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AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 73

Pursuit of Power: Russian History and the Buildup to Conflict with Ukraine

Host: Major Laura Quaco

Guests: Dr. Andy Akin and Lieutenant Colonel Sandra O'Hern

In this episode, Major Laura Quaco is joined by Dr. Andy Akin and Lieutenant Colonel Sandra O'Hern for a conversation about Russian history and the relationship between Russia and Ukraine leading up to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

[Intro music – The Air Force Song (Instrumental)]

Introductions

Major Laura Quaco:

Good morning, afternoon and evening listeners. Welcome back to The Air Force Judge Advocate General School Podcast. I'm Major Laura Quaco and I'm your host for this podcast. Now I have two special episodes for you all. So this episode and the next episode that I publish are related to Russia. I had the pleasure of sitting down with two experts.

The first is Dr. Andy Akin, who is a National Security studies professor at Air Command and Staff College here at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. And he has extensive personal and professional experience in Russian studies.

And also in the conversation was Lieutenant Colonel Sandra O'Hern, who's a reserve judge advocate with a lot of operational law experience in the deployed overseas and home station environment and in her civilian capacity, she works for the Institute for Security Governance.

So for the first episode, it's going to be more of the historical background and context of Russia, and then we'll get more specifically into the background between Russia and Ukraine and that relationship. And then in the second episode, we take more of a legal shift. And you're going to hear a lot from Lieutenant Colonel O'Hern talking about things like law of war, hybrid warfare, malign legal operations, and the both of them will do some actual application with real life examples.

So very interesting conversations. But before we move on to the interviews, one thing I want to point out, and because I'm a lawyer, yes, we love our disclaimers and I've got my disclaimer at the end of the episode, but I just want to point out that this is a purely academic discussion based on open source information. So anything discussed by the guests of the show or me as the host are not the views of Department of Defense, the Air Force, any of its agencies, nor the organizations that our guest speakers work for.

So without further ado, I'm going to turn it over to the first part of the interview where experts discuss the historical background of Russia and the Russia Ukraine relationship. Enjoy.

All right. So Lieutenant Colonel O'Hern and Dr. Akin, thank you so much for joining us today again. Before we get started, I'd like to give you all the opportunity to just introduce yourselves, get a little bit of your background in national security studies for you, Dr. Akin, and an operational law for you, Lt Col O'Hern. Dr. Akin, over to you, sir.

Dr. Akin:

Well, thank you so much for invitation to join you this afternoon. It's a beautiful day here in Montgomery, Alabama, and I'm glad to be able to talk about Russia. So I actually grew up here in Montgomery and have come back now twice. I had a strange fascination with the Cold War as a child, especially living this close to a kind of a key training and education center for the military.

And that evolved into much wider and broader conversations and questions about international politics and national security studies. So I began to study the Russian language as a freshman at Wabash College in Indiana. And then after two years, I was able to spend a full year in Russia studying as undergraduate in Irkutsk, Siberia for the fall, and then later in Moscow for the spring and summer, and then came back to the South and got a master's degree from Troy University in International

Relations and then moved to the University of Alabama to begin my Ph.D. work.

And about halfway through, I was awarded a short term Fulbright Fellowship, called the Fulbright Hayes to return to Russia for summer, where I studied for about eight weeks at the School of Higher Economics in the summer of 2007, which was just a phenomenal experience. And then when I finished my Ph.D., the prospects for Russian studies specialists were relatively low.

But shortly afterwards, the Crimea incursion occurred and there was all of a sudden a renewed interest in Russia as a security issue. And so I ended up back in Montgomery working for Air University shortly thereafter.

Maj Quaco:

Wow. Sir, I have to ask you, what was it like living in Russia?

Dr. Akin:

I had a phenomenal time. I really enjoyed myself. You know, this was still pre everyone has a cell phone age. And so the life of a student in Russia was fun. I lived with an exclusively Russian speaking host family. We went to school with the equivalent of Russia as a foreign language kind of curriculum. So most of our teachers would not speak to us in English even if they could.

And we did full immersion. So I joined the Irkutsk State University boxing team because I wanted to learn how to box and that was a good time. And then I'm also a classical cellist, and so I was able to borrow an instrument from one of the cellists at the Irkutsk Symphony, and I was able to take some lessons and do some playing as well.

And then when I moved to Moscow, I was living in the center of the city. The Bolshoi Theater was about a ten minute walk, one direction. The Moscow Conservatory was about a ten minute walk, the other direction. The campus where I was going to school actually had a

number of buildings all over the city. So once a week we had to run through Red Square in order to get to class on time because the commute schedule was relatively tight between classes.

So I was literally walking through the Red Square in the Kremlin at least three times a week. And just being in the middle of all of that history and political tension. But the Russians were very welcoming. They were very, very warm. They were very friendly. And that is in stark contrast to a lot of what we even see now, kind of the assumptions for how the Russians behave.

Maj Quaco:

Wow. I bet those are really interesting experiences. Did you get to do any jobs or internships while you were there?

Dr. Akin:

It's an interesting question. I did. So the summer I was in Moscow, for the summer of 2001, I actually interned with the journalism department at Moscow State University, working on a project on media law and human rights. So we were doing some translation work from Russian to English for some media law journals, and I got to meet some pretty interesting people through that.

Maj Quaco:

That's really interesting. I might actually have a question for you later on that, but before I get too into the weeds, Lieutenant Colonel O'Hern, could you please introduce yourself?

Lt Col O'Hern:

Yes, of course. And thank you as well for the invite. I appreciate the opportunity to join this podcast. And also very interesting to hear Dr. Akin's background. It's fascinating. And I have to say I'm a little bit envious. As for myself, I am currently a reserve Air Force Judge Advocate assigned to the International and Operational Law Directorate at the Headquarters Air Force and was formerly active duty.

So I'm at about 20 years now. With really a focus, kind of an intentional focus on international operational law, but certainly didn't start out that way. I kind of really tried to work my way into those fields by taking on, you know, as many as opportunities as I was able to. To include deployments at the Air Operations Center at Tyndall with NORTHCOM/NORAD, as well as a deployment to Afghanistan, working rule of law issues as the team chief in Kandahar province. And then working at Air Force's Southern 12th Air Force in Davis Mountain Air Force Base in Tucson, Arizona. With, you know, being able to work closely with partners in Central and South America.

That was previously. And then more recently, being able to be assigned to JAO has given additional opportunities for advancing, you know, my Air Force work in the International Operational Law division. Also prior to JAO, I worked at Fifth Air Force and U.S. Forces, Japan, at Yokota Air Base, and was also to work with able to work with Japanese partners with the Japanese Air Self-defense Force.

So that was really fascinating work as well. On the civilian side, currently, I work with the Institute for Security Governance, which is an activity within the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, specifically Defense Security Cooperation University or DSCU. My primary focus area is building institutional capacity with partners and allies, primarily in Central and Eastern Europe. My portfolio currently does include Ukraine, but to back up a little bit on the civilian side, I've worked in connection with Ukraine since 2018. Prior to working with ISG or Institute for Security Governance, I worked for the Defense Institute for International Legal Studies, or DIILS, working legal capacity building in that same region with a very similar portfolio to include Ukraine.

So very interesting work for me at least. And really has helped me pursue kind of this area that I've always been interested in. To back up I certainly don't have the extensive background that Dr. Akin does in the earlier years, but I had taken two years of Russian in undergrad at

Marquette University and that really sparked my interest and I was focusing on international relations and majoring in German.

That major did require I take another language and Russian happened to make sense to me. Prior to entering or starting at Marquette, I had attended high school on an exchange in Berlin, and this was shortly after the wall fell. So it very much still had that East Germany and then the different sectors of Berlin still very much in place, even though the wall had come down by that point.

And I would say that was probably also a very interesting time and really kind of sparked my interest in the region. As far as just international affairs in general, I had grown up overseas, so I'd always been around kind of an international community. A lot of parents of friends were part of the diplomatic corps or worked for international companies.

So just being exposed to that sort of throughout my life, I feel kind of really set the set me on this path to where I am today. And I think I couldn't be happier to sort of be working in my dream job on both the Air Force side and my civilian side.

Russian Studies

Maj Quaco:

Yes, ma'am. Well, thank you so much for sharing your experiences. I'm very excited for the conversation we're going to have today. I'm thinking you all are going to teach me a lot here. So, Dr. Akin, I want to ask you, what have you been your more recent experiences related to Russian studies?

Dr. Akin:

Well, about two years ago, through Air University and the Office of Sponsored Programs, I was able to set up a yearlong joint elective—called the Russian Research Task Force. And we have been able to partner with the Russian Strategic Initiative at EUCOM and some other folks to do a yearlong research focused effort at questions related to Russia and international security.

So that has taken us on kind of a whirlwind tour of we've been able to present our work at conferences. We have an active website through the AU portal on research, on questions that are very relevant and active right now. And then in the last year I have been particularly busy. I have been asked to do an awful lot of speaking and teaching, you know, now beginning to roll into some research projects based on the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

National Security Strategy

Maj Quaco:

Well, it sounds like they've been keeping you pretty busy Sir. So one thing I wanted to talk about, you know, as we're talking about Russia's background and I think this is going to be important to kind of flesh out our understanding of that background. There is national security strategy? But before we get there, can you first tell our listeners what is a national security strategy?

Dr. Akin:

Sure. So most states in the world with significant military capabilities will use a variety of signaling instruments to let their neighbors, the international community, the international institutions have some idea of what their intentions are, whether it's what their defense concerns are, whether it's what their intention for operational activities might be, what they're going to focus on. And one of these is a national security strategy.

Now, the United States, the federal government, particularly the White House, the office of the president, is required by law to issue a national security strategy. Basically upon entering the White House. So most administrations will take a year to 18 months, but then it'll be produced and then also by statute, there is kind of a cascading effect for strategic security guidance that comes from that.

So the United States national security strategy will come out first, followed by the National Defense Strategy, followed by the national military strategy, and then cascading down. We'll usually see updated combatant

commanders guidance, strategic guidance for their areas of concern. A variety of other countries, other states in the world sort of started following that track beginning in the 1990s.

And so Russia, as the Soviet Union collapsed around it and inside of it even, was faced with a particularly difficult set of circumstances in terms of their security focus and outlook and capabilities. They still had this enormous nuclear arsenal, but they did not have a direct threat, a specific state they were trying to deter. There was a lot of potential conflict around the borders of the former Soviet states and within some of the former Soviet states that they were concerned about.

And the Russians were also concerned about, you know, their own border, secure security and stability. So they began to issue national security strategies in about 1993/1994. And those strategies very much reflected the concerns of the day, that because Russia was in a weakened state, that they were concerned that other states might take advantage of them, that states might not live up to treaty obligations with the Russian Federation because of the inability to enforce some of those treaty actions.

And the Russians were also concerned about the treatment and status of ethnic Russians or Russian citizens who lived abroad, particularly in some of the former Soviet states. That messaging began to change in the early 2000s, shortly after Vladimir Putin became president of Russia, first by sort of default, when Boris Yeltsin named him as president on New Year's Eve 1999. And then after he began standing for election on his own beginning in the spring of 2000.

So the first couple of years of Vladimir Putin's national security strategies for the Russian Federation begin to build on some new and different themes. One is the theme that Russia has a long history of being a great power. It deserves to have that recognition and status and is actively working to achieve that status again. The second is a narrative that Russia was taken advantage of

by particularly the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union. And that the West, especially United States, have not been good partners, reliable partners on economics or trade issues or security concerns either. Particularly the expansion of NATO is obviously a big concern of the Russians.

And then in about 2015, the language in the Russian NSS began to shift dramatically. This is where we see the Russian state calling for a new kind of international security architecture and framework, one that is in stark contrast to what we refer to as the U.S. led liberal international system. Which is essentially what the United States stepped into at the conclusion of the Second World War to rebuild Europe and to create a security framework and an alliance structure to particularly provide stability and security in the North Atlantic.

The Russians now have asked and are advocating for what they call a polycentric world order, which is far more amoral in terms of leadership or governmental structure. So that Russian authoritarianism is no better than American democracy or the Chinese economic system is no better or worse than any of the World Trade Organizations or the international trade system that the United States and its partners have set up.

And then the most recent national security strategy that they released in 2021 ... first of all, they only released it in Russian, which is a signal by itself that the Russians are far less interested in actually cooperating with the international community as seen as being led by the United States than ever before. And it doubled down ... doubles down on some of these themes of what Russia is concerned about—the grievances they're airing. And then their intent to build up a strong nuclear deterrence, a strong conventional force, and move into that perception and role as a great power player in an equal footing with other great power players in the system.

Maj Quaco:

So prior iterations were actually released in English, and the most recent one was not.

Dr. Akin:

They're usually released in Russian and English tangentially. And then this last one was only in Russian.

Maj Quaco:

So it sounds like there were a lot of changes that were made in the past couple iterations. What do you think sparked those?

Dr. Akin:

Well, I think a great deal of that had to do with Vladimir Putin personally coming into power envisioning himself as sort of the inheritor of the great Russian empire, the status of Russia as a great power, and then working in stages to try and return Russia to that degree of respect and credibility within the international system or international frameworks.

Terrorism

Maj Quaco:

Right. And one other thing that I wanted to have you discuss that you and I kind of chatted about previously was a time when things were a bit different, when our interests were aligned a little bit more. You know, we were really focused on terrorism. Can you talk to that a little bit?

Dr. Akin:

Sure. So one of the other aspects of the U.S.-Russian relationship and even reflected in some of Russia's strategic documents, strategic security documents For many years, there was still an inkling that the U.S. and Russia could partner on a variety of can concerns or issues that equally affected both parties. And one of those was clearly terrorism.

Putin was one of the first world leaders to call President George H.W. Bush and offer his condolences and also his assistance after 9/11. We had that series of meetings and the kind of dialog in the media of Bush looking into Putin's eyes and seeing his soul and all of this

collaboration. And to a large degree, the United States and partners did work very heavily with the Russia and Russian Federation over security issues in Central Asia.

The Russians were pretty good partners with overflight and base accessing and the help with Afghanistan. That began to shift a little bit when we moved towards the 2003 Iraq invasion. And I think we're going to come back to this conversation a little bit later. But one of the tactics the Russians use in opposition to the United States is a "what about-ism" kind of kind of approach.

And the 2003 Iraq invasion was a particularly highlighted example of that, where in the United States levels a great deal of criticism appropriately at Russia for not abiding by norms and standards of either the international system or international organizations everyone belongs to. And in the United States, normally asking for consensus in institutions such as, you know, the U.N. Security Council, the broader United Nations General Assembly, and then some of the other security and economic systems, including NATO and related ideas.

And in Iraq, because the United States did not have U.N. Security Council approval to initiate that conflict, the Russians were deeply upset by the fact that the United States was willing to essentially take on a unilateral security action with virtually no international repercussions. When had Russia done something similar, there was widespread condemnation. So that was a turning point in the U.S. But particularly in the Putin relationship with the United States.

The Russian People

Maj Quaco:

Yeah, that's really interesting to kind of hear that perspective of where some things may have changed. But I kind of want to shift gears here and ask you, from your experience living there in Russia, you know your studies there, what do you know about the people? Like how do they feel about the government, to your knowledge?

Dr. Akin:

That's a great question. So the Russian people have a very long history of being critical of their government, but very accepting of people. But also very fatalistic and even cynical towards the agency they have as citizens of a country. So what I mean by that is the Russians do vote, but most of time, they're very cynical about whether or not their vote will even be counted, if not manipulated.

So there's just very little strong political culture inside Russia as opposed to sort of the participatory culture that we have in the United States. And that leads to a variety of unusual outcomes of behaviors. So on the one hand, the Russians have very little sort of faith and trust their government, although Putin remains fairly popular. The Russians also have this deep sense of history and a lot of even, you know, normal middle class Russians ... the conflict in Ukraine right now might be bad, but it also is necessary to reunite the ancestral and the nation of Ukraine with Russia where it belongs.

So there's a surprising amount of at least tacit support of Russia's operations. There is also an increased crackdown on any dissent. And there is also some degree of knowledge in terms of the Russian government has tried very hard and done a particularly good job of squelching free media and an open reporting in Russia.

Russians still can access a great deal of international media because the Russian firewall is far weaker than China's. So you have this mix of on the one hand, Russians can be informed if they choose to be. They are, you know, largely fatalistic and non-responsive. But there's also this sort of baseline of, yeah, Ukraine someday has to be part of Russia again.

So there's a little bit of support for what we're seeing.

Russian Media Crackdown

Maj Quaco:

So you brought up this crackdown of dissent in the media. How historically has the media been in Russia? Was it always crackdown? Was it open?

Dr. Akin:

Yeah. So there are several kind of long historical iterations of this in the early to late 19th century as print media became more just universally accessible, the Czarist government did take steps to censor, particularly newspapers. And then later on crackdown on more media reporting. Interestingly, one of the conditions that was around by the time of the Russian Revolution was the press had its restrictions lifted a good bit.

Similarly, in the early to mid 1980s, President ... Secretary Gorbachev also enacted a couple of reforms, one of which was glasnost, which was openness, which allowed a lot of freedom of media to report on conditions and activities that they never would have been allowed to report on in the past.

In terms of the impact of Soviet policies, opposition narratives to Soviet government policies and a variety of other of the things. And again, that was a precursor to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian constitution in 1993 does guarantee a great deal of freedom of the press. But Putin has been able to pretty masterfully claw back that and a number of very fascinating ways, one of which was that most of the media moguls who owned a great deal of either broadcast or print media were systematic accused of things like fraud or tax evasion and forced one way or another to sell their media empires back to the Russian state.

Lt Col O'Hern:

Wow.

Dr. Akin:

And as the sole owner of these media companies, they had pretty much full control over what was broadcast. So that has been one way. And then in the last year, the Russian government has taken steps, pretty draconian steps to prevent even foreign media outlets from operating effectively inside of the Russian Federation to the degree that, you know, even outlets like The New York Times, which has had a bureau in Moscow for probably a century, was forced to close down and leave because they ran the risk of even their reporters being criminally prosecuted for reporting of the standards that they normally live up to.

Maj Quaco:

Wow. So when you were doing your journalism internship, how was it then?

Dr. Akin:

There was a sense of cautious optimism at the time. There had begun to be a shift because by the time I was working there, some of the very large media companies had been privatized. They were in the hands of a relatively small number of individuals, most of which had a pretty good relationship with Putin. So there was some concern that media stories that were unfavorable towards the Russian government are going to be given an awful lot of very light treatment.

But at the same time, there was a series of laws that were allowing for more journalistic freedom, more access to digital media. So so again, kind of cautious optimism at the time. But within about four or five years, that turned to a lot of cynicism when a lot of the government crack-downs began again.

Maj Quaco:

Yeah, you know, it's really interesting how, you know, the media is treated differently elsewhere. In the states, of course, we're used to the Constitution and the First Amendment, all of that. But to hear it being treated differently in Russia is just really interesting. So now,

you know, I'd like to switch gears and move more specifically for those of us who haven't been following closely or feel like we can't.

I know history can be pretty daunting because it's like, well, if I haven't paid attention for the past two decades, how can I catch up now? But for our listeners, I'd like for them to get a bigger picture, bigger background and closer understanding of what's been going on between Russia and Ukraine. Obviously, that's a hot topic right now.

So, Lieutenant Colonel O'Hern, can you start off by providing some background from your knowledge between, you know, Russia, Ukraine, that relationship?

Russia and Ukraine

Lt Col O'Hern:

Yeah, I think Dr. Akin really gave some really good background on sort of these larger historical arcs in Russia that are so important to understanding the Ukrainian context that we see today. And again, I just want to step out here and just say—I want to reiterate that anything that I'm saying is not intended as any official view of the DoD or the Air Force or the agency I work for.

And certainly I would try to avoid any commentary on sort of the U.S. stance or position on any of this. So just with that caveat moving forward, I'd like to just highlight a few points just historically as it relates to Russia long term and the more, the near term of what's been happening, sort of the road to the crisis that has led us to where we're at right now with Ukraine.

So, you know, going back to really back centuries, there's a lot of historical context here related to Ukraine and Ukraine as it relates to Russia and particularly in the past couple hundred years when we're talking about Czarist Russia and the Russian empire, there really was a concerted effort to Russify the Ukrainian region or make them more Russian. And it's really interesting if anyone's interested or has the time.

There was a fascinating essay that Putin published and it's available in English on the Kremlin website published back, I think in July of 2021, where he talks through some of this Russian view of what Ukraine is and what it means to them. But really, it goes back much further, like I said, back to really dating back to the Russian Empire.

But there's a very complex history, even dating before then. Certainly not enough time here in this podcast to cover. So, you know, my apologies if this is overly brief, but following this period of the Russian Empire up until 1917, when we see the Russian Revolution, you had seen this concerted effort of Russification in the Ukrainian region.

In 1917, we saw this sort of short bid for independence on the heels of the Russian Revolution, where there was the Ukrainian People's Republic. But that was very short lived by the time the USSR came to be in 1922, Ukraine had been subsumed and unfortunately the problems did not end there. There was this forced Russification continued on during Stalin's era. We saw what was called the Holodomor, which is the forced famine essentially, that occurred in the early 1930s. Where essentially the Ukraine region was forced into a famine state with food and necessities withheld from the Ukrainian people.

And then, of course, by the fall of the Soviet Union, we see Ukraine declare independence as its own country. And I think understanding this history and understanding Ukrainian nationalism and their sense of independence is key to grasping what's going on right now. When you look back to the essay I mentioned that Putin had written back in 2021, in the way he describes it, Ukraine never really existed of its own, you know, sovereignty or as its own state.

It was an entity within the Soviet Union, but it was really invented by Soviet leaders within the Soviet Union. And it really is and has always been a part of Russian territory, is, as Dr. Akin had talked about. So he also goes on to talk

about how there's this sort of triune of what he considers Russian people or the larger Russian imperium.

And that would be Russians as we know it in the Russian Federation today, Ukrainians and Belarusians. And then the three of them sort of constitute this Russian entity and this desire to return to that Russian imperium. Which really, if you read closely, is not just what the Soviet Union was. Because when you look at the broader Russian empire prior to the USSR, it was considerably larger.

And he actually blames Soviet leaders somewhat for the USSR and that Russian empire being chipped away. So one of the other points that's really interesting that plays into what we're seeing now is Putin asserts that Ukraine's bid for independence occurred during their was this bid for independence that occurred during World War Two, during periods of German occupation, specifically in 1941 and 1944, where he argues Ukrainian independence fighters align themselves with the Nazis.

Although somewhat true, he sort of uses this narrative to support actions today. The Ukrainian independence fighters of that time had sort of seen the Nazis as they're and this was a very small minority, mind you see, they saw the Nazis as sort of saviors and seeing them as saving them from the Soviet oppression. And as I mentioned previously, it was pretty egregious suppression they were dealing with.

So again, Putin uses this as sort of a form of very effective form of disinformation to characterize what's going on with Ukraine and why there's a need for Russia to sort of save the people and demilitarize and denazify the people. It's a bit of a stretch, perhaps, to outsiders. You know, arguably when you when you read reports on this, that rationale is a bit of a stretch.

But it's certainly something that is used and from all reports appears to be quite effective at convincing the Russian people for why this is sort of a valid and noble effort on their part with the invasion of Ukraine. To step

away a little bit from that if it's okay, I'd like to talk a little bit more of kind of the immediate events leading up to where we're at right now, sort of skipping past decades of Soviet rule, although certainly a lot of these areas, there's a lot of incidents and things that occur that affect where we're at now.

Maj Quaco:

Sure. That sounds like it'd be wonderful. But I've got a quick question. So what do we know of how the Ukrainian people felt of that Russian argument you were just talking about the denazification?

Lt Col O'Hern:

Well, I mean, it's not true. I mean, it's almost laughable. It was if you read news reports, it's interesting because while Putin sort of goes into great detail in his essay, as well as speeches he's given in response to that essay, current president of Ukraine, Vladimir Zelenskyy replied in effect, I'm paraphrasing here, but oh, clearly Putin has a lot of time on his hands, essentially to be putting together this sort of very outlandish rationale.

So for all intents and purposes, there's not a lot to do or anything really to support. There's been some allegations from the Russian government. And again, this is to really separate the Russian people from the Russian government. But there's been some allegations that there is these neo-Nazi leader supporters of the former what they view as Nazi heroes from early times in Ukraine and their early bid for independence in World War Two.

But from what I've read really everyone agrees that there's really nothing to support that. So I think that's sort of the response on the Ukrainian side and this is also notwithstanding, there is obviously a large Russian ethnic population in Ukraine as well.

Dr. Akin:

Yeah, if I could, I wanted to actually kind of amplify and go back and add a few things that are amazing from what you said. So one, is yes, the Russians are actually

they're desperate to try and Russify all of these areas. As you mentioned, the great irony with this, of course, is that if we go back even further in history, Kiev is understood to be the first Slavic settlement.

And so what then was the land of the Russ, and then it became Russia, you know, emanated from, you know, engagements with those Slavic settlements. So in a very real way, the irony to point out here is that Ukraine probably has much more of a historical claim to Russia than Russia ever did on Ukraine. And then also there are at least two other entities that have had territorial claims on both Moscow and Kiev in the past year, of course, the Mongol Empire and even the Polish-Lithuanian principalities.

But you don't see either of those entities trying to exercise the current value of those historical territorial claims, which is, you know, it just adds to, as you said, the ridiculousness of Putin's argument. The other thing that comes up is this ... is how Putin has reinterpreted what Ukraine is and is absolutely right. The Soviets came up with this system is called the ethnofederal system, where, according to some Russian demographers, whether or not your sort of peoples, your nation met some criteria or threshold of history or civilization, then you were granted a greater or lesser degree of autonomy within the Soviet system.

And so, for example, you know, the Georgians and the Ukrainians were given this status as Soviet socialist republics. The Chechens, however, were made subjects of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic and not given their own independence. And so it's interesting to see Putin looking backwards at the decision to actually grant Ukraine this semi-independent semi-autonomous status was wrong, even though, again, he sees Belarus on the same plain and is not complaining about the fact that Belarus was given the same territorial advantage.

And you will see a lot of symbolism in a lot of Russian mythology and culture of this idea of the Troika or the

Slavic Brotherhood, which is Russia, Belarus and Ukraine sort of united as one. So yeah, these are all very relevant things that we're seeing coming back right now.

Lt Col O'Hern:

Thank you, Dr. Akin. And I completely agree there's ... we could go for hours on just this historical context alone. And, you know, you bring up a really good point. I think the saying is Kiev is the mother of all Russian cities. So it is it's a convenient sort of historical narrative that Putin certainly has created.

And fascinating at that. If I might, I'd like to touch on just a few key points that have kind of brought and I know Dr. Akin has touched on them as well. But to highlight what has kind of brought us to where we're at in Ukraine at the moment.

Maj Quaco:

Please do. Yes, ma'am.

Lt Col O'Hern:

So if we're going to skip ahead and I know this does not do it justice, but just for the sake of time, I'll skip forward to really when things started to heat up, at least for Ukraine, but certainly not for the region, because I think, you know, starting in the early 2000s, we really started to see a lot in the region with the color revolutions that occurred, which Putin and the Kremlin have repeatedly stated that these were nothing more than interventions by the West, particularly the United States.

"Color" Revolutions

Maj Quaco:

Can you explain what those were for our listeners?

Lt Col O'Hern:

Of course, I was actually didn't want to get into too much detail, but I absolutely can.

Maj Quaco:

The bottom line up front, ma'am.

Lt Col O'Hern:

Absolutely. So, what we're seeing, particularly in the in the very late 1990s, early 2000s, you start to see these color revolutions throughout the region of the former Soviet Union with well, in particular, you saw the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. There was the Tulip Revolution in Georgia, I believe, and really a bunch of the Velvet Revolution in the former Yugoslavia.

So there was really a lot of political uprising and civil unrest occurring and in reaction to what was perceived as corruption and dissatisfaction with the government and with attempts to overthrow the administrations that were in place at the time. So really kind of creating an environment of unrest throughout the region with ... and I don't know if Dr. Akin has anything to add to this. He certainly has the historical context, I think, is from the academic perspective.

Dr. Akin:

Yeah. The only thing I'd add is that what tended to spark these colored revolutions was in most of the former Soviet states, the former communist leaders turned themselves into nationalist Democrats overnight and then were able to run for office and still retain most of the power that they had when they were they were communists. And by the late nineties, early 2000s, in a number of these states, the public had gotten tired of the corruption and the fraudulent elections that actually did occur.

And that was sort of the spark of really pushed a lot of these things to happen. And yes, Moscow looked at all of these as coordinated, deliberate and set about by the United States as an intelligence operation.

Lt Col O'Hern:

Exactly. So you can see the stage is sort of already set. And by this time, of course, Putin is in control of the Kremlin. So he's overseeing all of this, you know, going on now for about 22 years. So as far as Ukraine and what was happening in Ukraine, we see a really a lot of this

dissatisfaction continuing on, a lot of the corruption the old Soviet cronies in control.

And really, it's not fooling the population in Ukraine or even elsewhere where some of this unrest was occurring. So one of the kind of key flashpoints that happened more recently is around the end of 2013. We see the Euromaidan protests that occurred started to occur in Kiev, but in Ukraine over all. And really this what was sparking this, what led up to this was the president at the time who was aligned with who was pro-Russian President Yanukovich.

There was any number of issues. There was reports on egregious corruption. Ukraine had been moving towards wanting to join the EU. I know Dr. Akin touched on this sort of NATO expansion. EU is another sort of perceived threat or slight that Putin has been wrangled by. And there was this bid to join the EU on the part of Ukraine. And at the last minute or unexpectedly to the population, the government, the Ukrainian government opted to not vote for and that resulted in protests.

And while they were largely peaceful, by February of 2014, there was a violent crackdown by of the protesters, by the President Yanukovich and his government. Again, that was a pro-government or pro-Russian government in Ukraine. And some allegations that the crackdown was occurring in part by troops or special police that were backed by Russia or even sent in from Russia.

I won't speculate on all the background on that. But really turned into a flash point for the Ukrainian population. By February of 2014, President Yanukovich actually fled to Russia and there was a change of power in Kiev. And in that same time frame, almost immediately thereafter was when Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea. And a lot can be said on that, it was there were sort of this sham referendum.

There is this notion from Russia that Crimea has always belonged to Russia, that the ethnic Russian population there was somehow being mistreated by the Ukrainian

government and that Russia had a right to this to this geographic area. This was not recognized by pretty much the entire international community, with the exception of a couple of countries in Russia, North Korea. You know, who you'd usually expect to recognize that. We also see in the same year pro-Russian separatists in the eastern Donbas region of Ukraine and then we see the self proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Lugansk in that region.

Again, this is an ethnically Russian populated area. And this set off really what ended up being an ongoing conflict all the way up until today and up until that invasion. I highlight this because I think a lot of people think the invasion of Ukraine that occurred last year, last February 24th, was somehow new or that was just sort of the first act of aggression.

And I think I highlight these and particularly this ongoing conflict in the East Donbas region to show that this has been ongoing for years and many people didn't realize or don't realize even today that Ukraine has been in conflict with Russia and the Russian separatists in the East for almost a decade. So this is not a new issue that just sort of popped up in the last year.

Maj Quaco:

Right. Because I know I certainly didn't see much about it in the media before February 24th.

Lt Col O'Hern:

Exactly. I don't think it was covered that much. Unless you're someone who follows this, you're naturally not going to know as much. So, things just kind of escalated since then. You see Ukraine voting for a goal to join NATO by 2017 is when they had that vote and by September 2020, current President Zelenskyy confirmed that goal of NATO membership.

And as Dr. Akin accurately pointed out, that's always been a very significant sensitive point for Russia - is this notion of NATO's expansion and NATO's expanding upon and up to Russian borders. And it's this act of

provocation on the part of the West. And that's sort of the narrative that's spun by the Kremlin and really fed through the media to the Russian population.

So then by March of 2021, the Kremlin starts to build. You see a lot of troop build up on the Ukrainian border. And then December of 2021, Putin demands that NATO deny membership to Ukraine, which of course did not happen. And then 21 February, Putin recognizes the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk in the eastern region. And just three days later on the 24th is when the invasion occurred under this purported need for self defense and collective self defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter, with saying that those newly recognized independent states need this self-defense from Russia.

And that's what they were responding to. Again, we can go into a lot of discussion on how that narrative or how that rationale really doesn't hold water, but really that those are kind of some of the major events that took place, really leading us up to where we are now. And a lot of questions that come up or that I encounter from people who are just learning about this. Is why this approach by Russia really doesn't seem to make sense.

Why Would they do this? It seems almost self-defeating. It sort of alienates some from the rest of the international community to the extent that they almost become like this pariah. Now, we've seen all these sanctions being imposed. Why would why would Russia take this approach to what end? And why does it really help them in any way?

And I think that really ... is to understand that is to really understand this Russian foreign policy and how they approach foreign policy. And it's not how we approach foreign policy or the majority of our allies and partners. So I think Dr. Akin touched on this. They have this obsession with being acknowledged as this great power and this need to bring back the Russian empire to what it was back in the day.

And then also this sort of fixation on enemies and NATO expansion, particularly between the 1990-2014 period and how they had increasingly encroached on what was believed to be sort of Russian on the on the Russian bordering areas. And again, I think Dr. Akin also pointed out that there's been these alternating periods of attraction and repulsion of ... with the West, working with the West and then not wanting anything to do with the West.

It's kind of stopped there. And let you or Dr. Akin jump in.

Dr. Akin:

So some kind of themes just to reiterate that I think are really important. Everything you said ... the issue with Ukraine in the 2013/2014 timeline and this is absolutely correct, there was a sense and even demand amongst the responsive nature of the politics of Ukraine that the state was going to move towards the West. Wanted to join Western institutions, wanted to sort of cast its light with the Democratic West and Russia once again operating under this narrative of the identity politics that Ukraine has to be part of Russia. It has to be under their sphere of influence. Saw all these things began to cascade and it just reinforced Putin's problem. One of the other things that I'll point out is that this NATO as the boogeyman for Russia argument also loses a great deal of explanatory power very, very quickly because any study of alliances or alliance expansion will show you very quickly that if an alliance adds more members, that in point of fact weakens the alliance for a good while because now somebody has to pay for and deal with interoperability integration, moving more deterrent equipment in different places, managing how to bring in the political aspect of all of these new members. So Putin knows this. So he knows that if you know Ukraine, which probably wouldn't, but even if it did become part of NATO, NATO would be in a substantially weaker position to actually act against Russia if anything occurred. But it plays very well in the domestic politics of Russia, particularly to nationalists and hard liners for Putin and his inner cabal, to be able to point to this as a direct threat to Russian security. So

Closing

Maj Quaco:

All right, listeners, that's all we have time for today. So now we've got some great background from Dr. Akin and Lt Col O'Hern. So save that in your back pocket because we'll be back in the next episode playing the remainder of that conversation where we're going to dive more into some legal principles and concepts and talk about some real life examples that we've seen in this conflict.

So until then, this podcast is in recess.

Major Victoria Smith:

Nothing from this show should be construed as legal advice. Please consult an attorney for any legal issues. Nothing in this show is endorsed by the Federal government, the Air Force, or any of its components. All content and opinions are those of its guest and host.

Glossary

- **DIILS:** Defense Institute for International Legal Studies
- **DoD:** Department of Defense
- **DSCU:** Defense Security Cooperation University
- **EU:** European Union
- **EUCOM:** European Command
- **ISG:** Institute for Security Governance
- **JAG:** judge advocate general
- **JAO:** Operations and International Law Domain
- **NATO:** North Atlantic Treaty Organization
- **NORAD:** North American Aerospace Defense Command
- **NORTHCOM:** Northern Command
- **NSS:** National Security System
- **UN:** United Nations
- **USSR:** Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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