Susan Smith Peter

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**SPEAKERS**

Susan Smith Peter, John Torpey

**John Torpey** 00:14

Russia has been rattling its sabers in the direction of Ukraine in recent weeks, amassing some 100,000 soldiers near the smaller country's borders. Is Europe facing a Russian invasion of Ukraine? What will the United States do in response? And of course, what will the Europeans do? What is the historical background to Russia's threats to Ukraine? Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that brings scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Today we discuss the crisis between Russia and Ukraine with Susan Smith Peter, who's Professor of History at the College of Staten Island in the CUNY system. Professor Smith Peter has written extensively about 18th and 19th century Russian history, especially with regard to regional identities outside the major capitals of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Her most recent book is Imagining Russian Regions, Civil Society and Sub-national Identity in 19th Century Russia, which was published by Brill in 2018. And of course, you can see from her expertise why we would want to have her come and talk about these issues today. Thanks so much for joining us today, Susan Smith Peter.

**Susan Smith Peter** 01:42

Thanks, John. I'm really glad to be here. And I'm excited to be able to talk about Ukraine and Russia in a long term historical perspective, because that's something that isn't always present in the commentary that we read and hear. So when we're talking about what's going on with the crisis in Ukraine, I mean, we need to start with some basics. And one of them is just a simple statement that Ukraine is its own country. Ukraine has its own language. I'm fluent in Russian, I studied Ukraine, and Ukrainian. And I can say that it's not just a dialect, it does sound different. Sometimes when you're reading Ukrainian, it's easier because you can understand and figure out the roots of the language. And sometimes they're quite similar but it really is its own sort of history, culture, language, all that sort of stuff. Now, I would kind of call what's going on historiographical warfare, historiographical in the sense of different ways of writing history. And one of the things I base this on is actually Putin's own statement. Putin wrote a statement, quite an extensive one called on "On the Historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians." It was actually so long, that Zelinsky, the President of Ukraine, kind of said, "obviously Putin has a lot of time on his hands." But one of the interesting things about this statement is that it's very historiographical in its nature. It's very detailed, it gives a retelling of the relations between the Russians and the Ukrainians. And Russians scholars, I mean, Russian historians in Russia, very much critiqued it and said it was anachronistic, and said that the idea of the people that he uses and projects back into the past is a 19th century idea. And that's all true. But one of the things that struck me is that it's very similar to one of the very first historical works in Russian that encompassed the Ukrainian people, which was Nikolai Ustrialov in 1839, he wrote a book called "Russian History." And in that history, he talked about how the Russian Empire had to regather its lands, and those lands were Belarus, Ukraine, and this happens with the partitions of Poland -I'm not going to get into all that right now- but the interesting thing about Ustrialov and why it's so similar to Putin is that Ustrialov considers that any time that Ukraine is not united with Russia, it's because of foreigners and the machinations of foreigners, especially Poles. And it's just tremendously similar to the way Putin presents the Ukrainians and on the historical unity, where he just really seems to feel that Ukrainians have absolutely no agency as a people, and that any time they tried to separate themselves from Russia, it's because of the evil machinations of foreigners, originally Poles, and then Austrians then, of course, the CIA and the Americans. And it's all sort of part of this larger view that Ukraine has no ability to even make its own arguments or to have its own history. And one of the things that's difficult for the West to understand about this conflict is that it has at its core of a conflict over a sacred origin. So the sacred origin is Kievan Rus', the first kind of important state in East Slavic lands. And so, you know, we're talking like...

**John Torpey** 06:01

I'm sorry to interrupt. But, you know, I was gonna ask you about the Kievan Rus', of course, because it does seem to be regarded as kind of the origin of later Russia. And hence, this would give some people the idea that these things were obviously deeply interconnected. And someone might still think of it that way. But so I wonder if you could talk about, how that's perceived among contemporary Russians, I mean, today's Russians. Is that something they, you know, they are aware of? I mean, presumably they're aware of it, at least in some dim way? That they're thinking about this region?

**Susan Smith Peter** 06:41

Oh, yes, absolutely. They're aware of it. I mean, Russians are very well versed in their history. The Russian history without Kievan Rus' doesn't really make a lot of sense, it would sort of be a similar situation if American history was in a situation where only Boston could talk about Lexington and Concord and Paul Revere and the American Revolution and the rest of the country could only begin the narrative with the War of 1812. It doesn't make sense to start the American historical narrative with the War of 1812 because the American Revolution is sort of a sacred origin story. So Ukrainians would object to that, because they would say that this is suggesting that Ukraine is really part of Russia, but I'm just using that as an example. So yes, it's still very much on people's minds, it's still very much part of the origin of Russian history and historiography, even in very well done and professional histories. And this debate goes all the way back to the 1850s between these two historians at the time, and it continues up to the present. So now it's seen as a sort of zero-sum game where either Ukraine or Russia can have the ability to say that Kievan Rus' is its origin, but not both. One could make the argument that Kiev is the true capital, that Ukraine itself is a true successor to Kievan Rus'. So yes, this is still very much a big, big problem. And you can go back to ideas about Ukraine that were developed in the Enlightenment, which had tremendous influence and continuing influence on Russian views of Ukraine. Because in the enlightenment, the view -even among Ukrainians, even among people who lived in Ukraine, and were interested in Ukraine- was that Ukrainian itself was a peasant language, that it wasn't a universal culture, that it was a particular culture. And then in the 1820s, you get Ukrainians saying, "wait a second, look at romanticism, peasants are wonderful, and Ukrainian language is more authentic, and it's real, and we can collect the Ukrainian folklore. And that division really continues to this day with a lot of Russians, including just regular members of the intelligentsia saying, "oh, Ukrainian is so peasant, it just doesn't have the same kind of status. It's not as a language of high culture like Russian." And a lot of that goes back to these Enlightenment ideas. And of course, Enlightenment is not always a wonderful, perfect thing. So you know, these kind of contested aspects have been going on for a long time. And one of the main things that we see and you see it also in the second half of the 19th century, is that Russian in the Russian Empire were very worried that Ukrainian language could lead to Ukrainian claims to autonomy, and maybe even to nationalism. And so the Russians take these various actions to suppress Ukrainian, to suppress written Ukrainian, spoken Ukrainian. And what does this do? It actually encourages the development of a Ukrainian identity that's very much separate from Russian. And, you know, we see a similar process happening today, where ironically enough, the Ukrainian identity before Euromaidan and before the invasion of Ukraine, Crimea and, and Donbas, there was actually not as much of a strongly developed different identity. I mean, there was a different one but many people were watching Russian TV, many people were very influenced by Russian narratives. And one of the somewhat expected, if you're an outside viewer, but unintended consequences of this long running conflict is that the sense of difference in Ukraine is much greater now than it was in 2013. And in some ways, I can compare that to the 19th century, where you have this [thing of the] Russian state constantly trying to prevent the discussion of Ukrainian and what did it do? It leads to an intensified sense of Ukrainian identity, history, language and all those good things. So there's the longer, the deeper stakes.

**John Torpey** 11:53

Yes. So, I mean, obviously, this is an important point that you're saying that there's a kind of greater sense of national difference among Ukrainians in the recent past in the last decade or so -perhaps less than that- and yet from Putin's perspective, I mean, Putin, as you know, famously said that he thought the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century. So he presumably is looking at this from a different perspective. I mean, when Ukrainians hear about the Soviet Union, they may think of the Great Famine of -I forgotten now exactly, 1930, I think, right?-but apparently, that to some degree was papered over in the intervening years. So I guess, if you can talk a little bit about the different perceptions of the unity or disunity, or unity and division between these two entities over the 20th century.

**Susan Smith Peter** 12:59

Yeah, so the great terror famine, Holodomor, that was 1932 to 33. It killed according to pretty important and accurate estimates, about 3.9 million people, mostly Ukrainians. So yes, one of the things that's interesting here is; I want to go back to the question of Putin and his view of the collapse of the Soviet Union. So Putin has this sense of the collapse of the Soviet Union as this terrible catastrophe. And in many ways, it was but because of what happened in the 90s. And what happened in the 90s is that the United States completely forgot the lessons of Versailles, that was just absolutely out of the window. And instead, there was a sense that Russia is not in the near future going to become a competitor. So therefore, it can be humiliated. But the problem is that when humiliation occurs, it's very difficult for that to be resolved in a way that isn't violent. So in the 90s, the Russians were accepting a lot of advice from the United States. And I'm not going to get into all the details, but that advice said that there should be this very fast kind of modernization and that there should be privatization, and that the market should take care of everything. And the result really was an absolute catastrophe. I mean, millions of people died when they didn't have to, and this is actually Western scholarship, it's not Russian nationalist stuff. And I mean, I saw myself things like these veterans from World War II or as they call it, the Great Patriotic War, begging on their knees, with all of their medals on their chest, begging on their knees with a cap in the hand. And, you know, I saw things like I remember in the crisis of of 1998, there was a borzoi dog that was begging at the - I was in a provincial town, and the borzoi is a very aristocratic dog. Well, why was it begging? Well, a lot of dogs have been kicked out by their owners, because their owners could have only two choices: they would either not eat themselves, and feed their dogs or eat themselves and kick out their dog. So this dog was wandering from stall to stall in the meat part of the market. And it was just clearly so confused, "why am I not getting food? Why am I hungry? Well, I was always fed before this". And I remember that, you know. So that kind of level of humiliation is very, very difficult to process. And if the United States that actually kind of remembered Versailles and carried out a Marshall Plan, we would be in a totally different situation right now, because it would have been certainly much more possible to have a stable and democratic Russia if this 1990s had not been so incredibly traumatic. And Putin is always talking about the 90s as this origin of his legitimacy, he's always saying, "you know, look at where we were in the 90s, you know, how humiliated we were, and I've made us a strong country, again. We are now again a real force in the world." And actually, the 90s are part of the reason why his power is to some degree diminishing, because the new generation, you know, the 90s for them is; they weren't around, maybe they were born, and maybe they weren't even born yet. And so it doesn't have a visceral kind of appeal to them. So it was a really great catastrophe. But the catastrophe did not necessarily have to be as great as it was. It was incredibly intensified by the actions that were taken. And of course, you could say, okay, Yeltsin should not have taken the advice of the Americans. But, um, you know, equally you could say the Americans should not have taken this stance that they did, but it's part of the larger kind of thing of what was going on at the time. I mean, this is a very harsh era, where you have the 1994 crime bill in this country, you have this kind of end of welfare, and this kind of harshness, that was very much part of Bill Clinton's time. And that harshness was incredibly intensified in Russia, where really just was red in tooth and claw, and the people that were not able to make it in the market, including old people, people with disabilities, they just died.

**John Torpey** 18:18

I think it might be useful, you know, for some of our listeners, who may not be getting some of these historical references, but to say a little bit more about, you know, exactly what happened after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I mean, you're comparing it to Versailles, which, again, may not be immediately comprehensible for some people. So maybe you could say in some greater detail exactly what happened with the collapse of the Soviet Union. I mean, one thing was, as you say, and enormous mortality that was related to collapse of the economy and massive increases in alcoholism and all kinds of things. So can you make a little bit more explicit what you mean, when you compare this to what happened in Versailles.

**Susan Smith Peter** 19:07

So what I mean is, there was a sense that this isan enemy that no longer is going to be a problem, that the victory can be a very harsh one, and that a kind of peace can be imposed on them without considering how it will really be seen from the point of view of the people who were defeated. So that's what I mean. So what happened in the the collapse of the Soviet Union? Well, Ukraine was very important in actually kind of saying "we don't want to be part of the Soviet Union," that was absolutely crucial to the collapse of it. And there was what happened in basically is all the different republics of the Soviet Union over time -it was a relatively short period of time in 1990- they were basically deciding that they were not going to stay within the Soviet Union. And at the end of 1991, you have this decision to end the Soviet Union. So, in some ways, when you look at it, when you study it, it's it's a very strange, almost mystical kind of thing. I mean, there's a decision that's made, which is almost like, you know, tomorrow, your country will no longer [be or] cease to exist, please make a note of it. And one of the things that's really important to understand here is that Gorbachev, who was of course, the head of the Soviet Union, at the time, was a tremendous idealist, and somebody who was less idealistic probably would have fought to keep it. But he was not willing to go to war to keep the Soviet Union over the will of the people of the constituent republics. So there was a decision to let the Soviet Union end. And so then what results are all the different states that we see now: the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, all of those states, which had been before part of the larger Soviet Union became independent, and they had their own foreign policy, their own defense, and so on, and so forth. So that's what happened there. And then what happened after that, and Russia was this era of humiliation and destruction, and just completely uncontrolled market forces and some people were able to do well. And it was a time of great hope; in some strange ways I miss it for that. But for the vast majority of the Russian people, it was a truly terrible time. But if it had been managed better, the collapse of the Soviet Union might have been turned into an opportunity to create a civic nation in the Russian Federation, a nation where the people who are part of the nation are not just ethnic Russians, but Russian citizens. The way that Yeltsin used to always refer to that was rossiyaniya (Россияния), which I still remember to this day. And rossiyaniya means "the citizens of Russia," so they could be Buryats, it could be Tartar, I mean, many different non-Russian ethnic groups. And if they've had more support and a less harsh kind of introduction to the market, it's possible that that kind of civic nation could have emerged. And if that were to have happened, then you wouldn't really need this drive to reclaim the Russian lands, which is based on wanting to get revenge on what happened in the past, and to make sure that there's still kind of empire. If you had a civic Russian nation, you would just be looking at a completely different situation. So I do feel that the collapse itself is a catastrophe, because of what happened afterward, not necessarily because of the real nature of what happened to the Soviet Union, because the Russian Federation could easily be a great power, even without a reconstituted Soviet Union.

**John Torpey** 23:57

Right. But it sounds as though this post-Soviet history really must shape everything that Putin thinks about the world. And it must be informing in some respects his thinking right now. But I have to say, it seems to me there's extraordinary sort of confusion and lack of consensus about what Putin seems to want in the current situation. I mean, do you think you can shed any light on that question?

**Susan Smith Peter** 24:26

Well, going back to the old historiographical war idea, I think in many ways, it's a reflection of the historiographical debate about Putin, not because people who are commenting on Putin today know about historiography of Putin, but because, there's like a real thing that's being discussed. And in the historiography, there's some people who say Putin just wants money. He stole a lot of stuff and, you know, it's about assuring his continued existence and extraordinary personal fortune. And there are other people who say no, Putin really believes in what he believes and what he believes has to do with Eurasianism and a whole bunch of other things that I don't have to get into at this particular moment. So that debate, in some ways is going on now with trying to figure out what does Putin want? If you're taking the point of view that Putin is just motivated by these basic economic drives per se, you could say, "well, he wants Ukraine because he wants the resources," for example. If you're looking at it as sort of historiographical thing, and in terms of ideological, you can make the argument which is closer to what I'm making, that it has to do with a sense of Russia can't really be an empire without Ukraine, it's sort of incomplete without Ukraine. So it's very difficult to know which one of those is is definitely correct. I mean, I myself sometimes feel that Putin doesn't really believe anything. And then sometimes I feel well, yes, he does have a belief system, and the belief system is organized around how can Russia become a great power, right? And what are the underpinnings of ideology and beliefs and values that are against the West? And so he's engaged in a search for those, and he's found various answers. But underlying the search is always how can we assist a system of values that's not like the West? So what does Putin want? I mean, it's just difficult to know, it is really difficult to know. And it's not just because there isn't enough information, also because the information is conflicting. And so I mean, if I knew what Putin wanted, I probably wouldn't be here. I'd probably be...

**John Torpey** 27:07

You'd be on the National Security Council.

**Susan Smith Peter** 27:09

Or CNN! So unfortunately, I don't really have I don't really have the answer. But I do know that if you just completely dismiss the ideas, it impoverishes our understanding of what Putin is about. I do think the ideas play some kind of role here. And certainly, the idea that Russia was humiliated, and that Russia must get revenge or reestablish itself, that idea is more basic than an ideology, it's kind of like a feeling. And that's real. I don't doubt for a second that that's real. So you know, but then again, Putin, you know, he was a KGB agent, he's very good at hiding his feelings and his thoughts, and he's also very good at this whole idea of maskirovka, which is playing with different masks, and which can often be a way of distracting people: saying one thing doing another. But that sense of humiliation and that desire for revenge, that is a thread that goes through. And strangely enough, the very beginning, he hoped to kind of do this by becoming more pro-Western. And this is something that's often forgotten, and the European Union and others didn't really accept that. And so if he's going to be rejected, he might as well completely reject them. So, you know, you see a similar process with Turkey, actually. But in any case, yes, what is he going to do? Very hard to know. I have speculations, I have ideas, what would be logical, but unfortunately, it's hard to really say.

**John Torpey** 29:07

Well, I mean, I think there's one theory out there among many, that suggests that his interest in, perhaps, invading or biting off another chunk of Ukraine, runs parallel with his interests in power and wealth in his own position. That is to say that by doing this, he shores up his domestic prestige. I mean, what do you think of? I mean, that seems in some ways kind of incontrovertible, I suppose, but it doesn't tell us really exactly what he's going to do. But it does seem to be a kind of plausible argument about what may be going on.

**Susan Smith Peter** 29:46

Yeah. I mean, that's, as I said, that that historiographical debate one of them is is more about him of making sure that he is able to control his own wealth and his own standing, his own status. I mean, one of the reasons why he's so terrified by these color revolutions is that he's afraid that he could be overturned and dragged through the streets like Qaddafi and so on and so forth. So, so yeah, that is a possibility. But then when we see the choice of Ukraine, the choice of Ukraine is not random. I mean, the choice of Ukraine has to do with, I mean, in 2008, NATO said that Ukraine and Georgia would, in the future be able to join NATO. And that's a big problem, primarily for Ukraine and Georgia, because then Putin after that, started the war on Georgia and it's a long range reason for what's going on in Ukraine. So you do you see this as one of the reasons why he is choosing Ukraine, and then you also have this historiographical thing, where if you want to celebrate the whole long history of Russia, Ukraine is a very important part of that history. And he's denying that it has a right to make any of its own decisions. So yes, but it's also sort of yes, and. Yes, he needs to shore up his support, which has been eroding because we have this new generation that doesn't even remember the 90s, which is a main justification. So one way you can kind of bring in those people is by saying, "look, we're expanding, we're being taken seriously. Look at how great this country is. And it's not just about the 90s. It's about the things that I can provide Russia with now," but you know, it's not just that.

**John Torpey** 31:52

Understood. Well, I think that's been a very helpful discussion of the historical background to what may be a march to war in Ukraine on the part of the Russians. It remains to be seen, although it seems to me that the talk of war has gotten even louder in the last 24 hours. So much to be concerned about, but I think much to be understood from historical perspective. So I want to thank Susan Smith Peter for sharing her thoughts about the crisis in Ukraine and Russia and its historical background. Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank Oswaldo Mena Aguilar for his technical assistance as well as to thank Merrill Sovner for helping put this show together and to acknowledge Duncan Mackay for sharing his song International Horizons as the theme music for the show. This is John Torpey, saying, thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons.