

H-Diplo ESSAY 416

11 March 2022

Commentary Series on Putin's War: "Zeitenwende: Russia's War against Ukraine and the End of the Thirty Years' Holiday."

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E416>

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The Western world's thirty years' holiday from history is over. History has returned, now that war has returned to the continent of Europe. Images of tanks rumbling down broad boulevards, of townscapes reduced to smouldering ruins, of refugees, their most precious belongings cramped into a rucksack or a suitcase, fleeing across borders, fill television and smartphone screens. Images that Western audiences used to know only in the grainy black and white of nearly eight decades ago are now livestreamed in colour and HD. It was not supposed to be like that. Following the end of the Cold War, it seemed safe to declare the 'end of history' – a few violent hiccoughs along Europe's South-Eastern fringes in the 1990s notwithstanding – and the final and irrevocable triumph of Western values and democracy. The Russian assault on Ukraine has dissipated the last remnants of that illusion. It marks a '*Zeitenwende*' (an epochal turning point), the new German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, has conceded.¹ Indeed, as one distinguished historian observed, Russia's arbitrary act of aggression suggested 'uncomfortable' parallels with 1939: "The dictator possessed by his mission, the barefaced lies and the claims of victimhood as the aggressors make victims out of those who only wanted to live their lives as they pleased. [...] We know what happened after 1939 and can only hope that somehow a peace of sorts will be patched up in Ukraine. But the world will never be the same. We have moved already into a new and unstable era."²

Trained to seek out often complex contextual information and usually at a safe distance of decades, if not indeed centuries, historians tend to be reluctant to rush to judgment. More often than not, the shock of the immediate may mean that a significant aspect may be missed in the analysis. Even so, the immediacy of events can also sharply illuminate the contours of what had so far lain hidden in semi-darkness. Russia's war in the Ukraine is such a moment, and a degree of historical perspective will help to sift out some of the noisy background chatter of the present.

Historians of international relations are well used to think of their subject in terms wars and subsequent post-conflict settlements. However lofty the ideals that inspired peacemakers, the termination of any war, the manner in which it is done, and the substance of its arrangements reflect the prevailing power relationships of that moment. The settlement itself crystallizes and preserves those power relationships. It confirms or reorders hierarchies and regulates, often in considerable detail, future relations between the victor(s) and the defeated. The more enlightened – and the more durable – settlements were those that included the defeated powers in the negotiations, the prospect of integration in the new system offering them a stake in its maintenance. No peace settlement, however, has proved permanent; no new order, whether regional or indeed global, has survived for longer than several decades. Power – its exercise and the struggle for its control – is the

¹ Olaf Scholz statement in the Bundestag, 27 February 2022, <https://www.bundestkanzler.de/bk-de/aktuelles/regierungserklaerung-von-bundestkanzler-olaf-scholz-am-27-februar-2022-2008356>.

² Margaret MacMillan, "Putin's War on Ukraine has brought the past to the present, and made the future uncertain," *The Globe and Mail*, 25 February 2022.

amorphous essence of politics and the vital core of all historical development. Ultimately, its destructive potential overwhelms all efforts to tame or contain it through rules-based structures. The challenge of constructive statesmanship is to prevent their complete destruction.

Incipient at first but steadily accelerating in recent years, international politics have settled into a new pattern, marked by heightened tensions and new forms of war-like conflicts in a more fragmented world. The institutional structures and power constellations of the old order remain in place, but their continued validity is contested as new peaks, faults, and cliffs are breaking through the surface crust of the old international landscape. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the latest and, so far, the most violent act in this process of transition.

The past is not inevitable; historical development is not linear. Yet it cannot be denied that Russian policy has been a source of friction and instability for some time. To an extent, this was a delayed aftershock of the implosion of the Soviet empire in 1990/1. It was not inevitable, but nor was it unforeseeable. As George F. Kennan warned in 1947, "one of the most dangerous moments to world stability will come when some day Russian rule begins to crumble in the Eastern European area."³ Kennan's warning was prescient, though he may have underestimated the duration of that dangerous moment. Indeed, President Vladimir V. Putin's decision now to escalate a war that had been going on with various degree of intensity since Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean peninsula and its *de facto* military presence into the Donbas region, marks a new phase in Russia's post-imperial trauma.

The stability of the post-1989 order was always going to be dependent on Russia's place in it; and NATO was always a necessary reinsurance against "a political reversion in Russia" and post-imperial conflicts along the fringes of the old Soviet Union.⁴ Key Western leaders at the time understood this. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, they were conscious of the need to help the Soviet leader, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, to manage the transformation and, later, the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union. The eastward expansion of NATO was always going to be problematic for Moscow. If all Soviet troops were withdrawn from East Germany, warned Britain's prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, in February 1990, "[i]t would seem as if the border of the Alliance has moved toward him [Gorbachev]," and she added that "the Russians should not be isolated."⁵ The nature of the commitments given to Gorbachev is contested. This applies more especially to the promise by the then US secretary of state, James Baker, of 9 February 1990 that "not an inch of NATO's present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction."⁶ But this assurance was given in the context of negotiations over the unification of Germany and with reference to the West German government's wishes to anchor the whole of Germany in NATO; and it was understood thus by Gorbachev.⁷

³ Memo. Kennan, 'PPS 13: Résumé of World Situation, 6 Nov. 1947', Thomas H. Etzold and John L. Gaddis (eds.), *Containment: Documents on American Policy and Strategy, 1945-50* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 93.

⁴ T.G. Otte, 'Continuity and Change: NATO's Role after the Cold War', *Arms Control (Contemporary Security Policy)* xiii:2 (1992), 243. The author offered a sceptical perspective, against the prevailing current of the time; he also pointed out the danger of a Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

⁵ Memorandum of telephone conversation Bush – Thatcher, 24 Feb. 1990, G.H.W. Bush Presidential Library, Texas A&M University, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1990-02-24--Thatcher.pdf>.

⁶ Record of conversation Gorbachev – Baker, 9 February 1990, Gorbachev Foundation Archive, Fond 1, Opis 1, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16117-document-06-record-conversation-between>. For Gorbachev's attitude see W. Taubman, *Gorbachev: His life and Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017) 542-550.

⁷ This did not stop the Soviet leader from trying his luck with Kohl the following day: 'I see a united Germany outside military formations, with sufficient national armed forces for defense. [...] It is not neutrality. It is power, and not just European, but global. We should "play around" with this idea ...', record of conversation Gorbachev – Kohl, 10 February 1990,

Contemporary historians have trawled the archives of that period, but it is doubtful that there ever was a NATO commitment not to expand into Eastern Europe, however much later Russian leaders might pretend otherwise.⁸ The wishes of the former Warsaw Pact countries in Eastern Europe aside, the power imbalance between Russia and the Western powers in the 1990s made it difficult to reconcile any differences in the matter of NATO's expansion. No doubt, there was an element of ambiguity in Western statements, but – for reasons of strategic calculation and partly because of pressing domestic concerns – President Bill Clinton sought Russia's smooth transition under President Boris Yeltsin.⁹ No practical steps were taken to accommodate the wish of Eastern European countries to join NATO until after Yeltsin's re-election in July 1996. Further efforts were made to integrate post-Soviet Russia in the new European order. Russia was invited to join the Group of Seven advanced industrialized countries, which was then reconstituted as the G-8. The NATO-Russia Founding Act in the following year affirmed that both parties did not "consider each other as adversaries" and pledged them to "build together a lasting and inclusive peace in the Euro-Atlantic area on the principles of democracy and cooperative security," based on the "respect for sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of all states and their inherent right to choose the means to ensure their own security."¹⁰ The treaty was signed before Putin came to power. Relations cooled somewhat during the Kosovo crisis in 1999, but Putin endorsed the Act at the NATO-Russia summit at Rome in May 2002.¹¹

At that time, the Russian president, at any rate in his public statements, emphasised common interests and spoke in favour of closer ties with Russia's European neighbours.¹² Since the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, his views appear to have darkened as his grip on power tightened.¹³ They have become suffused with a sense of historical betrayal,¹⁴ and they appear to be driven by an almost metaphysical sense of historical destiny, in which Russia and Putin are one.¹⁵ In astrophysics, so-called 'dark matter' is thought to account for much of all matter in the universe. Its preponderance in galaxies and clusters of galaxies has been detected through the phenomenon of 'gravitational lensing,' whereby matter acts

<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16120-document-09-memorandum-conversation-between>; the Russian version is in A. Galkin and A. Chernaev, *Mikhail Gorbachev i germanskii vopros* (Moscow: Ves Mir, 2006).

⁸ The question has given rise to a veritable cottage industry. For contrasting views see Mary E. Sarotte, "Not One Inch Eastward": Bush, Baker, Kohl, Genscher, Gorbachev, and the Origin of Russian Resentment toward NATO Enlargement in February 1990', *Diplomatic History* xxxiv:1 (2010): 119-140, and Kristina Spohr, 'Precluded or Precedent-Setting?: The "NATO Enlargement Question" in the Triangular Bonn-Washington-Moscow Diplomacy of 1990-1991', *Journal of Cold War Studies* xiv:1 (2012): 4-54.

⁹ For a critical appraisal see James Goldgeier, "Promises Made, Promises Broken? What Yeltsin Was Told about NATO in 1993 and Why it Matters," *War On The Rocks*, 12 July 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/promises-made-promises-broken-what-yeltsin-was-told-about-nato-in-1993-and-why-it-matters/>.

¹⁰ NATO-Russian Founding Act of 27 May 1997, https://www.nato.int/cps/su/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm.

¹¹ NATO-Russia Rome declaration, 28 May 2002, <https://www.nato.int/docu/basic/b020528e.htm>.

¹² See his speech to the German *Bundestag* on 25 September 2001, https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/geschichte/gastredner/putin/putin_wort-244966. A fluent German-speaker – Putin had been a KGB operative based at the *rezidentura* in Dresden – the president gave his speech mostly in German.

¹³ For the background Catherine. Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Russia Back and Then Turned on the West* (London: William Collins, 2020).

¹⁴ Edward Lucas, "Paranoia is the religion of Putin's Russia," *The Times*, 22 October 2018.

¹⁵ In an interview with the *Financial Times* in 2019, he revealed to be concerned about the question of his own succession, Lionel Barber and Henry Foy, "Putin heralds return to the top table," *Financial Times*, 28 June 2019.

as a lens, bending space and distorting the passage of background light. History has a similar effect. It, too, pervades international relations. Current politics have to wade through the gloopy mass of half-remembered pasts; and history, too, bends to the gravitational pull of power.

If any fresh evidence were needed, the Russian president and his war against Ukraine furnish it. By 2005, Putin decried the dismantling of the Soviet Union as “a major geopolitical disaster of the century.”¹⁶ Two years later, in an address to the Munich security conference, he attacked America’s monopolistic international dominance, which, he suggested, had fostered a general sense of insecurity. He also articulated, for the first time in public, the narrative of Western bad faith about NATO expansion. It has since become the Russian equivalent to the ‘stab-in-the-back’ myth of Weimar Germany.¹⁷ He reverted to the topic more recently, in a 2019 interview with the *Financial Times*, in which he discoursed on a variety of topics, “rang[ing] from the breakdown of the international rules-based order, the rise of China and the end of liberal ideology.” He gave the impression of a man who saw himself surrounded by enemies, and who therefore chose strength and aggression over compromise and restraint: “His proudest accomplishment ... is the restoration of the Russian state after the chaotic collapse of the Soviet Union.” The real tragedy of its demise was “the dispersal ethnic Russians across the newly-independent successor states of the USSR. ‘25 m ethnic Russians found themselves living outside the Russian Federation. Listen, is this not a tragedy? A huge one!’.” He also gave the impression of a man determined to rectify what he regarded as a historic wrong: “His favourite leader, he declares, is Peter the Great,” the Tsar who acquired territories from Finland in the North to the mouth of the Don in the South. “This is the sphere that Mr Putin believes Moscow must protect at all costs; hence his visceral opposition to Nato’s expansion eastward.” Of the eighteenth-century tsar, he said: “He will live as long as his cause is alive.”¹⁸

Parsing Putin’s speeches should not be taken too far. As with other Russian leaders, his ideology may be provisional, subject to tactical needs. But it allows for an insight into the sense of grievance that motivates his foreign policy.¹⁹ Further, it offers a guide to situations in which Putin may not be able to back away, with dignity, from his own rhetoric. The ‘dark matter’ of history plays a powerful role here, too. To some extent, Putin’s views are a reaction to the events of the 1990s. More importantly, they reflect his embrace of the fundamentally anti-Western, anti-European concept of *Russkii Mir* (Russian world), a partly historical, partly ideological construct that draws on the idea of ‘holy *Rus*’ of the tenth century – itself an ‘invention’ of nineteenth-century historians. It encompasses late-tsarist ideas of an ethno-cultural pan-Slav bond between the Eastern Slavs, and it is fuelled by memories of victory over fascism in the ‘Great Patriotic War.’ Putin also reactivated the idea of *Novorossiia* to describe territories in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, and in the spring of 2014 he laid claim to Moscow’s role of protector of ethnic Russians in these areas.²⁰

¹⁶ Putin annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 25 April 2005, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.

¹⁷ Putin speech at the Munich Security Conference, 10 Feb. 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>; see also Hanns Jürgen Küsters, “Eine sowjetische Dolchstoßlegende: Der frühere Kreml-Berater und Historiker Wjatscheslaw Daschtschew verteidigt Stalin und verteidigt Putin,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 March 2016.

¹⁸ Lionel Barber and Henry Foy, “Putin heralds return to the top table,” *Financial Times*, 28 June 2019. Putin seems very conscious of the power of imperial iconography. In his TV address of 8 March 2022, for instance, he stood in front of a statue of Tsarina Catherine II (the Great), under whom the Crimea was incorporated in the Russian Empire in 1783.

¹⁹ During the 2014 Ukraine crisis Putin treated the then German chancellor, Angela Merkel, to a long lament of grievances, ‘FT Big Read: How the West lost Putin’, *Financial Times*, 3 February 2015.

²⁰ Wilfried Jilge, “Die Ukraine aus Sicht des ‘Russkij Mir’,” *Russland-Analysen* 278, 6 June 2014, <https://www.laender-analysen.de/russland-analysen/278/die-ukraine-aus-sicht-der-russkij-mir/>. Nikolai Berdyaev’s *The Russian Idea* (London: G. Bles, 1947)

It is against such ideas that Putin's utterances on Ukraine ought to be seen. And here, once again, one has to plough through the dark matter of the conflicted and contested history of that country. The historical dualism between Kievan *Rus'*, which was open to Western influences, and Prince Yuri Dolgoruky's military settlement that developed into Moscow and formed the autocratic nucleus of the later Russian state is part of this mass of complicated past history. So is Ukraine's relative - until recent times - lack of continuity as a separate state, the multi-ethnic make-up of its population, the differences between the former Habsburg West of the country²¹ and the Russian-dominated Donbas, and its boundaries, established when Austro-German armies pushed eastwards to the Don in the first half of 1918 and then confirmed in the 1920s by the Bolsheviks, the unwitting heirs to Tsarist imperialism and Great Russianism.²²

Like any other nation, the Ukrainian is a historical construct. Historians know how to weigh the complex and often contrary elements of nation-building, and how to evaluate their significance.²³ Political leaders, let alone dictators, do not. Their 'gravitational lensing' will bend the dark matter of the past to their political needs, as was evidenced by Putin's essay of July 2021 on the unity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, in which he denied Ukraine's right to exist as an independent state.²⁴ No doubt, Putin's views are a form of pseudohistory, self-serving and partisan; and in his essay and other pronouncements he has shown a failure to understand modern Ukraine and its maturing civil society. Similarly, his ideas of world order, and Russia's proper place in it, draw on deep and permanent sense of insecurity and ambivalence towards Europe and the idea of the West, influenced by Aleksandr Geyevich Dugin's fusion of classic geopolitics with Heideggerian postmodernism and apocalyptic mysticism²⁵ or Ivan Aleksandrovich Ilyin's mish-mash of German idealism and Russian

is worth rereading. Tellingly, the book was published in Russia in the late 1990s, *Russkaya Ideya: Osnovnye problemy russkoi mysli XIX veka i nachala XX veka* (Moscow: Svarog i K, 1997).

²¹ John-Paul Himka, "Young Radicals and Independent Statehood: The Idea of a Ukrainian Nation State," *Slavic Review* xli:2 (1982): 219-235.

²² Mark von Hagen, *War in a European Borderland: Occupation and Occupation Plans in Galicia and Ukraine, 1914-1918* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 89-90.

²³ For a sense of Ukrainian nationhood memories of the *Holodomor* (famine) of the 1930s is central; the role of Ukrainian nationalists, such as Stepan Bandera, who was a Nazi collaborator, grates on Russian sensibilities, see also Norman Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), and David R. Marples, "Stepan Bandera: The Resurrection of a Ukrainian National Hero," *Europe-Asia Studies* lxviii:4 (2006), 555-566.

²⁴ Vladimir V. Putin, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', 12 July 2021, text at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; for a discussion of some of this see Charles Glover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

²⁵ Dugin's *Osnovy geopolitiki: Geopoliticheskoe budushchee Rossii* (Moscow: Arktogetya, 1999) enjoyed a degree of influence in Putin's Russia and was used as textbook by the General Staff; for a discussion of his ideas see Marlène Laurelle, *Aleksandr Dugin: A Russian Version of the European Right* (Princeton: Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson Centre for Scholars, Occasional Papers No. 254, 2006), https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/OP294_aleksandr_dugin_laruelle_2006.pdf.

orthodoxy, spiced with a dose of Italian fascism,²⁶ or the hotchpotch of Eurasianism that entered the political mainstream in Russia in the mid-2000s.²⁷ But however self-serving and partisan, they shape his political calculations.

The demographic, economic, and technological foundations of Russia's power are brittle. The country's many weaknesses, not least the regime's kleptocratic crony capitalism and its managed clientelism masquerading as democracy, do not lend themselves to effective, long-term economic and geopolitical planning. But Russia's mercurial leader has proved to be a tactically adept opportunist who has probed the West's perceived frailties on a number of occasions, buttressed by sustained and hitherto by no means unsuccessful disinformation and destabilization campaigns targeted at Western Europe and North America.²⁸ The build-up of Russia's weapons arsenal, the warfighting experiences gained in the Syrian 'laboratory,' the use of mercenaries (the Wagner Group) and foreign troops (Chechens), and a proven willingness to breach established norms and principles of international law (the Salisbury poisoning) have brought Moscow to the brink of entrenching 'escalation dominance' – a development facilitated by the West's unwillingness so far to meet Putin's challenge. His own courting of China since 2014,²⁹ America's precipitate withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, Washington's focus on East Asia, the return to power of a three-party coalition in Germany, the pending presidential elections in France, and the domestic travails of the prime minister of Great Britain, a country already diminished by its decision to leave the European Union, may well have persuaded Putin that the present moment was the right moment to strike.

It would be presumptuous to predict the outcome of Putin's Ukrainian venture. At the point of writing, nearly a fortnight into the conflict (9 March), Russia's campaign has run into serious, multiple difficulties, all of which resulted from poor strategic planning, arrogant assumptions about the enemy, and a callous disregard for the practicalities of war, reminiscent of earlier Russian campaigns in the Balkans in 1877-8 or the Soviet-Finnish Winter War of 1939-40. Despite these problems, a partition of Ukraine may still be militarily achievable, but this falls well short of the original object of bringing a demilitarized Ukraine under a Putin-loyal puppet regime into Russia's orbit. There are, in fact, no good political outcomes attainable now for the Russian president, and he may well be tempted to escalate the conflict to dictate terms of some sort before Western sanctions or, possibly, behind-the-scenes pressure by Beijing force him to make concessions.³⁰ There are no good outcomes for Western powers, who will have to reacquire themselves with the rudiments of *realpolitik* and geopolitics as they contemplate the new, hostile international environment. And there are unlikely to be good outcomes for the Ukrainian people. With his act of aggression against a neighbouring country, and his implicit threat against the wider European settlement, President Putin has lifted the curtain on a new era of uncertainty. Power and the classic instruments of power politics – and their occasional use – will occupy a central position in the new era of instability.

²⁶ For a discussion of Ilyin's work, see Anton Barbashin and Hannah Thoburn, "Putin's Philosopher: Ivan Ilyin and the Ideology of Moscow's Rule," <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2015-09-20/putins-philosopher>, and Timothy Snyder, "Ivan Ilyin, Putin's Philosopher of Russian Fascism," <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/03/16/ivan-ilyin-putins-philosopher-of-russian-fascism/>.

²⁷ Charles Glover and Tony Barber, "Invasion Ideologues: Ultranationalists join the Russian mainstream," *Financial Times*, 9 September 2008.

²⁸ Instructive Edward Lucas, *Deception: Spies, Lies and How Putin Dupes the West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

²⁹ Kathrin Hille, "Echoes of the Great Game as Putin looks to China," *Financial Times*, 7 July 2015. For Chinese President Xi Jinping's attitude see Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations*, 4th ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 273-274.

³⁰ At the time of writing, there are indications of Chinese unease at the extent of Russia's military operations, 'Xi urges restraint in first sign of split with Putin', *The Times*, 9 Mar. 2022; for the effect of sanctions, see also 'The economic weapon', *The Economist*, 5 Mar. 2022, 19-22.

The war in Ukraine also speaks to two broader points of European security. In the first place, historically, Russia has only found a place in Europe through empire.³¹ After 1989, Western leaders sought to rid Europe of that imperial presence. The attempt failed; and the current war is likely to harden imperial thinking in Moscow. Secondly, the war also underlines a crucial aspect of European history, one which is all too often overlooked by historians. More often than not, the fate of the continent was determined by a great power struggle for control of key strategic borderlands. As its very name suggests, the Ukraine was part of such a contested region, located at the interface of the Polish-Lithuanian, Ottoman, Russian, and later also Austrian worlds. Viewed more broadly, much of Eastern Europe's history, certainly from 1709/21 onwards, can be interpreted as a dynamic process of Prussia/Germany and Russia arranging their interests in this area either by war or by political accommodation as in the case of the Polish partitions or the Nazi-Soviet pact. Putin's war of choice in 2022 has already woken Germany from its thirty-year geopolitical slumber, and the future of Europe's Eastern half and of the continent's security architecture will depend again on these two powers. For now, Germany's awakening gives the whole of the EU greater unity and strength, and Europe is suddenly deploying its economic (and even military) power for a geopolitical purpose.³² Putin's war of choice may also, in time, force London and Brussels to seek a more pragmatic, post-Brexit relationship.

Whatever the outcome of the present conflict, the holiday is over.

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³¹ See, *inter alia*, John P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700-1917: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (London: Pimlico, 2003).

³² For the Brussels view see the op-ed piece by Josep Borrell, the EU's commissioner for external affairs, Borrell, "Putin's War has given birth to geopolitical Europe," 3 Mar. 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/geopolitical-europe-responds-to-russias-war-by-josep-borrell-2022-03>, accessed 3 March 2022.