

Opinion - Germany's Flawed Russia Policy Has Its Roots in a Misreading of History

Written by Björn Alexander Düben

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BJÖRN ALEXANDER DÜBEN, MAY 9 2022

Russia's unprovoked invasion of neighbouring Ukraine on February 24th marked a watershed moment for all of Europe, but few places have been more rattled by it than Germany. Within days of Vladimir Putin's attack, the German government announced the starkest shift of its core strategic policies in a generation, including a sustained increase in defence spending and the delivery of weapons to Ukraine. Just prior to the invasion, Berlin had suspended the (fully-built) gas pipeline Nord Stream 2, having previously spent many years stubbornly clinging to the project in the face of increasing opposition from its allies and partners. These steps mark a reversal of policy maxims that Germany had near-religiously adhered to for many years: (a) a commitment to diplomacy and cooperation, even with one's greatest strategic adversaries, (b) a determination to maintain dialogue and avoid burning bridges, and (c) an aversion to using military pressure as a tool to settle disputes.

One of the main determinants of these unswervingly dovish policy maxims was German history, specifically the history of Germany's early-20th-century genocidal warmongering and the lessons politicians, journalists, educators, intellectuals, and the broader public had drawn from it. By and large, Germany's '*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*', meaning 'overcoming of the past', which entails an in-depth and very serious engagement with the ghastly heritage of the Nazi era, has been a great success which Germans have gotten a lot of due credit for. But recent events in the lead-up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine have once again demonstrated that there are also some important historical lessons which Berlin, irrespective of its long-standing and genuine efforts to understand and atone for the horrors of Germany's darkest days, had manifestly *failed* to learn from this period.

Naturally, there are many important lessons to be derived from the rise of Nazism and the terror and destruction it brought, but three lessons in particular stand out: 1) the horrors of war (*any* war) and the imperative to prevent it, 2) the perils of dictatorial rule and the imperative to preserve liberal democracy, 3) the danger of appeasing aggressors and the imperative to contain them – by force, if necessary.

The first crucial historical lesson to emerge from the Nazi period is the importance of pacifism – a commitment to foregoing warfare (particularly wars of aggression) in the pursuit of national interests and a healthy aversion to anything that smacks of militarism. After Nazism had enveloped most of Europe in war and destruction – a mere 25 years after Germany had already born the primary responsibility for the outbreak of the First World War – one of the foremost conclusions drawn in Germany was the crucial importance of avoiding war. '*Nie wieder Krieg!*' – 'Never again war!' – became one of the mainstays of the German collective consciousness. This has been far more than mere rhetoric.

Many other democratic societies have openly embraced a modicum of militarism, including parades and pageantry, narratives of military valour, heroism, and patriotic sacrifice. In some societies, these habitual manifestations of militarism have not been unproblematic. Consider, for instance, the extent to which previous military experience has become a desired asset for practically any candidate running for public office in the United States. In German society, by contrast, everything to do with the military appears to have a whiff of the sinister and wicked. For decades, Germany's limited armed forces were designed strictly for self-defence, and getting German troops involved in overseas military missions – even those of a purely humanitarian nature – was an exceedingly slow and

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arduous process. This self-imposed categorical pacifism (which, ironically, coexists with Germany's sizable export-oriented arms industry) has undoubtedly done a lot of good for Germany. Above all, it helped to gradually heal most of the World-War-2-inflicted wounds and suspicions between Germany and its neighbours. For the first time in centuries, Poland, France and others (including Russia) began to feel that they have very little to fear from a dovish Berlin.

In recent years, however, Germany's come-what-may pacifism also provoked the ire of Berlin's allies who have been increasingly vocal in their complaints about German refusals to raise its military budget and improve the combat-readiness of its armed forces. Whilst some have admonished Berlin as a selfish free rider in matters of defence, Germany's attachment to pacifism is by no means a pretext but a matter of sincere and long-standing conviction among countless politicians and the public alike. And it was once again on full display in the months prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when Germany steadfastly refused Ukrainian appeals for weapons deliveries and even prohibited its own allies from delivering German-produced arms to Ukraine. Berlin's rationale for its obstructionism was the wish to preserve peace and avoid an escalation of tensions between Russia and NATO, particularly in light of Germany's perceived historical responsibility towards Moscow. In so doing, Berlin believed itself to be acting in accordance with the historical lessons of the Nazi era. But when Putin did invade Ukraine, despite all of Germany's de-escalatory steps, Berlin's pacifist strategy revealed itself to have been an abject failure – not least because it had steadfastly ignored the other two core lessons from its Nazi past.

The second crucial historical lesson from that time concerns the essential difference between liberal democracy and authoritarian dictatorship, and the importance of drawing a firm line between the two – based on an assumption that dictators and unrestrained authoritarian leaders are particularly liable to begin destructive wars of conquest.

It would be wrong to claim that this lesson has eluded Germans: Ever since the end of World War 2, the importance of preserving liberal democracy has been ceaselessly propagated and has become part of Germany's *raison d'état* – domestically, that is. *Within* Germany. In dealing with foreign states, nevertheless, it is fair to say that Berlin hasn't always fully appreciated the importance of this distinction. The German government has shown a general determination to reach out to every foreign government, quite irrespective of its regime type. Public opinion in Germany has also remained surprisingly favourable about engaging with select autocratic states (especially Putin's Russia) at the expense of traditional ties with some fellow democracies. Opinion polls in recent years have demonstrated that the German public frequently showed lower approval of the U.S. than of Russia or fellow authoritarian China and scarcely viewed Washington as a more reliable international partner than Moscow. The disastrous repercussions of the presidency of Donald Trump – who, in terms of his personal inclinations, is arguably no less of an autocrat than Putin, but unlike the latter was still reined in by powerful democratic institutions – certainly contributed considerably to such results, but this general trend had already been observable prior to the Trump presidency. In East Germany in particular, confidence in Putin remained remarkably high – even in light of increasingly disturbing events, such as: Russia's first invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Kremlin's open support for German far-right parties and their xenophobic narratives, crippling Russian cyberattacks against the German parliament and other key political institutions, or the murder of a Russian dissident in broad daylight in central Berlin.

The increasingly dictatorial nature of Putin's regime and its excessive level of domestic repression, particularly since early 2021, were normalised and brushed aside in favour of a 'business-as-usual' approach of continued engagement with Moscow, of 'not shutting doors', 'not burning bridges', or 'preserving channels for dialogue'. Presenting itself as an open-minded, tolerant, and de-escalatory policy in the tradition of 1970s *Ostpolitik*, this conciliatory approach conveniently dovetailed with Germany's economic and financial interests, which have been actively promoted by powerful lobby groups with direct access to Germany's top decisionmakers. This 'idealism of convenience' manifested itself in the continued pursuit of the multi-billion-Euro 'Nord Stream 2' gas pipeline project, as well as Germany's 24 billion Euros worth of annual energy imports from Russia in 2021 alone.

Granted, there are few Western democracies that have *not* cozied up to some of the world's most notorious dictatorships. The U.S. and U.K., for instance, which both have had far less intimate links with Putin's Russia, have instead opted to cooperate closely with other belligerent autocracies, such as Saudi-Arabia (Germany has in fact

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been much more restrictive in its cooperation with Riyadh, especially concerning arms sales). But with regard to Russia in particular, Germany's willingness to forgive, forget, and normalise even the most egregious autocratic excesses and to engage with Moscow as though it shared basic democratic values, appears more than a little naïve – an opportunistic idealism of convenience which ultimately complicated efforts to contain an expansionist dictatorial regime.

The third crucial historical lesson from the Nazi era – and the one Germans were most oblivious of – relates to the avoidance of appeasement when faced with a militarist autocrat with evident expansionist, irredentist designs. In the minds of American and British historians and political leaders, warnings of the fatal flaws of appeasement and the need to use credible deterrence to prevent the aggressive schemes of ascendant autocrats are an article of faith and indisputably one of the most important conclusions to be drawn from World War 2. In Germany, however, the 'Munich analogy' is much less prominent in political discourse and in the public imagination. Its corollary – the need to resort to active military deterrence when necessary – stands in an uneasy relationship with modern Germany's embrace of a categorical pacifism.

It is unclear if any Western policy could have prevented Putin from launching his invasion of Ukraine. But in retrospect, the most promising approach would probably have been a policy of solid and comprehensive military deterrence – an option that Germany rejected wholesale. For years, it became progressively clearer that Putin would curb his expansive schemes no sooner than he encounters credible threats of military resistance. Berlin, however, continued to cling to a mantra of minimising military pressure and expressing a boundless faith in the possibility of keeping communication channels with Moscow open and deescalating tensions through continuous rounds of negotiations, whilst actively blocking military assistance to Ukraine. This was in part based on a conviction that arming Ukraine could not possibly achieve anything positive, since it only made Russia more likely to act aggressively while Ukraine would not stand a chance against the Russian military anyway. Helping Ukraine build an active military deterrent would only risk escalating the situation and goading Moscow into an avoidable conflict. In the end, Berlin erred on both counts: Putin had made up his mind about invading Ukraine since mid-2021, if not much earlier. And Ukraine's armed forces, bolstered by Western weaponry, have been able to mount a remarkably effective defence against Russia's brutal but shambolic offensive.

In light of the sincerity with which modern Germany has pursued '*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*', the struggle with its own dark past, it is regrettable that Germans have long been so selective in what lessons they derived from it in their policy towards Putin's Russia. Perhaps the jolt created by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the wanton brutality of Moscow's military campaign has indeed led to a decisive shift in Germany's foreign and security policy. But, following a lengthy silence in the immediate aftermath of Putin's invasion, those who embrace an adamant pacifism appear to be reasserting themselves in German politics and the media. Only time will tell if Germany will truly be willing to implement the 'epochal change' recently announced by Chancellor Olaf Scholz and whether future German foreign policy towards Russia will be guided by *all* of the core historical lessons from Germany's darkest days.

About the author:

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