World War II Memory Weaponized

The US, UK and Ukrainian Memory Diplomacy

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Abstract

Focusing on two speeches by Ukrainian President Zelensky (as well as related activities) this article examines the recent diplomatic “use” in the on-going Russo-Ukraine War of World War II memory. It suggests that the Ukrainian government has skilfully—and very deliberately—deployed historical memory in diplomacy focused on both the United States and United Kingdom, and it suggests that part of the success of such endeavours lies in two connected factors. The first concerns the privileged position of World War II in Anglo-American culture; and the second is centred on the personalities of the current US and UK leaders, one of whom (Boris Johnson) has a well-known affection for Churchill, and the other of whom (Joe Biden) has been keen to assume the mantle of Franklin Roosevelt. With this audience, President Zelensky’s decision to invoke World War II memory is both savvy and clearly effective.

Keywords

The battle for international public opinion that has accompanied the Russian invasion of Ukraine has seen both belligerents exploit historical analogy to legitimate their respective causes. Perhaps predictably, given its enduring significance to the cultural and political landscape of modern Europe, the past
most frequently referenced has been World War II. To this extent, the ongoing conflict is as much a “memory war” as it is a conventional—and very bloody—conflict currently being fought among the cities, towns and villages of Ukraine.¹

For President Vladimir Putin, the experience of Russia’s “Great Patriotic War” apparently provides justification for the path he has chosen. Ukraine, he asserts, is a hostile and neo-fascist power that he intends to “de-militarize and de-nazify”—a deliberate and politically freighted reference to the broad policy of reconstruction adopted by the victorious Allies in 1945 vis a vis defeated Nazi Germany.² Such claims are intended to galvanise domestic support, tying the “fate” of Russia today to a heavily mythologised and culturally resonate history. At the same time, this past-present analogy is also operative (or at least it is intended to be) for international audiences; here is an unmistakeable Russian effort to secure the moral high ground by converting the invasion of an independent sovereign power into an (alleged) act of self-defence. As seen from Moscow, the invasion of Ukraine is thus a duty rendered in homage to the heroes of Stalingrad and Leningrad. From Kyiv, of course, the parallel with World War II is the exact inverse, with Putin’s Russia condemned as the invading fascistic entity bent on a war of destruction, devastation, and occupation. In this view, Ukraine is akin to Poland c. 1939, a similarly independent and sovereign nation invaded by hostile forces (including of course the Soviet Union).³

This clash between competing Russian-Ukrainian appeals to the wartime past has already been the subject of engaged critical scrutiny, and so too has the question of whether or not the frequent comparisons to World War II are even

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¹ N. Pachkhédé, “Beyond Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine is a Memory War that Both Sides are Wag- ing,” The Wire, April 27, 2022: https://thewire.in/history/beyond-russias-invasion-of-ukraine -is-a-memory-war-that-both-sides-are-waging (accessed June 29, 2022); V. Nikitin, “Memory Wars in Russia and Ukraine,” The Nation, March 1, 2022: https://www.thenation.com/article/ world/ukraine-russia-putin-historical-memory/ (accessed June 29, 2022).


appropriate. This short assessment thus takes a different tack. It turns attention to how the Ukrainian government has used culturally-specific memories of World War II not to claim a general legitimacy of cause but, rather, to cultivate political and military support from two key allies: the United Kingdom and the United States. Significantly, these are both societies in which World War II is generally perceived as a defining moment of national greatness, a “just” conflict conducted for noble ends and fought by a uniquely heroic generation. In doing so, I want to suggest that a key feature of the foreign policy currently being pursued by the government in Kyiv involves the instrumentalization of history, or what Brian Etheridge has aptly called “memory diplomacy.” This is a well-established form of diplomatic endeavour most often associated with high profile forms of commemorative ceremony such as D-Day anniversaries. In form and essential purpose, the “memory diplomacy” currently being deployed


5 Similar “use” of the World War II past can also be seen in recent Ukrainian diplomacy vis a vis other Western powers, but there is nonetheless something distinct in how President Zelensky has handled the US and UK, a consequence of the fact that in both countries the events of the 1940s have coalesced over the last eighty years into an unequivocally “Good” war.


by the Ukrainian government is clearly connected to such activity. But it is also subtly distinct, not least in the extent to which it has been called upon to deliver immediate, real-world, benefits. After all, Ukrainian national survival is dependent not just on the supply of Western weapons but also on sustaining Western sympathies and support (indeed, the former is very much dependent on the latter). Tracing the ways in which Zelensky has sought to do just this via carefully calibrated and culturally-specific references to the World War II past thus usefully furthers our understanding of the continued discursive malleability of the twentieth century's second global conflict. It also suggests that a latent nostalgia for the war years in both the United States and United Kingdom remains an important feature of the political landscape. As recent events demonstrate, this is something an attentive ally can usefully co-opt for diplomatic gain, and it is also something which a national government—be it in London or Washington—can similarly use to garner domestic support for foreign policy initiatives that may otherwise provoke criticism.

1 Ukraine, Churchill, and the Blitz of 1940

On 8 March 2022 President Zelensky of Ukraine gave a televised speech to the British Parliament at Westminster. He did so from a decidedly embattled situation: less than two weeks earlier, on 24 February, Russian troops had launched a multi-pronged invasion claiming that his government in Kyiv was fascist in orientation, anti-Moscow in outlook, and as a result represented an unacceptable threat to Russian sovereignty and security (similar reasoning had been used by the Kremlin to justify the Russian occupation of the Crimea in the spring of 2014). In many Western capitals, a quick Russian victory was assumed, with President Putin's forces widely expected to take control of Kyiv. But it was not so. Ukrainian resistance was (and indeed remains) resolute and robust, with at least one sizeable Russian convoy effectively grinding to a halt due to a combination of local tactical successes and Russian logistical failings. Thus, when Zelensky addressed the British Parliament after what he called “thirteen days of struggle” he did so from a position of relative political strength. His army had confounded—unexpectedly—the assumed might of a former super-power, and his own leadership (involving skilful use of social media) had drawn widespread praise. This was the real-world background to what was an effective—and affecting—rhetorical appropriation of the World War II past in his 8 March speech.

Zelensky began by connecting the United Kingdom and Ukraine in size and historical significance, carefully identifying his homeland as, like Britain, a “big
country ... with a dream”. He then moved quickly to establish the key frame of reference within which he clearly wanted his subsequent narration of the conflict to be understood. “I would like to tell you about the 13 days of war”, he explained to a full House of Commons, “the war that we didn’t start and we didn’t want. However, we do not want to lose what we have, what is ours, our country Ukraine”. And then came the historical parallel: “Just the same way you didn’t want to lose your country when the Nazis started to fight your country and you had to fight for Britain”. What followed were the day-by-day details—the hard facts of the war—delivered so as to assert, irrefutably, the legitimacy of this past-present connection.

On day one, explained Zelensky, “at four o’clock in the morning we were attacked by cruise missiles. Everybody woke up, people with children, the entire Ukraine, and since then we have not been sleeping”. By day two, Ukraine, isolated and alone, nonetheless stood its ground. “We have been fighting air-strikes”, said Zelensky as the heads of Parliamentarians nodded in accord, “and our heroic military servicemen on the islands have been trying to fight. When Russian forces demanded that we lay down arms ... we did continue fighting, and we did feel the force of our people that opposed the occupants until the end”. Soon, “the artillery started fighting us”, and by day five “the terror against us took place against children, against cities, and constant shelling has been taking place around the country, including hospitals, and that didn’t break us, and that gave us feeling of big truth”. Like Londoners eighty years earlier, therefore, Ukrainians stoically endure, even in the face of the ultimate provocation: the desecration of the sacred. For on day six, the clearly weary president explained, “the Russian rockets fell on Babi Yar—that is the place where the Nazis killed thousands of people during the second world war—and 80 years after the Russians hit at them for the second time, and even churches are getting destroyed by shelling”.

Further details making clear the brutality of Russian military policy followed, before the beleaguered Ukrainian president went into full Churchill mode:

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
And I would like to remind you the words that the United Kingdom have already heard, which are important again. We will not give up and we will not lose. We will fight until the end, at sea, in the air. We will continue fighting for our land, whatever the cost. We will fight in the forests, in the fields, on the shores, in the streets. I'd like to add that we will fight on the banks of different rivers and we're looking for your help, for the help of the civilised countries.\textsuperscript{13}

The speech, clearly drawing upon Churchill's famous “Fight them on the beaches” text of June 1940, ended with the words “Glory to Ukraine and glory to the United Kingdom” before the gathered crowd of British politicians rose in standing ovation. In the press, too, the praise quickly rolled in. Explicitly noting the way in which Zelensky “compared the stand that Ukraine is taking against Vladimir Putin to that which the UK took against Germany in the Second World War” the \textit{BBC}'s political editor, Laura Kuenssberg, declared the speech “poignant”.\textsuperscript{14} Elsewhere, the Right-of-centre papers were similarly impressed, with both the \textit{Times} and \textit{Daily Mail} approving of how the Ukrainian president had skilfully “channelled” Churchill.\textsuperscript{15}

This was clever speech writing suggestive of a president who despite (or perhaps because of) the exigencies of war had nonetheless taken the time to consider how best to engage his audience. Framing the speech with reference to the British experience of World War II—and especially of the Blitz—was especially savvy. Few (if any) events have been more mythologized in Britain over the last eighty years, with the events and experiences of the 1940s frequently trawled by politicians and pundits to frame everything from the Falklands War of 1982, to the Euro 96 football tournament, to most recently

\begin{thebibliography}{15}
\bibitem{} See J. Taylor, “We'll fight to the end, says Zelensky in historic address to Parliament.” \textit{The Times}, March 8, 2022: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/we-will-not-give-up-on-ukraine-zelensky-says-in-address-toparliment-lqwdnrkv8 (accessed June 29, 2022); J. Maidment and D. Wilcock, “We'll fight them in the sea, air, forests, fields and streets ... we will not surrender: President Zelensky echoes Churchill's famous WWII speech in moving address to Commons and gets a standing ovation as he vows to defeat Putin's invasion of Ukraine.” \textit{Daily Mail}, March 8, 2022: https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10593233/Volodymyr-Zelensky-delivers-historic-address-House-Commons.html (accessed June 29, 2022).
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the Brexit referendum (the aftermath of which, in historian Dan Todman's memorable formulation, saw a sizeable quota of Britons seemingly “drunk on Dunkirk Spirit”).¹⁶ In short, the imagery central to Zelensky’s speech—cities under siege, schools and hospitals bombed, churches destroyed—was readily digestible by a Westminster political class awash with a Brexit-induced forties nostalgia.

This latter issue reveals another key facet of Ukrainian diplomatic strategy vis-à-vis Britain: the deliberate targeting of one specific individual, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the only person in fact named in the entire speech (Vladimir Putin is a noticeable absence). Indeed, such is the extent to which the recent British government was enthral to the personality cult of Johnson himself that a diplomatic strategy which purposefully centred the Prime Minister and which in doing so played to his own (often, it seems, ill-formed) sense of history clearly had the potential to pay significant political dividends. Hence Zelensky’s rhetorical nods to Churchill: Prime Minister Johnson is the well-known author of an affectionate biography of the wartime leader, and he has persistently attempted to strike a “Churchillian” tone in his own speechmaking.¹⁷ Part of Zelensky’s plan, therefore, was clearly (and very sensibly) to provide Johnson with opportunities to play Churchill; hence the walking tours of defiant Kyiv. Such moments offered invaluable opportunities for Johnson to wander amongst the bomb damage and talk to the locals à la Winston in 1940.¹⁸

Linking the ongoing Russian assault on Kyiv (and Mariupol) to the 1940 Blitz on London, and inviting Prime Minister Johnson to see in Zelensky a Churchill-like comrade, was thus clearly a central feature of Ukraine’s recent UK-focused diplomacy.

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The Ukrainian president has proved equally skilled in “using” the World War II past when speaking to allies in the United States. In fact, just a week after his display of Churchillian defiance in Westminster President Zelensky deployed a similar rhetorical strategy in a televised speech to the United States Congress. Once again, culturally-specific historical memory was deployed, and once again Ukrainian authorities reaped the rewards.

The speech in question took place on 16 March. Zelensky began by drawing attention to the suffering of the Ukrainian capital as a result of “airstrikes from Russian troops everyday.” For the people of Ukraine this was, he explained, the “worst war since World War II”. It was a conflict which pitted “freedom loving people” against “Russian aggression”, and it had seen “democracy” imperilled by a “brutal offensive against ... basic human values”. Zelensky then moved to anchor his story of a besieged but unbowed Ukraine in American historical memory. After noting that Ukrainians—like their American allies—had “national dreams”, Zelensky recalled a trip to the United States during which he had encountered “your national memorial in Rushmore” upon which were carved the “faces of your prominent presidents, those who laid the foundation of the United States of America as it is today: democracy, independence, freedom”. Like those now distant colonists at Bunker Hill, Saratoga and Yorktown, the soldiers of Ukraine were thus fighting for their right to be free and independent. Next, though, came the speeches’ crucial moment in which the Ukrainian president adeptly tapped the wellspring of American World War II memory: “Remember Pearl Harbor”, Zelensky said, that “terrible morning of Dec. 7, 1941 when your sky was black from the planes attacking you. Just remember it”. And remember, too, he continued, “September 11th, a terrible day in 2001 when evil tried to turn your cities, independent territories, into battlefields, when innocent people were attacked, attacked from the air, yes.”

Much like his earlier recourse at Westminster to memories of the London Blitz, here was Zelensky guiding his audience—this time of American lawmakers—towards an understanding of the stakes as he saw them. Referring to Pearl Harbor, for instance, brought the past into the present. But it also made the otherwise foreign and distant familiar. Thus, where in London Zelensky had told British politicians that the Russian air attack had succeeded only in


20 Ibid.
awakening a Ukrainian capacity for Blitz-like stoic endurance, in Washington a week later the reference point was now—necessarily—Pearl Harbor. In its fundamentals, however, the underlying message was similar: just as the United States had suffered unprovoked military attack back in 1941 so, too, now did Ukraine. Eighty years ago, freedom had been assaulted in Hawaii; today, it is Mariupol.

Despite such powerful rhetoric Zelensky nonetheless failed to secure his key goal—a NATO no-fly zone. But he did achieve his secondary objective—using nationally-specific World War II memory to elicit continued public and political support. In the Washington Post, for instance, one reporter noted that Zelensky’s speech had hit home, and as a result there was “hardly any limit to the appetite that many lawmakers have for further assistance to Ukraine, short of direct American intervention in the conflict”.21 The Los Angeles Times went still further, suggesting that Zelensky’s speech was so “potent” that “within hours the White House rolled out a new $800-million package of aid that met many of Zelensky’s requests—800 new antiaircraft systems, 9,000 shoulder-mounted missiles and 7,000 small arms such as machine guns”.22

Such a response suggests that asking Americans to “Remember Pearl Harbor” is effective, a consequence of the event’s persistent presence in American political discourse.23 It was a repeated reference point after 9/11, and more recently it was invoked by the US Surgeon-General to describe the profound challenge presented by the Covid pandemic.24 But another crucial issue also worked to Zelensky’s advantage: the fact that the current occupant of the Oval Office—President Joe Biden—is peculiarly sensitive to historical memory of just this sort. Indeed, if Prime Minister Johnson was often drawn to a “Churchillian” take on history (and on himself), Biden’s hero is Churchill’s

23 For a detailed history of the Pearl Harbor attack in American memory, see E. Rosenberg, A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
wartime friend and ally, the 32nd President, Franklin D. Roosevelt. At one point during the 2020 election Biden even delivered a speech in Warm Springs, Georgia (a location Roosevelt had famously visited whilst convalescing from Polio) purposefully designed, at least according to one commentator, as an opportunity “to wrap himself in FDR’s mantle”.

Biden’s appeal to FDR was thus originally a deliberate response to the domestic challenges of the 2020s (both economic and environmental). But his desire to align his administration with that of the four-term Democrat who battled the Great Depression has also provided the government in Kyiv with an invaluable diplomatic opportunity. After all, a president keen to emulate FDR in domestic policy is surely going to be comfortable with doing similar in foreign affairs. In May 2022, Biden did just that: he signed into law legislation intended to ensure that Ukraine can continue to secure American economic and military support, even despite the country’s dwindling national resources. And the name of this legislation? The “Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act”. As one scholar has rightly noted, this certainly does—very deliberately—“echo” FDR’s 1941 “Act to Promote the Defense of the United States”, an initiative intended to provide essential support to a then beleaguered British Empire and which Churchill famously called “the most unselfish and unsordid financial act of any country in history”. The important point here, though, is that it was clearly the nostalgia for the 1940s original which played to Ukrainian advantage. Such nostalgia even helped the Act to pass Congress, and in a rare moment of bipartisan unity it secured 417 votes to just 10 against. Here is the United States as, once again, the “arsenal of democracy”; and here too is Biden as a modern FDR.


My emphasis.


3 Conclusions: Memory Diplomacy in Action

The exact role and power of personal diplomacy in inter-state relations is much debated, and so too is the extent of influence that can be exerted on the dynamics of world affairs by emotive appeals to history. These caveats accepted, it nonetheless seems clear that a connection can be reasonably (albeit tentatively) traced between how President Zelensky has carefully framed his communications with the US and UK and subsequent real-world developments. In both Westminster and Washington he has purposefully drawn connections between the Ukrainian present and the World War II past, a past which for both Britons and Americans remains a central feature of national identity as well as a source of significant popular pride. And it seems clear that diplomatic rewards have been duly reaped, be it the visits of Boris Johnson to Kyiv or the successful passage through Congress of a new Lend-Lease Act. To this extent, Zelensky has shown that World War II memory can be an invaluable diplomatic resource, one which can be harnessed for immediate benefit. It seems that it can even encourage the arrival of a sought-after future. Recently, for instance, there has been sustained discussion in the international press regarding the necessity of a post-war “Marshall Plan” for Ukraine.30 And why not? For if the assault on Kyiv is akin to the Blitz, if Zelensky is Churchill and Biden FDR, and if on-going Ukrainian survival demands a dedicated programme of “Lend-Lease”, then an American-funded Marshall Plan for post-war economic and industrial reconstruction is the logical next step.

Amidst the multi-faceted communications campaign currently being waged by Ukraine, therefore, one important component is a skilful and carefully targeted programme of “memory diplomacy” which draws upon the continued salience—especially in Anglo-American culture—of the World War II past. The activities discussed above are thus suggestive of some of the parameters within which such diplomacy—a constituent of what has been termed elsewhere “soft power”—can be powerfully effective. These parameters include a combination of real and very immediate challenges to the global status quo, personalities conducive to perceiving the links between past and present in a certain way, and a historical memory which is sufficiently common and consensual (whilst also usefully malleable) so as to offer useful points of convergence

which “work” for all those involved. The result, as recent events reveal, is history “used” for strategic advantage and the past invoked and deployed for tangible, real-world, benefits. This is war memory weaponized.