

HISTORY | MARCH 4, 2022

## The 20th-Century History Behind Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

During WWII, Ukrainian nationalists saw the Nazis as liberators from Soviet oppression. Now, Russia is using that chapter to paint Ukraine as a Nazi nation



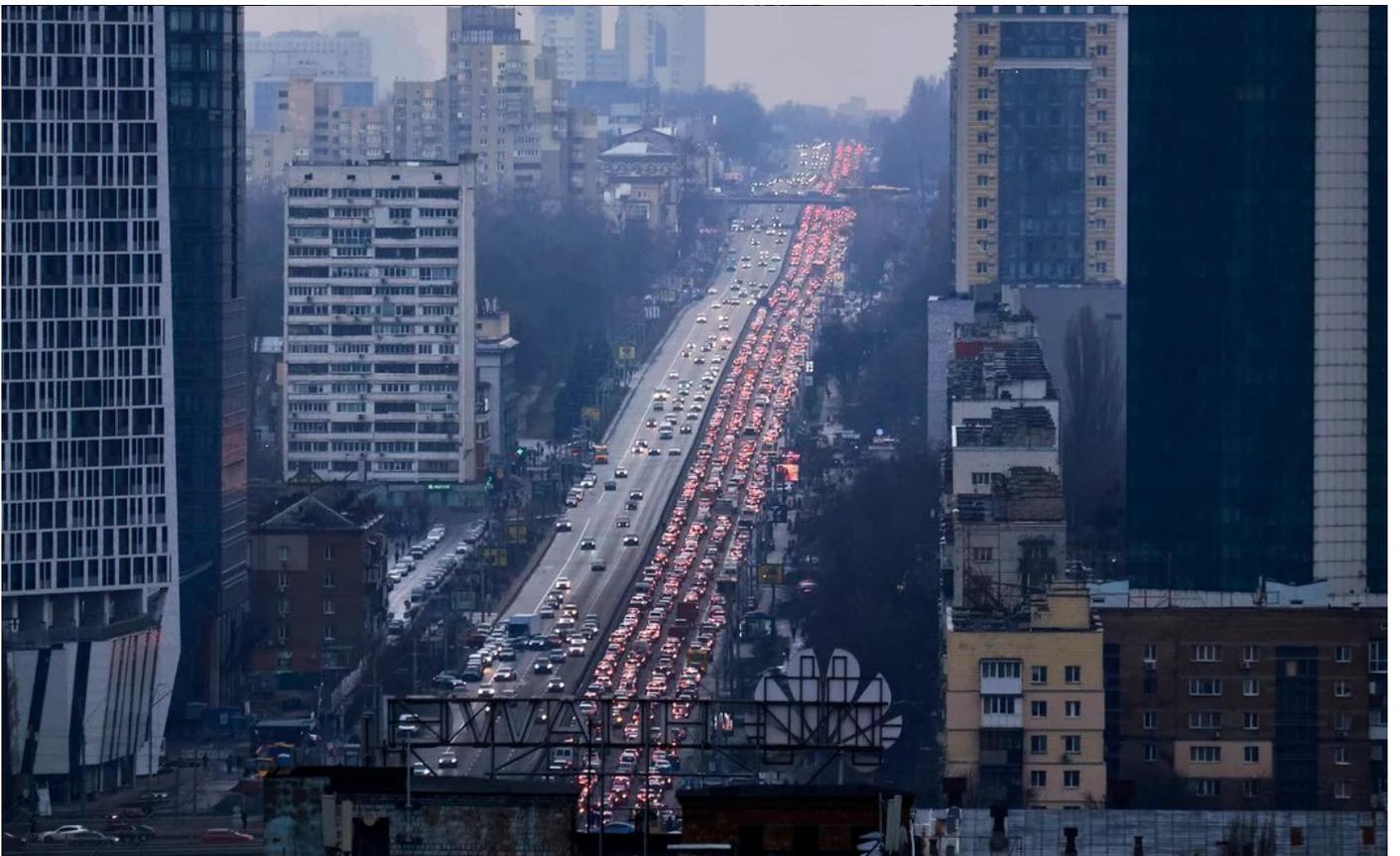
The debate over how to remember Ukraine's World War II history, as well as its implications for Ukrainian nationalism and independence, is key to understanding the current conflict. Photo by S. Khoroshko / Slava Katamidze Collection / Getty Images

second-largest city, Kharkiv, Russian President Vladimir Putin shared some choice words.

In an [essay published](#) on the Kremlin's website in Russian, Ukrainian and English last July, Putin credited Soviet leaders with inventing a Ukrainian republic within the Soviet Union in 1922, forging a [fictitious state](#) unworthy of [sovereignty](#), out of historically [Russian territory](#). After Ukraine declared its independence in 1991, the president argued, Ukrainian leaders "began to mythologize and rewrite history, edit out everything that united [Russia and Ukraine], and refer to the period when Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union as an occupation."



The "historical reality" of modern-day Ukraine is more complex than Putin's version of events, encompassing "a thousand-year history of changing religions, borders and peoples," according to the [New York Times](#). "[M]any conquests by warring factions and Ukraine's diverse geography ... created a complex fabric of multiethnic states."



Over the [centuries](#), the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, Poland, and Lithuania have all wielded jurisdiction over Ukraine, which first asserted its modern independence in 1917, with the formation of the [Ukrainian People's Republic](#). Russia soon wrested back control of Ukraine, making it part of the newly established Soviet Union and retaining power in the region until World War II, when Germany invaded. The debate over how to remember this wartime history, as well as its implications for Ukrainian nationalism and independence, is key to understanding the current conflict.

In Putin's telling, the modern Ukrainian independence movement began not in 1917 but during World War II. Under the [German occupation](#) of Ukraine, between 1941 and 1944, some Ukrainian independence fighters [aligned themselves](#) with the Nazis, whom they viewed as [saviors](#) from Soviet oppression. Putin has drawn on this period in history to portray any Ukrainian push for sovereignty as a Nazi endeavor, says Markian Dobczansky, a historian at Harvard University's [Ukrainian Research Institute](#). "It's really just a stunningly cynical attempt to fight an information war and influence people's opinions," he adds.

Dobczansky is among a group of scholars who have [publicly challenged](#) Putin's version of the Nazi occupation of Ukraine and the years of Soviet rule it's sandwiched between. Almost all of these experts begin their accounts with the fall of the Russian Empire, when tens of thousands of Ukrainians fought against the Bolshevik Red Army to establish the Ukrainian People's Republic. Ukrainians continued to [fight for independence](#) until 1922, when they were defeated by the Soviets and became the Ukrainian Soviet Republic of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.). By leaving out Ukraine's short-lived but hard-fought period of independence in the early 20th century, Putin overlooks the country's sovereignty, says Dobczansky.



Also omitted from this version of events are the genocide and suppression that took place under Soviet rule—most famously the Great Famine. [Holodomor](#), which fuses the Ukrainian words for starvation and inflicting death, claimed the lives of around [3.9 million](#) people, or approximately [13 percent](#) of the Ukrainian population, in the early 1930s. A human-made famine, it was the direct result of Soviet policies aimed at punishing Ukrainian farmers who fought Soviet mandates to collectivize. The Soviets also waged an intense “[Russification](#)” campaign, persecuting Ukraine’s cultural elite and elevating Russian language and culture above all others.

When Germany invaded in 1941, some Ukrainians, especially those in western Ukraine, saw them as liberators, says [Oxana Shevel](#), a political scientist at Tufts University. The Ukrainians didn’t particularly want to live under the Germans so much as escape the Soviets, adds Shevel, who is the president of the nonprofit educational organization [American Association for Ukrainian Studies](#).

“The broader objective was to establish an independent state, but in the process, [Ukrainians] also engaged in participation in the [Holocaust](#),” she says.

The question for Shevel is how to treat this history. From the Soviet point of view that Putin still embraces, it’s simple, she says: The Holocaust aside, [Ukrainian nationalists](#) were “bad guys” because “they fought the Soviet state.” Putin and other critics often draw on Ukrainians’ wartime collaboration with the Nazis to baselessly characterize the modern country as a [Nazi nation](#); in a February 24 speech, the Russian president [deemed](#) the “demilitarization and de-Nazification of Ukraine” key goals of the invasion.



Locals erect huge anti-tank traps during the Nazi invasion of Ukraine in 1941. Photo by Bettmann Archive via Getty Images

From the Ukrainian side of the debate, the country's wartime history is more complex. Are the nationalists "bad guys" because they participated in the Holocaust, Shevel asks, or "good guys" because they fought for independence?

For Putin, even raising this question is inflammatory. "Any kind of reevaluation of the Soviet treatment of history is what Putin would consider [a] Nazi approach or Nazification," says Shevel.

To deny the claim that Ukraine is a [Nazi state](#) isn't to downplay the Nazis' wartime actions in Ukraine. [Natalie Belsky](#), a historian at the University of Minnesota Duluth, points out that one of the biggest massacres of the Holocaust took place just outside of Kyiv. Between 1941 and 1943, the Nazis—aided by local [collaborators](#)—shot around 70,000 to [100,000](#) people, many of them Jews, at [Babyn Yar](#), a ravine on the outskirts of Kyiv. According to the [National WWII Museum](#), one in every four Jewish victims of the Holocaust was murdered in Ukraine.

While Germans often think of World War II as a fight against the Russians, the majority of the fighting actually took place in modern-day Ukraine and [Belarus](#), as well as large parts of western Russia, says Dobczansky. Under the German occupation, several million Ukrainians were sent to Germany to work on farms

“Those [nationalist] groups certainly had anti-Semitic elements,” says Belsky. “But [they] essentially felt that, or judged that, they were more likely to get Ukrainian independence under Nazi occupation than under Soviet occupation.”



Motorized infantry of the German armed forces advance into Ukraine during World War II. Photo by Hulton Archive / Getty Images

The Nazis, she says, promised Ukrainian nationalists as much—at least after the war. But even before their defeat by the Allies in 1945, the Germans turned on some of their Ukrainian allies, including one of the country’s most famous independence fighters, [Stepan Bandera](#). In his fight against the Soviets, Bandera [aligned himself](#) with the Germans, only to end up in a concentration camp after he refused to rescind a proclamation of Ukrainian statehood in 1941. Released in 1944 to help the Nazis battle the Soviets again, Bandera survived the war, only to be poisoned by the KGB in 1959. In 2010, Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko awarded Bandera the title of “[Hero of Ukraine](#),” but the honor was annulled a year later.

“This [reexamination of Ukrainian participation in wartime atrocities] has

invasion of Crimea, many Ukrainians viewed Bandera and other freedom fighters in a less favorable light, says Shevel. After, however, she noticed a shift, with these individuals, some of whom fought alongside the Nazis, being called heroes. The Soviets, once held up as liberators from the Nazis, were now the bad guys again.



Pro-Russian rebels allegedly move tanks and heavy weaponry away from the front line in accordance with the Minsk II agreement on February 26, 2015, in Chervonoe, Ukraine. Photo by Andrew Burton / Getty Images

Bandera may no longer be an official hero of Ukraine, but his memory and that of other 20th-century independence fighters endure. In 2015, Ukraine passed a series of decommunization laws calling for the removal of communist monuments and the renaming of public spaces in honor of Ukrainian nationalists and nationalist organizations, including those known to have participated in the Holocaust. The legislation has received pushback from scholars who see it as whitewashing, or ignoring the dark sides of these movements and their activities.

Shevel agrees that a complete reversal in framing is "probably not the best

Dobczansky, for his part, believes Ukraine is entitled to its own version of history and that Ukrainians should be allowed to choose how to present their own experiences. He praises local researchers' efforts to [study the Holocaust](#) and open their archives and notes that Ukraine's current president, [Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#), is Jewish.

"Ukraine has begun the process of confronting the darkest pages of its past," he says.



A crowd holds a demonstration outside of the Soviet headquarters in Kyiv in September 1991, after Ukraine declared its independence. Photo by Alain Noguees / Sygma/Sygma via Getty Images

In today's charged atmosphere, saying anything critical about Ukrainian nationalism or calling attention to Ukrainian nationalists' involvement with the Nazis can be seen as supporting Russia's depiction of Ukraine as a Nazi nation, Belsky notes.

This Russian narrative is nothing new. Instead, says Dobczansky, it's part of a long-term Russian information war on Ukraine. Putin's ahistorical justifications of the invasion doesn't surprise the scholar. What does surprise him is the outpouring of support he's seen for Ukraine, with even "[Saturday Night Live](#)" paying tribute to the beleaguered nation.



Dobczansky theorizes that the outraged response to the invasion is tied to society's relatively recent reexamination of colonialism. Because Ukraine was successfully integrated into the Soviet Union after World War II, Dobczansky doesn't see the period leading up to Ukrainian independence in 1991 as an occupation so much as a relationship between a colony and a colonizer. By waging war on Ukraine, Putin is, in essence, trying to hold onto a colony.

"[Russian leaders] basically don't recognize any Ukrainian historical agency except the agency that they imagined for them," says Dobczansky.

Ukraine—and the world—seem to be imagining something different.

*[Katya Cengel](#) writes about her time reporting from Ukraine earlier this century in her award-winning 2019 memoir, [From Chernobyl with Love](#).*

**Katya Cengel** | [READ MORE](#)

Katya Cengel is a freelance writer and author based in California. Her work has appeared in *New York Times Magazine*, *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Post* among other publications.

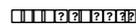
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