

## The historical fallacy may lead to a crime and loss: Putin's case

Georgiy Kasianov \*

Distorted historical imagination is one of the causes of Putin's war against Ukraine. The wrong picture of the past, enhanced by propaganda, may cause wrongdoing and crime in the present. Putin and his entourage, as well as a considerable part of Russian cultural and political elites do not recognize Ukraine and Ukrainians as a separate, sovereign entity. Accordingly, they perceive the war in Ukraine as a "home affair," presenting it as a liberation of Ukraine from Nazis. Thus, for Ukraine, this war is a combat for the very existence of the state and the nation.

Keywords: Russia's war in Ukraine, historical fallacy, history as a casus belli, Putin, Ukrainian-Russian relations.

### Putin's plans

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine. A variety of data indicate that the aggressor was counting on a blitzkrieg. Police units moved with the army – they were supposed to "ensure law and order" in the invaded territories. The Ukrainian military seized equipment and uniforms intended for the "victory parade," while operational documents indicate that the operation's maximum duration was expected to be two weeks. The aggressor provided troops with rations and fuel for two to three days.

To put it simply, the picture in the heads of Putin and his comrades seemed to be the following: the valiant Russian army will enter the territory of Ukraine. The brotherly people, exhausted under "nationalists and drug addicts," welcome the liberators. Smiling girls in vyshyvankas meet the brave Russian brothers and offer them bread and salt. The brothers put the proper government of teetotalers and internationalists in Kyiv. The enemy army disperses into the bushes. The liberators will receive a special welcome in the Southern and Eastern regions of the country.

### Ukraine's response

This rosy picture dissipated in the very first hours of the invasion. The Ukrainian army did not disperse. On the contrary, the aggressor encountered stubborn resistance. Ukrainian soldiers demonstrate their readiness to fight even in the most hopeless situations. Their response to the offer to surrender became a motto of the all-national

#### Redakcja:

Marek Pietraś (przewodniczący), Walenty Baluk, Łukasz Lewkowicz (sekretarz)

#### Redaktorzy tematyczni:

Waldemar Paruch (polityki publiczne), Wojciech Sokół (wybory i marketing polityczny), Katarzyna Kuć-Czajkowska (samorząd), Jakub Olchowski (bezpieczeństwo), Grzegorz Gil (konflikty)

Opinie autorów komentarzy nie przedstawiają oficjalnego stanowiska Instytutu.

resistance. The Ukrainian border guards on Snake Island enriched European world history with a new formula equal to the famous Cambronne's "Merde!"

As a result, vast columns of the aggressor's military equipment are bogged down on the approaches to Kyiv, the losses in manpower are already being compared to the total number of casualties in the Afghan war of 1979–1989, not to mention hundreds of destroyed military vehicles, helicopters, air jets.

The whole country fights. Being almost surrounded, Sumy and Chernihiv are not surrendering. The more successful advance of the enemy in the south comes at severe losses. Here Mykolaiv is fighting and Odesa is preparing to fight back. Mariupol, destroyed by brutal bombing, does not surrender. In the occupied cities of the south, Ukrainians protested against the occupiers, cursing them and even trying to stop tanks by hand. In the east, Kharkiv is fighting desperately. More than a million and a half citizens, primarily women and children, fled the war zones, fleeing from the "liberators." Military enlistment offices cannot cope with the vast number of volunteers enrolling in the army and territorial defense units. Hundreds of thousands of civilians instantly set up a large-scale assistance system for the military and refugees.

## **Preliminary results**

Putin and his entourage lost the gamble. He did not take Ukraine. And he will not. Instead, he receives hundreds of dead Russian soldiers, unprecedented economic and political sanctions, international isolation, and turning Russia into the world's pariah. Internal developments in Russia – growing violations of fundamental human rights – predict gloomy future. The long-term unpredictable consequences for his own country, do not bode well for his long-desired "greatness."

Experts in a wide range of fields assess Putin's chances of an unashamed victory in this dirty war, weighing the prospects of negotiations that would suit the aggressor or constructing scenarios for his defeat. However, whatever the result, it is clear that he has suffered a shameful doom. His colossal army can no longer wage a "small victorious war" against the people that Putin considered capable only of singing beautiful songs, performing fiery dances, and cooking tasty borsch. It turned out that the "brother Ukrainians" were not an ethnographic type, but a quite modern, sovereign, European nation, capable of defending itself, and as we can see, defending Europe. His further actions – shelling civil infrastructure, killing civilians, provoking a humanitarian crisis – reveal his gloom, frustration, and perplexity.

## **Historical fallacy as a casus belli**

Putin made a fatal mistake. Many analyses exist of the views, perceptions, and attitudes that caused his criminal action against "brotherly people." As a historian, I would comment on one aspect of his outlook (as well as the worldview of the lion's share of the Russian ruling class and cultural elite) – the perception of Ukraine and Ukrainians from a historical perspective.

Not long ago, Putin decided to share his views on the topic, which he articulated in the article titled "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians" (July 2021). There is no need to repeat his arguments and speculations. There was nothing new for those who followed his addresses concerning Ukraine. He revealed the basic formulae at the Bucharest NATO summit as early as 2008. According to him, Ukraine is an artificial state. Ukrainians are part of a bigger Russian people. "The West" has

seduced and corrupted Ukrainians since the mid-19th century, trying to tear them away from brotherly Russia. Vast territories of contemporary Ukraine in the South and East were given to it by the Soviets (from Lenin to Khrushchov). Thus, they could not be considered legitimate Ukrainian proper. Then, he repeated all these points in his speech, which preceded the invasion.

It is not clear who and how formed his views on history. Some elements of the Soviet textbook on the history of the USSR are easily recognizable. Some reminiscences of the imperial outlook are presented. This issue does not matter anymore. What matters is the practical outcomes of transferring the erroneous knowledge into practice. Putin's historical illusions about Ukraine and Ukrainians turned into aggression, warfare, violence, and humanitarian disaster right in the center of Europe.

The fundamental fallacy underlying this worldview is Putin's and his clientele's inability to realize and recognize Ukraine's and Ukrainians' subjectivity and sovereignty as a culture, a state, and a nation, and inability to perceive them as sovereign actors of history. Putin believes that he came to create order in his backyard – Ukraine, according to him, is a part of Russia's proper. He presents his deeds in Ukraine as a "special military operation," as if it were happening somewhere in Russia. Within this ill logic, it is legitimate to annex part of the sovereign state, wage a hybrid war in Donbas, impose unacceptable claims to the country's leadership, and blackmail the world's community with this "special operation."

Now, this worldview met reality. Ukrainians do not want to be a part of a "bigger Russian people." They want to be a part of Europe – on the ground of sovereignty and recognition of them as a unique, independent entity. Ukrainians do not want to greet the "Russian World," particularly in the form of missiles, tanks, shellings, ruined houses, schools, hospitals, and dead people. They are ready to resist it by all available means.

In the following decades, it is expectable that Ukrainians will be reluctant to accept any advances from the Russian side. Putin has turned Russia into the worst enemy, the „brotherly people” is now identified with aggression, atrocities, ruined houses, schools, churches, the loss of human lives. By saying Ukrainians, I do not mean ethnic origin. This term concerns all citizens of Ukraine: Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Poles, Crimean Tatars, Germans, Romanians, Roma, Belarusians, and more than a hundred nationalities, living in Ukraine through centuries.

The bitter and tragic irony of history: Putin built up Russia's foundation historical myth about Great Victory on the idea of Russia as a liberator of Europe from Nazism. This myth has been used to combat the "Ukrainian Nazis." Ironically, for some apparent reasons, Putin and his army obtained a label of "Rushists" – the combination of "Russian" and "fascist." Devastated Ukrainian cities, killings of civilians, millions of refugees – all these pictures are reminiscent of World War II. However, this time, the role of Nazi Germany is performed by Russia...

## **Propaganda as a deadly trap for propagandists**

Finally, his propaganda army trapped Putin's mind. For the past fifteen years, the Russian media and spin doctors have portrayed Ukraine as a sanctuary for zoological nationalists, a country torn by internal contradictions, mismanagement, and corruption. They have presented the public actions of politically marginalized

right-wing groups as manifestations of national politics. Noisy nationalist headliners, such as the torchlit processions on Bandera's birthday, were presented as national festivals approved by all Ukrainians. The fact that a large part of society remained indifferent to these games and that a significant portion of it disapproved of them was purposefully ignored. They depicted Ukraine as a chaotic, mismanaged society, as a failed state. They overestimated the level of internal discord. And, again, they ignored the most recent history: Ukrainians are effective in combatting external threats and are genuinely perfect in horizontal mobilization. Moreover, having low trust in state institutions, Ukrainians have demonstrated their ability and willingness to self-organization and their will to defend their freedoms. The story of the two revolutions of 2004 and 2014 teach that Ukrainians can fight and die for human values.

## **Conclusion**

Based on historical illusions and malicious propaganda, Putin created a picture of Ukraine, which pushed him to the action that lawyers already consider a war crime. It is a classic case of transferring historical myth into criminal deeds, comparable to other similar undertakings, like Hitler's belief in Sonderweg and his dream of the millennial Reich. Trying to ruin Ukraine, Putin invested in strengthening Ukraine's identity, pride, and self-assertion. He did it in 2004, intruding into Ukrainian elections, and in 2014, annexing Crimea and waging a proxy war in Donbas. Putin is doing it now. One of the possible outcomes might be Russia's catastrophe as an alternative to his plan to eliminate Ukraine. History has a cruel vengeance, and he will learn that lesson very soon.

\* Professor, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin