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## Whoever acts in the wrong movie is punished by life

Harald Müller

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been called a *historical turn* – yes, certainly, but in what direction? Some call it a regression into the Cold War, some fear a “new 1914”, others speak of an “unprecedented new environment”. These assessments are all wrong.

The Cold War remained “cold”: both sides respected the taboo of a transgression of the demarcation line. Today, however, we are witnessing a hot war and are concerned about it spreading into the territories of our Eastern NATO allies, and Putin’s nostalgia for the Soviet Empire is clear.

A new 1914 is not in sight. European powers are not “sleepwalking” along prefixed mobilization plans into an unwanted confrontation; the Russian dictator has planned, prepared and executed an expansionary aggression against a smaller neighbor. His aggressive mentality, the result of indoctrination during his formative years as a Soviet KGB agent, prevents the resuscitation of détente and it blocks, for the foreseeable time, all attempts to resume effective disarmament policies.

Finally, our new environment is far from being “unprecedented”. The precedent is the annexation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany in 1938, on the eve of World War II. The Third Reich had been testing the will to

resist of the Western powers for years: Rhineland 1935, intervention in the Spanish Civil War from 1936 on and the annexation of Austria in 1937-38. Hitler systematically mobilized the extremist elements of the German inhabitants of Bohemia, then claimed the right to represent them against a democratic Czechoslovak government, accused said government of repression and terror against the German minority, and built up an overwhelming military threat posture that forced the Western powers to propose negotiations. The notorious Munich Agreement, negotiated over the heads of the Czechoslovak government, was the result, i.e., the splitting of Czechoslovakia and the occupation of its German-speaking parts. A very brief quasi-peace ensued, followed by renewed military threats, invasion, occupation and terror in Bohemia and Moravia.

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## Putin acts according to “play it again, Adolf!”

Today, the historically trained ex-KGB officer Putin has copied Hitler’s machinations almost to the letter. Thus far, he has not yet copied Hitler’s genocidal furor, but he has already practiced the violent discrimination of minorities and the pitiless slaughtering of civilians. He has already practiced this in Chechnya and continues such cruelty on a large scale in Ukraine. And his nuclear saber rattling appears to indicate a readiness to commit mass murder.

Our historical turn, then, does not carry us back to the Cold War, but into the worst phase of European history, the Hitler years. Not all Europeans have woken up to this hard reality. Some warn against an “arm race spiral”, and request disarmament and the fulfillment of Russian demands – exactly like British Labour politicians and Germanophile Conservatives in the 1930s. These voices have fallen out of time and dream nostalgically for the less rough phases of the East-West Conflict of the seventies or even the late eighties.



*Bucha; Source: manhai (www.flickr.com/13476480@N07)*

But today, we do not have the choleric, but principally good-willed Khrushchev, the ill Andropov, and certainly not the universalist Gorbachev. Disarmament and cooperative security are only possible with a counterpart not harboring aggressive intentions; bringing down the mutual distrust is then the main task. But such a partner is not available today.

The Russian President has never left the enemies and worldview of the Soviet Empire behind. He has never

dreamed of objectives other than perpetuating his own reign in Moscow and the restitution of the lost empire. He has never understood how markets function, how a leader brings about one’s people’s prosperity, and that a minimum of domestic opposition is not a treacherous spark of instability, but – for a reasonable ruler – a tool for discovering and correcting mistakes. He does not understand either that the neighbors on Russia’s western border, experiencing Russian pressure and threats, will necessarily strive to obtain powerful protection: NATO. Putin wants absolute power domestically and absolute control over his neighborhood, either through annexation or by creating followers through fear and terror. He is an ultranationalist, unscrupulous, producing lies as he goes along like Hitler and Goebbels, and ready to use force. He is even prepared to use open nuclear threats.

## No Appeasement: let’s play hardball, but avoid nuclear escalation

Even now, it is a reasonable goal, for the Biden Administration to try to negotiate with Moscow in order to prevent a nuclear war. At the same time, NATO members have to take all necessary measures to mount a credible defense posture that negates any temptation to an aggressor to challenge the Alliance.

Like everyone, peace researchers bear the responsibility to learn historical lessons. The 1938 Munich Agreement teaches a particularly harsh lesson: The standard toolbox of peace research is of no use when the counterpart is unscrupulous, aggressive, and prone to use violence. This was true in 1938, and it is true today. Putin, in thought and behavior a reincarnation of Hitler, preserves probably a residual reservation because of the nuclear risks involved. When he loses this reservation, a reasonable uniformed person in his environment may be ready to stop him. In 1962 and 1983, individual Soviet officers saved the world from a nuclear disaster. On the other hand, limitless

readiness to compromise will only enhance the aggressor's appetite. It does not serve to achieve peace but sets the scene for the next war: Munich was followed by the complete annexation of the Czech lands, then the Memel region, and then Poland. Today, Ukraine could be followed by the Baltic states, then Poland, then what? Blocking this road for Putin requires tangible, growing support for Ukraine and strong efforts in collective defense preparations.

### **Credible deterrence needs Germany with cojones**

This is the big difference from 1938: the Western Alliance is not negotiating a shameful dismantlement of the victim state without the latter's leaders as Chamberlain and Daladier did. Rather – while staying out of the war itself to avoid nuclear escalation – the West supplies weaponry and imposes grim sanctions to impede the Russian war effort while taking steps to reduce the reliance on Russian energy resources. More is needed, as Ukraine requires, inter alia, more heavy weaponry, effective long-distance weapons to attack the regrouping points of the Russian armed forces, and anti-ship arms to keep the Black Sea Fleet at bay.

In addition, NATO has to do a great deal to offer its East European allies a credible security guarantee. Up to the start of the war in Ukraine, its posture has been no more than a tripwire: a Russian offensive would have to overcome the modest forces of the Baltics, Poland and Romania plus the deployed token forces by farther-away allies with the risk that NATO would reinforce and escalate, eventually up to the nuclear level. The war in Ukraine suggests the establishment of a more robust posture and drastic improvement of the possibilities of bringing in reinforcements promptly. Because of its economic strength and geographical position in Europe, Germany will have to play a key role, contrary to its engrained peaceful instincts. Germany's

military presence and reinforcement possibilities for its Eastern allies will have to be considerably enlarged. This concerns all three arms of the armed forces, and the logistical and transport infrastructure. Germany must ensure not only prompt reinforcements of its own but also reinforcements from the UK, USA, France and Canada, many of which would have to be channeled through German territory and airspace). Moreover, German capabilities to conduct operations in cyberspace, including offensive moves, need much beefing up. In the light of the



*NATO-Ukraine Commission; Source: NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization ([www.flickr.com/nato](http://www.flickr.com/nato))*

massive use of ballistic, cruise and supersonic missiles by Russian forces in Ukraine, heavy investment in air and missile defense on a European scale will be seen as inevitable, and a significant share of this will have to be shouldered by the strongest European economy as well. No one should underestimate the enormous impact on Germany of Putin's war. Berlin has overcome a decades-old reluctance to send arms to "areas of tension", canceled the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, set up a fund of 100 billion EURO to beef up its armed forces, and decided to keep its military budget above 2% of the GNP for the foreseeable future. This augurs well for a robust European defense. But it also means that the German economy as the engine of Europe must be kept in mind when further sanctions against the Russian dictator are strategically considered.



## Let's face it: no peaceful order feasible with Putin

Everyone who loves democracy, and a democratic Europe must come to grips with this new world. Cooperative, rule-based security, and time-honored principles of European foreign and security policies lie in ruins, not through bad European diplomacy, but through the break with international law by Putin's Russia. The ruins include the dysfunctionality of the UN Security Council which cannot work when one of the veto-holding five permanent members leads an illegal war and commits horrendous war crimes intentionally. The UN Charter has no tool against a permanent member working for the destruction of the international order. Russia has already sabotaged the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons by protecting Syria. It has covered for Assad's



Vladimir Putin attends 70th General Assembly Debate; Source: United Nations Photo ([www.flickr.com/un-photo](http://www.flickr.com/un-photo))

large-scale use of chemical weapons and has targeted the Organization with massive cyberattacks. Moscow blocks the OSCE as well. Arms control and disarmament cannot occur with such a "partner".

From the European perspective, Putin has defined the continent as an enemy, through a cyberwar against economic and political institutions, support for European and American right-wing extremists, and breaches of key security

treaties like the INF Treaty or the Paris Charter. He has committed blatant aggression against a state without nuclear arms, which had transferred its nuclear arsenal, inherited from the Soviet Union, in good faith to Russia, while the Russian government granted territorial and economic integrity to Ukraine. This puts into question the whole system of non-proliferation including the Non-Proliferation Treaty and thereby jeopardizes a key pillar of cooperative security in Europe and the world. The situation cannot be rectified as long as Russia is governed by a leadership whose openly confessed goals and ensuing practice have shown over the last fifteen years all too obvious parallels to the Germany of the late nineteen-thirties. Whoever has not understood this sobering fact should read the excellent study *Appeasing Hitler* by Tim Bouverie. Today, only a combination of credible defense and deterrence capabilities promises a modicum of security.

## No easy way out: three scenarios

No one can know the future. What is conceivable today are three different scenarios

1. Ukraine loses. Russia occupies the country and installs a puppet regime. Ukrainian resistance, however, does not stop, the occupants never gain complete control, and the resistance sweeps over into Belarus (already today, some Belarussians are participating in the Ukrainian defense effort). NATO improves its defense posture in the East quickly. Sanctions remain, and Europe, step by step, decouples its energy system from Russian oil, gas and coal. This looks like the early Cold War; the return to détente and cooperative security fails on the unchanged goals of Putin and the lacking trust of the West in the good will of Moscow.
2. Ukrainian resistance proves insurmountable. Russia remains stalemated. Military losses rise further, sanctions take their toll, and Putin's popularity

experiences a drop. The Russian leadership is finally ready for a compromise: Ukraine becomes neutral, combining the Swedish and Austrian models: it retains a formidable military and defense industry, stays out of NATO, but opens the accession path to the EU. Like for Austria, the US and Russia provide guarantees for Ukrainian independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Russia retains Crimea, for Luhansk and Donetsk, referenda under international supervision are prepared. NATO strengthens its positions in the Baltic states and the Black Sea states, but probably at a lower level than in Scenario 1. Sanctions will be lightened, but probably not completely removed as long as Putin continues to lead Russia.

3. Ukrainian resistance becomes stronger. Russian forces experience intolerable losses and are driven back toward the Russian border. Putin misses the chance for an early deal, and dissatisfaction within the military, intelligence services and oligarchs shoots up. Repression is no longer able to keep protesters down. Putin is replaced by a leader holding more moderate objectives. Russia withdraws from Ukraine. The West urges Kyiv to agree to a compromise similar to scenario 2, but without the obligation of neutrality. Ukraine joins the EU and NATO or concludes a bilateral defense agreement with the Western Alliance. There are attempts to resume arms control and disarmament negotiations in Europe to achieve security at lower levels. Sanctions are gradually lifted. The resurrection of cooperative security is not guaranteed but appears possible.