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The 2022 Invasion of Ukraine and its Lessons for Nationalism Studies

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The field of nationalism studies encompasses many subfields, reflecting the multi-faceted nature of nationalism itself, but understanding war lies at the heart of the discipline. Indeed, two books with the exact title *Nationalism and War* have been published in the last decade (Hall and Malešević 2013; Hutchinson 2017). While the horror of the Second World War haunts European imaginations, the horror of war in contemporary Ukraine has focused European attention on the problem of nationalist violence even more forcefully than the Yugoslav wars, if only because the Ukrainian conflict seems to have more potential to spread. If the NATO alliance or the European Union fails to act, it sets a precedent for further territorial aggression; yet if it intervenes too forcefully, it may find itself in a shooting war with a nuclear power. How did we end up here? How should policy makers analyze their options? Nationalism studies, perhaps, offers tools for understanding the forces at play.

Contributors to this themed issue on the Ukraine war and its lessons for nationalism theory wrote their papers in the early months of 2022, in the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion. You, dear reader, have knowledge we authors lacked: you remember important events of which we had no knowledge, events that occurred at times which for us still lay in an unknown future. Readers may have to forgive us our lack of prophecy.

As I write this introduction in August 2022, however, the war seems to have already changed the world dramatically, and much for the worse. The fighting has visited death and injury not only on soldiers of both armies, but also on one what the United Nations estimates are tens of thousands of civilians (OHCHR 2022). The United Nations also estimates there are 5.6 million refugees in Europe, on top of 7.1 million people internally displaced in Ukraine (UNHCR 2022). The war has also triggered what the World Food Programme calls a "global food crisis" in which "millions of people across the world are at risk of being driven into starvation" (WFP 2022). The global economy, furthermore, has been disrupted to an extent that the U.S. Federal

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reserve estimated "as reducing the level of global GDP about 1.5 percent and leading to a rise in global inflation of about 1.3 percentage points" (Caldara et al. 2022). It is hard to imagine any benefit that would justify these costs.

The war in Ukraine, admittedly, is not the only disaster going on in the world, and some activists might with justification point to climate change as a more pressing issue facing humanity. Nevertheless, I personally found the war in Ukraine more unsettling than other global crises, presumably because of my background as a historian of Eastern Europe. I should acknowledge that the war has not, so far, affected me as an individual. I live in New Zealand and do not have any Ukrainian relatives. Indeed, I have never even been to Ukraine, though I was once turned off a train at the Ukrainian border: an unscrupulous travel agent in St. Petersburg, selling me a train ticket to Prague, falsely assured me that I did not require a transit visa. Nevertheless, the Russian invasion threatens the peace in East-Central Europe, a region of the world where I spent several happy years of my life, to which I have become attached, and about which I have spent most of my career writing.

On February 24, 2022, when the invasion started, my initial response was a burst of pedagogical activism. My job as a historian is to disseminate knowledge to others. I am not a specialist in Ukrainian history, but casual conversations made it clear to me that I understood Ukraine much better than most of my academic colleagues at Victoria University of Wellington, my employer. I was certainly in a position to provide a contextualizing background about the conflict to the New Zealand public at large. The war seemed an issue of public concern, so pursing my chosen vocation felt like a way to contribute to humanity. I first presented to the staff seminar in the Victoria University, and subsequently participated via Zoom in a talk hosted by Otago University, in the far south of New Zealand. I then pitched, designed, and taught a six-week Zoom course called "Putin's Wars" for Earth Diverse, a charitable trust offering evening courses. In March, I also wrote an editorial for *Newsroom*, a New Zealand-based news provider (Maxwell 2022a). In April, I contributed a short essay to a community newsletter (Maxwell 2022b), which later hosted me on their associated podcast. In July, I gave an hour-long talk to an audience of nearly 400 people organized by the University of the Third Age. Such activities do not show much sign of abating: in the coming months, I am scheduled to speak to both a local Rotary Club and to the New Zealand Humanist society. Over the New Zealand summer, furthermore, I am scheduled to teach a Zoom course on Ukrainian history.

The idea for this special issue arose from a similar desire to participate in public debate at what seems an important historical juncture. As the war

began, I read with fascination Putin's speech justifying the "special military operation," a historical narrative harnessing both truths and half-truths in service of a fundamentally dishonest narrative defending the crudest military aggression. I first thought Putin's speech would make an interesting course reading for my Soviet history course, but then slowly realized I had enough to say for a scholarly article.

Public commentary on the invasion, furthermore, drove home to me how differently other scholars had reacted to Putin's speech, even prestigious scholars who shared my sympathy with the Ukrainian side. In particular, Timothy Snyder's commentary on Putin's speech struck me as both incomprehensible and irresponsible. Speaking shortly after the invasion, Snyder argued, among other things, that:

> Mr. Putin is telling ... a basically fascist story, it's a story about how once upon a time nothing was fragmented, there was purity, someone got baptized, there was water, they were purified, everything was purified, and his name was Vladimir, and my name is also Vladimir. That is quite literally the story, that is the story, it has been said in so many words. (IWM Vienna 2022, 23:23).

I did not recognize Putin's text in this passage. Putin's speech is not preoccupied with purity; it does not mention water. Putin did allude to Vladimir the Great's 988 C.E. conversion to Christianity, but what is "fascist" about celebrating conversion to Christianity as a national milestone? Is Saint Patrick's Day evidence of Irish fascism?

If Snyder disapproves of Putin for invoking Vladimir's conversion, furthermore, how can Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy enjoy Snyder's support? A quick search of the Ukrainian president's webpage confirmed that Zelenskyy too has invoked Vladimir's conversion as a milestone of national history (Zelenskyy 2021), and Zelenskyy's name is also Volodymyr. Yet Snyder praised Ukrainian national narratives: "their story is about existence, it's about subjectivity" (IWM Vienna 2022, 21:45).

When Snyder accused Putin of "fascism," finally, he apparently used the word in George Orwell's sense: "the word Fascism has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies something not desirable" (Orwell 1946, 257–58). While Snyder and I both find ourselves supporting the same side in the Russo-Ukrainian war, we evidently disagree about the methods with which western academics should seek to delegitimize Russian aggression. Snyder, evidently seeking to portray Putin in the worst possible light, pursued the politics of stigmatization. Such rhetoric, however, debases political discourse. Historians commenting on current events should instead attempt to provide a nuanced,

balanced appraisal, conceding when their opponents make a valid point, acknowledging the legitimate interests of the other side, and condemning excesses on their own side.

The idea of a themed issue on the Ukrainian war and its lessons for nationalism theory thus suggested itself. Politicians, intellectuals, community leaders, and ordinary people routinely espouse various forms of nationalism (or patriotism). While it is no longer surprising when political actors espouse nationalist tropes, metatheories of generic nationalism, implicit in both the utterances of policy makers and in public debates about global events, form a meaningful object of study. Is it not the goal of nationalism theory to understand nationalism, and ideally to provide tools for curbing its dangers? The Russian invasion of Ukraine provides nationalism theorists with a concrete opportunity to reflect on the role of nationalism theory in contemporary politics.

I thus wrote a draft call for papers specifically asking contributors to explore, among other things, how theories of nationalism informed Russian, Ukrainian, and other policy makers. How well do theories of nationalism explain the conflict? Does the war confirm or refute any models of nationalist politics? Many approaches to nationalism propose typologies distinguishing different types of nationalism. When civilians, soldiers, protesters, deserters, or refugees act from nationalist motives, what sorts of nationalism do they espouse? Does the war have any implications for normative branches of nationalism theory? Are there any practical lessons nationalism scholars ought to have already learned, but have not? Alternatively, what new lessons does the war teach?

With the call for papers in hand, I approached the *Journal of Nationalism, Memory, and Language Politics*, published by Sciendo on behalf of Prague's Charles University. The journal's editor, Hana Kubátová, responded with enthusiasm. The call went live on H-net in mid-March 2022, less than a month after the invasion began, emphasizing our desire to publish quickly, or at least quickly by the slow standards of academic publishing.

We received nine abstracts from scholars in ten different countries across Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America. Most of these scholars had not previously worked on Ukrainian history: I was, it seems, not alone in responding to the war with a burst of pedagogical activism. While circumstances prevented some contributors from submitting their work, we ultimately received six drafts. Three papers survived peer review and appear in this special issue.

The rejected papers, however, illuminate the contemporary situation nearly as much as the papers that survived the peer review process. Two submissions

were highly polemical: when discussing them, Kubátová and I found the word "propaganda" hard to avoid. In a pleasing bit of symmetry, one was pro-Ukrainian, the other pro-Russian. It seems unethical to quote lengthy passages from those papers; we do not seek to shame rejected contributors. Nevertheless, the feel of the propagandistic papers can be approximated with paraphrases. Taken together, they shed some light on the current historical moment.

The pro-Ukrainian piece, written by a scholar based in Ukraine, condemned the invasion as a war of conquest and enslavement. The article eschewed the term "orcs," but referred to Russian soldiers as beasts and slaves. It contrasted the heroism of Ukrainian nationalism with iniquitous Russian nationalism. The pejorative neologisms "RussiZm" and "Ruscism" (a portmanteau "Russia" and "fascism") both featured prominently. The letter "Z," famously painted on Russian military vehicles, was tediously equated with a swastika. The article ended by urging other countries to support Ukraine's inevitable victory.

Reading the pro-Ukrainian article as a scholar who regularly publishes on nationalism theory, I repeatedly found myself thinking about Rogers Brubaker's suggestion to study "ethnicity without groups." The Ukrainian scholar's argument was suffused with what Brubaker called "groupism" (Brubaker 2002). She reified a Ukrainian "group" by proclaiming Ukrainian national consensus on various issues that are actually controversial and divisive, such as church politics and language policy. She also reified a Russian "group" by explicitly refusing to draw any distinction between the Russian leadership and ordinary Russians. In time of war, it is perhaps understandable that a patriotic Ukrainian would want to reify a unanimous Ukrainian will. Living in a city suffering Russian missile attacks, furthermore, might understandably make one impatient with any distinction between the Russian government and the Russian people, since the complicit often draw such distinctions to deflect moral responsibility. Nevertheless, the article also propounded groupism by claiming that all Germans had once supported the Nazi government. The pro-Ukrainian author, I thought, would benefit from reading Brubaker.

The pro-Russian piece, meanwhile, came from an African scholar whose previous scholarly work concerned African affairs. Both Kubátová and I were initially enthusiastic to attract an African perspective on the Ukrainian conflict, both from a desire to include diverse perspectives and from the hope of learning something new. The draft submission, unfortunately, proved disappointing. It characterized the Ukrainian leadership as neo-Nazis and extremists, uncritically citing as evidence remarks made by Putin himself. It accused NATO of masterminding a war of conquest against Russia, and

even blamed the war on Boris Johnson and Joe Biden. This extraordinary interpretation of the conflict, I diagnose, derives ultimately from the author's opposition to Great Britain and the United States. Anything the British and Americans like, the author's logic appears to run, must be bad; since the British and the Americans are supporting Ukraine, the Ukrainians must be in the wrong and Russia in the right. Such reasoning explains how a scholar writing about the war in Ukraine could mostly ignore Soviet history while adducing instead events such as American military action in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the NATO bombing of Libya, the western failure to protect Tutsis from Hutu genocide, and the war in Yemen. The article concluded by urging fellow Africans to steer clear of European wars.

These two polemical submissions reflect political divisions among the international community. In global academic circles, both Russia and Ukraine have supporters. Academic opinion, as a subset of public opinion, can shape the thought of policy makers. The two polemical authors thus saw our call for papers as a potential front on which the propaganda war might be waged.

The two polemical submissions, however, also demonstrate some important areas of international consensus. Supporters of both Ukraine and Russia signal their political preferences with reference to Nazi wickedness. Snyder's thoughtless use of the term was criticized above. The Ukrainian author freely dispensed the opprobrious sobriquet "fascist," though in fairness also engaged with some scholarly definitions of fascism. The Russophile African scholar only once used the word "fascist," but frequently invoked "neo-Nazis," and repeatedly characterized Ukraine's 2019 language law as "Nazist." Many scholars surveying contemporary politics, concerned by fraying democratic norms and the rise of authoritarianism, have drawn analogies between the post-Soviet era and the interwar period (Hanson and Kopstein 1997; Rayner et al. 2020). The comparison arises partly from fear: the interwar period, after all, ended with the horror, death, and destruction of the Second World War. During the interwar period, however, fascists and Nazis enjoyed open mass support. In 2022, it seems, loathing for and opposition to Hitler and fascism remain universal, at least at the rhetorical level. Both the pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian article, anyway, condemned the holocaust and used the term "neo-Nazi" as a term of abuse.

The polemical essays also suggest residual consensus about the theoretical possibility of objective analysis. Several scholars have pondered whether the 21st century, characterized as it is by an easily-manipulated social media landscape and the global buzzword "fake news," might best be analyzed as "post-truth" political environment (e.g., Cooke 2017; Yee 2017; Crilley 2018;

Troude-Chastenet 2018; Vasu et al. 2018; Jaster and Lanius 2019; Wasserman 2020; Wahutu 2019; Giusti and Piras 2020). Yet both polemicists cited news stories from the BBC and France24, respected state-owned media outlets based in western Europe. Indeed, the pro-Russian article, for all its anti-American rhetoric, cited stories from Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, as well as mainstream American news sources, such as Reuters, CNN, and *Newsweek*. Traditional "legacy" media outlets thus still enjoy prestige. The fact that the polemicists attempted to publish in an academic journal, furthermore, suggests that academic institutions retain much of their authority as purveyors and gatekeepers of reliable knowledge.

In this special issue, then, academics summon their expertise in an attempt to shed some light on the Russo-Ukrainian War. The various contributions analyze different aspects of the conflict, deploying different theoretical approaches. Contributors do not agree about everything, but disagreement is a normal part of robust debate. Perhaps our disagreement can still shape public discourse for the better.

The first contribution, from Victoria Shmidt and Nadya Jaworsky, examines how whiteness and racial hierarchies have informed Austrian and Czech efforts to settle displaced Ukrainian refugees. These two states, both EU member states in central Europe, both participate in "the multilevel production of whiteness," which in turn rests on racial hierarchies, an East-West civilizational slope, and sundry other easily-documented forms of marginalization. The experiences of Ukrainian Roma highlight the salience of whiteness in the treatment of Ukrainian refugees. Shmidt and Jaworsky also document Ukrainian refugee participation in such discourses, urging refugees to "present a proper civilized face" to the host countries. While depressingly concluding that the reproduction of such discourses "seems inevitable," Shmidt and Jaworsky suggest that critical engagement offers some hope of eventually subverting them.

Domagoj Krpan then provides an overview of Ukrainian history, seeking evidence of Ukrainian national feeling. Inspired by Anthony Smith, Krpan divides Ukrainian history into different periods, with each contributing something to the development of Ukrainian particularist nationalism. The pre-national period before the 19th century led to the 19th-century era of national awakening, then to the complicated 20th century during which Ukrainians were first united in a single state, and finally the independence era, including the 2014 Revolution of Dignity and subsequent confrontation with the Russian Federation. Krpan finds important milestones and turning points throughout Ukrainian history but suggests in his conclusion that the

2022 invasion may turn out to be "the most substantial uniting factor" and possibly "the founding narrative in building the Ukrainian national identity for the 21st century."

My final contribution critically examines Vladimir Putin's justification for the invasion of Ukraine in light of western historiography. In various public pronouncements, Putin argued that Ukrainians are "really" Russians, that Ukrainian nationalism lacks authentic roots and originated in foreign meddling. The question of roots and origins, however, leads to a longstanding debate in nationalism studies, once pondered by Ichijo and Uzelac (2005) as the question "when is the nation?" I differ from Krpan in tracing the origins of popular adherence to Ukrainian particularist nationalism to one particular era, specifically the first two decades of the Soviet Union. This 20th-century chronology implies that Putin is not wholly mistaken about the modernity of Ukrainian nationalism. Nevertheless, by propounding a primordialist theory of nationalism, Putin's understanding of Ukrainian history is fundamentally mistaken: by assuming that legitimate nationalism must have ancient roots, Putin implies that twentieth-century developments somehow do not count. Regrettably, several western scholars who ought to know better have opposed Putin's primordialism with primordialist narratives of their own. I conclude by urging scholars to fight primordialism and its obsession with ancient origins.

These contributions, of course, do not exhaust the possible approaches scholars might take toward the conflict, and future scholars will doubtlessly push knowledge further forward. Future scholars will find in these contributions not only a snapshot of scholarly opinion at the moment of crisis, but, we dare hope, also some lasting insights into the war in Ukraine.

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