

Contested Memory and Legacy in International Relations: The case of Kievan Rus' in defining Russo-Ukrainian Relations, 1989-2025

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ABSTRACT

The Russia–Ukraine conflict is often explained through immediate geopolitical factors such as NATO expansion, security dilemmas, and power politics. While these explanations are significant, they do not fully account for the depth, persistence, and emotional intensity of the conflict. This article argues that the contemporary crisis between Russia and Ukraine must also be understood through the lens of memory politics, particularly the contested interpretation of the civilisational legacy of Kievan Rus. Drawing on theories of collective memory and securitisation, the study examines how historical narratives have been transformed from academic debates into instruments of political mobilisation and national security discourse between 1989 and 2025.

The article analyses how Russia and Ukraine have constructed competing national memories around Kievan Rus to legitimise divergent identity projects and geopolitical orientations. While Russia invokes Kievan Rus to advance a narrative of historical unity among Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, Ukraine interprets the same legacy as evidence of a distinct and autonomous historical trajectory. These conflicting interpretations have contributed to what may be described as a “war of memories,” in which history is weaponised through state discourse, legislation, education, and symbolic politics.

By engaging with historiographical debates on Kievan inheritance and examining the securitisation of memory in both states, the article demonstrates that unresolved historical legacies play an active role in shaping contemporary conflict dynamics. It argues that the transformation of memory into an existential security issue has intensified mistrust, narrowed the space for compromise, and reinforced antagonistic identities. The study concludes that without addressing the underlying politics of memory and the securitisation of historical narratives, diplomatic and military solutions alone are unlikely to produce durable peace between Russia and Ukraine.

KEYWORDS: Kievan Rus, Memory Politics, Collective Memory, Securitisation of Memory, Russo–Ukrainian Relations, War of Memories, Post-Soviet Space, Kievan Inheritance. Nation-Building, Security Discourse, Legacy in Modern Politics, Ukraine–Russia Conflict (1989–2025), Identity and Foreign Policy

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, history has increasingly moved beyond academic spaces to occupy a central role in politics, diplomacy, and security, shaping how states construct identity and interpret their relations with others (Assmann, 2006; Mälksoo, 2015). This shift is particularly evident in post-Soviet Eastern Europe,

where contested memories of the past continue to influence contemporary political choices and international alignments. The Russia–Ukraine relationship exemplifies how politicised historical narratives can sustain and intensify conflict rather than facilitate reconciliation.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, both Russia and Ukraine faced the challenge of redefining themselves as independent political actors. Despite sharing a long and intertwined history, their interpretations of this past diverged sharply. Russia emphasised continuity, presenting itself as the inheritor of a common East Slavic civilisation encompassing Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians (Miller, 2013). Ukraine, in contrast, sought to construct its national identity around rupture, resistance, and a deliberate reorientation towards Europe, framing its historical experience as distinct from Russian imperial and Soviet domination (Wilson, 2004). These competing identity projects laid the foundation for enduring tension.

Central to this divergence is the legacy of Kievan Rus, the medieval East Slavic polity widely regarded as a foundational civilisation in Eastern Europe. Russia frequently invokes Kievan Rus as the cradle of Russian statehood and Orthodoxy, reinforcing narratives of historical unity and civilisational continuity. Ukraine, however, interprets the same legacy as evidence of territorial rootedness and cultural autonomy, asserting a separate historical trajectory (Pelenski, 1998). As a result, Kievan Rus has evolved from a medieval historical subject into a highly contested political symbol.

The growing prominence of memory politics reflects a broader trend in which historical narratives are increasingly securitised. Through legislation, monuments, education, and official discourse, particular versions of the past are elevated while others are marginalised or criminalised, transforming history into an existential security issue (Mälksoo, 2015; Gaufman, 2017). This study argues that the Russia–Ukraine conflict between 1989 and 2025 cannot be fully understood without examining how the memory of Kievan Rus has been continuously reinterpreted, politicised, and weaponised, contributing to the escalation and persistence of geopolitical conflict.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT: RUSSIA, UKRAINE AND POST-SOVIET MEMORY

The disintegration of the Soviet Union marked not merely a geopolitical realignment but a profound rupture in historical consciousness across the post-Soviet space. For newly independent states such as Ukraine, independence generated an urgent need to reinterpret the past in ways that could legitimise sovereignty and support nation-building. Russia, however, largely perceived the Soviet collapse as a historical loss, prompting political elites to emphasise continuity with earlier imperial and civilisational traditions rather than rupture (Miller, 2013; Wilson, 2004). These contrasting interpretations of the same historical moment produced divergent memory trajectories that continue to shape Russo-Ukrainian relations.

In the years following independence, Ukraine embarked on a gradual yet deliberate process of redefining its national identity through selective remembrance and historical reinterpretation. This process involved distancing itself from Soviet symbols, narratives, and political traditions while foregrounding experiences of repression, famine, wartime suffering, and political marginalisation. Memory became a key instrument through which Ukraine articulated its separation from Russia, not only as a political entity but also as a moral and cultural community (Kasianov, 2022). This reorientation was closely linked to Ukraine's aspiration to align with Europe and position itself outside Russia's perceived civilisational and geopolitical orbit.

Russia's post-Soviet memory politics followed a markedly different path. Rather than embracing

discontinuity, Russian political discourse increasingly framed the Soviet collapse as an interruption in a longer historical continuum. Russia was portrayed as the legitimate successor to both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and as the principal guardian of a shared East Slavic civilisation (Mankoff, 2022). Within this framework, Ukraine was not viewed as an autonomous historical subject but as an integral component of a broader Russian civilisational space. Consequently, Ukrainian efforts to redefine national identity were frequently dismissed as artificial or externally driven, particularly by Western influence (Putin, 2022; Wilson, 2004).

These competing memory frameworks gave rise to what scholars describe as a “war of memories,” in which historical narratives are actively mobilised to legitimise political positions and delegitimise opposing claims (Bernhard & Kubik, 2014; Kaposov, 2017). In this context, memory ceased to function merely as a cultural resource and became a site of political struggle. Divergent interpretations of shared history were institutionalised through education, commemorative practices, monuments, and legislation, embedding contested narratives within everyday political life (Assmann, 2006; Mälksoo, 2015).

The legacy of the Soviet period further complicated Ukraine’s memory politics internally. Regional variations shaped distinct historical experiences: western Ukraine, influenced by Polish–Lithuanian and Austro-Hungarian rule, largely associated Soviet power with repression, whereas eastern and southern regions, integrated into the Soviet system for longer, retained stronger linguistic and cultural ties to Russia (Miller, 2013). Over time, historical interpretation in both states became securitised, framed as an existential issue linked to sovereignty and geopolitical orientation (Mälksoo, 2015; Gaufman, 2017). This broader memory landscape provides essential context for understanding why historical legacies—particularly Kievan Rus—continue to exert such powerful influence over contemporary Russia–Ukraine relations.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: MEMORY, SECURITISATION AND KIEVAN RUS

Collective memory refers to the shared representations of the past through which social and political communities interpret historical experiences and construct collective identities. Rather than functioning as a simple recollection of factual events, collective memory is socially produced and continuously reshaped through narratives, symbols, rituals, and institutional practices (Halbwachs, 1925/1992; Nora, 1989; Wertsch, 2002; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi & Levy, 2011). These shared memories provide communities with a sense of continuity and belonging, linking present identities to selective interpretations of the past and shaping how societies understand themselves over time.

Scholars of memory studies emphasise that collective memory plays a central role in the formation of both individual and national identity. Booth (2008), Kratochwil (2006), Jelin (2003), and Jolly (2008) argue that memory functions as a foundational framework through which societies define “selfhood” by situating themselves within historical trajectories. Identity, in this sense, is neither fixed nor static but dynamic, shaped by interpretations of origins, experiences of trauma, and imagined futures (Gregorios, 1989). Olick (2003) conceptualises collective memory as the “active past,” highlighting the ongoing negotiation between past and present through which societies continuously redefine who they are. Similarly, Halbwachs (1983) maintains that memory is always embedded within social frameworks, reinforcing the idea that recollection is guided less by historical accuracy than by contemporary social and political contexts.

Building upon the concept of collective memory, the notion of a “war of memories” refers to political and social conflicts that emerge when competing actors advance rival interpretations of shared or contested

historical legacies. Such conflicts are particularly visible in societies shaped by imperial collapse, regime change, or historical trauma. In these contexts, history becomes a political resource, mobilised through memorial laws, monuments, museums, school curricula, and public commemorations to legitimise certain narratives while delegitimising others (Assmann, 2006; Osiel, 1997; Bernhard & Kubik, 2014; Kopolov, 2017). Memory wars thus represent struggles over symbolic power, where control over historical interpretation translates into political legitimacy and moral authority.

A crucial dimension of contemporary memory conflicts is the securitisation of memory. Securitisation of memory refers to the process through which historical narratives are framed as existential or security concerns, thereby shifting them from the realm of academic debate into the domain of national security and state policy. This process often involves the enactment of memory laws, censorship or criminalisation of alternative interpretations, and the elevation of particular narratives as official and unquestionable (Mälksoo, 2015; Gaufman, 2017; Kopolov, 2017; Bachleitner, 2021; Kasianov, 2022). Conceptually, this framework draws from the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, which argues that issues become security threats not because of their objective nature but through discursive practices that frame them as existential dangers requiring extraordinary measures (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998).

In the context of Russo-Ukrainian relations, memory securitisation is particularly evident in competing interpretations of twentieth-century history and medieval legacies. Russian state narratives emphasise the Second World War as the “Great Patriotic War,” highlighting imperial continuity, victory over Nazism, and Slavic unity, while frequently invoking Kievan Rus as a shared civilisational origin binding Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Ukrainian narratives, by contrast, centre on experiences of victimhood and repression, most notably the Holodomor, interpreted as a man-made famine and an act of genocide, and institutionalised through measures such as the decommunisation laws of 2015 (Kasianov, 2022).

Within this study, collective memory is understood primarily as national memory or national narrative—that is, the dominant interpretation of a country’s historical experience articulated through state discourse and institutional practice. By examining how Ukraine and Russia selectively mobilise memories of key historical periods and the legacy of Kievan Rus, the framework highlights how historical narratives function as active forces shaping identity construction, security perceptions, and contemporary geopolitical conflict.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

Scholarly engagement with memory and identity in international relations has expanded considerably over the past two decades, particularly in the study of post-imperial and post-authoritarian societies. Memory studies have demonstrated that historical narratives are not neutral representations of the past but are socially constructed and politically mobilised to serve present interests (Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989; Olick, 2003). This insight has influenced international relations scholarship by highlighting how collective memory shapes national identity, foreign policy orientation, and perceptions of threat and security (Booth, 2008; Kratochwil, 2006; Mälksoo, 2015).

A significant body of literature focuses on the politics of memory in post-communist Europe, where regime change required the reassessment of Soviet legacies and historical trauma. Studies by Bernhard and Kubik (2014) and Kopolov (2017) illustrate how memory conflicts emerge as states attempt to redefine national narratives through monuments, commemorative practices, school curricula, and legal instruments. These works emphasise that memory politics often become contentious because they are closely linked to questions of legitimacy, moral responsibility, and state continuity. In this context,

historical interpretation is increasingly securitised, transforming debates about the past into issues of national survival rather than matters of academic inquiry (Mälksoo, 2015; Bachleitner, 2021).

Within the specific context of Russia and Ukraine, existing scholarship has largely focused on identity formation, post-Soviet transition, and geopolitical rivalry. Scholars such as Wilson (2004) and Miller (2013) analyse how divergent interpretations of history have shaped Ukrainian and Russian national identities since independence. Research on Russia's foreign policy towards Ukraine has tended to prioritise strategic factors such as NATO expansion, regional security concerns, and power politics (Mankoff, 2022; Pradhan, 2022). Although these studies acknowledge the importance of historical narratives, memory is often treated as a background variable rather than as a central explanatory framework.

Another important strand of scholarship examines the historiography of Kievan Rus and its contested place in East Slavic history. Scholars such as Pelenski (1998), Dvornichenko (2016), and Hrushevsky (1991) demonstrate that debates over the inheritance of Kievan Rus long predate the contemporary Russia–Ukraine conflict and have played a formative role in shaping distinct Russian and Ukrainian historical traditions. Pelenski's seminal work is particularly significant in challenging assumptions of a unified Old Rus polity and highlighting the fragmented and multi-civilisational character of Kievan Rus, thereby undermining monolineal claims of historical continuity (Pelenski, 1998).

Despite the richness of this literature, Kievan Rus is often treated primarily as a medieval historical problem rather than as a living political symbol. While recent studies have begun to note its renewed relevance in contemporary discourse, especially after the escalation of the Ukraine crisis, systematic analysis of how the Kievan legacy is securitised within modern state narratives remains limited (Kasianov, 2022; Pradhan, 2022). This study addresses this gap by integrating memory studies and securitisation theory to examine how the contested memory of Kievan Rus functions as a weaponised historical narrative shaping contemporary Russo-Ukrainian relations and geopolitical conflict in Eastern Europe.

KIEVAN RUS IN HISTORY: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND CONTESTED CLAIMS

The concept of Kievan Rus occupies a central yet deeply contested position in East Slavic historiography. Dvornichenko (2016), in his influential work *The Place of Kievan Rus in History*, demonstrates that even the term “Kievan Rus” itself is neither timeless nor uncontested. Although the polity existed between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, its retrospective classification as a distinct historical period emerged much later. Dvornichenko observes that the recognition of Kievan Rus as a separate and foundational historical entity gained prominence only in the early twentieth century, despite earlier references to its political and cultural importance (Dvornichenko, 2016). This delayed conceptualisation underscores how historical categories are shaped by later intellectual and political contexts rather than by medieval realities alone.

In classical Ukrainian historiography, particularly in the writings of Mykhailo Hrushevsky, Kievan Rus was not treated as the origin of a unified Russian history but as one phase within a broader continuum of Ukraine-Rus history (Hrushevsky, 1991). In contrast, early Russian historiographical traditions adopted a markedly different approach. Scholars such as B.D. Grekov, V.V. Mavrodin, and later B.A. Rybakov employed formulations like “Old Rus” and “Kievan Rus and the Old Russian Principalities,” situating the Kievan polity within an uninterrupted narrative of Russian historical development (Dvornichenko, 2016). This framing laid the foundations for monolineal interpretations that portrayed Kievan Rus as the first stage of Russian statehood.

The Soviet historiographical tradition further institutionalised this interpretation. M.N. Tikhomirov's

influential work, published posthumously, depicted the Kievan state as one of the largest and most significant medieval polities in Europe, emphasising its role in feudal international relations and cultural exchange (Tikhomirov, 1975). While this narrative achieved authoritative status in Soviet scholarship, Dvornichenko notes that it concealed persistent disagreements over the nature of the Kievan polity and the question of its historical successors (Dvornichenko, 2016).

Russian historians such as N.M. Karamzin regarded Kievan Rus as the foundational stage of Russian history, often overlooking the distinct historical trajectories of regions that constitute present-day Ukraine. Within this framework, vast territories from the Dnieper to Warsaw were subsumed under the notion of “Western Russia,” marginalising Ukrainian and Polish historical specificity (Miller, 2013). As Miller argues, such claims reflect a one-sided portrayal of Kievan Rus as the exclusive cradle of Russian civilisation, obscuring alternative regional continuities and interpretations.

Competing narratives further complicate this historiographical landscape. Pogodin asserted that Kievan Rus was originally populated by Russians who later migrated northeast after the Mongol invasion, with Suzdal and Moscow emerging as legitimate heirs (Miller, 2000). Hrushevsky (1991), by contrast, argued that the Kievan state was primarily a creation of Ukrainian Slavs, while later Russian populations emerged from a fusion of Slavic and Finno-Ugric groups who appropriated Kievan cultural and legal traditions. These opposing views highlight how interpretations of ethnicity, migration, and continuity underpin competing national claims.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union reinvigorated these debates, as historians in post-Soviet states revisited questions of ownership and legitimacy. Scholars such as N.F. Kotliar and P.P. Tolochko sought to extend Ukrainian historical continuity by linking the “Old Russian State” to the Kievan polity, challenging Soviet-era narratives that minimised Ukrainian distinctiveness. Dvornichenko cautions against instrumentalising Kievan Rus to artificially extend modern national histories, arguing that while it represents a rich antiquity, it should not become an object of political confrontation (Dvornichenko, 2016).

Beyond historiography, medieval political struggles also shaped the symbolic contest over Kievan Rus. The princes of Vladimir-Suzdal claimed Kiev as their ancestral patrimony, invoking religious authority—particularly Vladimir I’s role in Christianisation—to legitimise dominance (Pelenski, 1998). The sack of Kiev in 1169 and subsequent ideological efforts to elevate Vladimir reflect deliberate attempts to subordinate Kiev’s legacy rather than revive Kievan Rus as a unified polity (Pelenski, 1987; 1998). Together, these historiographical and political dynamics reveal Kievan Rus not as a settled historical entity but as a flexible and contested symbol, repeatedly reinterpreted to serve evolving claims of identity, legitimacy, and power.

THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE, CHRISTIANISATION, AND THE POLITICS OF KIEVAN INHERITANCE

The conversion of Vladimir of Kievan Rus to Christianity represents a pivotal moment in the political, religious, and civilisational history of Eastern Europe. Although the Byzantine Empire played a decisive role in facilitating the Christianisation of the Rus between 986 and 989, this process did not lead to direct ecclesiastical subordination to Constantinople. As Poppe (1976) demonstrates, Kievan Christianity operated with a considerable degree of institutional autonomy, which he characterises as a “special status” of the Old Russian Church, distinct from the Patriarchate of Constantinople (Poppe, 1976:198). These early arrangements laid the foundations for the organisational structure of the Old Russian Church and later became central to competing claims of religious authority and political succession.

Poppe (1976) identifies two distinct stages in Vladimir's conversion. The first involved the establishment of Byzantine church missions in Kiev, while the second culminated in Vladimir's formal baptism in Cherson following his capture of the city. The seizure of Cherson carried significant political and economic consequences, providing Rus with access to the Black Sea and establishing a strategic outpost that enhanced its regional influence (Talis, 1958:108–115). Several scholars argue that by entering the Orthodox Christian community, Vladimir sought to integrate Rus into the Byzantine Commonwealth and elevate its international status (Poppe, 1976). Others suggest that the Cherson campaign was intended to place Vladimir on equal diplomatic footing with the Byzantine emperors, thereby enhancing his political prestige.

Marriage diplomacy further reinforced the political importance of conversion. The Byzantine emperors Basil II and Constantine VIII agreed to offer their sister Anna—"born in the purple"—to Vladimir on the condition that he accept Christianity (Poppe, 1976:228). Some interpretations view this arrangement as an attempt to extend Byzantine ecclesiastical influence over the newly Christianised Rus through the Archbishop of Cherson. Alternative accounts, including Thietmar's chronicle, suggest that Vladimir's conversion was influenced by pressure from his Byzantine wife (Thietmar, ed. Holzmann, 1935). Regardless of differing interpretations, Poppe (1976:200) emphasises that Byzantine–Rus relations during this period were shaped by what he terms the "Cherson problem," a complex interaction of military conquest, diplomacy, and religious transformation.

Importantly, the conversion of Rus was not driven solely by Byzantine ambitions. Poppe (1976) highlights the willingness within Old Russian society—particularly among the ruling elite—to engage with Christianity as a moral, political, and institutional framework. The adoption of Christianity during 987–988 thus constituted an epochal transformation, embedding Rus within the wider Christian world while simultaneously creating a foundation for later disputes over civilisational affiliation and historical continuity.

Recent scholarship has reassessed the position of Kievan Rus within medieval Europe. Halperin (2015), reviewing Christian Raffensberger's *Reimagining Europe: Kievan Rus' and the Medieval World, 988–1146*, notes that Raffensberger raises "stimulating questions about the place of Kievan Rus' in comparative history, questions that are more important than whether one agrees with answers" (Halperin, 2015). Halperin concurs with the broader argument that, despite its internal heterogeneity, Kievan Rus was "part and parcel" of Europe. This perspective underscores that while contestations surrounding Kievan Rus persist, not all dimensions of its historical legacy are disputed.

Nevertheless, the inheritance of Kievan Rus remains one of the most enduring sources of political and cultural contention between Russia and Ukraine. Early scholars such as Pypin (1891) and Gudzi (1989), as cited in Pelenski (1998:3), identified disputes over the Kievan legacy as a fundamental fault line in Russian–Ukrainian relations. Pelenski's seminal work, *The Contest for the "Kievan Inheritance"*, analyses how both Russia and Ukraine sought to legitimise historical continuity through competing claims to Kievan Rus, while emphasising that Kievan Rus itself was a heterogeneous civilisation rather than a unified nation-state (Pelenski, 1998).

Pelenski (1998) identifies three dominant interpretative traditions regarding Kievan inheritance. The first is the monolineal and exclusivist Russian national theory, developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which emphasises uninterrupted dynastic continuity through the Rurikids and advances the Kiev–Vladimir–Moscow translatio narrative, relying heavily on ecclesiastical succession (Pelenski, 1998:3). The second is the monolineal and exclusivist Ukrainian theory, articulated primarily

by Mykhailo Hrushevsky, which employs territorial, ethnodemographic, social, and institutional arguments to establish continuity through Kiev–Galicia–Volhynia–Lithuania and later Cossack Ukraine (Pelenski, 1998:4). The third is the Soviet synthesis, which framed Kievan Rus as the common heritage of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians and was formalised as state doctrine during the 1954 Tercentenary of the Pereiaslav Treaty (Pelenski, 1998:4).

Despite their differences, all three traditions assumed a degree of unity within Kievan Rus—an assumption Pelenski directly challenges:

“The Kievan Rus’ was never a unified polity. It was a loosely bound, ill-defined, and heterogeneous conglomeration of lands and cities inhabited by tribes and population groups whose loyalties were primarily territorial, landespatriotisch, and urban but not national in the modern sense of the term. They were ruled for a time by a dynasty which very soon dissolved into several rival sub-dynasties which fought each other more fiercely than they battled the much-maligned nomadic ‘heathens’ of the East. Although the decline and dissolution of the Kievan Rus’ are usually attributed to ‘bad neighbours,’ internal factors played a larger part. Among them were the victory of the patrimonial states and city-states over multi-territorial and heterogeneous empires or proto-imperial polities” (Pelenski, 1998:5).

This assessment fundamentally undermines monolineal claims of uninterrupted continuity and highlights the fragmented political character of Kievan Rus.

The Galician–Volhynian Rus’, a patrimonial state, emerged as the final claimant to the Kievan inheritance following the decline of the Suzdal–Vladimir princes. Rather than engaging in direct confrontation, the Galician–Volhynian dynasty often pursued coalition strategies, partly to avoid conflict with the House of Chernihiv (Pelenski, 1998). According to chronicle evidence cited by Pelenski, “the last legitimate overlord in Kiev before the Mongol–Tatar invasion was none other than Danylo,” rendering subsequent claims—particularly those supported by Mongol authority—“invalid and illegitimate” (Nasonov, *Mongoly i Rus*, 26–33; cited in Pelenski, 1998:9). Pelenski thus concludes that the contest over Kievan Rus is neither a modern invention nor a purely territorial dispute but a long-standing struggle shaped by religious, historical, and national claims extending from the medieval period to the present.

Reflecting on the broader implications of the Kievan inheritance debate, Pelenski emphasises the inherent complexity of the issue, noting that “the complexity of the problem is compounded by its elusive quality, by its involvement in the socio-cultural conditioning of the two peoples’ intelligentsia and other segments of linguists, ethnographers, and historians of various backgrounds and methodological approaches” (Pelenski, 1998:12). He cautions that such historiographical inquiries often reopen unresolved debates and generate “unpopular” tentative answers rather than simply posing “popular” new questions (Pelenski, 1998:12). Pelenski therefore warns against projecting contemporary national concerns onto early medieval history, arguing that framing Old Rus’ in terms of conflicts between modern “nationalities” is both misleading and methodologically unsound.

Central to Pelenski’s argument is a firm rejection of the idea of unity within Old Rus’. He asserts that there is no substantial evidence to support the existence of a cohesive political or national entity, even before the Mongol invasion. The constituent lands and dynasties of Old Rus’ were primarily guided by local and regional interests rather than by any shared East Slavic consciousness. Alliances were fluid and pragmatic, with different regions engaging independently with Poles, Hungarians, nomadic groups of the southern steppes, and Ugro-Finnic tribes. From its earliest stages, Old Rus’ displayed “multi-civilisational” and “proto-imperial” characteristics, with Suzdal–Vladimir and Galicia–Volhynia pursuing separate processes of *Staatsbildung* and establishing independent monarchical systems (Pelenski, 1998:13).

The divergent responses of these two entities to the Mongol–Tatar invasion further underscore their civilisational separation. While the Suzdal–Vladimirians chose accommodation and cooperation with the Mongol Horde, southern rulers such as Danylo of Galicia–Volhynia and Mikhail of Chernihiv actively resisted Mongol domination. Notably, Mongol taxation was not imposed on the southern regions despite their defeat, reflecting their distinct political trajectories and historical positioning (Pelenski, 1998:13). These contrasting responses contributed to long-term divergence in political culture, governance, and external orientation.

As Pelenski explains, once Suzdal–Vladimir and Galicia–Volhynia parted ways, they became embedded in different civilisational communities. Suzdal–Vladimir gravitated toward the northeastern Rus’ world, oriented around Novgorod commerce and the Volga trade route. Following the Mongol conquest, it emerged as a junior partner within the imperial structure of the Golden Horde, participating in a new civilisational formation along the Volga basin (Pelenski, 1998:14). In contrast, Galicia–Volhynia became integrated into the East Central European civilisational sphere, encompassing Hungary, Bohemia, Austria, and Polish territories, with access to southern trade networks and the Black Sea. The decline of the traditional “route from the Varangians to the Greeks” reflected broader structural transformations in medieval commerce rather than nomadic disruption alone.

Pelenski ultimately concludes that claims to the Kievan inheritance depend on the criteria employed. If inheritance is defined primarily through religious authority and dynastic succession, Suzdal–Vladimir appears more legitimate. However, if territorial continuity, ethnic identity, social institutions, and cultural traditions are prioritised, Galicia–Volhynia emerges as the stronger claimant. As Pelenski concludes: “Precisely, the contest over the Kievan inheritance that significantly contributed to the splitting off of the Russian and the Ukrainian peoples and to their consolidation as two separate entities to begin with, the debate over the Kievan succession that has followed since the nineteenth century can itself be regarded as a further step in the protracted process of building a nation” (Pelenski, 1998:15).

This historical contest continues to shape contemporary geopolitics. As Pradhan (2022) argues, the ongoing Russia–Ukraine war is deeply embedded in unresolved historical legacies—particularly the contested inheritance of Kievan Rus—despite NATO expansion often being cited as the immediate trigger (Pradhan, 2022:327). Competing civilisational narratives, internal divisions within Ukraine, and generational shifts in identity formation further reinforce how historical memory, security perceptions, and geopolitical ambition remain inseparable in shaping Russo-Ukrainian relations today.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the ongoing “war of memories” between Ukraine and Russia from 1989 to 2025 is deeply rooted in competing interpretations of the civilisational legacy of Kievan Rus. Rather than remaining confined to historiographical debate, these contestations have gradually been transformed into powerful political instruments that shape national identity, security perceptions, and geopolitical behaviour. The legacy of Kievan Rus has thus become a central symbolic terrain upon which contemporary Russo-Ukrainian relations are negotiated and contested.

The analysis shows that Russia has increasingly mobilised the memory of Kievan Rus to legitimise claims of historical unity and civilisational continuity among Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. This narrative has been deployed not merely as a cultural assertion but as a strategic tool to justify political influence and territorial ambition in Ukraine. In contrast, Ukraine has interpreted its historical relationship with Kievan Rus as evidence of a distinct and autonomous civilisational trajectory, rejecting claims of

shared statehood or common political destiny. These fundamentally opposing interpretations have contributed to transforming historical disagreement into an existential conflict.

A key finding of this study is that memory politics in the Russo-Ukrainian context has undergone a process of securitisation. Historical narratives have shifted from academic discourse into the realm of national security, resulting in what may be described as “memory violence” and the weaponisation of history. Through laws, official discourse, and symbolic practices, particular versions of the past have been elevated as unquestionable truths, while alternative interpretations have been marginalised or criminalised. This process has intensified mistrust and hardened positions on both sides, making compromise increasingly difficult.

Russia’s grand narrative of Slavic unity—encompassing Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus—carries profound geopolitical implications. As scholars have noted, such narratives risk further destabilising already strained relations by denying Ukraine’s sovereign historical agency and reinforcing imperial patterns of thought (Miller, 2013; Pelenski, 1998). Ukraine’s equally firm rejection of these claims, grounded in its own interpretation of history and identity, underscores the depth of the memory divide. As long as these narratives remain irreconcilable, prospects for durable peace remain limited.

The findings suggest that any meaningful resolution of the Ukraine crisis requires engagement beyond immediate security and military concerns. Without addressing the underlying politics of memory and the securitisation of historical narratives, diplomatic or strategic solutions are unlikely to produce lasting stability. Developing alternative frameworks that acknowledge historical complexity, plurality, and ambiguity—rather than exclusive ownership of the past—may offer a pathway toward de-escalation. Until such an approach is adopted, the contested legacy of Kievan Rus will continue to function as both a symbol and a catalyst in the prolonged conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

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