

SECTION I

Narratives and Intelligence

The War on Ukraine: A Warning from History

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Abstract

Based on the run-up to the Ukraine war and the wars in Yugoslavia in the 1990s, this contribution aims to highlight two points relating to the utility of the past in understanding the future. First, although the past in itself has only limited predictive value, the study of the past and of past conflict may offer insights into the mind-set of today's actors. As people tend to act according to their beliefs and convictions that are essentially based on an understanding of their personal, and national histories, some courses of action and some outcomes are more likely than others. History can help us imagine what might happen and which dynamics may come into play.

Additionally, the study of historical writing, i.e., the interpretation of past events, may identify areas of future conflict. History is replete with overlapping territorial claims and mutually exclusive interpretations and sometimes, under certain conditions, these develop into war. It is proposed that historiographical debates and 'public history' could perhaps contribute to an early warning device and reduce strategic surprise, provided that conditions could be identified that trigger their transformation into tools for political mobilisation and war.

Keywords: Ukraine, Yugoslavia, Historiography, Early warning, Moral component

1. Introduction

What can history teach us about the war in Ukraine or its future relations with Russia? At times when uncertainties confound our judgment, people tend to look for guidance in theories and other insights derived from the past. Most if not all of our scenarios pertaining to the future of war in one way or another involve an analysis of past events, the search for useful analogies and the forward linear projection of perceived trends and developments, i.e., they display a belief in the magisterial potential of the past, sometimes unwittingly.¹ Attractive as it may seem,

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¹ Cf. Baudet, "Ranke and files," 66-86.

unfortunately history *by itself* does not teach anything, nor does it recommend a particular course of action. Historians are no prophets and a crystal ball is not among the tools they use in their trade. Metaphorically speaking, the past is a junkyard rather than a clear well. It is as confusing and contradictory as the present. It consists of random *and* interconnected events that are experienced, interpreted and reinterpreted until, perhaps, a certain measure of consensus is achieved. What can be learned from the war in Ukraine therefore has very little to do with historical necessities or eternal truths that can be extrapolated at will, even if a given state's or individual's behaviour may crudely conform to an established pattern.² The number of factors involved in predicting their course of action in ten years is too large to make a meaningful prediction, although it is conceivable that their behaviour will not fundamentally change between today and next week.

Still, those that argue that because the past may thus rhyme at best, it is useless, deprive themselves of a valuable frame of reference that can be put to good use. Building on an analysis of the run-up to the Ukraine war and the disintegration and war in Yugoslavia, this contribution will highlight two points relating to the utility of the past for the identification of future developments. The first is that it is through the study of their societies and their personal history that one can grasp a political actor's mindset, which in turn may help limit the number of scenarios we need to reckon with. The other is that *historiography*, i.e., the study of history writing, and 'historical culture' (a term that will be explained later on), could perhaps serve as an early warning device, provided that conditions could be identified that trigger their transformation from mere areas of academic contestation into tools for political mobilisation, and war.

2. The past is present

The past is not only prologue,³ it is present. Man is a historical being in the sense that his beliefs, values, convictions and also actions are founded in his individual and collective understanding of their personal and national past experiences. This, in turn, is not a static one-way exercise with history providing lessons and groups and individuals acting as the attentive students of these lessons. They may feel that they are but in essence there is some sort of dialogue between the past and the present. New experiences alter the way previous experiences are interpreted, and past experience provides the lens through which the present is analysed. While

² Morillo and Pavkovic, *What is Military History?* 48-52.

³ In opposition to Williamson and Sinnreich, eds., *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession*.

people are not captives of their past, it provides a strong normative frame of reference. By itself this frame does not prescribe war, indiscriminate killing, mass rape and the deliberate destruction of historical heritage, but studying such convictions and beliefs is a necessity when we hope to grasp an idea of their owners' future behaviour – in peacetime as in war.

There is, furthermore, general academic consensus that in times of uncertainty people tend to attach even more importance to their identity and heritage. In a world of rapid change, e.g., by the collapse of an empire, war, the influx of migrants or the introduction of technologies that appear to replace man by machines, the past appears preciously structured and clear. The *imagined* past, that is; the *real* historical past was as confusing to those that lived through it as the present often is to us. This imagined past is tailored according to present-day needs and concerns. Hence the tendency of every society to invent some Golden Age, somehow lost, but apparently still within reach provided that the right effort is made.⁴ Such sentiments are vulnerable to manipulation. Perhaps even more so in societies with a long tradition of autocratic rule where safety valves so to speak are largely absent.

In this chapter I will discuss two cases in which this mechanism can be identified. There are many more, but the process that led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia and in the run-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine share a number of similarities. In both cases there is a 'national cradle,' i.e., Crimea and Kosovo; in both cases in one of the contestants an alliance was forged between the Church and the State; in both cases, the opponents' right to exist was contested, and lastly, in both cases aggression was portrayed as self-defense against resurgent Nazism.

To start with the former Yugoslavia, for most Serbs, possession of Kosovo, where according to legend their medieval Tsar Lazar on 28th June, 1389, sacrificed himself in battle against the Ottoman Turks to gain the Kingdom of Heavens for his people, and of Metohija, where the Serb Patriarchate is, is essential.⁵ During the Serbian Uprisings of 1804 and 1811, in the Balkan war of 1912 and during the dissolution of Yugoslavia the medieval battle of Kosovo served as an inspiration. Control over these areas was Serbia's principal war aim in the First Balkan War (1912), and it was one of the key issues that helped Slobodan Milošević establish himself as the champion of all things Serb, with devastating consequences for Yugoslavia as a

⁴ MacDonald, *Balkan Holocausts? Serbian and Croatian Victim-centred Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia*; Cf. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

⁵ In Serbian *Kosovo* can mean two things: it refers to the entire area of today's independent Kosovo, or only to its eastern half. Its name is derived from *Kosovo polje*, the 'Field of Blackbirds,' north of Prishtinë where the 1389 battle against the invading Ottoman empire took place. *Metohija* ('monastic estates') is a Serbian term for the western parts of present-day Kosovo. In Socialist Yugoslavia, present-day Kosovo was referred to as *Kosmet*, a contraction of *Kosovo i Metohija*.

whole. A call to 'avenge Kosovo' appealed to large sections of the Serb nation, and perhaps continues to do so.⁶

Tragically enough, even though the Serbs gained autonomy and then independence from the Ottoman Empire, and in 1912 wrested control of Kosovo from the Ottomans, the 1389 defeat was never avenged enough. In 1989, Milošević used the 600th anniversary of the battle to issue a thinly veiled threat to Yugoslavia's other nations when he spoke about the struggles that Serbia was facing. These had not been armed battles, but this could not be excluded yet.⁷ This was part of a wider process of Othering in which non-Orthodox Christian Yugoslavs were consistently portrayed as a threat to the Serbs' survival. In this narrative Yugoslav Muslims, i.e., Bosnian *Muslimani* and the Albanians of Kosovo, were singled out as the greatest threat to Serb identity; the Bosnian Muslims were traitors to the Serb cause as they had adopted their enemy's religion, the Albanians because their presence in Kosovo and Metohija 'defiled' this 'Serb Jerusalem.' Both groups had a higher fertility rate, which was presented as a deliberate attempt to outbreed the Serbs.⁸

Building upon real historical memories and distortions created by Communist Yugoslavia, Croat nationalism, by contrast, was portrayed as Nazism, and Croats as genocidal by nature.⁹ This struck a chord with many members of Croatia's and Bosnia's Serb minority, whose grandparents had survived the Croatian World War II Nazi puppet state. The leaderships in Slovenia and Croatia did not stand by idly and soon engaged in a similar war of words and images. Bosnia's leadership followed an intermediate course, stressing Yugoslav brotherhood and unity, but to no avail. In 1989-1990 the bones of Tsar Lazar were carried around the future battlefields in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo. With each side stressing the need to defend, by force if necessary, what was rightfully theirs, Yugoslavia collapsed under the weight of the imagined histories of its constituent nations.¹⁰

In Russian history, one of the dominant conceptions is that there can only be one polity between the White, Baltic and Black Seas: Russia. Vladimir Putin's view that the collapse of the Soviet Union constituted the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century should therefore not be seen as a great exaggeration on the part of a paranoid despot.¹¹ Rather, it reflects his deep conviction that those events robbed

⁶ Baudet and De Baets, "Kosovo, het verleden op spitsroeden," 99-111.

⁷ Kurspahić, *Prime Time Crime: Balkan Media in War and Peace*, 50.

⁸ Mertus, *Kosovo: How Myths and Truths Started a War*, 8; Cf. National Library for Medicine, "Albanians accuse Serbs of waging demographic war, flock to secret birth clinics."

⁹ Krešić, "O genezi genocida nad Srbima u NDH."

¹⁰ Cf. MacDonald, *Balkan Holocausts?*; Thompson, *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina*.

¹¹ The Associated Press, "Putin: Soviet collapse a 'genuine tragedy'"; Osborn and Ostroukh, "Putin rues Soviet collapse as demise of 'Historical Russia'"; Herschberg, "Putin is repeating the USSR's

Russia of its rightful place in history, which is that of a great power, a position that he set out to restore. This ambition is welcomed by millions of Russians who after the disintegration of the Soviet Union were at a loss as to their identity, because they tend to conflate 'Russia' with the entire area of the former Tsarist empire and the former Soviet Union.¹²

Though not shared universally, such ideas stem from a particular understanding of Russia's history that has a long pedigree but gained new popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s. Since the 15th century, its intellectuals and political leaders have claimed that the East-Slavic lands cannot be anything else than 'Russian',¹³ an identity that is centered around the conflicting beliefs that Moscow is both the 'third Rome' and the sole heir to the medieval political entity of *Rus'* that at its height included most of the territories between the Black Sea, Novgorod and Moscow and introduced Eastern-Orthodox Christianity in these areas after the baptism of one of its Grand Dukes in the vicinity of Sevastopol in Crimea.¹⁴ Such beliefs not only lie at the heart of the so-called *Russkiy Mir* – 'the Russian world'¹⁵ but they are one of the causes of the war against Ukraine and without doubt will impact its outcome. Given Crimea's special place in the Russian myth of origin it is unlikely that any Russian leader will voluntarily give up the peninsula. Ukraine will have to conquer it and it is to be expected that Russia will cling to it as if it were Moscow itself. It is highly likely that Ukraine will try especially as Ukraine, like Russia, sees itself as the heir to medieval *Rus'*, and spokespersons for the government in Kyiv have on numerous occasions reiterated its intention to restore Ukrainian control in the peninsula.¹⁶ And in fact, in August 2023, it was reported that Ukraine is training

mistakes. The wrong lessons of history"; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Putin laments Soviet breakup as demise of 'Historical Russia,' amid Ukraine fears"; Conradi, *Who Lost Russia?: From the Collapse of the USSR to Putin's War on Ukraine*.

¹² Kuzio, "Russian national identity and the Russia-Ukraine crisis"; Cf. Igor Zevelev, "Russian national identity and foreign policy."

¹³ Von Hagen, "Does Ukraine have a history?" 660. This belief is also reflected in the official title of the Russian tsars: *Vserossiyskiy tsar*, and in the name of the Russian state: *Rossiyskaya Federatsiya*, i.e., the tsar of all the Russias, and the federation of Russias.

¹⁴ While both may be said to reflect the cultural influence of the Byzantine empire, these two ideas conflict because as the true heir to the Roman imperial tradition Russia should perhaps seek domination over its neighbors, Slavic or other, but not necessarily deny their right to express a separate cultural identity, whereas as heir to *Rus'* it sees itself as the sole guardian of Eastern-Orthodox Christianity, that spread through the lands of *Rus'*. In those areas there can be no other identity than the Russian one.

¹⁵ Note that it is *Russkiy mir*, not *Rossiyskiy*. *Russkiy* means Russian in an ethnic, cultural or linguistic sense. *Rossiyskiy* refers to the Russian state (vide footnote 14).

¹⁶ For instance: Cook, "We're approaching the red line of Crimea"; Deutsche Welle, "Volodymyr Zelenskyy vows Ukraine will retake Crimea."

50,000 personnel to ‘de-occupy’ Crimea.¹⁷ Another corollary is that any leader that wishes to restore Russia’s ‘rightful’ position in the world will feel the urge to limit the political and cultural freedom of movement of the independent Slavic states Belarus and Ukraine. Those that expect that the removal from power of President Putin will end Russia’s imperial aspirations, may well cherish false hope.

On the Ukrainian side, a somewhat different set of ideas informs thinking. In the 16th and 17th century when large parts of the country were part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth,¹⁸ the Orthodox elites in what is now Ukraine faced growing pressure to adopt Catholicism. A number of responses were formulated. One was to insist on Rus’ continued legal existence that would justify equality with Poland and Lithuania within the Commonwealth, another was the creation of the Uniate Church that kept the Eastern rites but accepted the Pope as its highest religious authority. Another still was to strongly hold on to Orthodoxy and find outside allies that could help to protect it. In these last circles the idea of *Malorussiya*, literally ‘Little Russia,’ was formulated. It expressed religious unity with Russia, whereas the addition ‘little’ implied distinctiveness. It was, in hindsight, a most unfortunate terminology in that it helped legitimise Muscovite political claims to the territory and underlay the union of Pereiaslav of 1654 that brought the Cossacks of Zaporizhzhia in Central Ukraine under Moscow’s control. As the Russian empire acquired and conquered more and more of present-day Ukraine, local elites largely accepted Tsarist rule, while at the same time maintaining that *Malorussiya* was different from Russia proper.¹⁹ Over time, this became increasingly difficult; in the late 18th century, when the Russian empire conquered the Black Sea coast, it abolished the Cossack hetmanate as the most conspicuous proof of Ukrainian separateness, and invited Russian and foreign settlers to the newly conquered areas, that were dubbed *Novorossiya*, ‘New Russia.’ In addition, Cossack military units were disbanded – although these would be recreated periodically as, for instance, during the Napoleonic wars. In the 19th century, Kyiv was proclaimed the mother of all Russian cities, and the Tsars banned the use of Ukrainian in schools and imposed their version of Rus history throughout their domain.²⁰ From a Ukrainian

¹⁷ Любезна, Катерина. “Україна готує 50 тисяч нових кадрів для стабілізації ситуації у Криму після деокупації.”

¹⁸ From 1386 the Lithuanian grand-dukes also served as kings of Poland. In 1569 the two entities merged into the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

¹⁹ Kohut, *The Question of Russo-Ukrainian Unity and Ukrainian Distinctiveness in Early Modern Ukrainian Thought and Culture*; See also: Kuzio, “Russian stereotypes and myths of Ukraine and Ukrainians and why Novorossiya failed,” 297–309; and: Kohut, “History as a battleground: Russian-Ukrainian relation and historical consciousness in contemporary Ukraine,” 123–46.

²⁰ Miller, *The Ukrainian Question: Russian Empire and Nationalism in the 19th Century*; Plokhy, *Ukraine and Russia: Representations of the Past*; See also: Musliu and Burlyuk, “Imagining Ukraine: From history and myths to Maidan protests,” 631–655.

nationalist perspective this was part of a continuous effort to erase Ukrainian identity as such. The same lens applies to Stalin's agricultural policy. In the 1930s he ordered the compulsory collectivisation of the agricultural sector throughout the Soviet Union. For Ukrainian nationalists collectivisation and the ensuing famine that cost the lives of millions of people, was directed at the Ukrainians' national identity, hence Kyiv's current campaign to have the famine, the *Holodomor*, recognised internationally as a genocide.²¹

These events have been interpreted differently in different parts of the country, however, with the east and south more susceptible to the Russian and the Soviet interpretations of the past.²² This is even more true of the perception of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) that was active in western Ukraine during the 1930s until about 1950. Initially they applied terrorist tactics to safeguard Ukrainian rights against repression by the Polish state. Then, from 1941, hoping for German support for an independent Ukrainian fascist state, they fought the Soviet Union and killed thousands of Eastern Galician Jews, and from 1943 also Poles. They continued to fight the Soviet Union until they were defeated in 1950.²³ In the early 2000s, president Yushchenko accorded its surviving members veterans' pensions on a par with the millions of Ukrainians that had served in the Soviet armed forces. Both, so the argument ran, had fought for Ukraine. This caused concern in those areas where Ukrainian nationalism was not strongly developed, such as in the eastern part of the republic.²⁴ Worse still, the continued veneration of OUN leader Bandera and similar figures by a section of the Ukrainian public would from about 1997 onward be used by Russia to argue that in Kyiv, Nazism was alive and kicking. In fact, it enabled Moscow's propagandists to suggest that Ukrainian nationalism

²¹ The famine is increasingly seen as intentional: Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivisation and the Terror-Famine*, 326; Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin's War on Ukraine*, 189–208, 354; For the current 'politics or memory': Kasianov, "Holodomor and the politics of memory in Ukraine after independence," 179–170, 172.

²² Cf. Smoor, e.a., "Understanding the narratives explaining the Ukrainian crisis: identity divisions and complex diversity in Ukraine," 63–96.

²³ Rossoliński-Liebe, "The fascist kernel of Ukrainian genocidal nationalism"; Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, 194–195, 326–327; Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule*, 285–297, 299–300.

²⁴ Marples, *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine*; Marples, "Stepan Bandera: The resurrection of a Ukrainian national hero," 555–566; Narvselius, "The 'Bandera debate': The contentious legacy of World War II and liberalization of collective memory in Western Ukraine," 469–90; Osipian, "Regional diversity and divided memories in Ukraine: Contested past as electoral resource," 616–642; In all, somewhere between twenty and twenty-three thousand people were members of UPA, the armed wing of Bandera's OUN. In contrast, several million Ukrainians served in the Red Army: Katchanovskii, "Terrorists or national heroes? Politics and perceptions of the OUN and the UPA in Ukraine," 220.

itself was national-socialist, an idea that ties in with the aforementioned Russian belief that all East-Slavs are, or ought to be, Russians.²⁵

Actors' ideas about the past therefore do matter. These provide a frame of reference that influences the way an actor perceives his environment, and in fact, him or herself. This, it cannot be stressed enough, does not mean that history has *predictive* power in that it enables us to determine beforehand what a given actor will decide. But it does enable us to identify which courses of action and which decisions are more likely than others. It can help us to preclude a number of scenarios. In a world characterised by uncertainty this is an extremely valuable tool.

3. A warning from history

In the previous paragraphs the focus was on the past as a frame of reference for nations and individual actors. It was argued that the past is not a static pile of data. It is reinterpreted, reframed and rewritten according to present concerns. This not only applies to 'collective memory,' the way a society makes sense of past experiences, but also to more explicit forms of engaging with the past, i.e., history writing, and various forms of 'historical culture,' such as school books, historical movies and exhibitions. History writing and historical culture however do not happen or evolve in splendid isolation; they reflect today's concerns.²⁶

Such marked changes in the way a society engages with its past have received considerable attention from academics, but much less so from those that are involved in threat assessments. This surely is an omission. Here, too, examples from the Yugoslav and post-Soviet experience may serve as an illustration. In the previous section it was argued that ideas about the past underlay actions in the present. Here I will make the case that marked changes in the way the past is seen, may indicate that some sort of crisis is looming.

In federal Yugoslavia each republic had its own academic community and public space. What could and could not be discussed, made and seen was defined by the communist leaderships in each of the federation's entities. Nonetheless there was also a Yugoslav public space of sorts, as Serbo-Croatian served as a *lingua franca* throughout the federation. After the death of dictator Josip Broz Tito in

²⁵ Kravchenko, "Fighting Soviet myths: The Ukrainian experience," 447–84; See also: Riabchuck, "Ukrainians as Russia's negative 'Other,'" 75–85; Vladimir Putin himself states as much in his "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians."

²⁶ See, in relation to Ukraine, Kraft van Ermel, *On the Crossroads of History: Politics of History in Ukraine and Questions of Identity in Post-Cold War Europe (1991–2019)*, especially chapter 1 in which the author discusses the concept of 'politics of history.' It must be stressed most emphatically that this is not limited to Russia or Ukraine, or the Western Balkans for that matter.

1980, there was no overarching authority anymore and although the system he had devised continued to function for a while, his successors lacked a federation-wide power base and increasingly saw themselves as representatives of the republic from which they hailed. While communist Yugoslavia had been far from averse to symbolically mobilise 'the people,' the republics now did so too.²⁷ Historians and other intellectuals contributed to this in no small way. Already in 1979 the federation-wide historical association stopped functioning after a conflict over the representation of the Second World War, which Yugoslav propaganda had depicted for decades as a unified struggle led by Tito and his Partisan movement against foreign aggressors and domestic quislings. Soon after Tito's demise, especially Serbian historians and intellectuals began to question his wartime record and the cult of personality that had developed around the partisan leadership, and Tito in particular.²⁸ The (allegedly perennial) historical suffering of the Serbs at the hands of their present-day compatriots soon became an important theme in historiography and popular culture. The World War II Serb-nationalist Četnik resistance movement was increasingly depicted as heroic, whereas before it had been ritually condemned for chauvinism and collaboration with the Germans.²⁹ In addition, Croatian contributions to the partisan movement were downplayed and Croat sympathies for the fascist Ustaše were highlighted. The official Yugoslav war-time population losses, themselves already doctored as Tito had hoped to secure more substantial reparations, were increasingly believed to reflect Serb losses only. Directors and artists challenged official views as well, such as Emir Kusturica's *When father was away on a business trip* (1985), that dealt with the political persecutions of the late 1940s and early 1950s.³⁰ Around the same time, a movie was made about Tsar Lazar that proved highly popular and rock band *Bijelo dugme* that in the

²⁷ For instance through education, cf. Zgaga, *The Situation of Education in the SEE Region. Final Content Report on the Project 'Support in OECD Thematic Review of Educational Policy in South Eastern Europe'* 2.

²⁸ Banac, "The fearful asymmetry of war: The causes and consequences of Yugoslavia's demise," 141–74; A classic example is Dedijer, *Novi priloz i za biografiju Josipa Broza Tita*; Another example is future president Koštunica and Čavoški's, *Stranački pluralizam ili monizam: Društveni pokreti i politički sistem u Jugoslaviji 1944–1949*.

²⁹ Đuretić, *Saveznici i jugoslovenska ratna drama*; Cf. Pavlowitch, "L'histoire en Yougoslavie depuis 1945," 89–90; Banac, "Historiography of the countries of Eastern Europe: Yugoslavia," 1098–1103, 1101–1102. See also: Ćirković, "Historiography in isolation: Serbian historiography today," 35–40.

³⁰ Kusturica would later direct the prize-winning *Underground* (1995). Widely praised among Western audiences and critics, it actually is an ambiguous take on Yugoslavia; on the one hand it makes ample use of national stereotypes, e.g., the Serb hero is deceived by his Croat friend that engages in arms trade with Germany; and we also see a treacherous Muslim. On the other hand, when the Serb in a gruelling scene kills his Croat friend, as he starts to end the flames, he mutters that 'a war is not a true war until brother fights brother,' while the movie ends with a happy party on a Yugoslavia-shaped

1970s had led the Western orientation of Yugoslav youth culture, released an album that mixed traditional folk music with 1980s synth pop, a mix that would later be termed *Turbofolk* and associated with ultranationalism. Its cover, a reproduction of the famous 1919 painting *Kosovska devojka* by Uroš Predić of a Serb girl giving a dying soldier something to drink in the aftermath of the 1389 battle, likewise reflected the changing mood.

Still, until 1986 Serbia's leadership opposed 'chauvinism.' When Milošević came to power, however, it was actively encouraged. By that time a narrative had developed in which the federalisation of the common state, Tito's key achievement, was portrayed as detrimental to the Serbs' interests. Through television, radio, movies, books the regime reached out to Serbs living in other entities of the federation. It also organised so-called 'Meetings of Truth' that shook the foundations of Yugoslavia and gave the Serbs a sense of empowerment. This was followed by secret police operatives who started organising paramilitary groups.³¹

Similar developments took place in Slovenia, Yugoslavia's most liberal republic. A vibrant counterculture had developed in the early 1980s, that was actively suppressed when its expressions ran against the perceived interest of the republican leadership. However, when, in 1987, the Communist youth organisation's periodical *Mladina* openly equalled Titoism with Hitlerism and the federal authorities intervened, Slovenia's leadership decided to portray the federation's intervention as an attack on Slovenia. This struck a chord with the public and bolstered this leadership's domestic legitimacy.

Croatia and Bosnia, the federation's most oppressive republics, also controlled media outlets and publishing houses. It was only around 1988-1989 that Croatia's leadership started to hesitantly follow the example of Serbia and Slovenia. Multi-ethnic Bosnian communists in contrast remained committed to the existing federal structures, until, in the wake of the dissolution of the federal communist party and the end of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, they felt compelled to hold democratic elections that brought ultranationalists to power. The seeds the communists had sewn would soon blossom.

In a similar vein, Russian representations of Ukraine and Ukrainian representations of Russia have changed since 1991. In both countries attempts were initially made to come to terms with the Soviet past, and especially Stalinism. In Russia however this proved far more difficult than in Ukraine, perhaps because the Russian Federation considered itself the heir to the Soviet Union. Stalin is still

island with the narrator assuring the public that however dispersed we are at present we will tell our children that 'once upon a time there was a country...'

³¹ On Serb paramilitary formations: Vukušić, *Serbian Paramilitaries and the Breakup of Yugoslavia. State Connections and Patterns of Violence*.

hugely popular, ostensibly because he won the Second World War and made the Soviet Union a great power. It is acknowledged that millions perished during his reign, both during the Collectivisation and the ensuing Terror of the 1930s, and again in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Still, in 2008 Stalin, a Georgian by birth, was voted the all-time third-greatest Russian, and critical thinking about his achievements is actively discouraged. School books stress his achievements and downplay his crimes.³² Apart from a brief spell in the 1990s, the past continues to be subjected to present-day political demands. It is no surprise that among the organisations and persons silenced by the Putin regime are *Memorial*, a group of historians committed to researching Stalinism, and the venerable Moscow Helsinki Committee, established by Soviet dissidents in 1976 to monitor Moscow's human rights record.³³

In parallel to this tightening of control, public memory was increasingly filled with narratives about how Russia and Russian values have always been threatened by the West, how these had made inroads in treacherous and ungrateful Ukraine, that furthermore had collaborated with Nazism. This, in turn justified strong leadership in Russia.³⁴ Years before Putin used this narrative to legitimise his invasion of Ukraine, it was disseminated through Russian books and movies. Regardless of their story line, in such endeavours the Ukrainians in it were Nazi sympathisers and spoke Ukrainian. When they 'rediscovered' their 'true' self, they switched to Russian.³⁵ Against this background it is quite conceivable that (at least some) displays in Ukraine of Nazi-related symbols are actually part of Russian false flag operations. The message that Russia's 'special military operation' against Ukraine is fully justified and part of an eternal struggle against Western aggression is also disseminated in schools.³⁶

³² Medieval ruler Aleksandr Nevsky, who defeated the 'German' Teutonic Knights in the 13th Century and became a Saint, was first. Sullivan, "Breaking down the man of steel: Stalin in Russia today," 457-462, 475-476; Nelson, "History as ideology: The portrayal of Stalinism and the Great Patriotic War in contemporary Russian high school textbooks," 57.

³³ Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism*; Kuzio, "Nationalism and authoritarianism in Russia: Introduction to the Special Issue," 1-11.

³⁴ Keenan, "Collecting history imprints from Russia in the age of the new official historiographic agenda," 114-129; Cf. Kuzio, "Soviet and Russian anti-(Ukrainian) nationalism and re-Stalinization," 87-99.

³⁵ Yekelchik, "Memory Wars on the silver screen: Ukraine and Russia look back at the Second World War," 4-13; See also: Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism*; van Gorp, "Inverting film policy: Film as nation builder in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2005," 243-58; Smorodinskaya, "'The fathers' war through the sons' lenses," 89-112; Baraban, "Forget the war: Wartime subjectivity in post-Soviet Russian films," 295-318.

³⁶ McGlynn, "Russia's history textbook rewrite is a bid to control the future."

Ukrainian intellectuals, in contrast, have been relatively free to address the past. In the last decade of the Soviet Union historians and others rediscovered a narrative about the present-day's Ukrainians' relation to medieval Rus. But while the Ukrainian declaration of independence of 24th August, 1991 argued that the new state had roots stretching back to these ancient times, this view was not imposed in schools and public life, and Ukrainian officials and intellectuals refrained from arguing that Rus' heritage was Ukraine's only. When, around 1994, the government proposed as state symbols the arms of the princely state of Halyč-Wolyn (roughly Eastern Galicia, present-day Western Ukraine), large sections of the public – both Russophones and Ukrainophones – in the eastern and southern parts of the republic were hardly interested and the symbols were adopted as part of a deal that granted autonomy to Crimea. Independence and the activities of emigree movements meanwhile stimulated an exploration of topics that had been glossed over in official Soviet historiography or had been treated in a highly ideologised fashion. These included the first independence and the civil war (1917-1921), the collectivisation, and Soviet counter-insurgency in western Ukraine.³⁷ As said, these were increasingly interpreted through a nationalist lens, i.e., these heinous Soviet policies were believed to be Russian policies directed at the Ukrainians' very existence, and this was reflected in a number of textbooks in schools.³⁸ The Southern and Eastern parts that had been longer exposed to Russian and then Soviet rule than the Western districts, meanwhile, had developed a somewhat dissimilar frame of reference.³⁹ Although Ukrainian army recruits were treated to a more or less official history of Ukraine, the Kyiv government did not impose such a history on society as a whole.⁴⁰ Rather, it tried to balance the diverging narratives in the same vein as it had tried to steer a middle course between the pro-European and pro-Russian strands of society, a divide that was encouraged and exploited by

³⁷ von Hagen, "Does Ukraine have a history?" 670-671; Narvselius, "The 'Bandera Debate': The contentious legacy of World War II and liberalization of collective memory in Western Ukraine," 469–90; Osipian, "Regional diversity and divided memories in Ukraine: Contested past as electoral resource," 616–42.

³⁸ Kuzio, "Nation building, history writing and competition over the legacy of Kyiv Rus in Ukraine,"; Janmaat, "History and national identity construction: The great famine in Irish and Ukrainian history textbooks," 345-368; idem., "Nation-building in post-Soviet Ukraine: Educational policy and the response of the Russian-speaking population"; idem., "Identity construction and education. The history of Ukraine in Soviet and Post-Soviet schoolbooks,"; Krylach and Kul'chytskyi, "Die Diskussionen in der Ukraine über die Schulbücher zur Vaterländischen Geschichte."

³⁹ Wilson, "The Donbas between Ukraine and Russia: The use of history in political disputes," 265–89.

⁴⁰ Kuzio, "Nation building, history writing and competition over the legacy of Kyiv Rus in Ukraine," 41.

Russian informational activities.⁴¹ The more Ukraine asserted its sovereign right to carve out its own political future the more Russia stepped up its efforts to subvert it. Russia's war against Ukraine did not start in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the secession of Donetsk and Luhansk, much less so with the invasion of February, 2022.

In hindsight, then, there seems to be a close relationship between these shifts in historiography and historical culture in the former Yugoslavia, and in Russia and Ukraine, and the ensuing wars. From the two cases I discussed, it may be tentatively concluded that changes in historical culture and public memory by themselves may be dramatic but that an additional ingredient is needed, i.e., a translation of such sentiments into a political program. This does not require an evil dictator. It does however require a deeply felt sense of crisis, political, economic, and moral, and a feebly developed public space in which the past cannot truly be discussed and put to rest. Another key issue would be to establish whether in these and other cases the process of Othering fell on fertile grounds because it struck a chord with people's pre-existing convictions. Still, a thorough analysis of historiography and historical culture could, perhaps, have prevented the intelligence failures surrounding the events of 2014 and 2022, just like it could have raised awareness that Yugoslavia had run into trouble in the early 1980s, rather than the late 1980s by which time a number of events had been set in motion that would fatally undermine that state.⁴² After all, key issues in intelligence analysis involve assessing intentions and assessing likelihood. A thorough knowledge of how a society engages with its past experiences surely would greatly benefit the quality of analysis.⁴³ In this respect, the work of the Netherlands-based *Network of Concerned Historians* may be of help: established some thirty years ago, it has monitored the freedom of historians around the world to research and disseminate their views. It lists court-cases, administrative measures, dismissals, physical attacks and the like. As such

⁴¹ Tsekhanovska and Tsybul'ska, "Evolution of Russian narratives about Ukraine and their export to Ukrainian media space"; Cf. Boyte, "An analysis of the social-media technology, tactics, and narratives used to control perception in the propaganda war over Ukraine," 88–111; Alekseyeva, *Narrative Warfare: How the Kremlin and Russian News Outlets Justified a War of Aggression against Ukraine*; Lange-Ionatamishvili, "Analysis of Russia's information campaign against Ukraine"; Bertelsen, *Russian Active Measures: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*.

⁴² This ties in with literature on intelligence failures. In each stage of the intelligence circle things may go wrong. Crucially though, the decision to act on a report hinges on its apparent trustworthiness.

⁴³ Compare Whaley, *Practice to Deceive: Learning Curves of Military Deception Planners*, who at 194–205 gives a number of qualities that a deception planner needs: a thorough empathy of the opponent's mind; See also: Heuer Jr., "Improving intelligence analysis: Some insights on data, concepts, management in the intelligence community," 8; as quoted in Marrin, "Preventing intelligence failures by learning from the past," 664.

its reports document ‘sensitive’ issues and changes in the way governments and societies address these.⁴⁴

A number of serious challenges come to mind though; one is cost as considerable effort will be ‘wasted’ on studying the pasts of countries and groups and leaderships that do not resort to war. Second, it requires well-developed language skills. Third, once such insights that call for long-term action have been obtained, they have to compete with more pressing short-term issues. Fourth, the question of what could be actually done to influence the course of events must be answered, and lastly, governments need to believe that there is an issue upon which they should act. Nonetheless, it would be worthwhile to try to develop a predictive tool that includes historiographic analysis as it would help identify key areas of contestation, and reduce the level of uncertainty in trying to assess intentions and likelihood. This line of reasoning runs more or less parallel to that of Wirtz in relation to indications and warning for terrorism, when he wrote that ‘[i]n terms of non-state actors such as criminal organizations or terrorist cells, deviations can be observed in what constitutes normal activity,’ deviations that may indicate that something is afoot.⁴⁵

4. Conclusion

History does not predict. It can nonetheless help understand future developments. In the first place, studying the past may provide insights in the mindsets of actors and help distinguish between potential and probable courses of action. Knowledge of this type enables us to better assess the likelihood of their occurring and help mitigate the risk of costly strategic surprise. Man is a historical being. Of course we may express a willingness to overcome or ignore the past, but inescapably, our interpretations of it are always there to guide, or in fact, haunt us. Almost thirty years after the Dayton Agreement that ended the Bosnian war, it is still debatable whether the arrangement would survive international disengagement from Bosnia. Likewise, although Russia clearly violated international law by annexing Ukrainian territory in 2014 and again in 2022, it is unlikely that it will voluntarily return those areas, especially Crimea, that, like Kosovo, is seen as the cradle of the nation.

If our frames of reference are rooted in our interpretations of history, the study of history may also provide early warning of sorts. Not because history repeats

⁴⁴ See “Concerned Historians.” The Network was founded in 1995 by Groningen-based Belgian historian Antoon de Baets whose career has been devoted to defending the freedom to research, while at the same time stressing the need for methodological rigour.

⁴⁵ Wirtz, “Indications and warning in an age of uncertainty,” 552.

itself, or because we somehow are now able to overcome the so-called ‘historian’s fallacy’ – ‘the belief that, having identified and analyzed the causes of past mistakes, future mistakes, including surprise – can be avoided,’⁴⁶ but because historical interpretations evolve. They shift as a result of new finds, but they do so primarily as a result of new questions and new experiences that trigger a reinterpretation of past experiences. Dramatic changes in the way a society perceives its past reflect dramatic changes in its perception of the present, and this, in turn may point at changes in the way it will assert itself in the future. However dramatic, such changes by themselves generally are insufficient for a war to erupt, but in combination with a number of other factors they are indicative that there is trouble ahead.

As said, it is a long way from recognising these dramatic changes to translating them into timely and actionable intelligence, let alone successful conflict prevention. But, then again, *pre-war* engagement, however modest its chances of success, is to be preferred over *post-war* reconciliation after the loss of tens of thousands of lives that were lost in senseless efforts to undo the past. Perhaps the best option lies in supporting the development of a public space in which the past can be discussed and put to rest. This requires engagement, rather than isolation. As the preamble of the constitution of UNESCO rightly argues: ‘Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is there that the defences of peace need to be erected.’

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⁴⁶ Cancian, *Coping with surprise in Great Power conflicts*, VIII.

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