

*The past is never dead. It's not even past*

# NOT EVEN PAST



## Putin's Effort to Make Conquest Acceptable Again



By Jeremi Suri

September 30, 2022 marked the abrupt end to a long era of world history. In a dark, threatening, and bombastic speech to his cowering, hand-picked *apparatchiks*, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that his country was annexing almost one-fifth of Ukrainian territory – the eastern provinces of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson. Russian soldiers staged referenda at gun-point in these invaded territories, forcing residents to cast ballots for a Russian *Anschluss*. No one believes the people of Eastern Ukraine want this outcome, but that does not matter for Putin. He claims Russia must take this territory from a sovereign state to protect his country's culture and manhood.

between the French Revolution and the Second World War, large countries frequently conquered small ones – about once every three years, on average. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were eras of imperial consolidation across the globe, when powerful, industrial states took control of people and resources in near and distant territories. As [Paul Kennedy](#) and others have written, imperialism was the currency of great power politics. Military technology favored large, well-organized armies. Resource extraction and factory production concentrated power in a few states. And the expanding regimes asserted a civilizing mission to dominate others – a claim widely accepted at the time, at least among those educated at major universities.



*A ruined apartment building in Borodianka, Ukraine, on April 6, 2022. Russian armed forces bombarded the town during their assault on Kiev in March. Source: [Pexels](#).*

**The Second World War**, triggered by the brutal, breakneck expansion of two empires in particular, Germany and Japan, weakened most of the conquerors. Years of economic deprivation and genocidal violence left little for holding distant territories. This was an imperial civil war that devastated the imperialists who made it. In its wake, formerly conquered peoples in Europe, Asia, and Africa gained new leverage to push for self-rule; their former conquerors had proven they were neither omnipotent nor civilized. Nationalist claims to territorial sovereignty for ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups replaced defenses of empire as the *lingua franca* of international relations. Adom Getachew calls this the “**worldmaking**” of an emergent anti-colonial era.

it existed to empower newly independent states, giving them voice, legitimacy, and often assistance in their efforts to secure their independence. The United Nations had severe limitations in its ability to curb abuses by states at home and abroad, but it re-mapped a former world of empires as a global community of sovereign territories. Above all, the international organization existed to reject conquest.

In this mission, the United Nations succeeded brilliantly. Although wars between and within states continued – and in some regions they multiplied in their frequency and damage – large countries felt constrained against conquering neighbors and former colonies. [Fazal](#) explains that after the Second World War new states were “born” at a rapid pace, and very few “died” over the next seven decades. Big powers continued to manipulate, bully, and coerce small states, but they paid consistent deference to their right to exist. The former empires relied on **“indirect” forms of influence**; they no longer argued they had a right to rule other peoples.

This development was significant because it placed constraints on how power could be used in foreign and military policy. A world organized against conquest deterred countries, including the United States, from acting in that way. A consensus arose that a norm of non-conquest benefited everyone – small states and big, powerful societies. Both superpowers promoted this norm, despite their other forms of aggression during the Cold War. Fearful of a war in disputed territories escalating into nuclear conflict, leaders in Washington and Moscow came to the conclusion that **they had to avoid aggressive conquest**. They fought many “limited wars,” as they called them – from Korea and Hungary, to Vietnam and Angola – but they almost always avoided annexation of sovereign territories. They used the cover of sovereign local leaders to show they did not seek another world war.

[Historian Arne Westad](#) has shown that these Cold War interventions were not necessarily less harmful than wars of conquest, but they were different. Each superpower had to make an effort to build an independent government in the site of intervention, and the intervening forces had to legitimize different local practices and cultures from their own. Each superpower also had to make promises about leaving, at least militarily. “Limited wars” were supposed to be limited in time; they could not be permanent, as acts of conquest claimed to be. These constraints on war promoted basic state sovereignty around the globe, making independent countries the expectation on all continents. Their numbers grew consistently from decade-to-decade, until now.







*“By defending the liberty and unity of Ukraine we defend the liberty and unity of the countries of Europe”: a banner protesting Russian president Vladimir Putin’s “geopolitical ambitions” hangs above Berlin’s “Checkpoint Charlie,” which formed part of the Berlin Wall during the Cold War, on August 6, 2019. Source: Maksym Kozlenko/Wikimedia Commons.*

Putin’s effort to conquer territory in Ukraine is a bold and intentional effort to reverse seventy years of history. The Russian president **calls this history “Western colonialism,”** when it is really the opposite. The ruler of a former empire (the Soviet Union) that has been disintegrating since 1991 into independent states, he fears that Russian power will continue to diminish unless he conquers nearby territories. Annexing Ukraine to Russia, as he intends, promises to make his regime a central actor again in the middle of Europe. He will use conquest to increase his country’s reach, as his nineteenth century predecessors did before.

Putin is unlikely to succeed because of **courageous Ukrainian resistance**, strong world opposition, and the excesses of his ambitions. Conquest is very hard under any circumstances, and it **rarely pays** when the population resists so strongly. What is discouraging, however, is that Putin is likely not alone in pursuing conquest today. The language of military control and racial superiority is echoed by **many other authoritarians**, including Donald Trump, and it has enthusiastic support from citizens fearful of losing

conquest, we must work to insure it does not become a renewed era of empire and intolerance.

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