

“The Tragedy Has Never Left Us.” On the War in Ukraine

Interview with Bruno Cabanes

By Florent Guénard

The invasion of Ukraine can seem to resurrect the images of the past: conquering armies, cities under siege, widespread destruction. The references to the Second World War abound, but they should not obscure the fact that this conflict, with all its complexity and tragedy, belongs firmly to the present.

La Vie des idées: How, to your mind, does the invasion of Ukraine by Russia fit within the history of 20th- and 21st-century warfare? Is it, as some would say, a regression to a form of past warfare that we believed, perhaps incorrectly, to have long ago disappeared?

Bruno Cabanes: The images coming to us from Ukraine can almost feel like they're plucked from Second World War, with endless columns of armored vehicles blocking roads in the lead up to an offensive, waves of infantry, many of them young, and civilians being targeted by bombings or forced into exile. American newspapers have chosen to publish photographs of some of these scenes in black and white in order suggest a similarity between what we're seeing now and the experience of war in the 1940s. The reality is more complex, though. Just because a crowded train station in Kharkiv on March 2, 2022 resembles one packed with refugees from 1941 doesn't mean the two situations are similar. The same is true for pictures of Kyiv's metro and

London's during the Blitz. All these comparisons between eras have the shared goal of suggesting the universality and timelessness of human suffering, since that tactic has been one of the most effective tools of the humanitarian project since the end of the 18th century. But this isn't how historians think, who instead seek to situate violence, especially at the most extreme, within its immediate context. Presenting the abuses of the Russian army in Ukraine anachronistically says more about our inability to comprehend war violence in an unarmed Europe than it does the reality of what we're watching happen at the borders of the European Union.¹

Far from being a "war of the past," the invasion of Ukraine has featured a repertoire of violence that we saw at work in Chechnya in the 1990s or, more recently, in Syria, like in the Battle of Aleppo (2012-2016). The forcible expulsion of civilian populations, village massacres, the organization of humanitarian corridors that Russian troops wasted no time in bombing, the siege or occupation of cities (Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mariupol, Kherson...), and the targeting of hospitals and maternity wards (for example, the Mariupol pediatric hospital on March 9, 2022) even echo the "policy of cruelty" implemented during the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. In the early 2000s, the anthropologist Véronique Nahoum-Grappe began to reflect on cruelty as both a social fact and political tool, through what she calls "crimes of desecration" (that is, the violation of what is sacred in each individual) and attacks on filiation that, for example, deliberately target children or weaponize the reproductive process, as in the case of rape.² The war violence in Ukraine belongs to this logic, so what's happening there currently doesn't come as a complete surprise. Indeed, reading the work of the great novelist Andreï Kourkov (Grey Bees, MacLehose Press, 2020) or the testimony of the journalist and writer Stanislav Aseyev (*In Isolation. Dispatches from Occupied Donbas*, Harvard University Press, 2022) is enough to confirm that the abuses of the last several weeks mirror those suffered by the civilians living in areas held by pro-Russian separatists since 2014. I don't believe in the "brutal return of tragedy to history" that French President Emmanuel Macron recently described for the very reason that tragedy has never left us.

¹ James J. Sheehan, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone? The Transformation of Modern Europe* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

² Véronique Nahoum-Grappe, "L'usage politique de la cruauté: l'épuration ethnique (ex-Yougoslavie, 1991-1995)," in Françoise Héritier, *De la violence I* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005), 273-323.

La Vie des idées: What perspective do historians of war bring to better understand the type of events we're currently witnessing?

Bruno Cabanes: But what kind of history are we talking about? When a conflict breaks out, the historians' expertise is often confused with strategy or geopolitics and called upon for the exact wrong purposes. They're asked to do things like predict how hostilities will play out or conclude—an impossibility given how often experience has confirmed their almost complete inability to prognosticate. Put differently, the entire trajectory of the field as it has developed since the late 1970s—namely, its inclusion of histories of cultures, emotions, the environment, and combatants' bodies—is disregarded in demands that it do what it's inherently less suited for: provide an operational history of an ongoing conflict. It's unfortunate. A presentism dictated by current events and urgency leaves little room for admitting our uncertainties. Is the Russian army behind on its objectives? Has Vladimir Putin underestimated the Ukrainian resistance? Such questions, as much as their answers, mobilize some forms of knowledge to understand the present moment while almost invisibly marginalizing others: those which, slow and complex, are the only ones able to study violence as closely as possible, to understand its internal mechanisms. To bring to light the deep movements that shape its forms, intensity, meaning.

But the history of war has other benefits. It can try to identify the cultural issues at play in Ukraine, which is crucial because warfare is always shaped by who its participants are—or rather, who they understand themselves to be. This is a central lesson of half a century of work on the cultural history of war. What happens in conflicts is deeply embedded in collective imaginaries. How else can we explain, for example, that the national leader Slobodan Milosevic's call for Serbia's campaign of ethnic cleansing on June 28, 1989 aligned with the 600th anniversary of the battle of Kosovo Polje, an event almost unknown to the rest of Europe? By drawing on a centuries-old, collective memory in his speech, delivered to a huge crowd at the Gazimestan monument near the site of the battle of Kosovo, Milosevic was able to equate those Serbs who fought against the invading Ottoman armies in 1389 with those fighting in the 1980s, thereby justifying the mass murders demanded of the latter as yet another act of heroic national defense. The task of historians is to unravel the hidden cultural threads connecting this episode of 14th-century military history, which pitted the armies of Sultan Murad I against the soldiers of Prince Lazar Hrebeljanovic, to the atrocities committed at the end of the 20th century.

In the same way, history may remember the importance of Vladimir Putin's address to the nation on February 21, 2022: a radio address lasting almost an hour, in which the Russian President drew on the shared history of Russia and Ukraine and on the memory of the Second World War in order to justify the "special military operation" (the term "war" being banned since, according to him, Ukraine is an integral part of Russia) launched on February 24, 2022 to "denazify" the country. The operation in Ukraine is a war of aggression according to how international law defines "crimes against peace." It's a war of colonization, of empire. An event with global dimension, which rekindles the fear of nuclear disaster. But it is also, and maybe even chiefly, a conflict waged in the name of Russian identity and in repudiation of Ukrainian nationhood, all using the myth of the "Great Patriotic War."

**La Vie des idées: How to explain this reference to the "Great Patriotic War?"
What does it mean?**

Bruno Cabanes: The death toll (between 25 and 27 million people, many of them civilians) and the scale of the destruction (1,700 towns and 70,000 villages wiped out by the fighting, according to official statistics) have a lot to do with it.³ In a recent book, historian Jonathan Brunstedt studied the mechanisms by which a socialist society, bound to internationalist ideals, reconciled itself with values like patriotism or the celebration of military victories in order to exploit them.⁴ On the local level, a community memory kept alive the recollections of suffering; on the national level, it was mostly about heroic resistance to invasion, the siege of Stalingrad – "Russia's Verdun" – and the conquest of Berlin. Nevertheless, for 8,500,000 million demobilized Soviet veterans, especially the wounded and disabled, the road to securing recognition and specific rights was long, with the turning point only coming after Stalin's death according to historian Mark Edede.⁵ It was a dozen years later, starting in 1965, that the celebration of the victory against Nazism, May 9, became a true Russian national holiday.

After the period of perestroika and the years following the fall of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Putin mobilized the Great Patriotic War to his advantage since, to his

³ Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II* (New York, Basic Books, 1994).

⁴ Jonathan Brunstedt, *The Soviet Myth of World War II. Patriotic Memory and the Russian Question in the USSR* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021)

⁵ Mark Edede, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War. A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)

mind, it formed a unifying and consensual myth. One of the few still effective in post-Soviet Russia. This exaltation of the war against Nazism has many advantages in the current context: it makes it possible to present the invasion of Ukraine as yet another defensive war and to build a sort of patriotic front around the figure of Vladimir Putin, remobilized by a sacrificial rhetoric: civilians must be ready to consent to sacrifices in the economic war declared against them by the West and, only in doing so, will true patriots distinguish themselves from Russian “traitors,” that “fifth column” whose threat necessitates the “purification” of Russia (to quote a television speech by Putin on March 17, 2022). Like the “Great Patriotic War,” the intervention in Ukraine is intended to restore the greatness of the Russian people, too long humiliated by the United States and the countries of Western Europe that should, after all, be grateful to them for having heroically contributed to the ultimate victory. In his speech on May 9, 2020, Vladimir Putin said: “Soviet soldiers liberated countries of Europe from invaders. They ended the tragedy of the Holocaust and saved the people of Germany from Nazism, that deadly ideology.” Finally, the great national narrative supersedes the ideology of the communist state: the current regime conducts a full-fledged politics of memory that unfolds through the construction of museums and monuments, the organization of gigantic parades (especially for the 75th anniversary of the 1945 victory) and a repressive policy toward anything in academic research that might dispel the official version: any reference to the German-Soviet pact or the aggression against Poland is banned. Since an amendment to the penal code in May 2014 (article 354.1), dissenting historians face fines and prison sentences.⁶

In Ukraine, which has its own memorial laws “condemning communist and national socialist totalitarian regimes” (law no. 2558 of 2015), it’s interesting to see that the reference to the Second World War is also present. For example, President Volodymyr Zelensky compares the brutal siege of the city of Mariupol by Russian troops to that of Leningrad (September 1941-January 1944), which caused more than a million victims among the starving civilian population and defenders of the Red Army. The references are thus reversed, with the Russians playing the role of the lawless aggressor. In contrast to the image projected by Vladimir Putin, deeply contemptuous of the former television series comedian, Zelensky seems to have been transfigured by the circumstances, to the point of embodying the presidential role with unexpected charisma. Few examples in recent history illustrate such an ability to transform into a commander in chief in such a short time. Everything happened so

⁶ Nikolay Kaposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars. The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

quickly in the first weeks of the conflict: the massive population displacements (nearly ten million refugees and displaced persons in three weeks), the support of Western countries, the mobilization of the Ukrainian civilian population, the growing authority of Zelensky. The Ukrainian President now resembles a character from a film made during World War II, “The Battle of Russia” (1943) in which Frank Capra praises the exceptional heroism of the Russian people. At the time, the documentary was shown in all cinemas in the Soviet Union at the behest of Stalin.

La Vie des idées: Is it possible today to besiege cities as big as Kyiv and Odessa and to cut them off from the world, as was the case during the Second World War?

Bruno Cabanes: It’s a complicated question because the situation is, of course, different from that of the 1940s. In 1939, the population of Kyiv numbered between 800,000 and 900,000 inhabitants; today, it’s 2.8 million. Large Ukrainian cities have expanded over a vast area (the extent of Kyiv, for example, is eight times that of Paris). Their dependence on energy resources, electricity and internet networks has increased. In the short term, the invading Russian forces can exert significant pressure on the civilian population by threatening to cut off water, electricity, gas, communications with the rest of the country (which, for many Ukrainians, is to say with their family or friends), or by bombing, even though attacks on civilian targets constitute a war crime under international law (Article 8 of the Rome Statute). Russian strategy prioritizes attacks on cities, both because they house the seat of government (like Kyiv), because of the terror that bombardments can cause, and for their value in terms of heritage and symbolism. There is nothing new or surprising in that.

In the long-term, however, it’s not certain that the Russians will win this type of urban warfare. It’s estimated that attackers must be ten times as numerous as besieged populations if they are to hope to win in an urban setting, that their ammunition must be four times greater, and that their losses will be six times higher than those of combat on open ground.⁷ In fact, local populations benefit from multiple tactical advantages: they have a thorough knowledge of the streets and districts, control the high points like the floors of buildings, and can use the subway tunnels, sewer pipes, cellars, and air-raid shelters for movement or protection: nearly 5000

⁷ John Spencer and Jayson Geroux, The Urban Warfare Project Case Study Series, Modern War Institute at West Point.

shelters were built in the city of Kyiv alone during the Cold War to deal with a possible invasion by NATO troops. Street-by-street, building-by-building guerrilla warfare is extremely costly in terms of human life on both sides. We realized this in Grozny as in Aleppo. Moreover, experience shows that bombardments tend to unify the civilian population rather than cause a collapse of morale. Even though it's important to be cautious of hasty comparisons, as I've already said, the precedents of the sieges of Madrid (November 1936-March 1939) and Sarajevo (April 1992-February 1996) illustrate both the savagery of urban warfare and the solidarity of those who are its first victims: civilians.

La Vie des idées: The Ukrainian resistance is fierce and the entire populace is displaying immense courage. But can it reverse the current balance of power? Is it possible that the Russians will encounter in Ukraine what they experienced in Afghanistan?

Bruno Cabanes: Prisoner of his own rhetoric that presents Ukraine as a "little Russia" and Ukrainians as "little Russians," Vladimir Putin underestimated the Ukrainian resistance. If the two nations are one in the same, as he claims, and if Ukraine is an "artificial construct" (but aren't all nations, in essence?), why would Ukrainians sacrifice so much to defend themselves in a conflict already lost? Moreover, his strategy was based on the anticipation of internal divisions and the absence of an energetic reaction on the part of the West, as was the case in Georgia in 2008. In contrast, and provided that events bear out this initial observation, Putin has succeeded in uniting Ukrainians in a form of "civic nationality" to a degree that's no doubt surprising to the Ukrainians themselves. The difference between Russia and Ukraine isn't a matter of language, culture, or religion, but of two different political traditions: one aspiring to consolidate a democratic regime, the other sinking into dictatorship. Since the conflict's first weeks, tens of thousands of civilians have joined the territorial defense forces on a regional basis, in support of the 250,000 soldiers of the Ukrainian army, sometimes after experiencing their baptism by fire in Donbas, as Coline Maestracci explains in her work.

Ukraine isn't Afghanistan. The geography, numbers of troops involved, geostrategic interests, and the cultural and linguistic proximity between the invading forces and invaded populations represent crucial distinctions. Still, the question arises of whether the Russians will encounter a prolonged stalemate. Only one month

removed from the start of the hostilities, it would be risky to make predictions. Nevertheless, specialists in Russian defense policy like Isabelle Facon underline the difficulties that Russia faces: a decade of underfunding; a catch-up undertaken since 2008 (but on the basis of an increasingly weak GDP); and battlefield experience in Syria since 2015 that, while permitting tests of modern weaponry like the Kalibr cruise missiles, also revealed an army beset by staffing and logistical problems (how to conquer a country like Ukraine, larger than France, with only 130,000 men?).

From there, multiple factors will shape the evolution of the conflict: the strength of resistance from the Ukrainian army and population, which itself depends in part on foreign aid; the cohesion of NATO and the European Union; China's support of Russia; the influence of those Russians who oppose Vladimir Putin's regime; the reaction of Russian mothers when they see their sons repatriated in "zinc coffins" from Ukraine, a country where one third of the population speaks Russian and where many relatives and friends live; and finally, the impact of economic sanctions, which a recent book by historian Nicholas Mulder, devoted to the interwar period, clearly shows to be a double-edged sword and of limited effectiveness against authoritarian regimes that have developed a policy of autarky, as is currently the case in Russia.⁸

La Vie des idées: Hasn't nuclear deterrence shown its limits with this conflict? Is the dream of peace, which, if never perpetual was at least prolonged between the great powers, now a dead letter?

Bruno Cabanes: On the contrary. Nuclear deterrence and the strengthening of NATO have played their part. Vladimir Putin's threats, if they are to be taken seriously, fortunately remain mere threats. The question that arises is the following: are we witnessing a return to the Cold War? I don't believe so. In the first place, that's because history never moves backwards. In the global context, Vladimir Putin's Russia is not the Soviet Union of the 1970s, even if the fear that the regime inspires in its own population, or the savage repression of internal opponents and civil liberties, hearken back to the darkest days of communist dictatorship. Next, the United States has also changed a lot. Under Donald Trump's presidency, American influence abroad has diminished, and its diplomacy has less currency with both its allies and adversaries. Washington seemed to come close to the rhetoric of force employed by Moscow. The

⁸ Nicholas Mulder, *The Economic Weapon. The Rise of Sanctions as a Tool of Modern War* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2022).

ramblings of the Trump administration have left their mark in Europe, weakening mutual trust and eroding the belief in sharing common values. Let's also not forget that the main threat according to the United States now comes from China. Even as the situation in Ukraine arouses concern, anger, or compassion, it's the Chinese regime's possible support of Vladimir Putin's Russia that garners the most attention.

La Vie des idées: Should this conflict be interpreted as a struggle between democracies and authoritarian regimes, akin to what the world witnessed in the 20th century?

Bruno Cabanes: This is certainly how the war is felt in Western public opinion. And it explains the commitment of the international volunteers who, alongside Ukrainians themselves, responded to President Zelensky's call and flocked to the defense of a democratically elected government. In fact, they're reviving a long tradition that stretches from Philhellenes like Byron who fought in the Greek War of Independence to Malraux who joined the international brigades in Spain, from Garibaldi to Che Guevara: ideological warriors, ready to sacrifice their lives for a country other than their own. Still, the boundary between democracies and authoritarian regimes is less precise than one might imagine or wish it to be. The United States has just emerged from years of a Trump presidency that undermined American democracy and ended with the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. The influx of Ukrainian refugees into countries like Hungary and Poland has allowed them to turn their hospitality into political capital, repudiating the European Union's longstanding criticisms of their stance towards the rule of law and civil liberties. In this attack on a sovereign nation by Russia, on the borders of Europe at that, it's clearly our common values at stake: how we define them and the price we're ready to pay to defend them.

For the civilian populations directly affected by the fighting, and probably for certain Russian soldiers, this war between cousins also affects their identities. The journalist and writer Svetlana Alexievich admitted her dismay at this fact as early as December 7, 2015, at the end of her remarkable lecture accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature, just a few months after the annexation of Crimea:

I will take the liberty of saying that we have missed the opportunity given to us in the 1990s. In response to the question: "What should we be, a strong country, or a

dignified country where life is good?" we choose the first option: a strong country. We have returned to the era of force. The Russians wage war against the Ukrainians. Against their brothers. My father is Belarusian and my mother Ukrainian. This is the case for many people. Russian planes are bombing Syria. A time full of hope has been replaced by a time of fear. The era has turned around and headed back in time. The time we live in now is second-hand... Sometimes, I'm not sure that I've finished writing the story of the 'Red man.' ... I have three homes: my Belarusian land, my father's homeland where I have lived my whole life; Ukraine, my mother's homeland, where I was born; and the great Russian culture, without which I cannot imagine myself. All three are very dear to my heart. But in this day and age, it is difficult to talk about love⁹.

translated by Cameron Givens for Origins

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⁹ Svetlana Alexievich, "On the Battle Lost", Nobel Lecture at the Swedish Academy in Stockholm, 7 December 2015.