

Parting Shot

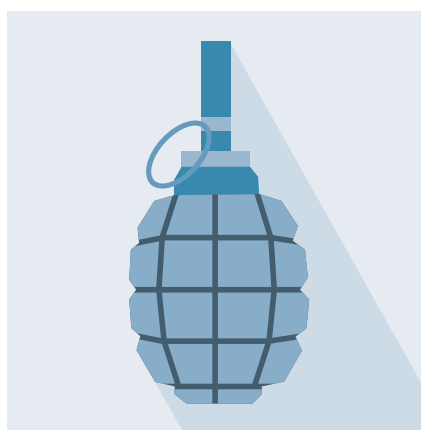
Russia's war on Ukraine will have shocked and surprised many readers. How far back in history should we look to find the roots of this terrible event?

By Mark Harrison

The difficulty of this question is illustrated by a recent anecdote. A broadcaster asks a journalist, a political scientist, and a historian where they would start. The journalist says: 'At the end of 2021 Russia demanded that Ukraine should never join NATO'. The political scientist says: 'In 1991 the Soviet Union broke up and Ukraine became an independent nation state'. The historian says: 'In the ninth century the Vikings arrived in the region bordering the Black Sea and settled there ...'

As this issue of *Advantage* shows, history casts a long shadow. Why are some countries rich today while others are poor? Why are boys advantaged over girls, and men over women? Why are some cities more vibrant than others? Why are some regions more integrated than others? All of these questions are shown to find at least partial answers in events that were distributed accidentally across a far distant past.

Why does history matter, and how do its effects persist? A completely different view is found in the claims of blood-and-soil nationalists across the world. Their ethnic communities, they commonly maintain, are descended from the first people who long ago settled in a region, made it their homeland, married among themselves, and defended their community against outsiders. The descendants, they suggest, have come to embody a set of national



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values that is unique and unchanging to the present day, untouched by events and shocks that might have disturbed the community in the time since its primordial foundation.

The views of Vladimir Putin on the Russian people and its values provide an example. On various occasions, the Russian president has claimed that 'respect for parents and family and love for our soil', and 'family, friendship, mutual assistance, and compassion' are shared values of the Russian people, arising from their common history.

When subjected to scholarly investigation, however, historical evidence undermines the idea of national values that are distinct, innate, and unchanging. Attitudes to gender roles, education, and trust in others turn out to vary across space and over time. While some variation responds to state borders and ethnolinguistic boundaries, much variation is found within national boundaries and within ethnic groups. Within-group variation can often be attributed to differences in exposure to historical events that were at least partly random, such as distance from disasters, arbitrary enforcement of laws and prohibitions, different personal experiences of forced settlement and expulsion, and exogenous leads and lags in improvement of transport and communications.

The evidence also shows that values have consequences. A large literature testifies to the economic losses suffered by communities where values prevail that are associated with distrust, discrimination, and restricted access to education and employment.

In the present crisis, even fictitious values have had consequences. Russian leaders have falsely claimed unique national values that are supposedly shared by all Russians, except for a few renegades. The crisis has arisen, they maintain, because these values are increasingly threatened by corrupt and unscrupulous outsiders and their collaborators, against whom the nation is entitled to defend itself by any means.

Thus, an imagined set of national values has been invoked to call Russia to arms and to rationalise the crime of planning and waging an aggressive war against Ukraine. ◀

Mark Harrison is Emeritus Professor of Economics at the University of Warwick and a CAGE Senior Research Fellow.