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Appeasement: The Road to the Russo–Ukrainian War¹

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Vladimir Putin began his all-out war on Ukraine on February 24, 2022. I participated in my first anti-war rally on February 27, 2022, three days after the invasion. Approximately 300 people in downtown Vienna protested the war and held anti-war signs. A friend of mine pointed to one of the signs carried by a young woman clad in a Ukrainian blue-and-yellow flag. The poster, held above her head, bore the legend: “Hey Putin, Let’s Speed Up to the Part Where You Kill Yourself in a Bunker!” The allusion was to Hitler. On returning home and searching the web, I found that an almost identical sign was carried at a protest rally in Berlin on February 25, the day after the invasion. However, the comparison of Putin’s actions to those of Hitler was not new.²

In March 2014, on the eve of the pseudo-referendum conducted by the Russian authorities in the recently occupied Crimea, historian Andrei Zubov, a professor at the Moscow Institute of International Relations, compared Putin’s planned annexation of the peninsula to Hitler’s *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938. Zubov drew parallels between Hitler’s vision of Greater Germany and Russia’s reunification rhetoric, pointing out that both annexations had been justified to the public as measures to protect the allegedly persecuted minorities; Germans (in Czechoslovakia) in the former and Russians in the latter. Zubov called the referendum a sham intended to provide legal cover for forcible annexation. The official results of the Russian referendum, which no independent observer was allowed to attend, claimed 97 percent support for the annexation of the peninsula, slightly less than the 99.73 percent support reported in Hitler’s referendum. Crimea was promptly integrated into the Russian Federation as the “Republic of Crimea,” losing the autonomous status that it had enjoyed as a part of Ukraine.³

Zubov was dismissed from his prestigious position at the country’s top diplomatic school. However, he did not lose the argument. A few days after the publication of his piece, Hillary Clinton, a former U.S. Secretary of State and the Democratic nominee for the presidency, compared Putin’s use of the Russian ethnic card to Hitler’s use of the German ethnic card. In Britain, Prince Charles drew a comparison between Putin and Hitler on the account of the

1 This essay is partly based on my book: *The Russo–Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (New York, 2023).

2 Influx News (25 February 2022), Twitter, [<https://twitter.com/InfluxNewsLive/status/1497347387958108160>] (URLs below are current as of 26 October 2025).

3 Andrei Zubov, “Èto uzhe bylo,” *Vedomosti*, 1 March 2014; Britannica, “Anschluss and World War II,” [<https://www.britannica.com/place/Austria/Anschluss-and-World-War-II>].

latter's claim for the city of Gdansk (then Danzig). Along with politicians and public figures, Zubov's parallel was picked up by academics. In March 2015, on the first anniversary of the Crimean "referendum," economist Klaus Friedrich, writing in *The Globalist*, added a couple of his parallels to Zubov's, including the theme of personal and national humiliation exploited by Hitler and Putin and their shared disdain for Western culture.⁴

Meanwhile, Putin and his propaganda machine insisted that the Russian "liberators" of Crimea were fighting Nazism and accused the victim, Ukraine, of having been captured by heirs of Hitler or behaving like the Nazis.⁵ The same argument was used in 2022, during the runup to the all-out invasion of Ukraine. In his television address at the start of the invasion, early on the morning of February 24, Putin accused Ukrainian leaders of being neo-Nazis and the West of supporting a neo-Nazi regime. "Focused on their own goals, the leading NATO countries are supporting the far-right nationalists and neo-Nazis in Ukraine, those who will never forgive the people of the Crimea and Sevastopol for freely making a choice to reunite with Russia," claimed Putin. "They will undoubtedly try to bring war to the Crimea just as they have done in the Donbas, to kill innocent people just as members of the punitive units of Ukrainian nationalists and Hitler's accomplices did during the Great Patriotic War. They have also openly laid claim to several other Russian regions." Putin formulated the goal of his "special military operation" as "demilitarize and denazify Ukraine, as well as bring to trial those who perpetrated numerous bloody crimes against civilians, including against citizens of the Russian Federation."⁶

Putin's propaganda had for years portrayed some of the Ukrainian volunteer military formations of 2014 as Nazi. However, much more was at stake than those battalions. A few days earlier, the United States had warned the United

4 BBC News, "Iz MGIMO uolen professor Andrei Zubov," 24 March 2014 [https://www.bbc.com/russian/rolling_news/2014/03/140324_rn_professor_mgimo_fired]; Karen Robes Meeks, "Hillary Clinton Compares Vladimir Putin's Actions in Ukraine to Adolf Hitler's in Nazi Germany," *Press-Telegram*, 5 March 2014 [<https://www.presstelegram.com/2014/03/05/hillary-clinton-compares-vladimir-putins-actions-in-ukraine-to-adolf-hitlers-in-nazi-germany/>]; Rebecca English, "Putin is Behaving Just Like Hitler, Says Charles," *The Daily Mail*, 20 May 2014 [<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2634400/Putin-behaving-just-like-Hitler-says-Charles-Princes-controversial-verdict-Russian-leaders-invasion-Ukraine.html>]; Klaus Friedrich, "Uncomfortable Parallels: Hitler and Putin," *The Globalist*, 21 March 2015 [<https://www.theglobalist.com/uncomfortable-parallels-hitler-and-putin/>].

5 BBC News, "Crimeans Urged to Vote Against 'Neo-Nazis' in Kiev," 13 March 2014 [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26552066>]; Shaun Walker, Leonid Ragozin, and Matthew Weaver, "Putin Likens Ukraine's Forces to Nazis and Threatens Standoff in the Arctic," *The Guardian*, 29 August 2014 [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/29/putin-ukraine-forces-nazis-arctic>].

6 "Address by the President of the Russian Federation," *President of Russia*, 24 February 2022 [<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>].

Nations that Russian intelligence services were compiling lists of people "to be killed or sent to camps." They included "Russian and Belarusian dissidents in exile in Ukraine, journalists and anti-corruption activists, and vulnerable populations, such as religious and ethnic minorities and LGBTQI+ persons." Hence, there was little doubt that anyone resisting the invasion would be killed or put on trial.⁷

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 faced immediate push-back from opponents of the war. Posters, similar to the ones that I saw in Vienna, flooded the streets of European capitals. Politicians and academics became less reticent about Putin-Hitler comparisons. In late February 2022, a few days after the invasion, Janne Haaland Matlary, a professor of international politics at the University of Oslo and a former politician, compared Hitler and Putin in an interview with a Norwegian newspaper. Matlary argues that as Hitler denounced the Treaty of Versailles, Putin opposed the rise of sovereign democratic states after the fall of the USSR, and both termed invasion an act of self-defense.⁸

While Zubov, Friedrich, and Matlary pointed out the similar motives behind Putin's and Hitler's actions, a comparison of Western policies with the aggressive ambitions of Hitler's Germany and Putin's Russia would be even more productive. As demonstrated in this essay, appeasement policies were adopted in both cases for comparable reasons and with comparable outcomes, suggesting that lessons learned by the West after the failure of those policies to prevent World War II were poorly absorbed and subsequently unlearned by democratic leaders and societies.

In January 2022, on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, viewers of the German/British drama *Munich—The Edge of War*, released by Netflix, were glued to their television and computer screens worldwide. The *New York Times* characterized the film as "a feature-length attempt to glorify Neville Chamberlain," the British prime minister who engaged in the much-debated diplomatic appeasement strategy in the run-up to World War II. The wisdom of Chamberlain's policy was questioned publicly by President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine, speaking to world leaders at the annual security conference in Munich. "The current policy of appeasement has to be turned into one of guarantees of security and peace," declared Zelensky on February 19,

7 Dan Sabbagh, "Russia Is Creating Lists of Ukrainians 'to Be Killed or Sent to Camps,' US Claims," *The Guardian*, 21 February 2022 [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/21/us-claims-russia-creating-lists-of-ukrainians-to-be-killed-or-sent-to-camps-report].

8 Anne Lise Stranden, "Invasion of Ukraine: 'A Lot of Historical Parallels to Hitler-Germany in the 1930s, Says Norwegian Professor,'" *Sciencenorway.no*, 28 February 2022 [https://science.norway.no/russia-war/invasion-of-ukraine-a-lot-of-historical-parallels-to-hitler-germany-in-the-1930s-says-norwegian-professor/1989909].

five days before the all-out war. “No one was foolish enough to compare Russia to national socialism,” wrote the *Guardian’s* correspondent, commenting on the mood in the conference hall, “but underlying every discussion was the question of Vladimir Putin’s true intentions and whether the Western response is moral and a sufficient deterrent, or instead a betrayal and a repeat of the appeasement of the 30s.”⁹

The answers came in less than a week. Putin was getting ready to attack, and the Western response repeated its 1930s policy. Hitler’s appeasement by the governments of Britain and France, which dominated Europe at the time, began in 1936. Without firing a shot, they allowed Hitler to reoccupy Rhineland, which had been demilitarized after World War I, with his inferior forces. Appeasement continued with the acceptance of Germany’s *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938 and the subsequent takeover of Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland, negotiated by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. He believed that the Munich Agreement of September 30, 1938, which permitted Germany’s annexation of Sudetenland and led to the dismemberment of the independent Czechoslovak state in the center of Europe, would secure “peace in our time.” However, he was mistaken.¹⁰

After the dismemberment, Britain and France formally abandoned their appeasement policy, signing agreements with Poland and other eastern European countries to guarantee their territorial integrity in the case of a German attack. In fact, however, the policy was maintained after the start of World War II. The “Phony War” of 1939–1940, in which neither the French nor the British moved against Germany, bore all the hallmarks of the appeasement of the previous era and was predetermined by it. Once again, it was a mistaken policy. By June 1940, Hitler’s forces were in Paris, the British were leaving Europe in panic at Dunkirk, and soon London and other British cities found themselves under attack by the Luftwaffe. World War II ceased to be phony and became real for the West.¹¹

The Western appeasement of Russia, early in this century, began in the same way as the appeasement of Germany—by turning a blind eye to the Russian government’s use of military force at home. The policy predated Putin’s accession to power, beginning with Western refusal to criticize his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, for starting the brutal Chechen War, which, according to official estimates, saw up to 40,000 civilians being killed and up to half a million being

9 Manohla Dragis, “‘Munich: The Edge of War’ Review: ‘Well Navigated, Sir’ (Not!),” *New York Times*, 20 January 2022; Kyiv Independent, “Zelensky’s Full Speech at Munich Security Conference,” 19 February 2022 [<https://kyivindependent.com/zelenskys-full-speech-at-munich-security-conference/>]; Patrick Wintour, “Memory of 1938 Hangs Heavy in Munich as Ukrainian President Calls for Action,” *The Guardian*, 20 February 2022 [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/20/memory-of-1938-munich-ukrainian-president-zelenskiy-russia>].

10 David Reynolds, “Munich 1938: Chamberlain and Hitler,” in *Summits: Six Meetings That Shaped the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2007), pp. 37–102.

11 Ernest R. May, *Strange Victory: Hitler’s Conquest of France* (New York, 2015).

displaced. In 1999, Putin, then Yeltsin's prime minister, launched the Second Chechen War. The Russian siege of Grozny in late 1999 and early 2000 killed as many as 8,000 civilians and left the city in ruins. Amnesty International estimated a total death toll of 30,000 civilians. However, this time, Russia succeeded in subjugating Chechnya.¹²

In March 2000, Putin won the Russian presidential elections, with 53 percent of the votes as opposed to 30 percent of his communist opponent. Putin's path to the Kremlin passed through the massacre of civilians in Grozny, nonetheless, the world welcomed a new face in the Kremlin, hoping that Russia would break with communism and stay on a democratic path. To keep Putin happy, the new masters of Europe, Germany and France, drew a line at the three Baltic states when it came to the membership of former Soviet republics in the European Union and NATO. The applications of Ukraine and Georgia for NATO membership were rejected at the alliance's Bucharest summit in 2008, despite a strong advocacy for their membership by the United States. Before going to Bucharest, President George W. Bush made a stopover in Kyiv, where he told the Ukrainians, "Your nation has made a bold decision, and the United States strongly supports your request."¹³ However, as the leaders of Germany and France arrived for the Bucharest summit on April 2, 2008, Russia's vocal protests against Ukraine's and Georgia's membership were on their minds. Putin came to the Romanian capital to take part in the Russia-NATO summit and warned the members of the alliance against extending invitations to the two post-Soviet republics. "The emergence of a powerful military bloc at our borders will be seen as a direct threat to Russian security," he said.¹⁴

Hence, London and Paris blocked the decision advocated by the United States and supported by the new east European members of the alliance to grant Ukraine and Georgia a Membership Action Plan (MAP). "We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO," read the declaration before making it clear that no accession would take place any time soon. The MAP was promised but not issued on the basis that the two potential applicants had to meet specific criteria to qualify. "[W]e will now begin a period of intensive engagement with both at a high political level to address the questions still outstanding pertaining to their MAP applications."¹⁵

12 John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge, UK, 1998); James Hughes, *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011), pp. 1-93; Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, DC, 2015), pp. 29-31.

13 White House Office of the Press Secretary, "President Bush Participates in Joint Press Availability with President Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine," 1 April 2008 [<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/04/20080401-1.html>].

14 Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (New York, 2016), p. 87.

15 NATO, "Bucharest Summit Declaration, Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008" [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm].

The matter was postponed and did not return to the NATO agenda at the next summit or the one after that. Everyone knew that the decision to deny a MAP to the two post-Soviet republics was a concession to their former master, Russia. Otherwise, it would have been impossible to explain why the participants in the Bucharest summit invited Croatia and Albania to join NATO. For the two countries, now perceived as threats by Russia, NATO's non-decision on their membership was the worst outcome of the summit—their applications were postponed indefinitely, leaving them with no protection from the alliance that they had publicly stated they wanted to join. While Russia would not attack NATO, it could easily attack nations aspiring to join it, and did so.

On August 8, 2008, a few months after the Bucharest summit, Russia launched a war on Georgia, ostensibly in defense of the enclave of South Ossetia, which had seceded from Georgia in the early 1990s. The Russian attack allegedly came as a response to the actions of the Georgian army, which had been ordered into South Ossetia. However, there was no doubt that the war was directly linked to the outcome of the Bucharest summit. Russia had established official relationships with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the two Georgian provinces that it was now “defending,” almost immediately after Putin's return from the Bucharest summit. The Georgians fought back under the leadership of President Mikheil Saakashvili, who had been educated in Ukraine and the United States. Nonetheless, the Russian army, larger and superior to Georgia's army, moved deep into the country and threatened to occupy its capital, Tbilisi.

The Russian advance was stopped after four days through a ceasefire negotiated by President Nicolas Sarkozy of France. The Russian troops left a good part of the occupied territory; however, they stayed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, protecting the independence of the two provinces from Georgia and perpetuating its territorial division. This undermined Georgia's chances of joining NATO, as the alliance was reluctant to accept any state with unresolved territorial issues. Russia's invasion of Georgia became the first instance of it initiating a major war beyond its borders. This sent a clear signal to the West that Russia was prepared to use military force to stop any expansion of the alliance. Moreover, it demonstrated to other post-Soviet republics that NATO would not come to their rescue in case of a Russian attack.¹⁶

The decision of the Bucharest NATO summit, coupled with the outcome of the Russo–Georgian War, dealt a devastating blow to Ukrainian aspirations

16 Jan Maksymiuk, “Is Ukraine Prepared to Maintain Its Tough Stand Against Russia?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 15 August 2008 [https://www.rferl.org/a/Is_Ukraine_Prepared_To_Maintain_Its_Tough_Stand_Against_Russia/1191251.html]; Samuel Charap and Timothy Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (Taylor & Francis, 2018), pp. 91–94; Svante E. Cornell and Frederick S. Starr, *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia* (Armonk, NY, 2009); Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York, 2010).

to join the alliance. The changing of the guard in Washington and the inauguration of Barack Obama as president in January 2009 led to a thorough revision of all elements of the U.S. foreign policy and an attempted "reset" of the U.S.–Russia relationship. The Bucharest summit put Ukraine in the most vulnerable position since declaring independence. Without nuclear weapons and NATO membership, Ukraine was at Russia's mercy, which led to an ambiguous membership offer to Ukraine by the Bucharest summit as a threat to its security. Ukraine became a lone warrior on open grounds, pursued by hostile forces, running to take shelter in a secure fortress, only to find the gates closing because of disagreements among its defenders.¹⁷

The opening salvo of the Russo–Ukrainian War—the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea in March 2014—became the first annexation of a sovereign territory in Europe since the end of World War II. Beyond rhetorical condemnations, there was little reaction from the Western powers. Up to 40 percent of the German public was not ready to disapprove his action. This attitude did not change until Russia began to take over the Donbas (Donets Basin) region of eastern Ukraine, and Russian anti-aircraft fire shot down a civilian airplane, Malaysian Airlines flight MH 17, killing all 298 crew members and passengers (of whom 193 were citizens of the Netherlands). This atrocity focused global attention on Russia's gross violations of international and humanitarian law, leading to economic sanctions against it.¹⁸

The sanctions, which had no decisive effect, proved too little, too late. Russia's direct invasion of eastern Ukraine began on August 24, 2014, the Ukrainian Independence Day. Russian special forces had been present in the region since April. However, that day, hundreds of Russian tanks, armored vehicles, artillery pieces, trucks, and thousands of regular troops crossed the Ukrainian border at multiple locations. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko was forced to negotiate under the most unfavorable conditions. On September 5, 2014, Poroshenko agreed to the conditions of the Minsk Protocol, signed that day in the capital of Belarus by representatives of Ukraine, Russia, the Organization

17 Ivan Watson and Maxim Tkachenko, "Russia, Ukraine Agree on Naval-Base-for-Gas Deal," CNN, 21 April 2010 [<http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/04/21/russia.ukraine/index.html>]; Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2015), pp. 44–52.

18 Rick Noack, "Why Do Nearly 40 Percent of Germans Endorse Russia's Annexation of Crimea?" *The Washington Post*, 28 November 2014 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/11/28/why-do-nearly-40-percent-of-germans-endorse-russias-annexation-of-crimea/>]; "Council Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 of 31 July 2014, Concerning Restrictive Measures in View of Russia's Actions Destabilising the Situation in Ukraine" [<http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2014/833/oj>].

for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the leaders of the two Donbas “republics.”¹⁹

The protocol called for an end to hostilities, the withdrawal of illegal armed units and mercenaries from Ukrainian territory, and the establishment of an Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) mission to monitor movement across the Russo–Ukrainian border—a measure that would prevent the influx of new Russian troops. Superficially, these conditions favored Ukraine, but the protocol also recognized the existence of new entities on Ukrainian territory not controlled by Kyiv. The Ukrainian government adopted a law on the special status of the regions captured by the separatists. This was a part of Russia’s original plan to “federalize” Ukraine. Hence, the Ukrainian government, which had earlier agreed to reform local administration, now had no choice but to accept the conditions dictated by Russia and its proxies.²⁰

The Minsk agreements were broken by Russia almost immediately after they were signed, as the OSCE was either unable to monitor the border or the missions reporting the continuing influx of Russian troops were ignored. In January 2015, Russia resumed a large-scale military campaign to improve the position of its puppets on the front lines and enforce the conditions imposed on Ukraine by the Minsk Protocol. That month, separatist troops managed to capture the ruins of the Donetsk airport, which were held by the Ukrainians. In the same month, 8,000 Russian troops, most of them professional contract soldiers supported by local separatist forces organized by Russian officers, launched a major operation against the Ukrainian-held city of Debaltseve—an important transport junction located between the territories held by the separatist Luhansk and Donetsk republics. The Russian troops proved unable to repeat the encirclement that they had managed at Ilovaisk, and the Ukrainian troops retreated from the area.²¹

19 BBC News, “Ukraine Deal with Pro-Russian Rebels at Minsk Talks,” 20 September 2014 [<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29290246>]; Tor Bukkvoll, “Russian Special Operations Forces in Crimea and Donbas,” *Parameters* 46, no. 2 (2016), pp. 13–21.

20 “Protokol po itogam konsultatsii Trekhstoronnei kontaktnoi gruppy,” [<https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/a/123258.pdf>]; Paul D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War* (Cambridge, UK, 2019), p. 247.

21 Shaun Walker and Oksana Grytsenko, “Ukraine Forces Admit Loss of Donetsk Airport to Rebels,” *The Guardian*, 21 January 2015 [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/18/ukraine-troops-retake-donetsk-airport-area-mass-operation>]; Gianluca Mezzofiore, “Debaltseve Battle: Pro-Russian and Ukrainian Forces Agree to Humanitarian Corridor for Civilians,” *International Business Times UK*, 6 February 2015 [<https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/debaltseve-battle-pro-russian-ukrainian-forces-agree-humanitarian-corridor-civilians-1486891>]; “Ukraine Troops, Pro-Russia Rebels Intensify Clashes,” *CBS News*, 10 February 2015 [<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ukraine-troops-pro-russia-rebels-intensify-clashes/>]; Taras Kuzio, *Putin’s War Against Ukraine: Revolution, Nationalism, and Crime* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), p. 256.

In mid-February 2015, as the battle for Debaltseve continued on the snow-covered fields of eastern Ukraine, Vladimir Putin met with his Ukrainian counterpart, Petro Poroshenko, the chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, and the president of France, François Hollande, to negotiate a new deal. The meeting took place in Minsk, and the new agreements subsequently became known as Minsk II. The Ukrainians kept fighting long after the end of the negotiations, and Putin no longer had the leverage over Poroshenko that the Ilovaisk debacle had given him the previous September. However, he was still on the offensive and managed to improve his position. Ukraine undertook not only to adopt a law on the status of the breakaway republics, but also to amend its constitution to accommodate that law.

The new protocol explicitly referred to Ukraine’s reestablishment of control over its border with Russia; however, it prescribed that Kyiv first conduct local elections in the breakaway parts of Donbas, and then gain border control. This provision suggested that the elections would be held under Russian control, leaving Ukraine to deal with Russian-appointed authorities in regions that would have enough power under the revised Ukrainian constitution to stall the country’s movement toward the European Union. Hence, the question of which would come first—Ukrainian control over the border (and, thus, its sovereignty) or the elections—became an obstacle to the implementation of the Minsk agreements. Thus, it brought Ukraine the long-awaited peace. There was desultory fighting and shelling across the border in the following years, raising the overall number of war casualties in Donbas to around 14,000 by the beginning of 2022. Those numbers would be dwarfed by the casualties incurred after the war resumed in February of that year.²²

Astonishingly, the Western appeasement of Putin’s Russia continued after it annexed Crimea and its *de facto* seizure of large parts of Ukrainian Donbas. Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany took the lead in implementing the policy. In effect, Merkel rewarded Russia for its war against Georgia by allowing German businesses to launch Nord Stream I, the pipeline bringing natural gas from Russia to Germany. Great jubilation accompanied the beginning of the pipeline’s operation in 2011, increasing Germany’s and Europe’s substantial dependence on Russian gas. The German government continued on the same path after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2014.

Merkel helped to negotiate the Minsk II agreements that ended the active phase of the Russo–Ukrainian war in Donbas in February 2015 and played an

22 The Telegraph, “Minsk Agreement on Ukraine Crisis: Text in Full,” 12 February 2015 [https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/11408266/Minsk-agreement-on-Ukraine-crisis-text-in-full.html].

important role in imposing and maintaining German and European sanctions on Russia after Putin annexed Crimea. However, Merkel was instrumental in providing political backing for the construction of Nord Stream II, the gas pipeline from Russia to Germany, specifically to the settlement of Lubmin in her Bundestag constituency. This project, undertaken after the imposition of the sanctions, was criticized abroad, yet perceived positively at home. When Merkel left office in December 2021 to accolades celebrating her numerous political achievements, there was little reason to believe that Nord Stream II would not become operational.²³

The economic interest of Germany and other countries was a key to European leaders readily turning a blind eye to Vladimir Putin's increasingly aggressive behavior. Economic considerations, as well as the belief that commerce was making the world more interconnected and reducing the likelihood of war and aggression influenced Western thought before World War II. Merkel encouraged economic cooperation with Russia not just to solve Germany's and Europe's energy problems but also to turn Russia into a reliable economic and political ally. Merkel's policies toward Russia were rarely criticized in Germany during her long tenure, which lasted from November 2005 until December 2021. Germany was about to further increase its dependence on Russian gas, and it was believed that Russia's need for Western revenue would make Putin more friendly toward collective Europe.

Although there were dark clouds on the horizon, with the United States and the United Kingdom warned the world about imminent Russian aggression against Ukraine, many in Germany believed that the problem could be solved with concessions to Russia. In January, a German naval officer, Vice Admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach, was caught on tape suggesting that Crimea would stay Russian, and Putin only wanted some show of respect. "It is easy to give him the respect he really demands—and probably also deserves," stated Schönbach, after exclaiming, "And, my God, giving someone respect is low cost, even no cost." The tapes became public and went viral, forcing Schönbach's resignation. However, his words reflected the thought process of the German political, military, and business elite at the time.²⁴

The 63-year-old social democrat, Olaf Scholz, who replaced Merkel as chancellor in December 2021, was faced with the international crisis caused

23 Philip Oltermann, "Germany Agonises over Merkel's Legacy: Did She Hand Too Much Power to Putin?" *The Guardian*, 5 March 2022 [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/05/germany-angela-merkel-power-to-vladimir-putin-russia>].

24 Christoph Hasselbach, "War in Ukraine: Is Germany Losing Its EU Leadership Role?" *DW*, 25 May 2022 [<https://www.dw.com/en/war-in-ukraine-is-germany-losing-its-eu-leadership-role/a-61879431>]; "German Navy Chief Schönbach Resigns over Comments on Putin, Crimea," *DW*, 22 January 2022 [<https://www.dw.com/en/german-navy-chief-sch%C3%B6nbach-resigns-over-comments-on-putin-crimea/a-60525709>].

by Putin's demand that NATO's borders be shifted westward and for his concentration of Russian troops on Ukraine's borders. What had only a few months earlier seemed a wise policy toward Russia by Merkel was now being increasingly perceived as the appeasement of an aggressor. The international climate changed, and Nord Stream II found itself in hot water—Germany's allies, the United States in particular, wanted the German government to stop the certification of the controversial pipeline. In February, Scholz visited Washington and agreed with Biden to cancel Nord Stream II certification if Putin went to war. "If there is military aggression against Ukraine, tough, mutually agreed and far-reaching sanctions will be imposed. It will be extremely costly for Russia to take such a step," Scholz declared at a joint press conference with his American counterpart. He flew to Moscow to convince Putin not to go to war, assuring him that Ukraine would not be admitted to NATO for the next thirty years.

Rebuffed there, Scholz made a stop in Kyiv on his way back to Germany. Zelensky was quick to remind him that Nord Stream II was a Russian geopolitical weapon, and his visit produced little public enthusiasm in the Ukrainian capital. While the United States, the United Kingdom, and the eastern European countries were helping Ukraine with weapons, Germany offered 5,000 helmets. The mayor of Kyiv, Vitalii Klychko, a former professional boxer and multiple heavyweight champion, who had lived in Germany and still had celebrity status there, quipped that Germany's next delivery to Ukraine would consist of pillows.²⁵

Scholz was not the only European leader trying to pacify Putin at the expense of Ukraine. No other European leader worked as long and as hard to claim the laurels of peacemaker in the newest iteration of the Russo-Ukrainian War as the French President, Emmanuel Macron. Back in December 2019 he had served as host of the first and only meeting between Putin and Zelensky, which ended on a positive note but brought few positive results. In February 2022 Macron was one of the last high-profile Western visitors to Moscow and

25 "Inaugural Visit of the Federal Chancellor to the USA: 'Take Joint Action and Do Whatever Is Necessary,'" *The Federal Government, G7 Germany*, 7 February 2022 [<https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/service/archive/federal-chancellor-scholz-in-washington-2003718>]; Leela Jacinto, "Ex-German Chancellor Schroeder's Russia Ties Cast a Shadow over Scholz's Trip to Moscow," *France24*, 15 February 2022 [<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20220215-ex-german-chancellor-schroeder-s-russia-ties-cast-a-shadow-over-scholz-s-trip-to-moscow>]; Carlotta Vorbrüggen, "Scholz, Biden, Macron und Johnson fordern rasche Inspektion des AKW Saporischschja," *Welt*, 21 August 2022 [<https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article240586497/Ukraine-Krieg-Scholz-Biden-Macron-und-Johnson-fordern-Inspektion-des-AKW-Saporischschja.html>].

Kyiv, trying to broker a deal that would prevent the war.²⁶ Macron never gave up the idea, long championed in Paris, of integrating Russia into Europe as a counterbalance to the United States and Germany. It had nearly materialized on François Mitterrand's watch in the Gorbachev era, only to slip away with the collapse of the USSR. Macron now hoped to create a new security structure in Europe that would include Russia and diminish the American role in guaranteeing European security. "Macron's goal is to initiate a dialogue on NATO's role in Europe and Ukraine, and potentially a new treaty on arms control, some sort of Helsinki Accords 2.0," argued Carole Grimaud Potter of the Center for Russia and Eastern Europe Research in Geneva a few days before Putin's invasion. "He knows it will take time, and that NATO and the EU will have to give in to some of Russia's demands, [since Russia] wants to guarantee its security and restore the might it lost when the USSR disappeared."²⁷

There was no appeasement on the part of the United States, but there was also no robust program to help Ukraine to defend itself. Secretary of State Antony Blinken first informed Zelensky of U.S. intelligence about the coming war in early November. A few weeks later, a senior State Department official told the visiting Ukrainian foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, "dig trenches." CIA Director William Burns, who visited Kyiv on January 12, 2022, informed Zelensky about the Russian plan to seize Kyiv by landing at the Hostomel airport near the Ukrainian capital. Moreover, he told the president to take his and his family's security seriously. More warnings came from Antony Blinken when he visited Kyiv a few days later and learned that Zelensky was not going to leave the capital.²⁸

Zelensky was not impressed by the American warnings. He later explained his attitude at the time: "You can say a million times, "Listen, there may be an invasion." Okay, there may be an invasion—will you give us planes? Will you give us air defenses? "Well, you're not a member of NATO." Oh, okay, then what are we talking about?" When Biden called Zelensky in late January to let him know that the Russian attack was almost certainly coming next month, Zelensky asked him to "calm down the messaging." He later told reporters that

26 Marc Daou, "Macron Welcomes Putin, Zelensky for Ukraine Peace Talks in Paris," *France24*, 8 December 2019 [<https://www.france24.com/en/20191208-france-macron-ukraine-crimea-zelensky-putin-peace-paris-summit-%C3%A9lys%C3%A9-palace-russia-ukraine-germany-merkel-eu-european-union-annex>]; Roger Cohen, Ivan Nechepurenko, Aurelien Breenen, Shashank Bengali and Anton Troianovski, "Macron Meets Putin in Moscow, Aiming for a De-Escalation," *The New York Times*, 7 February 2022 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/07/world/europe/macron-heads-to-moscow-aiming-for-a-de-escalation.html>].

27 Stephane Faure, "Ukraine Crisis: Why Is Macron Taking on the Role of Mediator?" *Aljazeera*, 23 February 2022 [<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/23/ukraine-crisis-macron-the-mediator-in-chief>].

28 Shane Harris, Karen DeYoung, Isabelle Khurshudyan, Ashley Parker and Liz Sly, "Road to War: U.S. Struggled to Convince Allies, and Zelensky, of Risk of Invasion," *The Washington Post*, 16 August 2022 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/ukraine-road-to-war/>].

the constant signals of "war tomorrow" were causing "panic in the markets and in the financial sector." He estimated Ukraine's losses from public statements about the coming war at \$15.5 billion.²⁹

Meanwhile, Ukrainians kept up a brave face, seemingly in denial of the serious situation. In late January, with the American and other Western embassies leaving Kyiv and incessant warnings from Washington and London about an imminent Russian attack, the Ukrainian defense minister, Oleksii Reznikov, reassured the Ukrainian parliament and public, "As of today, there are no grounds to believe [that Russia will invade]," and "Don't worry, sleep well. No need to have your bags packed." However, behind the scenes, the Ukrainian administration was asking its friends for weapons. The secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, Oleksii Danilov, had a message for the Western allies: "Don't scream about this so much. Do you see a threat? Give us ten planes a day. Not one, but ten, and the threat will disappear."³⁰

Zelensky took the same position on February 19, three days before the invasion, when he surprised everyone by leaving Kyiv to attend the Munich Security Conference. "Whatever happens, we will defend our wonderful land, whether there are 50,000, 150,000, or a million soldiers of any army on our borders," declared Zelensky. "To really help Ukraine, there's no need to say how many of them there are—soldiers and equipment. What needs to be said is how many of us there are. To really help Ukraine, there's no need to keep talking about dates of probable invasion. We will defend our land whether it's February 16, March 1, or December 31. What we need much more are different dates. And everyone understands perfectly well which ones." He was referring to weapons delivery.³¹

Zelensky reminded the conference participants about the responsibility that the great powers had assumed in signing the 1994 Budapest Memorandum and removing nuclear weapons from Ukraine. "Ukraine has received security guarantees for abandoning the world's third nuclear capability," stated Zelensky. "We don't have that weapon. We also have no security. We also do

29 Harris et al., "Road to War: U.S. Struggled to Convince Allies, and Zelensky, of Risk of Invasion"; Readout of President Biden's Call with President Zelenskyy of Ukraine, 27 January 2022 [<https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/27/readout-of-president-bidens-call-with-president-zelenskyy-of-ukraine-2/>]; BBC News, "Zelens'kyi: panika koshtuvala Ukraïni 15,5 mlrd," 28 January 2022 [<https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-60171082>]; Продолжение следует, "Христо Грозев: кто подставил Путина и сливает западной разведке его решения," [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekQB8pOwsC4>].

30 Harris et al., "Road to War: U.S. Struggled to Convince Allies, and Zelensky, of Risk of invasion"; Bill Bostock, "Ukraine's President Told Biden to 'Calm Down' Russian Invasion Warnings, Saying He Was Creating Unwanted Panic: Report," *Business Insider*, 28 January 2022 [<https://www.businessinsider.com/ukraine-president-told-biden-calm-down-russian-invasion-warnings-report-2022-1>]; Marta Bondarenko, "Dosyt' siiaty paniku cherez viinu," *Fakty*, 29 January 2022.

31 Kyiv Independent, "Zelensky's Full Speech at Munich Security Conference."

not have part of the territory of our state that is larger in area than Switzerland, the Netherlands, or Belgium. And most importantly, we don't have millions of our citizens. We don't have all this. Therefore, we have something. The right to demand a shift from a policy of appeasement to ensuring security and peace guarantees."³² According to a member of the Ukrainian delegation at the Munich conference, some Western leaders advised Zelensky not to return to Ukraine in light of an imminent invasion and form a government in exile. London and Warsaw, the capitals of Ukraine's two staunchest allies in Europe, were suggested. Zelensky refused, "I had breakfast in Ukraine this morning, and I will have dinner in Ukraine," responded the Ukrainian president. Few had expected such an answer from a former comedian who, with no prior political experience, had assumed the presidency of a troubled country and promised to end the ongoing conflict with Russia as soon as possible.³³

After Putin's all-out war on Ukraine in February 2022, the West changed course, as Britain and France had done after Hitler's attack on Poland in September 1939. France and Germany declared a policy change. In 1939, that change had followed Germany's all-out invasion of Czechoslovakia; in 2022, it came with Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine.

The start of the all-out war on February 24 took Scholz and the German political elite by surprise. "We have woken up in a different world," stated Scholz's foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock. On February 27, in an unprecedented Sunday session of the Bundestag, Scholz declared a major shift in German foreign policy. It was called *Zeitenwende* or the epochal tectonic shift. The previous day, the government had approved a shipment of 1,000 anti-tank and 500 surface-to-air missiles to Ukraine. Estonia's and the Netherlands' requests to transfer some of the German weaponry in their possession to Ukraine, previously been declined, were granted. However, most important was the decision to allocate €100 billion toward Germany's defense and raise the country's military expenditure to more than two percent of the GDP, a NATO requirement that Germany had heretofore ignored.³⁴

Despite the change in rhetoric, the German economy, which relied on cheap Russian gas, was affected by the shutdown of the nuclear power plants,

32 Kyiv Independent, "Zelensky's Full Speech at Munich Security Conference."

33 Roman Romaniuk, "From Zelenskyy's 'Surrender' to Putin's Surrender: How the Negotiations with Russia Are Going," *Ukrains'ka pravda*, 5 May 2022 [https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/articles/2022/05/5/7344096/].

34 Christoph Hasselbach, "War in Ukraine: Is Germany Losing Its EU Leadership Role?"; Peter Dickinson, "Not Just Putin: Most Russians Support the War in Ukraine," *Atlantic Council*, 10 March 2022 [https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/not-just-putin-most-russians-support-the-war-in-ukraine/].

which began after Fukushima and continued through the start of the Russo–Ukrainian War. The parallel between the way the West reacted toward German aggression in 1939 and the way Germany reacted toward Russian aggression against Ukraine was more than apparent. During the first half of 2022, the *Zeitenwende* was reminiscent of the “Phony War”—plenty of talk but little action. It took a while for Germany and France to match their rhetoric with their policies. The West had learned little from the experience of the 1930s, partly because comparing Putin to Hitler and present-day Russia to Nazi Germany remains an affront to political correctness.³⁵

Nonetheless, the parallels between how Hitler and Putin claimed foreign territory—similarities first pointed out by Andrei Zubov—and between the reactions of Western countries to the aggressive behavior of Hitler and Putin were evident. There was a widespread Western belief that the impulses, if not the actions, of the two authoritarian leaders were justified and their revisionist ambitions were limited in scope. The West regarded Hitler’s move into the demilitarized Rhineland as an understandable, if illegal, act of reclaiming full sovereignty over German territory after the allegedly unjust Treaty of Versailles curtailed that sovereignty. Russia, for its part, had allegedly been right to wage the two wars in Chechnya to reassert its territorial integrity after losing its outer empire in eastern Europe and its inner empire within the borders of the former USSR. In 1938–1939, the West considered Hitler’s takeover of Austria and mostly the German-speaking territories of Czechoslovakia justifiable, as the Versailles settlement had legitimized the principle that people speaking the same language belonged to the same nation and ought to live within the boundaries of a single state. The same tacit understanding, if not approval, was extended to Putin’s Russia after its illegal annexation of Crimea, with its ethnic Russian majority, and seizure of the predominantly Russian-speaking Donbas in eastern Ukraine.

In both cases, there was hope that Hitler and Putin would stop after claiming ethnically German territories of central Europe and ethnically Russian territories of Ukraine, respectively. Such hopes proved unjustified: the takeover of ethnically German and Russian territories and the absence of decisive opposition from the international community only whetted the appetites of the aggressors. By the time Western policy changed, both aggressors had grown much stronger and difficult to contain than during the years of appeasement. But even then, the West tried to outsource the war, leaving the actual fighting to the Poles and Ukrainians. Their sacrifices bought time for the democratic world to prepare for an actual fight. If the international community does not provide enough support for Ukraine to stop this war, it will need to fight once again.

35 Birgit Jennen and Michael Nienaber, “Scholz Touts Latest Ukraine Arms Delivery After Criticism,” *Bloomberg*, 1 June 2022 [<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-01/scholz-touts-latest-ukraine-arms-delivery-as-criticism-persists#xj4y7vzkg>].