

A New Global Order?

History and Power Politics
in the Era of Zeitenwende

With contributions by
Mary Kaldor, Georgiy Kasianov,
Kristina Spohr et al.

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“There will be no lasting peace in East-Central Europe, no enduring international security order, if such a peace repeats the errors of the past and prioritizes vindictiveness over the willingness to compromise.”

Robert Gerwarth

“From today’s vantage point, the decade that followed this epochal change, the 1990s, looks like a major historical aberration.”

Kristina Spohr

“The weakness of Putin the Historian – and others like him – is that they are not actual historians. Their narratives are like houses of cards that may look superficially appealing to poorly-informed observers but fall apart at the slightest poking by serious professionals.”

Sergey Radchenko

“Diplomats are opportunists who anticipate the openings created by a history they do not control. That is applied history at its best.”

Jeremi Suri

Geopolitics, Nationalism and Warfare as a History Hotspot

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there. Months into the Russian war against Ukraine, which has shattered the European order, it is obvious that this war has also challenged the message delivered by Leslie Poles Hartley in the opening phrase of his famous novel *The Go-Between* in 1953.

Historical master narratives developed and implemented by Russian President Vladimir Putin, reproduced by government officials as well as those academics and media that support Russia's toxic nationalism and aggression, have prepared the hard warfare that started on 24 February 2022. The abuse of history as a weapon is, of course, nothing new and it has, unfortunately, not been limited to Russia alone. But the way in which ideological warfare, based on politically motivated falsified interpretations of the past, has been transformed directly into the attempted destruction of Ukraine as an independent country marks a new level of misuse unprecedented in post Wall Europe.

Therefore, decision-makers, diplomats, experts, but also we as citizens need to find answers to urgent questions such as: *How do politics of history and the return to geopolitics and expansionism go together? How can we react to the geopolitical shifts on the European continent and how can we understand the historical context of the 2022 watershed moment? Why is historical sensibility essential for good diplomacy? And, last but not least, how can and how should historians use their knowledge productively in the digital age of ideological confrontation?*

This *History Hotspot* e-Paper brings together a selection of contributions by internationally renowned experts from the realms of history, political science, warfare analysis and peace research who took part in our Körber History Forum 2022. For two days, a group of 60 international experts came together to provide historical contexts to topical issues relating to *borders and contested spaces*.

This e-paper does not only provide food for thought but also attempts to provide historical orientation, context and advice at a time where confrontations about the past have morphed into the weaponization of history and actual warfare. We feel that this is a very important and timely task, and we hope that you will benefit from the collection of essays that we were able to bring together in the follow-up to our Körber History Forum in May with the generous help of our authors who were ready to share their knowledge and expertise with us.

Gabriele Woidelko, Florian Bigge, Alma Gretenkord
Körber-Stiftung
Hamburg, June 2022



Gabriele Woidelko
Head of Department
History & Politics



Florian Bigge
Programme Manager
Körber History Forum



Alma Gretenkord
Programme Manager
Körber History Forum

photos: Claudia Höhne

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Who Owns the Past? History and Geopolitics

How do *Geschichtspolitik* and the return to geopolitics and expansionism go together?

What are the driving factors behind Vladimir Putin's vision of history?

Is there a potential for a more common vision of the Black Sea region?

Ukraine: When Tensions over the Past Morph into War

The use of history as a tool for political manipulation has been on the rise in Central and Eastern Europe since the collapse of Communism in 1989/1991. But only in Russia, it serves as a basis for expansion, aggression and war.

By Georgiy Kasianov, Maria-Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin

In recent decades, history's growing use and misuse as a political instrument have become a global phenomenon. Economic and cultural globalization brought about the need for a transnational history. The project of a united Europe necessitated the search for the common European past, a symbolic currency equal to the euro in economics. Globalization also provoked the revival of the national master narratives worldwide as a response to the transnational or supranational visions of the past.

In Europe, the request for a common history, encouraged politically and financially by supranational European institutions, also inspired a restoration and revitalization of national master narratives. The dissolution of the Communist system and extension of the EU incited a revival of archetypical ethnocentric national histories in Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and the Balkans – first as a “return to the roots,” later as a reaction to the challenges of supranational narratives aimed at the promotion of historical unity.

The past became the present

History and memory (often confused and mixed) became prized tools for political, social, cultural (mis)management, manipulation, and instrumental use and abuse. They were inevitably brought to the core of internal tensions and international conflicts. The intensity of the use of the past for political (and now military) ends in the present is comparable to the eve of the First and the Second World Wars.

The past, reinvented, redrafted, and repackaged for specific political purposes, became the present. In some cases, it serves noble ends, more or less

effectively. The transnational Holocaust memory, chosen to unite Europe based on a shared responsibility for the past tragedy, might be mentioned as a constructive initiative. Memory and history of the Holocaust were brought up to the center of European politics of memory as an immersive reality promoting certain values and cultural, ethnic, and religious tolerance.

In other cases, the instrumentalization of the past may induce revanchism, aggression, and war. Russia, among others, might claim leadership in weaponizing history and memory. Since the middle of the 2000s, Russia has become an epicenter of conflicts over the past with its immediate neighbors: Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine.

In some cases (Poland), one can observe periods of aggravation and normalization in bilateral relations. In others: tensions over the past gradually morphed into the memory of Cold War and then, in the case of Ukraine – to actual combat. In all cases, this type of *Geschichtspolitik* was a symptom of the return of geopolitics and expansionism. Claims for the revision of the past inevitably led to claims for revising the status quo in the present.

Ukraine as an unnatural creation

The Russian variant of historical revisionism re-enacted the most extreme military action in Europe since the Second World War. Historical arguments were at the center of the argumentation in the annexation of Crimea and proxy war in Donbas. References to historical justice, lost territories, and compatriots in the near abroad were reminiscent of Hitler's speeches from 1938 – to 1939. Intensive use of rhetoric and symbols of the Great

Patriotic War by Russia's backed military formation in Donbas and the most extreme instrumentalization of the cult of the Great Victory of 1945 in Russia, turned into the new "War against Nazism" by 2022.

There are some more fundamental grounds for the action against Ukraine, apart from the purely instrumentalist use of the past. It is a part of the historical outlook, elevated (or downgraded) to the level of political doctrine, which denies the very idea of the existence of the Ukrainian nation and state. Putin started this theme at the Bucharest NATO summit in 2008, saying that Ukraine is an unnatural and "problematic" state formation and laying claim to territories and populations.

In July 2021 and in February 2022, a few days before the invasion, he lectured his people, stating that Ukrainians are a part of the Russian people while Ukraine is an unnatural creation, taken over by "Nazis and drug addicts". By saying this, he did not just manipulate fictitious discourses, he expressed convictions based on "historical data."

Russia's unique path

It is fundamental to the historical outlook of the Russian ruling class, cultural and political elites to consider Ukrainians as just an ethnographic branch of the greater Russian people, to see their claims for self-determination, a different language, culture, and identity as just a result of the intrigue of the evil West. Therefore, according to this worldview, the "Ukrainian question" is a matter of historical, centuries-long confrontation of spiritually-minded, friendly Russia with the corrupted, rationalist, and aggressive West.

This vision is intimately linked with the idea of the unique Russian path (Sonderweg), a special mission in the world predestined by its geographical location. No one would be surprised to find the historical roots of this outlook in the second half of the 19th century in imperial Russia, whose identity emerged as an imperial one. Russia's political and cultural elites bring their country to the 19th century, exactly to the times, identities, and actions that resulted in two world wars.

Historical master narratives and war

One may say that the Ukrainian historical outlook, as it is presented in the official historical discourse, also bears all essential features and messages of the 19th century ethnocentric, exclusivist nationalism. The same may be said for many other European historical master narratives.

However, there is one profound difference: none of them serve as a basis for expansion, aggression, and war. Moreover, an overview of the development of the national master narratives in Eastern Europe in the recent decades clearly shows that Russia did its best to fuel existential fear in the region, predominantly based on bad memories and histories, particularly among its neighbors. Now, these memories and histories have taken on a new history to be considered seriously.



photo: Interfax, Ukraine

Georgiy Kasianov

is a professor at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, Poland. Formerly, he was the head of the Department of Contemporary History and Politics at the Institute of Ukrainian History at the National Academy of Sciences in Kyiv. His research interests are the social, political and cultural history of Ukraine from 19th to 21st centuries, epistemology of history, nationalism. Central aspects of his current studies include national, international and transnational politics of memory, instrumental use and abuse of history, cultural and social memory studies. His latest book is called "Memory Crash. Politics of History In and Around Ukraine, 1980s–2010s" (2022). This piece is a part of the project "Quest for the Past" supported by the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA)

Blind Spot Back Sea: Regional Identities Versus Great-Power Aspirations

The Russian war has foregrounded naval security of Ukraine and the Black Sea region in everyday news. To understand what the Black Sea means to the region and what role it might play in the cultural and political future of its six neighboring countries, it is worth taking a look back into history.

By Ayşe Zarakol, University of Cambridge

In usual times, the Black Sea doesn't get much attention or coverage. It is not a region that seems to have mattered much in recent decades, especially in great power calculations. As the Bulgarian writer Dimitar Kenarov observed in a 2019 essay called "In the Back of the Beyond":

"The Black Sea is the most remote section of the world's oceans, the ultimate dead-end of the global aquatic system. From the Atlantic into the Mediterranean, from the Mediterranean through the Dardanelles into the Sea of Marmara, from the Sea of Marmara through the Bosphorus: the Black Sea is the most isolated room in the house – the cob-webbed garret rarely visited ... In a sense, the Black Sea does not really exist. Despite being located at the crossroads of several different regions – the Balkans, Anatolia, the Caucasus, the southern steppe-lands of Russia and Ukraine – it is part of none." Even in our everyday imaginaries, the Black Sea is usually more of an absence than a presence.

Early imperial legacies

But of course, these are not usual times ... Russia's invasion of Ukraine has suddenly foregrounded the Black Sea and Ukraine's naval security in everyday news. But will that change be long-lasting? Will we be thinking more about the Black Sea in years to come? To answer that question, we will first need to think about whether the Black Sea has always been neglected. As we look at history, we quickly realise that it was not always so.

There have been periods where empires have been quite active in the region. Originally a "back of beyond" region for Ancient Greece, by the time of the Byzantine Empire, the Black Sea had become quite active. The Byzantine Empire fragmented after the 4th crusade into various regional empires. And the Genoese were given exclusive trading rights in the Black Sea.

In the thirteenth century, Genoese settlements started to crisscross the region. The Mongols arrived around this time as well. What later came to be called the Golden Horde sieged Kaffa, the main Genoese trading post on Crimea several times during the 14th century. It is during one of these sieges that the Black Death is supposed to first have spread to Kaffa from the invading armies, and then to Europe via merchant ships escaping from Crimea.

20th century power shifts

For some centuries after, the north of the Black Sea region was under the control of khanates, first the Mongol Empire, then the Golden Horde and then the Crimean Khanate. The Byzantine Empire and its offshoots hung on in the south well into the fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, two new major powers had emerged: the Ottomans in the south, Muscovy (and later the Russian Empire) in the north.

The Crimean Khanate was initially a significant ally of the former and a major threat to the latter, but by the seventeenth century, what was left of it had been informally absorbed by the Ottoman

Empire, the initially ascendant power after the decline of the Mongols.

In the eighteenth century, the control of the area passed to the Russian Empire, the next rising power and on a southern expansionary track. By contrast, Ottoman power was shrinking, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries new states emerged around the Black Sea, as the Ottomans became weaker and weaker and eventually collapsed after WWI.

Many were reabsorbed (formally or informally) in the twentieth century by the Soviet Union. The successor state of the Ottoman Empire became a NATO outpost in the region, perennially on a defensive watch.

The Black Sea as a border zone

In other words, it is only really since the collapse of the USSR that the region has been home to a multiplicity of countries. Six countries now border the Black Sea: Russia, Georgia, Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, and Ukraine. In the broader region, we could probably also include Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia. None of these countries really think of the Black Sea as a focal point, in culture or foreign policy.

I would argue that this is because this sea has been a border zone for one empire or another successively for so many of the preceding centuries: the Mongols, the Ottomans, the Russians and finally the USSR. This has rendered the area a relatively inert zone, culturally, economically, socially.

The fact that power among Black Sea countries is still not distributed equally makes it hard to think beyond that, with each country except Russia and perhaps Turkey looking elsewhere for safety and trade. Some look to the EU, some look to Russia, some to the US. Nobody really takes the notion of a Black Sea regional identity very seriously.

Opportunities for a common vision?

However, if Russia's war on Ukraine ends as many people predict, i. e. with a Russia that has shrunk in ambition and capacity, there will be an opportunity that has not existed for centuries. The Black Sea countries will need to confront what this region can mean to them. And if such a day comes, the shared histories of the peoples around this body of water may be recovered in service of a more common vision of the Black Sea.



photo: Dmitri Jajich

Ayşe Zarakol

is a Professor of International Relations at the University of Cambridge and Fellow at Emmanuel College. Most recently she is the author of "Before the West: the Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders" (2022). Her research is at the intersection of historical sociology and international relations, focusing on East-West relations in the international system, history and future of world order(s), conceptualisations of modernity and sovereignty, rising and declining powers, and Turkish politics in a comparative perspective.

The Watershed Moment. How Did We Get There?

What is the historical context of the current *Zeitenwende*?

Which legacies of 1989/1991 came to an end in 2022?

How can we react to the geopolitical shifts on the European continent?

Zeitenwende: Or, the Return to Power Politics and the End of the Post-Wall World?

In consequence of 24 February 2022, the European continent is facing a whole new security situation. Values, norms, identities, and – in some places – national existence are once more at stake. How are we to understand this “epochal rupture”?

By Kristina Spohr, London School of Economics and Political Sciences

Over three decades have passed since the peaceful disintegration of the Soviet empire and the reunification of Germany. All round, hope bloomed in the spring of 1992 for a new departure in European and indeed world politics. It seemed that the Cold War had been brought to an end in a genuine spirit of cooperation. Diplomacy and dialogue had triumphed.

The new man in the Kremlin Boris Yeltsin, declared at the United Nations in New York, that he spoke for a “new Russia”. His was a country that, unlike the still developing People’s Republic of China, had freed itself from the “yoke of Communism” and left “tyranny” behind. Moscow’s “new foreign policy” was committed to disarmament, cooperation, and peace abroad. What’s more, “America and the West” were not merely “partners”, they were “allies”.

A “war of conquest” in Europe

Today, all dreams of a Russo-Western Alliance have long evaporated, and there is no talk of partnership. Far from it. On 24 February 2022, Russian armed forces invaded Ukraine. This blatant act of aggression marked a major escalation of a conflict that first erupted in 2014 with Russia’s illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and its backing of two separatist territories in the Donbas. The Kremlin’s decisions brought “war of conquest” back to Europe.

What does this war mean to us and what are its wider implications for Europe? How are we to understand this major “epochal rupture” or what

Chancellor Scholz has called *Zeitenwende*? And how does it relate to the watershed moment – the so-called *Wendezeit* – when the world exited the Cold War and the Europe’s map was quietly redrawn?

Putin’s war targets the European order

Ultimately, Putin’s war is about much more than Russia seeking to absorb Ukraine and potentially other parts of the Russian “near abroad” or “historical Russian lands.” His is not merely a war driven by territorial revisionism, or political revanchism. His real target is the European order, that of a “Europe whole and free and at peace”, created under American aegis after the end of the Cold War.

Russia is engaged in a struggle against American presence in Europe, against what Putin claims to be a Western “encirclement” of Russia, and against the post-Wall world order at large. Putin has long resented the realities of post-Cold War unipolarity that went hand in hand with the spread of democracy and free markets. He has been vexed by the growing appeal, especially to Georgia and Ukraine, of the prosperous, open Western societies and its institutions, EU and NATO.

And he has developed a hatred of the US’ pre-eminence in this liberal system, while in his eyes post-Soviet Russia was marginalised and betrayed, humiliated and robbed of its great power status. For this, America and the institutional West, the “empire of lies”, as he phrased it on 24 February, are to blame. Because they have tried to “put the final squeeze on us, finish us off, and utterly destroy us”.

1989 could have turned out differently

By contrast, to Russia's smaller neighbours to the West, from Estonia to Bulgaria, as well as the fiercely independent and long-term neutrals, Finland and Sweden, that post-Wall European order is the touchstone of their freedom.

This is an order whose principles were first articulated in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, and then reinforced in the Charter of Paris for a New Europe in 1990. (In fact, the principles were confirmed many times after that by all CSCE/OSCE parties, including Russia.)

Crucially, post Wall Europe was brought about peacefully during the "hinge years" (*Scharnierjahre*) of 1989-1992, when the world moved out of antagonistic bipolarity and entered a new world order. Beyond the "Gorbachev factor", people power and the subsequent electoral revolutions were the main catalysts of the massive political transformation in Eastern Europe. But much depended on the cautious but decisive political management by international leaders.

It could have all turned out so very differently, of which not simply Europe's bellicose past was proof, but China's distinct Cold War exit strategy – epitomised in the crackdown in Tiananmen square in June 1989. The way in which Europe transformed during the *Wendezeit*, namely without major conflict, was unique in the continent's history.

The 1990s as an historical aberration

From today's vantage point, the decade that followed this epochal change, the 1990s, look like a major historical aberration. In those early years of the "post-Wall era", East and West, having peacefully reunited Germany and navigated Soviet disintegration in an orderly manner, cooperated. It was a time of hope in Europe, one marked by democratisation, open trade, and free movement of people, ideas and information.

And this, in spite of Yugoslavia's bloody collapse and descent into genocidal civil war, the Chechnyan Wars inside Russia, and other regional ethno-national and border conflicts in the former Soviet space (from Transnistria to South Ossetia to Nagorno-Karabakh), which indicated that the danger of "Eastern" instability and "Balkanisation" spreading "West" was ever present.

To deal with this plethora of issues – from national minority and human rights to conflict prevention and resolution – and to facilitate confidence building across the continent, the 1975 Helsinki Conference was institutionalised in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Yet, nobody – Russians, Americans, or Europeans – was truly interested in developing this framework further into a new pan-European hard security structure.

Reinventing "Western" Cold War Institutions

Instead, we witnessed the perpetuation, adaptation, and reinvention of the old "Western" Cold War insti-

tutions. In these processes of modification, the way in which the German question was resolved – via article 23 of the *Grundgesetz* and via the 2+4 process – proved crucial. Ultimately united Germany, in effect a larger Bonn Republic, simply continued with the latter's institutional memberships – all the while these organisations themselves were undergoing change.

The European Community turned into a political and economic Union and NATO found a new purpose in peace enforcement activities and humanitarian interventions. Both deepened their structures (developing a CFSP as well as the NACC and PfP) and enlarged – with Russian acquiescence – into the former Eastern bloc as part of the reunification and stabilisation of the continent.

The US was reconfirmed as a "European power". Russia acceded to the G7 and the World Trade Organisation and it developed a new relationship with NATO through the "Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security". Euro-Russian political, economic and cultural interdependence grew fast.

As we now realise, that period offered only a brief respite (or what Russian's call *peredyshka*) from traditional great-power competition – and with it, the destructive force of brutal warfare.

NATO as shelter from post-Soviet Russia

The US Cold War sage George F. Kennan thus got it wrong when he argued in 1997 that with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and Soviet collapse, NATO had outlived itself, because, he believed, "given all the possibilities after the Cold War", a "future military conflict" was "totally unforeseeable and most improbable". He was also mistaken to condemn the Alliance's willingness to accept new members from *Zwischen-europa*, the Europe in between Russia and Germany, as a "fateful error".

In the 1990s, Balts and former Soviet satellites from Eastern Europe were knocking on the Alliance's open door in order to shelter from post-Soviet Russia, always volatile, but, by 1993, rhetorically threatening as well. Their insistence on being allowed to join NATO seems to have been proven right.

From today's vantage point, the Alliance as a community of values and its credible threat of defensive force, has prevented Putin from menacing its "new" members (though Russia has kept harassing its neighbours with perennial air space incursions, cyber-attacks, and propaganda campaigns among Russian-speaking minorities.)

NATO's persistent appeal

Finland and Sweden know this, too. They joined the EU in 1995 in what they considered a much more benign security environment. But each then stuck to its independent security policy and did not seek NATO membership – not least to avoid gratuitously

provoking the Kremlin after decades of fragile and fraught arrangements with the Soviet Union.

Now however, as Russia's unprovoked large-scale invasion of Ukraine is rapidly transforming the security landscape in Europe, they have changed track. With deep historic fears of Russian aggression and territorial ambitions reawakened, nowhere more so than in the Baltic area, Finland and Sweden lodged their NATO applications this May.

The persistence of NATO's appeal – after 1949, after 1989, and again in 2022 – lies in the fact that America, though not an easy partner, is at least an “empire by invitation”. Especially the smaller European countries that joined EU and NATO relatively recently have been considering the U.S. as the central pillar of the post-Wall international system based on international law and principles, within which their sovereignty and right to choose alliances are safeguarded. The fact that Russia, too, has legally committed to upholding these principles does not suffice, as the Russian aggression against Ukraine demonstrates.

Russia: an “empire by imposition”

Russia – whether Tsarist, Soviet, or Putinist – has shown historically its inclination to dominate through coercion and often conquest what it considers to be its sphere of influence. In other words, it has shown itself to be an “empire by imposition”; one in fact, that most recently declared the liberal order obsolete. Putin, after all, together with China's Xi, is keen to see a “post-West world order” emerge, finally ending, what they believe has been a lengthy and loathsome US-led “unipolar moment”.

In their shared view, only a handful of great powers are truly “sovereign” states, while the U.S. in one way or another controls the rest of the world. This extremely realist worldview, which disregards the most basic principles even of the somewhat dated Westphalian system – territorial sovereignty and the sovereign equality of states – naturally clashes with more progressive Western positions in international law and politics.

Again, Russia and China have signed up to these norms, too. Yet their narrow reading of sovereignty and, in our terms “flawed” perception of the pillars of modern-day international relations, lead them to believe that treaties guaranteeing the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of smaller countries located in their “spheres of influence” are, in effect, meaningless.

The war is a paradigm shift

Therefore, let me reiterate that Russia's war against Ukraine is not only about “correcting” some past historical injustices. On the contrary, it is about the future shape of the European security order, and it means a paradigm shift for all those concerned with Russia's role within it.

Since Russia is a major nuclear power (increasingly) threatening to use its arsenal, even those most determined European practitioners of bridge-building with firm neutralist traditions, Finland and Sweden, are now feeling compelled into a strategic realignment and to get under America's nuclear umbrella.

The future of European security

NATO's post-Wall eastern “expansion” has been criticized in some quarters for willingly provoking Russia and even laying the groundwork for Vladimir Putin's military campaign in Ukraine. It has been argued (not least by Putin himself) that the West, forever triumphalist and arrogant, is to be blamed for Russia's purposeful slighting, marginalisation, and abasement. So much so, that the Kremlin “had” to fight back in the end.

Yet, let's be clear: That Russia went to war in Ukraine in 2022 (as well as in 2014), was not because of decisions made in Brussels at NATO HQ or at the Berlaymont (cf. Ukraine's 2014 Association Agreement with the EU). That this war became possible, depended less on the Atlantic Alliance, less on non-NATO countries' strategic choices, less on Ukraine's or anybody's else's westward orientation, and much more on Russia – its autocratic, indeed authoritarian Putinist turn and its growing hostility towards the West, all the while seeking to recreate a nostalgic illusion of an alleged Russian greatness in the 21st century.

24 February 2022 changed Europe

What's more, as it appears now, there is less of a structural problem of too little Western integration of Russia, but one of too much interdependence. Indeed, as the German predicament reveals, Russia clearly set out to exploit and weaponize its energy supplies, by making Germany dependent.

The Brandtian *Ostpolitik* idea of achieving *Wandel durch Handel*, of changing Russia by harnessing its power through economic ties, did not work out. Equally, Berlin's over-fixation on *Dialogpolitik* to the detriment of Germany's defence posture, now prompts finger pointing at a succession of recent German governments for years of gullibility towards the Kremlin and for sailing too close to Moscow's winds.

There are, of course, many reasons for Germany's post-Wall trajectory. And ‘what if’ questions over too much or too little Russian integration will always remain. But one thing is for sure: There are no longer any doubts that 24 February 2022 changed Europe. It created a whole new security situation on the continent – and it demonstrated that Putin's Russia was willing to use military force to impose its imperial, or neo-imperial, designs. As a result, our values, norms, identities, and – in some places – national existence are once more at stake.

An ever stronger transatlantic partnership?

Yet, against the Russian leader's hopes of divide and rule in Europe, the war in Ukraine has brought out the impressive strength and resilience of the transatlantic community. For all the recent crises – from financial crash to mass influx of refugees to culture wars – North America and Europe remain each other's most important partners in commerce and culture.

They are showing, as we speak, that they can isolate Russia diplomatically and punish Putin economically. And they remain firmly bound together through the NATO defence alliance, a commitment that is also reaffirmed in the EU's "Strategic Compass" of March 2022.

More, with Europe forced to adapt to a new era of conquest, NATO is in fact experiencing an unexpected revival: For one, almost all European NATO members are now willing to increase their military spending to the 2% of GDP goal on defence, with Germany adding the equivalent of 0.5% of its GDP (100 bn Euro) in just one year to its defence budget.

Second, America is contemplating to build permanent bases on NATO's eastern flank for a long-term European security ramp up. And third, the Alliance is poised to add Finland and Sweden to its ranks. This will grant Northern Europe new capacities to coordinate substantial defence forces regionwide and allow for greater control of the Baltic Sea, thus supporting also the defence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

A watershed moment for Europe

The War then clearly marks a watershed for Europe – a *Zeitenwende*. The individual domestic responses to the fallout from Russian aggression are signs, too, that the post-Wall era is over. There is no longer talk in Berlin (or Brussels) about Germany (or the EU) as a "civilian power", no hesitation among Finns and Swedes to express that their future is only secure in NATO.

The question though is, can Russia be forced out of Ukraine, to re-establish the country's full territorial integrity; and can Ukraine's security be guaranteed beyond such outcome – goals Scholz proclaimed in April 2022, as the West desperately tries to defend the international normative regime?

Which global consequences to be seen?

From the ashes of war inexorably will emerge major geopolitical and institutional change on the continent – and we already see today that the consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine affect many countries even beyond Europe:

Indeed, Central Asian states, while heavily hit by international sanctions against Russia, are trying to maintain their sovereignty vis-à-vis Russia and China, while the latter is clandestinely supporting the Kremlin and seeking to exploit the void in South-East Asia (SEA) left by America following its

retreat from Afghanistan and exacerbated by the "new but old" US commitments in Europe.

Meanwhile, Latin America, Africa and SEA are suffering from higher food prices and shortages due to the war and finding themselves in the unenviable position of having to choose between either supporting the former imperialists from the West, or the (to them) somewhat friendlier new imperialists from Russia.

And India, which is heavily dependent on Russian arms supplies that it needs against Pakistan and China, finds itself forced to phase out Russian coal due to the international pressure (over the climate crisis) and regarding the upholding of the regime of sanctions.

Perhaps we should leave these issues for a later debate, when we can do justice to their depth, historical contexts, and political strategic ramifications.

A new geopolitical scenario in Europe

So, let me instead return to the geopolitical shifts on the European continent. These will almost certainly not play out in the simple way the Kremlin originally imagined – with Ukraine part of Russia and America pushed out of Europe. There will also be no novel order built around new pan-European structures.

Instead, Putin is likely to find himself confronted with realities he truly hates: a revived and further – northward – enlarged NATO-“West”, with more rather than fewer allies, strengthening themselves defensively by using and refining their tested institutions, and with a much longer NATO-Russian border than ever before, reaching all the way from the Arctic Ocean to the Turkish shores of the Black Sea. And he will also find himself facing an ever more assertive EU that in June 2022 granted “candidate status” to Ukraine and Moldova, while offering a “European perspective” to Georgia.

How to brace for the years to come?

If that scenario plays out, Putin's invasion of Ukraine will prove a historic own goal. Assuming he holds onto power, what will be his response to that dawning reality? Beyond contemplating Putin's next moves, Euro-Atlantic leaders, must also ask themselves the following:

- 1) How, against the background of the era between *Wendezeit* and *Zeitenwende*, to brace themselves for the years to come?
- 2) How to use the crisis mode as a catalyst to evolve?
- 3) How to turn such buzz words as *European* “strategic autonomy”, “strategic compass”, “common foreign and defence policy” into credible, substantiated political action?

They must decide:

- 4) What tactical moves to make, what strategic and institutional changes to undertake within EU and

NATO as Europe and the world adapt to the new realities that Russia's War will bring?

And considering that during the "hinge years" of 1988–1992 the cautious but decisive leadership of heads of states proved successful, the question arises:

5) Does this hold true for the coordination between US, EU, NATO and G7 today?

6) Finally, what lessons will the different international players – from Beijing to New Delhi, from the Caucasus to the Western Balkans – draw from Russia's actions and experience in 2022 and what will the consequences be?

The West – amidst all the crisis management – will now have to speedily develop its own new horizons of expectations, whether it wants to be a shaper of the future or be shaped by it. This is the key.



photo: Dermot Tatlow

Kristina Spohr

is Professor of International History at the London of Economics and Political Sciences and Senior Fellow at the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs at Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC. She is a specialist in the International History of Germany since 1945 and interested in questions of World Order, Diplomacy & Strategy and the practice of Applied History. Spohr is author most recently of "Post Wall, Post Square: Rebuilding the World after 1989" (2019) whose German edition "Wendezeit" (2019) won the award "Das politikwissenschaftliche Buch" 2020. She is currently writing a global history of the Arctic.

Diplomacy: How to Balance Politics and History?

Why is historical sensibility essential for good diplomacy?

What are the historical templates for “good peace”?

How do “old” and “new” wars differ and how does this help to understand what is at stake for Ukraine?

Good Peace: What Could be a Historical Template?

There are historical examples which indicate that for lasting peace and an enduring international security order, diplomats need to put the willingness to compromise over vindictiveness. But such “peace without victors” is a dangerous line of thinking in case of Ukraine.

By Robert Gerwarth, University College Dublin

On 9 May 2022, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, marked the 77th anniversary of Nazi Germany’s defeat with a speech to the European Parliament. Set against the current war in Ukraine – the first major war in Europe since 1945 (with the exception of the armed conflicts in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s) – Macron engaged in an exercise in applied history:

“What is our aim in the face of Russia’s unilateral decision to invade Ukraine and to attack its people? End this war as swiftly as possible. Do everything in our power so that Ukraine can hold out to the end and that Russia can never triumph.” In order to achieve a durable peace in Europe, he continued, “we will need, together, to never give in to the temptation of humiliation, nor the spirit of revenge, because these have already in the past wreaked enough havoc on the roads to peace.”

Rare references to the First World War

Macron’s speech presumably referenced the historical experiences of Germany and France, two countries long locked into a state of *Erbfeindschaft* (hereditary enmity) embodied by the two Treaties of Versailles of 1871 and 1919 that prompted repeated waves of irredentism and revanchism. The French and the Germans, so Macron’s implicit message, had learnt their lessons from the past – to avoid unnecessarily humiliating and vengeful peace treaties and to seek co-operation instead of confrontation.

Macron’s speech is interesting for another reason. The public debate about Ukraine is rife with

references to World War II and the 1990s, to promises made in the aftermath of the Cold War and the roads not taken then. Far less frequent are discussions about the First World War which ended in the fall of the Romanovs and the loss of most of their empire’s western borderlands. More than any other Western politician, Macron was heavily involved in the centenary of that conflict, chairing the expert commission on how to commemorate the “great seminal catastrophe of the twentieth century” and hosting the heads of government of all former combatant states in Paris on 11 November 2018.

Russia’s imperial legacies

Amidst the chaos of the period commemorated then, Ukraine – like many other aspiring nations in East-Central Europe – declared its independence, which was nominally confirmed through the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk between the Central Powers and the new Bolshevik government. Even if Ukraine was re-absorbed into the emerging Soviet Union in 1922, the “betrayal” of Ukraine and the loss of other territories that Russia had long laid claim to – from Finland to the Baltic States and Poland – remained a major Russian trauma comparable to Turkey’s obsession with the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) in which the imploding Ottoman Empire was stripped of its territories in the Middle East while Anatolia was to be partitioned.

Not unlike President Erdogan, Putin’s nostalgia for Russia’s imperial past – combined with a fear of ‘Western liberal imperialism’ that also dates back to the days of US President Woodrow Wilson and British Prime Minister David Lloyd George – remains

an under-appreciated prism through which his actions can be better understood.

Limitations of WWI analogies

The look back to the end of World War I might offer clues to the deeper historical origins of the current war in Ukraine, and to the mindsets in the Kremlin driving it, but not how to solve it. The Paris Peace Treaties (in)famously tried to reduce the potential for armed conflict in the post-imperial successor states of East-Central Europe through a combination of measures: the new states had to sign Minorities Treaties guaranteeing the rights of ethnic or religious minority communities within their borders.

Where inter-ethnic conflicts were deemed to be unresolvable through such treaties, the victorious Allies implemented a policy of permanent segregation through partitions (as in Upper Silesia or Northern Ireland), or expulsions (as in Western Anatolia). The latter were to become the dominant form of radical population politics in East-Central Europe until the later 1940s.

Peace agreements without victors

The search for a historical template for a 'good peace' can therefore not end in 1919. It would either take us further into the past – to the Congress of Vienna (1814–15) which generated the longest period of (almost) uninterrupted peace in Europe – or to the more recent Good Friday Agreement of 1998. What both have in common is that they resulted in a peace without victors. In 1815, defeated France was accepted as an equal partner in the deliberations about the future security architecture for Europe, while the Good Friday Agreement rested on a power-sharing agreement with international guarantors.

Whether such a peace without victors is feasible in light of the immense human suffering and physical destruction brought about by Russia's recent invasion is difficult to say. After all, the Minsk agreement of 2015 that was based on similar principles, did not prevent the current war.

In an ideal future scenario, a successful military repulsion of the Russian invasion would be followed by a negotiated peace based on those principles, a treaty that also recognizes that peace is not a moment in time, but a process that requires

the demobilization of minds as much as the demobilization of armed forces.

In any event, President Macron has drawn the correct lesson from Europe's turbulent twentieth century: there will be no lasting peace in East-Central Europe, no enduring international security order, if such a peace repeats the errors of the past and prioritizes vindictiveness over the willingness to compromise.



photo: private

Robert Gerwarth

is Professor of Modern History at University College Dublin and the Director of the UCD Centre for War Studies. His research is focused on the history of German and Central European political culture in the period between 1871 and 1945. Gerwarth is the author of "The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End" (2017) and "November 1918: The German Revolution" (2019), among others. He has also published several edited collections, including "War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War" (with John Horne, 2012) and "Empires at War, 1911–23" (with Erez Manela, 2014).

Old War Logics, New War Realities

Russia's invasion of Ukraine started with the aim of compellence which then turned unsuccessful. After that, the strategic attempt included many elements of new wars, such as deliberate shelling of civilians and sexual violence. How to respond?

By Mary Kaldor, London School of Economics and Political Science

Military force can be hugely destructive. It can be used as a terror weapon against civilians. Or it can be used as a show of force to deter enemies or to reassure domestic populations. But that is not the same as winning. What Thomas Schelling called “compellence”, making the enemy do what you want them to do, has become extremely difficult because of the effectiveness of all types of military technology. This is the lesson that should have been learned from the wars that have taken place since 1945 – Korea, Vietnam, the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, or the recent western interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

What I call “new wars” have to be understood as a way of getting around this fundamental problem. The word “new” is perhaps a misnomer. The distinction between “old” and “new” wars is not so much an empirical distinction – a descriptive distinction between earlier wars and the wars of now. Rather, it is a conceptual distinction, about a different logic of war.

Old Wars, according to my definition, were about compellence; they were defined by Clausewitz as “an act of violence designed to compel an opponent to fulfil our will”. They were deep-rooted contests that ended in victory or defeat. As Clausewitz explained, such wars tended to the extreme as each side tried to win.

What are new wars?

New wars, by contrast, are not about winning or losing. Rather, they are about using violence for other purposes, to generate fear as a basis for extremist ideologies or to make money through setting up checkpoints, taking hostages, looting or smuggling.

The Sunni-Shi'a division in Syria, for example, was a consequence rather than a cause of the war. The war began in response to demonstrations for democracy, but it was transformed into a sectarian conflict both by the Government, which deliberately targeted Sunni areas, and, by armed opposition groups funded by private donors in the Gulf. Rather than tending to the extreme, new wars tend to persistence. They are very difficult to end, as the various warring parties need violence to reproduce themselves.

New wars often begin as a response to social pressures for democracy. They can be understood as a way of channelling democratic discontent into identity based (ethnic, religious, or racial) tension that play into the populist narratives of authoritarian leaders. They can be viewed as a social condition – an alternative to bourgeois capitalism, a system in which power relations are continuously reproduced through violence.

The war in Ukraine began 2014

So how do we define the war in Ukraine? The Russian side bears a considerable resemblance to the sorts of regimes that characterise new wars. It is similar to the Milošević regime in Yugoslavia or to Assad's Syria. Putin has been fighting new wars ever since he came to power – Chechnya, Georgia, Syria. Through these wars, a narrative is constructed in which a kleptocratic criminalised regime increasingly defines itself as a great power based on ethnic Russian nationalism.

The war in Ukraine actually began in 2014 and can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to suppress the democratic demands of the Euro-Maidan and to promote ethnic tension. It came straight out

of the Gerasimov playbook; the Russian Chief of Staff wrote an article in February 2013 where he coined the phrase non-linear war to describe a new type of “special operation” in which the use of information technology, special forces, and internal opposition can rapidly produce a “web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe and civil war”. It can be argued that the new phase of the war is an expression of Putin’s need to sustain and reproduce the ideology that underpins his political position.

What does the war mean for Ukraine?

The Ukrainian side, however, is different. In places like Bosnia and Syria, armed groups came to resemble each and took on the ethnic logic combined with predatory behaviour. Erstwhile democratic protestors, who did not join the armed opposition, became civil society actors; they were the humanitarian first responders; they collected evidence of war crimes; they played a mediating role in local contexts; and they countered sectarian and extreme patriarchal narratives.

For Ukraine, this is a contest along the lines of the old war logic. It is a contest between Putinism (the criminalised ethnic nationalist system) and a civic state. Almost the entire country is mobilised in the war effort behind the type of activities typically carried out by civil society actors; in particular, the emphasis on international law and the efforts to collect evidence of war crimes is unprecedented.

Moreover, the dominant idea of Ukraine is civic rather than ethnic – that is to say, an idea of a political entity that includes Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Poles, Crimean Tartars and so on; an idea that was cemented in the Maidan protests. While Ukraine has its own oligarchs and has experienced pervasive corruption, huge efforts are being made to reduce corruption and preserve the social infrastructure.

The outcome of diplomatic solutions

But how long can this be sustained? Is there a risk that this could change, and we could see a new war on Europe’s doorstep? While the war may have begun as a classic invasion along old war lines, perhaps because of the hubris associated with being in power too long, it seems to be turning into a long attritional struggle in the Donbass region. On the Russian side, we can already observe many of the characteristics of the new wars – deliberate shelling of civilians, sexual violence, what appears to be systemic looting, mad and terrifying disinformation campaigns.

It is conceivable that, on the Ukrainian side, hatred of Russia could come to be directed against ethnic Russians and that the widespread arming of civilians to resist Russians could be used for looting and other crimes as shortages mount, weakening the Ukrainian civic spirit. There is also the risk that the main effect of economic sanctions on Russia, needed to express outrage, will further fragment and criminalise Russian society.



photo: private

Mary Kaldor

is Professor Emeritus of Global Governance at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences. She has pioneered the concepts of new wars and global civil society. Kaldor is the author of many books and articles including “New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era” (3rd edition, 2012), “International Law and New Wars” (with Christine Chinkin, 2017) and “Global Security Cultures” (2018). Additionally to her academic engagements, she was co-chair of the Helsinki Citizens Assembly, a member of the International Independent Commission on Kosovo and convenor of the Human Security Study Group, which reported to Secretary General of NATO, Javier Solana.

Any diplomatic solution, which of course is preferable to continued fighting, would be likely to freeze current territorial positions allowing extremist criminal gangs to control the Russian occupied parts, as happened in Crimea, and maintaining permanent pressure on Ukraine, perhaps in the form of constitutional interference, as was the case in the earlier Minsk agreement.

Invasions cannot accomplish “compellance”

What can be done to avoid this? Western countries are balancing on a tightrope between the risk of escalation and annihilation, the consequence of trying to win along old war lines and supporting Ukraine in all possible ways to prevent Russia from winning. What we are learning from this experience is not only are invasions wrong and illegal, but they can never succeed in old war terms. They cannot accomplish “compellance”. But they can succeed in producing the new war social condition.

Military force at the disposal of civic democratic states needs to be organised in defensive and non-escalatory ways, to protect civilians and uphold international law, in order to deter and prevent invasions. But it is also important to promote civicness, which is the best antidote to new wars.

In concrete terms, this means economic help to Ukraine and also finding ways to promote civic elements inside Russia – anti-war protestors, conscientious objectors, or human rights defenders. Ending purchases of oil and gas could be positive not just for climate change, for example, but as a way to end the rentier system that underpins kleptocratic dictatorships as in Russia.

“Any diplomatic solution, which of course is preferable to continued fighting, would be likely to freeze current territorial positions allowing extremist criminal gangs to control the Russian occupied parts, as happened in Crimea, and maintaining permanent pressure on Ukraine, perhaps in the form of constitutional interference, as was the case in the earlier Minsk agreement.”

Applied History and Diplomacy

Historical scholarship should neither condemn nor kiss up to power. Historians can help citizens and policy-makers to understand their moment and to begin to imagine a future that has its roots in the past, even if it remains unknowable.

By Jeremi Suri, University of Texas at Austin

Near the end of his long masterpiece, *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy admits: “The totality of causes of phenomena is inaccessible to the human mind. But the need to seek causes has been put into the soul of man.”¹ Like many ambitious thinkers, Tolstoy wanted to explain human behavior and advise rulers on how to make better policies. To his deep frustration, he realized this was impossible. The causes for any major event were too numerous and the forces moving people to action only became more mysterious as one studied behavior closely. Tolstoy concluded that there are no real “historical heroes.”²

This is the appropriate point of departure for discussing the uses of historical analysis in policy, what some call “applied history.” With the overwhelming evidence in recent years that “old” phenomena are resurgent – warfare, pandemics, racism, and authoritarianism, among others – many observers have grown dissatisfied with the social sciences (particularly economics) that promised to explain the world in purely rational terms.

History is not an alternative oracle

Historical scholarship offers explanations for the repeated tendencies of human beings to act in ways that defy science – the widespread rejection of masks and vaccines during COVID is only the most recent example. Historical wisdom takes us beyond the logic of numbers to probe the deeper fears and loves that drive social change. That is why Machiavelli’s *Prince* remains widely read and outlasts every trendy wave of “leadership science” books.

But history is not an alternative oracle. It does not offer “laws” or other “single causes” for human behavior, as Tolstoy reminds us. Serious historical scholarship shows us that big events have many causes which often contradict one another. And many of the causes have long periods of gestation, emerging from small, unnoticed changes in society that over time grow to exert powerful influence.

This is, of course, how demographic change works. Unpredictable shifts in birth and migration rates slowly push cultures and economies in new directions which are initially ignored until they shock, offend, and ultimately shatter long-held assumptions. We are living through one such moment in the United States and much of Europe today.

The rare gift of “historical sensibility”

Historians elucidate the many long-term causes acting upon our current world; we do not predict precisely how they will play out, but we explain the pressures, opportunities, and dangers that they create. We help citizens and policy-makers to understand their moment and to begin to imagine a future that has its roots in the past, even as it remains unknowable. Historical scholarship, therefore, neither condemns nor kisses up to power; it widens one’s vision of what power means in its current moment and context.

There is something called a “historical sensibility”, which few people have. It is not about being a historian and visiting the archives. A historical sensibility is what Tolstoy describes: an intuitive understanding that the roots of current events

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans., Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 987.

² For more on this point, see Isaiah Berlin’s brilliant essay, “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” available at: https://www.blogs.hss.ed.ac.uk/crag/files/2016/06/the_hedgehog_and_the_fox-berlin.pdf

are deep in the soil, and excavating those roots is necessary to shape the future of the garden. Policy-makers with a historical sensibility ask probing questions about long-term causes, they resist the urge to focus predominantly on the immediate, and they are profoundly skeptical of easy explanations and overbearing responses.

Their knowledge of history encourages humility. They look for compelling stories that explain complexity and reject facile “solutions” that try, foolishly, to overpower the past. Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine are just the latest reminders that even the most formidable militaries cannot reverse what has come before.³

The goals of diplomacy

This is the framework for understanding how diplomacy works. It is the oldest profession because it is the essential work of adjusting politics to history. Diplomats study the history of the regions they visit, and they search for ways to translate their society’s interests into effective influence abroad. The goal of diplomacy is neither peace nor war, but a furtherance of the aims charged to the diplomat by her masters (which in a democracy are the citizens.)

Diplomats cultivate relationships with foreign groups that allow them to understand, identify, and ultimately persuade. They find causes to champion for results that they want, and that they hope other societies want too. This work involves many skills, but it ultimately rests on penetrating the historical memory of another society and finding the openings within it. Skilled diplomats learn to think and see like their counterparts, yet they never forget that they serve the interests of their country or organization.

History and diplomacy

Ambassador Robert Hutchings and I have devoted a decade to studying the history and practice of diplomacy. Our research shows that diplomatic institutions which cultivate a historical sensibility are most effective in promoting the interests of their countries. This is learned behavior that comes from intensive training and a culture that emphasizes historical investigation before action and decision.

Diplomats develop communities of practice that bring different historical trends together for a shared set of causes. Echoing Tolstoy and Machiavelli, they are not heroes or even clever manipulators; diplomats are opportunists who anticipate the openings created by a history they do not control. That is applied history at its best.⁴



photo: Korey Howell

Jeremi Suri

holds the Mack Brown Distinguished Chair for Leadership in Global Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. He is a professor in the University’s Department of History and the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. Suri⁵ teaches courses on strategy and decision-making, leadership, globalization, international relations and modern history. He is the author and editor of several books on contemporary politics and foreign policy, including “The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America’s Highest Office” (2017) and “Foreign Policy Breakthroughs: Cases in Successful Diplomacy” (2015). His newest book “Civil War By Other Means: America’s Long and Unfinished Fight for Democracy” will be published in October 2022.

³ This discussion of “historical sensibility” draws on Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, eds., *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

⁴ See Robert Hutchings and Jeremi Suri, eds., *Foreign Policy Breakthroughs: Cases in Successful Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); idem., eds., *Modern Diplomacy in Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁵ <https://lbj.utexas.edu/suri-jeremi>

What Can Historians Do?

What history matters to Putin and why?

How can historians respond to the abuses of history?

Which harms are caused by historical distortion?

How can historians use their knowledge productively in the ever more controversial digital age?

The Use and Abuse of History

New technologies and social media help to fuel disinformation campaigns. What can historians do to intervene? The example of Wikipedia shows how historians can use their knowledge of the past in a responsible way and make it accessible to all.

By Heidi Tworek, The University of British Columbia

The abuse and misuse of history can be harmful in many ways. Most discussions on this subject focus understandably on textbooks, school curricula, and on politicians, sadly a highly relevant topic given Vladimir Putin's invocation of deeply flawed history to justify the invasion of Ukraine.

Historical distortions can, however, cause many other harms. First, they can create bodily harm. In early May 2022, much of the United States was roiled by a leaked draft decision written by Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito that would overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 court decision underpinning abortion rights in the United States. The official decision on June 24, 2022 returned abortion regulation to the individual states, which will now deprive tens of millions of women of access.

Legal and gender historians have pointed out that Justice Samuel Alito's draft majority decision overturning *Roe v. Wade* contains flawed understandings of the long history of abortion in the United States. Much representation around the leaked decision mistakenly portrayed *Roe v. Wade* as a decision that sparked polarization in the United States. Meanwhile, historians like John Christopoulos have also documented the much longer complex history around abortion and miscarriage, stretching back to 16th-century Italy.

A distorted picture of Europe's past

Second, misrepresentation can cause psychological harm. For many refugees from the former Yugoslavia, it hurts when politicians present the war in Ukraine as if it were the first major conflict in Europe since the Second World War. Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo, for example, called the war in Ukraine "Europe's darkest hour since the Second World War." Forgetting a war that made

2.5 million people refugees has deleterious consequences for the refugees, but also for Europe by creating a distorted picture of its past.

Third, historical distortions may cause financial harm. Unsurprisingly, the outbreak of war in Ukraine saw many online scammers switch to grifting around that crisis. Abbie Richards suggests that "TikTok's platform architecture is amplifying fear and permitting misinformation to thrive at a time of high anxiety," calling the platform's design "incompatible with the needs of the current moment." Those who do not understand the history of Ukraine may be even more susceptible to fake fundraising schemes.

Historians can help to preserve ...

These are just three types of harm that can result from the intentional abuse and unintentional misuse of history. With such problems seemingly ubiquitous, what can historians do? Arguably quite a lot.

First, historians can do what we were trained to do. We can document, preserve, and collect. For example, scholars at UBC and Simon Fraser University are working on a Xinjiang Documentation Project which finds and translates key documents around "the extrajudicial detention of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other ethnic groups in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Northwestern China." After Russia invaded Ukraine, scholars and volunteers started to download and preserve Ukrainian websites from museums, archives, and other cultural institutions. Currently the group consists of over 1,300 "cultural heritage professionals" who have preserved materials from over 4,500 websites. This effort, known as Save Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO), ensures that such websites will not be lost if Ukrainian servers go down or are otherwise disrupted by the war.

... and push for transparency

Second, historians can push for and governments can enable transparency and ease of collection of our own documents. Historian Matthew Connelly has long pointed to problems of overclassification as well as destruction and deletion of sources in the United States.

Meanwhile many archives and governments have devoted surprisingly little thought to how to preserve born digital documents, such as e-mails. It is almost impossible to read a floppy disc without a highly-specialized machine so what will happen with our current communications on platforms like Microsoft Teams? Concerted plans for born digital preservation are necessary to avoid the strange paradox of an era that had abundant information, but where little is preserved.

Finally, the internet itself is surprisingly unstable. Link rot is a pervasive problem: one study found that 50 percent of links in Supreme Court decisions since 1996 had rotted. Only one major non-profit institution, the Internet Archive, seeks to crawl and preserve the web for future generations. To prevent the abuse and misuse of history, it is time for greater attention to preserving materials that enable history-writing in the first place.

... and use their knowledge productively in the digital age

Third, scholars can facilitate the creation of easily-accessible knowledge. For my own part, I have focused my efforts here on my 100-person international history class of upper-level undergraduates at UBC. Every year, I ask students to create a Wikipedia article about a person, event, place, or organization which does not yet have an article or only has a stub article (meaning a page exists but with only a few sentences.) Students choose the articles themselves and can draw on their own expertise, e.g. translating secondary sources from different languages.

This past semester, students created articles on topics including the Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in Canada, the Invasion and Occupation of Monaco in World War II, the UN peacekeeping mission in the Dominican Republic (DOMREP), the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, and Anne Zelensky, a French feminist. (For more details on how I implement my Wikipedia assignment in a 100-person lecture

course at UBC, check out this podcast. For a list of the articles created by students in 2022, see here.)

Less than two months after their creation, my students' articles had received over 250,000 views. It may seem impossible to counter the endless stream of distorted TikTok videos, but if we are going to intervene online, Wikipedia is one excellent place to start.



photo: Sarah Hall

Heidi Tworek

is a Canada Research Chair and associate professor of international history and public policy at the University of British Columbia. Her work examines the history and policy around media, hate speech, health communications, international organizations, and platform governance. Her most recent book "News from Germany: The Competition to Control World Communications, 1900-1945" was published in 2019. Tworek is committed to bringing a historical sensibility to policy discussions. She regularly writes policy briefs on topics including Covid-19 communications, online harassment, and platform governance. <https://www.heiditworek.com/about>

The Past is Not a Foreign Country: Putin's Abuse of History

There are three major strands dominating the historical master narrative that is used in Russian foreign and domestic policies. But in the end, the overall common denominator is toxic nationalism. Historians need to respond to this.

By Sergey Radchenko, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, DC

One day in December 2019, Vladimir Putin held a strange meeting with leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States to discuss history. He brought a thick stack of archival documents to the meeting, which, he claimed, showed important truths about the Second World War. He selectively cited from these documents (most, if not all, of which are well known to historians) to prove that the West and, oddly, Poland, were responsible for the outbreak of WWII.

It was not *what* Putin said that seemed strange. The Russian propaganda had long peddled similar takes. That autumn we witnessed an exchange of accusations between Russia and the West on the same subject. At the time I opposed not just the Putinist rubbish but also the moves by the European Parliament to present the “correct” version of history. As a historian, I oppose fiery proclamations paraded as historical truths. I look for footnotes.

Putin the Historian

But what really struck me was just how *invested* Putin became in the historical debate. What we saw was not just that he was drawing on historical narratives. He was writing historical narratives and even living them. He seemed so obsessed – he went about with stacks of archival documents, needing them to prove not just to others but above all to himself that History itself was on his side.

Putin the Historian understands neither the historiography nor the meaning of historical evidence. He does not know the difference between the past as it happened and history as it is written.

Putin turns to history to legitimize a worldview, to provide a foundation for present-day narratives.

The great British historian E. H. Carr wrote that history “is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.” Putin prefers monologues. He tells us how it was because he wants us to embrace his vision of how it is.

Putin's history of the Russian nation

What history matters to Putin and why? Let me discuss three relevant strands. The first is what one may call the history of the Russian nation. Putin sees the Russian statehood going back a thousand years and more, to the murky days of Kievan Rus. Russia grew larger, defeated external enemies, at last spanning Europe and Asia. Empire and nation become one in Putin's mind, and he endows with Russian-ness all peoples of the far-flung empire, including, most poignantly, Ukrainians.

Contrary to the claim that Putin seeks to re-build the USSR, he has been very critical of the Soviet project, blaming the Soviet leaders – Lenin in particular – for the crime of having set up titular republics, thus allowing non-Russian nationalism to take root.

Moscow's protective wings

When observers speak of ideological underpinnings for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, they refer to this interpretation of Russian history, i. e. the view that the Russians and the Ukrainians are the same people and should be reunited under Moscow's protective wings. Those who resist are described in Putinist propaganda as “nationalists”, even

though the entire Putinist narrative is itself underpinned by toxic nationalism, the driver of Russian imperialism.

Russia's WWII cult

The second strand of history that preoccupies Putin is that of WWII. This entails blame-shifting. Blaming Poland for the war's outbreak has been an especially cynical ploy. Putin presents Moscow as the liberator of Europe from Nazism. But he is unwilling to acknowledge Stalin's responsibility for the war, or the crimes committed by the Soviets in "liberated" Europe.

Russia has succumbed to a WWII cult, a source of legitimacy for Putin. The Victory Day, with its parades and marches of the "immortal regiment" across Russian cities, co-opts the Russians into the state cult. The titanic WWII struggle is conflated with the current war in Ukraine, which is presented as an effort at Ukraine's "de-Nazification."

NATO enlargement and humiliation

The third strand is the history of NATO's enlargement. Putin has cited from an arbitrary selection of documents, including one well-known conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and James Baker, where Baker spoke of NATO not moving "even one inch" to the East. Historians have written extensively about this episode, providing the context, which Putin ignores. He wants to frame the argument to suit his political agenda: promises were given; promises were broken; thus, Russia is justified in pre-empting NATO by invading Ukraine.

The end of the Cold War, which Putin greeted in the GDR, adds a personal element to his historical musings. He feels that his country – and he personally – were humiliated by the West, and the war in Ukraine is a payback for this humiliation.

The role of historians

Putin lives in a world where the past and the present are indistinguishable. Russia fought wars, and it's still fighting wars, and it will always fight wars against a great enemy out there, the "Nazi-America" of his imagination that has always sought Russia's demise. Too many Russians unfortunately buy into Putin's narrative. For as long as they do, they will struggle to free themselves from his political visions.

Our role as historians is to derail political narratives that misuse history for self-legitimation. The weakness of Putin the Historian – and others like him – is that they are not actual historians.

Their narratives are like houses of cards that may look superficially appealing to poorly-informed observers but fall apart at the slightest poking by serious professionals.

The historian's role is to mercilessly poke suspicious narratives paraded as history – and not just by Putin but by any political players who claim ownership of historical truths for an obvious political purpose. History is inevitably political – we know that. But good history will always at least attempt to keep a safe distance from politics, and good historians will generally tend to know each other from those who are clearly in the business to attain expressly-political objectives. Our goal is to tenaciously keep this distinction in place.



photo: Johns Hopkins SAIS

Sergey Radchenko

is the Wilson E. Schmidt Distinguished Professor at the Johns Hopkins Advanced School for International Studies. He is a historian of the Cold War and Russian and Chinese foreign policies. Radchenko is the author of "Unwanted Visionaries: the Soviet Failure in Asia at the End of the Cold War" (2014) and the co-author (with Campbell Craig) of "The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War" (2008). His next book, a history of the Soviet Union in the Cold War, will appear with Cambridge University Press in 2022.



Körber History Forum 2022

Borders and Contested Spaces

Previous speakers include:

Anne Applebaum
Timothy Snyder
Karl Schlögel
Jörn Leonhard
Olivette Otele
Jan-Werner Müller
Mary Elise Sarotte
Quinn Slobodian

What can history and historical thinking contribute to looking at the Russian war against Ukraine in a broader context? How do legacies of the past shape today's international geopolitical aspirations and domestic conflicts? And what is the role of historians in all this? These questions were at the core of our debates at the Körber History Forum, taking place at Lübbenau Castle in the Spree Forest on 9–10 May 2022. More than 60 international experts from the realm of history, politics and media came together to discuss about the power that the past exercises on the present. The debates were overshadowed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the epochal shift it marks for the European and international post-Wall order.

For more information on the Körber History Forum, please visit our website: koerber-stiftung.de/en/projects/koerber-history-forum/

Körper-Stiftung

Social development needs dialogue and understanding. Through our operational projects, in our networks and in conjunction with cooperation partners, we take on current social challenges in areas of activities comprising “Innovation”, “International Dialogue” and “Vibrant Civil Society”, as well as with “Cultural Impulses for Hamburg”. Inaugurated in 1959 by the entrepreneur Kurt A. Körper, we are now actively involved in our own national and international projects and events. In particular, we feel a special bond to the city of Hamburg. Furthermore, we run an office in Berlin.

International Dialogue

Conflicts arise in situations that are fraught with misunderstandings and lack debate. Moreover, such conflicts are often grounded in the past. This is why we champion international dialogue and foster more profound understandings of history. We address political decision-makers as well as civil society representatives and emerging leaders from the younger generations. Our geographic focus lies on Europe, its eastern neighbours, the Middle East, and Asia, especially China. We strengthen discussions about history at the local level in a manner that stretches beyond national borders and encourage people to share their experiences of cultures of remembrance. Our foreign- and security-policy formats provide safe spaces for confidential talks built on trust. However, we also employ formats that involve the public, such as publications, competitions and networks, to provide impulses to the debate about common European values and inspire the further development of international cooperation.

Körper-Stiftung

Kehrwieder 12

20457 Hamburg

Phone +49 · 40 · 80 81 92 - 180

E-Mail gp@koerber-stiftung.de

www.koerber-stiftung.de

Twitter @KoerberHistory

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