of the Baltic Sea, Russian ships have to pass between coast lines controlled by two other nations. Tallin, the capital of Estonia guards access on the south shore of the gulf, and the capital

⁴⁹ Rasmussen, Johannes Bach. "[Karlskrona, Sweden](#)." *Travel Guide, Traces of the Cold War Period : the Countries Around the Baltic Sea*, Nordic Council of Ministers, 2010, p. 215.

⁵⁰ Falcoff, Mark. "[Why Europeans Support the Sandinistas](#)." *Commentary Magazine*, Aug. 1987.

of Finland Helsinki guards the north shore of the passage. Whereas Russia once had Estonia in its bear claw, today Estonia is a prospering member of both the E.U. and NATO.

Sweden's land mass lies protected from Russia behind Finland. However, it is in some sense the crown jewel of the Baltic. Its 3,218 km long coast forms the entirety of the sea's west coast and the eastside of the narrow Kattegat, the straits that opens up onto the Atlantic. Its long coast makes it vulnerable to a massive amphibious assault. Once upon a time, the difficulty of an amphibious landing kept Scandinavia out of reach for Russia once Scandinavia's disparate and quarreling petty kingdoms coalesced into Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Today, such an attack can be supported by a brutal air campaign.

A conquest of Sweden by Russia may seem extremely dated, but so did a land war in central Europe only a year ago. If such a conquest were to happen, Russia would establish hegemony over a sea that has been central to its aspiration since the tsardom was declared. Russia would again not just touch on NATO territory here and there, but aggressively push up against the alliance like it did before the collapse of the Berlin wall.

Though Kaliningrad would still be an enclave, its territorial isolation from Russia would no longer matter as much since the Baltic would essentially be a Russian sea. This would be even more true if both Finland and Sweden were conquered. The hypothetical "Grand Duchy of Sweden" would be somewhat difficult to control without also having control of Finland. If Finland does join NATO, then Russia would become largely cut off from its conquered land by the Gulf of Finland, which is only 80 km wide where Tallinn looks north towards Helsinki. From a high vantage point in Tallinn one can literally see Helsinki on a clear day.

Sweden can rest a little more assured since its full conquest is probably not feasible without launching both an aerial and amphibious attack along with a land invasion through Finland⁵¹. Note that Russia is well suited for such an invasion given that it would take place through an

⁵¹ Rasmussen, Johannes Bach. "[Sweden](#)." *Travel Guide, Traces of the Cold War Period : the Countries Around the Baltic Sea*, Nordic Council of Ministers, 2010, p. 199.

equally or even more arctic landscape found along most of Russia's immense 24,140 km northern coast.

Russia has ample of natural resources it can tap into, and does not need Fennoscandinavian metal resources. However, Russia could aim to disrupt Europe's access to rare earth metals (RE)⁵² which are essential to modern technology, from cell phones to satellites. One of the more accessible untapped RE metals is located 300 km south of Stockholm⁵³. Russia has geostrategic reasons for knocking out Europe's ability to become independent of both its own emerging and China's well established and dominant market supply for RE metals⁵⁴. An invasion of Fennoscandinavia could deal a major blow to Europe's ability to wean itself off its RE metal dependence.

Russia has no leverage except for aggressive military action now that Putin has poisoned the well of its emerging markets. Given the value the Baltic Sea has to Russia, and the benefits Fennoscandia offers a Europe now weary of its outside economic dependencies, Russia has considerable incentive to strike. If Sweden and Finland were truly neutral and had no moral qualms about settling for the highest bidder, then perhaps their neutrality would offer some protection. But they are full fledged members of the EU, and in all but legally binding declarations they are both aligned with NATO. The lack of any legal international obligation to defend them puts Sweden and Finland in grave danger.

Conclusion

The entire political spectrum of Finland and Sweden is now united in pushing for quick accession to NATO. Sweden's Social Democrats were more laggardly in reversing their long time opposition to membership. Part of their reluctance to openly come out in favor of NATO

⁵² Goodenough, K. M., et al. "[Europe's Rare Earth Element Resource Potential](#)." Ore Geology Reviews, vol. 72, no. 1, Jan. 2016, pp. 838–856.

⁵³ Axel Sjöqvist. "[The Race for Rare Earth Elements: A Swedish Perspective](#)." Innovation News Network, 26 Jan. 2022.

⁵⁴ Home, Andy. "[Europe Races to Fix Its Rare Earths Import Dependency](#)." Reuters, Thomson Reuters, 11 Oct. 2021.

may have had to do with face saving and having to admit the oxymoronic position of being a neutral ally. Anderson's earlier statements about requiring a $\frac{3}{4}$ majority were discouraging and indicative of a deeper resistance amongst key members of the party to abandon the platform's commitment to freedom of alliance.

Of course, one has to ask, freedom of alliance with whom? The Soviet Union? Prussia? North Korea? NATO is by its Article 2 thoroughly committed to protecting the same democratic and liberal values that the Social Democrats espouse, and which always distinguished them from Sweden's openly Marxist party *Vänsterpartiet*. Though a military alliance is by nature not strictly pacifist, NATO was designed to keep future European aggressors in check.

The well reasoned concerns about direct intervention in Ukraine has demonstrated that only actual membership is effective. Putin has shown how foolish prior Cold War assumptions were that NATO cast a protective shield over the whole Scandinavian Peninsula. Despite that Norway - Sweden's sibling nation tied to it by the hip – is a member, no one should not assume that NATO would behave any differently vis à vis Sweden than Ukraine.

Citizens of Fennoscandia and others around the world need to understand how deeply *narodny* tendencies have permeated Russian thinking over the last two centuries. Simultaneously, there have been *zapadny* tendencies but these have failed to subdue the folkism of Russia's power center metaphorically represented by the Kremlin, a set of architectural structures which have in one form or another sociopolitically fortified Moscow since long before the existence of present day Russia.

Those still against Swedish membership in NATO beware. Do not rest on the false security that the landmass of Finland would buffer it from Russia. Even if Russia may not be able to complete a full conquest of Swedish territory, it's possible that Putin would preemptively engage in direct military hostilities to interrupt NATO's willingness to allow Sweden to become a member for fear of escalating the hostilities to full out nuclear war.

Europe is now split between nations whose membership will trigger Article 5 and those who won't if invaded. Once invaded – as happened in Ukraine – prior invitations to join NATO will instantly be revoked. Article 5 has yet to be tested if a nuclear power were to invade a NATO member. However, the sentiment that the rule of law – even international law – has to be upheld despite even the greatest threat still has strong traction in the United States and Europe.

We have to live with the threat of nuclear war if we are to protect ourselves against bellicose authoritarians who value not the relative clarity of the rule of law and established norms around rights and responsibilities, but instead uphold some arbitrary and amorphous ethnic superiority, sanctity of culture, and sense of predetermined narodny destiny. Wishing it weren't so doesn't help us.

Membership in NATO is fundamentally a defensive posture, and its nuclear armed members are loath to ever openly threaten this use of ultimate force. Compare this deep reluctance – which establishes their inability to project nuclear defense beyond the borders of member states – to the unveiled public threats coming out of the Kremlin.

It is egregious that Swedes of the past have assumed NATO would come to their defense despite Sweden's stated neutrality. Had it been true it might have been a sheepish way to circumvent having any reciprocal obligations, a sly hand of realpolitik. But Putin has shown that the calculus itself was incorrect. What is so utterly frustrating about Ukraine is that many of us who would support a no-fly zone balk at the proposal because we would be imposing it against a nuclear armed Russia.

Those who argue that NATO membership itself would provoke Russia and heighten risks of a conflict should realize that Putin has no qualms about initiating military action despite the risks. Now that Russia has little else to economically lose, the barrier for preemptive military action has been lowered. As long as Article 5 offers Finland and Sweden no protection, Putin is more likely than ever to strike. A full invasion may not be necessary. The mere declaration of war, a heavy military air campaign, and an invasion and occupation of Gotland and Åland would suffice for NATO to withdraw its willingness to accept the two Nordic countries into the alliance.

Finland gave early indications that they would join⁵⁵. They seem to better understand the threat they face, and have no desire to again be subjected to the Cold War strategy that became known as Finlandization⁵⁶. Despite Sweden having handed in its application for membership, opposition to NATO in Sweden remains strong amongst some key political quarters⁵⁷. Prime Minister Andersson began by opposing even discussing membership, then under the political pressure shifted to claiming such an important decision would require a three quarter majority in parliament. Fortunately, Andersson and the leadership of the Social Democratic party fully reversed themselves and came out with a resounding YES to NATO and a submission requesting membership.

Nonetheless, strong opposition remains from core constituencies of their party⁵⁸, and those around the world who have upheld past Swedish neutrality and the progressive policies of the Swedish Social Democrats as exemplary. I agree that membership would be one of the most important Swedish foreign policy shifts in half a century and arguably even more. But the shift is less drastic than may seem. Sweden has never fundamentally and constitutionally been based on a principle of neutrality. For good reason, it declared itself non-belligerent and not neutral in the Winter War. It already weighed membership in NATO as the alliance was first being formed. It supported the Sadinustas in opposition to the violation of international law when the U.S. lay mines in Nicaraguan waters.

Sweden's neutrality grew out of the freedom of alliance outlined in the party platform of the Social Democrats. Unlike Japan – which has foreign policy requirements written into its constitution – in Sweden neutrality is a political and not constitutional issue. This is why Andersson was simply wrong in her earlier claim about requiring a supermajority. Internally, who Sweden forms an alliance with is merely a matter of regular legislative and executive procedures subject to expedient circumstances. Importantly, there needs to be external support for Sweden's change of policy. With what has happened in Ukraine, recent incursions into

⁵⁵ Heikkilä, Melissa. "Finnish Lawmakers to Discuss Potential NATO Membership." POLITICO, POLITICO, 28 Feb. 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/article/finland-nato-membership-sanna-marin-ukraine-russia/>.

⁵⁶ Horowitz, Jason. "Finns Don't Wish 'Finlandization' on Ukraine (or Anyone)." *The New York Times*, 9 Feb. 2022.

⁵⁷ Nordgren, Richard. "Sossarna i Sverige Har Svårt Att Övertyga De Egna Om Nato." *HBL*, 4 May 2022.

⁵⁸ Fritzon, Henrik. "Natomedlemskap Dåligt För Sveriges Säkerhet." *Dagens Arena*, 5 May 2022.

Swedish airspace⁵⁹, and distorted and uncontextualized posters in Moscow about past Swedish Nazi sympathizers⁶⁰, the expedient need for an alliance with an ethically aligned set of partners should be more evident than ever.

What should be clear beyond any doubt based on Putin's inchoate historical claims, the rhetoric emanating from the Russian infosphere, and the indiscriminate and deadly bombing of Ukraine is that Sweden and Finland will only be safe as full members with the NATO community. The world community should join Swedes and Finns in supporting their NATO membership before Putin finds himself gambling his last remaining resources in an all out war against the last proximal non-NATO territories outside the scope of Article 5.

⁵⁹ Person. "Swedish Defence Minister Calls Russian Violation of Airspace 'Unacceptable'." *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 2 Mar. 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/swedish-armed-forces-says-russian-fighter-jets-violated-swedish-airspace-2022-03-02/>.

⁶⁰ Scally, Derek. "[Russian Posters Smear Famous Swedes as Nazi Supporters](#)." *The Irish Times*, 3 May 2022.