

Revisionism and Revanchism: An Evaluation of Smolensk and Putin's Motives

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Amidst longtime regional conflict and dispute over Ukrainian territory— fervidly sought after by the Russian Federation— the President of the latter, Vladimir Putin, has made evident his beliefs regarding the supposed fraternal union of the two nations. In his address, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” Putin posits an argument widely held by many nationalists that assumes an unchanging fixed history and identity shared by the nations of Russia and Ukraine. Though they are two separate entities, he cites the medieval predecessor to the Russian and Ukrainian states, Rus’, as proof of their shared history and nationhood. In what he calls the “gathering of Russian lands” by the Grand Prince Vasili III, this assertion of unity persists.¹ Though, upon further examination of one instance of this aforementioned “gathering,” it becomes clear that this revisionist attempt at prescribing a unified identity bears little resemblance to the actual perception of the land at the time, as shown by the document “A Charter Granted to the Townspeople of Smolensk by Prince Vasili III of Moscow on 10 July 1514.” The prince does not behold the lands of Smolensk, a besieged city, as a land of Russians, nor is there any assertion of a unified and primordially tied identity as the motivation for its capture. Instead, what is shown in this charter is the establishment of a relationship between a Prince and his newly conquered subjects.

The question of ownership or right to land, be it a town or a formal state, is one from which many conflicts have arisen. The town of Smolensk is no different— though its reference

¹ Vladimir Putin. “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.” Presidential Executive Office (July 2021). <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/by-date/12.07.2021>

by Vladimir Putin appears invalid when put into a more factual context, one not being utilized for nationalistic gains. The city of Smolensk had been under Lithuanian control, but its importance to Moscow lay more in the resources it offered. In the charter that was produced following the city's capture, the Prince of Moscow assures the people of Smolensk that the siege will not be accompanied by forceful pillaging. Instead, it implies a reorganization of leadership and a recognition of the previous state of the city. The Prince maintains that the differences in the Rus'-controlled Smolensk will be minimal, and the people "[ruled] in all things as they were ruled by Grand Prince Vytautas and their other Sovereigns, King Alexander and Sigismund, according to their established charters."² While Putin claims that the Prince and other rulers of Rus' "cast off the foreign yoke," it is evident through this charter that much of the conditions of prior rule were allowed to remain.³ What is offered by the Prince appears fair to the previous lifestyles of the people of Smolensk, with only minor changes regarding livestock resources.⁴ The language utilized is similar to that of any other diplomatic document, rather than a prideful proclamation of unity and freedom for the people of Smolensk by the Prince.

Although the word "patrimony" is used frequently in this charter, there is no argument set forth by the Prince for national unity or a shared history. Instead, what the document suggests in the context of Smolensk's history of control is the reclamation of land, not of a Russian people. Though Smolensk and Moscow appear to be comprised of Eastern Orthodox believers, little else would seem to imply a sense of shared culture and nationality.⁵ Despite this, Putin still stresses the unity of the two lands through the ties provided by the Orthodox faith, though two lands of

² Prince Vasillii III of Moscow "A Charter Granted to the Townspeople of Smolensk by Prince Vasillii III of Moscow on 10 July 1514." Translated by Dr. John Randolph. p.1

³ Vladimir Putin. "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." Presidential Executive Office (July 2021). <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/by-date/12.07.2021>

⁴ Prince Vasillii III of Moscow "A Charter Granted to the Townspeople of Smolensk by Prince Vasillii III of Moscow on 10 July 1514." Translated by Dr. John Randolph. p. 2-3

⁵ Prince Vasillii III of Moscow "A Charter Granted to the Townspeople of Smolensk by Prince Vasillii III of Moscow on 10 July 1514." Translated by Dr. John Randolph. p.1

the same church have rarely been considered to be united as a whole historically.⁶ This over-exaggeration of a shared nationality, often utilized by Putin in his examination of the region's history, furthers the erroneous argument that Smolensk was made up of Russians, rather than subjects under a king. The relationship between a ruler and those he rules is far from that of the loyalty a citizen of a state may feel towards his leader in the present. To ascribe a modern sense of political relationships to the city of Smolensk or the greater Kingdom of Rus' becomes an attempt at revisionism. There is no evidence within this document that supports Putin's claim, nor the greater idea of a shared, fixed national identity between Russians and Ukrainians. Therefore, it remains evident that what occurred during the siege of Smolensk was not a "gathering of Russian lands," but the simple conquering of a city and its people.

In an attempt to modify history to fit his nationalistic and moderately irredentist aims, Vladimir Putin has misrepresented the manner in which the Kingdom of Rus' expanded in the 15th and 16th centuries. Though he presents a history of the "reunification" of lands comprised of Russians, examination of a charter from this time reflects little of the motivations he claims were present in the hearts and minds of the Moscow Princes.⁷ In the "Charter Granted to the Townspeople of Smolensk by Prince Vasili III of Moscow on 10 July 1514," there is no argument for national unity, nor is there evidence of the revanchist aims Putin himself has projected onto the past rulers, thus exposing his own manipulation and ignorance of history.

⁶ Vladimir Putin. "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." Presidential Executive Office (July 2021). <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/by-date/12.07.2021>

⁷ Idid.