Aggression Never Learns: Historical Parallels and Patterns in the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract— This paper examines the Russia-Ukraine war through the lens of comparative historical analysis, identifying recurring patterns in Russian imperial expansion, European responses to aggression, and the tragic repetition of diplomatic miscalculations across centuries. Drawing upon extensive scholarship, archival sources, and contemporary analysis from 2022 to 2026, this paper explores four principal historical parallels that illuminate the current conflict. First, the Crimean War (1853–1856) serves as a precursor to Russia's contemporary strategic overreach, demonstrating how tsarist ambitions in Ottoman territories parallel Putin's designs on Ukraine, and how both conflicts arose from anxieties about declining influence and the spread of Western ideas. Second, the paper examines the catastrophic diplomatic precedents of the Munich Agreement (1938) and the Yalta Conference (1945), drawing cautionary lessons for contemporary peace negotiations that risk sacrificing Ukrainian sovereignty for illusory stability. Third, the Budapest Memorandum (1994) is analysed as a testament to the fragility of security assurances when unaccompanied by enforceable guarantees, demonstrating how Ukraine's voluntary nuclear disarmament was met with betrayal rather than protection. Fourth, the paper investigates Russia's systematic weaponisation of history itself, deploying distorted historical narratives to justify aggression, deny Ukrainian statehood, and mobilise domestic support for war. Through these parallel investigations, the paper argues that while history does not literally repeat, it offers discernible patterns that, if ignored, condemn successive generations to relearn the same costly lessons. The paper concludes by considering what historical consciousness demands of the international community in responding to Russian aggression and supporting Ukrainian resistance.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine war; historical parallels; Crimean War; Munich Agreement; security guarantees.

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INTRODUCTION

The philosopher George Santayana's aphorism that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" has become perhaps the most overused yet under-heeded maxim in political discourse. In the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, now entering its fifth year as of early 2026, Santayana's warning resonates with particular urgency. The war has resurrected historical ghosts that many Europeans believed had been permanently laid to rest: land grabs in the heart of Europe, the denial of sovereign statehood, the manipulation of ethnic Russian minorities as a pretext for intervention, and the spectre of nuclear brinkmanship (Mbey, 2018; Plokhy, 2023; Snyder, 2022).

This paper argues that the Russia-Ukraine war cannot be understood in isolation from the deep historical currents that produced it. Russian President Vladimir Putin's actions are not those of a madman or a purely opportunistic adventurer; they are the product of a coherent, if deeply flawed, historical worldview that draws upon selective readings of Russia's imperial past, grievances about the post-Cold War settlement, and ressentiment toward Western liberal democracy (Adejumo, et al., 2021; Mankoff, 2022; Stent, 2022; Egbara¸et al, 2024). Understanding this worldview is essential not only for interpreting Russian actions but also for crafting responses that avoid the catastrophic mistakes of previous generations.

The paper proceeds through four substantive sections, each examining a distinct historical parallel that illuminates different dimensions of the current conflict. Section 2 examines the Crimean War of 1853–1856, exploring how Tsar Nicholas I's ambitions in the declining Ottoman Empire mirror Putin's designs on Ukraine, and how both conflicts arose from Russian anxieties about the spread of Western ideas and the erosion of traditional spheres of influence (Figes, 2010; Lieven, 2022; Aliu¸et al., 2024; Waliya & Mbey, 2024). Section 3 turns to the twentieth century's most infamous examples of diplomatic betrayal: the Munich Agreement of 1938, in which Western powers sacrificed Czechoslovakia in a vain attempt to appease Hitler, and the Yalta Conference of 1945, in which Stalin secured Western acquiescence to Soviet domination of Eastern Europe (Reynolds, 2022; Snyder, 2022; Chuka¸et al., 2023; Mbey¸et al., 2024). These precedents offer cautionary lessons for contemporary debates about negotiated settlements that might trade Ukrainian territory for peace.

Section 4 analyses the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, a document of particular salience for understanding Ukrainian grievances and Russian perfidy. In exchange for Ukraine's voluntary transfer of the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal to Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia itself provided security assurances respecting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Budjeryn, 2022; Yekelchyk, 2022; Owa¸et al., 2023; Owa¸et al., 2026). Russia's flagrant violation of these assurances has not only fuelled Ukrainian resistance but has fundamentally undermined the global

non-proliferation regime, sending a devastating message to states contemplating nuclear disarmament.

Section 5 examines Russia's weaponisation of history itself, deploying distorted historical narratives to justify aggression, deny Ukrainian statehood, and mobilise domestic support for war. From Putin's 2021 essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" to the systematic destruction of Ukrainian historical archives and museums, the Kremlin has made the control of historical memory central to its war effort (Kasianov, 2022; Plokhy, 2023). The paper concludes by considering what historical consciousness demands of the international community: not the mechanical application of supposed historical "lessons," but a nuanced understanding of patterns, contingencies, and the irreducible agency of human actors in shaping events.

THE CRIMEAN WAR AND RUSSIAN IMPERIAL OVERREACH

The Crimean War of 1853–1856, fought between Russia and an alliance of the Ottoman Empire, Britain, France, and Sardinia, offers striking parallels to Russia's current war in Ukraine. In both cases, Russian leaders sought to exploit the perceived weakness of neighbouring states to expand Russian influence and secure strategic advantages. In both cases, they miscalculated the willingness of Western powers to intervene. And in both cases, the war exposed deep structural weaknesses in the Russian state while simultaneously fuelling narratives of Western perfidy and Russian victimhood (Figes, 2010; Mbey, et al., 2018; Lieven, 2022).

Tsarist Ambitions and the Eastern Question

The immediate origins of the Crimean War lay in the so-called "Eastern Question": the problem of what would become of the Ottoman Empire's vast territories as the "Sick Man of Europe" continued its long decline. Tsar Nicholas I, who had ruled Russia since 1825, saw an opportunity to expand Russian influence in the Balkans and the Black Sea region, securing control over the Turkish Straits and positioning Russia as the protector of Orthodox Christians under Ottoman rule (Owa¸et al., 2017; Goldfrank, 2022; Waliya & Mbey, 2024). In 1853, Nicholas demanded that the Ottoman sultan recognise Russia's right to protect Orthodox subjects throughout the empire—a demand that, if granted, would have established a Russian protectorate over millions of Ottoman citizens.

The parallels with Putin's 2022 invasion are striking. Putin's stated war aims included the "protection" of Russian speakers and ethnic Russians in Ukraine's Donbas region, a formulation that, like Nicholas's claim to protect Orthodox Christians, asserted a right of intervention that fundamentally challenged Ukrainian sovereignty (Mankoff, 2022). Both leaders framed their actions as responses to alleged persecution of co-ethnics, deploying the language of humanitarian concern to mask imperial ambitions.

When the Ottomans, backed by Britain and France, rejected Nicholas's demands, Russian forces occupied the Danubian Principalities (modern Romania) and destroyed an Ottoman fleet at Sinope. Britain and France, alarmed by the prospect of Russian domination of the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean, declared war on Russia in March 1854 (Figes, 2010; Gregory & FRUEBI, 2024). The ensuing conflict, fought primarily on the Crimean Peninsula, became a byword for military incompetence, logistical failure, and strategic miscalculation on all sides.

Miscalculation and Intervention

A central theme of the Crimean War, and one that resonates powerfully today, is the Russian miscalculation of Western willingness to intervene. Nicholas I believed that the revolutionary upheavals of 1848 had so weakened the European powers, and that their mutual antagonisms were so deep, that they would not unite to oppose Russian expansion (Lieven, 2022; Oko & Mbey, 2025). He particularly underestimated British resolve, assuming that commercial interests would prevent London from confronting Russia.

Putin made analogous miscalculations in 2022. Drawing upon years of observing Western paralysis in the face of Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, intervention in Syria in 2015, and interference in Western elections, Putin apparently concluded that NATO and the European Union would not mount a serious response to a full-scale invasion (Owa¸et al., 2022; Stent, 2022). He underestimated Ukrainian resistance, the speed and scale of Western military assistance, and the unifying effect of Russian aggression on NATO.

The Crimean parallel also illuminates the domestic sources of Russian foreign policy. Nicholas I's Russia was a deeply conservative, autocratic state that defined itself in opposition to the liberal ideas spreading across Europe. The revolutions of 1848, which Nicholas helped suppress in Hungary, confirmed his conviction that Russia's mission was to stand as a bulwark against Western decadence and revolution (Figes, 2010). Putin's Russia, similarly, has defined itself in opposition to Western liberalism, framing the war in Ukraine as an existential struggle against Western cultural and political hegemony (Mankoff, 2022; Snyder, 2022; Gregory & Adie, 2024).

The Crimean Defeat and Its Aftermath

The Crimean War ended in Russian defeat. The siege of Sevastopol, lasting 349 days, became a symbol of Russian heroism and sacrifice, but also of the regime's incompetence. Russia's serf-based army was no match for the industrialised forces of Britain and France; its logistics were abysmal, its command structure dysfunctional, its technology outdated (Goldfrank, 2022). The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1856, imposed

harsh terms: Russia was forced to demilitarise the Black Sea, return captured territories, and renounce its claim to protect Orthodox Christians.

Yet the defeat also produced important reforms. Tsar Alexander II, who succeeded Nicholas in 1855, embarked on a programme of modernisation that included the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, reform of the military and judiciary, and limited local self-government. These reforms, however, did not fundamentally alter Russia's autocratic structure or its ambivalent relationship with Europe (Lieven, 2022).

The Crimean defeat also seared itself into Russian historical memory, creating enduring narratives of Western betrayal and Russian victimhood that continue to shape Russian foreign policy. The idea that the West, led by perfidious Albion, seeks to encircle, weaken, and humiliate Russia has been a staple of Russian nationalist discourse ever since (Figes, 2022). Putin has repeatedly invoked these themes, portraying NATO enlargement as a continuation of the Crimean War-era project to deny Russia its rightful place in European security.

Contemporary Relevance

The Crimean parallel offers several insights for understanding the current war. First, it demonstrates the dangers of imperial overreach driven by ideological conviction and miscalculation of adversary resolve. Second, it shows how Russian expansionism has consistently provoked the very Western unity it seeks to prevent. Third, it illuminates the domestic functions of foreign policy in an autocratic state: the war in Ukraine, like the Crimean War, has exposed deep structural weaknesses in the Russian state while simultaneously being framed as a heroic struggle against Western aggression (Galeotti, 2022).

The parallel also suggests caution about the post-war settlement. The Treaty of Paris, imposed on a defeated Russia, produced resentments that fuelled future conflicts. A durable peace in Ukraine will require not only Russian defeat but also a settlement that addresses the underlying sources of Russian insecurity without rewarding aggression or sacrificing Ukrainian sovereignty.

MUNICH, YALTA AND THE DANGERS OF APPEASEMENT

If the Crimean War offers parallels to Russian motivations and miscalculations, the twentieth century's most infamous diplomatic failures—the Munich Agreement of 1938 and the Yalta Conference of 1945—offer cautionary lessons about Western responses to aggression and the dangers of sacrificing smaller states in the name of stability.

The Munich Agreement: Czechoslovakia Sacrificed

The Munich Agreement, signed on 30 September 1938 by Germany, Italy, Britain, and France, permitted Nazi Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland, a border region of Czechoslovakia inhabited predominantly by ethnic Germans. Czechoslovakia, a democratic state and French ally, was not invited to the conference; its fate was decided without its participation (Reynolds, 2022). British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain famously returned to London declaring that he had secured "peace for our time."

The parallels with contemporary debates about a negotiated settlement in Ukraine are unmistakable. The Sudetenland, like Crimea and the Donbas, was a region with a significant ethnic population that Hitler claimed was persecuted by the Czechoslovak government. The Western powers, desperate to avoid war, pressured Czechoslovakia to accept the partition rather than fight with French support. The result, far from securing peace, merely postponed war while strengthening Hitler's position and demoralising potential resisters (Snyder, 2022).

Scholars have extensively debated whether the Munich analogy applies to Ukraine. Critics of the analogy note that Putin is not Hitler, that contemporary Russia is not Nazi Germany, and that the geopolitical context is fundamentally different (Mearsheimer, 2022). These objections, while valid in their specifics, miss the broader point: the Munich Agreement exemplifies the dangers of accommodating aggression, sacrificing sovereign states, and treating territorial integrity as a bargaining chip.

The Munich analogy has particular resonance in Central and Eastern Europe, where memories of 1938 remain vivid. Polish, Baltic, and Czech leaders have repeatedly invoked Munich in warning against any negotiated settlement that would legitimise Russian territorial gains (Reynolds, 2022). For these states, the lesson of Munich is clear: aggression must be resisted early and collectively, or it will grow to demand ever greater concessions.

Yalta: Spheres of Influence and the Betrayal of Eastern Europe

The Yalta Conference, held in February 1945 as Allied victory in Europe approached, presents a different but equally troubling precedent. At Yalta, Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin met to determine the post-war order. The conference produced agreements on the division of Germany, the occupation zones, and the holding of "free and unfettered elections" in liberated states (Plokhy, 2023).

The reality was far darker. Stalin had already installed communist-dominated governments in Poland and other Eastern European states, and the Yalta agreements did nothing to prevent the Sovietisation of the region. Roosevelt, focused on securing Soviet entry into the war against Japan and maintaining Allied unity, was unwilling to

confront Stalin over Eastern Europe (Reynolds, 2022). The result was the division of Europe into spheres of influence, with the peoples of Eastern Europe condemned to nearly half a century of Soviet domination.

The Yalta precedent resonates powerfully in contemporary Ukraine. The idea that great powers might agree to a new "Yalta" that sacrifices Ukrainian sovereignty in exchange for Russian acceptance of NATO expansion or economic cooperation has been vigorously debated (Stent, 2022). Critics of such proposals argue that they would repeat the moral and strategic errors of 1945: sacrificing smaller states to great power ambitions, legitimising spheres of influence, and storing up future conflicts.

Proponents of a negotiated settlement sometimes invoke the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, which accepted existing borders in Europe while committing signatories to human rights principles, as a model for resolving the Ukraine conflict (Mearsheimer, 2022). The Helsinki process, they argue, demonstrated that accommodation with Soviet power could coexist with eventual liberalisation. Critics respond that the Helsinki analogy ignores the crucial difference: in 1975, the borders being accepted had existed for three decades and were not the product of ongoing aggression; a settlement that legitimised Russia's 2022 gains would reward aggression and invite future violations.

The Nuclear Dimension: Cuban Missile Crisis Parallels

The danger of nuclear escalation adds another historical dimension to the Ukraine war. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, when the United States and the Soviet Union came closest to nuclear war, has been invoked repeatedly as a precedent for understanding the current confrontation (Plokhy, 2023). In 1962, the discovery of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba prompted a US naval blockade and intense negotiations that ultimately resolved the crisis through a secret deal: the US would remove its missiles from Turkey and pledge not to invade Cuba, while the Soviet Union would withdraw its missiles from Cuba. The crisis demonstrated both the dangers of nuclear brinkmanship and the possibility of resolution through direct communication and mutual concessions (Reynolds, 2022).

The Ukraine war has raised nuclear risks in several ways. Putin's repeated nuclear threats, his suspension of participation in the New START treaty, and his deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus have all heightened tensions. Western leaders have walked a delicate line, providing massive military assistance to Ukraine while avoiding direct NATO-Russia confrontation that could escalate to nuclear war.

The Cuban Missile Crisis parallel suggests both hope and caution. The crisis was resolved because leaders on both sides recognised the dangers of escalation and were willing to compromise. Yet the resolution came at the cost of accepting Soviet domination of Cuba, a price that Ukrainians are unwilling to pay. The challenge for

contemporary leaders is to manage nuclear risks without sacrificing Ukrainian sovereignty or rewarding nuclear blackmail.

Lessons for Negotiations

The Munich and Yalta precedents offer sobering lessons for any future negotiations to end the Ukraine war. First, negotiations that exclude the primary victim—Ukraine—cannot produce a just or durable peace. Second, territorial concessions to aggressors do not satisfy aggressive appetites but whet them. Third, spheres of influence arrangements that sacrifice smaller states to great power ambitions are both morally indefensible and strategically unsound, storing up resentments that will fuel future conflicts (Snyder, 2022; Plokhy, 2023).

These lessons do not mean that negotiations are impossible or that Ukraine must fight until it recovers every inch of territory. They do mean that any settlement must be negotiated with Ukraine's full participation, must include robust security guarantees that prevent future Russian aggression, and must not reward the use of force to change borders. The challenge for diplomats is to find a path between the Scylla of appeasement and the Charybdis of endless war.

THE BUDAPEST MEMORANDUM: BROKEN PROMISES AND NUCLEAR REGRET

If Munich and Yalta offer lessons about Western failures, the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 offers a case study in Russian perfidy and the catastrophic consequences of broken promises. For Ukraine, the Budapest Memorandum is not a historical abstraction but a living wound, a testament to the dangers of trusting security assurances unaccompanied by enforceable guarantees.

Ukraine's Nuclear Inheritance and Disarmament

When the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, Ukraine found itself in possession of the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal, including approximately 1,900 strategic nuclear warheads and up to 4,000 tactical nuclear weapons (Budjeryn, 2022). These weapons were physically located on Ukrainian territory but remained under the operational control of Russian forces, creating a complex and potentially dangerous situation. For the newly independent Ukraine, the nuclear inheritance posed profound dilemmas. Possession of nuclear weapons offered potential security benefits, deterring potential aggressors and enhancing Ukraine's international standing. But it also carried enormous costs: maintaining the weapons was expensive; Ukraine lacked the technical capacity to maintain them indefinitely; and continued possession risked international isolation and the loss of economic assistance (Yekelchyk, 2022).

Under intense pressure from the United States and Russia, Ukraine agreed to transfer its nuclear warheads to Russia for dismantlement. In exchange, Ukraine received security assurances through the Budapest Memorandum, signed on 5 December 1994 by Ukraine, Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The memorandum committed the signatories to "respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine" and to "refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine" (Budjeryn, 2022, p. 187).

The Assurances and Their Violation

The Budapest Memorandum was not a treaty requiring ratification but a political commitment. Its proponents argued that political commitments by great powers carried sufficient weight; its critics warned that without enforcement mechanisms, the assurances were worthless (Yekelchyk, 2022). Subsequent events have vindicated the critics. Russia's violation of the Budapest Memorandum began in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and the fomenting of separatist insurgencies in eastern Ukraine. It culminated in the full-scale invasion of February 2022. Each violation has been accompanied by elaborate justifications that implicitly acknowledge the moral force of the assurances even as Russia flouts them: the claim that the 2014 revolution in Kyiv was an unconstitutional coup, the assertion that Crimea was historically Russian, the fiction that Ukraine was committing genocide against Russian speakers (Snyder, 2022).

The Western response to Russia's violations has been a source of deep Ukrainian bitterness. The United States and United Kingdom, while condemning Russian aggression and providing substantial assistance, have not treated the violation of the Budapest Memorandum as the fundamental breach of international order that it represents. For Ukrainians, this reluctance reflects the deeper truth that the assurances were never truly guarantees: they were words on paper, easily discarded when inconvenient (Plokhy, 2023).

Consequences for the Non-Proliferation Regime

The Budapest Memorandum's failure has profound implications for the global non-proliferation regime. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) rests on a grand bargain: non-nuclear states agree not to acquire nuclear weapons, and nuclear states agree to pursue disarmament and to provide security assurances to non-nuclear states facing nuclear threats (Budjeryn, 2022). The Budapest Memorandum was intended to operationalise this bargain for Ukraine. Russia's violation of the memorandum has sent a devastating message to states contemplating nuclear disarmament: your trust will be betrayed, your security will be sacrificed, and your sacrifices will be forgotten when convenient. States like South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and others that rely on US security

guarantees have watched the Ukrainian experience with alarm, wondering whether their own assurances would prove equally hollow in a crisis (Yekelchyk, 2022).

The Budapest precedent has also complicated efforts to address nuclear proliferation in other contexts. Iran's nuclear programme, North Korea's weapons development, and debates in states like Saudi Arabia and Turkey about nuclear options are all influenced by the Ukrainian experience. If security assurances cannot be trusted, the logic of nuclear acquisition becomes overwhelming: only nuclear weapons provide ultimate security guarantees (Budjeryn, 2022).

The Shadow Over Future Negotiations

The Budapest Memorandum casts a long shadow over any future negotiations to end the Ukraine war. For Ukrainians, the memorandum is not ancient history but living memory, a betrayal that has shaped national consciousness and steeled resistance. Polling consistently shows overwhelming Ukrainian opposition to any settlement that would require new security guarantees from Russia or that would repeat the mistakes of 1994 (Plokhy, 2023). This popular sentiment has profound implications for diplomacy. Any negotiated settlement must include security guarantees that Ukrainians can trust. This means guarantees that are legally binding, backed by enforceable mechanisms, and supported by the tangible presence of allied forces. It means guarantees that do not depend on Russian compliance or goodwill. It means guarantees that, unlike the Budapest Memorandum, cannot be violated with impunity.

The Budapest precedent also suggests that Ukraine's NATO membership may be the only guarantee that Ukrainians will accept. NATO membership would place Ukraine under the Alliance's collective defence commitment, making an attack on Ukraine an attack on all members. While NATO membership carries its own risks and complications, it offers a level of assurance that bilateral guarantees cannot match (Stent, 2022).

The Weaponisation of History

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the Russia-Ukraine war, and the one that most directly engages this paper's historical focus, is Russia's systematic weaponisation of history itself. The Kremlin has deployed distorted historical narratives as weapons of war, using them to justify aggression, deny Ukrainian statehood, mobilise domestic support, and undermine international opposition.

Putin's Historical Manifesto

On 12 July 2021, seven months before the full-scale invasion, Vladimir Putin published a lengthy essay titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians." The essay, posted on the Kremlin website, laid out Putin's historical justification for

denying Ukrainian statehood and sovereignty (Putin, 2021). Putin's argument proceeded through several claims. He asserted that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" sharing a common heritage dating to Kyivan Rus', the medieval East Slavic state centred on Kyiv. He claimed that modern Ukraine is an artificial creation of Soviet leaders, who arbitrarily carved territory from historic Russia and granted it statehood. He accused post-Soviet Ukrainian governments of forcibly "Ukrainising" the population and discriminating against Russian speakers. He portrayed the 2014 Euromaidan revolution as a Western-orchestrated coup that installed a hostile, anti-Russian regime (Putin, 2021; Plokhy, 2023).

The essay was not scholarship but propaganda, selectively citing historical sources while ignoring vast bodies of evidence contradicting its claims. Serhii Plokhy, the leading historian of Ukraine, has demonstrated that Putin's arguments rest on a fundamental misunderstanding or deliberate distortion of East Slavic history: Kyivan Rus' was not a Russian state but a multi-ethnic polity whose legacy is claimed by Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus alike; Ukrainian national identity and statehood have deep historical roots predating the Soviet period; and the Soviet "gift" of territory to Ukraine was accompanied by brutal repression of Ukrainian national aspirations (Plokhy, 2022, 2023).

The Destruction of Ukrainian Historical Memory

Russia's war on Ukraine has targeted not only Ukrainian lives and territory but also Ukrainian history. Russian forces have systematically destroyed Ukrainian historical archives, museums, and cultural heritage sites, seeking to erase the physical evidence of Ukrainian statehood and national identity (Kasianov, 2022). The destruction began with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, when Russian authorities seized Ukrainian historical archives and incorporated Crimean museums into Russian cultural institutions. It intensified after the February 2022 invasion, with Russian forces targeting historical sites across occupied territories. The destruction of the Mariupol Drama Theatre, where hundreds of civilians had taken shelter, became a symbol of Russia's willingness to destroy Ukrainian cultural heritage (Snyder, 2022).

The Russian occupation authorities have also engaged in systematic "re-education" campaigns, imposing Russian curricula in occupied schools, destroying Ukrainian-language books, and compelling residents to accept Russian passports and Russian historical narratives. These policies aim to transform the historical consciousness of occupied populations, erasing Ukrainian identity and creating new generations loyal to Moscow (Kasianov, 2022).

History as Mobilisation

Within Russia, historical narratives have been deployed to mobilise domestic support for the war. State media, schools, and cultural institutions have saturated Russian society with propagandistic histories portraying the war as a continuation of Russia's heroic struggle against Western aggression (Galeotti, 2022). The Soviet Union's victory in the Second World War, or the "Great Patriotic War" as it is known in Russia, has been central to this mobilisation. Putin has repeatedly invoked the war, drawing parallels between contemporary Ukraine and Nazi collaborators, and portraying Russian soldiers as continuing the heroic struggle of their grandfathers against fascism. This rhetoric resonates powerfully with Russian audiences, for whom the memory of the Great Patriotic War remains deeply meaningful (Snyder, 2022).

The mobilisation of history has also targeted specific historical grievances. Russian media have endlessly repeated claims that Poles, Balts, and other neighbouring peoples are historically ungrateful to Russia for liberating them from Nazi occupation. They have portrayed NATO expansion as a continuation of centuries-old Western efforts to encircle and destroy Russia. They have invoked historical figures like Alexander Nevsky, who defeated Swedish and German invaders in the thirteenth century, as models for contemporary resistance to the West (Galeotti, 2022).

Ukrainian Historical Resistance

Ukrainians have responded to Russia's weaponisation of history with their own historical mobilisation. Ukrainian historians, journalists, and cultural figures have worked tirelessly to document Russian atrocities, preserve Ukrainian historical memory, and counter Russian propaganda (Plokhy, 2023). The Ukrainian response has been notable for its insistence on historical truth and complexity. Ukrainian historians have not simply replaced Russian myths with Ukrainian nationalist myths but have insisted on rigorous scholarship that acknowledges the complexities of East Slavic history. They have documented the shared heritage of Russians and Ukrainians while insisting on Ukraine's right to independent statehood and historical interpretation (Kasianov, 2022).

The war has also transformed Ukrainian historical consciousness. Polling shows dramatic increases in Ukrainian national identification, particularly among Russian-speaking Ukrainians who previously maintained ambivalent identities. The war has accelerated the consolidation of a unified Ukrainian political nation, forged in resistance to Russian aggression (Plokhy, 2023).

The International Historical Battle

The weaponisation of history has extended beyond Russia and Ukraine to the international arena. Russia has deployed historical arguments in diplomatic forums, seeking to justify its actions through selective invocations of international law, historical precedent, and cultural affinity. It has accused Ukraine of rewriting history to erase Russian contributions and of glorifying Nazi collaborators (Snyder, 2022).

These arguments have found some resonance in parts of the Global South, where historical memories of Western colonialism and Cold War exploitation have created scepticism toward Western narratives. Some African, Asian, and Latin American states have resisted condemning Russia, citing their own historical grievances with Western interventionism (Mankoff, 2022). This dynamic has complicated efforts to isolate Russia diplomatically and has highlighted the need for historical literacy in international diplomacy.

CONCLUSION: WHAT HISTORY DEMANDS

This paper has examined the Russia-Ukraine war through four historical lenses: the Crimean War, Munich and Yalta, the Budapest Memorandum, and the weaponisation of history itself. Each lens illuminates different dimensions of the conflict while revealing recurring patterns in Russian behaviour, Western responses, and the tragic repetition of diplomatic failures.

The Crimean War demonstrates how Russian expansionism arises from anxieties about declining influence and the spread of Western ideas, how Russian leaders consistently miscalculate Western resolve, and how defeat can produce both reform and enduring narratives of victimhood. Munich and Yalta reveal the catastrophic consequences of appeasement, the dangers of sacrificing smaller states to great power ambitions, and the moral and strategic imperative of resisting aggression early and collectively. The Budapest Memorandum exposes the fragility of unenforceable security guarantees, the devastating message sent by broken promises, and the imperative of ensuring that any future settlement includes guarantees that can be trusted. Russia's weaponisation of history shows how historical narratives can be deployed to justify aggression, mobilise populations, and erase identities, while also demonstrating the power of historical truth and resistance.

What, then, does history demand of us? Four imperatives emerge from this analysis. First, history demands clarity about Russian motivations and the nature of the conflict. This is not a civil war, not a local dispute, not a Western provocation that Russia merely responded to. It is an imperial war of aggression, launched by an autocratic state to deny the sovereign existence of a neighbouring democracy, justified by distorted historical narratives and conducted through systematic atrocities. To

understand this is to reject the false equivalences and moral ambiguities that have too often characterised Western commentary.

Second, history demands resistance to appeasement. The lessons of Munich and Yalta are not abstract propositions but concrete warnings about the consequences of sacrificing smaller states to aggressive powers. Any negotiated settlement that rewards Russian aggression, that legitimises territorial gains achieved through force, that excludes Ukraine from meaningful participation, or that provides unenforceable guarantees repeating the Budapest pattern, would not end the conflict but merely postpone and worsen it.

Third, history demands accountability. The violation of the Budapest Memorandum, the destruction of Ukrainian cultural heritage, the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity—these are not merely regrettable events but violations of international law that demand response. Accountability means supporting the International Criminal Court's investigations, establishing special tribunals for the crime of aggression, preserving evidence of atrocities, and ensuring that those responsible face justice.

Fourth, history demands historical literacy. The weaponisation of history cannot be countered by ignoring history but only by engaging with it rigorously, honestly, and complexly. This means supporting historians and historical institutions in Ukraine and elsewhere. It means challenging Russian propaganda with evidence and argument. It means understanding that historical narratives are not mere ornamentation but fundamental to how societies understand themselves and their place in the world.

The philosopher George Santayana warned that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. The tragedy of the Russia-Ukraine war is that so many of its elements have been repeated before: imperial overreach, diplomatic miscalculation, the sacrifice of smaller states, the violation of solemn promises. Yet Santayana's aphorism points also toward hope. If we can remember, if we can learn, if we can apply the lessons of history with wisdom and resolve, we may yet break the cycles of repetition that have produced so much suffering. The challenge is not to find some perfect historical analogy that exactly predicts the future, but to cultivate historical consciousness: the ability to recognise patterns, understand contingencies, and act with awareness of how our choices will be judged by future generations.

Ukrainians are fighting not only for their territory and their sovereignty but for their history and their future. They are fighting to ensure that Ukrainian children will learn Ukrainian history in Ukrainian schools, that Ukrainian museums will display Ukrainian artifacts, that Ukrainian identity will survive Russian efforts to erase it. In this struggle, they deserve not only our military and economic support but our historical solidarity: our commitment to remembering what they remember, to bearing

witness to what they suffer, and to ensuring that when this war ends, its lessons are not forgotten.

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