Transcript

The War in Ukraine and Universal Values, 11 March 2022

This public conversation took place in the IWM Library on 11 March 2022, with Serhii Plokhii and Timothy Snyder, moderated by Philipp Blom. It considered what is at stake after Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February, turning an eight-year conflict that started with the annexation of crimea in 2014, into a full-scale war.

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PB: Good evening, and thank you for coming at this...excuse me, at this very sad moment. I don't want to say too much. We've got two wonderful experts here to listen to. Just to give you a little signpost for the evening, we will be speaking for about three-quarters of an hour and then we will open the floor to your questions and perspectives. They may or may not be the same as the subject of the discussion. We will probably not talk so much about Putin's image of history and what Putin thinks he's doing, but more about the historical structures of this conflict and also about the historical moment that we all find ourselves in. And to pitch the first question, Tim, I saw a debate that you had a few days ago. I think it was at Yale, and you spoke very eloquently about which moment we would be in now if the Ukrainians hadn't fought. What would we be talking about now if the Ukrainians hadn't fought? How important is it, what is happening at the moment?

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TS: Okay. So first of all, thanks, Philipp, and thanks, Serhii for being with us, and thanks to all of you for coming together. I appreciate that question very much because it speaks to the specific origins of this institution where you all happen to be. The reason why

there is this place in the world, the reason why there is this library, this building, is that 40 years ago a young Polish philosopher had the idea that Western conversations would be enriched and over the long-term improved if they were put in contact with people who were then known as East European dissidents. The notion was that our — that's my Western 'we'—our way of seeing the world would be enriched, changed, altered in ways we couldn't predict if we were put in contact with people who had different experiences, but perhaps some of the same reference points.

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And I think we are very much in that kind of moment. Again, in 1982, when this place was created, the reference point was, of course, the Solidarity Movement in Poland, which at that point had just been suppressed. But the suppression of the Solidarity Movement by martial law was not the end of the story. And there were people, in the 1980s, who came from Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe who did change our conversation, and did enrich our conversation, and did make us wiser people politically and morally. And the Institute has something to do with that. Now that wouldn't have happened if people in Poland, in August of 1980, hadn't taken risks. And when I say we're in a similar moment, I think that's true now.

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The Russian… In 1980 and 1981 in Poland, the question was always, will they invade, will they invade, will they invade? And they didn't invade. In the end, they had the Communist regime in Poland suppress Solidarity. Here they invaded. It's a different day, Russia is not exactly the same thing as the Soviet Union, but this time they invaded, and without cause, without justification. Every justification that's been given for this invasion just makes it worse than it already was. The justifications that have been given for this invasion add a kind of moral dimension, add a kind of moral horror to this invasion. The way that it's spoken about, the way that it's justified, make it worse rather than better obviously.

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And so I appreciate this question because just to take again, this very small example, we would not be here with an opportunity to talk about values, which is our subject, if it weren't for the fact that Ukrainians are fighting now. If Zelensky had not stayed in Kyiv, if Ukrainians had not chosen to resist, we would all be impoverished by that. We would have lost this time, we would never... We've been given this time as a gift to speak about who we are and what kind of future we might have. If Zelensky had fled, if the Ukrainians had not fought, we would all be that much more cynical, that much more narrow, that much less capable of talking about how the world ought to be.

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So, Philipp, that's what I mean. I mean that...I think that every second that they resist is like a day for us, and every day that they resist is like a year for us. It gives us time to think as Europeans, or as Americans, or as people who are concerned about certain values, it gives us time. They've bought us time. And that counterfactual where they didn't resist, for me, is just so dark. It's so dark, the idea that invasion could... We're not going to talk too much about these premises that have been provided for this invasion, but if we lived in a world where those premises were not resisted, we would all be, I think, more cowardly. We would all have fewer examples to look to. Europe would not have this opportunity that it has now to base its moral future on things like resisting imperialism, and resisting colonialism, you know, which is what it ought to be based on. Americans would not have this chance, which they're now having, to have a conversation, which is not about COVID, to have a conversation which is about... Republicans and Democrats are now talking to each other about something for the first time in years, in years. Right? So, what they've given us is an opportunity to reevaluate, and to get across certain divides, and to think about the future. And so that's what I meant.

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PB: Serhii, you have written on the history of Ukraine. You're an expert on nuclear matters in Ukraine, on the history of Chernobyl. Now, this is just, at the beginning of the evening, the very darkest aspect of this conflict that is looming in the background, and none of us know what will happen. We have learned not to think that this is run by

rational principles that we can rely on rational, or even reason, or even self-interest, even on the part of Putin. I don't want to ask you to be a prophet, but if you could say, what does this moment mean for you? You're also a Ukrainian. What does this moment mean for you? What does it mean for Ukraine? What does it mean for a wider picture, even in its openness now?

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SP: Thank you, and thank you for including me in this conversation. One thing that is very obvious for me about the war, and it started with different excuses, explanations, the goal was really reestablishing Moscow's control over Ukraine's sort of space, and more than that really destroying the Ukrainian nation—as it was called, solving the Ukrainian question for Russia once and for all. And what the war does, it does actually absolutely the opposite to the intentions because I believe that it's not just justification. There were also intentions and beliefs that were behind this decision to start the war, the belief that Ukrainians have no right to exist, as simple as that, and [they]don't exist, and are not supposed to exist in the future.

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What you see is Ukraine actually emerging with every battle, from every ruined house, every ruined village stronger and stronger. And there are clear miscalculations on the part of Putin and those who advised him on the war, because Ukrainians demonstrated that they are a nation, that they're dedicated to their state, they're dedicated...that they're united, they're dedicated to the defense of the values in which they believe. Between 80 and 90%, dependent on the day when the poll is done, believe that they will succeed, that they will emerge victorious in that war. A very different, probably percent than we would get in this audience or somewhere, anywhere else, but in Ukraine, that's the percent that we're getting.

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So it's a historical moment in a sense that we see really a key moment, a key stage in the formation of the Ukrainian nation. And this is not an ethnic nation. It's a nation that survived back in 2014 by uniting across ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious lines.

And that's divided how it stands today. If you look at the language, if you look at religion, if you look at regionalism, which always was an issue in Ukraine. Look at the footage of those people in the Russian-speaking towns, in cities, in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, that Putin came allegedly to liberate, and really destroys. They're marching out there against the tanks with Ukrainian banners speaking Russian, and these are the images that certainly are surprising to... And again, there is a different [level of] surprise certainly in that sense in Moscow compared to the surprise in Ukraine or outside of Ukraine. But these are the clearest indications that we got there a new Nation, and it is continuing its formation.

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And that war in the long-term will strengthen that nation and will strengthen that Ukrainian project. So the result is already completely opposite to what was envisioned, and that will be the case in the future. Even more so, I have no doubt, and I'm very optimistic in terms of Ukraine, of the future, of the medium-term, long-term. I'm very concerned, of course, of what is happening today, what will happen tomorrow, or this immediate future. But this is the moment of truth in terms of the formation of a new democratic, but also united and strong nation of Ukraine.

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PB: Tim, one of the aspects I think that has shocked us in the West most, is that we have been thrown back within a day or two into a kind of history we thought we had passed, a kind of history we thought that would no longer happen in Europe, a history of violent conflict, also a history of quite startling pathos. When you listen to Zelensky speaking, it is a kind of pathos we're no longer used to in the discourse in Europe. And at the same time, it strikes me, what's really startling, is that this is a war of stories. There was no realistic territorial problem that Russia had to fix. Ukraine was not an immediate strategic danger. It is about the vision of a united Russia. It is about the vision of a Ukrainian identity not existing. It is really an almost a narrative war; unfortunately the bombs aren't narrative that are falling. But can you enlarge on that?

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TS: So I think that's a very apt point Philipp, and let me try to expand on it in three different directions. When I think of the pathos, as you describe it, of Volodymyr Zelensky, it makes me think of the pathos of Czechs in 1938. The kinds of things that he is saying are very similar to the kinds of things that Czechoslovak leaders were saying at around the time of the Munich Accords, the difference being, and I think it's a very important difference, that unlike the Czechoslovaks, who did make these kinds of clear statements to their Western allies, the Ukrainians are fighting. And that puts round the pathos an entirely different atmosphere, and that is why these addresses that Zelensky makes to Western capitals, Western parliaments are heard.

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They may not always lead to all of the responses that he would like, but the fact that there is action that is corresponding to the pathos, he has earned the right to express himself in that way by risking his life. And that changes things dramatically. And it brings things, you know, into a realm of conversation, which is very familiar in this house (by 'house' I mean the Institute für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM)). The philosophy with which this project [the IWM] began had to do with ideas of the relationship between risk and truth. Right? The truth, you know, Havel for example, that tradition, the truth is what you're willing to take a risk for. Truth is what you're willing to put yourself behind. Right?

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So that's a certain philosophical tradition, which has a certain place in politics, which has been meaningful. You know, I'm not saying that Zelensky is a philosopher, but he is someone who, I would say, has earned a right to these kinds of words. And, of course, you know, the connection that I'm making to 1938 and 1939 is not incidental. The possible comparisons, you know, as you suggest, go much further than that. When I think of this war, I'm not thinking of 1942 or 1943, but I am thinking of 1938 and 1939. And, in particular, picking up on something that Serhii mentioned, in particular, this language that another state is artificial, which is as all of you would know, that's what Mr. Putin has said about Ukraine, that it's an artificial state.

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That is exactly what Hitler said about multiple European states. Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, all three of which were destroyed with increasing violence in the onset to the Second World War. It is also incidentally what Stalin said about Poland in 1939, that Poland was an artificial state, it never should have existed, and its population includes our ethnic brethren that we have to cross the border to rescue. That kind of atrocity talk, which Putin has now used to try to somehow explain this invasion, that atrocity talk is familiar also from both Hitler and Stalin in 1938 in 1939. The idea, an imagination, right, and entirely imaginary threat where you say, "A country that is actually more tolerant, much more tolerant than mine, I'm going to accuse that country of intolerance and atrocity." That is what Hitler did. Right?

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German speakers in Austria were freer than German speakers in Germany in 1938. I'm not saying Austria was a great country in 1938, but comparatively speaking, Russian speakers in Ukraine are much freer, much freer in every respect than Russian speakers in Russia. But there is that same trick, right, this notion that I'm going to imagine an atrocity across the border. And Mr. Putin's speeches have, you know, they're not about history, of course. They're about a kind of myth, but they have this character, as I think Serhii quite rightly says, that when you deny the existence of a nation and a state, what you're doing is asserting your own right to destroy that nation and that state. This is a very important point, which Hannah Arendt makes in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. The language that a totalitarian leader uses to describe the world is there in order to bend the world into that shape.

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So, of course, I mean, it's a banal truth, but I'll repeat it. Of course, there is a Ukrainian state, and that Ukrainian state I have to say has proven to be remarkably functional under incredible stress. And, you know, the Ukrainian tax authorities are still functional enough to issue a statement saying that if you happen to claim a Russian armored vehicle or tank and bring it to your farm, you will not be taxed for it. The Ukrainian Nation, as Serhii has already said, it's not that it didn't exist before, but, I mean, what more proof does one need? It's not just that people are fighting. I mean, just imagine the

physical courage involved, the physical and moral courage involved in resisting an invasion by Russia, by Russia. It's extraordinary. But all the people who aren't fighting, who are active in what we call in a phrase, which is too, somehow too light for this moment, what we call civil society, all the people who are doing some little thing.

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When I speak to my Ukrainian friends, I mean, when I manage to catch them, you know, there are many commonalities. One of the commonalities is that they all manage to calm me down rather than the other way around. But another one of the commonalities is that they're all doing something. They're all doing something for someone else. And, like, that is what is meant by being a nation. A nation is not about a declaration. It's not about some idiotic story about the past. A nation is about the future. It's about being able to do things together.

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So there was a French historian, a brilliant French historian, called Jules Michelet, who described the nation as a daily plebiscite.[1] So the nation is about what you go out and do every day. It's about what you say and what you do every day. It's how you leave a trace. So, you know, this competition of stories, it's a competition as I see it of different kinds of stories, so it's not as though one is directly aligned against the other. There's a story, which is a kind of gray, pale story, about non-existence, you know, the story that all of the past points in one direction. And that one direction is that there can't be Ukraine, there can't be a state, there can't be a nation. And then there's another kind of story, which doesn't address that directly. I mean, one of the things I'm struck by... I mean, there're plenty of Ukrainians who can address all these things directly, but what I'm struck by is that their story is just it's, it's orthogonal, it's somewhere else. Their story is about existence, It's about subjectivity. It's about being now, right, in this twenty-first century.

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1 The French philosopher Ernest Renan first used this idea that a nation's existence is a daily plebiscite in his 1882 lecture "*Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*"

So it's not exactly rebuttal, you know, to that story. It's a different mode of expression. And I think…I'm sure we'll have a chance to talk about Ukrainian history since you have two historians of Ukraine, and, you know, the chair of Ukrainian history at Harvard on the panel, but I think it's very important to recognize that this doesn't come down to who really... You know, when a Viking warlord called Valdemar baptized himself, maybe, 1,000 years ago after having flirted with Islam, and Judaism, and Western Christianity, when a Viking warlord called Valdemar married a Byzantine princess, even though he already had eight wives, or maybe it was six, and 800 concubines, or maybe it was 600, that moment didn't define whether Russia and Ukraine and Belarus are... You know, it's not about disputing the meaning of Valdemar baptizing himself, right? That's not what this is really about because here's the thing... The story that's told by Mr. Putin, about how a baptism 1,000 years ago...

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And I've tried to give you some of the colorful details because it's the colorful details that remind us what history and life are really like, right? But this kind of story that Mr. Putin is telling is a basically fascist story. It's a story about how once upon a time nothing was fragmented. There was purity, someone got baptized, there was water, they were purified, everything was purified, and his name was Vladimir, and my name is also Vladimir. No, that is quite literally the story. That is the story. It has been said in basically so many words. He's also said that in the length of 7,000 words in a published paper, but that is basically the story. And that is a fascist story.

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The story that the world was once united, the story that the world was once united and pure, but it has been fragmented and broken by outsiders. That is Mr. Putin's version. The version is that everything which is Ukraine comes from outside. It's the Poles, it's the Germans, it's the Austrians, it's the Americans. That's all artificial. And so if you can just strip that away then you come that back to the real story, the unity, this imagination that he has about the last 1,000 years. The thing is his story, the last 1,000 years, has everything in it except for the facts. And in order to strip away the facts, as Serhii quite rightly said, you have to strip away the people. You have to kill all the

people who have been produced by history as it actually has been. You have to physically eliminate all of the variety, which allows people to speak of belonging to a nation and doing the small things that make a nation real.

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And that is the relationship between Putin's story and this invasion. It is about getting rid of the Ukrainian nation as it has actually been created by history and trying to move towards this vision of purity where there is nothing, there's no contingency left, there's no difference left, there's no variety left. There's just, what Mr. Putin himself calls, this kind of historical unity. So that's one kind of story and where it leads. And so that's why I wanted to stress that. It isn't a battle of stories in the sense that we have to decide what that baptism 1,000 years ago really meant. I think it's more important to recognize that there's one kind of story, which leads in this horribly homogenizing direction, which justifies violence. And then there's a different kind of story which is basically saying, "We're here. We're here."

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PB: So Serhii, every conflict such as this one, and I don't want to belabor the point of this story too much, but to me, at least stories are enacted values or dramatized values. And, you know, they teach us how to be in the world to some extent. As you have just so eloquently said, we're seeing the emergence of a story, the emergence of the story of a new Ukraine. We're also seeing breakdowns of stories, very dramatic. I mean, from the third-hand knowledge that we can perhaps have, it seems that Mr. Putin really did think that the soldiers would be greeted with flowers and Ukrainian folk songs. And there was no plan B when that didn't happen. And that story is clearly broken. And there seems to be a great deal of confusion, also, which story to tell now. As you said, you know, all sorts of reasons are being given and it's rather chaotic because there is no great story to carry this anymore. But there's another story it seems to me that's breaking down. And that's the story of the West, the story of a West that knew that it could be wealthy, and safe, with impunity, and that the nasty aspects of history would never touch it again. All of a sudden that story is no longer true.

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SP: Yes, yes, yes. I think these are just excellent points and very deep ones. In terms of the story that is being broken, and again, Tim did an excellent job tracing it back certainly to the...or the way how the story is formed to the baptism of Rus', I would focus on the 19th century, on the imperial part of the story narrative. And that's the existence of one big Russian nation. That's where Putin's ideas come from, belief comes from. And in that world, there is no real place for either Ukrainians or Belarusians, maximum Little Russians or White Russians, who can dance a little bit differently or speak a funny language, but they're not nations and not supposed to be nations. And the Ukrainian language was banned for 40 years for publications in Ukrainian in the 19th century exactly to make that story a reality, to arrest the development of Ukrainians and then Belarusians as well.

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And what we see is a continuation of that story or that narrative, and those policies, by someone who believes in this 19th century conservative Utopia, pre-modern nationhood sort of thinking, very imperial thinking in that sense. And then expects that, as you said, people will greet them with flowers because the story is so beautiful, is so great. And he believes in it. And people are welcoming him with either all Soviet grenades, or javelins, or whatever it is, which breaks the story right there. And the Ukrainian story emerges, which has its own again, myth and mythology, but of a different kind that brings it to the fore.

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And what you see more and more is this reference to the Cossack past, certainly. And that's where the anthem of Ukraine, Ukraine is not dead yet, this is about that. This is about the Cossack state being gone, destroyed by the empire in the late 18th century, but we as Ukrainians, we continue. So the model is, of course, the Polish model, the petitioning of the Polish, Ukrainian Commonwealth, but that's what we have and this Ukraine is not dead yet. And now we're defending this state that is there. So it's really what is happening is very much rooted in this original mythology of the formation of Ukraine as a modern nation in the 19th century.

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What is different now and different from the five attempts to create a Ukrainian independent state in the twentieth century—the fifth succeeded—is that the idea of Ukraine is not just an idea of intellectuals. It's not something that maybe people believe in and are prepared to vote in favor of it. Now they're prepared to take arms in their hands, whether they're trained or not. In my native city of Zaporizhzhia, there were not enough arms for people, for volunteers who came and wanted to get them. And the same is true in Kyiv. And many of them, and Tim mentioned, they're our friends, they're historians, they're people in the humanities who we know quite well, young people, sending their families and small children back and staying. Different estimates, 40,000, 50,000 people from Europe returned. Men returned to Ukraine to take arms.

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So it's a different... And again, Zelensky earned his right to say things that he's saying. That's what is happening today, that the Ukrainian resistance, the Ukrainian dedication to the ideas is something that gives a different meaning to Ukrainian story. Again, in terms of...it is more than a story to something that is embraced by the people, and people are prepared to risk their lives for that. And finally, the West. I think that what is happening here to a degree I addressed in the talk that I gave here about the "end of history." And deep down in different ways and in different interpretations, it seems to me that almost everyone whom I knew believed that the page was turned on that violent story of the twentieth century, and on the violent story of the long 19th and twentieth century.

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And I look at Ivan [Vejvoda] here and again, 1990s Yugoslavia, it was …Okay, this world crisis started in the Balkans, it's ending in the Balkans. Somehow, the twentieth century ended bloody and dramatically, but it ended. And now we're in a different world where annexation is not happening, where aggression without any excuse whatsoever is not happening. That is why historians are here to tell us about the scary stories that that was somewhere in the past. And now it's a nightmare of living through the most awful, the most painful, the most damaging parts of the story that was history, that we were studying and we were teaching to others. And this is awakening.

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There were long debates whether we are in the new Cold War or not. Look at the German budget, defense budget, which doubled. If this is not an indication we are in a different world, which also looks scary, frighteningly familiar from what was happening in the twentieth century. But if you don't want the twenty-first century turning to the twentieth century, we have to come to that realization. We have to come to the realization that if there would be the sort of European and world solidarity over the issue of the Crimea, or before that over the issue of Chechnya, we would not have Crimea. We would not have Donbas. We would not have Ukraine today. And if you don't get together and take risks, and sacrifices—and sacrifice is already being taken, but also risks—things will get worse. And there was a question of what would happen if the Ukrainians would not fight. The future would look actually much, much worse for all of us in Vienna, in Austria, in Europe, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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PB: Tim, a war like that, like this exposes a lot of dirty little secrets that societies have. And to take Serhii's point, and Fukuyama also said basically the goal of the world is to get to Denmark. We will all become Denmarks, you know, all terribly civilized, and wealthy, and rather equal, and with free markets and liberalism. And we all know that that hasn't happened. We've been plunged perhaps back, perhaps forward, into quite a different time of history. So what does this moment mean for the West and its image of itself?

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TS: So let me... I want to continue, I want to address that in two ways. I want to look at a very important Western, but not only Western, reference point, which is the Second World War, and talk for a moment about how that is now being contested. And then I'll say a word about the future or what we're following off from, following from Serhii, what kind of a turning point this might be in a self-conception. We've talked a bit already about how this resembles 1938 or 1939. And Serhii's made the point that one has to address this differently than one addressed 1938 in Czechoslovakia, or 2014 in

the Donbas if one wants to... I'll make the point slightly more strongly, if one wants to get to the twenty-second century at all, if we're going to get across this century.

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But it's not just... So we're making these comparisons in a kind of pragmatic low-key way, but it seems to me that for the European Union, in particular, it's very important to see that their whole conceptualization of the Second World War is now under active assault. So there's an obvious way in which this is true, and that is that there's a war going on, and there shouldn't be a war going on. And European integration is supposed to prevent war, and now we have a war which is...whatever your definition is, it's a terrible war of aggression and destruction. But in addition to that, there is a contestation of vocabulary, which has a great deal to do with whether and how Europeans and others are going to be able to think about the future. And it has to do with the end of the Second World War, with the outcome of the Second World War, with how we judged the Second World War.

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And what I have in mind is Mr. Putin's attempt to appropriate the basic concepts that Europeans and others have used to try to understand and then build a moral and institutional infrastructure around the Second World War. Concepts such as genocide, concepts such as Nazi, concepts such as tribunal. In Mr. Putin's declaration of war, a couple of Thursdays ago, and in a number of statements since what he has done has been to claim that this war is about... And I hate to even repeat this because it's so absurd and grotesque, and it's such a moral atrocity, honestly, that this concept is even in the world, but that what he means to do is to denazify Ukraine.

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Now, that is horrible in a factual way, of course, because it's a country with democratic elections. It's the only country... You know, and as historians, they tell us never to predict things, but I'm going to predict this. It's the only country that's going to elect a Jewish president with 73% of the vote. That's not going to happen again. None of you is ever going to see that in a country besides Israel, which has a certain affirmative action

advantage in this respect. You're never going to see another country elect a Jewish president with 73% of the vote. It's not going to happen. That's Ukrainian history. That's not going to be anybody else's history.

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So this idea is factually grotesque, but its deeper problem is that it is a weapon directed at you. It's a weapon directed at the European conceptualization of this war because its aims are not just to mischaracterize the world, but to alter the world in a way where all of your characterizations will no longer make sense. If you characterize the world in this way, and then you carry out the threat, that is, God forbid, you win the war and you round up the Ukrainian intelligentsia, you round up all of the people who in some way stand for Ukraine, if you do that...and this is...I'm just saying what Mr. Putin says his war aims are, right? His war aim are the destruction of the Ukrainian state and nation, and he's explicitly called for tribunals to deal with these people.

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If he does that, that's not just horrible on its own, it is a kind of war of aggression on European memory because he's taking the words Nazi and genocide, and not just making them meaningless, he's debasing them, he's perverting them. His claim is that, "Those words mean whatever I say they mean." There is no connection between signifier and signified, no connection between rhetoric and reality. He is making the claim that, "I, as the leader of Russia," define those words. And by extension, those words mean nothing besides power. There are no words, you have no words in your language to defy power. I'm going to take the basic words that you have taken from the 1940s. I'm going to take Nazis and genocide. I'm going to take those words away from you. I'm going to take the words, which are at the far extreme of describing a moral world, and I'm going to take them from you. I'm going to put them in the category of words that just mean what power says that they mean.

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So, and, of course, this logic continues with the idea of tribunals. If there are trials as Mr. Putin... Again, I'm just quoting him. If there are trials, as he says there will be, what are

those trials? Those trials are deliberate perversions of Nuremberg. They are deliberate sham tribunals defined to take not just our vocabulary of atrocity and debase it, but also the very institutions like the rule of law, the application of the rule of law, and debase them, pervert them, put them on trial so to speak, make them look ridiculous. So, not just to commit an atrocity, but to commit an atrocity which makes judging atrocity seem absurd.

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This, I'm trying to say, is now a competing interpretation of the Second World War, which says that the meaning of the Second World War is that the leader of Russia has the capability to describe anyone he wants as Nazis, to accuse anyone he wants of genocide and that if he succeeds in doing that, and destroying a nation, and bringing people to trial and so on, then all that vocabulary, all those institutions, all of the psychological and moral basis upon which the European Union has been built, that's all gone. That is all gone. And so when Europeans are facing this war, they have to think, "What can we do in response to that?" And now I'm slowly moving to the future. It is, I think, not enough to say, "We learned from the Second World War." Maybe you did, but there has to be a reaffirmation of whatever it was that you learned from the Second World War, now, a practical reaffirmation.

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Because let's say that it's actually true, that Europeans learned from the Second World War, and that brought about this process of European integration. If that were true, if that proposition were true, it would then certainly logically follow that when there is a war of destruction on this scale, the process of European integration would be extended to the country that is the victim of that war. And if European leaders and publics... And by the way, publics seems to be thinking the way that I'm thinking. Publics seems to be ahead of leaders on this question of whether Ukraine should be a member of the European Union. But if it's true that Europe learned something from the Second World War, and that the European Union is a response to the Second World War, if that is true, then it would certainly follow that Ukraine would be offered membership in the European Union now. And if it is not, if there is no active response from the European

Union, if the European Union does not affirm itself when facing a war in 2022, as opposed to a war in 1942, it's relatively easy to face a war in 1942. It's relatively easy to talk about what you learned from that war.

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But if it's true at all that there was learning from that war, if that tradition is actually true, and I put a question mark behind this, then the war in 2022 has to be a war that by which, through which, as a result of which, European integration is confirmed. And if you don't do that, it's a little bit like asking the question of what would've happened if the Ukrainians hadn't defended their country. If you don't defend the notion of Europe as a peace project, if you don't defend the legacy of learning from the Second World War by also learning from this war, then you have lost the competition for what the Second World War actually means. You will have lost it to someone who says, "The Second World War is an argument for more war." That is what is at stake.

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PB: It brings to mind the fact that I think we do not learn from history. We simply react to trauma as societies. And these reactions to trauma may be productive in Europe. After the Second World War, they created an emphasis on no nationalism, on interlinked statehood, on pacifism. That was clearly a reaction to what had happened before, but unfortunately, generational traumas fade and generational traumas also set perhaps a mold in which to see the future that isn't like the future at all. But as we're historians, I think I'm slightly wary of the fact that I feel myself carried along by a strong historical pathos. I think it is our job to take a step back and reflect on these things and not allow ourselves that easy way out.

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But at the moment, we have a revived vocabulary we also thought had vanished: Zelensky is described, rightly so, as a hero. We lived in hero-less societies, even in societies that we're proud of no longer needing heroes. Now, my question to you is, to wrap up this conversation and open the questions to the floor, are we playing with fire by reviving historical pathos, by reviving ideas as heroism, and a motherland, and

things like that, which are historically terribly loaded terms, or have we simply forgotten that a society can only exist if it has strong points of identity and if it has an awareness of extremists?

[00:49:21]

SP: Well, thank you. Thank you for these thoughts and for this question. I first, maybe, will start with reacting to what Tim was saying and then you added to that new dimension, which generational trauma, but I would put emphasis on generations, right, and the question of learning and relearning World War II. I'm less familiar with the bookstores here in Vienna. I will have to visit them more often. But I certainly know that I was annoyed more than once walking into the American bookstores, Barnes & Noble in particular, and see just shelves after shelves all about World War II. And that was the only history that was, at least in small bookstores, where maybe 80% or 90% of the books were on World War II.

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But I thought that with that annoyance to me came this belief that because there were so many books that people will not just read them but learn from them. And then as things started to develop again, and particularly in 2014, and then later in comparisons really with 1938 and 1939, and annexation of Crimea and so on, and appeasement that became a dirty word, but after becoming dirty it was removed completely from the vocabulary. And I realized that despite the fact that all that there was about history was World War II, the lessons are not learned at all. Or they're read as entertainment as opposed to something that has to provide a deeper understanding of history and the dangers that come with that. Because the world didn't react to the developments starting in 2014 in any way that suggested that anyone at all in that new generation of decision-makers read any of those books that I saw in the bookstores in the United States of America.

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And that for me means, again, the whole thing is about generation. And we almost assume that the experience and the lessons drawn from those events by the generation

that built the European Union, by the generation of '50s and '60s who were making decisions, that somehow it was transferred to us as well, and it wasn't transferred. And I wonder whether this horrible war is also not just an invitation, but a demand and an opportunity to relearn history. To relearn history is not looking at the entertainment channel one episode after another, but looking at basically something that can happen today and can happen in the future if you don't act on that.

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And in terms of heroes, whether nations need heroes to exist, I have no doubt that nations need heroes and need at least selfless acts for them to come to existence. And they need heroes and selfless acts. And selfless acts and then heroes, I look at that as basically a way by the society to recognize that act, to acknowledge it, to turn it into something that can be emulated. So they need that to survive. And how many heroes were there in British history between the wars? I don't know, maybe there were some Chamberlin and Churchill doesn't qualify but...

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PB: Churchill doesn't qualify.

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SP: But then came along 1940, and there was a demand and there was a response to that demand coming from Churchill, and we got that hero. Again, not a saint, yes, we know...

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PB: I think Indians would disagree with you quite very vehemently, but...

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SP: Well, absolutely. But look at the British and what he did to the British spirit.

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PB: Yes.

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SP: But that was an important part of British survival and continuation in the war. And now we've got Zelensky. It's unbelievable, but he reflects what people think if 80% to 90% believe that they will succeed, they will... He, of course, helps to build that confidence, but he also gets energized from it. And there is no way for any nation, for any group to survive without a hero, which again for me, brings together two components, someone who is prepared actually to risk her or his life to lead, and then the society that actually sees that for what it is and recognizes it.

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PB: Thank you very much.