

## An Unknown Land? The Making of a European History of Ukraine in German, British, and Polish Print Media after 24 February 2022

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### ABSTRACT

Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the perception of Ukraine in Western Europe changed dramatically. With increased media coverage and public awareness, the previously unknown country was widely perceived as European, and it was historical references and arguments with history that underpinned this change. This article analyses how Western journalists, historians, and politicians related Ukraine to Europe and presented its European history by studying newspaper coverage in Germany, Poland, and the United Kingdom between 1 January 2022 and 1 March 2023. Shortly after the full-scale invasion, the war in Ukraine came to be seen as a return of history, with a geopolitical bloc confrontation between Russia and the West emerging once more. Furthermore, when presenting Ukrainian history from a European perspective, Western media outlets focused on specific events, such as mass violence in the twentieth century, often relating Ukraine to respective national histories. In both of these discursive nodes, Ukraine was depicted as a setting for European history without contributing to Europe itself. In contrast, Ukraine's recent twenty-first-century history revealed its ambition to adopt European values and join the European Union. Polish and German commentators, but also Ukrainian voices, viewed the Euromaidan protests particularly as an addition to the history of European integration. The article holds that after 24 February 2022, the Europeanization of Ukrainian history provided a way to make sense of unexpected events and legitimize Western support for Ukraine. However, it did not contribute to reflections on European or Ukrainian history.

**KEYWORDS:** Ukrainian history, Russo-Ukrainian war, European memory, Europeanization, media discourse

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## 1 Introduction

“For Europeans, even the educated ones, this country did not exist,” German historian Karl Schlögel said in May 2022.<sup>1</sup> With these harsh words, he captured the extent to which Germans and Western Europeans, in general, lacked fundamental knowledge about Ukraine and its history. Schlögel, a specialist in Eastern European history, had warned of Russian aggression since the annexation of Crimea and the start of the Donbas War in 2014.<sup>2</sup> Two months after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Schlögel condemned Europe as “west-centered and complacent” and concluded that Western European ignorance of both Ukraine’s history and its recent development had paved the way for Russian aggression and thus the ongoing war.<sup>3</sup> For Schlögel, it was clear that to support Ukraine in this conflict, Europe needed to learn about Ukraine and accept it as European.

Europeans learned significantly more about the country under attack in the days, weeks, and months following 24 February 2022. History guided political argumentation, including calls for arms shipments to Ukraine or pledges for increased diplomatic efforts. Television and newspapers extensively covered Russia’s warfare and Ukraine’s defensive efforts. European media also reported the fate of civilians in Ukraine, including the 4.3 million who fled to neighboring countries where they were warmly welcomed, categorized as “refugees” under international law, and considered “European” by culture. This humanization of Ukrainian refugees sharply contrasts with the treatment of those who have come to Europe from Syria and the Middle East since 2015.<sup>4</sup> Western European media also reflected on Ukrainian culture and provided a forum for Ukrainian authors

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1 Die Ordnung im Kopf und die Unordnung der Welt, in: Frankfurter Rundschau, 2022-05-03; see also: Wie die Ukraine erst jetzt entsteht, in: Frankfurter Rundschau, 2022-06-03.

2 KARL SCHLÖGEL: Entscheidung in Kiew: Ukrainische Lektionen, rev. ed, München 2022 [2025].

3 Die Ordnung im Kopf.

4 Figures for 2022: Temporary Protection for Persons Fleeing Ukraine—Monthly Statistics, in: Eurostat (2024), [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary\\_protection\\_for\\_persons\\_fleeing\\_Ukraine\\_-\\_monthly\\_statistics#Key\\_findings](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Temporary_protection_for_persons_fleeing_Ukraine_-_monthly_statistics#Key_findings) (2024-10-30). On the discursive differentiation of Ukrainian and other refugees, see: GAETANO GIANCASPRO, FLAVIA LUCENTI: Implicit Hierarchies in the EU Representation of Refugees: A Comparative Text-Analysis of the European Parliament’s Framing of Syrian and Ukrainian Diasporas, in: Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica 54 (2024), pp. 175–189; KATHERINE McCANN, MEGAN SIENKIEWICZ, MONETTE ZARD: The Role of Media Narratives in Shaping Public Opinion toward Refugees: A Comparative Analysis, Geneva 2023; in contrast to this, a recent study argues that this humanization centers on the imagination of Ukrainian refugees as middle class and is therefore precarious, see: JANNIS PANAGIOTIDIS: Just Like Us? “Sameing” Ukrainian Refugee Migration, in: Journal of International Migration and Integration, online first, 2025-12-11.

reporting about the ongoing war and their experiences. Ukraine's history has been a fundamental aspect of this presentation of the previously little-acknowledged country.

This article explores this new knowledge of Ukraine. I analyze the role of history, particularly European history, in making sense of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and ask which aspects of Ukrainian history gained prominence in the German, British, and Polish public and which were omitted. Historiography and memory were foundational to the Ukrainian national movement in the nineteenth century, especially its rejection of imperialist Russian conceptions of history. Historiography and memory have also helped define the new state since its independence in 1991.<sup>5</sup> In the current Russo-Ukrainian conflict, since 2014, historical narratives, arguments drawing on history, and controversies over memory have been omnipresent, for instance, with regard to the Cossacks' tradition of freedom, the struggle against fascism, or the colonial project of "Novorossia" (New Russia).<sup>6</sup> Amid increasing tensions, Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly brought forward revisionist arguments, claiming the "historical unity" of Ukrainians and Russians or delegitimizing the beginnings of Ukrainian independent statehood.<sup>7</sup> By February 2022, observers both in Ukraine and the West understood these imperialist narratives as an attempt at constructing a pretext for Russia's military aggression. In Western European media, both journalists and historians widely debated and refuted these narratives.<sup>8</sup> Rarely have history

5 For an overview, see: ANDRIY PORTNOV: Memory Wars in Post-Soviet Ukraine (1991–2010), in: UILLEAM BLACKER, ALEXANDER ETKIND et al. (eds.): *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, New York 2013, pp. 233–254; BARBARA TÖRNQUIST-PLEWA, YULIYA YURCHUK: *Memory Politics in Contemporary Ukraine: Reflections from the Postcolonial Perspective*, in: *Memory Studies* 12 (2019), 6, pp. 699–720; GEORGIY KASIANOV: *Memory Crash: The Politics of History in and around Ukraine, 1980s–2010s*, Budapest–New York 2022.

6 GUIDO HAUSMANN, TANJA PENTER: *Der Gebrauch der Geschichte. Ukraine 2014: Ideologie vs. Historiographie*, in: *Osteuropa* 64 (2014), 9–10, pp. 35–50; IRYNA VUSHKO: *Historians at War: History, Politics and Memory in Ukraine*, in: *Contemporary European History* 27 (2018), 1, pp. 112–124.

7 VLADIMIR PUTIN: *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, in: *Official Website of the President of the Russian Federation* (2021-07-16), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (2025-04-07); VLADIMIR PUTIN: *Address*, in: *Official Website of the President of the Russian Federation* (2022-02-21), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828> (2025-04-07).

8 See, e.g.: *Why Russian Imperialism Explains the Ukraine Crisis*, in: *The Independent*, 2022-02-21; *Warum Wladimir Putins Erzählung von den gebrochenen Versprechen des Westens nicht stimmt*, in: *Die Zeit*, 2022-02-24. Historians and other experts, however, had drawn this conclusion earlier. PETER DICKINSON: *Putin's New Ukraine Essay Reveals Imperial Ambitions*, in: *Atlantic Council* (2021-07-15), <https://www.atlantic-council.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-new-ukraine-essay-reflects-imperial-ambitions/> (2024-11-12); MARTIN SCHULZE WESSEL: *Putins bedrohliche alternative Geschichts-*

and images of history been so important in a political conflict, and rarely have conflicting parties invoked history to this extent to legitimize their goals.

In particular, this article studies the notion of Europe and Ukraine and its historical relationships to the notion of Europe. After 24 February 2022, politicians, intellectuals, and historians, including the aforementioned Schlögel, presented Ukraine as part of European history. European Union (EU) politicians also did so. For example, in May 2022, Charles Michel, president of the European Council, celebrated Europe Day in Odesa, a city he called “a melting pot of European culture and history.”<sup>9</sup> But what did Europe or European history mean in this context? Which space or time was considered European, and how did politicians, journalists, or intellectuals position Ukraine within this Europe? What was the value of such a European history, and which European values did it refer to? With these research questions, this article contributes to both the growing literature on the Russo-Ukrainian War since 2022 and wider research on the idea of Europe in memory studies, European studies, and the history of ideas.<sup>10</sup> With this focus, the article adds to research about the value of the past and provides insights into the valorization of a European history for Ukraine.

Studying memory provides insights into an evolving social reality, in this case, the discursive Europeanization of Ukraine. Memory studies have stressed that acts of remembering, i. e., all those acts of mental representation that refer to something as past, allow for creating a sense of belonging—not only to a nation but also to regional or social formations or a community of values. These acts include both formal commemorations, academic historiography, and other references to the past, such as casual analogies to historical events or specific arguments drawing on the past. Just as memory is best understood as constantly negotiated and inherently polyphonic, the practices of inclusion and exclusion through memory are dynamic and conflictive.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to studying how the

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schreibung, in: libmod.de (2021-07-21), <https://libmod.de/putins-bedrohliche-alternative-geschichtsschreibung-schulze-wessel/> (2024-11-12).

9 “Mama Odessa, Heldenstadt,” in: taz, 2022-05-14. For the full text, see: CHARLES MICHEL: Europe Day Statement by President Charles Michel in Odesa, Ukraine, in: European Council (2022-09-05), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/press/press-releases/2022/05/09/europe-day-statement-by-presidentcharles-michel-in-odesa-ukraine/> (2025-04-07).

10 WIM WEYMANS: A Critical History of the Use of “European Values,” in: REGINA POLAK, PATRICK ROHS (eds.): Values—Politics—Religion, Cham 2023, pp. 95–123; SHANE WELLER: The Idea of Europe: A Critical History, Cambridge 2021; MATS ANDRÉN: Thinking Europe: A History of the European Idea since 1800, New York—Oxford 2023.

11 MICHAEL ROTHBERG: Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization, Stanford, CA 2009; ASTRID ERLI: Travelling Memory, in: Parallax 17 (2011), 4, p. 4–18; GREGOR FEINDT, FÉLIX KRAWATZEK, DANIELA MEHLER, FRIEDEMANN PESTEL, RIEKE TRIMČEV: Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies, in: History and Theory 53 (2014), 1, pp. 24–44.

memory of a certain event evolves, in this article, I analyze how the discursive usage of historical analogies, narratives, or mnemonic signifiers contributes to the production of meaning and the articulation of political claims.<sup>12</sup> This means that interpretations of the past substantiate the present social order and provide a projection into the future.<sup>13</sup> In this article, I argue that after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the memory related to Ukrainian history in European societies became highly dynamic, and its change affected the relational position of Ukraine within Europe.

To analyze public discourse on the European history of Ukraine, this article focuses on quality newspapers as a source of public discourse in Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), and Poland. In its first months, more than 70 percent of the adult population in the three countries followed media coverage of the war "closely."<sup>14</sup> In the context of Russia's full-scale attack, major quality newspapers served as important arenas of knowledge production and interpretation and guided public discourse in the three countries under study. Although television and increasingly social media, such as *X/Twitter*, were the main sources of information and news content, print media and, in particular, newspapers provided background information on the war and Ukraine, allowing for wider reflection on the topic. They also mirrored the most relevant political, social, and cultural debates, including those occurring in other media.<sup>15</sup>

Germany, the UK, and Poland have all supported Ukraine. However, these national cases each represent different positions in the political process of European integration. For a comparative analysis, it is also important that newspapers exist in a comparable format in all three countries and provide a suitable source

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12 For this article, I build on a collaborative project concerning arguments drawing on history and the idea of Europe that I conducted with Rieke Trimçev, Félix Krawatzek, and Friedemann Pestel over the last few years. While the Russo-Ukrainian War was an important aspect of our analysis, we did not discuss historical discourse on the conflict in more detail. Our results are published in FÉLIX KRAWATZEK, FRIEDEMANN PESTEL, RIEKE TRIMÇEV, GREGOR FEINDT: *Shades of Blue: Claiming Europe in the Age of Disintegration*, Ithaca, NY 2025; RIEKE TRIMÇEV, GREGOR FEINDT, FÉLIX KRAWATZEK, FRIEDEMANN PESTEL: *Europe's Europes: Mapping the Conflicts of European Memory*, in: *Journal of Political Ideologies* 25 (2020), 1, pp. 51–77. For a discussion of the role of historical narratives in political decision-making, see also: FÉLIX KRAWATZEK, FRIEDEMANN PESTEL: *The Political Force of Memory: The Making and Unmaking of Brexit as an Event*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 66 (2024), 1, pp. 4–31, here pp. 7–10.

13 CONSUELO CRUZ: *Identity and Persuasion: How Nations Remember Their Pasts and Make Their Futures*, in: *World Politics* 52 (2000), 3, pp. 275–312.

14 KIRSTEN EDDY, RICHARD FLETCHER: *Perceptions of Media Coverage of the War in Ukraine*, in: *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*, pp. 34–37, here p. 35.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

for a systematic analysis of public discourse.<sup>16</sup> The comparative analysis of these cases, therefore, covers different ideas of Europe and accounts for the transnational diffusion of mnemonic narratives and patterns. For this analysis, eleven widely read broadsheet newspapers were included. From Germany, I analyzed the daily newspapers *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (center left), *Frankfurter Rundschau* (liberal left), *Die Welt* (conservative), *taz* (*die tageszeitung*, left), and as a weekly *Die Zeit* (center left).<sup>17</sup> From the UK, the corpus included daily newspapers *The Guardian* (center left), *The Independent* (liberal left), *The Daily Telegraph* (conservative), and *The Times* (centrist). From Poland, I included the dailies *Gazeta Wyborcza* (liberal progressive) and *Rzeczpospolita* (conservative-liberal).<sup>18</sup>

To identify relevant articles, I searched these newspapers between 1 January 2022, when an extension of the Russo-Ukrainian War seemed probable, and 1 March 2023, shortly after the first anniversary of the full invasion. I worked with a search algorithm targeting every article containing the root of the terms “memory” or “history” and “Europe” within a proximity of five words in the wider context of the root of the term “Ukraine,” i. e., in a proximity of 50 words. This means that I specifically targeted utterances that combine any signifiers of the past, such as memory (including, for instance, history, commemoration, memorial, remembrance, etc.) with the word field of Europe (including “Europeanization,” “Europeans,” etc.) and related this to “Ukraine,” “Ukrainians,” or anything Ukrainian.<sup>19</sup> My Factiva database search identified 529 articles, including 111 in German papers, 101 in UK papers, and 317 in Polish papers. The corpus was interpreted following a qualitative discourse analysis. First, I focused on how the war in Ukraine was embedded thematically, which arguments drawing on history were presented, and which actors made these claims. Second, I clustered the arguments thematically and temporally to identify specific discursive nodes, allowing further analysis. Third, I compared the findings for each country to identify transnational diffusion and argumentative convergences or divergences.

This article proceeds in three steps. First, it identifies the narrative of a return of history before and after 24 February 2022 and shows how politicians, journalists, and intellectuals in Germany, the UK, and Poland used spatial and civilizational patterns of interpretation harkening back to the Cold War. Second, the

16 JUAN DíEZ MEDRANO: Framing Europe: Attitudes to European Integration in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom, Princeton, NJ 2003, p. 107.

17 This corpus does not include the important and widely read *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which is not in the Factiva database and, therefore, could not be used systematically in this analysis.

18 The political categorization of each newspaper is made relative to its position within the respective national media sphere.

19 I conducted an equivalent search in German and Polish, searching for the roots of *Geschichte*, *Gedenken*, *Erinnerung*, *Gedächtnis* or *Vergangenheit* and *historia*, *pamięć*, *dzieje* or *przeszłość*, respectively, in proximity to Europe and in the context of Ukraine.

article explores media contributions that described a European history of Ukraine through analogies to national frames of reference and those that highlighted a history of violence in Ukraine. It also discusses the role of historians as experts in distributing information about Ukraine. Third, the article studies how voices from Ukraine and Western European countries referred to Ukraine's contemporary history, including the 2014 Maidan protests, to accentuate Ukrainian agency and the voluntary choice to participate in European integration. In conclusion, this article holds that Ukraine was Europeanized using history and the attribution of European values. Yet, the form of discursive Europeanization also reveals the limits of European integration for Ukraine and the limited agency of Ukrainian actors.

## 2 The Return of History

In European public opinion, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a sharp break, even a return of history. To capture this mood, *The Independent* spoke to a young woman among the 500,000 people at a peace rally in central Berlin on 27 February 2022. The 23-year-old student explained why she decided to show solidarity with Ukraine: "I woke up on Thursday to war in Europe that I thought would never ever happen." Faced with unexpected violence, she also reconsidered her position on arms shipments and fully supported German military aid to Ukraine. "It's not right that we've been hiding behind our history for this long. The Ukrainians need our help."<sup>20</sup> The British liberal-left newspaper concluded that even Germany, notorious for its post-Cold War pacifism and neglect of its armed forces, had understood how the war in Ukraine had changed Europe's political outlook and brought back "darker episodes of European history."<sup>21</sup>

Before and after 24 February 2022, historical analogies provided orientation in a complex situation and helped substantiate political claims. Speaking to parliaments across Europe and the political West, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelens'kyi used vivid historical references and positive frames, tailoring his arguments to each audience. Before the French National Assembly, he compared the devastation of Mariupol to Verdun. Before the Israeli Knesset, he suggested that Russia was pursuing a "final solution."<sup>22</sup> At the same time, a new group of

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20 Putin's War Forces Germany to Abandon Pacifist Stance, in: *The Independent*, 2022-03-02.

21 Russia Is Determined to Take Advantage of a Divided West, at Ukraine's Expense, in: *The Independent*, 2022-01-19, see also: Muzeum Auschwitz solidarne z Ukrainą [Museum Auschwitz in Solidarity with Ukraine], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-02-25.

22 Geschichtsmoral, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-01-04. For a broader analysis of Zelens'kyi's wartime rhetoric, see: MARTA DYCZOK, YERIN CHUNG: Zelens'kyi Uses His Communication Skills as a Weapon of War, in: *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 64 (2022), 2–3, pp. 146–161; NATALIYA GABOR, YULIANA LAVRYSH, LYUDMYLA PAVLYUK: Communi-

experts received public attention and contributed to the circulation of arguments using historical parallels. Besides strategists and security experts, historians specializing in Eastern Europe and military history rose to prominence with their explanations of the war. In interviews, opinion pieces, and other formats, these historians refuted Putin's claims of a historical unity between Russia and Ukraine and explained that Ukraine had its own long history.<sup>23</sup> Some historians, most prominently Timothy Snyder, assumed the role of public intellectuals and became avid commentators on the ongoing events or even activists advocating for stronger support of Ukraine's defensive efforts.<sup>24</sup> In addition to the significant role of history as an argumentative tool for legitimizing the war, historians proved decisive in making sense of the war.

While the war in Ukraine was geographically distant for most Europeans, it was used in media narratives to mark the end of a long peace. However, these interpretations differed in their scope and historical chronology. In an immediate reaction to Russia's invasion on 24 February, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock declared that when Putin attempted to "turn back the wheel of history at the expense of his neighbors," he displayed "absolute contempt for everything that constitutes the order of peace in Europe."<sup>25</sup> The loss of peace and security, sometimes referred to simply as the "European order,"<sup>26</sup> became a recurring pattern of interpretation. Politicians and commentators argued that the rejection of violence as a means of conflict resolution, just as the violent redrawing of state borders had a distinct and historically unprecedented European quality. Yet, these arguments reflected on different time spans. For Poland's *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Europe's peace resulted from "everything we agreed in Europe after 1945, and what we confirmed in 1975 in the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Helsinki."<sup>27</sup> For the Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev, this order was achieved after the end of the Cold War.<sup>28</sup> Such arguments ignored sig-

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cation Narratives of President Zelenskiy Shaping a New Image of Ukraine in the World, in: MONIKA BANAŚ, VESA PUURONEN (eds.): Dynamics of Uncertainty, Unrest and Fragility in Europe in the Shadow of the Ukraine and Migration Crises, London 2025, pp. 133–152.

23 See, e.g.: Zeitenwende, in: taz, 2022-02-25; Wątpię, czy Putin przełknie Ukrainę [I Doubt if Putin Will Swallow Ukraine], in: Gazeta Wyborcza, 2022-02-26; Plan Putina bazował na fałszywych założeniach [Putin's Plan Was Based on False Assumptions], in: Gazeta Wyborcza, 2022-03-06; Don't Hold Your Breath for Putin to Be Toppled, in: The Times, 2022-03-07; Ukrainisch und Russisch, in: Die Welt, 2022-03-08.

24 "There Is a Temptation to Give in to Nuclear Blackmail", in: The Independent, 2022-12-30.

25 Paris und Berlin beschwören Zusammenhalt, in: taz, 2022-02-24.

26 Warum Wladimir Putins Erzählung nicht stimmt; Zeitenwende.

27 To wojna Rosjan, a nie tylko Putina [This Is the Russians' War, Not Only Putin's], in: Rzeczpospolita, 2022-04-02.

28 Die Zeit der sanften Macht ist vorbei, in: Die Zeit, 2022-03-02.

nificant violence that had also raised questions about Europe's capacity to ensure peace, e. g., the wars in the former Yugoslavia and the Donbas War since 2014.<sup>29</sup>

The end of the long-perceived era of European peace invites reflection on the values upon which this European order was built. As Shane Weller demonstrates, the notion of European values has been widely used across history, but was narrowed down to a collection of liberal yet universalist values during European integration.<sup>30</sup> Alongside democracy, freedom, and diversity, peace served as a leitmotif for European integration, underscoring a narrative of Europe "risen from the ashes" after World War II. This narrative imagines European integration as a peace project aimed primarily at the integration of former enemies rather than at economic stability and prosperity.<sup>31</sup> Only in the 1970s and 1980s, when the European Commission put forward the first conceptions of a European identity, was a value-based narrative used to underpin the integration project.<sup>32</sup> Reflections after 24 February 2022 show that peace was complemented by other values, such as respect for the human rights enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights, important to EU memory politics.<sup>33</sup> In Poland, the loss of peace was also associated with the struggle for values constitutive of a nation-state, independence, and sovereignty.<sup>34</sup> Across Europe, the peace project served as an overarching narrative to substantiate European integration beyond economic reasoning.

In the German debate, the return of history also appeared as a "turning point in history," or *Zeitenwende*, a term German Chancellor Olaf Scholz used in his speech to the Bundestag, Germany's federal parliament, on 27 February 2022 to announce a clear policy change. Scholz pointed to the experience of World War II among the older generation and aimed to create unity amidst the threat of the war spreading to Germany. Understanding the full-scale invasion as a turn of history also created the opportunity to confront the violent disruption of order in Europe and to gain a more active role in the evolving events. Scholz emphasized that this *Zeitenwende* "does not just affect our country. It affects all of

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29 KIRAN KLAUS PATEL: *Project Europe: A History*, Cambridge—New York 2020, p. 82.

30 WELLER, p. 247–251.

31 STELLA GHERVAS: *Conquering Peace from the Enlightenment to the European Union*, Boston 2021. For a critical account of this narrative, see: PATEL.

32 KRAWATZEK/PESTEL/TRIMČEV/FEINDT, pp. 38–40.

33 *Zeit der sanften Macht*. Cf.: ANA MILOŠEVIĆ: *The European Union and Memory*, in: MATHIEU SEGERS, STEVEN VAN HECKE (eds.): *The Cambridge History of the European Union*, Cambridge 2023, pp. 591–611, here pp. 606–607.

34 *Tak płożczanie uczcili Narodowe Święto Trzeciego Maja* [How Płock Residents Celebrated the National Day of 3 May], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-05-04; see also: "Tyłko razem możemy skutecznie obronić niepodległości naszych państw" ["Only Together Can We Successfully Defend the Independence of Our Countries"], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-08-16.

Europe.”<sup>35</sup> While the concept of such a turn of history was ubiquitous in Europe, the term itself was restricted to Germany and became an effective discursive tool. *Zeitenwende* framed measurements in support of Ukraine as the “unavoidable consequences of a changing world,” rendering criticism illegitimate. The term was widely used and, at times, described not only geopolitical change but also Germany’s changing policy and increasing buildup of arms. In Western countries, Scholz’s speech was well received, but it was not related to Europe or the history of Ukraine.<sup>36</sup> Timothy Garton Ash referred to Scholz’s restriction to the German context when he discussed what the West learned from Ukrainians one year into the war. In *Gazeta Wyborcza*, he explained that Europe had finally gained the capacity to defend itself, with Poland being a significant contributor, second only to Germany, if the latter fulfilled its *Zeitenwende* pledge.<sup>37</sup>

With geopolitical polarization, the return of history brought back past spatial patterns of interpretation, especially the images of a bloc confrontation. Before 24 February 2022, returning to a permanent confrontation with Russia was framed as a dangerous scenario. In German newspapers, letters to the editor warned against further escalation and praised the mutual benefits of détente and economic ties.<sup>38</sup> However, after 24 February 2022, German, British, and Polish media framed it as a civilizational conflict and featured Ukrainian voices that described the bloc confrontation as a reality.<sup>39</sup> In a letter to the editor of *The Times*, Ukrainian analyst Orysia Lutsevych underlined, “We are at a crucial point in human history. The battle for Ukraine is a battle for European civilization.”<sup>40</sup> *Die Welt* quoted Ruslan Stefanchuk, speaker of the Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine’s parliament, who saw his country as the “defensive outpost [*Vorposten*] not only of Ukraine but the whole of Europe.”<sup>41</sup>

Interpreting the war as an existential conflict between civilizations created clear lines of conflict, excluded intermediate positions, and polarized the public. The pattern pitted an autocratic and imperialist Russia against a liberal, democratic Europe. This interpretation had been important for anti-Communist oppo-

35 Policy statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag (2022-02-27), <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378> (2025-04-07). The term is part of standard language and has been used by others to describe the situation before Scholz’s speech, see: *Zeitenwende*.

36 The Week Where Decades Happened, in: *The Guardian*, 2022-08-13.

37 Lekcje od Ukraińców dla Zachodu [Lessons from Ukrainians for the West], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2023-02-23.

38 Vertrauen statt Konfrontation, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-01-18.

39 “Diese imperiale Politik wird scheitern,” in: *taz*, 2022-09-24.

40 Ukraine’s Needs and the Impact of Sanctions, in: *The Times*, 2022-03-02.

41 Wie in einer Simulation, in: *Die Welt*, 2022-02-22; see also: We Must Stop Nuclear Disaster, in: *The Daily Telegraph*, 2022-05-03.

sition in Poland and other countries of the Eastern bloc and strongly resonated in East Central Europe after 1989.<sup>42</sup> In the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War, this civilizational pattern integrated Ukraine into the liberal, democratic Europe. Politicians and commentators from both Ukraine and the West ascribed European values to Ukraine, especially freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.<sup>43</sup> Others, such as Berlin-based musical director Daniel Barenboim, took this argument further, declaring that the people of Ukraine were also defending “our freedom.”<sup>44</sup>

Journalists and intellectuals deployed a similar civilizational framing when they related Vladimir Putin to historical rulers. The comparison of Lenin-grad-born Putin with Tsar Peter I was not particularly new, as it was already a frequent reference for Western observers and Putin himself. However, after February 2022, this comparison was not only used to imply opening the gates to Europe but also took on an additional meaning to reference renewed Russian expansionism.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Michael Thumann, *Die Zeit* foreign correspondent, compared Putin to Iosif Stalin, “the conqueror of Europe up to the Elbe.”<sup>46</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* also compared Putin to Adolf Hitler, a narrative device particularly popular in Ukraine and on social media.<sup>47</sup> But Putin failed in his ambition to emulate Russian tsars and Soviet general secretaries, as one *Times* journalist remarked, because he helped unite a previously divided Europe and expand the Western military alliance.<sup>48</sup> In this dyadic constellation of February 2022, despite disagreements of European policy and the disputed unity of the EU, Europe appeared as a community of values intertwined with the United States, the idea

42 Cf.: GREGOR FEINDT: Auf der Suche nach politischer Gemeinschaft: Oppositionelles Denken zur Nation im ostmitteleuropäischen Samizdat 1976–1992, Berlin—Boston 2015, pp. 272–275; ANDRÉN, p. 276.

43 The Cost of Delaying Support for Ukraine, in: *The Daily Telegraph*, 2023-02-10; Wojna na Ukrainie [War in Ukraine], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-02-24; *Zeit der sanften Macht*.

44 Mit der Kraft der Musik, in: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2022-03-07; see also: Radni Torunia chcą zmienić nazwę osiedla kojarząca się z Armią Czerwoną [Toruń Councillors Want to Change the Name of a Housing Estate Associated with the Red Army], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-03-16.

45 Putin vergleicht sich mit Peter dem Großen, in: *Die Welt*, 2022-06-09; Putin Compares Himself to Peter the Great in Quest to Take Back Russian Lands, in: *The Guardian*, 2022-06-10. For criticism of such analogies, see: MARTINA WINKLER: Peter I.—Zar und Kaiser: Eine Biografie, Göttingen 2025, pp. 450–451.

46 Warum Wladimir Putins Erzählung nicht stimmt; see also: Ukraina błaga o realną pomoc, a Zachód przysyła jej wyrazy sympatii [Ukraine Begs for Real Help, and the West Sends it Sympathy], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-02-25.

47 Even Crushing Ukraine Won’t Satisfy Putin’s Warped Territorial Ambitions, in: *The Daily Telegraph*, 2022-03-15; see also: MARLENE LARUELLE: Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West, Ithaca, NY 2021, pp. 1–9.

48 Ignore Putin’s Threats and Expand Nato Now, in: *The Times*, 2022-05-03.

of a liberal West, and, ultimately, NATO. This image of a united Europe has been a frequent framing in ideas of Europe since the 1970s.<sup>49</sup>

The “return of history” is a diffuse metaphor that captures the shock and uncertainty felt after Russia’s full-scale attack and popularized the narrative of a new world order. In Germany and Britain, in vernacular usage, such as in the words of citizens demonstrating for peace or supporting Ukrainian refugees, historical references served to channel negative emotions. This return of history referred primarily to the mediated experience of war and violence. In the contributions of journalists and academics, the metaphor responded implicitly to Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History” thesis, which claimed the ultimate victory of liberal democracy after the collapse of communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, Russia’s invasion meant the return of a specific past, namely the Cold War and its bipolar world order—a returning past with which Europe and the West were immediately confronted.<sup>51</sup> In contrast, the metaphor of a “turning point in history” or *Zeitenwende* created a different image in which the West, both politicians and the public, actively engaged the changing geopolitical constellation and opposed the return of a history of mass violence and destruction. In both perceptions, Ukraine’s position and role in the new order changed dramatically. Arguments based on history analyzed in this section emphasize that Ukraine had become a part of Europe, sharing and defending its values. Early in the war, politicians, historians, and journalists alike stressed that Ukraine stood on the European and Western side of this new world order.

### 3 A European History of Ukraine

The extension of the Russo-Ukrainian War sparked interest not only in the ongoing hostilities but also in Ukraine itself. As it became clear that Ukraine was fighting on the side of the liberal West and Europe, politicians, journalists, and, most importantly, historians deliberated about the country’s history to underpin political actions supporting Ukraine and its integration into a Western and European community of values.<sup>52</sup> This section discusses how and to what extent the history of Ukraine was rendered European.

In debates around Ukrainian history, the country’s most obvious contribution to European history was violence.<sup>53</sup> Newspapers reminded their readers that

49 ANDRÉN, p. 278.

50 FRANCIS FUKUYAMA: *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York 1992.

51 SERHII PLOKHY: *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*, New York 2023, pp. 293–300. See also: CHRISTOPHER COKER: *The War in Ukraine and the Return of History*, in: *LSE Public Policy Review* (2023) 3, 2, pp. 1–8.

52 For a longer tradition of such arguments, see: ANDRÉN, p. 282.

53 Cf. ANNA VERONIKA WENDLAND: *Befreiungskrieg: Nationsbildung und Gewalt in der Ukraine*, Frankfurt am Main 2023, pp. 20–24.

Ukraine had been a central location of the Holocaust and Soviet mass killings in the 1930s.<sup>54</sup> Emblematic of this focus was the recurring reference to Timothy Snyder's monograph *Bloodlands*, especially in the British and German press.<sup>55</sup> In particular, media outlets paid significant attention to the Ukrainian Famine, or the Holodomor, as the culmination of Ukraine's experience of extreme violence in the twentieth century.<sup>56</sup> In December 2022, the Bundestag passed a resolution declaring the famine part of "a period of the most massive, hitherto unimaginable atrocities against humanity on the European continent."<sup>57</sup> However, in its coverage of this resolution, *Frankfurter Rundschau* argued that the memory and implications of the Holodomor transcended Germany and Europe and its historical context, i. e., the newspaper called for a universalizing commemoration.<sup>58</sup> If the famine was genocide, it was a crime that mattered to all of humanity, and Europeans were obliged to commemorate it.

Other media contributions emphasized Ukraine's diversity, a trait frequently seen as quintessentially European.<sup>59</sup> On the pages of German and British newspapers, Ukraine's history of religious, cultural, and linguistic plurality qualified it as European. In March 2022, journalist Cathrin Kahlweit introduced *Süddeutsche Zeitung's* readers to the history of Kharkiv, a city then under siege and expected to fall. "Hardly any other place in Ukraine symbolizes the togetherness, cooperation, and conflict of European history so much," Kahlweit explained. She detailed how the inhabitants of Kharkiv used the Ukrainian and Russian languages in their everyday lives, unimpressed by their political symbolism. Kahlweit saw the city as "an antithesis to everything that Russia's president wants back in his revisionist madness." Kharkiv had experienced the extremes of the twentieth century: rapid industrialization, forced collectivization, and the deaths of thousands during the Holodomor, Stalinist terror, and German occupation. The city continued to experience extremes on the frontline of the Donbas War, resisting

54 "Die Ukraine soll ein freies Land bleiben," in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-06-04; *Die Zeit* vergeht nicht, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-07-02.

55 Der kurze Weg von Kobane nach Kiew, in: *Die Welt*, 2022-13-04; Wie die Ukraine erst jetzt entsteht; A Reader's Guide to Understanding the Ukraine Crisis, in: *The Times*, 2022-02-06.

56 Was auf dem Spiel steht, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-03-01; Schlüsselmomente einer stürmischen Beziehung, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-05-23; "Eine Katastrophe, die Europa in ihren Sog zieht," in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-10-31.

57 Antrag der Fraktionen SPD, CDU/CSU, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen und FDP: Holodomor in der Ukraine: Erinnern—Gedenken—Mahnen, Bundestag, Drucksache 20/4681, (2022-11-29), <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/046/2004681.pdf> (2025-04-07), p. 2.

58 Durch Hunger ermordet, in: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2022-12-01; for universalizing memory, see: RIEKE TRIMÇEV: Two Models of Universalizing Memory Practices, in: *European Review of History / Revue européenne d'histoire* 24 (2017), 4, pp. 631–644.

59 PIM DEN BOER: Konzept Europa, in: PIM DEN BOER, HEINZ DUCHHARDT et al. (eds.): *Europäische Erinnerungsorte*, vol. 1, München 2012, pp. 59–74.

separatists and Russian territorial claims.<sup>60</sup> For Kahlweit, Kharkiv represented both Ukraine's history and its nearest future. This emphasis on diversity superseded the narrative of a country torn "between East and West," a classic interpretation of Ukrainian history that is notably absent from the corpus analyzed here, as it contradicted Ukraine's new geopolitical position as part of the West.<sup>61</sup>

A different approach to bringing Ukraine closer to Europe was to relate its past and present to national histories and depict the country from a European perspective. In the UK, attacks on Ukrainian cities evoked memories of World War II. Under the banner of "the biggest flight of people in Europe since those days," a columnist in the *Daily Telegraph* reminded readers how British families had welcomed refugees into their homes during the war. In today's Ukraine, "[c]hildren are being born in bomb shelters—like my own dad, who arrived, bellowing lustily, in the middle of a German air raid on Gloucester."<sup>62</sup>

In Germany, it was not so much the comparison of suffering that made Ukraine part of European history but rather the parallels with mass violence and genocide, most clearly with the Holocaust—the negative foundational myth of European memory.<sup>63</sup> Given the millions of Ukrainian refugees, center-left *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote that "not since World War II have so many people been robbed of their homes and displaced in such a short time."<sup>64</sup> As reports of genocidal violence in Bucha emerged and Russian bombs damaged the Babyn Iar Holocaust Memorial Center in March 2022, the Holocaust became an obvious point of comparison.<sup>65</sup> In the case of Ukraine, Holocaust memory left room for interpretation. On the one hand, references to the Holocaust mobilized the universalist imperative of "never again," a familiar mnemonic pattern in German memory discourse that accompanied attempts to prevent a return of mass violence. In May 1999, then-German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer legitimized Germany's contribution to the Kosovo war with the slogan "Never again Auschwitz." In this light, arguments based on the history of the Holocaust had the potential to justify the delivery

60 Was auf dem Spiel steht.

61 Cf. IHOR ŠEVČENKO: *Ukraine between East and West: Essays on Cultural History to the Early Eighteenth Century*, 2nd ed., Edmonton 2009.

62 We'll Never Escape the Shadow of World War, in: *The Daily Telegraph*, 2022-03-16; see also: Komisarz UE z wizytą w Warszawie [EU Commissioner on Visit in Warsaw], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-04-07.

63 Cf.: CECILIE FELICIA STOKHOLM BANKE: *Remembering Europe's Heart of Darkness: Legacies of the Holocaust in Post-War European Societies*, in: MALGORZATA PAKIER, BO STRÄTH (eds.): *A European Memory: Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance*, London 2010, pp. 163–174; KRAWATZEK/PESTEL/TRIMÇEV/FEINDT, pp. 68–84.

64 Nichts berechtigt uns zur Hoffnung, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-04-02.

65 Die, die "unseren" Jesus ablehnen, in: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2022-04-07; Raketen auf die Gedenkstätte Babyn Jar, in: *taz*, 2022-03-02; "Der Stalinismus hat nie aufgehört," in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-03-08.

of weapons to Ukraine.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, active support for military efforts against Russia seemed to contradict the German *Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit* (Theodor W. Adorno) and the memory of the Nazi war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. In this debate, conservative *Die Welt* diagnosed Germany with “ignorance toward Ukraine” because most Germans identified the Soviet Union and Soviet victimhood exclusively with present-day Russia but lacked the awareness that also Ukraine had suffered “the worst bestialities in European history” at the hands of Germans.<sup>67</sup> As the Russo-Ukrainian War progressed, the argument of historical responsibility towards Russia lost its significance and only rarely appeared in the German debate. Despite the foundational quality of the Holocaust for European memory, responsibility toward Ukraine was mostly spoken about in the present, and arguments about responsibility arising from historical conditions were neglected.

Historical comparisons were particularly common in Poland but differed in form and content from debates in the UK and Germany. Polish journalists and commentators frequently indicated historical links between Poland and Ukraine, even if only to warn that Russian bombing also threatened Polish cultural heritage within Ukraine’s borders.<sup>68</sup> Other comparisons revolved around the history of wars. For example, *Rzeczpospolita* claimed that battles “on Ruthenian, now Ukrainian lands, more than once in history saved the [early modern] Republic [of Poland] from the ravages of war.”<sup>69</sup> Such comparisons alluded to various military adversaries, from the Tatars and the Ottoman Empire to Tsarist and Soviet Russia. These adversaries had in common their conception as a foreign menace from the East, culturally distinct and threatening to European values and ways of life. Deploying the pattern of civilizational conflict, *Rzeczpospolita* saw the beginning of a new partnership between Poland and Ukraine. Journalist Paweł Łepkowski argued that the 1,000-year history of Polish–Ukrainian antagonism should be overcome but not forgotten. Praising Ukrainian heroism and Ukrainians’ contributions to the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany, Łepkowski likened Ukraine’s current effort to Poland’s struggle in the Polish–Soviet war, writing, “Every day the Ukrainians are holding back and wringing out the forces that would have ravaged Europe. They are like the Poles in 1920.”<sup>70</sup>

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66 KRAWATZEK/PESTEL/TRIMČEV/FEINDT, pp. 68–84, 143–144; see also: DANIEL LEVY, NATAN SZNAIDER: *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, Philadelphia 2006, pp. 166–167.

67 Die Deutschen sollten Friedrich Merz dankbar sein, in: *Die Welt*, 2022-05-05.

68 Polskie dziedzictwo narodowe w zagrożeniu [Polish National Heritage in Danger], in: *Rzeczpospolita*, 2022-03-15.

69 Ekonomia pokona rosyjskiego niedźwiedzia [Economy Will Beat the Russian Bear], in: *Rzeczpospolita*, 2022-04-22.

70 Pamiętajmy, ale nie rozpamiętujemy [Let Us Remember, but not Brood Over], in: *Rzeczpospolita*, 2022-07-15.

For Polish commentators, history also pointed to a threat from the West. *Gazeta Wyborcza* warned of a possible betrayal of Ukraine and clarified that it should not be “allowed to fall victim to a Yalta 2022.”<sup>71</sup> For a Polish readership, Yalta required no further explanation. In Polish mnemonic discourse, the 1945 war conference signifies the forceful inclusion of East Central Europe into a Soviet sphere of interest with the approval of Western allies but without the consent of the countries affected.<sup>72</sup> The narrative of a “Western betrayal” also shaped European memory politics and the mnemonic East-West divide.<sup>73</sup> Since Poland’s EU accession in 2004, politicians and memory activists in Poland and East Central Europe have criticized Western European societies for lacking awareness of Eastern European experiences of Soviet mass violence and occupation. As these politicians and memory activists successfully lobbied for an EU-wide Remembrance Day for the Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, active remembrance of Soviet atrocities was also a matter of contemporary security and a warning against new forms of Russian imperialism.<sup>74</sup> Here, historical references underscored East Central European efforts to remind Western partners in the EU and NATO of their obligations to the whole of Europe.

This European history of Ukraine focused on the twentieth century, reflecting the dominant position that World War II and the most recent period hold in memory and centering on national histories. While the newspaper articles analyzed here all positioned Ukrainian history with respect to Europe, this relation was based on national readings of European history, such as the British memory of area bombing in World War II or Germany’s Holocaust remembrance that inherently assumed a European quality. Reflecting on a shared history with Ukraine, this national framing of Europe was particularly visible in the Polish case when references to past battles or geopolitics moved Poland—and Ukraine—to the

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71 Nie pozwólmy, by Ukraina padła ofiarą Jałty 2022 [Let’s Not Let Ukraine Fall Victim to Yalta 2022], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-03-31; Wobec zbrodni przeciw pokojowi, słowo “solidarność” zyskuje nowe znaczenie [In the Face of Crimes against Peace, the Word “Solidarity” Acquires a New Meaning], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-03-31; see also: Ukraina błaga o realną pomoc [Ukraine Begg for Real Help], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-02-25.

72 WŁODZIMIERZ BORODZIEJ: Versailles und Jalta und Potsdam: Wie Deutsch-Polnisches zu Weltgeschichte wurde, in: HANS HENNING HAHN, ROBERT TRABA (eds.): *Deutsch-Polnische Erinnerungsorte*. Vol. 3: Parallelen, Paderborn 2011, pp. 360–380; SŁAWOMIR ŁUKASIEWICZ (eds.): *Jałta: Rzeczywistość, mit i pamięć* [Yalta: Reality, Myth, and Memory], Warszawa 2019.

73 Wobec zbrodni przeciw pokojowi. See also: MARIA MÄLKSOO: The Memory Politics of Becoming European: The East European Subalterns and the Collective Memory of Europe, in: *European Journal of International Relations* 15 (2009), 4, pp. 653–680; MAŁGORZATA PAKIER, JOANNA WAWRZYŃIAK: Introduction Memory and Change in Eastern Europe: How Special?, in: MAŁGORZATA PAKIER, JOANNA WAWRZYŃIAK (eds.): *Memory and Change in Europe*, New York 2015, pp. 1–20.

74 KRAWATZEK/PESTEL/TRIMÇEV/FEINDT, pp. 92–95.

center stage of European history. Attempts to popularize knowledge of a longer European perspective of Ukrainian history remained an exception, particularly in Germany and the UK. This approach was hardly used in Poland, even though the early modern period and the Middle Ages usually play a significant role in Polish historical consciousness.<sup>75</sup>

In German media outlets, pre-twentieth century Ukraine was a field for academic experts. Newspapers regularly reviewed new and older publications by German or international historians, including Ukrainian scholars such as Serhii Plokhyy, thus providing their readers with an overview of scholarly knowledge.<sup>76</sup> In a contribution to *Die Zeit*, Andreas Kappeler, probably the most influential German-speaking historian of Ukraine, outlined the country's "long road to independence" since the seventeenth century and criticized Putin's imperialist and revisionist narratives. With an emphasis on the mutual exchange between Ukraine and the West and the influence of Western culture and education in the early modern period, Kappeler distinguished Ukraine from Russia and presented it as a European alternative to Russian autocracy in Eastern Europe.<sup>77</sup> The Russo-Ukrainian antagonism was also central to *Frankfurter Rundschau's* short overview of Kerstin S. Jobst's entangled history of Ukraine. Ukraine had been "part of Europe for centuries, a 'borderland' as the name suggests, and yet culturally, ethnically, and religiously part of Central Europe." It was only Russian oppression that had "driven [it] out of Central Europe" in recent decades.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, but less frequently, the British interest in medieval and early modern Ukraine revolved around the historical relationship between Ukraine and Russia. *The Independent* described how the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and the rise and fall of the Mongol Empire had reverted the relationship between Kyiv and Moscow and pushed Ukraine to the periphery of Europe. This long historical perspective allowed for a better understanding of the conflict "which threaten[s] to again plunge part of our continent into the horrors of war."<sup>79</sup>

After 24 February 2022, Ukrainian history appeared widely in print media, touching on various topics from the historical diversity of Ukraine to episodes of mutual relations or mere historical analogies. The contributions of both journalists and experts were aimed at providing historical context. When politicians labeled Ukraine European and sometimes used historical arguments to prove this

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75 Cf.: Chemik ze Lwowa [Chemist from Lviv], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-03-01; *Polskie dziedzictwo narodowe*; *Ekonomia*.

76 See: *Schlüsselmomente*, here as a review of the German edition of SERHII PLOKHYY: *The Frontline: Essays on Ukraine's Past and Present*, Cambridge, MA 2021. For a similar account in the UK, see: *A Reader's Guide*.

77 *Der lange Weg zur Unabhängigkeit*, in: *Die Zeit*, 2022-03-10.

78 *Vertrieben aus Mitteleuropa*, in: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2022-10-08. See: KERSTIN S. JOBST: *Geschichte der Ukraine*, ext. ed., Ditzingen 2022 [2010].

79 *Why Russian Imperialism Explains the Ukraine Crisis*.

point, historians and journalists who reviewed their books conveyed complexity and communicated the findings of academic historiography to the wider public. Ultimately, German, Polish, and, to a lesser extent, British newspapers framed Ukraine as a historically European nation.

However, the Europeanization of Ukrainian history and the role of historians as experts in this war also met with criticism. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*'s Sonja Zekri critically reflected on the role of Timothy Snyder as a historian turned activist who informed the public about Ukrainian history while raising donations for arms shipments to Ukraine. Zekri reiterated the critical reception of Snyder's *Bloodlands* among historians and the reproach of overly "ethnicized" interpretations of Stalinist atrocities.<sup>80</sup> In particular, Zekri was critical of Snyder's Europeanization of Ukrainian history in his highly popular lecture course at Yale University, published weekly on YouTube. According to Zekri, in this class, Snyder

"presents Ukraine as the arena of a kind of pan-European catharsis. The fact that he enthuses that 'the whole of European history' also took place in Ukraine, 'only more interesting,' is a banality in the first part and may be due to his enthusiasm for the subject matter in the second part. But was Ukraine really, as Snyder claims, at the center of the First and Second World Wars, the Stalinist terror, the Holocaust, and the fall of the Soviet Union? As commendable as it is that Snyder gives Ukraine the relevance it deserves after years of marginalization, does he therefore have to exaggerate so much?"<sup>81</sup>

Zekri went further, questioning the independence, open-mindedness, and objectivity of Snyder's historical research in light of his support for the private funding of arms shipments. While this critique built on an idealized understanding of "scholarship as a vocation" in the Weberian sense,<sup>82</sup> it also raised the more general question of whether a Europeanized history of Ukraine was based solely on research or to what extent it was influenced by presentist political discourse.

This critique was a case in point: Faced with Russian aggression against Ukraine and Western societies deliberating responses, scholars specializing in "Eastern Europe" debated the consequences for their academic work and their outreach into society.<sup>83</sup> After 24 February 2022, historians of Eastern Europe became public experts well beyond their strict fields of research. At the same

80 Unter Freunden, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-11-14; cf.: TIMOTHY SNYDER: *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010. Zekri referred to: JÜRGEN ZARUSKY: Timothy Snyders "Bloodlands": Kritische Anmerkungen zur Konstruktion einer Geschichtslandschaft, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 60 (2012), 1, pp. 1–31.

81 Unter Freunden.

82 MAX WEBER: *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. by DAVID OWEN and TRACY B. STRONG, Indianapolis—Cambridge 2004.

83 As an overview, see: V. V. KRAVCHENKO, MARKO R. STECH: *The Unpredictable Past? Reshaping Russian, Ukrainian and East European Studies*, Edmonton 2024.

time, the Russo-Ukrainian War initiated a process of self-reflection within the academic community and put, for instance, the dominance of Russian history and language within Eastern European studies into question. With calls for a decolonization of both research and university teaching, this reflection also extended to fundamental spatial concepts such as Eastern Europe or the post-Soviet sphere. However, as this section has shown, arguments attributing a European history to Ukraine did not reflect the spatial category of Europe as such but integrated Ukraine into a holistic conception that centered on Western European and predominantly national narratives.

#### 4 Ukraine's Path to Europe

European history also offered a model for Ukraine's future. In a mode of self-historicization, Ukrainian voices, alongside German, Polish, and British commentators, discussed Ukraine's most recent history in light of European integration. In contrast to the metaphor of the return of history and European perspectives on Ukrainian history, these contributions highlighted Ukrainian agency in the twenty-first century.

The key moment in Ukraine's recent and European history was the Euro-maidan.<sup>84</sup> The protests on Kyiv's central square, the Maidan Nezalezhnosti [Independence Square], began in November 2013 after President Viktor Yanukovich's sudden decision not to sign the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, opting instead for closer ties with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union in a decision that overruled an overwhelming majority in the Verkhovna Rada. The protests culminated in February 2014 when demonstrators occupied government buildings and clashed with special police forces, resulting in the deaths of 108 protestors, most of whom were shot by police snipers. Thanks to this "Revolution of Dignity," a new government was formed. Yanukovich fled the country, and the Verkhovna Rada removed him from office. Days later, Russia occupied Crimea and initiated pro-Russian unrest in Eastern Ukraine, leading to the Donbas War.<sup>85</sup> These protests demanded "a Ukrainian path towards Europe,"<sup>86</sup> symbolizing a voluntary and optimistic political choice for European integration. For European politicians visiting Kyiv in the days before Russia's full-scale attack, the memo-

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84 Cf.: Putin nie spodziewał się takich szerokich sankcji ze strony USA i UE [Putin Did Not Expect Such Broad Sanctions from the US and EU], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-03-03.

85 DAVID MARPLES, FREDERICK MILLS (eds.): *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Analyses of a Civil Revolution*, Hannover 2015.

86 Zersplitterte Zukunft, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-02-19; see also: Antywojenny protest Ukraińców we Wrocławiu [Ukrainians' Anti-War Protest in Wrocław], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-02-21.

rial to the “Heavenly Hundred” (*Nebesna sotnia*), the protesters murdered on the Maidan, was an important item on their agenda.<sup>87</sup>

The narrative of a path to Europe was often repeated in the days around 24 February 2022.<sup>88</sup> In the leftist *taz*, Polish sociologists Karolina Wigura and Jarosław Kuisz remembered a visit to Kyiv in early 2014 and their conversations with protesters and people on the streets.

“The atmosphere [...] reminded us of our home country, Poland, in the 1990s—sincere enthusiasm for the EU, no doubts about the chosen path towards the West. Kyiv shone with ideals that, in our country in 2014, had already been corrupted by Euroscepticism.”<sup>89</sup>

Their account is indicative of the short-lived optimism across the EU in the weeks after Russia’s full-scale attack. The emphatic reception of Ukrainians seemed to be “unique in European history”<sup>90</sup> and to foster a collective approach in foreign policy.<sup>91</sup> Unlike other groups of refugees, Ukrainian war refugees were humanized and imagined as “Europe’s next generation.”<sup>92</sup>

From a British perspective, this EU optimism was surprising and distant. In fierce debates before the 2016 Brexit referendum, the Leave campaign and conservative and populist media had delegitimized the EU and ridiculed it by analogizing European integration to subjugation to Hitler or Napoleon.<sup>93</sup> However, in a contribution to the conservative *Daily Telegraph*, Tim Stanley recalled the history of the Maidan protests and Ukraine’s commitment to European integration:

“We Brits might be surprised. To us, the EU is the antithesis of self-government, but to many post-Soviet states, it is the only basis upon which it is possible, for the EU provides a model of development along with institutions often superior to the corrupt state apparatus left behind by the Russians. It is aspirational.”<sup>94</sup>

87 Immer mit der Ruhe, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-02-15; Bereit für alles, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-02-21.

88 Russia is Determined to Take Advantage of a Divided West, at Ukraine’s Expense, in: *The Independent*, 2022-01-19.

89 Deutschlands Soft Power schmilzt zuerst in Kiew, in: *taz*, 2022-02-19.

90 “Flucht aus der Ukraine,” in: *Die Zeit*, 2022-04-03.

91 For a critical discussion of this collective approach, see: HEIDI MAURER, RICHARD G. WHITMAN, NICHOLAS WRIGHT: The EU and the Invasion of Ukraine: A Collective Responsibility to Act?, in: *International Affairs* 99 (2023), 1, pp. 219–238.

92 Flüchtlinge aus der Ukraine, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-03-29; LARISSA PAVLICHENKO, OLENA POPIVNIAK: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Ukrainian War Refugees’ Image in British Press, in: *International Journal of Philology / Mizhnarodnyi filolohichnyi chasopys* 13 (2022), 3, pp. 81–92; JARI MARTIKAINEN, INARI SAKKI: Visual Humanization of Refugees: A Visual Rhetorical Analysis of Media Discourse on the War in Ukraine, in: *British Journal of Social Psychology* 63 (2024), 1, pp. 106–130.

93 KRAWATZEK/PESTEL, *The Political Force of Memory*, p. 16; STEVE BUCKLEDEE: *The Language of Brexit: How Britain Talked Its Way out of the European Union*, London 2018, pp. 119–128.

94 If Europe Betrays Ukraine, It Betrays Itself, in: *The Daily Telegraph*, 2022-01-24.

Stanley made sure to support Ukraine, but much like the historical arguments in favor of Brexit, he questioned Europe's strength and vigor.<sup>95</sup> Without the support of the United States, the Europeans had failed to take a clear stand against the occupation of Crimea in 2014. If they failed again in 2022, they would "betray everything they claim to stand for."<sup>96</sup>

EU optimism resurfaced in the German and Polish press when Ukraine was granted the status of a candidate for accession in June 2022. At this "historical moment,"<sup>97</sup> the past became a metaphor for predicting the future. Timothy Garton Ash commented on this in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, writing, "Yes, this is Europe's chance to enter a new era in its history."<sup>98</sup> Along this line, Zelens'kyi argued in a video address on 24 June 2022, stressing that his country was "not a buffer zone between Europa and Asia" but "an integral part of Europe."<sup>99</sup> "The status of candidate country is not just a chapter, but a whole book in the history of Ukraine's European integration, which we have begun to write today," Zelens'kyi continued.<sup>100</sup>

European media made clear that Ukraine had a future.<sup>101</sup> As appealing as this future-oriented framing was, the emphasis on Ukraine's voluntary choice to belong to Europe also had the potential to diminish its European history. By juxtaposing a European future with Ianukovych's rule in 2014, the path to Europe clearly emphasized European values as promoted by the EU, such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. In debates around the constitutional treaty of the EU, for instance, these values were derived from the roots of Europe in antiquity, Christianity, or the Enlightenment, or more often drawn from the history of European integration itself.<sup>102</sup> Thus, Europe's values had an inherently historical quality. By contrast, the emphasis on the future made Ukraine a bystander to the past. With the exception of historians and their insights into Ukrainian-Western entanglements in the seventeenth century and the contribution of Kyiv scholars to a pan-European exchange of Enlightenment ideas, the European history of

95 KRAWATZEK/PESTEL, *The Political Force of Memory*.

96 *If Europe Betrays Ukraine*.

97 Prawie 90 proc. Ukraińców chce swojego kraju w UE [Nearly 90 % of Ukrainians Want Their Country in the EU], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-06-24.

98 Otwarcie Ukrainie drzwi do UE? [Opening the Door to the EU for Ukraine?], in: *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2022-06-22.

99 "Gewinnen werden wir in jedem Fall," in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2022-06-25; see also: Ukraine gets EU Candidate Status in "Historic Moment," in: *The Independent*, 2022-06-24; Neuankömmlinge in Europas Wartezimmer, in: *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 2022-06-25.

100 Volodymyr Zelens'kyi, Video Address (2022-06-24), <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/videos/oficijno-viznano-ukrayina-ce-majbutnij-rivnij-partner-dlya-2-2777> (2025-04-07).

101 "Wir Ukrainer verstehen schon, dass das Jahre dauern kann," in: *Die Welt*, 2023-02-02..

102 KRAWATZEK/PESTEL/TRIMÇEV/FEINDT, pp. 25–37.

Ukraine centered on the experience of violence, not on values. Moreover, this article's analysis found that the myth of the Cossacks, which enshrined the freedom, self-government, and independence of these free people as constitutive of contemporary Ukraine, had no impact on the European history of Ukraine. European history had happened in Ukraine, but if this European history was to be written by Ukrainians, it remained a project in the making.

## 5 Conclusion: Europeans Imagine Ukraine as European

After Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, European media imagined Ukraine as European. Newspapers in Germany, the UK, and Poland discovered the hitherto virtually unknown country. They identified Ukraine as a location where European history had happened and was happening, occasionally attributing European values to this history. In this reassessment of Ukraine's position within Europe, the country remained an object of both history and historical interpretation rather than becoming a subject in its own right. While German, British, and Polish media outlets invited Ukrainian authors to report on the war experience, discussion of Ukraine's European history was left to Western journalists, historians, and politicians. Western media only rarely provided a forum for Ukrainian voices on the country's European history; most often, Zelens'kyi accomplished this, regularly deploying historical analogies in his speeches to Western parliaments. Ukraine's ideational integration into Europe remained in the hands of the West.

This article has identified three discursive nodes in which Ukrainian history was Europeanized. They point to the transnational diffusion of arguments drawing on history in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian War and underline that the discursive Europeanization of Ukraine occurred in public spheres that maintained different conceptions of Europe and its integration. In the first node, the Russo-Ukrainian War was perceived as the return of history, the end of a long peace, and a return to a polarized world order, comprising a bloc confrontation between Russia and the West, between an illiberal, authoritarian aggressor and a community defined by shared values that now included Ukraine. In a second node, German, British, and Polish media presented a European history of Ukraine centered on mass violence, often using Timothy Snyder's phrasing to refer to it as the "bloodlands." Here, the Polish debate differed, as Ukraine and its history were relatively familiar to Polish readers, and Ukraine's history of violence seemed less exceptional. While all three national cases shared this focus on mass violence, the framework's salience varied depending on the authority of the voices, its temporal scope, or the extent to which a European interpretation led to universalizing memory practices or was superseded by references to the West. A clear contrast emerges in the third node: Ukraine's path to Europe and its quest for EU membership. This node evoked renewed EU optimism in parts

of the German and Polish presses but was met with a lack of understanding in the conservative British media.

This Europeanization of Ukraine referred to alleged European values such as freedom, democracy, and respect for human rights and attested to contemporary Ukraine's aspirations toward these values and EU membership. While arguments based on European values were important in discussing the lost European peace order and the struggle against Russian aggression, they were particularly strong in arguments about Ukraine's path to Europe. This discursive Europeanization centered on a universalist and secular understanding of Europe. On other occasions, it included conservative references to the idea of a Christian Europe in terms of a civilizational conflict with Russia, which made Ukraine part of Europe in a specific culturalist understanding. It was these two senses of belonging, along with humanitarian motives, that underscored the emphatic reception of Ukrainian war refugees. While the group of mostly Ukrainian women and children were portrayed as innocent victims, white, Christian, and European, they were placed in stark contrast to the adolescent, Muslim, and male refugees from Syria or Afghanistan who, in the discourse of 2022, seemed to threaten Europe's security.

This ambivalent attribution of values shows that, in the media discourse analyzed in this article, Ukraine was primarily viewed as an object of history. Only in the pattern of the "path to Europe" did Ukraine become a sovereign subject of history with its own agency. When reference was made to Ukraine's recent history, especially the 2014 Maidan protests, Ukrainians appeared as the next generation for European integration and expansion, reflecting, at least for some time, a new optimism in the EU. This Europeanization through historicization resembles the discursive humanization and Europeanization of Ukrainian war refugees in the weeks following 24 February 2022.<sup>103</sup> It can be understood as the positive valorization of Ukraine and its limited inclusion in a Western and European community of values without its recognition as an equal partner. In this sense, the imagining of Ukraine as European in the writings of German and Polish and, to a lesser extent, British actors aimed to substantiate support for Ukraine in its defensive efforts.

Therefore, analyzing newspaper discourse after 24 February 2022 reveals that the Europeanization of Ukrainian history offered a means of making sense of the unexpected events and the experience of a distant but no less urgent war on the European continent. Historical commentary underpinned this Europeanization of Ukraine and served to legitimize political action. However, it did not produce innovative reflections on Europe's history—or Ukraine's.

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103 MARTIKAINEN/SAKKI.

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