

MYTHIC HEROISM AS A BALM FOR PARANOID ANXIETY: PUTIN'S JUSTIFICATION FOR ANNEXING UKRAINIAN TERRITORY

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AN ANALYTIC EXTRA FOR STILLPOINT MAGAZINE

Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine. Jan 20, 2022. At this moment, more than 100,000 Russian troops, a thousand tanks, and hundreds of fighter jets are poised to invade on the Eastern borders of Ukraine, their proxy forces already occupying the Donbas region, 150 miles from here, and Crimea. It will become clear in the next weeks whether this buildup leads to a deeper invasion of Ukraine's sovereign territory or not. Regardless of the near-term outcome, powerful underlying psycho-historical dynamics will remain to be reckoned with.

Among the most insightful ideas brought to historical analysis by psychoanalysis are Vamik Volkan's concepts of *chosen traumas* and *chosen glories*, both of which are used to anchor what Volkan calls *entitlement ideologies*—ideologies used to justify violent state behavior, even genocides. *Chosen traumas* are renderings of historical events that allow political leaders to galvanize individuals into adopting a group identity and loyalty through an appeal to decisive historical wounds, mobilized to justify radical group action and sacrifice. *Chosen glories* center on heroic events that focus group identity around heroic transference figures, and in doing so ostensibly reveal a people's transcendent entitlement to a place. Volkan argues that the mental representations in group identification are scaffolded by *chosen glories*, traumas, and entitlement ideologies. My focus is especially on the unconscious dynamics, both collective and personal, activated within the process of personal identification with group traumas, glories, and entitlements.

To be clear, what psychoanalysis provides is not a geopolitical analysis, nor an international relations analysis. It does not result in answers to realpolitik questions of how economic and military power centers are likely to behave with respect to each other. What psychoanalysis *can* reveal, however, are unconscious fantasy mechanisms that state actors and charismatic leaders can activate in the individuals they govern, to emotionally manipulate them into tolerating, or supporting, state acts of aggression towards other groups of people. These unconscious mechanisms, while frequently activated by propaganda, are much more potent than merely propagating intentionally false or misleading factual information. Governments misleading people, as Noam Chomsky has spent a career exposing, is one thing; inducing them into frenzied fantasies of archetypal heroes versus evil forces is another. That is why obsessive fact-checking generally accomplishes little against propaganda. A fact-check is like tossing a bit of driftwood into a raging river, expecting it to stop the current.

CHOSEN TRAUMAS, CHOSEN GLORIES

Volkan provides a remarkable example of a *chosen trauma* in the case of Slobodan Milosevic's mobilization of Serbian Nationalism in 1989, which set the stage for the 1999 war between Serbs and Albanians. This war ultimately resulted in a NATO truce imposing the creation of a new, compromised nation-state, Kosovo. The passage is lengthy, but instructive enough to quote in its entirety:

Political leaders may initiate the reactivation of chosen traumas in order to fuel entitlement ideologies. The story of how Slobodan Milosevic allowed and supported the reappearance of the Serbian chosen trauma, the mental representation of the June 28, 1389 Battle of Kosovo is well documented. According to the myth that developed among the Serbs some 70 years after the Battle of Kosovo, the event and the Serbian characters of this battle, especially the Serbian leader Prince Lazar who was killed during the battle, mingled with elements and characters of Christianity. As decades passed, Prince Lazar became associated with Jesus Christ, and icons showing Lazar's representation in fact decorated many Serbian churches throughout the six centuries following the battle. Even during the communist period when the government discouraged hero worship, Serbs were able to drink (introject) a popular red wine called "Prince Lazar."

As the six-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo approached in 1989, with the permission and encouragement of Milosevic, Lazar's 600-year-old remains, which had been kept north of Belgrade, were placed in a coffin and taken over the course of the year to almost every Serb village and town, where they were received by huge crowds of mourners dressed in black. Again and again during this long journey, Lazar's remains were symbolically buried and reincarnated, until they were buried for good at the original battleground in Kosovo on June 28, 1989. On this day, the six-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, a helicopter brought Milosevic to the burial ground where a huge monument made of red stone symbolizing blood had been built. In the mythology, Prince Lazar had chosen the Kingdom of Heaven over the Kingdom of earth. By design, Milosevic descended from a helicopter, representing Prince Lazar coming to earth to find a new Kingdom, a Greater Serbia.

Thus Milosevic and his associates, by activating the mental representations of Lazar and the Battle of Kosovo, along with the peak emotions they generated, were able to create a year-long *"time collapse"*: *The perceptions, feelings, and expectations concerning a past hero and event were collapsed into the perceptions, feelings, and expectations about at a current "enemy," thus magnifying its threat.* Milosevic and his associates first encouraged a shared sense of victimization followed by a shared sense of entitlement for revenge. [emphasis added]

This mass manipulation was as masterful as it was diabolically effective, contributing on the Serbian side to their role in the mutual genocidal violence between Serbs and Albanians during the Kosovar War of 1998-1999. But Milosovic shouldn't necessarily be credited with diabolical brilliance, marinated as he was growing up in a Soviet propaganda milieu that had reached into almost every aspect of life for its subjects. Even the humble Christmas tree, for example, had been recast to service the transcendent state by the anti-religious campaign of the Bolsheviks. Although Peter the Great had brought that Christmas tradition back from his travels in Western Europe during the seventeenth century, it had always had a secondary association with the New Year since Orthodox Christmas falls after the New Year, on January seventh. It was therefore an easy matter for the Soviets to officially re-cast the Christmas tree as the New Year's tree, just as Christians had appropriated that originally pagan symbol. By enforcing such appropriations throughout society, the Soviets were able to relocate spiritual vitality, shifting it away from culture and religion and into the state. Indeed, the status of the Church was systematically appropriated to the state, and cathedrals became state office buildings or museums. To this day, New Year's Eve culminates in Russia with a hallowed, televised speech by the president, essentially taking the place of Christ, just before midnight—the savior who ushers in the re-birth of time under the auspices of the state. More concretely, Lenin's embalmed body lays on eternal display in Red Square, as if to manifest the transcendent life of the Bolshevik cause. From time immemorial, pharaohs, kings, and tyrants have tried to associate themselves with a transcendent realm so exalted that it justifies their subjects killing and dying for them.

This same kind of pseudo-spiritual obfuscation—an *entitlement ideology*—was laid out plainly in an essay published recently on the official Kremlin website, ostensibly by President Putin.

This statement provides a remarkably explicit rendition of *chosen traumas, glories, and enemies*, utilizing precisely the sort of “time collapse” that Volkan describes.

First of all, I would like to emphasize that *the wall that has emerged in recent years between Russia and Ukraine, between the parts of what is essentially the same historical and spiritual space, to my mind is our great common misfortune and tragedy*. These are, first and foremost, the consequences of our own mistakes made at different periods of time. But these are also the result of deliberate efforts by those forces that have always sought to undermine our unity. The formula they apply has been known from time immemorial—divide and rule. There is nothing new here. Hence, the attempts to play on the “national question” and sow discord among people, the overarching goal being to divide and then to pit the parts of a single people against one another.

To have a better understanding of the present and look into the future, we need to turn to history. Certainly, it is impossible to cover in this article all the developments that have taken place over more than a thousand years. But I will focus on the key, pivotal moments that are important for us to remember, both in Russia and Ukraine. [emphasis added]

Putin then proceeds to render his version of twelve centuries of history in defense of the notion that Russians and Ukrainians in fact inhabit a unified “historical and spiritual” space, but for the immoral aggression of outsiders through time—the Swedes, the Poles, the Mongol Hordes, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and of course, most recently, the vassals of the NATO West. In this way he aims to cast a spell of emotio-historical conviction that Russian action to reclaim Ukrainian territory is rightly motivated in terms of justice and, most importantly, spiritual truth. The spiritual dimension is critical because only when an empire or nation-state is perceived to be elevated to the transcendent realm that derives its authority from an ultimate reality does it trump all other moral compunctions and seem to justify actions of any kind, including the sacrifice of one’s own life, or one’s children’s lives, to its ends.

Putin’s assertion of historical, spiritual unity with Ukraine is intended both for an internal and an international audience. However, an appeal to more recent wounds has also been repeatedly emphasized to the internal Russian audience. For example, in his speech to the nation on 25 April, 2005, Putin asserted:

First and foremost it is worth acknowledging that the demise of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century. As for the Russian people, it became a genuine tragedy. Tens of millions of our co-citizens and compatriots found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory.¹

This quote presages the later use of reunification of the Russian diaspora as justification for the subsequent territorial annexations in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014).

If Milosevic psychologically linking events in 1989 to events from six hundred years prior seemed audacious, Putin collapses time even further—1100 years—to the tenth century in order to anchor his version of ultimate truth for today. This is a defining characteristic of establishing a *chosen* (historical) *trauma*—situating the (ostensibly) moral truth about present conflicts between groups of people by tunneling through time (time collapse) to an imagined past containing a yearned for heroism and mythic greatness found sorely wanting in the present. The heroic moment thus found through the time-collapse telescope serves multiple functions. First, the hero narrative centers and grounds a defining moment of truth. Second, hero figures immediately root the imagination in the mythological/archetypal realm. Third, this realm opens the door to even more powerful and highly charged emotional identifications.

When people feel deeply ashamed, weak, or helpless—effectively creating “narcissistic wounds”—they are prone to feel drawn towards vicarious identification with highly vaulted or otherwise powerful leaders.² When these leaders have succeeded in also positioning themselves as the bearers of a mythopoetically-absolute entitlement, the relief felt in liberation from narcissistic wounding through identification can achieve archetypal degrees of intensity. Jungian analysts call this *possession by an archetype*—a largely unconscious and supercharged illusion of mass co-participation in archetypal heroism, wherein a refuge in seeming narcissistic fulfillment is achieved. Thus Vladimir Putin wants to wrap himself in the legacy of tenth century Vladimir the Great.

The sad reality underlying populist or authoritarian fevers is that the people most vulnerable to them are precisely those who have felt most disempowered, overwhelmed, and with the least agency in their fate. The narcissistic relief of feeling identified with power or a transcendent meaning is a welcome reaction formation, even a manic defense against underlying fears, anxieties, and shame. The rise of Adolf Hitler in a downtrodden and desperate post-WWI Germany is widely taken as a commonsense example of such a process.

In Putin's and his ghost writers' attempt to make tenth century Vladimir the Great the ultimate heroic touchstone of the true Russia—and the tenth century Kingdom of Rus the defining framework for twenty-first century Russian State entitlement—what is the shame and insecurity for which relief is being offered? Most obviously, because it's most recent, it is indeed their oft-cited “catastrophic” collapse of the Soviet Union which reduced the grandiose Russian Soviet sphere from a vast empire of vassal states to today's much diminished Russian Federation, a shadow of its former Soviet self.

Looking more carefully back to the invocation of the tenth century origins suggest a core anxiety present in the Russian collective psyche. Left out of Putin's official narrative about Vladimir the Great and ancient Rus is the fact that tenth century Vladimir was not a Russian at all, not even a Slav. He was, in fact, a Viking overlord. This fact is well known among educated Russians, and often leads to sarcastic asides about how it took foreigners to bring some semblance of civil organization to the scattered, pagan tribes of ancient Rus. Underscoring this theme of intrinsic insufficiency, Katherine the Great, the eighteenth century monarch most responsible for expanding the reach of the Russian Empire, was born a German princess. A century earlier, Peter the Great, although actually Russian, felt the need to tour Western Europe for several years in order to understand how to modernize Russia—apparently he felt the wherewithal to modernize was not present at home. Even Joseph Stalin, the brutal architect of the modern Soviet State, was himself not Russian, but Georgian—Georgia having been under the control of the Russian Empire since the turn of the nineteenth century. The brutality of actual Russian leaders in Russian history, such as Ivan the Terrible, further underscores this theme of collective insecurity about the capacity for self-governance.

Even the philosophical roots of Russian Soviet Communism required appropriation and usurpation in order to suggest Russian ethnic origin. That is, Marxism clearly and unambiguously originated in the work of nineteenth century German Philosopher Karl Marx, though the official Soviet political doctrine was re-named Marxism-Leninism following Lenin's death in 1924. Although Lenin had contributed ideas for some alternative paths to revolution, he offered no fundamental revision to Marx's core dialectical materialist philosophy. Nonetheless, while there is one statue of Marx in Moscow, and in two or three other Russian cities, virtually every city in Russia, and across the entire reach of the Soviet Union, contained a looming, centrally located statue of Lenin, always with chin up and a faraway gaze as if seeing past the miseries of the present to some stern future destiny. Many in Eastern Europe were of course taken down after Perestroika. A more accurate representation might have been of Marx carrying Lenin on his shoulders, or of Lenin dragging a skeptical Marx along by the hand.

While it is factually true that the tenth century Kingdom of Rus was founded in Kyiv by Vladimir the Great, in what is now Ukraine, it hardly follows that this is the birth of a pan-Russian collective soul, unless one accepts that this soul was created by the act of non-Slavic, non-Russians and that its development has also largely been proctored by non-Russians.

To extend this deeply ironic theme one step further, Putin has cultivated a relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church since his ascent to power, suggesting that pan-slavic Orthodox Christianity is an indicator of this united spiritual history. While we will never know why Vladimir the Great actually chose Christianity over Islam, when both religions were lobbying this Viking pagan to become the Empire's religion, the apocryphal joke among Russians is that he chose Christianity so that he could continue to drink alcohol. This is beyond ironic in a culture in which vodka is the

most overt opiate of the people. One of Putin's first acts after Western sanctions were imposed following his 2004 annexation of parts of Georgia was to fix the price of vodka, so it was unfazed by the inflation that followed.

U N C H O S E N T R A U M A S

If some of the most important events in Russian history were shaped by non-Russian, Russian leaders, it presents a disturbing undercurrent of doubt in the Russian collective unconscious, doubt as to whether they have the intrinsic capacity to manage their own fate. This, along with their real history of slaughter and subjugation at the hands of the "Mongol Hordes" during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, enhances the tendency to view outsiders as dangerous, and to easily fall into a paranoid mindset. Not only have foreigners in fact been dangerous, but the insecurity about self-capacity can seem to be relieved by projecting an unacceptable defectiveness into the Other, in the form of perceived evil. Projection of a threat to the ego's self-esteem is the hallmark of paranoia.

In addition is the objective history that the vast majority of the Slavic populace, from the time of the Viking conquests onward, lived in state of virtual slavery: serfdom. Indeed, many were literally captured and enslaved in the Middle Ages, which is why the English word *slave* derives from *slav*. Serfdom itself was only finally outlawed during the nineteenth century in Russia. Totalitarian communism followed quickly thereafter, deftly sublating the residual serf mentality into the Bolshevik one; any sense of ancestral rootedness was virtually destroyed as property was seized, families dislocated, and genealogical pasts hidden or forgotten. Nation-state identity was substituted for ancestral identity. Putting all of these historical factors together reveals several dimensions of insecurity to defend against by projecting toward others presumed dangerous in this context.

Another *chosen glory* that Putin has been raising up and rehabilitating is the Great Patriotic War (World War II). I say rehabilitating because memories of the war cannot be entirely separated from memories of Joseph Stalin whose genocide of people of the Soviet Union dwarfed in numbers dead the German Holocaust of the Jews (twenty million vs. five million). Focusing on World War II serves multiple functions. Primarily it anchors the meta-narrative of the dangerous Others against whom there must be an ever-vigilant defense. Whitewashing Stalin's atrocities facilitates placing the locus of evil squarely on Others. No wonder the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation recently dismantled *Memorial*, a post-soviet civic organization dedicated to chronicling historical human right violations in the Soviet Union.

There is also a specific agenda with respect to Ukraine in sanitizing Stalin since one of its (obvious) collective traumas was the Holodomor, the Great—or "Terror"—Famine of 1932-33 that resulted in the death of approximately 3.5 million Ukrainians. This was on the one hand just a byproduct of Moscow's prioritization of its needs over the rest of the Soviet Union's inhabitants, but it was also a Stalinist retaliation against Ukrainian resistance to Soviet domination and cultural annihilation. This clear history of ethnic interests and identities in conflict stands as an inconvenient refutation of Putin's attempt to assert a unified twenty-first century ancient Rus soul.

Missing also from the standard Soviet history of the Great Patriotic War, and Putin's attempts to re-invigorate the populace's allegiance to a heroic version, is almost any mention of the involvement of Western forces in the defeat of Hitler's Germany. Reflecting on other glossed-over examples of non-Russian sources of Russian greatness—Vladimir the Great, Katherine the Great, Stalin himself—it's easy to imagine how a similar repressive impulse would occur in the context of World War II. It simply stirs up too much pre-existing dread to contemplate what the fate of Russia might have been had Hitler not been crippled by the simultaneous war in Western Europe. Whether there is a realistic historical counterfactual is not the point. The reason for omitting "help" from the West in the Russian WWII narrative is the longstanding and deep-rooted Russian fear of

vulnerability and ultimate inadequacy—despite the objective truth of the decisiveness of that help being well known to those in power at the end of the war. Acknowledgements of this reality by Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, and iconic war hero general Georgy Zhukov are all in the less public historical record.

Alongside the paranoid response—we know/feel that we are vulnerable, but this is unacceptable/terrifying; therefore we imagine/feel that we are strong and morally righteous while Others are corrupt and dangerous—is another primitive defense, the reaction formation, namely, turning an unacceptable feeling state into its opposite. Instead of “we are vulnerable or inadequate,” everyone else is vulnerable to our mighty power. This defensive ruse was displayed very blatantly, for example, when Khrushchev pounded his fists on the table and brandished his shoe in response to criticism during a United Nations conference. The display of seeming dangerousness and disrespect (shoe as symbol of lowliness and filth) belying fear and underlying low self-regard.

I M P L I C A T I O N S

Putin and his KGB/FSB scholars have crafted over decades a paranoid-heroic narrative that offers a negation of, and felt liberation from, the deepest of Russian psycho-cultural insecurities through identification with a heroism that is infused with the archetypal energies of power and transcendent meaning. They know well how intensely their own populace yearns for such a mental liberation after centuries of historical trauma—invasion, genocide, slavery, serfdom, and domination. The fantasized union with the transcendent Russian Soul in all of its chosen glory would be gratifying enough for many to sacrifice their own life and the lives of others. Starting from a position of helplessness in the historical sphere, giving oneself up to the One with historical power—Putin/Vladimir/Rus—through identification, restores a sense of agency, purpose, and freedom even if, in the final analysis, this is largely an illusion.

What Russia will do with Ukraine, time will tell. Since Putin and his advisors actually do have the power for choice in the matter, they could base their decisions primarily on reason. But it would be wise for their Western counterparts to bear in mind that as human actors, they too can be swayed by the very same paranoid insecurities they prey on in their subjects. If Putin does decide to invade Ukraine, the Russian people have been made ready to follow.

¹ Translation is mixed from two sources: <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna7632057> and <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.

² The use of narcissism here is in Kohut's sense of normal narcissism, which is essentially the idea of self-esteem and self-regard, which includes a sense of agency and effectiveness in the world.

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