

THE ROAD TO WAR – WESTERN DIPLOMACY OF THE 1920S-30S AND PARALLELS WITH THE PRESENT

Abstract

The article discusses the similarities between the diplomacy pursued toward Nazi Germany in the 1920s-30s and toward modern Russia. Analyzing these parallels helps us identify and avoid future mistakes. The Second World War, just like the Russia-Ukraine war of 2022, cannot be explained solely by the actions of the aggressor states - misguided diplomacy by democratic countries also played a major role.

We have often heard comparisons between the appeasement policy applied to Nazi Germany in the 1930s and the policies adopted toward Russia by the United States and certain European countries from the 2000s until 2022. The similarities between Russia's and Nazi Germany's foreign policies are not coincidental. Their behavior stems from the specific features of the international order they opposed. While today's world order may be more resilient than that of the 1920s-30s, the two systems share many structural characteristics, including the decisive importance of the principle of collective security. Also similar are the responsibilities democratic states bear in confronting authoritarian regimes.

Alongside the similarities, there are also differences - in 2022 the response to Russia's aggression was more effective and unified than Putin had anticipated. Western countries were able to provide Ukraine with the necessary weapons at the very early stage of the war. Europe's collective security system is far more effective than it was during the interwar period. However, there are still many challenges and problems, and confronting them requires the pursuit of sound diplomacy.

Key Words: Russia; Interwar Diplomacy; Nazi Germany; Russia-Ukraine War

When speaking about similarities, we must first highlight the preconditions: both Hitler and Putin rose to power in recently defeated countries (Germany after World War I, and Russia after the Cold War) that felt deceived and unfairly humiliated. Here, however, we should note an important difference - the Treaty of Versailles placed the full moral and economic responsibility for the war on Germany, which fostered feelings of hostility toward the victorious powers. By contrast, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was assigned no such responsibility. Instead, Western states attempted to integrate it. The fact that, despite these diametrically different approaches, the result turned out to be the same makes me think that the problem must be sought elsewhere.

Henry Kissinger writes that the Paris Conference was too punitive to reconcile Germany, and too weak to contain Germany. (Kissinger, 2021, p. 307). Indeed, the Paris Agreement is an intermediate option between two completely different approaches to diplomacy, which ultimately achieved neither of the goals they set out to achieve. It is clear that both the Second World War and the Russia-Ukraine conflict could have been

avoided after the Treaty of Versailles and after the Cold War's end. The rise of Hitler in Germany and of Putin in Russia may be seen as, to some extent, a natural course of events. Yet in both cases Western countries committed a similar, decisive mistake - they moved toward reconciliation too early. For a reconciliation policy to succeed, both sides must be convinced that hostility is truly in the past and that relations should begin anew. However, both Hitler and Putin were awaiting a chance for revenge for what, as I noted above, they regarded as an unjustly lost war. While the victors tried, in their eyes, to construct a postwar security system, the leaders of the defeated states were waiting for the opportunity to resume the conflict. "The victor is not victorious if the vanquished does not consider himself so" - this quote from the Roman author Quintus Ennius fits both cases well.

Naturally, after the First World War, no one in the victorious countries wanted another war. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson hoped it would be "the war to end all wars." A similar sentiment prevailed in the West during the 1990s, when the idea of the "end of history" was popular. Yet in both cases, peace required protection - it would not simply sustain itself, since the defeated states had not been fundamentally transformed. The Paris system failed to push Germany toward correcting its past mistakes and distancing itself from the errors of the previous regime (Murray 2009:231). The imposition of so-called "moral guilt" on Germany only deepened the problem. For different reasons, the same did not happen in Russia in the 1990s. American scholar Robert Kagan, in his book "The Return of History and the End of Dreams," writes about Russia in the 1990s that the various geopolitical problems that arose around Russia "would have been solvable as long as Russia was on a post-modern, integrative, democratic path." That is, if an authoritarian ruler were to come to power in Russia, he could use the geopolitical situation created around him to his advantage. (Kagan, 2008, p. 22) This cannot be blamed solely on the victors, though there are examples of more successful integration of defeated states into the international system - Germany and Japan after the Second World War, or France after the Napoleonic Wars. In Russia's case, naturally, the situation was different, since the Soviet Union's defeat was not as clear-cut as that of states vanquished on the battlefield. Substantively, however, the processes unfolded in a similar way.

"Pacifism, which brought war instead of peace" - this is how German writer Thomas Mann described in the 1930s the policies pursued by Britain and France toward Germany (Applebaum 2024:39). Appeasement can sometimes be justified, but the context emphasized above changes much of the picture. During the interwar period, there was a widespread belief that Germany had been punished too harshly by the Paris settlement. Appeasement was, in part, an attempt to compensate for that mistake. Britain, guided by its traditional balance-of-power approach, believed that Germany's strengthening would actually serve peace. Yet it failed to properly assess the existing reality, and in the end the balance of power tilted in the wrong direction.

The Thomas Mann quote cited above is recalled by American journalist and historian Anne Applebaum in the context of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Peace is often invoked to justify appeasement, yet short-term peace may well prepare the ground for a long-term war. The idealistic visions that emerged after the Soviet Union's collapse - that universal peace had been achieved - proved unfounded. In part, this illusion encouraged Russian aggression: first in Georgia in 2008, then in Ukraine in 2014, and finally in the war that has now been raging on Ukrainian territory for four years.

Russia's aggression, like Germany's in the 1930s, can partly be explained by a power vacuum. Germany felt that it had geographical freedom of movement in Eastern Europe and diplomatic room to maneuver across the continent. There was neither a deterrent nor a punitive mechanism in place that might have restrained its actions. Similarly, in 2022, Russia perceived that a comparable power vacuum had emerged in Eastern Europe and believed that its attack on Ukraine would not provoke a significant response. The reduction of European armaments, combined with diplomatic and political appeasement, convinced Russia that it would encounter little to no resistance in Ukraine.

Instead of appeasement, in both cases, what was required was a proportionate response to aggression. U.S. diplomat Wess Mitchell has argued that states seeking power often use what he calls “peripheral probing” to test the strategic positions of the dominant power. By provoking small conflicts or demanding compromises, both Nazi Germany and Putin’s Russia sought to gauge the dominant power’s sphere of influence (Grygiel & Mitchell 2011:12).

In both cases, Hitler and Putin interpreted the inaction of leading powers (Britain, France, and the League of Nations in the 1930s; the U.S., NATO, and Western European states in the 2000s-2010s) as a signal that their aggression would go unanswered. After Britain and France failed to respond to Germany’s remilitarization of the Rhineland, the Anschluss, and the annexation of Czechoslovakia, Hitler assumed he could invade Poland without serious opposition. Similarly, the West’s insufficient response to Russia’s war against Georgia in 2008 and its actions in Ukraine in 2014 led Putin to expect only minimal resistance from the West in 2022.

Russia’s actions have always been aimed at destabilizing the existing international system. Much like Germany, the new order did not suit it. It had taken virtually no part in its creation and felt uncomfortable within it. Germany had already managed to undermine the system even before Hitler, when in 1926 it signed the Locarno Treaty, recognizing only its western borders while leaving its eastern borders open for future revision. It is also important to note that the Paris system rested on an incomplete understanding of the principle of self-determination, which primarily favored the preservation of the status quo. The borders established in 1919 were to be maintained regardless of the ethnic composition or claims of different peoples. Germany fully undermined this principle when it justified the Anschluss under the pretext of protecting self-determination. Putin employs the very same reasoning to justify his aggression. One of the key principles of today’s international order is the inviolability of internationally recognized borders - something Putin has already tried to violate multiple times. Supporting the creation of new states and redrawing the world map are the methods through which Russia seeks to establish a new global order. (Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 2018, p. 134)

In this context, the role of the United States in maintaining the modern international order becomes all the more crucial. The major flaw of the Paris system and the League of Nations was the absence of the very country that had conceived the idea - the United States. Today’s order, too, is organized primarily around American interests and values. Above all, the U.S. must continue its unwavering support for NATO countries, since for the principle of collective security to function properly, a potential aggressor must be 100% certain that even an attack on a single country will come at a heavy cost.

One of the main reasons why European countries remained lenient toward Russia until 2022 was their deep economic ties. Between 2004 and 2013, up to 45% of the EU’s gas imports came from Russia, with Germany being the particularly growing importer. Consequently, German foreign policy became constrained - it could not credibly threaten Russia with sanctions unless it diversified its own energy supplies. The fact that Germany did not halt the Nord Stream pipeline project connecting it with Russian natural gas even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 made it clear that the Germans were unwilling to employ not only military power or threats but even economic sanctions against Russia (Applebaum, *Autocracy Inc* 2024:132).

The war in Ukraine in 2022 was not caused by appeasement, but appeasement did influence Moscow’s strategic calculations. In the West, the lack of willingness to assign responsibility to Russia created in the Kremlin the impression that, just as in Georgia and Crimea, the West would not react to an invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This illusion was shattered in 2022, when the West abandoned the policy of appeasement. Yet the war could have been avoided had Russia been held properly accountable earlier. It is equally important that, once the war ends, Western countries do not return to appeasement or to accommodating Russia’s demands.

Appeasing authoritarians has never brought peace, because such regimes require war in order to survive. The correct policy, in both cases, would have been to display greater aggression, or at least threats, against

aggressors, since they can only be deterred by strength, not by concessions. The idealistic visions that existed both in the 1920s and in the 1990s - that wars were a thing of the past and that permanent peace would prevail - have never proven true. There will always be aggressors dissatisfied with the existing international order. The less prepared democracies are to contain them, the stronger they will become.

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