A Comparative Analysis of Russian Responses to the Polish and Ukrainian Questions

Grace Kędziora
Brown University

The 1863 Polish Uprising, whose goal was to liberate the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from Russian rule, provoked an ideological debate within Russia about how it should respond to this "Polish Question." Ultimately, Russian policy took a turn toward more imperial control by brutally suppressing the Uprising and imposing a stringent Russification policy on the Poles. 150 years later, Ukraine's push for independence and closer ties with Western Europe also provoked an ideological debate regarding how Russia should answer this "Ukrainian Question." Russia responded with its illegal occupation of the Crimea and eastern Ukraine in 2014, and a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. When viewed in this historical context, contemporary debates regarding the reasons and justifications for Russia's actions in Ukraine reflect an ongoing historical debate within Russia regarding its proper role as a great power, search for security, and self-definition as a nation-state. The Russian response to the Polish Question of 1863 can provide a useful historical framework to better understand Russia's contemporary attitudes towards the West and its answer to the Ukrainian Question of 2014.

This paper will examine the parallels between competing ideas that helped shape public opinion, cultural discourse and political action in Russia during the Polish Uprising of 1863 and the 2014 Invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, it will compare how prominent intellectuals–such as Mikhail Katkov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikolay Strakhov, and Alexander Herzen–approached the Polish Question in 1863 with how President Vladimir Putin and political activist Alexei Navalny responded to the Ukrainian Question of 2014. The analysis will show that debates around the Polish Question provide valuable historical context to better understand Russia's response to similar demands for independence from Ukraine and reflect an ongoing debate in Russian society about Russia's place in the international order.

THE POLISH QUESTION

The "Polish Question" refers to Russia's response to Poland's demands for independence from Russian domination. Over the course of three partitions, Russia incorporated territory of the Polish-Lithuanian

Commonwealth into its Empire, culminating with the Third Partition of 1795 which effectively erased the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth from the map of Europe. The Poles made several attempts at achieving independence in the early 19th Century, the last of which occurred in January 1863.

In 1863, the Russian Empire was grappling with its defeat in the Crimea; this war with the Ottoman Empire, France, the United Kingdom, and Sardinia weakened its military, drained its resources, and undermined Russia's credibility in Europe. Poles had anticipated full autonomy as a result of the reforms undertaken in Russia after the defeat in the Crimean War, but Tsar Alexander II was unwilling to compromise. Growing impatient, Polish opposition groups held democratic demonstrations, issued a manifesto calling for a national insurrection, and launched a guerilla war against the Russian military in 1863. The Polish opposition was outnumbered, poorly equipped, experienced little success and, despite drawing sympathies from Western Europe, could not convince foreign powers to provide military assistance.[1] After 18 months of Polish resistance, the Russian government squashed the Polish insurrection and enacted retaliatory policies that included mass executions, imprisonment, and exile.[2] In order to further dissuade independence movements, the Russian government implemented a stringent Russification policy that sought to eliminate elements of Polish identity: the suppression of the Polish language, education, national symbols and traditions, the persecution of Polish activists and intellectuals, and the imposition of Russian language and culture.[3]

RUSSIAN CONSERVATISM AND THE POLISH QUESTION: MIKHAIL KATKOV

While the Russian state ultimately pursued a hard-line imperialist response to the Polish Question through its use of force and violence, Russian intellectuals proposed and debated several competing visions. In 1863, Mikhail Katkov spearheaded the Russian nationalist movement, which was characterized by a desire to preserve and promote Slavic culture and Orthodox Christianity while also seeking to modernize and strengthen the Russian state. He claimed that Poland's movement for self-determination was a dangerous threat to the Russian Empire's stability and unity. Additionally, he interpreted the Russian answer to the Polish Question as proof that "the Russian nation is alive and strong," and "not a dead mass, but a living force" and recommended that the Russian Empire take action to suppress any movement for autonomy in the Kingdom of Poland.[4] A decisive show of force would remind Europe of Russia's vitality, solidify Poland's ties to the Slavic world, and effectively protect Russia's Slavic sphere of influence from Western political aggression.

His argument was predicated on the notion that, as a Slavic nation, Poland historically belongs to Russia's sphere of influence because of their common history and unique cultural identity. Katkov believed that Poland's claim to national sovereignty was a betrayal and the result of foreign manipulation, particularly from France, which was seeking to overthrow the legitimate rule of the Russian Empire. Katkov argued that as the leader of the Slavic world, the Russian state was tasked with defending Slavic culture and its sphere of influence from perceived Western aggression.

1. Kieniewicz, Stefan. "Polish Society and the Insurrection of 1863." Past & Present, no. 37 (1967): 130–148. http://www.jstor.org/stable/650026.
2. Kożuchowski, Łukasz, and Theodore R Weeks. "'Russification' As a Means to Keep the Russian Empire." Polish History - A Project of the Polish History Museum in Warsaw, 2019.
3. Ibid.
4. Maiorova, O. E. "War as Peace: The Trope of War in Russian Nationalist Discourse during the Polish Uprising of 1863." Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History. Slavica Publishers, October 3, 2005.

CHALLENGES TO CONSERVATISM ON THE POLISH QUESTION: DOSTOEVSKY, STRAKHOV, AND HERZEN

Although Katkov's position was popular among many Russian intellectuals, not all of them promoted his solution to the Polish Question. Fyodor Dostoevsky headed Vremya, a widely popular newspaper that sought to reconcile the westernizing and nationalist trends in Russian culture.[5] In a series of articles, Dostoevsky and his colleague, Nikolay Strakhov, polemicized Katkov's position. While they maintained the importance of a strong Russian state, they argued that resources would be better allocated to domestic development than imperial pursuits. Additionally, Strakhov criticized how the Russian government handled the situation and invited readers to approach the Polish Question from a Polish perspective, one where Poland rightfully views itself as "civilizationally equal to all other European nations" and thus can "hardly regard [Russia] as anything else than barbarians" on account of its repression of the Polish people.

Prominent liberal thinker Alexander Herzen also offered an opposing view to the Russian imperial initiative. He advocated for Polish independence by protesting the Russian government's policies through a series of articles in the Free Russian Press. Herzen's argument against Russian imperialism was founded on his liberal convictions, mainly the supremacy of democracy and the right to self-determination. In "The Proclamation of 'Land and Liberty,'" Herzen argues for Polish freedom because he also stands for Russian freedom; Russia and Poland are "chained by a single set of fetters" and jointly acknowledge the "absurdity" of the Russian Empire.[6] Furthermore, the imperial formation has "lived out its time" and he is "against the empire" because he is "for the people." As a "central and influential participant" in debates among the Russian intelligentsia in the 1860s, Herzen facilitated discussions on the relationship between Russia and the West, the nature of Western civilization, Russia's historical destiny, and the social, moral, and political climate of the age.[7] Despite his efforts, Russia remained steadfast in its imperial direction, with conservatives accusing Herzen of being a foreign agent seeking to foment unrest, and liberals viewing Herzen's pro-Polish stance as unpatriotic.[8]

While Russian intellectuals engaged in thorough debate regarding the Polish Question of 1863, it is clear that Katkov's nationalist perspective ultimately prevailed. The Russian government's violent suppression of the Polish opposition and attempts at destroying elements of the Polish national identity through its Russification policy align with Katkov's nationalist vision. Katkov, who has been dubbed "the opinion maker of 1863" by Andreas Renner, has also been credited with inventing this Russification policy "from below."[9,10]

THE UKRAINIAN QUESTION

Views like Katkov's live on in Russian foreign policy debates to this day, as is shown by Russia's contemporary response to the Ukrainian Question. The Ukrainian Question refers to Russia's response to Ukraine's move towards liberal democracy and independence from Russia's sphere of influence. While Russia has recognized Ukraine as an independent state since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the countries have engaged in ongoing political and territorial conflict since 2014. After the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych by a pro-Western

5. Bojanowska, Edyta M. "Empire by Consent: Strakhov, Dostoevskii, and the Polish Uprising of 1863."
6. Herzen, Alexander, A Herzen Reader. Translated by Kathleen Parthé (Northwestern University Press, 2013).
7. Offord, Derek. "Perilous Voyage: Alexander Herzen and the Legacy of the Russian Intelligentsia." TLS. Times Literary Supplement, no. 5688, April 6, 2012.
8. Pogorelskin, Alexis E. "Vestnik Evropy and the Polish Question in the Reign of Alexander II."
9. Bojanowska, Edyta M. "Empire by Consent."
10. Kofman, Michael, et al. "Lessons from Russia's Operations in Ukraine." RAND Corporation, May 9, 2017.

and pro-democratic popular movement in what is known as the Maidan Uprising, Russia annexed Crimea, resulting in a prolonged occupation and ongoing violence between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces in Eastern Ukraine. In February 2022, Russia launched a large-scale invasion that aimed to destroy Ukraine as an independent state. In addition to violating Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the Ukrainian government has accused Russian troops of destroying civilian infrastructure and committing human rights abuses, while Russian president Vladimir Putin has relied on nationalist and anti-Western rhetoric to justify the invasion.[11]

ECHOS OF KATKOV: PUTIN ON THE UKRAINIAN QUESTION

Vladimir Putin's political ideology emphasizes Russian national identity, preserving Russian culture and values, and promoting Russian interests and influence in the global arena. Like Mikhail Katkov, Putin is highly concerned with foreign influence and considers democratic opponents "sinister agents of foreign powers" plotting to "destroy Russian statehood," "usurp power," and hand the country over to rapacious outsiders.[12]

A month after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin outlined the rationale behind Russia's Ukrainian policy in a speech to members of the Kremlin. In his speech, Putin emphasizes the historical and cultural factors that unite the Russian and Ukrainian people. He argues that Crimea represents Russia and Ukraine's "shared history and pride" because it is where Prince Vladimir, the ruler of Kievan Rus, adopted Orthodoxy, which "predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilization, and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus."[13] Because they share Ancient Russ as a "common source," Russia and Ukraine are "not simply close neighbors," but are rather "one people." Likewise, Putin argues that Crimea has "always been an inseparable part of Russia" despite all of the dramatic political and territorial changes the Russian State underwent during the 20th Century, including the Bolsheviks' decision to transfer large sections of the "historical South of Russia" to the Republic of Ukraine, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Importantly, Putin also distinguishes between the Russian state and the Russian nation. While the Russian state exists within its internationally recognized borders, the Russian nation is a vast "ethnic group" that was divided by borders following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. By emphasizing the historical and cultural similarities between the two nations, minimizing the significance of borders, and distinguishing between the Russian State and Nation, Putin establishes an argument for Russia's historic right to claim Ukraine as within its sphere of influence and to protect it from perceived foreign aggression. He argues that, while Russia and Ukraine are officially separate entities, they are bound together by a millennium of cultural and historical ties that transcend the arbitrary nature in which the West organized the modern world.

Additionally, Putin contends that Ukraine's movement towards political and economic integration with the West is representative of Western domination and is not the result of Ukrainian self-determination. Putin claims that Western nations, led by the United States, break international law, take advantage of areas plagued by tyranny and poverty, and use force to coerce other countries into their spheres of influence. He compares Ukrainian democratization to American political intervention efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, referring to them as "controlled color revolutions" in which the United States imposed standards that do not correspond to these nations' cultures and way of life and then forced the necessary resolutions from international organizations to make the aggressions look legitimate. Putin further claims that "like a mirror" the situation in Ukraine reflects Western efforts to subjugate

11. Amnesty International. "Human Rights in Ukraine." Amnesty International.
12. Applebaum, Anne. "Putinism: The Ideology." London School of Economics and Political Science, February 2013.
13. Putin, Vladimir. "Address by the President of the Russian Federation." President of Russia, March 18, 2014.

less developed nations. Thus, the residents of Crimea "turned to Russia for help in defending their rights," to which Russia responded, not by illegally invading and annexing the territory, but by creating conditions so that Crimeans could "peacefully express their free will." By undermining the legitimacy of Ukraine's democracy, underestimating the appeal of Westernization, and suggesting that foreign adversaries have played a coercive role in Ukraine's post-Soviet regime, Putin argues that Russia was acting in defense of ethnic Russians when it annexed Crimea.

CHALLENGES TO PUTIN'S IMPERIALISM: NAVALNY ON THE UKRAINIAN QUESTION

Alexei Navalny was a Russian lawyer, anti-corruption activist, and political dissident who was widely considered to be the strongest opposition candidate to the ruling party in Russia. Generally seen as a pro-Western, liberal voice in Russian politics, his popularity could be attributed to his work exposing hypocrisy and corruption in the Russian government as well as his demand for fair elections.[14] Navalny was arrested and charged by Russian authorities numerous times but continued to serve as the voice of the Russian opposition through his social media presence (notably using Twitter as a medium) until his death on February 16, 2024.

In February of 2023, a series of posts were made to Alexei Navalny's Twitter account regarding Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. Titled "15 Theses of a Russian Citizen Who Desires the Best For Their Country," the tweets outline Navanly's position on Russia's occupation of Ukraine. Navanly first argues that Putin has "unleashed an unjust war of aggression against Ukraine under ridiculous pretexts."[15] Navalny further claims that Putin is trying to turn all Russian citizens into his "accomplices" and make it into a "people's war," but the real reasons behind this operation are Russia's domestic political and economic problems. Furthermore, Putin is motivated by his desire to stay in power and shape his historical legacy as "the conqueror tsar" and "the collector of lands." While Nalavny emphasizes the Ukrainian loss of life, he also argues that Putin's war will ultimately result in military defeat and that the government is harming Russian citizens by allocating resources to this imperial initiative: "Russia is a vast country with a shrinking population and dying out rural areas. Imperialism and the urge to seize territory is the most harmful and destructive path." Further, Navalny states, "the Russian government is destroying [its] future with its own hands just in order to make our country look bigger on the map. But Russia is big enough as it is. Our objective should be preserving our people and developing what we have in abundance." Navalny's critique not only exposes the flawed motivations behind Putin's aggression, but also signals a pivotal moment for Russia.

Moving from condemnation to constructive proposals, Navalny suggests a focus on internal development and peace as the way forward, setting the stage for a detailed exploration of these solutions. According to Navalny, for Russia to recover from Putin's special military operation, it must "leave Ukraine alone," recognize its borders as they were drawn in 1991, and allow it to develop "the way its people want" because a "continuation of this war is just a tantrum caused by powerlessness, and putting an end to it would be a strong move." Navalny argues for dismantling Putin's regime through free elections and establishing a "parliamentary republic based on alteration of power through fair elections, independent courts, federalism, local self-governance, complete economic freedom and social justice." Then, Russia would be able to partner with the U.S. and Western Europe to compensate for the damage done in Ukraine, which would enable Russia to progress toward the removal of sanctions, encourage the return of young Russian professionals, restore foreign investment and economic relations with the "civilized

14. Coalson, Robert. "Is Aleksei Navalny a Liberal or a Nationalist?" The Atlantic, July 29, 2013.
15. Navalny, Alexei. "15 Theses of a Russian Citizen Who Desires the Best For Their Country." Алексей Навальный, February 2, 2023.

world, and ultimately pursue economic growth."

Navalny concludes his essay with a polemic vision for Russia's political and ideological future: "Recognizing our history and traditions, we must be part of Europe and follow the European path of development. We have no other choice, nor do we need any." By rejecting the imperial idea, supporting Ukraine's right to self-determination, promoting domestic investment and reform, and suggesting that Russia should politically and economically integrate with the Western world, Navalny outlines an alternative vision of Russia rooted in traditional Western liberal ideas.

Navalny's vision for Russia shares several characteristics with the visions expressed by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikolay Strakhov, and Alexander Herzen in response to the Polish Question of 1863. Like Dostoevsky and Strakhov, Navalny implies the Russian government is behaving "barbarically." He argues that Putin is undermining the rights of a sovereign nation under "ridiculous pretenses" grounded in historical fallacies and grievances. Navalny's ideas regarding individual freedom and social progress through the promotion of democracy and the rejection of authoritarianism are similar to those expressed by Herzen. He also contends that Russia finds itself at a critical juncture in a manner that is analogous to Herzen's argument in "The Proclamation of 'Land and Liberty.'" Like Herzen and the Polish Question, Navalny implies that the Ukrainian Question can serve as a "turning point" that marks the "end of one chapter in Russian history and the beginning of another."[16] Instead of solidifying Russia's imperial identity, the situation in Ukraine has revealed the weaknesses and absurdity of the Russian authoritarian state. In addition, it can serve as a catalyst for social and ideological change because it has provided the Russian people with the necessary information to demand progress and enact political reform. Navalny's perspective ultimately echoes that of Herzen, with both advocating visions of Russian nationhood that have failed to overcome the dominant conservative, nationalist paradigm.

CONCLUSION

The Russian response to the Polish Question of 1863 provides a useful historical framework to better understand Russia's current behavior towards the West, and its approach to the Ukrainian Question. Putin's arguments for Russian intervention in Ukrainian affairs are strikingly similar to the dominant and prevailing Russian response to the Polish Question of 1863; both emphasize Russia's right to protect its Slavic sphere of influence, minimize Poland and Ukraine's appetite for Western integration, and accuse Western nations of malicious conspiracy. Navalny's response to the situation in Ukraine shares similarities with the ideas expressed by more liberal Russian intellectuals such as Dostoevsky, Strakhov, and Herzen in response to the Polish Question. Unfortunately, the ideas expressed by figures such as Navalny, Herzen, Dostoevsky, and Strakhov had a limited impact on Russian policies because they have been suppressed from larger public discourse by authoritarian regimes who espouse the prevailing imperial/nationalist perspectives.

Over 160 years, Russia has debated the degree of autonomy it is willing to tolerate in its neighbors. The similarities in the prevailing views and ultimate persistence of the imperial/nationalist perspective reflect the view that Russian rulers must control and dominate their neighbors in order to feel secure in their own statehood and maintain political power. So long as the prevailing view maintains that Russia must dominate its neighbors to feel secure in its own statehood, Russia will continue to view the liberal development of its former vassal states as an existential threat to the Russian state and its response is likely to be the same – resorting to violence or coercion in the name of its own security. Any state within its perceived sphere of influence that develops Western and democratic leaning tendencies will be viewed as a threat to the stability of a Russian regime that views democracy as a threat to its own existence.

16. Herzen, Alexander, A Herzen Reader.

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