Weaponizing History
Russia’s War in Ukraine and the Role of Historical Narratives

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Abstract

This paper deals with Weaponizing History in the Russo-Ukrainian War in diachronic perspective focusing on the events of 2014 and 2022. It shall be demonstrated that in 2014 it was medieval narratives that were the main focus: For instance, in the presidential speech addressed to the Federal Assembly on December 4, 2014, the annexation of Crimea was legitimized by the disputed “Korsun Legend”. This firmly established narrative has made it possible to proclaim Crimea to be the cradle of the Russian nation and a sacred place. In the recent war Putin invokes the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) which has been developed into a central place of remembrance in his regime and according to which Ukraine is to be denazified and delegitimized as a product of Bolshevism. It is significant to note that these narratives synchronize and harmonize rather well with one another in the collective historical consciousness of Russians.

Keywords
(ab)uses of historical memory – politicization of history – history wars – Russkiy Mir – Putinism – annexation of Crimea – Russo-Ukrainian War

Dedicated to Jasmin
1 Introduction

In his nineteenth welcoming speech at the traditional Victory Day parade on Red Square on May 9, 2022, the recent Russian war of aggression against Ukraine merged with the usual narrative of the Great Patriotic War in such a way that the latter—canonized as sacred in the historical consciousness of Russians—merely provided a backdrop for the actually important current war. Thus, Putin did not end his address with the usual holiday-related formula “Glory to the victorious nation! Happy Victory Day!”, but with the present-day appeal: “Glory to our heroic Armed Forces! For Russia! For Victory! Hooray!” Sociological and public opinion research suggest that the president had really struck a sympathetic chord with Russians. For example, in April 2022 between 70 and 75 percent of the respondents declared their support for the war against Ukraine. 71 percent were even proud of this war. In other words, most Russians see the current war as a just one. Embedding it in the narrative of the Great Patriotic War hit a real nerve with the nation, since the victory of May 9, 1945 is a fundamental pillar of Russian national pride. Opinion polls on the

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1 The Victory Day Parade was held for the first time on June 24, 1945 in Red Square. Between 1947 and 1965 the celebration was suspended in the form of a pompous parade. Since 1965 it has been celebrated annually on May 9. Since 2010 the military parade is accompanied by the Immortal Regiment march. Cf. M. Nemtsev, “How Russia’s Immortal Regiment Was Brought To Life.” https://www.ridl.io/en/how-russia-s-immortal-regiment-was-brought-to-life/?fbclid=IwAR2es-jg5g8vEPRitCj565Q_Oge2ceCWDVzKWFsCZ8b7LzOxT-nXNNEdVko, May 8, 2019 (accessed May 27, 2022).


7 Opinion polls show that of all historical events in Russian history, well over 80 percent of
The annexation of Crimea in March 2014 already showed that this is about nothing less than the realization of a historical consciousness based on pride in the heroic deeds of a great victorious nation. At that time, 81 percent of respondents saw it as the restoration of historical justice. The connection between war advocacy and historical consciousness exposes history in many ways as a weapon having a wide range of applications in the Putin regime. This historical consciousness is complex because it synthesizes different narratives that hark back to different periods in history as a whole and establishes them as a uniform historical grand narrative about a great multiethnic nation walking a heroic path full of privations, which nevertheless always leads to victory and glory. This unified grand narrative is completely devoid of a “historical shame”, the only exception being the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A particularly strong historical consciousness forms an important pillar of the Putin regime, which presents itself as the legitimate successor to the victorious and legitimate political leadership of the Russian state in different periods of history. In the past decade, the Putin regime paid great attention to cultivating historical consciousness and considered this weapon to be a strategic one. However, the armory is much older than the current regime. It was Josef Stalin who discovered history as a weapon. The appropriation of medieval history for a later legitimization of an illegal act of war in Crimea has parallels with Stalin’s restoration of Byzantine studies, which were banned in 1929. At that time, Byzantinists, who had not yet been repressed, were supposed to his-

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9 See e.g. J. Zajda, Globalisation and National Identity in History Textbooks. The Russian Federation (Dordrecht: Springer, 2017), ch. 1, 7.


11 In 1934 history as a school subject was reinstated at schools. Stalin sought to explain Russian historical overlordship over Constantinople and the historical territories of the Byzantine Empire. For this purpose, a number of imprisoned Byzantinists were rehabilitated. S.A. Ivanov, “The second Rome as seen by the third: Russian debates on “the Byzantine legacy.”” In The Reception of Byzantium in European Culture since 1500, eds. P. Marciniak and D.C. Smythe (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 55–80, here: pp. 60–67.
torically justify the recapture of Constantinople by Russia as the true heir to Byzantium. Thus, in Stalin’s expansionist plans of the late 1940s, history as a weapon turns out to be conceptually a continuation of Catherine the Great’s Greek Project. In the context of the annexation of Crimea, Putin also draws on this project by hijacking the Russo-Turkish War of 1787–1791 as a central place of memory. However, there is a significant divergence between Putin’s and Stalin’s politics of history, which is concentrated in their portrayals of the historical role of Lenin and the Bolshevisists. Especially in the context of the war against Ukraine, Lenin is a negative historical figure for Putin.

During the Soviet period, narratives were established that outlasted the Yeltsin era, although the state largely abandoned history as a weapon. Putin discovered this weapon during his first term (2000–2004)—although he did not utilize it back then—and monopolized it no later than during his third period in office (2012–2018). Since then, this weapon not only had to be kept safe and maintained. The regime also aims to turn it into a mass-produced good. Thus, it is not only Vladimir Putin as commander-in-chief of the Russian armed forces who uses history as a weapon, but ideally, every Russian citizen.

2 Methodological and Epistemological Reflections on the Term “Weaponizing History”

Special attention is to be paid when using the term “weaponizing history” as it may come across as vague, undifferentiated, or too one-dimensional. In fact, numerous publications on various historical periods speak of “history as

12 “To the Bolsheviks, Byzantium was one of the attributes of tsarism; more generally, for people of the new, avant-garde era, it became a symbol of everything dilapidated, moth-eaten and dusty. From the late 1920s through to the late 1930s, the very word ‘Byzantine’ was banned and was used only in quotation marks. Byzantine scholars became the targets of repressions; Vladimir Beneshevich, the most prominent among them, was executed. However, some 10 years later, Stalin’s imperial renaissance began, and Byzantium gradually made its return. In 1943, Byzantine Studies were reinstated by an administrative order. The Soviet leadership also revived the imperial ambitions of tsarist Russia: in 1946, Stalin laid territorial claims on Turkey. By 1947, the Byzantine renaissance in the USSR had reached its peak and then declined.” Cf. S.A. Ivanov, “The Second Rome as Seen by the Third: Russian Debates on ‘the Byzantine legacy’.” In The Reception of Byzantium in European Culture since 1500, eds. P. Marciniak and D.C. Smythe (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 55–80, here: p. 67.

a weapon” even in cases when history is not used as a legitimation for military offensive actions. Instead, it is used to refer to any kind of politics of history or construction of the past. This broad semanticization blurs the boundaries between instrumentalization and weaponization of history.

The term “instrumentalization” is semantically broader and has more neutral connotations. It is used, among other things, in the context of Westernization and the European integration of former countries of the Eastern bloc in the 1990s. Along the same lines, Turkish politics of history placed its emphasis on the Byzantine or Eastern Roman heritage in order to historically justify the country’s affiliation with Europe in the context of Turkey’s EU accession talks between Ankara and Brussels in the 2000s. In these contexts, history is instrumentalized for the creation of meaning and self-identification in a new geopolitical configuration. This kind of instrumentalization of history can also be observed in the Yeltsin era as well as in the first phase of the Putin era 2000–2008. It is therefore important to name the criteria that legitimize the term “Weaponizing History”. For this, we will refer to criteria that Edgar Wolfrum identified and worked out for German politics of history in the period between 1871 and 1990. According to Wolfrum, history is used as a weapon when legitimation for aggressive political decisions, mobilization and integra-

17 At that time, the politics of history in many eastern European countries were aimed at establishing historical narratives referring to a common European heritage. See e.g. S. Berger, “Writing National Histories in Europe: Reflections on the Past, Presents and Futures of a Tradition.” In Conflicted Memories. Europeanizing Contemporary Histories, eds. K.H. Jarausch and T. Lindenberger (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), 55–68.
18 See for instance A. Sarisakaloğlu, Europas Identität und die Türkei. Eine länderübergreifende Framing-Analyse der Mediendebatte über den EU-Beitritt der Türkei (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 86–87. However, it should be pointed out that the representation of the Byzantine Empire in Turkish history textbooks remained always negative. See K. Durak, “The representation of Byzantine history in high school textbooks in Turkey.” Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies 38 (2) (2014), 245–264.
tion of majorities and exclusion of minorities take place under the umbrella of politics of history claiming sovereignty over memory for itself.\textsuperscript{20}

Applied to the Putin regime, these criteria are met only after the annexation of Crimea\textsuperscript{21} and this is true for the legislation involving the stigmatization of opponents of the regime “misinterpreting” history, as well as for the development of unifying educational standards in schools and universities, and, not least, for the development of large-scale projects supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, such as the Russkiy Mir. The celebration of Victory Day on May 9 also correlates with the characteristics of Weaponizing History mentioned above. Taken together, these criteria have an enormous potential to promote real wars, literally turning history into a weapon.

3 Systemic Prerequisites for Putin’s Politics of History

The collapse of the USSR in December 1991 also saw the collapse of the education system in which the historical education of Soviet citizens was an important element.\textsuperscript{22} ‘Historical’ not only meant ‘patriotic’ but also ideologically adequate, i.e. educated in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism.\textsuperscript{23} This perpetuated the state monopoly on the interpretation of historical and political issues.\textsuperscript{24} A

\textsuperscript{20} For the present conceptual rendering of “Weaponizing History”, we will take the following characterization of history as a weapon by Edgar Wolfrum as a basis: “Geschichte wurde und wird als Waffe, als politisches Kampfmittel gegen innere und äussere Gegner eingesetzt [...] Geschichte—oder die Konstruktion von Vergangenheit—ist offenbar eine geeignete Mobilisierungsressource im politischen Kampf um Einfluß und Macht. Sie kann als Bindemittel dienen, um nationale, soziale oder andere Gruppen zu integrieren. Sie kann ausgrenzen, Gegner diffamieren und gleichzeitig das eigene Handeln legitimieren.” Cf. ibid., 5–6.


\textsuperscript{23} Marxism-Leninism was not only the ideological basis of all school curricula, but also a subject in which all university graduates had to pass a compulsory examination. Relevant chairs were omnipresent in the Soviet university landscape. For a brief introductory presentation see K. Weaver, Russia’s Future: The Communist Education of Soviet Youth (New York: Praeger, 1981) and J. Zajda, Education in the USSR (Oxford et al.: Pergamon Press, 1985). Zajda emphasizes that the officially declared aim of higher education in the USSR was “to train highly qualified specialists educated in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism.” Ibid, p. 94.

\textsuperscript{24} A.L. Litvin, Writing History in Twentieth-Century Russia: A View from Within (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).
complex system consisting of memory culture and historical narratives glorifying heroes from earlier periods was established. In many places, this shaped both the streetscape in the form of monuments and street names, the annual rhythm in the form of celebrations and national commemoration days, and it also shaped the view of history formed not only by history books but by a film industry and literature for young people geared towards a patriotic education.\textsuperscript{25} Youth organizations such as \textit{Young Pioneers} and \textit{Komsomol} supplemented this armory tasked with forging and fostering of a historical consciousness.\textsuperscript{26} Even years after this infrastructure ceased to exist, the historical consciousness generated by it continued to have an effect, which remained evident in the form of imperial nostalgia of Russians, regardless of gender and age.\textsuperscript{27} In the Yeltsin era, for example, a politics of history determined by the ideals of Perestroika and Glasnost was dominant only to a limited degree.\textsuperscript{28} On the one hand, the crimes of Stalinism were dealt with publicly, or on a large scale for the first time,\textsuperscript{29} while on the other hand, the influence of imperial communist ideology remained substantial, not only in the Duma but also in the nostalgic collective memory.\textsuperscript{30} This almost aporetic ambivalence is reflected in the significance of \textit{October Revolution Day} on the seventh of November which remained a non-working day after 1991 up to and including 2005.\textsuperscript{31} However, a new politics of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} F. Martínez, “To Whom Does History Belong? The Theatre of Memory in Post-Soviet Russia, Estonia and Georgia.” \textit{Anthropological Journal of European Cultures} 26 (2017), 98–127.
\item \textsuperscript{26} H. Pilkington, \textit{Russia’s Youth and its Culture. A nation’s constructors and constructed} (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 90–94.
\item \textsuperscript{27} R. Rabbia, “Russian Youth as Subject and Object of the 1990s “Memory War”.” In \textit{Youth and Memory in Europe. Defining the Past, Shaping the Future}, eds. F. Krawatzek and N. Friess (Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2022), 85–97, esp. 85–87.
\item \textsuperscript{28} I. de Keghel, \textit{Die Staatsymbole des neuen Russland. Traditionen-Integrationsstrategien-Identitätsdiskurse} (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2009), esp. 68–69.
\item \textsuperscript{29} R.W. Davies, \textit{Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era} (London: Macmillan, 1997), esp. 90–95.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Even after it was proclaimed one of the 17 Days of Military Honor, more particularly, The Day of the 1941 military parade on the Red Square in Moscow by the Federal Law of March 13, 1995 under the number 32-F3, it retained its original meaning and designation both in the collective memory and in everyday life in general. Cf. https://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/7640, March 13, 1995 (accessed June 15, 2022). The rededication of this date as the Day of Accord and Conciliation, which took place on November 7, 1996, did very little to change this. For President Yeltsin’s decree (ukaz) of November 7, 1996 see http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/10231, November 11, 1996 (accessed June 15, 2022). For a contextualization see e.g. O. Figes, \textit{A People’s Tragedy. The Russian Revolution 1891–1924. 100th Anniversary Edition} (London: The Bodley Head, 2017), XVI–XVII. For further reference see D.I. Gigauri, “Идеология и культура советского государства: к памяти Октябрьской Революции”
\end{itemize}
history in the Yeltsin era already contained important building blocks for the future imperial politics of history under Vladimir Putin, with these building blocks representing elements of the Russian Orthodox and Soviet Empires. It was on May 9, 1995 when the Victory Day was celebrated on a grand scale for the first time since 1991. At the same time, the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior was initiated as well. This is closely interlinked with the 1996 transfer of the remains of the Tsar’s family, killed in 1918, from Yekaterinburg to St. Petersburg and the canonization of Tsar Nicholas’s II family. In 1997, this cultural heritage culminated in the 850th anniversary of the capital.

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36 Originally consecrated on May 26, 1883, the Cathedral was rebuilt between 1995 and 2000 largely thanks to private donations. It was dedicated to the heroes of the Patriotic War of 1812 and was considered a symbol of the Tsarist regime after the October Revolution of 1917. Demolished in 1931, it was to make way for the never built Palace of the Soviets. The reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in the heart of Moscow was accompanied by a further appreciation of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). See for example T. Pagonis and A. Thornley, “Urban Development Projects in Moscow: Market/State Relations in the New Russia.” European Planning Studies 8 (2000), 751–766, esp. 757–760.

37 P. Gilbert, “The Canonization of Nicholas II.” https://tsarnicholas.org/2019/03/20/the-canonization-of-nicholas-ii/, March 20, 2019 (accessed June 17, 2022). The historical-political recourse to the Romanov dynasty correlated in the Yeltsin-era with the revival of the Cossacks and the (re)construction of military schools in which a patriotic education was to be ensured and the cultural heritage of old Russia to be resurrected and preserved. See e.g. https://yeltsin.ru/archive/act/37239/, July 12, 1996 (accessed June 17, 2022).
Moscow when Russia’s glorious history spanning vast periods of time was recapitulated and celebrated in a cross-epochal presentation. In this historical-political mode of operation, the question of the reunification of Russia and Crimea was raised at the end of the Yeltsin-era. This was primarily attributed to the then mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov. The perception of Ukraine as Russia’s little sister during this transformation period referred to both the Soviet era and the period of the Russian Empire.

From the perspective of the politics of history, the Yeltsin-era ended on December 12, 1999, 19 days before the handing over of power to Putin on New Year’s Eve with a now much-discussed history-philosophical essay by then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in Nezavisimaia Gazeta on the future of the Russian nation in the 21st century. In it, he anticipated his historical-political agenda by referring to values that will endure.

In 2000 already, Putin’s politics of history appeared as symbolic politics aimed at conveying imperial values to a largely nostalgic population. In that sense, on December 25, 2000, the reintroduction of the modified national anthem speaking of a ‘sacred state’ and an ‘age-old union of fraternal peoples’ indicated a translatio imperii:

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38 M. Glaser and I. Krivushin, Moscow’s Evolution as a Political Space. From Yuri Dolgorukiy to Sergei Sobyanin (Cham: Springer Nature, 2021), 56–58.
40 Symptomatic are terms ‘near abroad’ and ‘fraternal people’. See e.g. O. Shevel, “Russia and the Near Abroad.” Great Decisions 1 (2015), 1–16.
41 To summarize, it can be concluded that signs of an imperial image of history emerged in the Yeltsin-era with regard to the politics of history and the culture of memory. The historical consciousness that had been formed primarily in the Soviet era since Stalin proved stable even in times of democratization.
43 “It is very difficult to strive for conceptual breakthroughs in the main areas of life if there are no basic values around which the nation could rally. Patriotism, our history and religion, can and, of course, should become such basic values.” Quoted after R. Sakwa, op.cit., p. 163.
Russia is our sacred state ...
Be glorified, our free Fatherland,
The age-old union of fraternal peoples ...

The next historical-political milestone followed in 2005 and marked a re-semantization of the existing set of public holidays and commemoration days. With the introduction of the National Unity Day (Den’ narodnogoyedinstva) on November 4, 2005, Putin built on the Day of Moscow’s Liberation from Polish Invaders, introduced in 1649, as well as on the church festival of the Icon of Our Lady of Kazan. From then on, this day was to commemorate the liberation of Moscow from the Polish-Lithuanian invaders by the Russian opolchentsy (militiamen). This motif is part of the repertoire of Putin’s historically-conscious war rhetoric since 2014 in which the pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas region were also referred to as opolchentsy. With this term opolchentsy, a connection is made between the aforementioned Russian liberation struggle against the Polish-Lithuanian invaders in the early 17th century, the Patriotic War against Napoleon in 1812, the Great Patriotic War 1941–1945, and finally the war in Donbas. This creates an epoch-spanning metaphysical narrative of a holy war that Russia has been waging against external enemies for hundreds of years. Putin brought up this narrative in connection with the conspiracy myth of ‘the anti-Russia project’. On July 13, 2021, for example, during the Q&A session on his article On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians (July 12, 2021), he stated that ‘the anti-Russia project’ reaches far back into the past, thereby conceptualizing Poland and Lithuania especially as Russia’s historical and contemporary enemies.

49 In history textbooks, opolchentsy is used as a matter of course in this context. Cf. A.V. Torkunov, ed., Istoriia Rossii: Uchebnik dlia obshcheobrazovatel’nykh organizatsii v trekh chastakh (6–10 klass) (Moskva: Prosveshchenie, 2016).
50 *The [anti-Russia] project started back in the 17th and 18th centuries in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. It was later exploited by the Polish national movement and, before World War I, it was used by the Austro-Hungarian Empire ... So, it all started a long time ago, during the Middle Ages, and it continues to this very day. They are simply recycling old
However, this narrative also assumes Sweden to be an enemy defeated by Peter the Great during the Great Northern War. Based on this, Ukraine is conceptualized as Malorossiia (Little Russia) that always fought alongside Russia.51 The Kremlin leader’s recent historicizing rhetoric with reference to Peter the Great suggest that he understands the current Russian war of aggression against Ukraine as a continuation of a still ongoing centuries old holy war against ‘anti-Russia’ to reunite the ‘Russian Lands’.52 There can be no question that this directly threatens other countries, especially in the light of the current war against Ukraine. In his speech on May 9, 2022, Putin even invoked Russia’s historic armed forces who came together to fight the collective enemy.53 The way of the Weaponizing of History includes further components than those particular to a “hard military authoritarianism with the elements of nostalgic totalitarianism”.54 It is a transcendent or religious component that turns

51 “During the Great Northern War with Sweden, the people in Malorossia 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.” Russian Presidency, “Article by Vladimir Putin “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”,” http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181, July 12, 2021 (accessed June 10, 2022).

52 “[Peter the Great] was not taking away anything, he was not taking away anything, he was returning ... The areas around Lake Ladoga, where St Petersburg was founded. When he founded the new capital, none of the European countries recognised this territory as part of Russia; everyone recognised it as part of Sweden. However, from time immemorial, the Slavs lived there along with the Finno-Ugric peoples, and this territory was under Russia’s control. The same is true of the western direction, Narva and his first campaigns. Why would he go there? He was returning and reinforcing, that is what he was doing.” Russian Presidency, “Meeting with young entrepreneurs, engineers and scientists.” http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68606, June 9, 2022 (accessed June 11, 2022).

53 “The defense of our Motherland when its destiny was at stake has always been sacred. It was the feeling of true patriotism that Minin and Pozharsky’s militia stood up for the Fatherland, soldiers went on the offensive at the Borodino Field and fought the enemy outside Moscow and Leningrad, Kiev and Minsk, Stalingrad and Kursk, Sevastopol and Kharkov. Today, as in the past, you are fighting for our people in Donbass ...” Russian Presidency, “Victory Parade on Red Square. President of Russia—Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Federation Armed Forces Vladimir Putin attended a military parade marking the 77th anniversary of Victory in the 1941–1945 Great Patriotic War.” http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68366, May 9, 2022 (accessed May 30, 2022).

the concept of *Russkiy Mir*, as originally developed in 2007 for power politics, into a Holy Rus’, a community of a “triune people” comprising Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians sharing a common destiny.

The preconditions for this sophisticated Weaponizing of History, which emotionally reaches and mobilizes millions of Russians, are rooted in the earlier periods of Russian history. What made Putin’s politics of history such an effective weapon was the systemic organization of the related armory mentioned at the beginning. It was a series of laws that regulated speaking and writing about history and sanctioned overstepping the boundaries of what could be said with harsh penalties, including prison sentences. In addition, it was the Concept of a new educational and methodological complex for teaching national history that was implemented from 2013 to 2015 and the 2015 introduction of a so-called single history textbook—the only history textbook allowed. This was preceded by a commission from 2007 to 2008 led by Alexander Filipov which amended history education and introduced new textbooks. The textbook narrative on Russian history is always in line with that of the President. Finally, it is the development of a network of specialists comprising the Russian Historical Society (РГО) founded in 2012, a reincarnation of the Imperial Russian Historical Society (1866 to 1917), and the Russian Military Historical Society (РВГН).
When reflecting on Putin’s historical motivation for the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea in mid-March 2014, the danger of a teleological interpretation lurks always near. The assumption that President Putin may be “quite obsessed with history” is too tempting. In fact, Putin advocated the standardization of history textbooks at schools and universities as early as 2003. During the brief Medvedev interlude from 2008 to 2012, minor Memory Wars were already raging in which the Russian state claimed sovereignty over the interpretation of history in general and Ukrainian-Russian history in particular. In addition, the Memory Laws mentioned in the previous chapter belong to a contemporary historical context in which laws were also passed to strengthen the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), namely against blasphemy and to defend the feelings of the faithful (symptomatic of this was the political persecution of the feminist band Pussy Riot). Meanwhile, the foe image of Ukrainians as “neo-Nazi Banderites” had not yet been shaped in early 2014, nor was it foreseeable at the beginning of 2014 what kind of weaponry President Putin would resort to. The Great Patriotic War was only to be declared sacral on its 70th anniversary in 2015. Meanwhile, the instruments and the weaponry of a hybrid war, which included history as well as information, were ...

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63 Russian Presidency, “President Vladimir Putin said that it was unacceptable for textbooks on the history of Russia to be politicized at a meeting with history scholars at the Russian national library.” http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/29821, November 27, 2003 (accessed May 31, 2022).


ready for use at that time, when there were no signs of an attack on Ukraine’s sovereignty. Therefore, it seems reasonable to examine the Kremlin leader’s historicizing statements in a period of about half a year before and after the annexation of Crimea by macrohistorical means. The focus will be on three speeches delivered by Putin from September 19, 2013 (speech no. 1), March 18, 2014 (speech no. 2) and December 4, 2014 (speech no. 3). On the basis of the following three speeches by Putin, it will be shown microhistorically that the transition from instrumentalization to the weaponizing of history had not yet been completed in 2014. However, 2014 represents a macrohistorical turning point in the Russo-Ukrainian War in that essential elements of the increasing sacralization of Russia, the Great Patriotic War and the Putin

68 There was, however, no strategy for an engagement yet. It had arisen only situationally and sporadically from the events of the second half of February 2014, when Putin’s ally Viktor Yanukovich fled Kyiv on the night of February 21–22. See for example F.V. Mills, “Understanding the Euromaidan: The View from the Kremlin.” In Ukraine’s Euromaidan. Analyses of a Civil Revolution, eds. D.R. Marples and F.V. Mills (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2015), 239–259.


72 It should be noted that Putin favored a narrative based on the Middle Ages during the period in question, giving the impression that the choice was situational or contingent rather than preprogrammed. By comparing these speeches it can be demonstrated that the historicizing medieval narrative is used in a contrary way in speeches 1 and 3. In speech No. 1, Putin referred to the conventional historiographical concept of the formation and baptism of Old Rus, which corresponds to the mentioned Normanist theory. For the Normanist theory, see e.g. A.A. Selin, “Invitation of the Varangians” and “Invitation of the Swedes” in Russian History: Ideas of Early Historiography in Late Russian Medieval Society.” In Vers l’Orient et vers l’Occident. Regards croisés sur les dynamiques et les transferts culturels des Vikings à la Rous ancienne, eds. P. Bauduin and A.E. Musin (Caen: Presses universitaires de Caen, 2014), 397–406. Crimea played no role in it. In speech No. 2, delivered two days after the referendum in Crimea, he touched upon the highly contentious Korsun Legend, which was highly influential in the historiography of the 19th century and still is in Patriarch Kyrill’s recent theological program of the so-called Russkiy Mir. In Speech No. 3, in which the Kremlin leader reviewed the balance sheet for the year 2014, the Korsun Legend is in the forefront and forms the dominant historical narrative. Therefore, a rather conscious decision in favor of the Korsun Legend can be assumed for Putin’s History War in 2014. In speech No. 2, however, the medieval narrative is merely embedded in a historical narrative of the whole that seems rather amorphous. In consequence, a contingency hypothesis must be assumed, according to which Putin used history as a weapon spontaneously or sporadically in his speech of March 18, 2014.
regime as the protector of the Russkiy Mir become evident. Furthermore, the defamation of the supporters of the Euromaidan as neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites can already be observed in 2014. Different *modi operandi* for the historical legitimization of the annexation of Crimea and Russian influence on Ukraine emerged in 2014. These elements of Weaponizing History were to be expanded and established by the Putin regime in the following years.\(^7\) In 2013, this turn of events was not yet foreseeable. Thus, at the level of political communication, the following speeches represent the expansion of the limits of what can be said, the linguistic stigmatization of Ukraine, and the claim of sovereignty over the interpretation of history.

### 4.1 Putin’s Speech No. 1, Held in Valdai on September 19, 2013

Two months before the Euromaidan, President Putin delivered a speech at the tenth Annual Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club at Lake Valdai in Novgorod Region, which he opened with a tour d’horizon on the correlation of the choice of the location with the history of origins of Russia.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) In this context, a fusion of diverse narratives into a conglomerate can be observed very vividly in the iconography of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Kubinka near Moscow, which was consecrated on June 14, 2020. Cf. D.L. Hoffmann, “Introduction. The politics of commemoration in the Soviet Union and contemporary Russia.” In *The Memory of the Second World War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. D.L. Hoffmann (London/New York: Routledge, 2022), 3. This unites different historical stereotypes stemming from the Soviet era and representing Russia’s greatness as a military power and savior of the world from Nazism. The semiotics of this monument is intended to emotionally captivate visitors. For this purpose, an understandable and generally known visual language is chosen. Consider, for example, the depiction of the national and film hero Alexander Nevsky, who in the 1938 film production by Sergey Eisenstein has the last word in the form of a paraphrase from Matthew 26:52: “Go tell all in foreign that Russia lives! Those who come to us in peace will be welcome as a guest. But those who come to us sword in hand will die by the sword! On that Russia stands and forever will we stand!” Quoted after P. Eltsov, *The Long Telegram 2.0. A Neo-Kennanite Approach to Russia* (Lanham et al.: Lexington Books, 2020), 69. On Alexander Nevsky as a central figure in Russian collective memory, see J.V. Wertsch, “National Narratives and the Conservative Nature of Collective Memory.” *Neohelicon* 34 (2) (2007), 23–33, esp. 26–28. These words are found as an iconographic depiction in the mentioned cathedral in a central location next to the common Nevsky depiction.

\(^7\) “I hope that the place for your discussions, for our meetings is well chosen ... We are in the centre of Russia—not a geographical centre, but a spiritual one. [Novgorod Region] is a cradle of Russian statehood. Our outstanding historians believe and have analysed how the elements of Russian statehood came together right here. This is in the light of the fact that two great rivers—the Volkhov and Neva—acted as natural means of communication, providing a natural linkage at the time. And it was here that Russian statehood gradually began to emerge.” Russian Presidency, “Meeting of the Valdai International
It is significant that Putin did not refer to Khersones in the Crimea (as in later speeches) but to Old Ladoga (rendered in the official English version of this speech as ‘Novgorod Region’), located between the Volkhov and Neva rivers, as “a cradle of Russian statehood”. By doing so, he referred to the recent general opinion among medievalists regarding the origin of the Rus. This finding is to be considered important insofar as this Valdai speech can be characterized as programmatic for Putin’s politics of history. In it, he described the entire Russian history—extending over a thousand years by the medieval narrative—as being a part of Russian identity. Another important finding is the use of the terms “Kievan Rus” and “a common Dnieper baptistery” he referred to when underlining the oneness of Russia and Ukraine.

On that note, Putin drew on the common medievalist hypothesis that Prince Vladimir was baptized in Kyiv in 988 AD, and not in the Crimea. Therefore, at the end of 2013, he had not yet opted for the Crimea-related Korsun Legend for the baptism of Prince Vladimir. Then again, he used the term “Kievan Rus”, which has been more common since the Soviet period, to refer to the Old


76 Only six months earlier, at the Meeting of the Council for Interethnic Relations, held at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center under his chairmanship, Putin ordered the creation of common history textbooks. These should contain “a single concept and follow a single logic of continuous Russian history” so that “respect towards all the episodes of our past” is taught in schools. This finding also supports the contingency thesis with regard to Putin’s politics of history in late 2013 and early 2014. Cf. Russian Presidency, “Meeting of Council for Interethnic Relations.” http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17536, February 19, 2013 (accessed June 1, 2022).

77 “We must be proud of our history, and we have things to be proud of. Our entire, uncensored history must be a part of Russian identity.” Russian Presidency, “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club.” http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243, September 19, 2013 (accessed June 6, 2022).

78 “Ukraine, without a doubt, is an independent state. That is how history has unfolded. But let’s not forget that today’s Russian statehood has roots in the Dnieper; as we say, we have a common Dnieper baptistery. Kievan Rus started out as the foundation of the enormous future Russian state. We have common traditions, a common mentality, a common history and a common culture. We have very similar languages. In that respect … we are one people.” Ibid.


Noticeably enough, this term was removed from usage in 2014. Both history textbooks and social media, such as Wikipedia, have since used the term “Old” or “Ancient Rus” exclusively. This finding also speaks for a situational decision by Putin, which led to a cunning history war against Ukraine only in the wake of the annexation of the Crimea.

4.2 Putin’s Speech No. 2, Held in the Kremlin on March 18, 2014

Two days after the controversial referendum in Crimea setting the final seal on the reunification of the Ukrainian peninsula with the Russian Federation, Putin delivered a speech that preceded the annexation of Crimea in the following days and historically legitimized this act. There are some indications that the authors of the speech may have wanted to put forward all historical arguments to legitimize the “Heimkehr” of Crimea. For instance, the Holy Great Prince Vladimir, Equal of the Apostles, is found right next to the Black Sea Fleet and the graves of Russian soldiers from the Russo-Turkish war (1787–1791), from the Crimean war (1853–1856), and from the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), which had not yet been declared sacred in 2014, but which has nevertheless always formed the basis of Russian national pride.

In this speech, two central narratives emerged, now playing a central role in various stages of the Russo-Ukrainian War. During the first stages of the

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83 The historical part takes up about 10 percent of the whole speech, and the medieval narrative is not in the forefront, unlike in speech No. 1; it is rather closely integrated into a conglomerate with locations of shared memory—especially those of the 20th century.

84 “Everything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride. This is the location of ancient Khersones, where Prince Vladimir was baptised. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. The graves of Russian soldiers whose bravery brought Crimea into the Russian empire are also in Crimea. This is also Sevastopol—a legendary city with an outstanding history, a fortress that serves as the birthplace of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet. Crimea is Balaklava and Kerch, Malakhov Kurgan and Sapun Ridge. Each one of these places is dear to our hearts, symbolising Russian military glory and outstanding valour.” Russian Presidency, “Address by President of the Russian Federation.” http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603, March 18, 2014 (accessed June 4, 2022).

85 From the Ukrainian point of view, the Russo-Ukrainian War began with the annexation of Crimea in violation of international law and was further perpetuated in the Donbas
war, the medieval narrative was predominant, with the shift in emphasis from the conventional narrative of Prince Vladimir’s baptism in Kyiv to the Crimea-related Korsun Legend. The reasons for why the medieval narrative of 2014 is unsuitable for the 2022 war of conquest against Ukraine. Immediately following the annexation of Crimea, the medieval narrative was used for a further expansion of the political theology of *Russkiy Mir*. In the official statements of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia—who exercised his authority as pastor over Kyiv until the schism of 2018—86—the phrase “the territory of Ancient Rus” in particular was consistently used to designate the three fraternal peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.87 The term Kyivan Rus, still used by Putin in Speech No. 1, has since been consistently avoided. Instead, Prince Vladimir is claimed to be Vladimir Putin’s predecessor and role model whose work began a thousand years ago and which Putin is now to continue on the “territory of Ancient Rus” with the ultimate aim of achieving a “great Eurasian state”.88 In Kirill’s view this “great Eurasian state” is based on “the spiritual unity of brotherly peoples”, namely those of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. In this historical-political concept, the war against Ukraine, which in 2014 shifted to the Donbas, was in the view of the Russian Orthodox Church nothing more than “an internal feud” analogous to the period of feuds of the 12th and 13th centuries in Old Rus.89

The significance of the medieval narrative was systematically strengthened and increased in the communication between the national leader Putin and Patriarch Kirill with a publicly great impact between 2014 and 2021, culminating in a direct comparison of the two Vladimirs who became more and more similar to each other in this discourse.90

88 Ibid.
89 “We pray for Ukraine; it is a source of great sorrow for us. We say a special prayer for peace in Ukraine during every Sunday service and at celebratory liturgies. We are calling this an internal feud; this is exactly the kind of infighting that took place in ancient times.” Russian Presidency, “Meeting with members of the Holy Synod and representatives of local Orthodox Churches.” http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46247, July 18, 2014 (accessed June 19, 2022).
90 “Being named in honour of the Baptist of Rus’ is certainly an honour and a responsibil-
In the logic of this ‘memory theater’, it was now up to national leader Vladimir Putin to follow in the footsteps of his namesake, the Holy Prince Vladimir. In Putin’s speeches, this medieval ruler is presented not only as “the spiritual founder of the Russian state”, but also as a “national leader and warrior”. In this medieval narrative, Prince Vladimir fought as a warrior against external enemies, but not against fraternal peoples. He created a united state in which he established “the common spiritual source for the peoples of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine” for different tribes on the territory of Old Rus by “the holy Christening at the ancient city of Khersones” in Crimea and made of them “one big family”. Escalating the war against Ukraine to a war of conquest on February 24, 2022 does not fit this medieval narrative of a family comprising Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians, a brotherhood of Eastern Slavic peoples led by a Christian ruler put on a level with a Saint, Prince Vladimir. Although it was the medieval narrative that dominated Putin’s speeches in 2014, he opted to use other narratives at that time already which later became important—most notably the neo-Nazi narrative. The neo-Nazi or Banderites-narrative, serving as the historical basis of legitimacy in the current phase of the Russo-Ukrainian war was also articulated in parts in speech No. 2. In characterizing the Euromaidan, various lexemes with pejorative overtones such as nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes, and anti-Semites were taken off the shelf of resentments against the so-called zapadentsy, literally speaking of Western Ukrainians who were considered collaborators of Nazi Germany in Soviet historiography. As a result, Ukrainians who peacefully gathered on Euromaidan in November 2013 were stigmatized as “the militants on Maidan”. As “heirs of Bandera, Hitler’s accomplice during World War II”, they were in charge of Ukraine and were causing the population to bleed dry through “terror, murder and riots” with the help of “foreign sponsors”. By activating the old Soviet places of memory, this conspiracy myth made it possible to use Bandera as a pars pro toto for a Western-oriented Ukraine as a highly efficient narrative.

91 For the term, see e.g. P. Matussek, “Memory Theatre in the Digital Age.” Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts 17 (2012), 8–15.
93 Ibid.

JOURNAL OF APPLIED HISTORY 4 (2022) 102–125
4.3  Putin’s Speech No. 3, Held in the Kremlin on December 4, 2014

On December 4, Vladimir Putin delivered his annual State of the Nation address, the most important part of which built upon metaphysical arguments for the annexation of Crimea and, indirectly, for the war in Donbas that has been raging since April 2014. Based on the idea of Holy Rus’, Putin reactivated this idea in the context of the “historical reunification of Crimea with Russia.” At the same time and according to Putin, this reunification represents “the indivisibility and integrity of the thousand-year long history” of Russia. Referring to the Korsun Legend, Putin reproduces analogous narratives from the second half of the 19th century. Khersones, or Korsun in the Crimea was thus declared a holy place where Prince Vladimir was baptized in 988 AD.

By declaring Khersones a holy place, Putin became one more in a long list of slavophiles, however, he took a step further when he associated Khersones with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Putin presents himself as the new Holy Prince Vladimir, who represents Christian values and stands on the side of God. The imagined enemy, by contrast, “the Euro-Atlantic countries”, are on the side of Satan in this view of history.

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98 “… Christianity was a powerful spiritual unifying force that helped involve various tribes and tribal unions of the vast Eastern Slavic world in the creation of a Russian nation and Russian state. It was thanks to this spiritual unity that our forefathers for the first time and forevermore saw themselves as a united nation. All of this allows us to say that Crimea, the ancient Korsun or Chersonesus, and Sevastopol have invaluable civilizational and even sacral importance for Russia, like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem for the followers of Islam and Judaism. And this is how we will always consider it.” Russian Presidency, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly.” http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/47173, December 4, 2014 (accessed June 12, 2022).
99 In the spirit of a medieval narrative of a ruler by divine right.
100 “We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values … They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.” This quote is taken from speech No. 1 (see above).
This particular pseudo-theological narrative was set in stone with the 2020 construction of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, a temple of holy war—then, at the latest, a theologically nourished war cult feeding its charm from the Russians’ Memory Theater can be assumed.

In conclusion, it is possible to state that already in 2014, the Kremlin leader’s language contained many elements of Weaponizing History, as they appear in his speech of February 24, 2022 announcing the start of the so-called Special Military Operation or in his recent speech on the annexation of four additional Ukrainian territories on September 30, 2022. However, the analysis of these speeches does not show a linear, purposeful progression, but shows signs of some breaks and changes. In March 2014, Putin situationally replaced the medieval narrative with the Great Patriotic War narrative, only to return to the medieval narrative (already chosen in 2013) at the end of 2014. The annexation of Crimea was to be presented not as a victory against the Banderites, but as a redemption of the historical legacy of the Kyivan Rus. As a consequence, Putin’s instrumentalization of history shows breaks and changes that suggest rather situativity and arbitrariness—at least when it comes to the year of the annexation of Crimea. Analyzing his Victory Day speeches on May 9 confirms this conclusion: neither in 2015, nor in 2016, nor in 2017 did Putin talk about history or Ukraine.101 In fact, his rhetoric does not change until 2018, when the Kremlin leader began to present himself as the guardian of history which was allegedly falsified by enemies.102 In this new role, he created a synthesis of medieval narratives, the sacralization of the Great Patriotic War, and the delegitimization of Ukraine as a bulwark of neo-Nazism.103 Nevertheless, this conglomerate seemed contingent and situational until February 24, 2022 when Putin now put forward the denazification and demilitarization of the neighboring state as reasons for the special operation.

101 See the relevant stenographs on the Kremlin leader’s website.
103 This conglomerate was presented in this form in Putin’s address on May 9, 2021. Cf. Russian Presidency, “Victory Parade on Red Square.” https://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/keywords/117/events/65544, May 9, 2021 (accessed October 1, 2022). Since then, this has had few variants and remains repetitive throughout.
5 Results and Future Outlook

In analyzing the recent politics of history in the Putin regime and its significance for the Russo-Ukrainian war, a system theoretically-oriented modus operandi appeared to be useful. Thus, we were able to show that the preconditions for the use of history as a weapon can be found not only in the Soviet era of Russia’s political history, but also in the short period of democratization under Boris Yeltsin. Meanwhile, the repertoire of the construction of the past goes back in part to the interpretation of history by the late slavophiles. This is especially represented by Vladimir Putin’s reception of the philosopher Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954). Thus, the historical repertoire is heterogeneous and in part contains disparate elements. As we have demonstrated with the micro-historical analysis of Putin’s speeches immediately before and after the annexation of Crimea, Putin’s handling of this repertoire was contingent and situational. A clear historical-political line, or a leitmotif, is not recognizable. Regarding institutions and legislation, however, mechanisms were created and optimized over a long period of time, beginning with Putin’s first term of office that enabled the use of history as a weapon at the political and state level. However, the systematization and standardization of the historical narrative did not take place until shortly before Russia’s large-scale war of aggression against Ukraine.

In the most recent phase of the Russo-Ukrainian War, a shift of emphasis within the historical narrative can be observed. The medieval narrative with which the idea of the “triune people” was generated disappeared in the thicket of the 20th century in Putin’s 2022 speeches. The thousand year old unity of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians was deemed unsuitable for a war of conquest—this had to be legitimated internally and externally.

In his address to the nation of February 21, 2022, Putin drew on Lenin’s Ukraine policy and referred to modern Ukraine in express terms as “Vladimir Lenin’s Ukraine.” In this historical degradation of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, there is a considerable break with Stalin’s historical policy, which has already been referred to in the course of this article. Unlike Prince Vladimir, Peter the

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104 Cf. T. Snyder, The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), esp. 16–32.
Great, or Joseph Stalin, Lenin is not Putin’s hero, but is considered a disintegrator of the Russian Tsarist Empire both in history textbooks and in official historiography. Nikita Khrushchev, who has been pejoratively referred to as Kukurusnik (advocate of maize) since the late 1950s by the public at large, has also always been disliked by most Russians. He became all the more suitable for the role of the second founder of an illegitimate Ukraine.

It is evident that even the narrative of the Great Patriotic War has remained peripheral in 2022 as the only still visible historical narrative. The traumatic date of June 22, 1941 acts as a mistake that must not be repeated, which is why Russia should commence the “special military operation” preemptively. This “special operation” is directed against “neo-Nazis and Banderites backed by the United States and their minions.” In this explication of the collective enemy, the deeply ingrained anti-Americanism of many Russians merges with ‘ethno-nationalism’ or ‘imperial nationalism’. At the same time, the

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110 “… in 1954, Khrushchev took Crimea away from Russia for some reason and also gave it to Ukraine. In effect, this is how the territory of modern Ukraine was formed.” Russian Presidency, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation.” https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828, February 21, 2022 (accessed May 2, 2022).
116 See for example P. Kolsto and H. Blakkisrud, eds., The New Russian Nationalism. Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism 2000–2015 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016). These terms are becoming more and more common in describing Putinism in a nutshell. Nationalism in the sense of xenophobia and a (post-)imperial syndrome has always been deeply rooted in Russian society; its government support and utilization in the sense of ideas with a well-defined formal unity, however, represents a phenomenon that has only become established under Putin’s third term (2012–2018). Cf. Ibid., ch. 8.
“collective West” appears as the “empire of lies” according to this worldview and thus represents an incarnation of evil, which to fight ought to be downright a mission pleasing to God.

Seen from such an angle, this war waged by Putin and his army against the Ukrainian people, represents a proxy war against Western civilization, to which Russia historically belongs. Whether it will, and can ever belong to it again remains to be hoped. This, however, seems rather unlikely without coming to terms with history in the same responsible way first as has been done in post-war Germany.

The fact that Weaponizing History—despite the many years of effort that did not spare resources—did not prove successful in the mobilization of Russian reservists announced on September 21, 2022 after all raises the question about the efficiency and limits of the politics of history in the Putin regime, which nevertheless continues to focus its attention on the historical-patriotic education of the youth, who are to be educated in the historical consciousness outlined in the present article. In the end, the question remains open what impact a regime change will have and whether a new leadership can achieve the desired objective of steering the Russian youth into the right channels—in either a positive or negative respect.


119 The partial mobilization generated an outright wave of flight. Thus, hundreds of thousands of men who could potentially be mobilized or who have received a summons to mobilize have already left Russia. Cf. F. Light, “Russian men take the long road out to escape mobilisation.” http://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russian-men-take-long-road-out-to-escape-mobilisation-2022-10-04/, October 4, 2022 (accessed October 4, 2022).

120 The Kremlin leader underlined this at a meeting with the winners and finalists of the Teacher of the Year contest on October 5, 2022 when he proclaimed: “I would like to thank once again teachers across all generations who have taught their pupils values such as conscience, honour and duty, staying true to your roots, your past, being responsible for your homeland and ready to help it, and defend your Fatherland. The soldiers and officers serving in the Russian Army, as well as volunteers and militia in the heroic Donbass region who are fighting for our right, and for their right, to choose their own development path, were brought up with these timeless values.” Cf. Russian Presidency, “Meeting with the winners and finalists of the Teacher of the Year contest.” https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69519, October 5, 2022 (accessed October 5, 2022).