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Russia's search for ontological security and the Ukraine invasion

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 astounded political commentators across the globe. Seemingly nonsensical from a physical security perspective, the announcement of invasion resulted in economic sanctions against Russia, the rapid decline of President Vladimir Putin's reputation in the international sphere, and dissent amongst Russian citizens. This article contends that while invasion is difficult to justify from a physical security approach, the pursuit of ontological security is a convincing and meaningful explanation for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Unpacking how biographical narratives and behavioural patterns sustain a state's sense of Self demonstrates that Russian state selfhood was reaffirmed through invasion. This argument is developed in reference to masculinist narratives surrounding the Russian Self, including an imperialist role identity, a masculine Self contrasted with a feminine Ukrainian Other, and a drive to defeat supposed fascist forces within Ukraine. In addition, Russia's invasion of Ukraine sustains ontological security through fitting into a behavioural pattern of consistent conflict. Ontological security is a highly necessary consideration when analysing global conflict, particularly in the case of the 2022 Ukraine invasion.

Key words: ontological security, Ukraine invasion, biographical narrative, Self/Other, gender, identity

Introduction

February 24th, 2022 was a harrowing day for the global community. President Vladimir Putin of Russia declared his intent to orchestrate an invasion of Ukraine, inciting the blatant violation of international law, imminent casualties and displacement, and the assertion that a sovereign nation could be subject to conquest in the present day. For political commentators, invasion currently appears to be a nonsensical misjudgement, especially when considering the physical security of the Russian state. Putin has been confirmed as power-hungry and delusional, willing to place his country into economic strife and global isolation to pursue territory and power. However, the attempted invasion of Ukraine reaffirms Russian state identity and is in line with previous behavioural patterns within Russian foreign policy. As such, the invasion of Ukraine is enabled by Russia's search for *ontological security*. Pursuing ontological security, Russian state actors reaffirmed gendered biographical narratives of Self and maintained conflictual behavioural consistency by launching the invasion of Ukraine.

It is essential to describe the concept of ontological security to introduce this argument, focusing on behaviour, role identities, the Self/Other dichotomy and affective resonance. Subsequently, I examine the power of biographical narrative in sustaining ontological security and how such narratives are subject to highly gendered

frameworks. Additionally, unpacking notions of consistency and conflict provides further insight into how the search for ontological security may play out in action. Sketching out this framework shows that the invasion of Ukraine is a reach for ontological security. Announcing invasion affirmed the Russian state's various narratives of Self, including the role identity of imperial power, the masculinised Self in contrast with a feminised Ukrainian Other, and the historical continuation of an anti-fascist agenda. Each of these narratives are informed by gendered framing. In addition, invasion aligned with the behavioural consistency of conflict, reducing uncertainty and retaining ontological security for the Russian state. Ultimately, Putin's decision to invade Ukraine can be parsed out and understood if the framework of ontological security functions as the primary analytical tool.

Defining ontological security

Ontological security is a nebulous concept requiring an extensive explanation. Referring to the security of one's sense of Self, identity and being in the world, ontological security invokes considerations of behaviour, identity, affect and emotion. Jennifer Mitzen defines ontological security as "the need to experience oneself as a continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realise a sense of agency."¹ Emerging at an individual level, ontological security may be extrapolated and applied to the far broader unit of the modern nation-state.² The ontological Self is simultaneously present and continually *coming into being*, meaning that states constantly search for ontological security through behavioural patterns and narrative construction at a domestic and international level.³ Brent Steele summarises that states seek ontological security "to maintain *consistent self-concepts*, and the "Self" of states is constituted and maintained through a narrative which gives life to routinised foreign policy actions."⁴

State actors such as politicians and diplomats are the agents who actively pursue ontological security at the state level.⁵ However, the ontological security of a state encapsulates the security and identity of the general population. Here, the state is understood as a territorially bounded country containing public institutions and a national population. While not all members of a country's population will identify with the dominant state identity, a majority will perceive conceptions of state identity as hegemonic through the consistent retelling of state selfhood within widespread public discourses, such as media spaces and politicians' public communications.⁶ Establishing a dominant conception of Self is achieved through language and imagery,

¹ Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 341–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346>, 342.

² Ibid., 342. Within social psychology, substantial empirical support exists for the presence of ontological security at an individual level (Mitzen, 348).

³ Felix Berenskoetter, "Parameters of a National Biography," *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 1 (2014): 262–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066112445290>, 268; Catarina Kinnvall, "Ontological Insecurities and Postcolonial Imaginaries: The Emotional Appeal of Populism," *Humanity & Society* 42, no. 4 (2018): 523–43, 532; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 58.

⁴ Steele, 3.

⁵ Alisher Faizullaev and Jeremie Cornut, "Narrative Practice in International Politics and Diplomacy: The Case of the Crimean Crisis," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 20 (2017): 578–604, 585.

⁶ Emil Edenborg, "Creativity, Geopolitics and Ontological Security: Satire on Russia and the War in Ukraine," *Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 3 (2017): 294–316, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2017.1378086>, 302.

spread throughout the country by political actors seeking to construct a framework for state-level action and identity.

The search for ontological security provokes and informs the behaviour of states, particularly within foreign policy. States will act in ways that affirm and align with conceptions of the Self.⁷ Key to this is behavioural consistency. Where individuals may seek ontological security through adopting particular routines, states replicate this by maintaining consistency within political behaviour (such as foreign policy).⁸ Routine and consistency establish cognitive certainty, allowing for security in one's selfhood and identity.⁹ In seeking ontological security through action, states adopt behavioural patterns that align with particular role identities.¹⁰ Role identities may include positions as a liberal democracy, an imperial power, or a rational actor in an anarchic international system.¹¹ States must incorporate conceptions of other states' role identities to reaffirm their own role identity.¹²

To further reaffirm senses of selfhood, states develop personal identity by employing a Self/Other dichotomy within public discourse. Here, the Self is developed through identifying an opposing Other, a process of *othering*. Within foreign policy, othering can manifest in the treatment of other states, reaffirming a state's self-identity through contrast with supposed negative aspects of an opposing state. In action, this means a relationship of domination toward another state, naturalised through the Self/Other narrative.¹³ Some scholars critique focus on the Self/Other dichotomy within literature on ontological security; however, constructing an Other alongside the Self is a critical aspect of consistent identity formation.¹⁴

In harnessing role identities and the language of Self/Other, the search for ontological security is deeply laden with affect and emotion, even at the state level.¹⁵ To construct narratives of identity, state actors draw upon affective registers, such as unease, alienation, warmth and hope.¹⁶ Affective "sticky associations" are tied to other states in the international sphere.¹⁷ Creating affective moods prompts emotion, causing state actors and the general population to attach personal meaning to the search for ontological security.¹⁸ Understandings of Self and the search for ontological security are therefore rife with emotional feeling and thinking, countering traditional associations between physical security and non-emotive rationality.

Biographical narratives and gendered discourses

Having sketched a general outline of ontological security, we may pick apart the methods through which ontological security is maintained and pursued. Here, it is

⁷ Mitzen, 344.

⁸ Kinnvall, 530; Mitzen, 342.

⁹ Mitzen, 342.

¹⁰ Mitzen, 357.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Edenborg, 296.

¹⁴ Berenskoetter, 268; Kinnvall, 535; Steele, 59.

¹⁵ Steele, 17.

¹⁶ Christine Agius, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Catarina Kinnvall, "Populism, Ontological Insecurity and Gendered Nationalism: Masculinity, Climate Denial and Covid-19," *POLITICS, RELIGION & IDEOLOGY* 21, no. 4 (2020): 432–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2020.1851871>, 433.

¹⁷ Edenborg, 296.

¹⁸ Kinnvall, 532.

necessary to consider the coalescence of self-identity and gendered narrative. The construction of a biographical narrative of state identity is a crucial factor in maintaining ontological security. Narratives serve as powerful mechanisms to affirm identity through emotive resonance within the national public consciousness.¹⁹ By describing a sense of place and employing binary categories like Self/Other, biographical narratives offer coherence to conceptions of the Self – providing ontological security.²⁰ Jelena Subotic writes that certain state narratives may be intentionally activated at times of crisis to smooth over public panic and offer a sense of ontological security, providing a “cognitive bridge” between a policy change and “autobiographical continuity.”²¹ A state’s history forms a “substantial part” of the biographical narrative, with personal identity developed through reflection on the past.²² Felix Berenskoetter contends that “experiences of violence, suffering and loss leave the deepest mark in a biographical narrative.”²³ Biographical narratives may also look to the future, envisioning utopian or dystopian settings for the nation-state which prompt emotional reaction and drive state action.²⁴ In the construction of a biographical narrative, multiple narratives of selfhood can converge into a master narrative “which guides and legitimises courses of action and provides ontological security.”²⁵ When numerous social actors buy into a narrative, it becomes hegemonic.²⁶ As multiple narratives may be interwoven into one, biographical narratives of state selfhood often contain tensions and internal contradictions.²⁷ Despite this, Subotic contends that narratives guide political actors and foreign policy development by offering “cultural cognitive boundaries.”²⁸

As present society is subject to patriarchal structures, the Self of the state is often associated with masculinity.²⁹ This fusion is appealing, given that gender roles are pervasive within present society; the concept of masculinity is easy for the public to grasp.³⁰ Many states thus follow a *masculinist logic* within their ontological security seeking, defined in Agius et al. as “an underlying ethos or totalising worldview that implicitly universalises and privileges the qualities of masculinity, and in doing so, subordinates and “other” alternative ways of understanding, knowing and being.”³¹ The Self is uplifted through association with the masculine, as masculine performance and behaviour is privileged within dominant public discourse.

Within numerous biographical state narratives, gendered frameworks underpin the Self/Other drive that is central to ontological security seeking. To reaffirm the Self, the Other is often feminised, imbued with traits perceived as inferior within a patriarchal cultural setting.³² Under a masculinist logic, that which is feminised is subsequently

¹⁹ Edenborg, 297; Berenskoetter, 269; Faizullaev and Cornut, 578-579.

²⁰ Edenborg, 297.

²¹ Jelena Subotic, “Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12 (2016): 610–27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12089>, 611.

²² Berenskoetter, 270; Subotic, 612.

²³ Berenskoetter, 270.

²⁴ Kinnvall, 529; Berenskoetter, 273.

²⁵ Berenskoetter, 279; Subotic, 615.

²⁶ Subotic, 615.

²⁷ Edenborg, 309; Berenskoetter, 280.

²⁸ Subotic, 613; Faizullaev and Cornut, 581.

²⁹ Agius et al., 438.

³⁰ Wendy Bracewell, “Rape in Kosovo: Masculinity and Serbian Nationalism,” *Nations and Nationalism* 6, no. 4 (2000): 563–90, 570.

³¹ L. Nicholas and C. Agius, *The Persistence of Global Masculinism: Discourse, Gender and Neo-colonial Re-articulations of Violence* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 5, in Agius et al., 439.

³² Bracewell, 566; Agius et al., 433.

marginalised.³³ This phenomenon is well documented within the domestic behaviour of imperial powers seeking to subordinate particular identity groups; for example, Hindu men were feminised within public discourse of the colonial state under the British Empire.³⁴ The Masculine/Feminine dichotomy transposed onto the Self/Other also manifests within the physical actions of states in the international arena. For example, by harnessing masculinist logic, dominance and offensive action toward other states can form a central part of a state's behavioural pattern and self-identity – if that identity is informed by notions of masculinity and power.³⁵ Wendy Bracewell employs the example of Serbian nationalist policy under Slobodan Milosevic, where models of masculinity were connected to “an aggressive and expansionist nationalism.”³⁶ One consequence of this highly gendered narrative was war in Kosovo.³⁷ In addition to masculinist narratives of Self manifesting within foreign policy, Agius et al. note that moves to create an official state narrative based upon masculinity and traditional gender roles are “often accompanied by a ‘strongman’ style of political leadership.”³⁸ The masculinised Self of the nation-state is reflected and reaffirmed through the national leader.

As a caveat, Steele notes that patriarchal structures not only inform the Self/Other dichotomy within biographical narratives of the state but also inform dominant approaches to International Relations (IR) theory.³⁹ Feminist scholars argue that the prevailing conception of an inherent rationality within state action is a “reflection of the dominant role men have played in international politics *and the field of international relations theory.*”⁴⁰ Rationality and emotion have been historically perceived as a dichotomy, imbued upon the dichotomy of Masculine/Feminine. As IR theory exists within the context of patriarchal structures, rationality is perceived as the natural approach to state (and individual) behaviour, even when there is evidence to the contrary. Similarly, Mitzen argues for the personification of the state within ontological security literature through a contrast with the personification of the state in realist IR theory.⁴¹ While realism assumes states reflect the individual as a rational actor looking to maximise gain and retain physical security, scholars focusing upon ontological security also argue that the state reflects individual thinking – except here, the individual is an emotive being concerned with retaining personal identity.⁴² There is an apparent reluctance within IR literature to perceive both the individual and the state as emotive entities, reflecting Steele's argument that patriarchal approaches have dominated IR theory.

Consistency and conflict in ontological security

Turning to a different aspect within the search for ontological security, it is helpful to pick apart the notion of achieving ontological security through behavioural consistency. Jennifer Mitzen notes the requirement for behavioural consistency when

³³ Agius et al., 449.

³⁴ Priya Chacko, *Indian Foreign Policy: The Politics of Postcolonial Identity from 1947 To 2004* (Florence, US: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/otago/detail.action?docID=957926>, 23.

³⁵ Agius et al., 440.

³⁶ Bracewell, 580.

³⁷ Bracewell, 581.

³⁸ Agius et al., 437.

³⁹ Steele, 66.

⁴⁰ Steele, 66.

⁴¹ Mitzen, 345.

⁴² Mitzen, 345.

attempting to reach a sense of stable selfhood.⁴³ Importantly, however, she contends that consistency and conflict are not mutually exclusive. Routine and behavioural consistency at a state level may be derived from peaceful action in the international sphere, but consistency can also stem from frequent dangerous activity. To elucidate, Mitzen employs the individual example of a domestic violence victim who remains in an abusive relationship due to the comfort of consistency and security.⁴⁴ Similarly, “because routines that perpetuate physical insecurity can provide ontological security, states can become attached to physically dangerous relationships and be unable, or unwilling, to learn their way out.”⁴⁵ As such, ontological security can explain conflict that is “seemingly irrational” from a physical security perspective.⁴⁶ Biographical narratives make sense of this seemingly irrational conflict, offering coherency and comfort to a state’s population.⁴⁷ As states become attached to conflict, Mitzen argues that this process indicates adherence to a particular role identity.⁴⁸ Identifying as a dominant, ever-expanding global power means that offensive action and conflict reaffirm ontological security and reduce uncertainty.⁴⁹ For these states, Mitzen writes that “on a deep level, they prefer conflict to cooperation, because only through conflict do they know who they are.”⁵⁰

As states employ highly gendered narratives of Self within the search for ontological security, this consistency of conflict can fit neatly into a masculine personal identity. Advocating for offensive action within foreign policy aligns with perceivably masculine traits, including dominance over others and an affinity for confrontation. Masculinist logics within biographical state narratives can thus induce this consistency of conflict, a behavioural pattern that affirms ontological security by adhering to gendered narratives of Self. Emil Edenborg writes that “sexual and gendered difference is invoked to legitimise and naturalise hierarchical and adversarial relations between nations, through the invention of national heterosexual and gender-binary traditions, and the disparagement of feminised Others.”⁵¹ Gendered narratives and conflictual behaviour patterns are thus intertwined in the search for ontological security. Acting on the offensive (e.g. invading a sovereign nation) offers reassurance to a nation’s perception of Self, if this selfhood is tied to power, masculinity and conflict.

The Ukraine invasion

In the search for ontological security, states harness gendered narratives of Self and adhere to consistent patterns of behaviour – including behaviour that promotes conflict and potentially endangers physical security. As such, the search for ontological security effectively explains Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, intending to capture the entire Ukrainian territory and replace the government.⁵² In his announcement speech, President Vladimir Putin justified the invasion as an effort to counteract hostile

⁴³ Mitzen, 342.

⁴⁴ Mitzen, 347.

⁴⁵ Mitzen, 354.

⁴⁶ Mitzen, 341.

⁴⁷ Faizullaev and Cornut, 583.

⁴⁸ Mitzen, 359-360.

⁴⁹ Mitzen., 360.

⁵⁰ Mitzen, 361.

⁵¹ Edenborg, 302.

⁵² John Psaropoulos, “Timeline: Six Months of Russia’s War in Ukraine,” Al Jazeera, accessed October 4, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/24/timeline-six-months-of-russias-war-in-ukraine>.

Western expansion into Eastern Europe.⁵³ Putin levied accusations of “genocide” against ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine as further reasoning for Russian control of the Ukrainian government and territory.⁵⁴ Putin argued that invasion was “a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation... It is not only a very real threat to our interests but to the very existence of our state and to its sovereignty.”⁵⁵ The war in Ukraine has resulted in mass casualties and displacement of Ukrainian citizens. Numerous reports of war crimes have accompanied the invasion, including mass shootings and rape.

At face value, Putin’s call for invasion appears irrational.⁵⁶ Invasion has diminished Russia’s standing in the international sphere, provoked stringent economic sanctions, and stoked dissent at a domestic level.⁵⁷ However, as Mitzen argues, the pursuit of ontological security can offer “a structural explanation for the apparent irrationality of conflicts among security-seekers....”⁵⁸ The invasion of Ukraine serves to reaffirm the selfhood of the Russian state, a Self that was developed through the telling of hegemonic biographical narratives. As a traumatic event for the Russian (and Ukrainian) populace, invasion is a moment where Subotic’s notion of “selective narrative activation” could thrive.⁵⁹ In addition, invasion aligns with previous state behaviour of aggression toward Ukraine, maintaining senses of stability and consistency of Self despite conflict.

Russian state narratives of self

To examine how invasion bolsters Russia’s ontological security, it is necessary to unpack the hegemonic narratives harnessed by the Russian state to inform a sense of Self. The intentional activation of a grand Russian state narrative amidst the Ukraine invasion reflects Subotic’s argument that narratives are employed at times of stress and crisis.⁶⁰ Narrative activation affirms ontological security, quelling fear and dissent at a domestic level. Edenborg describes three key aspects of the Russian state’s biographical narrative that inform the pursuit of ontological security and the invasion of Ukraine. These are: the perception of Russia as a great imperial power, gendered cartographies surrounding imagery of Russian and Ukrainian identity, and the position of Russia as a “denazifying” force against a Ukrainian government overrun by fascists.

53 Max Fisher, “Putin’s Case for War, Annotated,” *The New York Times*, February 24, 2022, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/europe/putin-ukraine-speech.html>.

54 Fisher.

55 Fisher.

56 Mark Gongloff, “Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine Is Not a Rational Act,” *Bloomberg*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-02-24/russia-s-invasion-of-ukraine-is-not-a-rational-act>; Lynne Hartnett, “The Long History of Russian Imperialism Shaping Putin’s War,” *Washington Post*, accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/02/long-history-russian-imperialism-shaping-putins-war/>.

57 “What Are the Sanctions on Russia and Are They Hurting Its Economy?,” *BBC News*, January 27, 2022, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60125659>; Matt Fidler, “Protests in Russia against Mobilisation – in Pictures,” *The Guardian*, September 22, 2022, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2022/sep/22/protests-russia-against-mobilisation-pictures-moscow-st-petersburg>.

58 Mitzen, 343.

59 Subotic, 616.

60 Subotic, 614.

Within biographical narratives of the state, Russia is imagined as an imperial power and the centre of empire.⁶¹ This imagining aligns with the contention that states claim a particular role identity to bolster coherence of Self and ontological security. The role identity of an imperial power demands certain behavioural patterns, namely domination and expansion into surrounding territory. Such behaviour is evidenced in the invasion of Ukraine, with Russia seeking to take land represented in state communications as rightfully Russian. History as part of biographical narrative plays a significant role here, with reference to Ukraine and Russia existing within the same territorial boundaries under the Soviet Union and Russian Empire.⁶² In addition, Putin has consistently claimed that Russia and Ukraine are not separate nations, sharing common ancestral roots and ethnic origins.⁶³ Ukraine is thus imagined within the Russian state narrative as both “an imperial frontier and border zone.”⁶⁴ Russia’s previous offensive behaviour toward Ukraine fits this role identity of great imperial power. As outlined by James Headley, the capture of shipping yards, land access to Crimea, “resources in Donbas and important ports on the Black Sea” fit within a hegemonic state narrative of rightful ownership over Ukrainian territory.⁶⁵ This vision of an expansive and mighty Russian Empire also aligns with Berenskoetter’s description of utopian biographical narratives, where imagery of a nation’s future drives state action in the present.⁶⁶

Expansion into Ukraine is further justified through the biographical narrative that Russia must save ethnic Russians from a despotic, fascist Ukrainian government.⁶⁷ Russian diplomats frequently depict the Ukrainian government as harbouring fascist revolutionaries intent on harming ethnic Russians within Ukraine. During the annexation of Crimea in 2014, one Russian diplomat spoke of “the threat to the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine (particularly in Crimea) and the need to defend them.”⁶⁸ In his invasion announcement speech, Putin described the potential for “genocide” in Donbas, calling for the need to save ethnic Russians from human rights abuses.⁶⁹ According to Edenborg, this (fictitious) narrative provides “ontological security by suggesting a historical continuity between the war against Hitler Germany and today’s war, and [produces] the border between Self and Other as an absolute moral one.”⁷⁰ The Second World War, known as the Great Patriotic War in Russian public discourse, is a salient motif within biographical narrative, inducing a strong emotive reaction among the populace.⁷¹ Just as the Soviet army helped the Allied forces defeat fascism in Europe, the Russian military must defeat fascism in Ukraine. Violence and significant loss within historical memory are central to this powerful biographical narrative of Russian identity, as outlined by Berenskoetter.⁷² In addition, wartime imagery stirs up deep affective resonance and emotion among the population,

⁶¹ Edenborg, 298.

⁶² Hartnett.

⁶³ James Headley, “Narratives of National and State Identities in the War in Ukraine,” *Australian Institute of International Affairs* (blog), accessed October 27, 2022, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/narratives-of-national-and-state-identities-in-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

⁶⁴ Edenborg, 298.

⁶⁵ Headley.

⁶⁶ Berenskoetter, 273, 277.

⁶⁷ Headley; Faizullaev and Cornut, 589; Edenborg, 306.

⁶⁸ Faizullaev and Cornut, 586.

⁶⁹ Fisher.

⁷⁰ Edenborg, 306.

⁷¹ Headley; Edenborg, 306.

⁷² Berenskoetter, 270.

making invasion appear, as Putin describes, “a matter of life and death.”⁷³ The Ukrainian government is envisioned as a “spectacle of the Other,” justifying offensive action.⁷⁴ The invasion of Ukraine is thus perceived as an example of historical continuity, where Russia once again acts to defeat fascism. By invoking moral stakes and maintaining historical self-identity, invasion was enabled through the search for ontological security.

Within Russian state narratives, gendered frameworks represent the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, with a masculine Russia attaining natural dominance over a feminised Ukraine.⁷⁵ Additionally, Edenborg identifies a recurring theme within the Russian state narrative of a sexually deviant Europe, a process of othering that solidifies the identification of the Russian Self with traditional sexual norms.⁷⁶ Europe's “gender order” is deemed destructive due to the rise of feminism and increasing rights for the queer community.⁷⁷ As such, European states are othered within the Russian state narrative. Ukraine is perceived as veering dangerously close to the ideals of “Gayropa,” sparking imagery of Ukraine as a feminised Other sitting on the Russian border.⁷⁸ Russia must therefore act to bring Ukraine into line with traditional gender norms, a goal attempted through invasion and conquest. This action reinforces conceptions of a masculine Russian Self; according to Oleg Riabov and Tatiana Riabova, “Russian political rhetoric has referred the de-masculinisation of Ukraine in terms that make it an integral part of the re-masculinisation of Russia.”⁷⁹ Subordinating a feminised Ukraine through invasion and conquest feeds the masculinist Russian state identity, providing ontological security. Additionally, in alignment with masculinised conceptions of the Russian Self, Putin is frequently assessed as fitting within the “strongman” leadership style described above.

Narratives of the Russian Self informed Russia's foreign policy shift toward invasion.⁸⁰ Building on Edenborg's description of gendered cartographies within approaches to Ukrainian and Russian identity, I argue that all three narratives discussed above are informed by gendered thinking and a masculinist logic. Identification as an imperial power and the defence of Ukraine from supposed Nazi forces are exertions of masculinist thinking, expressing desire for dominance, expansion and power. Firstly, Wendy Bracewell notes that imperialist projects are frequent sites for “the formulation and contestation of masculinities.”⁸¹ Seeking to capture Ukrainian territory and affirm the role identity of a great imperialist power in turn bolsters senses of masculinity, while the feminised Ukrainian Other is marginalised and deemed incapable of self-governance. Furthermore, the desire to “defend” ethnic Russians in Ukraine from a fascistic government also speaks to a masculine self-identity, looking to save and protect those in need.⁸² Such thinking speaks to the inherent contradictions within biographical narratives; ethnic Russians within Ukraine are not Others, but are nevertheless feminised and labelled in need of defence.

⁷³ Fisher.

⁷⁴ Edenborg, 306.

⁷⁵ Edenborg, 302.

⁷⁶ Edenborg, 302.

⁷⁷ Oleg Riabov and Tatianna Riabova, “The Decline of Gayropa?,” Eurozine, accessed October 26, 2022, <https://www.eurozine.com/the-decline-of-gayropa/>.

⁷⁸ Edenborg, 304; Riabov and Riabova.

⁷⁹ Riabov and Riabova.

⁸⁰ Subotic, 613.

⁸¹ Bracewell, 566.

⁸² Faizullaev and Cornut, 586.

In addition to remaining gendered, all three narratives discussed above sustain behavioural consistency (and thus, ontological security) through a masculinised consistency of conflict. Adversarial relations toward Ukraine have been present within Russian foreign policy throughout Putin's leadership, tracing back to the annexation of Crimea and armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine.⁸³ Invasion is a continuation of this behavioural pattern, affirming ontological security for Russian state actors and the population. This affirmation is achieved through the reduction of uncertainty – consistent behaviour, even if such behaviour is conflictual and reduces physical security, provides a sense of stability and a consistent Self throughout time. In addition, the behavioural pattern of an adversarial relationship toward Ukraine solidifies the masculine Self, as conflictual routines within foreign policy reflect a self-identity connected to perceivably masculine traits of power and dominance.

Conclusion

Russia's search for ontological security enabled the invasion of Ukraine, as Russia sought to retain behavioural consistency and biographical narratives of Self. For the Russian state, narratives of Self are informed by a masculinist logic, prompting an identity as an expanding imperial power, gendered dichotomies surrounding Russian and Ukrainian identities, and the drive to enter Ukraine as a force against fascism and illegitimate governance. Such narratives draw upon crucial aspects within the construction of a hegemonic Self, such as the role identity of a dominant power, the process of othering toward Ukraine and Europe, and the use of dynamic imagery like the historical memory of the Second World War. In addition, conflict in Ukraine was a continuation of the Russian state's behavioural patterns, providing ontological security through the reduction of uncertainty and the reaffirmation of a masculinist disposition toward conflict. Ontological security has thus proven to be a pertinent consideration within this instance of global conflict. Overall, this argument proves that political commentators and scholars should include questions of identity and selfhood within the analysis of foreign policy. In particular, ontological security is an incredibly salient notion when attempting to understand state behaviour that appears nonsensical from a physical security perspective. State actors may push forth action that can harm a state's economy, population and reputation – but protects senses of Self. Ultimately, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not the only instance of global conflict where ontological security is an important consideration. Nevertheless, the Ukraine invasion remains a deeply harrowing search for the security of Self, capturing the attention of millions across the world.

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⁸³ Reuters, "Timeline: The Events Leading up to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 1, 2022, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/events-leading-up-russias-invasion-ukraine-2022-02-28/>.

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