



THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD

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This conversation took place at the Yalta European Strategy Annual Meetings on March 2, 2022. It was moderated by Anne Applebaum and has been abridged.

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Even if we don't know who Ukrainians are, Ukrainians know very well who they are themselves.

Ukraine is a typical European country, just more so. Ukraine has a medieval period, with many of the interesting features of medieval history. It has a conversion to Christianity—it's just more interesting because they were also Judaic and Islamic,

and actually multiple Christian options were considered. Ukraine has a very interesting Early Modern period. It passes through the Renaissance, it passes through the Reformation, just maybe a little bit more so. The Ukrainian Renaissance has multiple language questions as opposed to just one, as it was in most of Europe. The Reformation has multiple religious options, as opposed to just one or two, as in most of Europe. Ukraine has a very typical modern period. In the 19th century, in the territory where Ukraine now lies, there was a national movement. It was subjected to an unusual degree of oppression inside the Russian Empire. Ukraine, again very typically, began with a struggle for national liberation after the First World War, but it failed largely because of the success of the Russian Revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union. Everyone in the Soviet Union

recognized that Ukraine was a nation. The Soviet Union was formed the way it was because the Ukrainian question was so important. In the 20th century, Ukraine was at the center of both of the major totalitarian aspirations: Stalin wished to create the Soviet Union by exploiting Ukraine, Hitler wished to create a German Empire in Eastern Europe also chiefly by exploiting Ukraine—which means that Ukraine was the most dangerous place to be when both Hitler and Stalin were in power. Since the end of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has been an independent state. In both 2004 and 2014, Ukrainians rose up to try to prevent a Russian-backed oligarchy from weakening their institutions, their state, and their future.

YNH

I think that the whole war is about the existence of the Ukrainian nation. Putin's idea is that there is

no Ukraine. This is his whole rationale. He's built this fantasy in his head that Ukraine doesn't exist; that Ukrainians are just Russians; that they want to be absorbed by Russia; and are prevented by some gang of Nazis. This fantasy has led him to invade Ukraine, expecting that Zelenskyy would just flee, that the army would surrender, and the population would throw flowers on the Russian tanks. But Zelenskyy didn't flee; the army is fighting like hell; and the population is throwing Molotov cocktails on the Russian tanks—not flowers.

In this sense, Putin has already lost the war, because this is a war about the very existence of the Ukrainian nation. And now everybody around the world knows that Ukraine is a very, very real nation.

I think there's the classic issue of tyranny here. We're in Plato territory or Shakespeare territory: the aging, lonely tyrant who can't

listen and has to escalate. What I would emphasize as a related point, is we're seeing a kind of confrontation between history and myth. Putin's myth is that for one thousand years, Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia existed together. Putin seems to really believe that Ukraine owes everything to Russia. He seems to really believe that only the Russians suffered during the Second World War, and not the Jews or the Belarusians, or the Ukrainians. He also seems to be chiefly concerned, not with what happens right now, but with being remembered as a great Russian leader in the future, which is why I think he's not so concerned with the losses of Russian soldiers, or the Russian economy, or Russian interests in any broad sense. I think he's beyond all of that.

I think that Putin's at the stage where he's thinking about his place in history. And he's completely

wrong; after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russians and Ukrainians were not enemies. He is creating this with his own hands—he is turning them into enemies. This will be his legacy. He is planting seeds of hatred for generations, and this will be his legacy for regional history. If you look even more broadly, then he's dragging the whole of humankind back to an era of war, that we thought we'd left behind in 1945.

People sometimes say that the long peace we've been living through has been a fantasy of poets and artists and leftist intellectuals. But that's not the case. It has been driven by the numbers in budgets. If you look at governments around the world, in 2020, the average defense budget was about 6%. In Europe, it was about 3%. Historically, this is absolutely amazing. For most of history, emperors, kings, and princes spent 40%, 50%, or 70% on their

military. Lower defense spending is the basis for having good health care systems and education systems. Now, the day after the invasion, Germany has doubled its defense budget. It's what they should do in this situation—but we also need to understand the implications. If we allow aggression to win, it will hurt every person on the planet, and not just the immediate people involved in Ukraine and Russia.

Well, what we're observing has to do with a larger process in European history. The Europeans found a very good answer about what to do after Empire, which is European integration. European integration has served an increasing amount of Europe very well as the economic and cultural basis for peace and prosperity for three generations. The Ukrainians understand this, which is why in 2004 and in 2014, and now as President Zelenskyy applies for

European Union membership, they've put Europe at the center of their thoughts and words, even as they face incredible struggles. So in Europe, you can either have integration, or you can have empire. Russia is the last important European country that is still on the side of empire. I think what European leaders are understanding is that a Europe that is going to be whole and free also has to be a Europe that is capable of defending itself—capable of defending those who are willing to defend it. Right now, European history is being made in Ukraine, because it's the Ukrainians who are willing to put their bodies in the way of risk, harm, and death in order to protect things that people, broadly speaking, care about. There's a curious way in which what the Ukrainians are now doing in these hours and days magnifies out into the rest of the world. I have this feeling that every day that the Ukrainians

resist is giving us another year or another decade of the kind of life we're used to having. Every day that they fight magnifies outwards and gives us a chance to reflect, and affirm, and act on our own.

A big intellectual mistake that a lot of people made after communism came to an end in Europe in 1989, or the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, was the notion that now "there are no alternatives," to quote Maggie Thatcher. That was incorrect. There are always alternatives. Many, many people in the West thought that capitalism would automatically bring democracy. That's a very comforting thought because you can hand over the process of democracy to a larger impersonal force, to an invisible hand. That turns out not to be true. Both Russia and China have shown that tyranny can be wed very easily to capitalism. What's worse, if you delegate all the work of freedom to imperson-

al forces, you're forgetting what freedom is. Freedom is all about resisting impersonal forces—becoming a personal force yourself.

What Putin is talking about is fate: that it's Ukraine's fate to be with Russia, it's Belarus's fate to be with Russia. A dictator's imagination of the past can create a single lane along which the future is going to travel. We have to resist both inevitability, our own thoughtless optimism, and ideas of eternity.

And the way to do that is to be creative. It's to imagine multiple futures. Here the Ukrainians have been very helpful. From the Maidan Revolution to the present, they've been helping us to imagine how things could be different. They've been helping to shake us out of undue optimism and undue pessimism. Any positive outcome of this moment will have to do with Ukrainians helping us to think our

way into multiple, better futures.

Very often, people say that Russians have lived under an autocratic system for hundreds of years, so they can't have a democracy. Ukrainians have shown us this is not true. They have lived under the same Czarist autocracy and under the same Soviet autocracy. Ukraine had even worse economic conditions than the Russian Federation because it didn't have the natural resources of Russia. So it's a much poorer country, and still its people chose differently. They chose to have a liberal democracy and fought repeatedly to protect it, which means that even if you come from hundreds of years of autocracy, you can still choose democracy. This is one of the things that infuriates Putin about Ukraine, because it's like a poster that tells Russians: "look, you can choose differently."

Hannah Arendt has this idea in her

book *Origins of Totalitarianism* that the most important thing in life is renewal, the ability to invent new things, the human capacity to create new things. If we look at the language that Putin is using from Moscow, it's the exact opposite of that. It's all about deadening. It's all about closing down the imagination. It's all about forbidding alternatives. It's all about the idea that things that happened in the past have to repeat over and over. What's exciting about democracy, and the Ukrainians are helping us remember this, is democracy is unpredictable. Look, Volodymyr Zelenskyy is unpredictable. He's a Russian-speaking comedian who basically came out of nowhere, a Jew who won 73% of the vote in a free presidential election. That's what democracy can bring us. It can bring us unpredictable things. And now, he's a war president who's with his people. Democracy gives you

that chance. The more democracy you have, the more unpredictability you have, and the more possibility for renewal.

In the 21st century, we are seeing that Ukraine has been at the center of very important developments—it's at the center of cyber-warfare, it was in 2014, it is again now, it is at the center of the struggle against oligarchy, or hydrocarbon oligarchy, which is a great problem of the 21st century. Insofar as we have a future in which we get over our 20th century and our 21st century problems, Ukraine will also be at the center of that.

— T.S. YUNH