

# Putin's Use and Abuse of History as a Political Weapon

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This essay discusses Vladimir Putin's use and abuse of "History" in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. It takes as its point of departure Sergey Radchenko's essay, "Putin's Histories," in which he charts three important strands of Putin's Historical Narrative, which are summarized as (1) Putin's (imperialist) History of Russia, (2), the "Great Patriotic War" narrative, and (3) Putin's NATO *ressentiment*. The essay examines and expands each of these in turn, analyzing how they are used in Russia's war against Ukraine and how they help us to see that a central factor driving this war is Russia's inability to see it itself as anything other than an empire.

*Keywords:* Putin's imperialist history, Great Patriotic War narrative, Russia-Ukraine War, Kremlin propaganda, Russian (neo)imperialism

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## 1. Introduction

To draw upon different strands of history for the purpose of creating, strengthening, or re-imagining a national narrative is not in itself problematic and, in fact, is common to most, if not all, states. Yet when one's historically informed (or de-formed) narrative is transformed into a History that cannot be contested or challenged and is used to colonize, exploit, and justify waging aggressive and unjust wars on other sovereign states—or as Vladimir Putin did with Chechnya, autonomous territories within one's own borders—one's Historical narrative becomes a propagandistic weapon.

This essay discusses Vladimir Putin's use and abuse of History in the context of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. I take as my point of departure Sergey Radchenko's essay, "Putin's Histories." Following Radchenko, I capitalize the term "History" (and its variants) to indicate that Putin's use

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of history creates a rigid Historical narrative that he deploys for nefarious political purposes.

Radchenko charts three important strands of Putin's Historical Narrative, which can be summarized as follows: (1) Putin's (imperialist) History of Russia, (2), the "Great Patriotic War" narrative, and (3) Putin's NATO *ressentiment*. In what follows, I examine and expand each of these in turn, analyzing how they are used in Russia's war against Ukraine and how they help us to see that a central factor driving this war is Russia's inability to see it itself as anything other than an empire.

## 2. Putin's imperialist history of Russia

The first strand in Putin's Historical Narrative is his claim that one can draw a direct line of continuity from medieval Kyvian Rus' to the contemporary Russian state.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, Radchenko notes that Putin traces the origins of the Russian state to the Rurik or Rurikid Dynasty, which began its rule of Kyvian Rus' in the 9th century. That is, Putin defends "anti-Normanism," which claims that the Rurikid Dynasty was not of Norman (Viking) origin but rather of Slavic origin. However, this claim is highly contested, as significant historical evidence exists pointing to the Varangians—i.e. the Vikings—as playing a central role in founding medieval Kyvian Rus' and establishing its initial ruling dynasty. For example, Serhii Plokhy presents a more nuanced and complex account of this early history. He charts the critical contributions of the Vikings (Varangians) in the establishment of Kyvian Rus' as a medieval polity or proto-state and their essential role in the early Rurikid Dynasty. Plokhy's history emphasizes the multiethnic and multicultural character of Kyvian Rus' and its development, which involved complex trade, military, religious, and marital as well as intermingling relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Serhy Yekelchuk is likewise critical of overly simplistic views of the history of Kyvian Rus'. For instance, he highlights the irony in various parties' claims of historical primacy vis-à-vis Kyvian Rus', since the "medieval state in question was actually created by the Varangian or Norman invaders, who came to rule over autochthonous East Slavs by advancing from the shores of the Baltic Sea down the Dnipro-River sometime in the mid-ninth century"

<sup>1</sup> See also, (Yekelchuk 2020, 28). Here I have used the term "narrative" to describe Putin's misuse of history. However, one could also, as Liudmyla Pidkuimukha does, use the terms "myth" and "myth-making" as accurate descriptors of Putin's History. Pidkuimukha paraphrases Michael Geis' definition of myth in (Geis 1987, 28–30), which I find helpful. Here myth is understood "as a simple and non-falsifiable causal theory that justifies actions or assertions and is somewhat widely held by the discursive community" (Pidkuimukha 2022, 40).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, (Plokhy 2021, 23–60).

(Yekelchik 2020, 26). Yekelchik goes on to say that not only Russians, but also Ukrainians and Belarusians can rightly point to Kyvian Rus' as the basis of their national traditions. However, Putin's History ends up homogenizing and flattening this diverse and complex history to serve his own political agenda.

In his July 12, 2021 essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," Putin tells a quite different and overly simplified story. (The very title of the essay already assumes that there is no real distinction or relevant historical, cultural, and linguistic differences between Russians and Ukrainians.) While Putin acknowledges that "Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus," his claims throughout the essay elide and erase genuine differences among the three peoples (Putin 2021). These effacing and erasing maneuvers make it clear that he sees Ukrainians as Russians and Ukraine as belonging to Russia. Thus, any attempt by Ukraine to assert its alterity and independence is met with hostility, both in the form of weaponizing History and the actual use of weapons against Ukrainian people.

There are reasons to question claims regarding direct continuity between the contemporary Russian state and Kyvian Rus', since the latter ceased to exist as such in the thirteenth century. Additionally, to assert that Russia is the rightful or primary inheritor of Kyvian Rus' legacy is just as problematic, since it fails to recognize the multiple polities that arose following the destruction of Kyvian Rus' by the Mongols—polities which include what we identify today as not only Russia but also Ukraine and Belarus, each of which exhibited and developed their own distinct nations, states, cultures, languages, religious practices, and political trajectories. Moreover, a more nuanced reading of history shows that Ukrainian identity, culture, and language were regularly suppressed by "Russia," both in its imperial and Soviet expressions.<sup>3</sup>

Although history is more complex than Putin's simplified and politicized History suggests, owing to his authoritarian rule, Russian citizens are not permitted to challenge or dispute his highly contestable claims. As Radchenko states, Putin has established:

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, (Plokhy 2023, 12). Here Plokhy discusses the challenge that Ukrainian nationalism brought to the Russian empire. Russian officials instituted policies with the aim of hindering the growth and flourishing of distinct Ukrainian and Belarusian languages. For example, as Plokhy explains, "the first ban on the publication in Ukrainian of anything other than folklore—including the Bible, religious texts, and language primers, along with school textbooks—was introduced in 1863 and remained in effect, with some modifications, until the first decade of the twentieth century" (Plokhy 2023, 12). This is simply one of the many examples that Plokhy highlights of Russia's attempt to suppress and destroy Ukrainian culture and language.

the parameters of a politically acceptable ‘history’. Discovering or discussing evidence that contradicts this point of view becomes unpatriotic and dangerous. The same of course applies to any other historical ‘debate’ in which Putin has taken sides. Debate becomes meaningless and history is replaced with History. (Radchenko 2023, 58)

When it comes to his account of the 20th century, here, too, Putin’s History exhibits flattening tendencies owing to the Russian imperial lens through which he interprets Ukraine. For example, in a February 2022 address, Putin says: “I will start with the fact that modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process practically started right after the 1917 revolution, and Lenin and his associates did it in a way that was extremely harsh on Russia—by separating, severing what is historically Russian land” (Putin 2022). Putin’s aim is not to rebuild the former USSR, and, as the above quotes indicate, he has been quite critical of Lenin’s concessions to Ukraine and the other republics. Lenin argued, contra Stalin, that the non-Russian republics should have equal status with Russia and at least *formally* acknowledged that each had their own distinct national identities, languages, and cultures.<sup>4</sup> Hence, as Radchenko observes, it should not come as a surprise that part of Putin’s defense of his war against Ukraine includes critical remarks toward Lenin and Khrushchev (the latter owing to his having relinquished “Russia’s” Crimea to Ukraine). Since, after all, in Putin’s History, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were responsible for the creation of modern Ukraine, as he puts it in his July 2021 lengthy essay, by “chopping the country to pieces,” “detach[ing] from Russia its historical territories,” and thus robbing Russia (Putin 2021). Here again, because of Putin’s imperial understanding—which influences his understanding of premodern and Soviet history—any violence that contemporary Russia enacts against Ukraine, including illegally annexing the latter’s sovereign territory and waging war against it, can be justified “as historically necessary because it merely seeks to reclaim territories that have been lost by Putin’s predecessors by folly or by accident” (Radchenko 2023, 58).<sup>5</sup>

In Putin’s imperial account of History, “Russians and Ukrainians were [and are] one and the same people—a single whole” (Putin 2021); those Ukrainians who think otherwise have been deceived by the West or are classified as dangerous nationalists or “Nazis” and must undergo de-Ukrainization. What is meant by “de-Ukrainization”?

A recent article by Vera Tolz and Stephen Hutchings examines the extremist character of Russian imperial discourse in Russian domestic me-

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, (Plokhly 2023, 17–18).

<sup>5</sup> For Putin’s claims regarding Lenin and Khrushchev, see (Putin 2022).

dia's reporting on the war, which portrays Russian imperialism as a "positive force." By creating a narrative context in which present Russian military goals are explicitly connected with Russia's imperial past, they can (re)introduce "the shocking concept of de-Ukrainization," which has dangerous genocidal connotations. As Tolz and Hutchings put it:

By openly embracing colonial subjugation, the term acquires potential genocidal meaning. Indeed, certain Russian media personalities linked de-Ukrainization explicitly to the 'legitimate' slaughter of masses of people, including [Vladimir] Soloviev's proposal to kill 'as many Ukrainians as possible' ("Soloviev Live," 5 April 2022; see also Sergeitsev 2022). Thus, the de-Ukrainization narrative provided the imperial counterpart to that of pseudo anti-colonial de-Nazification. (Tolz and Hutchings 2023)<sup>6</sup>

As we have seen, Putin presents an overly simplified, homogenizing narrative that denies Ukrainian alterity and independence. His (mis)use of the history of Kyvian Rus' is part of his attempt to present Russia as having a special and unique destiny, one that gives it a "right" to what it proclaims has always been part of its own historical territories. In section 4, we will discuss how his fabrication of a direct line of continuity between Kyvian Rus' and the modern Russian state creates an image of Russia as "timeless" and "unchanging," both of which are tropes that prevent challenges to Putin's narrative and genuine change vis-à-vis Russia's imperial identity and aims.

### 3. "The Great Patriotic War" narrative

A second important strand of Putin's Historical Narrative is his interpretation of World War II, or as it is called in Russia, "The Great Patriotic War." On the one hand, as Radchenko notes, Putin portrays, "Moscow as the liberator of Europe from the scourge of Nazism," and, simultaneously, on the other, he refuses "to acknowledge Stalin's responsibility for the war, or the crimes committed by the Soviets in 'liberated' Europe. There is no place in his black-and-white discourse for the rape of Berlin, the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe, or the invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968" (Radchenko 2023, 58).

<sup>6</sup> On Timofey Sergeitsev and "de-Ukrainization," see (Sergeitsev 2022). Sergeitsev creates a narrative that ultimately equates all Ukrainians with Nazis and the process of "denazification" with an "inevitable" process of "de-Ukrainization." More specifically, Sergeitsev not only asserts that the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), and organized territorial defense forces are war criminals and Nazis, all of which must be "punished in such a way that an example is made" through a process of "total lustration," but he also asserts that "a significant portion of the masses are also guilty of being passive Nazis and collaborators of Nazism." He goes on to say that the masses who survive must be denazified, which, among other things, will require "re-education" and "severe censorship."

To take responsibility for and acknowledge these criminal, repressive, and expansionist actions in the Soviet Union's history would not only challenge Putin's self-righteous History but also necessitate significant changes to current laws and policies that penalize and even criminalize those who attempt to publicly document and expose Stalin's atrocities (Radchenko 2023, 58).<sup>7</sup> Once again, the messiness of actual history must be cleaned up so that History can serve the regime's rigid and uncontested narrative.

Since Putin's History over-emphasizes unity and sameness, public events that function to strengthen claims of Russia's special destiny through public displays of "patriotism," and, hence, promote unity, are especially valuable. A prominent example of performative patriotism is Russia's May 9th Victory Day celebration, which has become one of the most important Russian national holidays. The event, which, today, has taken on an almost religious, cultic character, includes the "immortal regiment" march, in which Russians are encouraged to participate by walking through the streets, carrying pictures of family members who died in the Great Patriotic War.

Our reflections on Putin's use of the "Great Patriotic Narrative" reveal, on the one hand, that Putin's History is rigid, in the sense that when deployed by the Kremlin, such narratives cannot be contested or challenged. On the other, given Putin's authoritarian rule and control of state media, he can utilize terms, tropes, and events, emptying them of any legitimate historical meaning and repurposing them for his political agenda. Thus, as Radchenko observes, for the Kremlin's present imperialistic aims vis-à-vis Ukraine:

the story of fighting against the Nazis in the Second World War has been conflated with the war in Ukraine, which is presented, improbably, as an effort at Ukraine's 'de-Nazification'. (Radchenko 2023, 59)

Yet, Putin's narratives also have a performative dimension; they must be enacted and, as it were, embodied by the citizens whom the Kremlin seeks to influence. Not all (or even most) citizens need participate in such events. As long as enough participate—whether genuinely, from fear, or otherwise coerced or encouraged—and the events receive repeated media coverage accompanied with the proper state-aligned messaging and interpretations, they fulfill their function in supporting the Kremlin's narratives.

This enactment of the "Great Patriotic Narrative" comes to life in the ritualistic performance and participation in events such as the May 9th Victory Day celebration, which arouses patriotic sentiment and facilitates political

<sup>7</sup> On the Kremlin's shutdown of Memorial International, which chronicled the mass crimes of Soviet past, see (Reevell and Stukalova 2021).

unity; and in doing so, the narrative then re-rigidifies in service of the particular political objective at hand—namely, Russia's war against Ukraine.

As we've noted, in one version of Putin's narrative, Ukrainians are identified with Nazis. We should, however, recall that Victory Day in its earlier (and decisively less propagandistic instantiations) was associated with honoring the millions of Soviet soldiers and civilians who lost their lives in World War II fighting against *actual* Nazis in order to defend their country. Understandably, many Russians have strong, positive, and genuinely noble, patriotic sentiments associated with this day. However, the present Kremlin narrative falsely equates Ukrainians with Nazis and in so doing presents Russia's war against Ukraine as a continuation of its fight in World War II against Nazi enemies who had invaded the Soviet Union. Thus, Putin's use of the "Great Patriotic Narrative" vis-à-vis his war against Ukraine creates an alternative (false) reality through re-appropriating past events and actors (i.e., Nazis) and infusing them with new meanings that serve the Kremlin's political aims. Moreover, the present "Great Patriotic Narrative" and its performative enactments mask the fact that Russia's violent and aggressive actions against Ukraine—invading a sovereign country, illegally annexing its territories, mass killings of civilians—actually aligns *Russia* more squarely with the actions of the Nazi regime.

#### 4. Putin's NATO *ressentiment*

The third strand of Putin's Historical Narrative pertains to the fall of the USSR and his account of alleged broken promises vis-à-vis NATO enlargement eastward. Putin made his views known in an excoriating speech at the Munich Security Forum in 2007. In this speech, he claimed that NATO enlargement was a "serious provocation" for Russia and that Western partners had reneged on assurances given in 1990 not to expand NATO or place NATO troops beyond German territory.<sup>8</sup>

NATO has, undoubtedly, gained many members from former Soviet republics and satellite states. However, not only is Putin's interpretation of what was (and was not) promised by Western partners contested by historians, scholars, and analysts, but this framing is itself likewise problematic and fails to address *why* so many former Soviet republics were eager to move

<sup>8</sup> The relevant quote from Putin's 2007 speech is as follows: "And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them. But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that: 'the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee'. Where are these guarantees?" (Putin 2007).

westward and join NATO—namely, because of genuine security threats from their aggressive, expansionist, and colonizing neighbor, Russia.

Mark Kramer makes a compelling case based on declassified Soviet, German, and American documents that no such promises were made; moreover, the context in which NATO enlargement was discussed was with respect to how it would apply to the German Democratic Republic (GDR). That is, the agreement that was made and assurances given had to do with placing NATO troops in East Germany; there were no official promises made regarding broader NATO enlargement.<sup>9</sup>

Kramer also appeals to an October 2014 interview with Mikhail Gorbachev that was later translated into English. As Kramer notes, “In the interview, Gorbachev was asked whether the topic of NATO enlargement beyond eastern Germany ever came up during the negotiations in 1990 on German reunification. Gorbachev’s response was unequivocal: “The topic of ‘NATO expansion’ was not discussed at all [in 1990], and it wasn’t brought up in those years. I say this with full responsibility. Western leaders didn’t bring it up, either” (Kramer and Shifrinson 2017, 187).<sup>10</sup> This is *not* to claim that Gorbachev was uncritical of NATO—in fact, he goes on to say that later NATO increases eastward went against the “spirit” of assurances given in 1990; however, it is to show that Putin’s misrepresentation of what was said continues to be part of his anti-West narrative and plays especially well with his domestic audience.

It is common knowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union deeply impacted Putin and that he sees its demise as part of the West’s aim to humiliate both Russia and him personally. Putin’s *ressentiment*, his anger toward the West for what he sees as thwarting Russia’s civilizational destiny has been stewing for quite some time. The war crimes that we see occurring in Ukraine today, the bombing of schools, civilian homes and infrastructure, rape as a weapon of war, and the utter disregard for Ukrainian life—all of these can be “rationalized” by Putin as part of his (neo)imperial project of “bringing Russia up from its knees” (Radchenko 2023, 59).

## 5. Reflections on Putin’s history and Russia’s identity problem

Each of the aforementioned uses and abuses of history serve Putin’s political aims. The claim that the Russian state has a direct line of continuity to medieval Kyvian Rus’ creates the sense of a timeless and unchanging Russia. Since this origin myth cannot be critically challenged, Putin is equally as-

<sup>9</sup> See (Kramer and Shifrinson 2017, 186–192, esp., 188). The essay referenced is a co-authored exchange between Kramer and Shifrinson, in which the latter responds to Kramer in the last few pages of the essay.

<sup>10</sup> For Kóshunov’s interview with Gorbachev, see (Kórshunov and Gorbachev 2014).



sociated with a sense of being above history, and hence, “timeless,” because he controls and creates History. His use of the Great Patriotic War narrative allows him to present the Soviet Union, which is equated with Russia, as the savior of Europe and, hence, as “righteous.” Lastly, his framing of NATO enlargement depicts Russia as having been betrayed by the West, especially the United States; consequently, both Putin and Russia appear as the “aggrieved” partner. As Radchenko notes:

Timeless, righteous, but aggrieved, Putin presents a formidable façade of defiance. He lives in a make-believe world where the past and the present have become indistinguishable. Russia fought wars, and it is still fighting wars, and it will always fight wars, because there is an arrogant enemy out there. (Radchenko 2023, 59–60)

The reality, however, is that the history of the relationship between Ukraine and Russia is anything but simple. Putin's oversimplified, continuity-heavy History is carefully constructed to serve his (neo)imperial aims; it fabricates a mythic Russia whose proclaimed civilizational greatness allows it to justify whatever violence it deems necessary to fulfill its destiny. Rather than acknowledging the ruptures, discontinuities, and genuine differences among the cultures, lands, and peoples it has encountered, Putin's History over-emphasizes unity, continuity, and sameness. Consequently, he sees Russians and Ukrainians as “one and the same people—a single whole” and Ukraine's sovereign territory as Russia's “historical territories” (Putin 2021).

On the one hand, history is never, in the strict sense, repeated. That is, history involves variations on themes but never strict, timeless repetitions—any “repetition” is always a repetition-with-a-difference. Hence, we can discern certain patterns or riffs on a historical theme, which are instructive; however, there will also be new elements and challenges to confront. For example, the current war has shown the inadequacy and unpreparedness of our international institutions when it comes to how to protect nuclear power plants in an active war zone. On the other, we shouldn't downplay the instructiveness of the “historical riffs” we are able to discern. The historical riffs and rhymes are worthy of our reflections and can help us avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

Along the same lines, Plokhly argues that what are witnessing unfold in Ukraine today is a variation on old an imperial theme. That is, as he puts it, the present war “is an old-fashioned imperial war conducted by Russian elites who see themselves as heirs and continuators of the great-power expansionist traditions of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union” (Plokhly 2023, xxxi). Although we have lived under the illusion that after the fall of the Soviet Union, history had come to an end and a peaceful international order was securely on the horizon, the Russia-Ukraine War has awakened

us from our dogmatic, post-historical slumber. To cite Plokhy: “The war clearly indicates that Europe and the world have all but spent the peace dividend resulting from the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and are entering a new, as yet undetermined, era” (Plokhy 2023, xxi).

Russia has, in the 21st century, once again brutally attacked its neighbor, Ukraine; but to quote the first line of its national anthem: Ukraine has not yet perished. In fact, Kyiv did not fall in February 2022 but successfully defended its capital, causing the Russians to retreat from the Kyiv oblast. Ukraine’s resistance, battlefield and maritime successes, and commitment to defend its sovereignty and right to exist as a democratic, pluralistic European country give us good reasons to hope and believe that it will prevail.

Yet, so long as Russia continues to see itself as a (neo)imperial power, it will continue its quest to conquer, and both history and Putin’s History indicate that Ukraine will be at risk; hence, Ukraine’s need for continued and *timely* western support as well as *genuine* security guarantees—not another version of the impotent Budapest Memorandum, lacking a mechanism for enforcement when the terms are violated. The pressing question today is not what will Ukraine become, but rather what will *Russia* become? The real threat to Russia is not NATO or imagined Ukrainian “Nazis” but rather Russia’s *own* identity problem—its inability to conceive of itself in terms other than as an imperial power whose destiny is realized only in a subjugating, nihilating relation to Ukraine (Dickenson 2023).

Until Russia gains the ability to imagine itself otherwise-than-empire, Ukraine’s independence and security will be constantly threatened. (Actual history tells us that this typically happens when empires lose wars.) Rather than pressing Ukrainians to a negotiated settlement that will not result in genuine peace, we should, first and foremost *listen* to what Ukrainians have to say—otherwise we reenact and reinforce a colonial paradigm in which those oppressed or attacked have no voice.

Moreover, we need to be more attentive to the (imperialistic) Russocentric frameworks and narratives that structure our own academies, which frequently show up not only in academic but also in western political and journalistic analyses of the war. Oksana Zabuzhko poignantly draws attention to these (imperialistic) Russocentric tendencies. As she observes, examples of such imperialistic interpretative grids can be seen in the reporting on “the disproportionately large conscription among Russia’s ethnic minorities in 2022, a form of ethnic purge of potentially mutinous regions [which] was not half as widely discussed as the plight of Moscow office workers fleeing abroad” (Zabuzhko 2023).

Regarding Russia’s future, Zabuzhko states that “Russia will not become a democracy until it falls apart” and likens Russia today to a “premodern

multiethnic empire living on geographic expansion and resource looting as 300 years ago.” She questions why we continue to cling to the 19th century-inspired

idea that preserving the Russian empire would be less catastrophic, in terms of humanitarian consequences, than recognizing the right to life of dozens of peoples whose lot under Moscow's rule was never anything other than dogged survival under the threat of extinction. This prejudice helped the empire to survive twice in the 20th century, in 1921 and in 1991. It is high time to rethink it (Zabuzhko 2023).

In the 2004 Orange Revolution, 2013–14 Euro-Maiden Revolution (also called the Revolution of Dignity), and in the Russia-Ukraine War (2014–present), Ukrainians have made abundantly clear in their words and with their actions that they stand for western democratic values, human rights, and international law. Rather than follow Putin's (neo)imperial path leading to death, destruction, shame, and cultural and political isolation, Russians today who want a different—and truly democratic—future must grapple with their imperialist identity-problem and undergo an *internally* motivated project of de-imperialization on both the individual and collective levels.

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