

Czar Vladimir in Wonderland
Alexander J. Motyl (Opinion Contributor) - The Hill

The Putin regime has made it all the way down the rabbit hole. Nonsense is now the name of the game, as the Kremlin's recently drafted media "recommendations" reveal.



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*A few weeks ago, Vladimir Putin **compared** himself to Czar Peter the Great (1672-1725). This time, Putin and his propagandists have compared Czar Vladimir to Prince Alexander Nevsky (1221-1263).*

Readers may be forgiven for wondering just what the heck is going on with all these megalomania-cal comparisons; it's as if France's diminutive President Emmanuel Macron were likening himself to the Sun King, Louis XIV (1638-1715) and the man who defeated the Arab armies at Tours in 731, Charles Martel.

There is a method to Putin's madness. He is hoping to persuade Russians that he is the latest in a long chain of strongman leaders who, like every czar, deserves the popular adulation due a divinely ordained autocrat placed on earth to protect and exalt Mother Russia.

Putin is also drawing on the fact that Alexander defeated the Swedes and the Livonian knights in 1240 and 1242, while Peter crushed Charles the XII of Sweden — and his Ukrainian allies! — in 1709. The message is clear: Putin, like Alexander and Peter, is defending Russia from the imperialist West and its lackey, Ukraine.

So far, so good. But then, Russia's propagandists lapse into nonsense by blithely ignoring the embarrassingly obvious contradictions in their overall narrative. Nevsky rejected the West and subordinated his principalities to the Golden Horde — that is, to Asia.

In contrast, Peter admired the West and its military and technological innovations, traveled extensively in Europe, and purposely founded the city that bears his name in order to open a “window” to Europe.

Logically, Putin cannot both support and detest the West. Nor can he paint his [alliance with China](#) as resembling the “Mongol yoke” so lamented by Russians.

But Putin and his propagandists know full well that they can get away with such historical nonsense precisely because their entire ideological message consists of crude contradictions, bald-faced lies, and painfully self-evident exaggerations.

The Russian population that imbibes such heady brews resembles the zombified inhabitants of Aldous Huxley’s “[Brave New World](#),” who are administered feel-good drugs to rid them of thoughts about their dreary lives.

Like Putin and his minions, these Russians inhabit a “Wonderland” within which things are what Putin says they are. Not surprisingly, [polls show](#) that most Russians prefer not to think about the genocidal war they are waging against Ukraine. Far better to swallow some “soma” and forget that you are complicit in a world-historical crime.

Equally preposterous is the Kremlin’s new media line regarding its genocidal war against Ukraine. Naturally, the “recommendations” insist that the war is purely defensive and intended to stop the godless West from attacking holy Russia.

But the truly bizarre part is that the Kremlin also compares the war to the baptism of the [Kyivan Rus’ state](#) in 988 and thereby paints itself as the defender of Orthodox Christianity and its values. Once again, readers may wonder what is going on.

As serious historians now recognize, Rus’ was a Kyivan polity centered on the Dnipro River that was only tangentially related to the principalities in the far north, Vladimir, Suzdal, Moscow and Novgorod.

Historians may disagree over whether the Kyivan state was proto-Ukrainian or not, but there is no disputing that Kyivan Rus’ relationship to Nevsky, Peter, and their world is analogous to that of Rome to France.

Yes, France’s precursor, Gaul, was part of the Roman Empire and no history of France would be complete without reference to Rome. And yet, it would be absurd to suggest that ancient Rome is more a part of French history than of Italian history.

Is it any wonder that the [grand prince](#) who brought Christianity to Kyivan Rus’ spelled his name Volodymyr — as does Ukraine’s President Zelensky — and not Vladimir, as in Putin?

What really takes the cake is Putin’s desire to paint himself as a defender of Russian Orthodoxy. On the one hand, he’s absolutely correct to point out that the Putin state and the Russian Orthodox Church — and its apostate patriarch, [Kirill](#) — do indeed share the same values: the veneration of wanton death and destruction in Ukraine.

On the other hand, some Russian believers must still hold dear the Ten Commandments and reject Putin's and Kirill's indifference to humanity and humility. Of course, that contradiction doesn't matter in Putin's rabbit hole.

The Kremlin's propagandists don't care whether what they say or write makes sense to thoughtful people, because they know that many Russians [have ceased](#) to think.

One day, it's possible that the capacity for critical thought will reappear in the Muscovite state. If and when it does, Russians will realize that they have been living a bloody lie for all of Putin's unhappy reign. The moment of reckoning will be painful indeed, and no amount of soma will assuage it.

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