

Ukraine is here, the maps stay the same.¹ On the ethics of framing an analysis.²

Claude Denis, University of Ottawa, Canada

Abstract

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the world in which New Area Studies (NAS) were born has shifted, and this leaves us with a number of questions on how to move on. In this post-2/24 world, we are back to the past of raw military power, colonial conquest and destabilized international borders. And because the invasion is, itself, explicitly dealing with Ukraine and its borderlands as constructs of history and of politics – as illegitimate constructs, in the Putinian telling – it presents an ethical challenge for constructivist, NAS scholars. I am proposing a two-part ethical and political reflection on how to think about Russia's invasion of Ukraine – and, more to the point, how to think about areas and borders *in view of the war*.

In different circumstances, highlighting the historical constructedness of Ukraine's (and therefore Russia's) borders would make sense, while *always* carrying risks of "recuperation" by Russian revanchists. Now, this risk is heightened sharply and the question of *how to be a scholar in a time of war* is urgent. Analysis of the situation needs to be anchored first and last in a recognition of the profound wrong that is being perpetrated by Russia against Ukraine, and in an affirmation of the Ukrainian people's existence and right to exist. The first part of the ethical reflection, then, calls for resisting the use of history *as justification* for political projects.

The second part of the ethical reflection resists a different dimension of the urge to step back and contextualize, especially in left-leaning academia: the critique of American imperialism and of NATO's very existence as its instrument. But putting one's critical and political energies, *now*, in fighting NATO's expansion and support of Ukraine cannot but bolster Russia. Whatever NATO's misdeeds were toward Russia in the past thirty years, there can be no

¹ This title combines points made by Tim Snyder (2022) and Tanisha Fazal (2022) about Russia's war on Ukraine and its historical background.

² My thanks to Dominique Arel and F. Guillaume Dufour, as well as to the editors of *New Area Studies*, for their comments on the manuscript.

equivalence with the death and destruction that Russia is raining on Ukraine since 2/24 – and recognition of this fundamental imbalance must inform our practices, as citizens and as scholars.

1. ... but the world has shifted

"As the [20th] century ends, the [European] international outlook is more peaceful than at any time previously."

Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent* (1998: 403)

Nobody really knows or understands, outside a very small group of men in the Kremlin, why the Russian government launched a full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine in late February 2022. Were they so worried about the eastward advance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or is it rather that they so feared the contagion of a democratic west-facing Ukraine? Did they really expect to re-establish a Russian empire and believe that Ukraine isn't a real country? These notions, among others, including the grotesque claim of "denazification," were all advanced in uncountable hot takes immediately after February 24th – and will be discussed below – as the world's 24-hour news cycle demanded that meaning be made in the face of something that seemed incomprehensible.

Who knows³... But among the variety of reasons proffered by Moscow and others, the issue of control over Ukraine's eastern borderlands seems notably – if not exclusively

³ While the Russian decision to invade Ukraine has seemed downright absurd, which accounts for much of the world's surprise and disbelief that this could be happening, it fits within conceptions of a "Greater Russia" voiced by President Vladimir Putin. And it represents "the culmination of brinkmanship and military preparations that have paid dividends over 20 years: subduing Chechnya, preventing Georgia from joining NATO, intimidating the Baltic countries, seizing Crimea and the Donbas, crushing democratic movements in Belarus and Kazakhstan, and persuading the West not to interfere with his "near abroad," including his ally Bashar al-Assad of Syria" (Johnson, 2022: 6). For an overview of the kind of Russian reasoning that would have contributed to the decision to invade,

– credible. Indeed, following the failure of its winter assault on Kyiv, the Russian military pivoted fully eastward, to capture the Donbas region and establish a land bridge between the Russian mainland and the Crimea... at the price of destroying much of Ukraine’s south-east along with key cities in the north and centre of the country. This, after Russia had already annexed the Crimean Peninsula forcibly and supported and boosted secession movements in the Donbas region since 2014.

For the first time since the post-World War II settlement,⁴ an international border in Europe is the detonator of world-historical violence: because of its scale and the magnitude of its consequences – potential and already realized – Russia’s invasion of Ukraine will mark world history. For decades, wars between states *for territorial conquest* had nearly disappeared from the surface of the Earth. As Tanisha Fazal (2022) writes of the global status quo prior to Russia’s “anachronistic” aggression, “borders were, by and large, sacrosanct.” “There have been plenty of wars since 1945. But a certain kind of war – wars between states over unresolved territorial claims – did decline.” In Europe and much of the rest of the world “the maps, by and large, stayed the same...” This said with the considerable caveat that the decolonization process created a large number of new countries and international borders. At its core, then, Fazal’s point is that, for three quarters of a century, international borders had been safe from conquest,⁵ even as wars of liberation and negotiated independence settlements did redraw the world’s maps. Russia’s war on Ukraine would mark the end of the end of conquest.

see Shatzer (2022), a review of two books that study Russian leaders’ understanding of war and of their country’s place in the world. As convincing as this Greater Russia story may be, however, it raises a whole set of issues regarding what could be seen as a *fuite en avant* by the Russian regime, driven by its own internal tensions and contradictions (see for instance Fauconnier, 2022).

⁴ That is to say, the stabilization of borders, populations and alliances in the decade after 1945 in Europe. See Mazower (1998).

⁵ Since 1945, the only precedent seems to have been Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 which did not stand, as then-President George H.W. Bush vowed. Depending how one views the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it could also count as an exception; Israel’s annexation from Syria of the Golan Heights, unrecognized internationally except by the Trump administration, undoubtedly fits the bill.

Not that European borders have been a trivial matter at any point in these seventy-five years. From the construction of the Cold War's "iron curtain" to the establishment of the European Union's various border regimes (for example, Schengen arrangements); and from the effective disappearance of border controls from Greece to Sweden during the 2015 refugee crisis to the building of border walls in reaction – the politics and demographics of European borders have never been far from the surface of the region's political concerns. But as Mark Mazower could write at the end of the nineteen-nineties, "(b)orders are now a matter for police rather than the military: illegal immigrants are a greater concern than neighbouring armies" (Mazower, 1998: 401). That was then...

In the small world of academia, the intertwining of stable international borders with the heavy geopolitical tension of the Cold War factored in the creation and expansion of *Area Studies*, which prospered as a handmaiden to statecraft. And then, with the Cold War's end, crisis came to Area Studies (see Hutchings, 2018). Out of the crisis, renewed critical attention, coalescing in *New Area Studies* (NAS), has focused on what *makes* an area, and on what realities may be overshadowed by constituted areas. The academic literature on borders (specifically, and in NAS more generally), European and not, has grown and diversified massively. With a finely tuned critical sense, it has developed conceptualizations of borders as anything but lines on a map: borders are zones, areas, fields, dimensions, relations, constructs, and so on (Denis, 2018). *Areas*, for their part, have been problematized beyond and beneath international borders. This has happened, by and large, in the complex space of the neoliberal post-Cold War and post-9/11 world, which is why our critical gaze has been much concerned with the interface between *area* and *security* – including of course the securitization of borders. To paraphrase Mazower above, in the post-9/11 years, when the world said "border," governments thought "policing."

The impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine amounts to *another* reshuffling of the world's geopolitical and geoeconomic deck, one of the most significant since World War II. As the writer Masha Gessen underlines, "(w)hen this war is over, Europe will no longer be defined by the history of the Second World War. The next era of European history, whenever it begins, will be the aftermath of the war in Ukraine"



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(Gessen, 2022). Which means that we are already in a *post-2/24* world. In the words of a Swedish government report commissioned after the Russian invasion began and serving as a rationale for Sweden joining NATO we now live in “a fundamentally changed world,” characterized by “a structural, long-term and significant deterioration of the security environment in Europe and globally” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2022: 13, 5). While Europe is neither the whole world nor – any longer – its centre of gravity, it still weighs heavily enough for this conflagration to move the planet’s balance – we need only think of the war’s impact on worldwide food supplies and prices (see Harris 2022).

The world in which the NAS were born has shifted, and this leaves us with a number of questions on how to move on. Another way to put this is that the work of our predecessors in “Traditional Area Studies” (Hodgett and James, 2018: 3) was implicated in the real world of geopolitics; and so has the work done so far in NAS. Critical scholars will say to this: of course. Which begs the question: how are they / we, *now*, implicated in the world that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is remaking?

2. How to be a scholar in times of war. Or, thinking ethically in unthinkable times

“Sometimes it is easier to dream the old dreams – even when they are nightmares – than to wake up to unfamiliar realities.”
(Mazower, 1998: 395-6)

The first task is to acknowledge how disorienting this all is, especially coming on the heels of three enormously disorienting decades: the rapid and peaceful collapse of the Soviet bloc was followed by 9/11 and the simultaneous anthrax attacks in the United States,⁶ the 2008 financial crisis that nearly killed capitalism, and the COVID-19

⁶ Starting on September 18, 2001 and continuing over several weeks, letters containing anthrax spores were mailed to politicians and media personalities in the United States, killing five people and making seventeen sick (see FBI, 2010). Even as it was happening (I remember too well), the timing of this toxic mail campaign raised the question of a potential link with the airplane attacks a week earlier and fed the confusion and anxiety about the meaning and scope of these events.

pandemic. All these have been sudden, deep, and essentially unpredicted crises that upended our understanding of the world. Living through each of them, we – citizens of... wherever⁷ – asked ourselves *what on earth is actually happening?* How does the world make any kind of sense? Now, I am not saying that these crises were inherently incomprehensible or entirely unpredictable. I am saying that, by and large, as we were living through them and through specific moments of them, people did not know how to make sense of them, how they fit in the world, what kind of thing might happen next.

The climate emergency and the “war on terror,” unfolding over the same period – but slowly – have not represented the same kind of sense-making challenge: of course, our governments reacted the way they did to 9/11; of course, our governments are failing to tackle climate change. These crises are, as Michel Foucault (1971) would have said, *dans le vrai*: we can readily make sense of them within our established frames of reference. Those others are not *dans le vrai*.

The current crisis amounts to one more in the series of incomprehensible 21st-century events, as Putin’s invasion challenges our sense of the world again: how does this aggression even make any kind of sense? Among other questions: is nuclear war suddenly a serious threat? Is it crazy to even ask this? How do we even know what is a crazy question, given what happened on 2/24 and since? And in the face of this craziness, how are we to act, as individuals, citizens, members of research communities?

Getting down to work, then, one question that arises is what our new academic sophistication about the constructedness of areas and borders tells us about Russia’s aggression, how it helps us understand the events and the issues. The answer, I suspect, is: not too much, beyond seeing that borderlands can still be both prizes and excuses for military aggression. The opacity of Vladimir Putin’s Kremlin’s decision-making process is of course an obstacle to understanding, mirroring the decades-long inscrutability of the Soviet Kremlin (see Hutchings, 2018: 31) – which, in its time,

⁷ In my case, a citizen of Canada – an anchoring to which I will return below in the context of the discussion on NATO.

had made "Kremlinology" and tea-leaves reading roughly synonymous. But the specific issue with this first question is not one of insufficient information. Rather, this is a problem of it being the wrong question, precisely because the invasion is, itself, explicitly dealing with Ukraine and its borderlands as constructs of history and of politics – as illegitimate constructs, in the Putinian telling. This presents an ethical challenge for the constructivist, NAS scholar; more on this below.

Another, reciprocal and more apposite question is what Russia's war on Ukraine teaches us about our conceptualizations of borders and areas as constructs. In this latter perspective, I am proposing a two-part ethical and political reflection on how to think again about Russia's invasion of Ukraine – and, more to the point, how to think about areas and borders *in view of the war*. Along with so many others, I have done work that emphasizes the constructed character of social and discursive spaces, subjectivities, practices, etc. I wrote, for instance, of international borders as death zones defined as much by time as by space, and as asymmetrical vectors: inside a Canadian international airport where a man was tazed to death by police after spending too much time between Customs *and* Immigration; or in the cold-weather Canada-US prairie where a Ghanaian woman froze to death trying to walk away from Donald Trump's America (Denis 2018).

This work was done in a world of stable international borders. The critique of the state, of securitization and of nationalism's exclusionary character was very much a matter of "punching up" and of bemoaning the hardness and arbitrariness of international borders. What happens to this critical impulse, however, in a situation such as this one: international borders shattered by tank columns and air-to-ground missiles, and a weaker nation-state assaulted by one of the world's biggest armies?

Under attack by the vastly more powerful Russian armed forces, Ukraine's eastern frontier – along with many other parts of the country in the first phase of the war – certainly qualifies as a death zone; but there is no great insight in seeing that. Which brings me to an important caveat: what I have *not* done in the past, what I have *not* written about, are Russia and Ukraine, and I am still not doing that. This is not an "area specialist's" article on Russia or Ukraine and its borderlands. I have made every

effort for whatever I write here about Ukraine, Russia and the war, Europe and NATO, to be accurate and solid but I have not tried to situate it within the Ukrainian area studies literature. It is an article about how we think about borders and areas, how we construct them conceptually, taking explicit account of the ethical pressure that a transformed geopolitics of the world exercises on us critical scholars and citizens of wherever.

3. Resisting history-as-justification

The first part of the reflection is that it would be easy, in an academic perspective, to riff on the socio-historically constructed character of Ukraine's borders and the areas that they contour and constitute.

As a matter of fact, maps have been circulating online for anyone to google, such as this Kremlin-friendly one,⁸ its title referencing "(t)erritories annexed to Ukraine by" everyone from Russian tsars beginning in 1654 to Khrushchev in 1954, by way of Lenin and Stalin; this being meant to illustrate how Ukraine was "made" by Russia / the Soviet Union. These annexations "to Ukraine" did happen, and their stories have been credibly told in the relevant literature. And, as war rages, the historian Timothy Snyder (2022) has provided an eloquent précis of the bogus character of the Putinian claim that Soviet leaders created Ukraine out of nothing. Going back over a thousand years, Snyder shows instead the ancient sources of Ukrainian peoplehood. And he argues that the irreducible fact of Ukrainian nationhood basically forced Lenin to shape the Soviet state into its specifically multinational federalism, so as to avoid the incipient Union's implosion: for Snyder, in a limited but very real sense, it is Ukraine that gave the Soviet Union its particular form, not the reverse. From this historical foundation, the 20th century instability of Ukraine's borders is readily accounted for without providing support to Putinist claims.

⁸ I am not reproducing it here, but see "Territories annexed to Ukraine... by...", a map found on Google, 8 April, 2022. <https://images.app.goo.gl/RF5Nzo4vyHHYq1oE6>. Consulted 2 May 2022.

Snyder’s history is eloquent and I find it easily convincing. But, especially in the circumstances of our time, there is an ethical risk to engaging in this kind of historical debunking of Putin’s myth-making: to argue the (in)accuracy of a specific historical narrative is to accept the grounding of the discussion *in* historical narrative, the notion that history justifies some set of borders or other. What happens, then, when other historians or assorted demagogues disagree with this or that part of Snyder’s story? We have already seen any number of – especially left-leaning – intellectuals claim that Putin has a point about Russian interests and history, and that the “peoples” of the Donbas should be able to exercise their right of self-determination.

In different circumstances, highlighting the constructedness of Ukraine’s (and therefore Russia’s) borders would make perfect sense, while *always* still carrying risks of “recuperation” by Russian revanchists. And so the academic writer always has an ethical responsibility to avoid stepping blithely into the real world, providing rocks (or even pebbles) for the bully to throw at their potential victim. Now, this responsibility is heightened and the question of *how to be a scholar in a time of war*⁹ is urgent. Especially now, then, analysis of the situation needs to be anchored first and last in a recognition of the profound wrong that is being perpetrated by Russia against Ukraine. And this should lead away from detached consideration of the historical

⁹ I borrow the question, not accidentally, from Mayhill Fowler (Stetson University, Florida), who co-moderated the webinar *Ukrainian Scholars in Times of War*, hosted by the Chair of Ukrainian Studies and Professor Dominique Arel at the University of Ottawa, 8 April 2022. The other co-moderator was Daria Mattingly (originally from Kyiv), from the University of Cambridge. The panelists were Maryna Zelynska, from Mariupol State University, a political scientist first displaced to Kropyvnytskyi in Central Ukraine and then obtaining asylum in Germany; Tania Kalenychenko, from Drahomanov State University in Kyiv, displaced from Irpin near Kyiv and engaged in humanitarian aid; Olena Muradyan, from Karazin University in Kharkiv, displaced to Poltava weeks into the war, and caring for her sociology students; Yuri Shapoval, a historian at the Institute of Ethnic and Political Studies in Kyiv, displaced from Bucha to Germany early in the war; Sofia Dyak, director of the Centre for Urban History in Lviv, hosting more than 50 displaced scholars engaged in an oral history project of the war. Their affiliations are as listed on the webinar announcement, and the description of their current situations is up to date as of late June to the best of my knowledge. Of the five Ukrainian scholars participating in the panel, four had been displaced by the war – one from Kharkiv, two from Kyiv and one from Mariupol (after having had to leave the Donbas eight years ago); two had their houses shelled, and two others witnessed scenes of destruction that the rest of us see on television, corpses on the road, as they were evacuating.

construction of sovereign, bounded spaces, and toward an acknowledgment of the material reality, *now*, of those constructed spaces. I am not suggesting – let's be perfectly clear – that we should abandon constructivist perspectives or historical analysis. Rather, I am saying that as we frame research questions; as those of us who can, talk to the media or write op-ed pieces, our focus should be on the material reality of the current situation, not on the vagaries of the multi-secular histories that brought us here. This is very much a contextualist ethical claim.

In the early days of the war, as people rushed to get even a basic understanding of what on earth was happening, references in the media to Ukraine's historically mobile borders and close kinship with Russia were frequent. As the fighting continued, these receded and were replaced by stories of the astonishing Ukrainian resistance, of the incompetent and criminal Russian military, and of the pros and cons of increasing NATO involvement.

At the time of writing, the second (or even third) phase of the war – focused on the Donbas and the southeast – is well engaged but it is not yet clear how it will resolve. Should the Russians manage to retain control of the eastern borderlands and much of the Crimean-facing coast, discussions of the national / ethnic / linguistic character of these regions is likely to make a come-back as Russia will seek whatever legitimacy it can get for its appropriation of these lands and people. In fact, increases in the supply of heavy weapons to Ukraine by NATO members, and the uncertainty of what comes next (more escalation?), are already bringing some observers to revisit the question of how (and therefore when) Ukraine acquired its borders (see vanden Heuvel, 2022). In the face of such "realist" musings anchored in Great Power interests (see Mälksoo, 2022), as will be discussed below, the call of the historical narrative is already resurfacing, and it is more important than ever to resist it.

Resisting historical narrative is hard for me – I have lived and sworn by historical sociology from my career's beginnings. But that is just the point: along with all my contemporary colleagues in "the West," I have lived all these years under the reassuring umbrella of the settled post-WWII international order guaranteed by seemingly permanent borders. This umbrella of stability managed to absorb (before

my time) the decolonization process in the 1950s and 1960s, as the nation-state defined by its untouchable sovereign borders became the only game in town, backed by the United Nations Charter.¹⁰ As Martin Kimani, Kenya’s ambassador to the United Nations, said in a speech reacting to the Kremlin’s recognition of the “republics” of Luhansk and Donetsk, days before the invasion began:

Kenya and almost every African country was birthed by the ending of empire. Our borders were not of our own drawing. Had we chosen to pursue states on the basis of ethnic, racial or religious homogeneity, we would still be waging bloody wars these many decades later. Instead, we agreed that we would settle for the borders that we inherited. But we would still pursue continental political, economic and legal integration. Rather than form *nations that looked ever backwards into history with a dangerous nostalgia*, we chose to look forward to a greatness none of our many nations and peoples had ever known.¹¹

None of us writing today has known any other world. But Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, with its focus on borderlands and its free-floating narrative appeal to a supposedly ancient and shared *Russian* history, is shoving us into a different world. It would have us, all of us, accept re-established Russian dominion on any number of lands and peoples, only beginning with Ukraine, on the basis of the destiny of the Russian people. Destiny being another word for where we come from and where we must be going – for history as justification, as necessity and obligation. Ambassador Kimani’s refusal to look backwards, nostalgically, “into history” gestures explicitly at the dangers of history-as-justification, an outlook that fantasizes history as providing total legitimation.

¹⁰ Article 2(1) affirms the “sovereign equality of all” members; and 2(4) affirms their “territorial integrity and political independence.”

¹¹ Emphasis added. The speech was widely praised, but it also drew criticism for what some saw as a belittling of African societies’ “greatness” before colonization. See for instance Gathara (2022), which is also the source of the quoted section of ambassador Kimani’s speech.

As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy wrote in *Le mythe nazi* (2022 [1981]),¹² borrowing from Hannah Arendt’s theory of ideology, fascism is the *ideology of the subject*, where history is conceived as the necessary unfolding of the Subject – whether nation, race, class, party, humanity itself – and its destiny, embodied in the state which sees itself as “the absolute subject.” For my purposes, this claim about the nature of fascism would be a digression were it not for Russia’s mobilization of this ideological nexus to justify its aggression. It points at what it is, specifically, that ought to be resisted when appeals to history are made to account for war, just as much as it tells us something about the nature of the Putin regime.

4. Giving minor peoples¹³ their due.¹⁴ Or, what of NATO?

The second part of the ethical reflection deals with a different dimension of the urge to step back and contextualize. This urge feeds, in this case, on a widespread stance – that I generally share – in left-leaning academia to despise American imperialism and decry NATO’s existence. My email inbox receives just this kind of denunciation on a regular basis. As I wrote these previous lines, I became concerned that I did not have on hand an example of these anti-NATO screeds. Then, my inbox obliged: *The Bullet*, produced by socialistproject.ca, was re-posting an article by a Canadian PhD student published a few days before in *The Helsinki Times*. The article criticized Finland’s plan to join NATO, which it pretty much presents as evil incarnate, and pointed out that the country’s neutrality had served it well in the past. The “analysis”

¹² Published in English by *Critical Inquiry*, University of Chicago Press, Winter 1989.

¹³ In an email to me, Dominique Arel, a scholar of Ukrainian politics and history, remarked that in the English-language literature on Ukraine, the word “nation” is generally used rather than “people.” He added that in Ukrainian and Russian usage “nationality” and “nationalism” are common – as is “narod” however, which can be translated as “people.” In the context of Ukrainian and Russian area studies, Arel noted, it is uncommon to use “people” as I do. But, as will become clear below, I use it in the sense of the Charter of the United Nations, which affirms the right of *peoples* to self-determination. As I claim no expertise in Ukrainian area studies and do not position this article in that context, I aim to get away with this non-standard use.

¹⁴ Maria Mälksoo (2022) makes similar arguments on a number of issues below, in her case focusing on how the discipline of International Relations has dealt with Eastern Europe.

is so simplistic as being caricatural. And whether the author is aware of the 1939 Soviet invasion of Finland is anybody's guess.

That a Canadian, safely protected by the breadth of the Atlantic, would have the gall to harangue Finns in their own media on the proper attitude to a belligerent Russia on their doorstep, leaves me (almost) without words:¹⁵ as a fellow Canadian, I am acutely aware of my country's privileged situation in this conflict. Canada is and has always been in a unique position within NATO, as the only member that is both protected by the Atlantic and is a mid-size player that will never be any enemy's primary target: in almost any scenario, we are the country with the least to lose from a confrontation with Russia (or pretty much anyone else).¹⁶ There is no real way in which NATO is protecting us, Canada, against anybody or anything. But what of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians, whose countries were re-absorbed forcibly into the Soviet Union at the end of WWII after a few decades of independence? What of Poles, Czechs, Slovaks and Hungarians, who were all invaded by the Soviet Union within the last sixty years and are now, all of them, covered by NATO's Article 5 protection of its members?¹⁷

¹⁵ I hesitate to reference the article fully, to avoid taking an easy shot at a very junior colleague. But if anyone needs to see it, the article is at: <https://socialistproject.ca/2022/05/no-putin-war-in-ukraine-no-finland-nato/#more> and I consulted it on 5 May 2022. On Finland's newly minted aspiration to join NATO, see Timsit and Cheng (2022). At a meeting of NATO leaders in Madrid on 29 June 2022, NATO issued a formal invitation to Finland and Sweden to join the alliance (see Erlanger and Shear, 2022).

¹⁶ One potential exception would be the Arctic, should it ever become the focus of large-scale armed conflict.

¹⁷ The main paragraph of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty reads: "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area." See North Atlantic Treaty Organization (2022).

In the *No to NATO* argument just as the use of history as justification, doing what comes naturally to the left¹⁸ will again result in legitimizing Putinian claims to "Russia's security interests." The good intentions of our average leftist and pacifist do not matter here, just as the well-meaning so-called color blindness of white liberals in North America (or the French state) has racist consequences: putting one's critical and political energies, *now*, in fighting NATO's expansion and support of Ukraine cannot but help Putin's Russia. The consequences of our acts, including our speech acts, matter.

Broadly, the anti-NATO argument will bolster the notion that Russia's borders are made insecure by NATO aggressiveness. And it will encourage thinking in terms of geopolitics and, specifically, Great Power politics. This will also lead to discounting as somehow irrelevant or unimportant the security interests and will of the Ukrainian people, along with those – for instance – of the peoples of Moldova, Georgia, Finland and Sweden. As the Kremlin's spokesman threatened the Finns with "retaliation" should they go ahead with a NATO application, what are we to make of public opinion in Finland, where a recent poll found 75% support for joining the Atlantic alliance (surging from 25% before the Ukraine invasion), with all of 12% opposed; and in Sweden, where the majority of the population also favors – for the first time ever – joining NATO? Is this to be dismissed on account of what the warmongers in the Kremlin view as "threats to its [Russia's] national security?" (Henley, 2022). Or of gullible Finns and Swedes being somehow bamboozled by their governments' pro-NATO buckling to US pressure?

NATO is undoubtedly an instrument of American imperialism and has engaged, in the last thirty years (i.e. since the collapse of the Soviet bloc) and more, in problematic campaigns (Afghanistan, Libya...). Not to mention how it has enabled Turkish oppression of the Kurdish people within and outside its borders (see Tugal, 2022). And it has moved right to the Russian border by admitting former Soviet republics, the three Baltic countries; while Ukraine, Belarus and tiny Moldova are Russia's only

¹⁸ My broadside here should not be taken as criticism of the left generally, which is after all my family. For instance, Toussaint and Dhar (2022) provide a good example of cogent analysis on Ukraine from the same source, *The Bullet*.

three remaining buffers facing several ex-members of the Warsaw Pact, now NATO members.¹⁹ But these admissions were the result of the democratically elected governments of these countries *wanting* NATO protection from potential Russian aggression – and, looking at what is happening now in Ukraine, all these peoples are visibly immensely relieved to be under that protection. In this sense, in east-central Europe, NATO is both an instrument of American imperialism and a protector against Russian aggression – which is also imperialist. In this context, NATO’s refusal to get directly involved in the war (i.e. to have its own forces cross Ukraine’s borders and/or breach the Russian border) is the best proof that it is not a threat to Russia *as a sovereign country*. In expanding eastward, on the other hand and in supporting Ukraine to the unexpected extent that it is doing, NATO has shown that it *is* in the business of curbing Russia’s *imperial* ambitions.²⁰ Especially now and especially taking account of the desires and interests of Russia’s neighbours, one may ask: *and what is wrong with that?*

Here, another dimension of Snyder’s *New Yorker* essay is especially helpful: by characterizing Russia’s aggression as a *colonial war* for a territory that has been eastern Europe’s first colony, he provides a frame for our understanding that is rooted in history, but that does not depend on history to make sense and/or to justify a particular order of things. It is Russian imperialism *today* that is being resisted and that should be resisted. Although Russia’s ultimate war aims in Ukraine remain broadly inscrutable (for one thing, have they changed since February 23rd?), we can recognize what it is doing as colonialist and imperialist in the here and now without needing to investigate historical issues: once we affirm the existence *today* of the Ukrainian people, and of Ukraine as a sovereign state; and once we register Russia’s violation of that sovereignty and its violent attempt to take control of (at least) part of that sovereign state’s territory for the foreseeable future; we can see what is happening as a colonialist and imperialist enterprise.

¹⁹ From north to south: Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. Several others about these four directly.

²⁰ Mälksoo (2022) points out that it may not be simple to disentangle Russian nationhood (and nationalism) from its imperial and imperialist history. But if imperialism is an integral part of Russian nationhood and nationalism up to now, it is not fated to remain so: as Mälksoo writes, collective and state work can be done, must be done to come to terms with the past – a past that will soon include the post-invasion reckoning.

There is, then, an ethical responsibility to *not be blinded* by hostility to NATO. This is helped by framing the analysis away from Great Power geopolitics, and therefore from a focus on Western imperialism and the security of Russia’s borders; and towards the interests and security of “minor” peoples and their well-founded fear of *Russian* imperialism. Speaking of context, it is a basic historical fact that there has not been a single year, since Peter the Great, that Russia has not been a menace to its neighbours – including first and foremost the “subject peoples” incorporated at one time or another into “Mother Russia” or, later the Soviet Union.²¹

To the degree that “Traditional Area Studies” (TAS) were bound to the Cold War’s Great Power dynamics (not for nothing that the “crisis” in TAS coincided with the collapse of the Soviet bloc (Hutchings, 2018)), it makes sense for the New Area Studies, *post-2/24*, to pay attention to the circumstances of minor peoples and small nations – their feats and foibles, their struggles with more powerful neighbours, their internal contradictions, and so on.²²

On both these counts, this reframing affirms a small number of basic truths that need to be asserted in plain writing, with pride of place in any assessment of this war and

²¹ The period immediately before and after the break-up of the Soviet Union is a partial exception to this multi-secular threat: not by coincidence, it is what allowed several new countries to be born peacefully. But the first Chechen war (1994-1996) shows how partial the exception is.

²² One of the reasons that a number of observers, egged on by Russian propaganda, have been reluctant to support Ukraine fully has been the presence and supposed importance of far-right, ultra-nationalist and even white supremacist forces in the invaded country’s political and military landscape. As Nonjon (2022) explains in detail, these forces exist, they are very active, *and they have been very marginal politically*. Whether they remain marginal in the future, especially given their highly motivated participation in the country’s defense, is an open question. I would wager that Ukraine’s now very strong and growing ties to the West, including the European Union and NATO, will more than counterbalance the war’s effect on the far right’s reputation within Ukraine. In any case, let me ask this: suppose that the far right was actually a major player in Ukraine’s socio-politics, would the invasion be any less objectionable? Should it face any less resistance? Also, why should it be surprising or especially damning that there is an extreme-right in Ukraine, when such currents are also present in such countries as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the United States and indeed Canada? These currents ought to be fought everywhere, recognizing that they are, in almost all these countries, small but growing minorities.

its sources: the Ukrainian people exist, they have claimed and continue to claim the existence of Ukraine as a sovereign state; nobody – not Ukraine, not NATO – has done anything to justify the mass destruction that Russia's armed forces are inflicting on Ukraine's people and territory; to the extent that Russia has / had legitimate security claims against NATO, these were to be *discussed* and negotiated, recognizing as a given the interests and sovereign will of the peoples of east-central Europe, including the Caucasus, but also those of Central Asia. Russia's invasion of Georgia, its annexation of Crimea, and its subversion of eastern Ukraine were all already in contravention of these basic truths. On the other hand, Russia had at its disposal any number of ways of pressuring other countries into taking its claims seriously – for instance, threatening and/or implementing an embargo on its energy sales to Europe would have gotten the attention of all the regional players. Not that such pressures would have necessarily been legitimate: I am simply saying that in a world of power politics, they were a tool available to the Russian government. My point is this: it's not as if it ever was a choice between full-scale (or even limited) military aggression or nothing – and this is ultimately the main reason why the contextualizing claim of *NATO pushed Russia into a corner* should never be given the time of day.

Not to mention this other question: even if we were to consider NATO a bad actor in this story, why should Ukraine be made to pay the price for the Atlantic alliance's misdeeds and mistakes? Why should it pay *this* price? For critics of NATO, the issue is not to just shut up, or to suddenly become NATO apologists. It is to situate the critique of NATO separately from the analysis of Russia's aggression. The bottom line is that there exists a grotesque disproportion between, on the one hand, whatever pressures and provocations NATO imposed on Russia in the last twenty years and, on the other hand the death, destruction and existential threat that Russia imposes on Ukraine today (and Moldova tomorrow, and...). Anyone unable to grasp this disproportion ought perhaps to visit the ruins of Mariupol or Kharkiv, and talk to the traumatized survivors of Bucha.

5. Making the obvious visible

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites completed the process of decolonization, as Europe’s last empire fragmented. As Mazower writes, “(o)ne way to look at Soviet rule in Eastern Europe²³ is simply as an anachronism, a relic of past modes of rule no longer suited to the modern world” (1998: 377). The USSR’s breakup thus made possible both the “return to Europe” of most east-central European countries and former Soviet republics, by way of the adoption of neoliberal capitalism; and the independence of several countries in Central Asia that also bought into neoliberal globalization. All of this seemed to confirm, until recently, the victory of the Western model in a “world of nation-states” (Mälksoo, 2022). This model and its material embeddedness in Europe are, after all, what Ukraine was reaching for and a source of its clash with the Kremlin since at least the 2013 “Revolution of Dignity,” when a popular uprising overthrew the Ukrainian government after it bowed to Russian pressure to pull back from trade and political *rapprochement* with Europe.²⁴

The sovereign nation-state model was a key feature of the post-WWII settlement’s umbrella of stability,²⁵ that was made manifest and naturalized by unchanging post-colonial international borders. For not only were borders unchanging, but it came to seem unthinkable that they might change – unless by common agreement²⁶ as in the awkwardly swift Czech and Slovak divorce, or the peaceful independence of former Soviet republics.²⁷ As Mikhail Gorbachev once said, “(t)he time is ripe for abandoning

²³ Mazower was writing about European history. The argument should be extended, of course, to non-European ex-colonies of Russia (and the Soviet Union).

²⁴ For Russian revanchists such as Vladimir Putin, it is Ukraine’s very independence, in 1991, that appears to anchor the *cassus belli*. Later developments only added to the grievance, making it increasingly urgent.

²⁵ In this settlement, of course, sovereignty was and is a relative thing, on all sides of the Cold War and ever since: from the Soviet imperium’s rule over its satellites to neocolonialism and imperialism and the rise of neoliberal globalization, the spirit of *Animal Farm* is never very far – all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.

²⁶ It is in fact the status of existing borders that changed – from internal to international – rather than their positions on territory and map.

²⁷ This includes not only the northwest to southeast swath going from the Baltic countries and Ukraine to Tajikistan, but also the Russian Federation itself, which was one of the first republics to secede from



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views of foreign policy which are influenced by an imperial standpoint... It is possible to suppress, compel, bribe, break or blast, but only for a certain period” (the year was 1987; quoted in Mazower, 1998: 380). Even the accession of South Sudan and Eritrea to sovereign-state status stemmed, after lengthy armed conflict, from negotiated agreements.

That umbrella of stability, then, freed people like me to explore the many ways in which the historical construction of borders has been problematic and arbitrary, without fear of playing into the schemes of land-hungry tyrants. And so we were enabled, for instance, to question the ways in which nation-states were / are oppressive of multiple minorities. But as the Soviet-born British journalist Peter Pomerantsev (2022) has written, “Ukraine is the place where the invisible is surfaced, where the suppressed will be remembered, where horror is made into meaning.” As international borders and their legitimizing narratives can no longer be taken for granted even in the very European heart of the international system, they become visible again – visible in the sense of questionable, challengeable. Which means that students of borders, and of borders as constructs, must tread carefully, thoughtfully, and ethically.

the USSR (see Snyder 2022). In other words, it is as Russia itself grabbed its independence from the Soviet Union that it abandoned its imperial ambitions and recognized the claims of its now-former subject peoples – and this could have been the genesis of a non-imperialist Russian nationalism. But the Putin regime turned away from this scenario and has been overtly trying to reestablish something like that empire for nearly two decades.



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