

OCTOBER 2022

CURRENT HISTORY

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RUSSIA AND EURASIA

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COMING IN NOVEMBER

Learning from the Pandemic

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC KEEPS GOING, but it is not too early to learn from its first two and a half years. The global response to the pandemic scored poorly on ethics, as rich nations hoarded vaccines. Older adults and minorities suffered disproportionately, but children's rights were also neglected. Urban life and work patterns were severely disrupted, raising questions about sustainability while opening up new possibilities for the future of cities. A November special issue of *Current History* will cover these aspects of the pandemic and more. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **Ethics and Global Health Emergencies**
Sridhar Venkatapuram, King's College London
- **Reviving and Rethinking Cities**
Shauna Brail, University of Toronto
- **Children's Rights in Crises**
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CURRENT HISTORY

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“The success of the Ukrainian state in repelling the Russian military onslaught and sustaining its operations in the first months of the war grew out of the humiliating experience of 2014.”

The Ukrainian State under Russian Aggression: Resilience and Resistance

SERHIY KUDELIA

On the morning of February 24, 2022, minutes after Russian President Vladimir Putin declared the start of the “special military operation” against Ukraine, missiles hit over 100 targets in all regions of the country. Simultaneously, Russian troops crossed into Ukrainian territory from three directions in a coordinated multipronged assault. One contingent entered from the territory of Belarus in an attempt to encircle and seize the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. Another one, coming from western Russia, sought to capture the second-largest city, Kharkiv. The third rolled into southern Ukraine from Crimea and rapidly advanced to the region’s capital, Kherson.

In the first hours of the offensive, many Western officials issued dire predictions about the likely “decapitation” of the Ukrainian government and the quick capture of Ukrainian territory by the “militarily superior” Russian forces. Informally, Western leaders advised Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to abandon Kyiv and move to western Ukraine, or even as far as Poland. Russian leaders, acting on similar presuppositions, provided detailed instructions to their field commanders on the step-by-step takeover of Ukrainian government buildings. Few believed that Ukraine could survive such a massive assault and maintain control over its major cities.

A little over a month later, however, Russia withdrew most of its troops from Ukraine’s northern regions and ended its attempt to take Kyiv. It also regrouped most of its forces in the east around

Kharkiv and deployed them in a new effort to capture Ukraine-controlled parts of the Donbas region. And although Russian forces managed to occupy the southern region, they faced outbursts of civic protest and defiance on the part of local officials, public sector employees, and ordinary residents.

Rather than leading to the downfall of the Ukrainian state, the Russian assault revealed the resilience of Ukrainian state institutions at the national and local levels. It also made clear that Ukrainian society had overcome many of the internal divides that had plagued the nation since its independence. The appearance of Russian soldiers on the streets of Ukrainian villages and towns did not lead to a replay of the 2014 “Russian spring” staged in Crimea and Donbas, with welcoming rallies under Russian flags. Instead, it drew a universal and unequivocal rejection that produced a rare moment of political unity. In the first weeks of the war, over two-thirds of Ukrainian survey respondents—the largest share in the country’s history—said that they would like to see Ukraine join the European Union and NATO. The seemingly perennial internal divide between Ukrainians seeking closer ties with the West and those sympathetic to Russia was no more.

The success of the Ukrainian state in repelling the Russian onslaught and sustaining its operations in the first months of the war grew out of the humiliating experience of 2014. Then, the Ukrainian government had watched helplessly as its military units surrendered to Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms, law enforcement personnel defected to the Russian side, local officials declared allegiance to Moscow or separatist governments, and citizens joined self-defense groups

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to fight the Ukrainian army. Facing little resistance, Russia swiftly occupied and annexed Crimea, while most of Donbas fell under the control of two self-proclaimed republics. Ukrainian society's response to these events was equally disorienting. Although most believed that Russia had engaged in an act of aggression against Ukraine, some said that Putin was merely intervening to protect Ukrainians from being punished for their political views.

Ukraine's weakness in 2014 was a function of four main deficiencies. First, its political institutions lacked sufficient legitimacy to mobilize the public and political elites against Russian aggression. Second, Ukraine lacked the defensive capacity to fight back against Russian military incursions and destroy Russian proxies in Donbas. Third, the nation lacked a shared set of values that would allow a unifying response to Russia's actions. Fourth, Ukraine lacked sufficient support from the international community to ensure tangible military and economic assistance to withstand Russian aggression.

Over the next eight years, Ukraine achieved a qualitative improvement in each of these four dimensions. As a result, Russia's full-scale invasion failed to push Ukraine anywhere near the point of collapse. Instead, the country's response reassured both Ukrainian citizens and the world that it had secured long-term viability.

INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTH

The initial Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2014 began at a moment when the state was in disarray, and Ukrainian society was deeply divided regarding the country's future. After months of increasingly violent protests in Kyiv and other cities, known as the Euromaidan Revolution, the government dissolved and President Viktor Yanukovich fled. The new cabinet, comprising members of the opposition parties, and acting President Oleksandr Turchynov, selected by the parliament, lacked legitimacy in southeastern regions, particularly in Crimea and Donbas. This opened space for pro-Russian protesters backed by armed Russian agents to claim power at the local level and demand that referendums be held on the secession of these regions.

Local authorities received no guidance from Kyiv on how to respond to the separatist

challenges. They also lacked support from the security agencies, which often sympathized with the separatist cause and were scornful about the post-revolution government. Local administrators in Donbas acquiesced to separatist demands and even assisted with holding secessionist referendums. Some of them organized local residents to obstruct the movement of Ukrainian troops through their towns and impede the "anti-terrorist operation" launched by Kyiv. The low level of public confidence in the Ukrainian armed forces and widespread disdain for the post-Maidan authorities created a favorable environment for the mounting separatist insurrection in Donbas.

Putin counted on a similar response when he announced the launch of the "special military operation." In his address, Putin promised to "de-Nazify" the Ukrainian political system and "liberate" Ukrainians from their nationalist rulers. This time, however, Russian leaders proved utterly detached from Ukrainian political realities. Three years earlier, incumbent President Petro Poroshenko had lost his reelection bid to an un-

expected contender, Zelensky, who had a background in entertainment and no prior political experience. Zelensky won the 2019 election with a larger share of the vote than any of his predecessors. He received the most support—

over 80 percent—in exactly those eastern and southern border regions where Putin would direct his assault in 2022.

Although Zelensky's approval rating declined early in his tenure, he remained the most popular political leader in the country and was favored to win reelection in 2024. He also maintained control over the parliament, where his party, Servant of the People, garnered a majority in early elections in July 2019. This allowed Zelensky to install his picks for all cabinet positions and prevented the kind of intra-executive conflicts that plagued the presidencies of both Poroshenko and Viktor Yushchenko (2005–15).

Local governments across Ukraine received a new democratic mandate in October 2020 municipal elections. The composition of the city councils was substantially renewed, with about 70 percent of the deputies elected for the first time. Most of the incumbent mayors in the regional centers retained their positions; some, like the heads of Mariupol, Chernihiv, and Zaporizhzhia, won

Mayors openly defied the Russian military and encouraged nonviolent protests.

with absolute majorities in the first round. Kharkiv elected a new mayor, Ihor Terekhov, in October 2021 following the death of the incumbent. Another new mayor, Ihor Kolyhaev, was elected in Kherson. Thus, all of the major cities targeted by the Russian invasion in 2022 had recently elected leaders whose authority rested on democratic legitimacy.

They were further empowered by a recently launched decentralization reform that provided city administrations with additional funds from local tax collection and allowed them to set spending priorities. This led to noticeable improvement in the quality and delivery of public services. A survey conducted by the International Republican Institute in May–June 2021 showed that over half of respondents in most Ukrainian cities were satisfied with the performance of their mayors. They also expressed overwhelming support for the Ukrainian army, with residents in only three cities out of twenty-four—Mariupol, Sievierodonetsk, and Odesa—offering less than 50 percent approval.

Once Moscow began its February 2022 assault, dozens of Ukrainian towns were under threat of Russian occupation. The response by local governments across Ukraine in the first days of the war was crucial both for exposing the duplicity behind Putin's war justifications and for preparing their communities for resistance. While issuing statements condemning the Russian attack, local authorities coordinated territorial defense units, set up checkpoints around their towns, and maintained supplies of basic necessities.

The swiftness of the Russian advance meant that some local administrators had to continue governing their communities in the presence of Russian troops. In certain cases, as in the towns of Svatove and Starobilsk in Luhansk oblast (province), mayors sought to negotiate with the occupiers, demanding noninterference in their daily activities. In other instances, such as in Henichesk and Skadovsk in Kherson oblast, they had to resign and leave their towns under Russian pressure.

Yet in places like Melitopol in Zaporizhzhia oblast, mayors openly defied the Russian military and encouraged nonviolent protests against occupation. They kept Ukrainian flags flying over the government buildings and used social media to make regular public appeals reasserting their loyalty to Kyiv. In early March, Russian forces started abducting local administrators to coerce them into collaboration. Some were ultimately released and

forced to flee, while several others disappeared or were confirmed to have been killed.

In contrast to Crimea or Donbas eight years earlier, only a handful of local mayors, in towns like Rubizhne in Luhansk oblast and Kupiansk in Kharkiv oblast, openly switched sides and continued in their positions under Russian authority. In the largest cities that the Russians seized, such as Kherson, Melitopol, or Mariupol, the elected mayors rejected offers to collaborate and either left or resigned. As a result, in most occupied cities and towns, the Russians had to look for lower-level officials or public sector employees to fill top positions. Those who agreed were mostly members of pro-Russian political parties that had been promptly banned at the start of the Russian invasion.

Such instances of collaboration were strictly individual in nature. Despite attempts by the Russians to coerce deputies, none of the local assemblies issued statements in support of the occupation. In 2014, such resolutions by local councils in Crimea and Donbas had been used to lend an impression of legality to the secessionist process. But in March 2022, the Kherson oblast council, convened in a special session, adopted a resolution asserting that the region would remain part of Ukraine and dismissing as illegitimate any attempts to hold a referendum on turning it into a new self-proclaimed state.

DEFENSIVE CAPACITY

Throughout Ukraine's first decades of independence, its military sector remained chronically unreformed and underfunded. The national security strategy adopted in 2007 under Yushchenko and amended in 2012 under Yanukovich lacked a precise articulation of immediate threats and did not even consider the possibility of Russian aggression. Russia was mentioned along with Moldova and Belarus as a country with which Ukraine had an "undemarcated border," but it was not identified as posing a potential challenge to Ukraine's integrity. The document even called for a "strategic partnership" model for dealing with Russia that would entail a "search for common approaches to forming an all-European collective security system." Although the strategy noted the "deteriorating conditions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and defense industry" and the "ineffectiveness of its intelligence and counterintelligence bodies," it contained no specific recommendations on how to reverse these trends or benchmarks to measure the progress of reforms.

Low levels of defense spending (under 1 percent of GDP annually) prevented modernization of military equipment or adequate training of personnel. The continuous downsizing of the armed forces, with a selloff of equipment and changes in the force structure, left Ukraine unprepared to deal with the challenges of hybrid warfare. As Russia launched its covert and overt operations on Ukraine's territory in early 2014, the Ukrainian defense minister reported having barely 6,000 combat-ready troops under his command. A mass defection to the Russian side in Crimea, with about 75 percent of Ukrainian personnel switching sides in March 2014, exposed weak commitment to the Ukrainian state and lack of trust in national leadership. Similar defections at the outset of the armed conflict in Donbas that year had a demoralizing effect on units, weakening their resolve to fight the separatist challenge.

In the years since, Ukraine adopted a range of policies that helped strengthen its defensive capabilities. Among the most crucial was the establishment of a mechanism for quick enlistment of civilians. Mobilization of highly motivated volunteers into auxiliary battalions played a decisive role in stopping Russia's "hybrid" aggression during the intense conflict phase in the summer of 2014. Volunteer battalions were later integrated into the newly formed National Guard and subordinated to the interior minister.

The auxiliary forces controlled by the Defense Ministry were organized as "territorial defense" battalions and emerged as a vital element of the defense strategy adopted by Zelensky. Under the 2021 Law on the Foundations of National Resistance, they became a stand-alone branch of the armed forces, consisting of 25 brigades and 150 battalions, with one battalion per raion (the administrative unit below the oblast level), comprising 10,000 active-duty servicemen in total for the country. They were to be buttressed by up to 130,000 reservists who had to undergo regular training to be ready for mobilization during wartime. The aim of these units, as the commander in chief of the armed forces, General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi, stressed just two weeks before the Russian attack, was to stage "resistance in each town, in each village, on each street, and in each building."

Local government leaders and heads of raion and oblast administrations received authority over

the formation of territorial defense units alongside military commanders. This recognized the importance of the civilian component in defense planning and corresponded to principles of government decentralization enacted since 2014. But the new law went into effect on January 1, 2022, so the formation of these units remained incomplete at the time of the Russian invasion.

Two weeks before Russia launched its attack, Zaluzhnyi reported that the battalions in only 13 border oblasts had reached about 70 percent of their peacetime capacity, while units in some cities, like Kyiv, Mariupol, and Odesa, were falling behind in the pace of mobilization. Belated organization of territorial defense was emblematic of the failure to organize a proper defense of cities and towns in southern Ukraine and allowed for the quick occupation of Kherson. Local authorities in that city neglected to provide a permanent base for its territorial defense unit, while many of its members remained unarmed. The attempt to resist the Russian advance in the south in the first week of the war led to numerous casualties among the locals who joined these units.

Still, territorial defense became an immediate draw for civilians willing to contribute to the war effort once the full-scale invasion began. In the first two weeks of the war, 100,000 Ukrainians reportedly

joined territorial defense units across the country. Checkpoints organized spontaneously in towns around Kyiv, Cherkasy, and Kharkiv were manned by local volunteers whose resistance prevented a rapid Russian advance at the outset of the war.

In subsequent months, the tasks of these units broadened from improving local defense capabilities to participating in combat operations outside their original deployment areas, alongside regular soldiers. Legislative changes allowed their deployment in combat zones and expanded the types of weaponry that their members could use to include mortars, artillery, and rocket systems. Units from western Ukraine were transferred to the east to reinforce defensive operations against Russian forces. The liberation of the northern regions of Ukraine was achieved with the participation of territorial defense units that joined the army's counteroffensive operations. But many of the fighters arrived on the front lines poorly trained and equipped, resulting in a particularly high casualty rate among them.

*Rising civic attachment
strengthened commitment
to defending the country.*

Since 2014, Ukraine's defensive capabilities have also benefited from increased funding, structural reform, enhanced training, and external support. The armed forces grew to over 200,000 active-duty personnel, at least a third of them having combat experience in Donbas. Defense spending has increased by 72 percent since 2014; according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, it amounted to \$5.9 billion, or 3.2 percent of GDP, in 2021.

The Joint Operations Command, facilitating improved tactical control and coordination, was reintroduced after having been disbanded under Yanukovich. The Special Operations Forces (SOF) emerged as a separate branch of the armed forces and launched a combat training program in 2016 with major assistance from the United States and NATO. Ukrainian SOF units, provided with modern equipment including advanced communication devices, proved crucial in the successful defense of Kyiv during the early weeks of the war in 2022. They compounded Russia's logistical problems by operating behind enemy lines to ambush its armored vehicles and break its supply chains. The failure of the first phase of the Russian invasion was the result of Ukraine's reinforced defense capability, combined with the strong morale of its forces.

NATION-BUILDING

Since 2004, political competition in Ukraine's presidential elections had been organized around regional cleavages, with most voters in the south and east favoring candidates who were strongly opposed by majorities in the west. This resulted in heightened regional polarization as the two opposing political camps—pro-Western “orange” and pro-Russian “blue”—took increasingly irreconcilable positions.

Another factor contributing to intense cross-regional confrontation was the persistent strength of regional identities in Donbas and Crimea, which were often framed in terms incompatible with the Ukrainian state. Calls to maintain economic and cultural ties to Russia were often linked with support for Ukrainian membership in a Moscow-led economic and political union, which for many represented a reconstituted Soviet Union. In August 2013, a Rating poll showed that 57 percent of Donbas residents fully or partially opposed Ukraine's independent statehood. Separatist groups in Donbas justified their activities by citing the need to protect regional interests in dealings with Kyiv.

The Euromaidan protests in 2013–14 sharpened these regional divides. Survey respondents in the west viewed the uprising as a civil rights movement, whereas easterners perceived it largely as an illicit power grab by opposition leaders. The fall of Yanukovich's regime resulted in growing separatist sentiment. In March 2014, about a third of respondents to an International Republican Institute survey in the south and east endorsed the option of Crimea joining Russia or becoming an independent state. In April 2014, a poll conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology found that about a third of Donbas respondents indicated a preference for the region to secede.

My own research showed that regional identification underpinned support for armed militancy in Donbas. Those who viewed themselves primarily as residents of the region or of their localities, as opposed to being citizens of Ukraine, were likely to have a more sympathetic view of insurgents and attribute their actions to ideational rather than material motives.

The onset of the armed conflict in Donbas and the ensuing violence that spread to other regions, however, led Ukrainians of Russian descent in the southern and eastern regions to reclassify their nationality as Ukrainian. John O'Loughlin and Gerard Toal found in a 2020 study that “about one in three Russians appear to have reclassified their nationality” in the period between April and December 2014. This was followed by a shift in language use. An increasing number of Ukrainians, according to Kyiv International Institute of Sociology surveys, reported using the Russian and Ukrainian languages equally at home. Between 2014 and 2017, the share of exclusive or predominant Russian language users dropped from 34.7 percent to 25.7 percent.

At the same time, as Grigore Pop-Eleches and Graeme B. Robertson found in a 2018 study, a growing number of Ukrainians identified Ukraine as their homeland (an increase of 11 percent between 2012 and 2015). They also expressed a greater sense of pride in state symbols, such as the anthem and flag.

Most importantly, the regional polarization that characterized the preceding decade became less pronounced in voting results. In both the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, the winning candidate received majority support in almost all electoral precincts across the country. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the positioning of Zelensky's Servant of the People as what Paul

Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield describe as the “catch-all” party allowed voters to transcend the traditional ideological divisions and unite around valence-based issues, such as competence or anti-corruption appeals.

This strengthening of civic identification was paralleled in a set of government policies aimed at minimizing Russian political and cultural influence in Ukraine. In 2014, the authorities banned broadcasts of Russian television channels in Ukraine, blocked access to Russian social media networks, halted the circulation of Russian newspapers and public showings of newly released Russian films, and compiled lists of books to be barred from sale for allegedly containing Russian propaganda. The government also restricted entry to Ukraine for over 100 Russian artists and celebrities who had endorsed Putin’s actions or visited occupied territories of Ukraine. These policies were combined with changes in the education law that limited Russian-language instruction in schools and further regulated use of Russian in television and print media.

Finally, the government reasserted its own historical narratives in order to emphasize the tragic consequences of Soviet rule for the Ukrainian nation. The decommunization campaign led to the removal of over 1,000 monuments to Lenin or other Soviet-era figures and the elimination of communist imagery from public spaces. It also equated communism with national socialism, and criminalized promotion of the symbols of any such regimes. Ukrainians who fought the Soviet regime, either during or after World War II, were now revered as heroes. Although some of these measures proved controversial, especially those commemorating nationalist leaders with records of Nazi collaboration, their overall effect was to deny the Russian government levers of influence over public opinion in Ukraine. After August 2014, Rating surveys showed, Putin remained the least popular world leader in Ukraine: 81 percent of respondents in September 2021 expressed a largely or fully negative opinion of him, doubling from October 2013.

One implication of this rising civic attachment within Ukrainian society was strengthened cross-regional commitment to defend the country in the event of a full-scale Russian attack. A KIIS survey indicated that between December 2021 and February 2022, the share of Ukrainians willing to participate in armed resistance to Russia grew from 33.3 percent to 37.3 percent. Weeks before the

Russian invasion, over half of respondents across Ukraine (57 percent) suggested that they were willing to participate in either armed or nonviolent resistance against Russia. By March, according to a Rating survey, 59 percent of Ukrainians said they were willing to take up arms in Ukraine’s defense.

In southern Ukraine, which came under direct Russian attack early on, the majority (53 percent) said they were fully ready to fight back. In the first weeks of the war, Ukrainians in occupied areas showed their attachment to the state by staging regular demonstrations under Ukrainian flags. Despite the risks, hundreds of Ukrainians held marches in Kherson, Berdiansk, and Melitopol, calling on the Russian forces to leave their towns.

Once the Russians resorted to arrests and abductions of pro-Ukrainian activists, the resistance moved underground and turned violent. A string of targeted assassinations of local collaborators demonstrated that Russia’s occupation remained tenuous, and made it more difficult for Moscow to co-opt local actors to govern the occupied territories. Though such underground resistance would be insufficient to end the occupation, it raises the cost of Russia’s presence and undermines its narratives about being welcomed by a popular embrace. Over the longer term, continued internal resistance and lack of popular support will make it harder for Moscow to pursue either annexation of these lands or their transformation into quasi-states.

STRATEGIC SHIFTS

Russia’s military actions against Ukraine drew opprobrium from the West in both 2014 and 2022. What differed markedly was the intensity of outside support for the Ukrainian state. The Kremlin’s decision to annex Crimea in March 2014 resulted in the most serious diplomatic standoff with Russia since the end of the Cold War, but it did not lead to immediate reinforcement of Ukraine’s defenses. Over the next eight years, the West sought to deter Russia from further aggressive actions and calibrated all of its policies to avert potential escalation of the crisis into a full-blown war.

In March 2014, Russia lost its seat in the group of the world’s most advanced economies (the G-8), and several international organizations, such as the Council of Europe, severed their ties with Moscow. The United States took the lead in imposing sanctions on individuals in Putin’s inner circle and on entire sectors of the Russian economy. The

European Union's support for the sanctions policy was belated and more cautious. Though Europeans endorsed sanctions against individual defense or energy companies, they were not willing to end their economic cooperation with Russia in key areas such as the energy trade. The embodiment of Europe's contradictory approach was the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline from Russia to Germany, launched by the Russian state-owned company Gazprom in 2018 with financing from British, French, German, and Austrian firms.

Although the United States was more consistent in its application of sanctions and authorized billions of dollars in security and economic assistance to Ukraine, the Obama administration sided with the Europeans in denying Ukraine's requests for arms supplies. Only in December 2017 did US President Donald Trump approve the first arms sale to Ukraine—a shipment of a limited number of anti-tank missiles and launchers for defensive purposes. The ultimate goal of the West was to keep Moscow engaged in talks over Ukraine, searching for a diplomatic solution to the conflict in Donbas while keeping the issue of Crimea on the back burner.

Western leaders proved more unified and determined in their response to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. They immediately applied some of the costliest sanctions to date against the Russian financial sector, freezing the country's assets in Western institutions, removing its banks from the financial messaging system Swift, and barring Russian firms from borrowing money in the West. They also agreed on far-reaching changes in energy trading with Russia by committing to banning all imports of Russian oil and gold, ending the Nord Stream 2 project, and substantially reducing gas imports. Meanwhile, all top Russian officials, major Russian oligarchs, and even members of Putin's family were placed under individual sanctions, and their assets were frozen or confiscated.

The clearest shift in Western policy was in the area of security assistance. The West now largely agreed on the need to defeat Russia in Ukraine rather than merely deter it, and to hold Putin accountable for the crime of aggression against a sovereign state. This approach led to the unprecedented supply of advanced weaponry to the Ukrainian armed forces, eventually including artillery and multiple-launch rocket systems, with the goal not only of stopping the Russian advance, but

also of helping Ukraine regain its occupied territories militarily. Whereas before February 2022, Western leaders had sought a diplomatic “off-ramp” to resolve the crisis, since then, in the words of US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, they wanted to “see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things it has done in Ukraine.” US aid totaled \$54 billion just in the first three months of the war.

For the West, achieving its objectives in the Russian-Ukrainian war now rests, to a large degree, on the capacity of the Ukrainian state. Though its survival as a political unit is no longer at stake, the challenges that Ukraine faces will only multiply. Russia's continued violation of its integrity will deny Ukraine the ability to develop economically and will deepen its dependence on foreign assistance to meet its rising security needs. It will also lead to major demographic changes and social dislocation, as millions of Ukrainians are forced to give up their jobs and flee their homes.

Although Ukrainians have demonstrated unprecedented unity in the face of aggression, internal societal rifts may reemerge as the nation struggles with the mounting loss of territory and human life. A prolonged war could strain Ukraine's political institutions and endanger some of the key democratic norms, such as free media and competitive elections, that set it apart from its neighbors. The effects of the Russian invasion and territorial conquest will reverberate through this century. Even if Russia ultimately concedes defeat, a major ideational shift and generational change will be required for it to accept the permanence of the Ukrainian state and find a way to coexist with it peacefully.

For some Ukrainians, though, the Russian invasion also offers a small glimmer of hope. The war will forever reshape the physical and symbolic landscape that tied Ukrainians to the Soviet past. The horrific destruction of Ukrainian cities could signify the end of post-Soviet Ukraine, which maintained some of the worst cultural and institutional traits of the communist system. The heroic sacrifice of tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers could generate a national consensus around new ethical norms and guarantee the provision of accountability and justice. And the sense of national pride that came and went with every revolution may now become a permanent unifying pillar of Ukrainian identity. ■

“[T]he current war is at least partly connected to the inherently traumatic nature of the experience of the USSR’s collapse. . . .”

Russians in Wartime and Defensive Consolidation

JEREMY MORRIS

The Russian invasion of Ukraine seemingly shocked Russia experts as much as anyone else. At home, it brought disbelief, fear, and apprehension to the majority of Russians. As an ethnographer of Russia with over 30 years of close interaction with people from all walks of life there, I was party to a snapshot of reactions, first on a minute-by-minute basis as the first bombs and rockets fell on Kyiv, and then in even more difficult exchanges with friends and colleagues in response to atrocities like the murder of civilians in Bucha and the destruction of the city of Mariupol, as well as the effect of sanctions and the withdrawal of Western companies from Russia itself. In this overview, though, I will try to connect the reactions of most Russians—which fit a pattern of what I call “defensive consolidation”—to a broader arc of current history.

To understand the seemingly muted, accepting, and sometimes approving responses by Russians toward the war, we have to do two things. First, dig deep into the structure of Russian society, characterized by economic adversity and political disconnection. Second, zoom out—and look at how disappointment, resentment, and the fruitless searches for a connective idea to make sense of the new Russia find partial, but incomplete, fulfillment in expressing approval of the leader’s decisions. Now is the beginning of the end of Putinism, but it was never a coherent ideology, and in many senses is just part of a continuity of change that goes back to 1986 and Mikhail Gorbachev’s late Soviet reforms. The descent into militarism, chauvinism, and isolationism is a last desperate attempt to give society a reason to believe in the state’s

capacity to lead, and an answer to the question posed by big politics: “Who are the Russians?”

Even for many ordinary people—while they grudgingly express loyalty—aggression against a neighbor and autarky are the wrong answers. In my many talks with Russians over the years, they have had an entirely different question in mind, one that the regime itself doesn’t even appear to understand: How to address the loss of social coherence and purpose that the Soviet period—however flawed and coercive in practice—provided for the majority of citizens of that supranational state?

RUSSIA’S LONG COVID

Before focusing on Russians’ reaction to the war, let me step back and take stock of “late Putinism” as seen by the average Russian person. We need to remember that COVID-19 hit Russia particularly hard in 2020–22. The federal government cynically delegated the response to subnational authorities, and the burden fell on what was already a chronically underfunded health service and an aging, sick population. By some counts, Russia has had the highest rates of death of any developed nation. Moscow, both the city and the region, where over 10 percent of the Russian population lives, instituted relatively harsh lockdowns and used advanced technology to monitor citizens’ quarantine, arbitrarily punishing thousands of ill people due to the rushed and buggy programming of a self-isolation app.

When vaccination began, people simply did not trust the authorities and medical personnel. Mass avoidance of the Sputnik V vaccine was not so much about anti-science views, but reflected a realistic and rational calculation—Russia’s state is ineffective at protecting people at the best of times, as I wrote previously for *Current History*.

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Resentment also played a part. A frequent rejoinder was, “Why should I risk my health in getting a job of unknown provenance when the state does nothing for me?” Essentially, people refused a call to reciprocal social solidarity—not because they are strongly individualistic, but because of the overall absence of meaningful social protection. The idea that the weakest need to look after themselves is coded into the callous “common sense” of Russian politics itself.

The Russian economy had its boom time in the 2000s, but after the global financial crisis of 2008, it saw some of the worst stagnation of incomes in Europe. Corruption grew, and the net wealth of a new breed of the super-rich expanded—those with political connections, often via the security services, to Putin and his circle. The increasingly online population was no longer blissfully ignorant—the tenacious efforts of oppositionist Alexei Navalny to publicize corruption at the highest level meant that no one could ignore the rapacious appetites of the new elite, set against deteriorating standards in schooling, health, and social infrastructure more generally. While oil revenues continued to make Russia, and particularly Moscow City, rich in terms of GDP, average incomes fell behind.

Politicians responded with often harsh rhetoric of social Darwinism, lamenting the lack of “entrepreneurialism” or bootstrapping among poor Russians. More than once, a minor scandal ensued after unguarded statements by out-of-touch politicians, such as, “No one asked you to have children,” or, “If you’re not already successful, why should I talk to you?” Even before the present crisis, Russia had drifted into a long period of growing social discontent with government, a weak economy benefiting only a tiny minority who could extract “rents,” often via corruption, and a largely cynical and distant political class whose main rhetorical strategies revolved around mounting a “culture war” against symbols of so-called Western permissiveness and proposing backward-looking evocations of Russia’s imperial greatness, often centered on the Soviet victory in World War II.

BEYOND THE RHETORIC OF REVANCHISM

Therefore, when war surprised everyone, including even intimates of Putin himself, it was

not surprising that in looking for proximal causes, observers focused on these rhetorics of revanchism, chauvinism, and “victim” narratives. The latter relate to frequent complaints about Russia’s alleged sidelining in international affairs since 1991, a lack of support for the transformation of its economy and society (such as the aid given to Germany after 1945), and the expansion of NATO to its doorstep. For our media, an important part of explaining the war to a European and North American public is to highlight the effective leveraging of this victim narrative coupled with nostalgia for the USSR’s great power status. The allegation is that Russians have been willing consumers of this Putin-branded Kool-Aid.

It is true that a good share of Russians, particularly older people, feel that Russia is “disrespected,” and a few relish the idea that Russia should be feared. There are even some who celebrate Ukraine being “put in its place.” But my argument is that for the majority, resurgent aggressive nationalism, directed from above, is not relevant to their lives. So how did we get to such a state of affairs? It surely

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can’t be enough to focus only on the rhetoric of Putinism, especially when it is relatively empty of positive content and delivered without the dark charisma of a Trump figure. Despite our Western obsession with Putin’s flirtation with macho images, his aging and his eccentric reclusion during the pandemic (holding meetings at very long tables) have left him a much more marginal figure than he once was.

In the United States, the genre of “hillbilly research” is now well known. The respectable version is work by scholars like sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild, who lived in Louisiana communities to get at the sense of loss and disappointment that led people to emotionally connect with populist messages such as “Make America Great Again.” In the media, this research is often simplified to such an extent that it panders to liberal prejudices by producing a one-dimensional, wholly malevolent and resentful political subject who wants to “burn it all down.” Since the Russo-Ukraine war started, this pattern now repeats itself: Russians are portrayed as bloodthirsty, vengeful barbarians bereft of reason and compassion.

Like Hochschild’s, my research focuses on the ways the “left behind” see and experience the

world, and that includes politically. It was therefore with a great sense of trepidation that I opened my phone messenger on the morning of Russia's invasion. I had been in conversation with my usual research participants more frequently in February 2022 as it became clear that the geopolitical situation was getting worse. What was I going to find—a baying mob? Instead, their initial reaction was disbelief, shock, and that roller-coaster vertigo feeling—a giddy anxiety. “It can't really have happened? How can he [Putin, who is rarely named] have made this decision?”

But even in the first 24 hours shock started to morph, or at least gut responses mixed with cognitive processes and coping mechanisms kicked in. Most Russians, whether they admit it or not, daily consume state-controlled media, and they are influenced, sometimes strongly, by the state's messaging. But we should be cautious about propaganda's supposed “hypodermic” effects: people's views aren't directly injected by propaganda, but shaped by their own coping mechanisms and life experience.

The Russian state has shut down most easily accessible sources of trustworthy alternative information. After the war started, a virtual private network was needed to access YouTube (where many oppositionists are active), Facebook, and Twitter, along with Russian-language news sites critical of the regime. Many people were rightly afraid to even talk about the war, given the immediate move by the government to criminalize the publication of information that discredits the Russian armed forces—a frighteningly wide definition that could be applied to people “liking” a post on social media. Nonetheless, there were some significant antiwar street protests early on, despite the risk of arrest and prison. Even now, antiwar graffiti and surreptitious messages appear in public spaces, as well as some evidence of sabotage of military draft offices.

The invasion was officially called a “special antiterrorist operation” against “neo-Nazis,” but it quickly became clear to many that things were not going according to plan. This fed into cognitive and emotional coping mechanisms, forms of defensive consolidation: a retreat into comforting truths which help individuals deal with cognitive dissonance. For example, rather than accept that “our” Russian troops were indiscriminately using rockets against civilian targets in Ukraine, a person wrote to me via Facebook (while it was still accessible): “It's better that it's over quickly; Ukrainians

brought this upon themselves; it's better that it happens there than here; it was inevitable that the West would provoke a large conflict.”

DENIAL AND LAY NARRATIVES

Sociologist Stanley Cohen wrote a book called *States of Denial* more than 20 years ago about how people react to unpleasant events not with critical thinking, but with avoidance. This insight is relevant to all types of societies and historical periods. Most Russian people quickly came to “know” on some level that Putin had invaded Ukraine, that Russian forces are responsible for the deaths of thousands of Ukrainians, and that the massive destruction of Ukrainian cities (where, incidentally, a lot of Russian-speaking Ukrainians live) was the result. And yet they will actively “not know.” They will on some level continue to make use of narratives claiming that the Ukrainian leadership is guilty, that the West provoked the conflict, that Ukrainian resistance only makes the conflict worse, or that Ukrainian troops “choose” to contest or target urban territory, making civilian casualties worse.

Cohen concludes that denial has no easy solution. Historians of postwar Germany have long known of this problem: collective punishment did not lead to an enduring or deeply held sense of guilt, only a vague sense of responsibility. More powerful than guilt or shame are competing claims of victimhood.

Even among those with more awareness or a more instinctive grasp of the murderous capacities of their own state, the Russian response has been chiefly defensive consolidation. I don't use the familiar term “rally round the flag,” because what is happening in Russia is not directly connected to expressions of patriotism, or nationalism, or enthusiasm for either the “special military operation” or the Russian government. The state has failed to create a coherent conservative ideology, or meaningful reasons for loyalty to the regime, beyond self-interest and advancement. In my research, I often find examples of the Russian state's opaqueness or incoherence in the eyes of its citizens. Russian people fall back on a variety of instinctive and “lay” narratives—some of which coincide with elite talking points, but also have a life of their own.

Against the impossible truth of the war, the phrase “Truth [*pravda*] is on our side” is used by more than a few in a kind of magical defensive incantation—but it is not said with any sense that

the speaker celebrates this “truth.” An alternative translation of this emotionally evocative phrase could be, “Our cause is just.” A retired provincial engineer in his 60s says:

There’s disinformation on both sides, but we have the greater truth. Yes, it’s war: we’ll find out later who burned whom; there’ll be losses, probably big losses for us, and for you, but you cannot stop inevitable historical processes. This is not about fascism, I will admit, it’s about overcoming a greater injustice—the division of fraternal peoples.

SENSES OF LOSS

Two words stand out here: “injustice” and “fraternal.” Zooming out to look at the long post-communist period since 1991, it’s easy to see why these Soviet-style keywords still have purchase on the thinking even of younger people. The relative recovery of living standards from 1999 to 2008, which could have been Putin’s legacy, only papers over the bigger picture. By many measures of human flourishing, subjective well-being, and social mobility, Russia has barely progressed since the Soviet period. Indeed, it’s not hard to argue that for the majority, despite the façade of a roaring consumer sector and the shiny trappings of a market economy, life is more of a financial and future-fearful struggle than the so-called era of stagnation in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Once more, Russia is a struggling middle-income country with a GDP per capita similar to that of Argentina, Malaysia, or Bulgaria. Its oil and gas income flatters this statistic; in reality, incomes are so skewed toward the rich that the average wealth of a Russian family is negligible, the poor are reliant on microcredit to get by, and many people struggle to pay utility bills—even for smartphone data. Average incomes in Russia were recently surpassed by China for the first time—a remarkably bad milestone for Russia, given its mineral wealth and its highly educated and urban population, and China’s still urbanizing millions of poor citizens. Russia has also taken a tumble down the global ranking for wages, with real incomes similar to those in Mexico, Thailand, Turkey, and Brazil.

These social problems make it obvious why even now, a significant majority of over-40s

responding to polls express nostalgia for the USSR, as do nearly half of younger people over 25. Typically, this is interpreted as more evidence of chauvinism (a post-empire people harking back to a period of greatness), or an expression of the inability of some generations to adapt to change and their stubborn attachment to the state’s management of individual risk. Recently, a few scholars have rejected this negative assessment of “Soviet nostalgia.” (I prefer not to use this term at all.) Nonetheless, a shared sense of having “lost” something worthwhile, whether a political project of relative equality, a vast federal state of some modernizing power, or simply a coherent sense of social purpose, can act as a glue that binds all kinds of people to an elite in a time of trouble.

Defensive consolidation would therefore be part of a relative closing of the gap between an elite that has lost its way and a tired and disoriented people. What makes it different from the usual way of looking at reactions to war, such as “rally round the flag,” is that it is based on a deeper set of ideas that are dislocated in time and space (loss of the “good” USSR project, resentment against a collective West, social dislocation from the 1990s, and loss of social bonds in general). It is striking that despite some visible flag waving, the majority have not responded with

overt nationalistic or even patriotic fervor or enthusiasm. Even pro-war demonstrations must be carefully curated, so afraid is the regime of independent mobilizations.

Nonetheless, almost all Russians are patriots (why wouldn’t they be?) and seek ways of expressing their belief in their country. The only way of doing this right now is to defensively consolidate behind the “idea” of a political struggle for the nation (which is hardly even a sense of “Russianness”) against the hegemonic part of the world. Some Russian leftists have made a similar prognosis: that varieties of Soviet patriotism were discredited and discarded by Putinism, leaving the path open only to expressions of chauvinistic, even fascistic militarism.

Western scholarly, media, and other responses to the war on Ukraine have shown a large degree of incuriousness and moralizing, even demonizing of “the Russians.” We’re closer to the spirit of 1914 and open propaganda that paints the enemy as barbarians than to World War II, or even the Cold

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War. Lacking here is what American sociologist C. Wright Mills famously called the “sociological imagination”: an awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society’s context and history. It is ironic that the harshest voices criticize Russians for lacking the will or courage to respond morally to the actions of their leaders, but then themselves fall into emotional and untenable explanations of events.

My own view might seem controversial, but it involves taking a long view of the last thirty years or more as a still-unfinished process of coming to terms with the traumatic end of the Soviet period. We have to look to particular senses of loss if we are to explain a search for meaning and identity in the present that for now results in consolidation in Russia behind an idea that “everyone is against us, and yet we are the victim.”

RETURN OF THE TRAUMATIC POST-SOVIET SUBJECT

Anthropologist Serguei Oushakine coined the term “the patriotism of despair” in a book of that title published in 2009. He paired this with the idea of a “community of loss” to describe left-behind towns whose sons had been killed in the Chechen wars. Oushakine looked at how veterans’ mothers responded to the state’s abandonment of its own citizens. But what if we extend that insight to talk about a broader sense of absence in the present and its impetus to find a replacement set of values, objects of attachment, and ideas? Oushakine points to this possibility: he says his book is concerned with a “collapse of the general social context (symbolic order) within which actions and identities used to make sense.”

For me, this insight is intensified by the reactions of Russians to the war today. An incomplete process of integrating different experiences and ways of talking about loss and disappointment is visible in the shared reactive and defensive responses by Russians to their state’s aggression. We could go further and say that the current war is at least partly connected to the inherently traumatic nature of the experience of the USSR’s collapse, now out in the open. Do I mean that revanchist desires for punishment and aggression are unveiled? Well, once more, that could be part of it, but the nature of the trauma is more psychosocial than ethnonationalist. It gains visibility in the actions of Putin’s clique toward Ukraine, using ideas about the core nation and errant Ukrainian subjects, but its roots are surely in the loss of the

overall ends-driven logic of the Soviet project and the resulting social, economic, and political disorientation.

Some formidable scholars have started to substantiate the argument. Georgian-Russian philosopher Keti Chukhrov, in a recent book called *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism*, offers a unique political-economic history of communism. Her thinking is too complex to do justice to here, but her basic point is that we should take seriously the effect of the eradication of private property on the identities of Soviet people. The Soviet system was more than just communist ideology; it was a specific form of modernity where the utopian future orientation of the whole society could not be avoided, regardless of an individual’s ideas and views. However flawed the “deprivatization” of the economy and society, it had real leveling effects beyond income and access to goods and status.

Chukhrov’s argument is that the system presented an imaginary space of possibility that was continually held up as an ideal, regardless of reality. Indeed, its emphasis on continually building toward a shining future made references to current shortcomings, or complaints about privations, irrelevant. In place of desire for consumption or acquisitiveness, this form of modernity allowed people to invest themselves in production that had future meaning: the material of socialism, the smokestacks and factories of Stalinism, rather than the materialism of capitalism. But more than that, Chukhrov points to the remodeling of desire: it is based not on responding to a “lack,” but on the merits of involvement as a group member. Instead of atomized competition, there would be the satisfaction of inclusion in a project where one had no need to think of oneself as an individual “homo economicus” competing against the rest. Chukhrov’s argument, then, is about directing the “libido,” in a nonsexual sense, which drives all humans in their projects and life-aims.

THE SOCIAL EMOTIONS OF SOVIETNESS

We don’t need to completely accept Chukhrov’s radical psychoanalytical perspective to agree with the general idea of her argument; we can turn to a historical frame of reference, as researcher Galina Orlova recently has done. As a “social archaeologist” of the USSR, she emphasizes the overwhelming power of the Soviet project’s rhetorical language, with its focus on mobilization and acute sense of temporality. Soviet citizens were

always being made conscious of the historicity of their society, regardless of the reality of their own lives. They lived in a present that was simultaneously breaking from the capitalist and feudal past in the most radical ways and hurtling toward a future of plenitude.

People might not have felt up to this challenge of making history, but they were told most insistently that they were a part of it. The cognitive and ontological “relief” of knowing this not only helped individuals deal with the real privations, violence, and disappointments of Soviet reality; it gave ordinary, flawed people, who may have had little understanding of the political project, permission to ignore the bigger picture and attend to their mundane daily troubles. But it did not allow them to develop a sense of existing outside this totalizing social system. They could not abdicate membership and identity.

Some scholars have argued that retreat into private life and cares was a statement of detachment from the system, but Orlova would argue that the very allowance of heroic ordinariness contributed to a sense of alignment with society, and of being-in-common. After all, if I live in a society that is building communism, whatever meager contribution I make, whether serving as a nightwatchman in a polar north construction site or cooking meals for kindergarten children, gains a sense of working with society toward a single shared aim.

For scholars such as myself and Orlova, what we observe today is a keen sense of the loss of an ineffable “commonality” (*obshchnost'*). Collective memory can activate and even transmit to younger people a sense of this loss. In interview after interview, when interlocutors assess the current state of affairs in comparison with the Soviet order, they begin by talking about social security and perhaps even ideological foundations, but what dominates is the sense of the possibility of social communication, reciprocity, understanding, the human texture of material life. This comes through when they talk about workplaces, schools, their relations with their grade school teacher, neighbors, grandparents. About the reality of the low standard of living, the Cold War, state coercion, lack of personal freedom, and the technological ineffectiveness or inefficiency of the Soviet system they

are largely indifferent. “Yes, we may have lived badly, but. . . .”

People in the present are jarred into enthusiasm when the prospect of some reanimation of lost formats of communication presents itself—through work relations, volunteering, and other kinds of quasi-civiness. And these can be vicarious—witness the “nostalgic” popularity of Soviet comedies and dramas, even among younger people. What these modes have in common is that they can offer a substitute tinsel of emotional connectedness. But people want more. The thesis is simple: people suffer from the collapse of those forms of sociality that were part of the experience of the Soviet project. They are ready to support anything that somehow promises to return those forms of communication and unalienated existence in the world. This is not about the “political” as in ideological stances, not about national identity or empire, but about communicative bonds of collective experience. This is perhaps the one truth Putin really understands (without fully understanding) and can connect with.

The study of the social emotions of groups whose actions seem alien or even morally culpable to us has an inevitable political effect. We ascribe “resentment,” or victim-complexes, to those we disapprove of. Essentially, we avoid having to think about the deeper causes of these emotions. It is still surprising to me that the social and historical roots of the observed revanchism and bitterness of those who support Putin’s war, and those who only conditionally or reluctantly acquiesce to it, have been given so little attention.

Hopelessness and marginalization lead to the danger of radicalization of social groups that, given the recognition of their right to emotions of grief and loss, would not have been so hardened. People fall prey to those who give them hope for recognition of their emotional status. And it is no longer so important for them that in the process of recognition, the lost quality of social relations in an earlier era is replaced by loyalty to a despicable political regime. More positively, there are still plenty of their countrymen who, even now, while sharing a sense of loss, do not give in to the temptation to join in the celebration of the death and destruction that Russia has brought to their closest cultural neighbor, Ukraine. ■

“[T]he historical dispute with Russia reflects unresolved post-1991 conflicts centering on Lithuania’s occupation by the USSR. It is also shaped by recent threats to sovereignty and uncertainty regarding the future.”

Lithuania at the Frontier of the War in Ukraine

NERINGA KLUMBYTĖ

“**W**hat will *this* Lithuania be like?” wondered Ona, the oldest woman in a southern Lithuanian village where I conducted research during Lithuania’s accession to the European Union and NATO in 2004. She would say, “I don’t expect anything good from Lithuania; I remember what pre-Soviet Lithuania was like.” She had herded geese in the summers when she was five years old, and rocked a cradle in winter for food.

I was curious why Ona thought of sovereignty as recurring and temporary—something that comes and goes. For many villagers, statehood was like a cyclone: it was unpredictable, changing, and passing. For me, the achievement of independence from the Soviet authoritarian state, the transition to democracy, and integration into the EU and NATO did not seem temporary or questionable. But in 2022, the villagers’ understanding of time makes more sense than mine.

I have lived through only one change of regime—the collapse of the Soviet Union. The oldest villagers had lived through several regimes: the Russian Empire, Lithuania, the USSR, Nazi Germany, again the USSR, and again Lithuania. After Russia’s occupation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Donbas in 2014, they anxiously spoke about the “return of Russia.” They lived only 25 miles away from the Kaliningrad oblast, the heavily militarized Russian exclave. No matter how critical they were of *this* Lithuania, they did not want Russia to take it over again.

LONG STRUGGLE FOR SOVEREIGNTY

Ona knew that sovereignties do not last long in this part of the world and that regime changes are deadly. Her neighbor Elena took me once to an old village cemetery with unmarked World War II graves. Among the graves with headstones were strange unused plots with bumps covered by grass and wildflowers. In the rain, Elena would touch the warm, soft, wet ground as if it were a human body. She told me about the sounds of soil falling into a burial pit onto the fur coat of her classmate Juozas. He had gone to the woods to escape being drafted into the Red Army after the war. Juozas hoped that the Soviets would be defeated so he could return home. He joined the Lithuanian resistance forces, whom the villagers called “forest people” (*miškiniai*). Their average age was twenty-one.

Juozas, killed by the NKVD, the Soviet paramilitary police, was buried secretly at night, since his family was afraid of being accused of collaboration with the resistance. Elena’s friends and cousins who fought against the Soviet regime were buried in the same place. Some families were lucky enough to bury their sons, daughters, fathers, and mothers legally. Their gravestones bore the inscription, “Died tragically.” All the villagers knew what it meant. Other gravestones had inscriptions that said, “Died at the hands of bourgeois nationalists”—meaning the Lithuanian resistance forces. These gravestones were erected with funds from the Soviet state. It took ten years after the end of World War II for the graves of forest people to stop appearing in the village cemetery.

Many survivors lost a family member to the post-World War II fighting, to deportations, or to exile. Marx and Engels famously said that “proletarians have nothing to lose but their

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chains.” But the new “proletarians” of Lithuania lost much more to deportations, Soviet collectivization, the nationalization of property, the implementation of atheism, and Russification. In his book *Teroras*, Lithuanian historian Arvydas Anušauskas estimates that no fewer than 456,000 people were Soviet “genocide and terror victims and experienced violence.” That translates into “every third adult Lithuanian or every second man, every eighth woman, and every fifteenth child.”

Many Lithuanians lived in new chains that the Soviet authoritarian regime brought with its liberating ideology of communism: it allowed no freedom of religion, movement, speech, or association. Many, like Ona, enjoyed some privileges that the regime provided, like the opportunity for a secondary education. Others were repressed or sent to the gulag. At 16, Elena was accused of being a liaison to forest people. She was imprisoned, tortured, and deported to Siberia for 11 years. After Stalin’s death in 1953, mass violence terminated, but memories of violence remained and were voiced during the anti-Soviet nationalist movement in the late 1980s.

After the Russian Empire collapsed during World War I, the new states of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Finland were created. Lithuania drew its heritage primarily from the Lithuanian Grand Duchy, which had been the largest medieval state in Europe, extending from the Baltic Sea in the north, through parts of contemporary Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, to the Black Sea in the south. After gaining independence in 1918, Lithuania was a democratic republic. Following a 1926 coup, it became an authoritarian state.

Before the beginning of World War II, on August 23, 1939, the foreign ministers of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, agreeing to take no military action against each other for the next 10 years. They also signed secret protocols dividing Eastern Europe; Lithuania was to be in Nazi Germany’s sphere of influence. But according to the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty of September 28, 1939, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia fell under Soviet control.

In 1940, the USSR occupied Lithuania, which had been a neutral state. The Soviets installed a puppet government and staged parliamentary

elections. The new delegates petitioned the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union to accept Lithuania as part of the USSR. Reneging on the nonaggression pact, however, the Nazis attacked, pushed the Red Army to the east, and occupied Lithuania from 1941 to 1944. During the Nazi occupation, 195,196 Lithuanian Jewish residents (over 95 percent of the total) were killed.

In 1944, the Red Army reoccupied the Baltic states. This second occupation lasted for almost fifty years. The United States never recognized the incorporation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into the USSR. Lithuanian armed resistance forces were active across the entire country for almost a decade after World War II, until their last leaders were captured and executed. The resistance forces hoped that Western powers would help liberate Lithuania and reestablish it as a sovereign state. But there was no supply of weapons, just messages of encouragement and false promises on Voice of America radio broadcasts. Forest people climbed onto the tallest trees in the woods to capture the radio waves and hear assurances of forthcoming liberation.

After losing its independent statehood in 1940, Lithuania disappeared from maps. Lithuanians became a minority in the USSR. Their experiences and memories of

violence, their awareness of the national past, and their “Western” status in the USSR consolidated their identity in Soviet times.

New immigrants from the Soviet Union settled primarily in depopulated cities like Vilnius or Klaipėda or in newly built industrial towns. Compared with those in Latvia and Estonia, the Russian minority in Lithuania was relatively small (accounting for 8.5 percent of the population in 1959 and 9.4 percent in 1989).

In the late 1980s, a Lithuanian independence movement gave voice to the injustices experienced during World War II and the Soviet period. Its leaders called for the restoration of sovereignty, reintegration into Europe, and the return of justice for political prisoners and deportees. “Freedom” was among its major uniting ideals. Mikhail Gorbachev’s Soviet liberalization policies created the geopolitical context for the rise of the Lithuanian nationalist movement.

On March 11, 1990, the Supreme Council of Lithuania, comprising pro-independence

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in this part of the world.*

representatives chosen in free elections, pronounced Lithuania an independent state, making it the first Soviet Socialist Republic to secede. In a referendum held on February 9, 1991, three-fourths of citizens voted in favor of an independent democratic republic as the form of the new state. The United States recognized Lithuania's independence on September 2, and the USSR followed suit on September 16. On September 17, Lithuania became a member of the United Nations. The USSR ceased to exist on December 31, 1991.

DIVERGENT NARRATIVES

The anti-Soviet resistance of the forest people is part of Lithuania's post-Soviet official history, recognized by the EU and NATO. These memories are integral to reasserting the legitimacy of national sovereignty, which has been routinely undermined by Russian claims over the past two decades that the Baltic states are “failed states,” “NATO puppets,” and “Nazi collaborators.”

From the Russian ideologues' perspective, Lithuanian histories of Soviet occupation consist of “historical distortions” and denial of the postwar Nuremberg trial outcomes, according to which the Nazis had committed war crimes whereas the Soviet Union had sacrificed millions of its citizens to liberate Europe. Russia does not recognize the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states, claiming that they voluntarily acceded to the USSR. In June 2022, some members of the ruling United Russia party even suggested repealing Lithuania's independence, asserting that it had illegally seceded from the Soviet Union in 1990. A draft bill in the Duma claimed that the Russian Federation is the legal successor of the USSR on its territory, and that the recognition of Lithuania's independence by an unconstitutional body, the Soviet State Council—and without a referendum on secession—makes that act void.

Divergent historical narratives are codified in the Lithuanian and Russian criminal codes. In Lithuania's, Soviet war crimes are recognized as “genocide” (Article 99). Unlike the definition in the United Nations Genocide Convention, the Lithuanian criminal code states that genocide can be carried out against “any social or political group” in addition to national, ethnic, racial, or religious groups.

This approach, which treats Soviet war crimes as genocide, is irreconcilable with Russia's revival of patriotism centered on World War II, which

hails the Soviet victory as having delivered the liberation of Europe. In 2014, Russia enacted the so-called Yarovaya law, which makes the deliberate dissemination of false information about Soviet actions during World War II subject to criminal prosecution.

In 2010, the Lithuanian parliament passed a law criminalizing public approval of crimes committed by the USSR or Nazi Germany against the Lithuanian Republic or its citizens. It also criminalized denying or grossly diminishing such crimes. Similar laws were passed in Poland in 1998 and in Ukraine in 2015. These countries have also created museums dedicated to the crimes of communism and erected hundreds of monuments to the victims of Soviet terror. Soviet-era monuments commemorating the USSR's victory in World War II have been demolished.

As historian Nikolay Koposov argued in his 2017 book *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia*, Russia protects the memory of the state and Stalinism from its victims. Although Lithuanian, Polish, and Ukrainian laws also protect state narratives, Russia's approach is very different. Russia's sense of victimization emerges because Eastern European countries undermine its image as a dominant power and the liberator of Europe, whereas Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine seek to legitimize their own sovereignty.

In Lithuania, the historical dispute with Russia reflects unresolved post-1991 conflicts centering on Lithuania's occupation by the USSR. It is also shaped by recent threats to sovereignty and uncertainty regarding the future. For Russia, it is part of a revisionist politics as well as insecurity over its role in the world. Russian President Vladimir Putin famously said in 2005 that the collapse of the USSR was “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.”

The 2022 war in Ukraine epitomized Russia's revisionist politics. Its justifications for the invasion employed the same rhetoric about “failed states,” “Nazis,” and “NATO puppets” that it has used to define the Baltic states. The war has also further exposed Russian insecurities about its borders and global leadership. Whereas Moscow sees Ukraine and the Baltics as part of Russia's historical lands, these countries emphasize their sovereignty grounded in Western European traditions, democratic values, and welfare and security regimes, without Russia.

SAFE WITH THE WEST?

After the NATO summit held in Madrid on June 28–30, 2022, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda declared that Lithuanian citizens had never been so safe, even if threats at the borders have grown exponentially. Yet this safety coexists with anxiety that war is coming. In a July 9 Facebook post, Lithuanian writer Marius Ivaškevičius said: “If I was a king of Lithuania, I would prepare for the imminent war and do everything to avoid it. I would make every effort to protect my cities and people from annihilation and at the same time make sure that every citizen of my kingdom knows what they must do if the war begins.”

When the war started in Ukraine in February 2022, one Vilnius private school principal spent substantial funds to secure supplies—food, water, batteries—in case students had to hide in the school’s basement after a nuclear attack. Now she is fighting the rats that discovered these emergency supplies. Other Lithuanians renewed their passports and made plans to leave the country. A friend of mine regretted that she could not finish her cancer treatment and “will have to die.” Some citizens started buying guns and joining the military or paramilitary organizations. But some argue that Lithuania is not defensible, since missiles could be launched from Belarus and reach the farthest corners of the country without the Russian military even entering its territory.

This was not the case three decades ago, after the Soviet Union collapsed. The threat did not exist in the early 1990s, when Russia, under President Boris Yeltsin, experienced its most democratic period. At that time, accession to the EU and NATO was the major foreign policy goal of Lithuanian political elites. The government presented integration in the Euro-Atlantic organizations as a way to escape from the Soviet past by joining the Western world and its democratic and security institutions. The former communist leadership and nationalist, centrist, liberal, and conservative parties and leaders were united in this aim.

In 1994, Lithuania submitted an official application to become a NATO member. In 1995, it signed an association agreement putting the nation

on a path to EU membership. In a 2003 referendum, 91 percent of voters (with a 63 percent turnout) voted for joining the EU as a full member state.

In 2003, during my research before and after the referendum, when I asked about the EU, respondents were not sure what the bloc stood for or how life would change after joining it. Many viewed membership in the EU as an elite project, and expected it to primarily benefit the country’s elites. Respondents were also skeptical of the political elite’s commitment to the national cause.

Marginalized villagers did not expect to benefit from European travel privileges or access to the EU job market. Their reluctance was often expressed in fears of losing Lithuania’s sovereignty by joining another union, not long after Lithuania had seceded from the Soviet Union. But as advertisements promoting EU membership proliferated, they hoped that their children and grandchildren would benefit.

Soon after Lithuania’s integration into the EU, euroskeptics expressed concern over the loss of national identity in a globalizing world. But

Memories are integral to reasserting the legitimacy of national sovereignty.

resentment toward the elites and the EU did not mean that they wanted Lithuania to become part of the Russian Federation or remain in its zone of influence. Nobody I interviewed in rural communities and the cities of Kaunas

and Vilnius raised this as an option. Moreover, the often-misunderstood nostalgia for Soviet times, strongly visible in 2003–2004 among both rural and urban populations, did not entail any desire to return to Soviet-style conditions. This nostalgia recorded the sentiments of those newly marginalized by the transition to capitalism who wished to be heard and recognized. They made arguments about security and economic uncertainty, not statehood.

In 2007, Lithuania joined the Schengen zone of free movement within most of Europe, and in 2015 it adopted the euro currency. The opening of borders led to increased emigration to the EU, raising national concerns about brain drain and depopulation. But the demographic situation stabilized in 2019, with more people immigrating to the country than emigrating.

The threat posed by Russia was not articulated in Lithuania’s policy or public discourse until the

2014 occupation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. In fact, the 2002 and 2012 National Security Strategies referred to mutual trust and collaboration with Russia. The 2017 National Security Strategy, however, named Russia as the major security and cybersecurity threat facing Lithuania. Likewise, NATO's new strategic concept, approved at the June 2022 summit, identified Russia as the most significant threat to its members' peace and security.

In April and May 2022, the parliaments of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia voted unanimously to declare the killing of Ukrainian civilians in the town of Bucha, near Kyiv, an act of genocide. On May 10, the Lithuanian parliament declared Russia to be a "terrorist state," taking the most radical position among European countries.

The town hall in Vilnius bears a plaque that quotes a line from US President George W. Bush's speech at that site on November 23, 2002: "Anyone who would choose Lithuania as an enemy has also made an enemy of the United States of America." Lithuania's membership in NATO was a decisive step in the country's post-Soviet history. After Russia launched the war in Ukraine, NATO protection became the main guarantee of Lithuania's sovereignty.

When US President Donald Trump criticized European countries for not spending sufficiently to support NATO, Lithuania was among the first to increase its contributions. Currently, it is among the top eight member states in terms of defense spending as a share of gross domestic product. Lithuania's defense budget has risen from 0.76 percent of GDP in 2013 to 2.5 percent in 2022.

Since 2014, NATO has extended its presence by deploying troops and equipment in the Baltic states. The June 2022 decision to continue to increase NATO's "enhanced forward presence" in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland is intended to strengthen Lithuania as a military frontline and protect the Suwałki Gap, a narrow corridor of Lithuanian borderlands that separates the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea from Belarus. If this territory were occupied by Russia, the Baltic states would be cut off from their NATO allies. Kaliningrad is home to the Russian Baltic Fleet and a deployment location for nuclear-capable Iskander missiles. The expected admission of Finland and Sweden to NATO will create another layer of protection in the Baltic Sea.



Figure 1. Images of Ukrainians by the Užupis bridge and the Orthodox Cathedral of the Theotokos in Vilnius. (Photo by the author.)

SIGNS OF WAR

Kyiv is only 447 miles away from Vilnius. Missile strikes in Kyiv cannot be heard in Lithuania, but people on the southern border with Belarus hear the explosions of missiles that Belarusian and Russian forces launch during their military exercises. In Vilnius, residents see troops on the streets, military equipment on the roads, and warplanes scything the sky.

It seems that there are more Ukrainian flags in Vilnius, Riga, and Tallinn, the capitals of the three Baltic states, than their own flags. In Lithuania, the government and media warn that if Ukraine is occupied, Russian occupation of the Baltic states may follow. Public support for Ukraine is overflowing. In June, Lithuanian citizens collected more than 5 million euros in just three days to buy a Turkish Bayraktar combat drone for Ukraine. Internet memes mocked European leaders' reluctance to supply arms to Ukraine, juxtaposing it with this Lithuanian citizen activism.

In the summer of 2022 in Vilnius, I could not walk a block without seeing a flag, a sticker, an art piece, or just a ribbon in the Ukrainian colors of blue and yellow. Images from the war zones and photos of Ukrainian people dotted the cityscape. (See Figure 1.) Vilnius shop windows were decorated in blue and yellow; flower beds bloomed with blue and yellow pansies; billboards announced fundraising efforts for Ukraine; concerts and art shows were staged to raise money. The words "For your and our freedom!" appeared in many public spaces in Vilnius. (See Figure 2.)

Graffiti declared, “F*** Putin!” (without asterisks) on the walls of downtown side streets.

A billboard for the Ateitis children’s international soccer tournament displayed three flags for Ukraine: one original flag representing the country and two more covering the Belarusian and Russian flags. On billboards on both sides of the major Vilnius-Kaunas highway, travelers saw the famous exchange from the beginning of the war, when a Ukrainian border guard on Snake Island, told to surrender by a Russian warship, responded: “Russian warship, go f*** yourself.” (Again, without asterisks.)

On June 18, 2022, the Lithuanian Youth Organization Council organized a fundraising event called “Rave on Putin’s Grave.” The invitations pictured Putin in a coffin and invited young people to join a wake and symbolically send off the Russian leader to his burial.

As of May 2022, Ukrainian refugees constituted two percent of the population in Lithuania. In a country restaurant far from Vilnius, a waitress told me she did not speak Lithuanian because she was a Ukrainian refugee. The menus in most restaurants were in Lithuanian, English, and Ukrainian. On the Bolt ride-hailing app, drivers’ names increasingly showed up as Mykola, Serhiy, or Oleksiy—Ukrainian names.

The news media aired interviews with survivors from the war zone. The stories haunted me for days: thirteen bakers killed in Makariv; the bombed maternity and children’s hospital in Mariupol; the massacre in Bucha; an 8-year-old boy who wrote in his diary during the siege of Mariupol, “My two dogs died,” and “so did my grandma Galya, and my beloved city”; farmers blown up by mines while plowing the fields; and a father holding his son’s hand after he was killed at a bus stop in Kharkiv.

During my research in 2016, I found that the majority of my respondents from Lithuanian Russian-speaking minorities, especially older generations (according to the 2021 census, Russians make up 5 percent of the population), followed the official discourse in Russia and agreed with Russia’s perspectives on Soviet and post-Soviet history. But they also negotiated their identities in public and private spaces, emphasizing “coexistence” and “shared suffering” with other



Figure 2. Cathedral Square in Vilnius. The flag says: “Glory to Ukraine! For your and our freedom!” (Photo by the author.)

Lithuanians, reclaiming their belonging in a post-Soviet society. After the beginning of the war in 2022, the sense of political belonging among Lithuanians, Lithuanian Russians, Lithuanian Poles, and others has been increasingly defined by either support for Ukraine or approval of the invasion.

The war has divided Russian-speaking minorities, as well. In Vilnius, three Russian Orthodox priests were dismissed after criticizing Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This prompted the Lithuanian Orthodox Church to consider the possibility of seeking autonomy from the Moscow Patriarchate, a step supported by the Lithuanian government.

When I was 17, I remember waking up as the floors of our five-story apartment building trembled from the arrival of Soviet tanks in Kaunas. Soon after, on January 13, 1991, the Soviet army attacked the television tower in Vilnius and killed fourteen people, including a 23-year-old woman, close to my age. After being run over by a tank, she called her mother from the hospital as she slowly bled to death. These deaths became symbols of people’s desire for freedom in an independent Lithuania. I thought I was part of the last generation to see tanks on the streets and carry such memories of death.

Wars do not end with victories or peace agreements. They continue in people’s minds and

The Ukrainian colors of blue and yellow were everywhere in Vilnius.

reemerge in memories. In Lithuanian rural communities, almost six decades after World War II, villagers spoke of marked and unmarked graves, bumps on the land, and the sounds of soil falling on dead bodies. Their lives were heavy

with loss and longing. In Ukraine today, children write in their diaries that they want to become soldiers when they grow up. We have to wait for the time when they will dream of being astronauts again. ■

“Protest art offers what no other post-Soviet, institutionalized opposition has been able to provide: the possibility of imagining a radical alternative to the seemingly unchangeable authoritarian status quo.”

Art and Protest in Kazakhstan

DIANA T. KUDAIBERGENOVA

In early January 2022, my native Kazakhstan became a top item in the international news when massive antigovernment protests swept the country. As people flocked to central squares, even though they had disjointed agendas, most were demanding real political change. Within days, the protests generated images that had previously been unimaginable for the majority of Kazakhstanis.

First came a video of a monument to former President Nursultan Nazarbayev being toppled in one of the retired dictator’s strongholds, the Almaty region. Then came unprecedented violence and the first reports of victims, as well as allegations from top officials about “terrorist attacks.” There were many reports of organized armed groups. Journalists, scholars, and others close to the protests on the ground learned quickly to distinguish peaceful protesters from violent mobs trying to exploit the situation.

On January 6, the day of the worst violence, peaceful protesters gathered in Almaty, the country’s biggest city. In New Square, they displayed a long poster bearing the message in Kazakh: *Biz Qarapayim Halyqpyz, Biz Terrorist Emespiz* (“We Are Ordinary People, We Are Not Terrorists”). This slogan and the associated social media hashtag #BizQarapayimHalyqpyz marked a historic breakthrough for Kazakhstani society. The demonstrators aimed to convey the legitimacy of their protest as an act of communication, while also using banners to shield themselves from bullets and violent repression. They encouraged people to speak openly to a regime that many simply called “power”—*vlast*’ in Russian or *bilik* in Kazakh.

It was not the first time that ordinary citizens in Kazakhstan had used posters, slogans, and protest art as tools to speak up to the regime. Yet the language, the form, and the performance of the January 6 banner brought regime–society relations into focus.

The wave of protests that culminated in the toppling of the Nazarbayev monument came to be known as the Kazakh Spring. The protests started as early as March 2019, following the strongman’s resignation, in response to the regime’s move to install its chosen successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, instead of holding open, competitive, and democratic elections. From the start, protest art was one of the main tools of resistance. In what became known locally as the “poster wars,” anonymous activists challenged the authoritarian regime with a series of posters demanding open and fair elections. Some quoted the constitution, noting that one of its articles states that “the only source of power is the people.” Others expressed their demands by quoting the Soviet rock band Kino’s legendary song “Changes!”

Groups of people all across the country, from Astana to Uralsk and Almaty, were arrested for protesting during the poster wars, even when the posters they carried were blank. When the police arrested participants for standing at rallies, they staged walking protests (*seruen*), using the streets, famous monuments, and parks as stages for their prolonged demonstrations.

As the poster became a symbol of civil disobedience during these three years of constant demonstrations in Kazakhstan, law enforcement officers were puzzled as to the source of this form of protest. At the heart of the Kazakh Spring were artists’ studios where young activists and future political leaders met and planned their next rallies. This was where new ideas and slogans for posters were born. In one operation, activists repainted

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a semiofficial Nazarbayev mural in one of Almaty's microdistricts, turning the old dictator's stern visage into the face of a clown. That was accompanied by a social media campaign with the hashtag #CancelElbasy—a repudiation of the title “Elbasy” (“Leader of the Nation”), which Nazarbayev continued to hold after his resignation as president. Constitutional reforms approved in a June 2022 referendum would strip Nazarbayev of that title along with numerous privileges.

Protest art may not be a new phenomenon for European societies, where artists historically have been the avant-garde of political change. But examining the way it has developed since the late 1980s in the post-Soviet space can provide an original contribution to our understanding of political dynamics and transformations in nondemocratic and highly authoritarian contexts. Art, and especially visual art, has become a form of expression and protest, as well as a platform that gives voice to many in places where nothing else has seemed to work, to ensure that they would be seen and heard by those in power, both in the regimes and among the elites.

In countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, as well as Russia, political change has been inspired by art exhibitions and artists' studio discussions that transformed the private sphere of Soviet-style “kitchen talks,” where many had discussed political dissent, into vast revolutionary spaces. Protest art offers what no other post-Soviet, institutionalized opposition has been able to provide: the possibility of imagining a radical alternative to the seemingly unchangeable authoritarian status quo. It demonstrates how monuments to the most powerful dictators can be destroyed in seconds. Above all, it inspires and demands change. In conditions of an almost total absence of viable institutions to counter growing authoritarianism and the persistence of personalized regimes, with a relatively weak civil society, local contemporary art emerges as a driving force to resist and rethink these power relations.

CRITICAL MISSION

Protest art is part of a form of contemporary art that emerged in the post-Soviet space as the influence of once-dominant Socialist Realism began to wane. This was a completely new phenomenon, both conceptually and practically. For the first

time in almost a century, art offered nearly complete freedom from both state domination and the logic of propagandistic production.

Those in this region who proudly call themselves contemporary or conceptual artists do not receive state subsidies. They are not part of the state-controlled Artists' Union or any other form of state domination of artistic production. Contemporary art in post-Soviet Central Asia is a type of cultural production that aims to be free from state censorship, control, and support.

This often means enduring harassment, fines, and threats. In some of the most severe cases, artists have faced criminal charges. This was the case with Uzbek photojournalist Umida Akhmedova (a recipient of the Vaclav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent), first in 2009 and again in 2014, when she protested in front of the Ukrainian Embassy in Tashkent against a crackdown on anti-government protests in Kyiv.

Uzbek artist Vyachaslav Akhunov, who dedicated his lifetime of artistic production to rethinking and ridiculing Soviet propaganda (in his reworking of Lenin posters, for example) and openly criticized the regime of Islam Karimov in comments to the press, was subject to foreign travel restrictions for several years. His younger conceptual artist colleagues were

often worried that they would not get their Uzbek passports issued in time to make scheduled trips, or that they would not be allowed out of the country at all, because of the critical stances they had taken against the regime.

Conceptual art in these contexts is created not to serve the regime (as Socialist Realist art did) or corporate interests (as commercial art does) but to produce a specific field of critique. “The art cannot be conceptual, contemporary, if it is not critical,” one local curator once told me. She did not mean that it is a prerequisite for every artist to find something to criticize. But in this field, the rules were set unanimously a long time ago, and protest art remains a barometer of the political injustices of repressive regimes.

Kazakh political artist Askhat Akhmediyarov once told me that “the artist is like a surgeon,” on a mission to detect and remove authoritarian frames of thinking. The artist has to work on a deeper level, he explained, in order to establish dialogues with society, but also to get rid of the

*Coercion gave rise to the
country's most creative
protest movement.*

frames that regime propaganda established in people's minds: that change is impossible or that the stable status quo is preferable to uncertainty and chaos. The role of the contemporary artist is to demonstrate reality as it is, such as the unbearable living standards that Akhmediyarov portrays in his series dedicated to class stratification.

Contemporary art also has to offer an alternative future—not in the form of the ubiquitous official banners promising a “prosperous homeland” in fifty years, but an alternative that everyone can start building now. By doing so, the contemporary art community in Central Asia quickly developed into a thriving sector of civil society.

TALKING BACK

On March 19, 2019, Nazarbayev delivered a televised address in which he announced his sudden resignation as leader of the nation he had ruled for thirty years. This remarkable event gave rise to a new epoch in which Nazarbayev remained bodily present in public and political life, retaining the influential position of Leader of the Nation, but in a slow transit from his long reign of total control to an undetermined future.

Rapid changes followed Tokayev's installation as interim president. Nazarbayev's eldest daughter, Dariga, was appointed the new speaker of the Senate, putting her next in line to the presidency. This move raised concerns among the public that she was being groomed as her father's eventual successor. The protests were partly directed against this possibility.

Days after Nazarbayev's resignation, the capital city formerly called Astana and Furmanov Avenue, the central street in Almaty, were renamed after him, setting off a number of protests and petitions. An anonymous artistic Facebook account called Akimat Astany (“the city administration of Astana”) created a popular digital slogan: “Tokayev is not my president, Nur-Sultan is not my capital, Dariga is not my speaker of the Senate.”

A local alternative band promptly released the song “*Ya umirayu v Nur-Sultane*” (“I Am Dying in Nur-Sultan”), which was played at unsanctioned rallies and made into a legendary meme. Contemporary artist Medina Bazargali organized a solo walking picket against staged elections right after the March 19 resignation and broadcast it live on their Instagram account, an act that instantly turned the 17-year-old artist from Almaty into the “symbol of a new revolution,” as Bazargali put it.

In an interview I conducted with the artist in 2020, they explained how this brave act allowed them to overcome a “certain barrier” and gain a sense of freedom:

There was a lot of activism back then [in the spring of 2019], and my picket gave me the opportunity to speak up freely about things I wanted to say and say it openly online. . . . Perhaps that March was a definitive moment for me when I understood that I could freely talk about things I do not like. Not that I just don't like it, but that I want the change to be coherent. . . . I just feel an enormous responsibility as a citizen. . . . When I overcame that barrier—that main fear when you are so scared—to tell the truth online, then at that moment I completely rejected my fear with that picket, and since then, I openly say what I feel and think.

INDEPENDENCE GENERATION

In March and April of 2019, a series of protests and the formation of underground artistic and political movements gave rise to a new concept in Kazakhstani politics. This was the Qazakh Koktemi (Kazakh Spring) and the deinstitutionalized political movement now known as Oyan, Qazaqstan (Wake Up, Kazakhstan!).

For most Kazakhstanis, Qazakh Koktemi culminated on April 23, 2019, with an artistic intervention at the Almaty marathon. During the race, large banners were unfurled at three locations. Their main message was: “You cannot run from the truth. For Fair Elections” (*Ot Pravdy ne ubezish. Adil Sailau Ushin*). Asya Tulesova and Beybarys Tolymbetov held a smaller banner, leading to their arrest, while another was hung but abandoned by a different group of art activists. Two other activists, photographer Aigul Nurbulatova and Sunbike Suleimenova, who was four months pregnant and was filming the event, were also arrested by the police.

All four were immediately interrogated and spent long hours in a cold prison cell before being put on trial for their actions, prompting large gatherings of activists, artists, friends, and journalists who attended and reported on the court hearings. This attempt to deter further activism by coercion ironically gave rise to the country's most creative protest movement. It also turned Tulesova, Suleimenova, and Tolymbetov into the initial leaders of the newly formed Oyan, Qazaqstan movement, which was consolidated in the corridors of the courthouse between the trials of activists in April and May

2019. This was also how the so-called poster wars started.

The protest movement was led by young people, particularly the so-called independence generation born shortly before or after 1991, when Kazakhstan became independent. Members of the movement were aware that it was rooted in underground meetings of young contemporary artists. Even if Oyan, Qazaqstan looked from the outside like a political movement promoting reforms and democratization, internally it was driven by the creative might of young artists. Gathering for the first time in an unnamed art studio in late March 2019, the group of artists was diverse and relatively small, not more than 15 or 20 people from the same network who had exhibited together, partied at the same clubs, and met for discussions in the same artistic circles.

“Everyone completely switched off their phones and hid them in a separate room so that secret police wouldn’t have access to our information,” remembered one of the activists (who, like the others I interviewed, asked to remain anonymous). They offered the same reasons for their gathering. One said, “Unfortunately, I cannot imagine the situation where we would have fair elections in Kazakhstan.” As another put it, “We were triggered by Nazarbayev’s resignation and by the fact that he simply relegated his power to Tokayev, another person from his tight circle of elites.”

When I asked an activist what led them to engage in this political art and activism even though they had not previously done so, they said:

It did not happen in April; it happened earlier, in March, the event that we all are aware of, when our first president left and when subsequently they renamed the capital city after him in just one day [without holding a referendum on the issue]. . . . Before that, I thought that there were a lot of unfair issues that we were putting up with constantly. Some of these things are completely unbearable. But that move . . . just raised such a feeling inside me—I could not believe this; how can this occur at all? It was very shameful just to be silent and not attempt to do something against it. [If we didn’t act], it would have just demonstrated that something is wrong with our society. We do not have an ideology, and our only “ideology” is paternalism, and on top of that, it is

*In the post-Soviet space, art
offered freedom from
state domination.*

this type of paternalism where [the masses] do not even receive these resources. Only a tiny group lives on the benefits of these resources, and the main part of the population barely survives. . . . At that moment, me and my friends, other people involved [in the anonymous art group] did not think of our protest acts as a continuation of our art careers; it was more an act of despair. Because we no longer could be silent, and we felt that we needed to say something. . . . We were not in direct contact with those other people who protested with posters in other cities in Kazakhstan. We did not know each other, but we understood that everyone knows about [authoritarianism], and many people think about what to do.

All the members of this anonymous art group remembered how their moments of short-lived happiness over Nazarbayev’s resignation were overshadowed by enduring moments of despair over the fact that “it brought no change.” Their urgent need for change drove them to action and inspired the idea for the banner bearing the message “You cannot run from the truth” to be displayed at the Almaty marathon at the end of April. As one activist from the group remembered it:

If it wasn’t for that banner, Oyan, Qazaqstan wouldn’t have existed right now.

Because prior to June 5 [2019, when activists announced the creation of the movement at a press conference] it was simply a disorganized number of people, and we did not have the name of the movement. To be completely honest, not everybody had a plan or strategy to self-organize. But then when the banner set everything in motion—some of our art activists were arrested and were tried—people started coming to the court hearings. . . . In this process, we understood that there were a lot more of us—like-minded people who were united in the corridors of the courtrooms—and we understood that we needed to do something.

The aim of this underground group was to produce anonymous visual protest art, and this dictated the medium of expression—handmade banners bearing catchy slogans, displayed in public spaces. Activists gathered in art studios to discuss the form and message of each banner, decide on locations for display, and delegate to each group the task of placing it in a specific public space. Then

another group was responsible for taking photos of the banner before the police could remove it. All the members of the group and their friends then disseminated the photos on social media, where the images spread widely in Kazakhstan and beyond.

Each banner, even after the historic April 2019 Almaty marathon intervention, spurred public discussions, media reports, and commentary by local political analysts. The intention, according to the creators, was to start a public dialogue about the unequal and unfair nature of the authoritarian regime in Kazakhstan. After the first poster in April 2019 called for open and fair elections, a banner in early June 2019, also displayed in Almaty, cited the first article of the Kazakh Constitution: “The only source of power in the state is the people” (*narod*).

This “constitutional banner” was placed at a pedestrian bridge in the city center, over one of Almaty’s main avenues, in the early morning hours. By the time a photo of the banner was widely shared on social media, news of the arrest of local contemporary artist Roman Zakharov had also spread across social media channels, from Facebook and Instagram to Telegram and private messenger groups. Online mass media was quick to relay the social media reports. Zakharov was hastily tried on charges related to the “constitutional banner.” He faced up to 15 days in a temporary detention center, but the story was shared so widely—and the idea that someone could be imprisoned just for citing the constitution caused such outrage—that he was released later on the day of the trial, hailed as a hero.

OPEN LETTER

Saule Suleimenova is a well-known Almaty-based contemporary artist. She has been protesting with her art since the mid-1980s, when she was part of the first unofficial art groups to emerge at the end of the *perestroika* years, such as the famous Green Triangle in Almaty. Over time, Suleimenova’s art became more critical of the political realities around her. She is now perhaps one of the most prominent voices of decolonial post-Soviet art, which questions and conceptualizes Central Asia’s position and pathways in relation to different empires and colonial experiences, past and present. Her work is a testament to the transformations her country has gone through in the past three decades.

In our conversations, when I cannot find any other words but keep asking how she manages to

feel and capture her time so well, she tells me that it is literally under her skin. Every event hits harder than the previous one. Not only does her work engage with contemporary events, it also confronts dark passages in Soviet history. Suleimenova has produced works commemorating the victims of Stalinist terror by depicting faces in the gulags. She has also done a series on the 1933 Kazakh famine, known as *Asharshylyq*, which happened at the same time as the Ukrainian Holodomor, was similarly caused by Stalin’s collectivization campaign, and claimed the lives of at least a quarter of the Kazakh population.

On July 6, 2022, Suleimenova opened a solo exhibition of her art in the heart of Almaty’s old quarter. The opening fell on a day of great symbolism: it was Nazarbayev’s unofficial date of birth, as well as the official celebration of Astana Day. Moreover, July 6 marked the passage of six months since January 6, the most violent day of the protests. In Kazakhstan, few people call them “the January protests.” Those who are scared simply refer to them as the “events” (*sobitiya*), whereas those who are braver call the episode Bloody January (*Qandy Qantar*). For those who still hurt, *Qantar* (January) suffices. The difference in nomenclature is not accidental. Kazakhstani society has been deeply traumatized by what happened.

Suleimenova, for as long as I have known her, has always been attentive to emotions rather than words. She responded to January 6 with a project that aims to heal the collective trauma. Several weeks prior to the exhibition’s opening, she posted requests on all her social media accounts, asking people to donate plastic bags for a big plastic art painting. Suleimenova has worked with plastic bags for over a decade, incorporating bits and pieces of these mundane objects into works of art. This time, she asked people to donate red plastic bags because the work was to be dedicated to Bloody January. She called the exhibition *Biz Qarapayim Halyqpyz*, quoting the January 6 poster that declared, “We Are Ordinary People.”

As the spectators entered an old house in downtown Almaty that hosts an art space called Dom, they faced a large painting of the city’s New Square. (See Figure 1.) For years, the square has served as a space for demonstrations—from the December 1986 protests that were violently repressed by Moscow’s forces, to the opposition’s clashes with the local police throughout the 2000s, and now in the tragic days of January 2022. Suleimenova depicted everything in the



Figure 1. Saule Suleimenova, “The Skies above Almaty. Bloody January.” Shown at the July 2022 exhibition *We Are Ordinary People* in Almaty, Kazakhstan. (Artist’s photo.)

massive painting—the old Soviet buildings standing side by side, with the Monument of Independence and its stela (which none of the artists I interviewed particularly liked), and former administrative offices in the background. Every little piece of this urban structure is known to most Kazakhstans who have been to Almaty, the former capital, at least once in their lifetime.

This is the central space where the old Soviet city meets the new megalomaniacal and neoliberal Almaty, with its proliferating shopping malls. The contours of the familiar settings are painted in red to symbolize the blood of the people who died during the protests. The spectator is confronted

with that reality, and with the silence that suddenly fills the busy room, facing questions.

The question posed by the exhibition’s curator, Vladislav Sludsky, was an obvious one: Has art become the new instrument to deal with the collective trauma caused by the regime? Suleimenova said she hoped that many politicians would visit the exhibition to attempt to answer that question. She sent an invitation to the Kazakh president himself.

Contemporary art has long been in conversation with the regime. In this case, the artist chose the dictatorial power of the regime as her main opponent. Still, the invitation hangs there as an open letter to a state that has to finally start listening. ■

“Squeezed by border closures and military and economic pressure from their own government, the Pamirs’ diverse population is suffering a blockade from all sides.”

Dying Dreams in Tajikistan’s Global Borderland

TILL MOSTOWLANSKY

On May 16, 2022, security forces moved into Khorog, the capital of Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province, to violently subdue anti-government protests. In the following weeks, Tajik soldiers killed dozens of civilians as well as the local leader Mamadboqir Mamadboqirov. The government’s crackdown came as no surprise; similar operations had been ordered several times by Tajik President Emomali Rahmon since 2012. Nevertheless, the latest targeted violence against civilians was the worst since the 1992–97 Tajik civil war ended twenty-five years ago. Internet services in the region were suspended, and the Tajik government developed a narrative of a Western conspiracy that had led to the violence. There were arrests of members of the opposition and civil society activists across Tajikistan.

In the late 1990s, the end of the civil war brought hopes of development and prosperity to Gorno-Badakhshan, often called “the Pamirs” in reference to its prominent mountain range. The end of the Soviet supply system to this strategic border region next to China and Afghanistan had devastated the economy and impoverished its people. Along with the civil war’s end, factors including the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, China’s steep economic rise in the early 2000s, and increasing international development funding could have led to favorable economic prospects. But most hopes of improvement never materialized for the majority of inhabitants. After a quarter-century and hundreds of millions of dollars in development and security assistance to Tajikistan, the

region is isolated, international borders are closed, and dependency on remittances from precarious labor migration to Russia remains high.

In her 2019 book *Global Borderlands*, on Subic Bay in the Philippines, sociologist Victoria Reyes characterizes such areas as sites that have inequalities written into their very fabric and in which meanings, identities, and sovereignty are contingent. Global borderlands exist in a state of exception in which empire and imperialism have thrived and continue to take hold. The larger High Asian borderland of which the Pamirs are part—including areas in Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan—has long been marked by such processes and constellations of power.

In the twentieth century, the region’s colonial frontiers transformed into Cold War borders, and nation-states sought to pull these borderlands’ ethnically and religiously diverse populations ever closer into their orbits. The latest violence in the Pamirs is part of this longer history, in which fraught relations with the state, war, and economic marginalization, as well as oppression based on language, ethnicity, and religion, have encountered transient dreams of globalization.

WHO IS THE STATE?

The legacy of the civil war continues to influence politics in Tajikistan. Rahmon, who came to power during the war, has been on a long quest to quell the opposition to which he had to make concessions in the 1997 peace agreement. Armed groups from the Pamirs had been part of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), which was guaranteed 30 percent of government posts after the war. In 2015, however, the Tajik government banned a former UTO member, the Islamic

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Renaissance Party, citing trumped-up terrorism charges. The increasingly violent suppression of dissent in the Pamirs can be seen as part of the Tajik government's larger project of eradicating opposition throughout the country.

It is doubtful whether silencing critical voices in the Pamirs will be possible in the long term. People in the region receive very little assistance from Dushanbe, the capital, and they endure economic and political marginalization, not to mention the religious and linguistic discrimination that many face as Shia Ismaili Muslims and speakers of distinct Pamir languages. The Tajik state has had a fragmented presence in the region since the end of the civil war, investing minimally in trade and infrastructure projects while leaving most aspects of social and material development to international providers of funding.

In this regard, the institutions of the Aga Khan Development Network, chaired by the imam and leader of the global community of Ismaili Muslims, have been of utmost importance. During the civil war, they provided humanitarian aid essential to survival in the Pamirs. Since the war, these institutions have overseen an array of development projects in areas from agriculture, energy, infrastructure, and banking to education and health. But at the time of writing in July 2022, the government began to signal that it was trying to squeeze Ismaili institutions out of Tajikistan.

The vast majority of Gorno-Badakhshan's more than 220,000 inhabitants are Ismailis. Nearby areas in Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan also have sizable Ismaili populations. The Aga Khan IV and his institutions are hugely influential in some of these areas. However, Ismaili organizations have sought to avoid direct political engagement, as is their practice in other development contexts in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Many people in the Pamirs have come to rely on Ismaili institutions to deliver services that previously, in the Soviet era, were provided by the state. As a result, the question of who exactly represents and personifies the state in the Pamirs has no straightforward answer. For over a decade, Rahmon has sought to reduce this ambivalence about the state's role by violent means. The Tajik government could have encouraged loyalty and calmed dissent through policies of redistribution and improving people's living conditions. Instead,

People in the region receive very little assistance from Dushanbe.

the authorities continue to squeeze the Pamirs, long seen as an extractive frontier rich in resources and providing access to the Chinese market.

This extractive relationship fundamentally differs from the one the Soviet state sought to promote among its citizens in the Pamirs. During much of the Soviet era, they were treated as a border population that required close integration into the broader framework of the country. These policies were based on self-interest related to border security, and should be seen in the context of parallel Soviet policies of displacing and resettling people from the Pamirs by force.

In the last three decades of the Soviet Union, many of the remaining inhabitants received various benefits based on the fact that they lived in a strategically important borderland. Neither the Tajik state nor Ismaili institutions could subsequently live up to this centralized and economically unsustainable approach to borderland welfare. Today, state agencies are too impoverished for such investments, while a considerable

concentration of wealth is in the hands of the president's family. Meanwhile, the Aga Khan Development Network follows the decentralized logic of international development and often engages in

project funding, but it lacks the comprehensiveness of Soviet-driven development.

Nevertheless, both government and Ismaili approaches to development and statecraft operate with sweeping assumptions about wider connectivity. Having emerged from a post-World War II Western development agenda, Ismaili institutions promote strong beliefs in economic liberalism and globalization, free trade, and entrepreneurship. The Tajik government, driven largely by the presidential family and its close allies in Dushanbe, models itself on the oligarchic kleptocracies whose practices of hiding wealth in offshore havens have been revealed by the Panama Papers and similar recent leaks. This system relies on domestic policies of extraction, exclusion, and the policing of access to resources, while labor migrants toil abroad to sustain their families back in Tajikistan.

THE ROAD TO CHINA

The end of the civil war was an important step in the development of closer relations between Tajikistan and China. First, a border conflict had to be resolved—it dated back to the colonial

period, when Russia unilaterally delimited its boundaries. Tajikistan agreed to cede land to China, albeit much less than China had claimed historically. Soon afterward, a road link was established between the old Soviet road system in the Pamirs and the Chinese border at the Kulma Pass. In 2004, the border crossing was opened, and trade began between Xinjiang and the Pamirs.

People living along the road initially had high hopes for cross-border trade, but these expectations never materialized. Chinese visa regulations for Tajik citizens and restrictions on Tajik vehicles in China turned small-scale trade into an unprofitable endeavor. Members of the presidential family have kept transport companies under their control and managed to evade taxes and tariffs. This renders competition with the elite in Dushanbe effectively impossible, leaving local people with poorly paid jobs as day laborers.

The road to China changed the economy in the Pamirs dramatically. Not only did trade with China reaffirm that the seat of political and economic power was now located in Dushanbe, but the opening of the Kulma road also resulted in the abandonment of previous routes. The major Soviet supply route to the Pamirs had run from Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan to Khorog at the Afghan border. Soviet engineers began to build this high-altitude road in the 1930s. Over the decades, it became the region's central economic artery. Even during the Tajik civil war, Ismaili institutions employed this road—the Pamir Highway—to deliver large quantities of humanitarian aid through the former Soviet supply system.

With the opening of the road link to China in 2004, the connection to Osh lost its economic importance from the perspective of state institutions. The road from Kyrgyzstan to the Pamirs began to decay; maintenance has been minimal over the past decade. Even though people in the eastern Pamirs still heavily rely on access to southern Kyrgyzstan for economic and family reasons, state abandonment as well as the growing hostility between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have rendered this international connection increasingly precarious.

Many of the China-related economic and infrastructure projects in the Pamirs predate China's global Belt and Road Initiative, which, since its launching in 2013, has become a predominant way of framing relations with Tajikistan's eastern neighbor. Many people in the Pamirs are therefore accustomed to the Chinese presence in the area; in

recent years, it has also manifested in a Chinese military base in the eastern Pamirs. This presence has had only minimal impact on people's daily lives, however. Neither the pre-2013 projects nor the Belt and Road Initiative have created local jobs or substantially increased people's mobility to China.

The major transnational engagement of young Pamiris remains labor migration to Russia as well as to other Central Asian states. In 2020, almost 27 percent of Tajikistan's gross domestic product consisted of remittances sent from abroad. This figure has declined from 40 percent ten years ago, but it remains high in global comparison and against the backdrop of Russia's persisting, and worsening, economic crisis. As a result of these strong ties to Russia, people from the Pamirs have built and organized diasporic communities and institutions in major Russian cities.

In addition, after almost thirty years of direct engagement with Ismaili institutions, many people from the Pamirs have made use of the educational and institutional pathways offered by programs of the Aga Khan Development Network. Over the years, these programs have brought Ismailis from the Pamirs to universities and cities in Europe and North America.

ISMAILI PATHWAYS

Khorog, a city of around 30,000, has gone through substantial changes over the past few decades. For a small city far removed from Central Asia's economic and political centers, Khorog was well equipped in the Soviet era. The city had a university, a hospital, a mix of apartment blocks and private houses, and an airport that provided inhabitants with a flight connection to Dushanbe. Since the end of the civil war, new urban planning—based on the activities of Ismaili institutions rather than state-driven development—has transformed Khorog. Although the government scrapped flights altogether, the city now has an Aga Khan-built international university, a new park, a kindergarten, a high school, and a tourism center. Health facilities have been greatly improved, including an Aga Khan pharmacy. NGO-built infrastructure extends to energy, transport, and trade.

The most visible materialization of the Ismaili presence is the main Jamatkhana of Khorog, a large communal hall used for religious services, cultural events, and other gatherings. The Jamatkhana, opened in 2018, was designed by a Canada-based architect, and marks the transformation of

Khorog's urban space. The Jamatkhana is not only a representation of Ismaili visions of a modern city, but also showcases the transnational connections that Ismaili institutions have brought to the Pamirs. The institution of the Jamatkhana—which did not exist in the Pamirs before the 1990s, but is now omnipresent in the region—embodies a version of Ismaili modernity that is rooted in the diasporic South Asian Ismaili communities of Europe and North America.

Connectivity among people in the Pamirs, religious and development institutions, and Ismailis far beyond the region has taken various forms over the past two decades. While the Aga Khan Development Network has brought funds, projects, and personnel to the Pamirs, people from the Pamirs have also traveled and lived abroad, often in the context of school and university education, professional training, or business trips. These stays abroad have familiarized people from the Pamirs with foreign places and languages to a much greater degree than other citizens of Tajikistan. In the course of these journeys, they have also been able to engage with diverse Ismailis from around the globe. Diasporic Pamiri communities are linked to fellow Ismailis from South Asia, East Africa, Europe, North America, and the Middle East.

The promotion of globalization is not solely the domain of Ismaili institutions that seek to improve education and foster economic growth. Mobility and connectivity are also important aspects of the communal Ismaili globalization that the Aga Khan encourages in his religious messages. In this framework, development and interaction across borders are deeply interlinked with Islamic ethics and visions of a desirable society. The Aga Khan delivers such messages in the form of edicts (*farman*) to his followers in the Pamirs through his religious administration, most prominently the Ismaili Tariqah and Religious Education Board. In these edicts, global concerns of the Ismaili community come together with local issues; guidance on religious practice intertwines with broader political and economic goals.

In the Pamirs, connectivity to Ismailis in neighboring countries is a central concern. In the borderland of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and China, as well as just a few kilometers farther south in northern Pakistan, Ismailis constitute a majority of the

population. This is a unique situation—in all other parts of the world, Ismailis form minority communities. In the Ismaili institutional imagination, this broader cross-border area plays a prominent role—not only because of the population density of Ismailis, but also due to widespread poverty, political neglect, and economic marginalization.

The areas at the western tip of Xinjiang in China, where the state prevents the integration of Ismailis into the global framework, remain inaccessible. Since the 1980s, northern Pakistan has been an important developmental laboratory for Ismaili institutions, from which many concepts and ideas have subsequently been transplanted to the Pamirs. Their main focus with respect to the Pamirs, however, has been the establishment of deeper connections between places and people along the Tajik-Afghan border river, the Panj, which marked the southern border of the Soviet Union for many decades.

DESERTED BRIDGES

During the Soviet period, the border with Afghanistan was heavily guarded. Yet even under these circumstances, connections across the river existed in the Pamirs. The Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979–89) brought a high degree of interaction. In the Wakhan Corridor, a narrow stretch of Afghan territory between Tajikistan and Pakistan, remnants of this interaction can be found even today.

The Wakhan Corridor is a legacy of nineteenth-century colonial border agreements between the Russian and British empires. The Soviet army built bridges in the Wakhan to reach strategic positions. These bridges are still in use. During the decade of the Soviet occupation, people in the Afghan Wakhan received humanitarian aid across the Panj. Later, during the Tajik civil war, weapons, fighters, and drugs began to cross the border. In the same period, Ismaili institutions sought to establish a physical presence among the Ismaili communities on the Afghan side. For this presence to materialize in official, bilateral frameworks, they had to wait until the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and the increasing international support for reconstruction and development in Afghanistan.

In the early 2000s, the Aga Khan Development Network built several bridges across the Panj with the support of foreign governments and NGOs. Some of these bridges included border markets

*Connectivity to Ismailis
in neighboring countries
is a central concern.*

to which traders and customers from both sides had visa-free access. The goal of improving the local cross-border economy was an important impetus for the bridge construction. At the same time, the bridges were supposed to serve much broader ideas of globalization and trans-regional connectivity, deriving from the assumption that economic exchange would ensure peace and stability.

In 2006, the Aga Khan, together with Rahmon and then-Afghan Second Vice President Abdul Karim Khalili, opened the bridge between Tajikistan and Afghanistan at Ishkashim. At the gateway to the Wakhan Corridor, Ishkashim was envisaged as providing a crucial road connection between Central and South Asia. In his opening speech, the Aga Khan emphasized this aspect, describing the bridges as inspiring progress and hope: trade could now emerge between China, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. But in addition to their economic value, he stressed that the bridges across the Panj would also stand for connection, cooperation, and harmony.

For a while, there was considerable optimism regarding the future of Afghanistan and its relations with Tajikistan. Yet this sentiment proved to be short-lived. Even though tourists, researchers, and NGO workers began to use the border crossing at Ishkashim to travel to the Afghan Wakhan, most people in the Pamirs had little incentive to do so. Over decades, many had learned to fear Afghanistan as a place of war and danger. More importantly, the security situation beyond Ishkashim, on the road to the Afghan urban centers of Faizabad or Kabul, remained far too unpredictable to sustain trade. There were frequent border closures due to nearby fighting and opaque government policies. The border markets remained closed most days of the year. Eventually, it became clear that the hope for harmony and connectivity expressed in the Aga Khan's opening speech reflected a world of development dreams far removed from day-to-day life.

Meanwhile, a few years before the fall of the Western-backed government in Kabul in the summer of 2021, Afghanistan began to pursue its own project of connectivity with China. Funded by the Afghan government, a Kabul-based construction company began to build a road in the high-altitude parts of the Wakhan. On my last visit to Afghanistan in 2019, the road builders had made substantial progress on the way to the high plateau leading up to the Chinese border. But construction

came to a halt when the Taliban returned to power last year and Afghanistan's assets were frozen abroad.

Although the project created some locally important connections between villages and high pastures, the Afghan road to China through the Wakhan has also turned out to be a mirage. Last year, Ismaili institutions, which had been highly active in the Wakhan, reduced their public visibility in the Afghan part of this borderland. The border along the Panj between Afghanistan and Tajikistan has once again become a space of erratic interaction consisting of trade in illicit goods and unstable mobile phone signals that reach from the Pamirs across to the otherwise disconnected Afghan Wakhan.

CONFLICT AND BLOCKADE

For several years, starting in the late 2000s, I conducted research in the eastern parts of the Pamirs. Inhabited by a diverse group of people—including Kyrgyz, speakers of Pamir languages, and Tajiks—this is a region of interest to the central government for reasons related to the economy and territorial integrity. Its people, however, are a low priority; their well-being is not on the political agenda. If Khorog is seen from Dushanbe as a distant, mountainous site of opposition, Murghab, the largest settlement in the east, appears as a remote, exotic location even to many people in the Pamirs. Geographical distance, the high-altitude environment, and cultural differences all have a role to play in this perception.

Yet this remoteness, which seemed like a major disadvantage to life in Murghab, also had its own appeal until a few years ago. The decade-long war in Afghanistan went on frightfully close to settlements in the western Pamirs, but remained far away from Murghab. The shockwaves of the Tajik government's military incursions into Khorog were also much softer up in the east. And during violent clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and Xinjiang in 2009, people in Murghab could rest assured that such events were unlikely to happen in their remote area.

Although ensuing political instability put temporary pressure on food supplies and trade in the region, such problems were usually resolved within the span of a few months. This changed first with the COVID-19 pandemic, and then as simmering border tensions between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan escalated into an armed conflict in the summer of 2021. Since then, the border between

the two countries has been closed unpredictably, severely disrupting the supply of goods from Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, the center of economic activity for people in Murghab.

Over the past decade, Gorno-Badakhshan has gone from being a supposedly autonomous region at the margins of Tajikistan to a zone under blockade. In this regard, it shares some similarities with territories across the border in Afghanistan, China, and Pakistan. To be sure, border closures and political instability are nothing new to people in the Pamirs. Policies of integration in the Soviet Union ruthlessly deprived them of connections to kin and economic resources across international borders. Later, the Tajik civil war brought the region to the brink of catastrophic famine.

Yet this is the first time since the early 1990s that the political and economic situation in the Pamirs is truly desperate. Squeezed by border closures and military and economic pressure from their own government, the Pamirs' diverse population is suffering a blockade from all sides. In the long run, this blockade might prove to be worse for the region than the civil war period.

People in the Pamirs have long lived in relations of patronage with powerful political actors. Colonial relations in the Russian Empire fed into Soviet policies that aimed to transform the Pamirs into

a loyal borderland. Ismaili institutions delivered high levels of aid and services during the civil war and in its aftermath. These forms of patronage now belong to the past. With most of Gorno-Badakhshan's civil war commanders gone, the population is left vulnerable to the government's exploitation and abuse.

Diasporic communities from the Pamirs have grown in Russia and a few Western countries over the past two decades. They have the potential to be a lifeline for people in the region and could advocate on its behalf. But with most migrants located in Russia, these connections have become precarious.

Tajikistan is a close ally of Russia and continues to maintain this relationship even through the current war in Ukraine and international sanctions on Russia. In return, the Russian government has extradited Tajik civil society activists and opposition members to Tajikistan. To prevent substantial interaction between people in the Pamirs and their family and friends abroad, ordinary travelers returning to Tajikistan have been arrested at the airport in Dushanbe. Under these conditions, the dreams of an interconnected borderland serving as a hub for tourism, trade, and cross-border mobility—so eagerly invoked by development planners and politicians—have evaporated into thin air. ■

How Russia's Patriotic History Projects Support Putin's War

FRANCINE HIRSCH

Russia's predatory war against Ukraine reminds us how much history matters. Months before the invasion began on February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin was rewriting the past in order to justify an illegal war and pursue an expansionist agenda. He began by playing up the "historical unity" of Ukrainians and Russians, and describing Ukraine as an "artificial creation" of the Bolsheviks. He did this with a clear goal: to challenge Ukraine's right to exist.

Since February 24, Putin has launched a massive disinformation campaign aimed at connecting the struggle against Nazi Germany in World War II to Russia's current war against Ukraine. He has told the Russian people that present-day Ukraine is run by Nazis—and that Russia's "special military operation" is aimed at the country's liberation and "de-Nazification." He has also misused the language of international law, falsely claiming that "the Kiev regime" was carrying out a "genocide" against Russians in Ukraine. The International Court of Justice has ruled unequivocally that this is a lie.

Putin has, in fact, been smearing Ukraine's government as "fascist" since 2014, when a popular uprising overthrew Kremlin-backed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. Russian leaders and the Russian state media intensified this rhetoric at the start of the 2022 invasion, making the outrageous claim that Ukraine's current leaders, including President Volodymyr Zelensky, are "neo-Nazis." (Zelensky, of course, is Jewish.)

Putin and the Russian State Duma have used both terror and propaganda in recent months to rally the Russian people and to propagate this version of events. They have shuttered Russia's

independent press and labeled Russians who question the official narrative as "fifth columnists" and "foreign agents." They have suppressed information about the Russian Army's war crimes. And they have stifled Russian dissent with threats, new laws, and arrests. They have also shut down non-governmental organizations—including the human-rights group Memorial, which had worked to expose the truth about the Stalinist past.

At the same time, Russia's leaders have embarked on a massive propaganda campaign aimed at winning hearts and minds. A key element of this campaign has been a program of national-patriotic education, designed to tap into the memory of World War II and to connect it to current events. Russian officials have introduced new lesson plans and flag-raising ceremonies in schools, and have organized festivals, exhibits, and other mass spectacles.

To start to make sense of all this, it is necessary to understand the role of World War II in Russia's political imagination. The Soviet Union lost 27 million people in the war against Nazi Germany. Feelings about this loss, and about the Soviet Union's ultimate victory, run deep in Russia. World War II, still remembered in Russia as the Great Patriotic War, has long been a critical part of Russian national identity. It was a focal point of Soviet ideology during the postwar era, and has become a cornerstone of Russian state ideology under Putin. Victory Day, celebrated on May 9, is the most important Russian national holiday—commemorated with military parades on Moscow's Red Square and in dozens of cities throughout the country.

While Russia celebrates the Soviet victory, it also exploits the memory of collective sacrifice and personal suffering. Over the past couple of years, the Russian government has released tens of thousands of archival documents about Nazi war crimes in the Soviet Union and has made many of them accessible on websites. At the same time,

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Putin and other Russian officials have drawn a false association between Ukrainian nationalist groups that fought alongside Nazi Germany and Ukraine's present-day soldiers and leaders.

New museum exhibits, like one at Moscow's Victory Museum called *Ordinary Nazism*, give this narrative visual form. This exhibit purports to "show the inextricable link" between the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, which collaborated with the Nazis in World War II, and "the modern nationalist organizations of Ukraine." It accuses the latter of reviving "the ideology of Nazi Germany." A haunting installation in the center of the exhibit hammers home an explosive lie—which many Russians believe to be true—about the "Ukrainian murder of Russian children in Donbas" since 2014. It features a swing set and stuffed animals with white cut-out angels suspended above—and is clearly meant to provoke grief and outrage.

SKewed LESSONS

Russian officials and cultural institutions have organized numerous projects to support Putin's campaign for national-patriotic education and to bring local institutions into line with the state's official aims and priorities. Some of these projects predate the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The "Without a Statute of Limitations" project, devoted to the memory of World War II, is among the most ambitious. Its main objective is to publicize information about war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by "the Nazi invaders and their accomplices" against civilians in the occupied Soviet Union. The project was launched in December 2018 by the Search Movement of Russia (an organization devoted to the memory of veterans "who died defending the Fatherland"), together with Russia's ministries of culture, defense, and foreign relations, as well as many other institutions. What began as a public history project devoted to collective memory and patriotic education—something that one might also find in other European countries and in the United States—has taken on a new and dangerous purpose since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"Without a Statute of Limitations" was designed from the start to target people of all ages, but especially schoolchildren and university students, throughout the Russian Federation. It sponsors

film screenings, theatrical productions, concerts, lectures, scholarly workshops, and conferences about Nazi war crimes. It holds student essay contests on the theme of the Great Patriotic War as well as competitions to design new memorials dedicated to the Russian victims of Nazism. The project has published more than two dozen volumes of archival documents about Nazi war crimes, each focused on a particular region. It has organized "search expeditions" to dig for evidence of decades-old Nazi atrocities, the results of which have been heavily publicized in the Russian press. It also created a museum exhibit, *The Judgment of History*, which was launched in September 2020 and has opened with great fanfare in the two years since then at local institutions in dozens of towns and cities across Russia.

The Judgment of History uses the Nuremberg Trials of 1945–46, the Tokyo Trials of 1946–48, and the Khabarovsk Trial of 1949 to teach the younger generation about the "heroic history" of Russia and the "horrors of fascism." One of the exhibit's primary goals is to highlight the Soviet

Union's contribution to the international process of post-war justice. Another key goal is to detail Nazi crimes against Russian civilians, including intentional starvation, mass deportations, forced labor, and crimes

against childhood.

The exhibit is somewhat understated, especially compared with the *Ordinary Nazism* exhibit. Visitors encounter archival documents and black-and-white photographs of Nazi atrocities, gravesites, and the postwar trials. The mode of presentation—21 large display boards that include descriptions prepared by archivists and professional historians—is meant to convey scholarly objectivity. The political interpretation is layered on top: guided tours interpret the exhibit for visitors, focusing on the themes of Russian heroism and victimhood.

What the exhibit lacks in visual pizzazz, it makes up for with its broad reach. The opening ceremonies at institutions throughout the Russian Federation have been treated as major events, featured on local and central television and in the Russian press. Local officials have used these occasions to celebrate their region's role in the Great Patriotic War, and to highlight specific details of Nazi crimes against local populations. At the

What began as a public history project has taken on a new and dangerous purpose.

opening in Novgorod, a local official spoke about the burning of local villages and the torture and murder of civilians. At the opening in Pskov, participants remembered “the more than 75,000 inhabitants of the region . . . who became victims.” The local institutions hosting the exhibit (museums, universities, and other venues) sometimes supplement the main display with documents and photographs from local archives, as well as with physical artifacts such as rifles and mess kits that belonged to local veterans.

TELLING OMISSIONS

In thinking about *The Judgment of History*, it is critical to consider not just what is included on the display boards and in the media coverage of the exhibit, but also what has been omitted. Russia's narrative of World War II, not surprisingly, includes no mention of the Soviet Union's war crimes, crimes against humanity, or crimes against peace—including the invasion of the Baltic states, Finland, and Poland. In fact, the public mention of such events is illegal under a Russian law that prevents people from “insulting the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland.” The 2021 law explicitly bans public discussion about Soviet collaboration with Nazi Germany or about Soviet war crimes during World War II. Putin depends on a whitewashed version of history, with an emphasis on Russian heroism and Russian victimhood, to support his narrative about present-day Russia and its place in the world.

There are other omissions, too. Newspaper articles and television reports about the exhibit discuss the “Nazi genocide of the Russian people,” with virtually no mention of the Nazi slaughter of Ukrainians, Poles, or Jews. The terms “Soviet” and “Russian” are almost always used interchangeably.

Though *The Judgment of History* was designed from the start to support an official version of history, something shifted after February 24. Media coverage of the exhibit became more explicitly political and began making a direct link to Russia's “special military operation” in Ukraine. At the exhibit's opening in Yoshkar-Ola in the Mari El Republic (an ethnic region of the Russian Federation), the republic's vice premier declared that the Russian Army was completing the work that the Red Army had started in defeating Nazism. His speech was featured on local television.

At the opening in an exhibition hall at a university in Smolensk, the university's director proclaimed that “the hatred of fascism and Nazism is written at the level of the genetic code of Russians.” Criticizing the West for supporting Zelensky, he declared it “a pity that the lessons of Nuremberg are not remembered in the EU and America.”

The opening at the National Library of the Republic of Karelia had its own nuances. Karelia and Finland share a border, and the speeches reflected the current state of Russian-Finnish relations—severely strained by Putin's invasion of Ukraine and Finland's bid to join NATO. The speeches focused on Finnish-run concentration camps in Karelia during World War II, accusing the Finns of grievous war crimes.

It would be easy to dismiss projects like “Without a Statute of Limitations” as inconsequential if they were not so central to Putin's propaganda—and if they were not being mobilized to drum up hatred of Ukrainians and Ukraine. The way that the Russian media campaign around this project is being used to falsely smear Ukrainian leaders as Nazis is especially sinister given all that we know about the Russian Army's rape, murder, and deportation of Ukrainian civilians. Members of Russian patriotic youth organizations interviewed on television about *The Judgment of History* exhibit have spoken about the horrors of Nazism and the importance of world peace—in the next breath praising the Russian Army for fighting “Ukrainian Nazis” and stopping the “genocide of Russians” in present-day Ukraine. Under Putin, reality has been turned on its head.

Putin knows that history matters. Russian leaders and the Russian state media are using the work of Russian historians and archivists as the foundation for a dangerous disinformation campaign. As the war continues in Ukraine and as Putin cracks down on dissent at home, scholars and journalists outside of Russia must push back against Putin's lies about the past and the present. Putin has gone to great lengths to isolate Russia from the rest of the world, and it is becoming more and more difficult to reach most Russians. We must do all that we can—using social media, online forums, and whatever other channels remain open—to challenge false narratives. We must insist on the truth. ■

A New Age of Empires?

ADEEB KHALID

The twenty-first century is shaping up to be an age of empire in Eurasia, Jeffrey Mankoff tells us at the beginning of his wide-ranging book, *Empires of Eurasia*. Certain key states—Russia, Turkey, Iran, and China—are willing to project power across their borders to intervene in the affairs of their neighbors, using local proxies or sheer military force to achieve their goals. They neither recognize the territorial fixity of the nation-states at their borders, nor care much for their sovereignty. Thus, they pose a challenge to the US-led global liberal order, which is ostensibly law-governed and rule-based, built on principles of self-determination, equal sovereignty, and territorial inviolability. Mankoff's book seeks to provide a historical explanation for this apparent resurgence of imperial behavior, and for the international security issues such behavior engenders.

Each of the four states discussed by Mankoff was an empire in the past, and the legacy of empire continues to shape how statesmen in each of them see their place in the world. For Mankoff, it is these legacies, rather than ideology per se or structural or civilizational causes, that explain the current behavior of these states. Each has a complicated set of identities in which the national and the imperial are deeply but ambiguously intertwined; they each have ethnically differentiated borderlands that are often heavily securitized; and they each have an adjacent geopolitical zone they consider to be part of their “natural” space (or “near abroad,” in Russian parlance). The book has four sections, one on each of the former empires; each section comprises chapters on identity, borderlands, and “near abroads.”

**Empires of Eurasia:
How Imperial Legacies
Shape International Security**
Jeffrey Mankoff
(Yale University Press,
2022)

Over these twelve chapters, we get impressive historical surveys of the four empires and their twentieth-century transformations, as well as accounts of the conditions in each of the four present-day countries' diverse borderlands, and their geopolitical ambitions. Mankoff is impressively well read. He knows the relevant languages (and is at pains to remind the reader of this, giving original language terms throughout).

Russia's borderlands span the bulk of its territory, but it is the boundary with Ukraine and Belarus that is the most relevant to Mankoff's argument. The book was finished before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Mankoff would likely take the invasion as an affirmation of his argument, which is based in the book largely on Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its support for self-proclaimed republics in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine and in Georgia.

Meanwhile, Turkey, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has shown new assertiveness in the Balkans, the Arab Middle East, and the Caucasus. Much of China's territory is also an ethnic borderland (Inner Mongolia, Tibet, Xinjiang), a legacy of Qing expansion, which it has massively securitized in recent years—though much of its geopolitical ambition is channeled through the Belt and Road Initiative, the ambitious plan to transform Eurasia's trade routes through huge investments in infrastructure in numerous countries across the continent and around the world. Iran situates itself in *Iranzamin*, a wider zone of ancient Persian culture, and has intervened in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan.

Clearly, all four of these countries seek to project their power beyond their current boundaries. But is it simply their imperial legacies that make them act like this? It is not always clear whether the imperial legacies are structural—that is, whether the links of the past propel these states to act in a certain way—or whether they are memories to which leaders and publics can appeal. It is

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also not clear whether we are talking about an imperial moment or a permanent condition of post-empire. In all four countries, empire was renounced by new regimes that emerged in the twentieth century, one in the name of universal social revolution, three in the name of the nation.

LEGACY ISSUES

Empire has come back. But was its return inevitable? And are we not chalking up too much to imperial legacies? There is a wide range of phenomena that are ascribed to imperial legacies in this book.

Russia reasserted control over Chechnya by employing a politics of difference and cultivating the figure of Ramzan Kadyrov as a “vassal.” China has incarcerated over a million Uyghurs in Xinjiang and is attempting to efface their culture. This is quite the opposite of a politics of difference, but Mankoff ascribes both to imperial legacies.

The Russian Empire is no different for Mankoff than the Soviet Union, the vast upheaval of the revolution notwithstanding. But many of the legacies relevant today are Soviet, not imperial (particularly the territorialization of nationality).

Meanwhile, it is difficult to see Iran as being part of this group, even if Mankoff allows for considerable diversity among the four countries. Iran’s ambitions are not of the same scale, and its geopolitical sphere today does not coincide geographically with the territories of any old Iranian empire.

Far more problematic, however, is Mankoff’s characterization of the Eurasian ex-empires as a peculiar kind of polity, different both from former European empires—whose colonies were overseas and from which they have successfully disentangled themselves—and from other “normal” nation-states of today, which are satisfied with fixed territorial boundaries and their place in the global order. In one of his more expansive moments, Mankoff declares that these Eurasian ex-empires share a common “political culture emerging from the nomadic steppes,” but he is usually careful to not generalize to that extent. He is attentive to historical detail and rightly eschews civilizational discourse. Yet the four former empires are nevertheless characterized in the book by various lacks and absences. They do not treat their borders as permanent or fixed, they have “failed to become liberal democracies,” and

they are driven by narratives of past victimization as well as past glory.

How unusual is any of this? Britain and France, Mankoff suggests, are now more or less regular nation-states with fixed boundaries, comfortable in the global order of sovereign states. Surely this is an overstatement. What, then, are we to make of France’s incessant interventions in its former empire in Africa? Or what is so unambiguous about contemporary British identity? Brexit showed the strength of the nostalgia for empire in England and the uneasy relationship between it and the other countries of the British Isles. Nor are links with the former empire completely severed. Citizens of the Commonwealth resident in the UK can vote in British elections, and the queen is the head of state of numerous former colonies that are now independent states.

But the real elephant in the book is the United States. That country routinely projects its deadly military power across its borders and around the world. Its borderlands (and its Black population)

are securitized, and it has an expansive “near abroad” that encompasses the entire Western hemisphere. Even its territory is not as tightly delimited as most of its citizens think. It has numerous

possessions scattered across the Caribbean and the Pacific, some formally recognized, others not. It is remarkable how little domestic curiosity was aroused when the existence of the enclave in Guantánamo Bay became widely known, once it was chosen to house the notorious prison camp where people abducted from around the world have been incarcerated for over two decades.

Beyond these possessions lies the archipelago of US military bases that spans the globe, whose existence most US citizens take completely for granted, and which is used for the projection of military power around the world. The national identity of the United States is ambiguous and deeply contested; its politics are driven by a messianic exceptionalism; it does not treat other states as equals; and it is loath to follow rules that it dictates to others. It has invaded countries halfway around the world and overthrown regimes on multiple continents. Its imperial record puts any of the four ex-empires discussed by Mankoff in the shade.

*Are we not chalking up too
much to imperial legacies?*

But such evasiveness about US hegemony is built into the design of the book. Mankoff is a research fellow at the US National Defense University, and his book is clearly aimed at an audience of security policy experts, not historians. Its job is to provide an explanation of security challenges faced by the United States to an American audience, not to describe the current state of the world to a global readership. Mankoff writes with a straight face about a law-governed, rules-based international order, even as he acknowledges on the last page of the text that the basis of this order is the “United States’ insistence that all states—except the United States itself—subject themselves to rules and institutions codified by the victors in World War II.” He discusses liberal democracy as if it always lives up to its promise in the West. Thus he can paint the Eurasian ex-empires as deviant outsiders to a normative global order.

Must we be surprised that some states might have questions about the global hegemony of the

United States? Might their behavior not be explained through a calculus of power? China’s new ambitions rest not on its habit of empire, but on its explosive growth over the past four decades, which allows it to claim a new position in the world and to challenge a status quo not of its making. Russia’s relationship with Ukraine is more ambiguous than the current wave of Ukrainophilia sweeping the West would allow us to recognize, and many of the disputes of the present era can be traced back to Soviet rather than Tsarist precedents. The opportunities for Turkey and Iran to intervene in their neighbors’ affairs have often been made possible by disastrous US interventions abroad.

Empire and imperial legacies are ever present in the modern world. There is nothing peculiarly Eurasian about them, and they cannot be attributed only to these four Eurasian powers. To do so is to provide a blinkered view of the world that we live in. ■