

Michael D. Kennedy

Violence and Truth in 2022's Epoch End: COVID-19 and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the World Historical Context¹

Abstract

Objective: In this research article, I seek to explain the cultural logics and practices of narratives of global transformations and thereby demonstrate the significance of articulation and rearticulation in their constitution. I focus on cultural politics from within narratives – through the fall of 2022 – organising our sense of the COVID-19 pandemic on the one hand, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine on the other.

Research Design & Methods: This is a theoretical paper, with references to numerous Web articles, newspaper articles, and some research volumes.

Findings: I conclude by reflecting on the ways in which these narratives can be rearticulated in order to develop a more global solidarity in the epoch end's policy and practice.

Implications/Recommendations: This paper is relevant to the research into further interactions between wars and epidemics, as well as for researching the consequences of the Russian invasion into Ukraine.

Contribution/Value Added: This paper is original in presenting an insight into the connection between the COVID-19 pandemic and the violence taking place in Ukraine as of February 24th, 2022.

Keywords: solidarity; pandemic; COVID-19; war; Russia; Ukraine; sociology

Type of article: theoretical article

JEL classification: I1 and Z1

Michael D. Kennedy (Professor) – Brown University, Department of Sociology, Box 1916; Maxcy Hall, 108 George Street, Inner Campus – Lower Green, Providence, RI 02912 USA; e-mail: michael_kennedy@brown.edu; ORCID: 0000-0001-6768-4134.

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Introduction

The end of an epoch is upon us, but its meaning is not entirely clear. Its manifestations, depending on one's location in the world are, however, obvious.

For those in Ukraine, Russia's invasion defines the end of an era, and those affected by that assault fight to define the terms of its conclusion and its successor states. The violence of that confrontation radiates outwards, however. While the conflict is clearly bounded, at least for now, its implications spread globally with effects on food security, the displacement of populations, disturbances in the prior global energy system, and consequent environmental outcomes with specific concentrations of harm. It even seems to legitimate threats of invasion elsewhere. There is no inherently transcendent truth in this conflict, but truth does become an object of contest. This is as much an information war as a kinetic one, with the qualities of its violence determining, in the end, what meaning this war will be assigned if it ever concludes. It is clear, however, that the world will not remain the same regardless of any conclusion.

The COVID-19 pandemic, by contrast, is not defined by violence, although its disruption of the world is, at least at the time of my writing, far greater. That disruption is more consequential, because try as humans might, the pandemic cannot be contained by an information war, even while the truth of the virus may be hard to recognise. It can be approached, however. We know now that it travels in certain fashions rather than others, and we know better how to minimise its spread among its mobile human carriers. We also know that denying its truth is harmful, and that we may not be able to keep up with its evolution. Where the truth is the hardest to render resides in who should suffer, and why. Here, machinations of all sorts emerge to justify why the rich and powerful should be first in line to be inoculated and the least inconvenienced by pandemic regulations. While the world will be changed regardless of the conclusion of Russia's war in Ukraine, those with power and privilege do all they can to restore the order that had existed prior to the assault of COVID-19. In this, it could very well be that COVID-19 is less eventful, less epoch-ending, than Ukraine, even while its consequences are greater.

In each case, solidarity has been an ethos that animates the struggle against violence and disruption on the one hand, and for truth on the other. Because these solidarities commingle in epoch end, they are informing one another even if they are emerging from different eventful logics. In this paper, I seek to, first, reveal these contrasting logics and, second, consider their rearticulation in the spirit of solidarity.

Although I focus on the war and the pandemic, this knowledge extends into the cultural sociology (Kennedy, 2015) and its emphasis on cultural logics and practices, as well as eventful sociology and the significance of articulation and rearticulation in shaping global social change. I propose we explore any event's distinctive cultural politics from within its action rather than interpret it from some superior perch showing how an event illustrates an *a priori* standpoint. I do, however, rely substantially on contemporary global publications, in English, to access elements of the world's hegemonic discourses. I conclude by reflecting on the narratives that might guide the rearticulation of these two events into a story whose resolution, with proper focus, could yield greater global solidarity.

Narratives of epoch end

We have quite a range of those who not only see but conjure into existence epoch end with their words and actions. Putin is, perhaps, the most significant example here with his declarations that Ukraine is no nation (Putin, 2021), that Russia's invasion is only a military operation to de-Nazify a place properly understood as an extension of Russian civilisation, even while his actions, and Ukraine's response, illuminate the lie that organises the war. Putin's solution to a problem he divines rests in coercion and violence which, in turn, only inspire more violence in response. This war is locked in a spiral of conflict ending only in cataclysm or in absolute defeat of one or another side.

One of my favourite clarifications of this chaos came from Ivan Krastev (2022), who drew on another intellectual to name our era.

"In 1993 the great German poet and essayist Hans Magnus Enzensberger predicted that the Cold War would be followed by an age of chaos, violence and conflict. Reflecting on what he observed in Yugoslavia and the urban riots in the United States, he saw a world defined by an "inability to distinguish between destruction and self-destruction." In this world, "there is no longer any need to legitimise your actions. Violence has freed itself from ideology." Mr. Enzensberger was right. He was just too early."

Although it was Putin's invasion of Ukraine that prompted Krastev to signal that violence has been freed from ideology, it has set into motion the prospect of its spread. On August 3, 2022, US Senator Bob Menendez (2022), in the wake of US House Speaker Pelosi's visit to Taiwan, declared that "the clear lesson of Ukraine is that authoritarian leaders have been emboldened in recent years by dysfunctional democracies and hesitant international relations". As I write, China encircles Taiwan in military exercises.

Of course, the crisis in Ukraine and its extensions are not the only issue motivating talk of epoch end. Pundits are, however, especially inclined to identify epoch end when they go beyond one area and link subjects, for instance how Putin's invasion and COVID-19 lead nations to attempt to withdraw from globalization as such (Wong & Sampson, 2022). David Brooks (2022) exemplifies in arguing that globalisation's failure to integrate the world has led to culture wars that threaten to ruin it. The process's apologists overreached, he writes, and did not rein in the surging inequalities and globalisation's assaults on non-Western cultural traditions, taking down the West's (genuine?) claims to universal rights and reason in the process.

Brooks exemplifies the presumptive power against what I write, where from a particular perch of insight and illumination one can explain the logics of social change everywhere. He is far from alone.

When COVID-19 or Russia's invasion of Ukraine define the life concerns of a particular place in our world, then epoch end inflected by pandemic or war is likely to organise one's account of the present and its alternative futures. Not every place puts these issues at the heart of prospects. As we were reminded in discussions of global famine, prohibited deliveries of grain from Ukraine, and Russia, are only part of the story, and only an extension of suffering too long endured and overlooked (Walsh, 2022).

Moreover, it is hard not to consider climate catastrophe as the central feature defining epoch end. Scholars in various fields, from economics (Galbraith, 2021) to sociology (Galvin, 2020; Stuart et al., 2020) and beyond have increasingly framed their work in that epoch ending mode. Sloterdijk (2018) notes that even naming the Anthropocene anticipates its apocalyptic end. Here,

then, we also find the rhetorical point associated with the empirical – the need to convince those who live beyond heat waves and floods that this is a sign of things to come. Ghosh (2016, p. 30) takes his literary skills to the task of explaining the “great derangement”, finding that the climate catastrophe is not merely strange, given our history, but it is “uncanny” as it is something “we recognise we have turned away from”.

Climate catastrophe is unlikely to realise its horror alone. For example, Wolf-Meyer (2019, p. 4) marks the coming apocalypse as multiple, for epoch ends are never singularly caused and, rather combine with other disasters, which in their articulation become unimaginable. That may be why we look away, at least until the disaster is in our face, in our home, or in what was left of that home.

The epidemic and the war are neither so uncanny nor unimaginable, and on their own terms they are understandable within their own logics. But if we are not touched by them, we can put them aside to focus on our own traumas.

For example, if we do not live in Ukraine, and rather Taiwan, we might rather focus on the prospect of China’s invasion rather than Russia’s actual one. If we are at risk of starvation, to focus on COVID-19 feels like a distraction. But that is the point: there are so many pressing moments creating a global sense of epoch end that we are at risk of figuring them singly to make them manageable, and subject to our own knowledgeability. But that is not how epoch end works, for it occurs in combination, creating a disastrous reality that emerges beyond anyone’s ken. We might anticipate, however, that fusion by articulating catastrophes in their own terms, and then in rearticulation along lines that might address them both, or them all. At least we can start with this war and this pandemic.

In this paper’s conclusion, I will return to what I mean by epoch end, but for clarity’s sake at the start, I recognise its appearance when discourses of consequence define an event as so meaningful that previously existing rules and distributions of resources for a given set of social, economic, political, and cultural relations must be transformed in order to take into account the new circumstances issuing from the event. The greater that transformation in scale and time, the more it approaches the end of an epoch. In this, I extend eventful sociology.

Eventful sociology

William Sewell’s (2005) eventful sociology contrasts with most social science distrustful of historical particularities; those social sciences seek more generalisable accounts of social change. Sewell acknowledges the possibility that there are temporally heterogeneous causalities that can change over time, embracing the possibility of global or radical contingency, one that might undo or alter the most apparently durable trends of history (Sewell, 2005, pp. 100–103). Developments become eventful only with cultural sociological work, however. As Sewell (2005, pp. 225–270) emphasises, the storming of the Bastille in 1789 only became eventful when particular intellectuals and political figures sought to name the riot an expression of the public’s sovereignty over the divine right of kings.

While we need narratives and symbols to recognise and elevate the meaning and consequence of developments, we also need their importance to transcend their most immediate context. For example, were the French Revolution to have failed, and were successors among world revolutionary movements not to have declared that they are following in a revolutionary tradition established in 1789, the eventfulness of that riot would likely be confined to French history textbooks, if

there. We could never have recognised, as Eric Hobsbawm (1996), the Age of Revolution. Nor would we have, as many did after 1989, to have declared the Age of Revolution over with 1989's revolution, begun in Poland in 1980, against the tradition of revolution (Kennedy, 2002).

Epoch ends also need their narratives to be recognised. I was reminded of this as Dr. Anthony Fauci retired from his scientific leadership in the USA where, for over 50 years, he led the struggle against infectious disease (Gonsalves, 2022). While his career's conclusion is noteworthy, it began in the wake of a real epoch end, where the "age of hubris" around eradicating infectious disease crashed before the onslaught of AIDS, Ebola, and other viruses (Snowden, 2008). To recall the sense of triumph as the war to end all wars concluded in 1918 might have also been called hubristic, but its achievement was far too brief to be even recalled now other than as an example of folly.

In short, to figure the eventfulness of any development, and especially their contribution to the recognition of epochal change, we need to think about several things well beyond the event itself: its narrative embeddedness, the qualities of resources moving a story to be told, the immediate resonance of those tales and their measure of surprise, and the actual and virtual range of identifying their consequence for subsequent changes alongside their complementarities with other developments in epoch end. We need to figure their articulations (Kennedy, 2015, pp. 13–14).

The eventfulness of COVID-19 and its implication in epoch end

The eventfulness of COVID-19 is extraordinary for the swiftness and surprise of its consequence, its global spread, and its implications not only for public health but also its political and economic effects. It sparked other kinds of transformations that added to its epoch-ending qualities.

Health, well-being, and politics

In sheerly personal terms, COVID-19 was powerfully eventful. So many families across the world lost loved ones and suffered all sorts of emotional trauma as a consequence. At least in my own home's locale, one feature of the local public sphere was, upon reaching a round number, to count the number of people who died and try to figure the meaning of their deaths (Miller, 2021).

For those responsible for global sensibilities, they were likely in 2020's end to describe COVID-19 in terms similar to these: a "global crisis of unprecedented reach and proportion". The United Nations (2020) declared then that 2 million people died from COVID-19; by August 1, 2022, that number approached 7 million (Our World, 2022). One might have sensed, especially in parts of the world relatively unaccustomed to collective catastrophe, that grief defined culture in ways with which we still reckon.

Well beyond public health and its personal consequences, we can readily recognise that COVID-19 was exceptionally eventful for its politics too.

Like mass shootings, debates about the pandemic's actual danger were fierce, especially in its first 15 months in the USA. Mortality rates were politicised. Even I, no demographer, had to settle into teaching and public discussion to elaborate the meaning of "excess deaths" to explain how we could best estimate COVID-19's effects on mortality.

However, that contest over the reality of COVID-19 made sense in political terms. After all, even Trump's own pollster concluded that he lost the 2020 election because of how badly he managed the pandemic (Dawsey, 2021). After a brief appearance of success, the pandemic, and the ethical scandals it facilitated, also brought down Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom

(Seymour, 2022). It has not brought Modi down in India, even though “senior officials forced scientists at elite institutions to downplay the (Covid-19) threat to prioritise Mr. Modi’s political goals” (Singh, 2021). Some thought it could contribute to Bolsonaro’s end in Brazil, but a recent court verdict makes that likelihood less certain (Downie, 2022).

COVID-19 has made it hard for governments to appear efficacious, and even truthful. Certainly, the latter is the case for authoritarians, especially those working in polarised political contexts where they manage presentations of data on the pandemic as just another piece of public relations or propaganda. But this is not always the case. Other nations, especially those with experience managing pandemics, fared much better, and more truthfully (Lo, 2020).

A rigorous comparative study of COVID-19’s effects on incumbents’ popularity across democratic nations, and even authoritarians’ hegemony, could be illuminating, especially when considering how truthfulness shapes the effects of governance.

While each nation has needed to figure how to address COVID in national terms, this was also, clearly, a global phenomenon, and must be addressed in its terms too.

Our World in Data (2022) reported on August 1, 2022, that approximately 2/3 of the world’s population had received at least one dose of the vaccine; in February 2022, over half of the world had been vaccinated and won one of the more optimistic statements I saw in this pandemic: “a logistical feat without precedence in human history” (Timsit, 2022). But it was the vaccine inequity that drew the critical response: rates of inoculation are far worse in poorer countries. Even as vaccinations are now being more widely distributed, that the wealthy were inoculated first has not been lost on those concerned about how fares those who live their lives in the Global South.

It is remarkable how the global public sphere in the middle of 2022 moved away from debates that overwhelmed it in the spring of 2021. Many worked to turn the global pandemic’s inequity into an indictment of capitalist privilege (Bello, 2021). This was not only a matter, they argued, of the poor being last to receive vaccines, but, rather, that vaccine inequity reflected a concern for how property rights over the vaccine seemed to take precedence over getting the pandemic under control. The West’s reputation more generally fared poorly in this epoch-ending event when it came to expressing global solidarity. Nationalism seemed to triumph.

One might also, however, have approached this question of global solidarity in more nationalist terms. Authorities could have argued that, especially when it comes to pandemics, global solidarity is in the national interest. For example, Emily Bass (2022) compared HIV and Covid-19. She contrasted their enabling factors, but emphasised US relative failures around the latter, with this searing indictment: „doing more than others is not the same as doing enough.”

If inequalities and inequities assumed substantial presence in assessing COVID-19’s earlier effects, both within and across nations, it also stimulated recognition of kin injustices. Within the USA, the recognition of systemic racism grew dramatically.

The twin pandemic

Protests in the USA associated with Black Lives Matter surged in the summer of 2021 following the murder of George Floyd. These protests were the largest ever in US history (Morris, 2021). And this was at a time people were cautious to assemble beyond primary groups. In fact, it was common during the pandemic in the USA to hear discussion of the twin pandemic of COVID-19 and systemic racism. Some worked to fuse their sensibilities about injustice and death, apparent, also on social media (Davis & Love, 2021).

“The BLM movement is premised on the social fact that Blackness can be fatal. Arising after high-profile extrajudicial killings of Black Americans by vigilantes and police, BLM works to highlight and dismantle the systemic conditions that render Blackness deadly. Within the dataset, racism in general, and Black mortality in particular, were situated alongside COVID-19 as dual pandemics, with COVID-19 operating as both a metaphor and a scale for expressions of racial violence.”

The very sensibilities the COVID-19 pandemic inspired – an attention to health and well-being, a quest to understand how to interpret data properly, all the while confronting inequalities in the delivery of vaccines, among other qualities – might also have disposed the American public to consider the measures of systemic or structural racism defining their society. It certainly stimulated discussion about how to understand the pandemic.

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw a new kind of public social science emerge. Two exemplars stand out in the USA: Ashish Jha, whose own communicative capacity made him one of the most trusted experts beyond government for explaining the pandemic and what individuals ought to do (Garde, 2021). He became President Biden's coordinator of COVID-19 response in March 2022. Sociologist Zeynep Tufekci was also remarkably effective for explaining how government communications and data analysis were themselves problematic, contributing to poorer policy and practice. As she wrote, „Science's ability to understand our cells & airways cannot save us if we don't also understand our society and how we can be led astray” (Tufekci, 2021). In fact, the head of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced a major reform of the organisation in light of its failures to address both COVID-19 and Monkey Pox properly (Bokat-Lindell, 2022).

As the anticipated reform of the CDC suggests, the problem is not just a bureaucratic one, but also a matter of cultural imagination. Drawing from the age of hubris when we figured Science could eradicate epidemics, we remain stuck in knowledge cultural silos thinking that particular kinds of expertise are the foundation on which to address crises. But just as epoch end brings together multiple crises, their elements, like a pandemic, can be made worse by the visions that articulate them.

We are at a crossroads when it comes to public health, science, and political authority, resonating with the climate crisis and its own articulations of expertise and governance. There is a full scale cultural war being waged between those who diminish cries of environmental apocalypse and those “science denialists” (Brulle, 2020). With Biden's defeat of Trump in 2020, many anticipated a new era with slogans like “trust the science”. It's not clear, however, whether that affirmation is enough given the need to move science's understandings of the virus as quickly as the virus itself mutates (Quammen, 2022). One might argue that we need to insulate science from politics so that its truth might be rendered without interference, but the fragmentation of science itself can lead to the rendering of partial truths that cannot render the full articulation of the calamity facing us.

Indeed, when thinking of COVID-19, we know that its crisis is not just a matter of public health, but also a matter of economics.

Economics

In its 2020 year-end review of COVID-19, the World Bank identified poorer health, greater poverty and economic inequality, lost educational opportunities, and overall economic decline, among other negative effects, as part of the pandemic's cost (Blake & Wadwha, 2020). In its 2022 report, the World Bank declared something similar while praising the initial response

of governments to the crisis in their “decisive economic policy response” (World Bank, 2022). Of course, the pandemic as such is still not over in any nation, an endurance even more true for the world as such.

Already in the middle of 2020, the United Nations forecast the following transformations as a result of COVID: a severe economic contraction of 3.2% as a consequence of lockdowns, disrupted supply chains, unemployment, and depressed demand. They estimated that more than 34 million people would fall into poverty. Governments, as a consequence, would have to introduce major stimulus packages to protect social, and economic, well-being. There was also, however, a concern for international cooperation and global solidarity.

“Stronger global cooperation is critical, especially to contain the pandemic and extend financial assistance to countries hardest hit by the crisis...The report underscores a window of opportunity for “recovering better”, with renewed global solidarity enhancing public health systems, building resilience to withstand economic shocks, improving social protection systems worldwide, greening of economies and addressing climate change.”

In 2022, while the United Nations offered concern for the continued pandemic, Ukraine’s effects took central stage.

“Global growth prospects have weakened significantly amid the war in Ukraine, rising energy, food and commodity prices, soaring inflation and tightening monetary policy stances by major central banks. ... The broad-based slowdown of the global economy will undermine a full, inclusive and sustainable recovery from the pandemic. This slowdown, and the war in Ukraine – triggering sharp increases in food and fertiliser prices – will hit the developing countries particularly hard, exacerbating food insecurity and increasing poverty. Monetary tightening by the developed countries will increase borrowing costs, undermine debt sustainability, and further constrain the fiscal space to support a full recovery of developing country economies.”

Much as experts and agencies beyond public health previously focused on the pandemic now turn their attention to the effects of the war on Ukraine, so shall I. But before I do, one concluding reflection.

The pandemic’s consequence for the world has been tremendous. It has invited a global solidarity, given the quality of the challenge, but that has been met mostly on the terms of the rich and powerful. The pandemic has also, however, clarified the importance of science in figuring the virus’s pathways and mutations, and truthfulness in figuring the communication of those understandings to global publics. Its implications for public policy and the practice of publics continue to roll out, whether in public health, economic policy, communications, or social welfare. Its effects can generate additional conflict, however, as sacrifices and harms are born unequally and likely graft onto already existing injuries and injustices. There is space, in this contest, for generating a more just society where the precarity of life and of social institutions comes to be recognised, even if too many of those with authority focus more on building back better rather than venturing into new forms of governance and association.

In short, we need not only foster a greater imagination, without hubris, of how to address pandemics and other threats to well-being, but also develop a new approach to knowledge that depends less on defending expert turf and, rather, moves a more flexible articulation of learnedness in the address of crisis.

That challenge becomes even greater when we add Russia’s invasion of Ukraine to our imagination of epoch end.

Russian invasion of Ukraine

Analysing the eventfulness of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is both simple and enormously complex, and certainly more challenging than assessing COVID's contribution to epoch end.

First, was the invasion on February 24, 2022, unexpected? On the days, even weeks, immediately preceding, the Ukrainian authorities emphasised things to be normal while the Biden administration underlined the likelihood of full-scale invasion given Russia's encirclement of Ukraine and military entry into Belarus. At the same time, because Russia had *had already* invaded Ukraine in 2014 and occupied parts of its territory in Crimea and the Donbas, Ukrainians knew it possible. It was like living on the edge of a volcano. Those from Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, among others, were also historically primed to expect such aggression (Žaryn, 2022).

What was surprising, however, was the initial trajectory of the war and its months of endurance. Whether Putin himself expected a blitzkrieg-like success is hard to say, but the Russian troops' preparation was certainly not consistent with any anticipation of a long drawn-out conflict, much less subsequent retreat from conquering Kyiv and Kharkiv. Although earlier anticipations emphasised Ukrainian resilience in resisting a Russian occupation, few if any discussed what months of conventional war would look like.

That endurance is realised first and foremost by the courage and military accomplishments of the Ukrainians themselves, but significantly and meaningfully by the solidarity they have received from a remarkably united West. That is first and most meaningfully tangible in terms of the weapons the Ukrainians have received, and the efficacy of their use in this conflict. Putin likely expected Western solidarity to collapse, especially in the face of economic difficulties, and must have anticipated that past military tactics associated with brutal, criminal warfare would realise similar effects as Russians found in Chechnya and Syria. They have not been triumphant in the first six months of this war, however.

Solidarity not only endured but was meaningfully extended as Finland and Sweden dropped their ambitions for neutrality and sought entry into NATO. Too, with this experience and new weaponry supplied, the Ukrainian military itself becomes an invaluable future member of the alliance. More remarkable, perhaps, is the new willingness of the European Union to offer Ukraine and Moldova candidate status, even if that remains more of a promise than a real institutional transformation. Anticipated futures can matter, however.

As of this writing, however, the war trajectory itself is hard to interpret. Can Ukraine force Russia out? Will Russia sever Donbas from Ukraine? And what about Kherson even as Ukrainians launch a counter-offensive to retake the city? By now, daily tales of what happens in particular places across Ukraine not only overwhelm the Ukrainian public imagination but shape global publics, too.

Who could have imagined, for example, that general publics, or at least reporters, in the USA would be familiar with not only Odesa, L'viv, and Kharkiv, but also be likely to say Kyiv, the Ukrainian pronunciation, instead of Kiev, the Russian one more familiar in the English-speaking world? We even discuss now how what has happened in Mariupol, Bucha, and Kherson matters. In all of this, Ukraine has become a prominent actor in the world historical imagination, and what happens there, and what Ukrainians do, can shape global futures in the end of an epoch. But it is not just a matter, important as it is, of winning a war.

In this, the Ukrainian struggle is much different than a relatively focused one on COVID-19 and its distribution. Consider these different issues emanating from the war as such.

Institutionally-distant consequences

One can begin with war's effects by considering those most immediate, but I begin with what I call institutionally-distant consequences. At the least, this war has terrific bearings on those who must manage and engage policies and practices around refugees, energy, and famine.

Refugees

On August 3, 2022, the New York Times (Santoro et al, 2022) featured the story of Ukrainian loss this way, with the fate of refugees leading:

“The merciless accounting that measures the losses from Russia’s invasion now includes about 6.2 million Ukrainian refugees elsewhere in Europe, according to the United Nations, and another 6.3 million “internally displaced.”

That means that about 30 percent of the country’s estimated prewar population of 41 million has been forced from their homes, amounting to by far the largest migration crisis in Europe since the aftermath of World War II.”

Displacement overwhelms the people of Ukraine, rather evenly distributed within Ukraine and in other parts of Europe, most notably Poland. Russia has taken in a similar number as Poland even as some accuse the invader of relocating some of this population to Russia against the wishes of those displaced.

Some have cautioned that Ukrainian refugees from a war fought on behalf of European freedom could realise the same destabilising effects that previous more explicit weaponisations of migrants sought (Editorial Board, 2022). Especially within Poland, the complexity, and challenge, of managing this across different levels of government, and within civil society itself, is understood by the well-informed within and beyond Europe.

However, many also recall the ways in which previous migrations were themselves weaponised, increasing international tensions and polarising domestic politics, all with authoritarians’ desired wish to undermine European solidarity itself (Harlan & Zakowiecki, 2022). Those associated with Poland’s current government justify its earlier decisions, declaring that “neutralising the dangers stemming from illegal migration” and “providing logistical support as befits the armed forces of a frontline country” are categorical alternatives. I am not so sure, but I agree: one might speculate that “Lukashenko’s hybrid efforts were a kind of prelude to or exercise ahead of the 24 February attack” (Żaryn, 2022).

The contradictions facing Poland and other countries, including my own, around politics, justice, and security in managing global migration flows are substantial. It is too easy to interpret these dilemmas solely through a national(ist) lens. Scholars, and public figures, must work more seriously in addressing these matters, engaging the most critical works (e.g. Besteman, 2020) in addition to those which more readily come to the desks of those managing policy. We must embrace contradictions here rather than bury them. Consider this case in point.

When Professor/Ambassador Krzysztof Szczerski (2022) spoke before the United Nations on February 28, 2022, about the solidarity his nation expresses not only with Ukrainians, but with all refugees from this war, regardless of national origin, he did much to extend the meaning of “for your solidarity and ours” [Pol. “*za wolność naszą i waszą*”]. That was a good moment for the spirit of solidarity and challenge to those who manage, and are responsible for, global flows

of refugees and other migrants. That expression, however, has not come to dominate the world's interpretation of aid for refugees of colour across Europe, and even in Poland.

To the extent this war continues and displaced Ukrainians stress the social infrastructures of those offering solidarity in this and other ways, the greater the likelihood that the measures of virtuous mutuality realised in this war will dissipate, much as it is already risked by charges of racism in migrant reception.

Energy

Again, those who have experienced Soviet domination were right to call out the dangers of energy dependency on Russia. Kennedy (2015) noted the challenge, on a global scale, of getting those who would critique carbon dependencies to recognise more immediately the dangers of Russian energy power.

One of the great effects of this war has been to solidify those critiques of Russian energy powers. At the same time, despite the terrific proclamations of weaning Europe from that dependency, there is a real waiting game in play: who can suffer more longest? Will Russia, especially as it makes money from the growing price of energy, outlast European democracies' comfort with increasing energy insecurity, especially as winter approaches? Recent accounts issue dire predictions of the coming winter not only in Europe but across the world (Wallace-Wells, 2022a).

There is a genuinely transformational solidarity in the air, and in proposal, if US allies could agree to adopt price caps on how much they pay for Russian oil and thus limit the profits Putin's Russia has to fund its assault on Ukraine. This policy promises brilliance (Editorial Board, 2022a). But this is only a plan to weaken the Russian war machine within this energy complex.

Overriding that promise is this kind of stark warning from Fatih Birol, the leader of the International Energy Agency: "The world has never witnessed such a major energy crisis in terms of its depth and its complexity. We might not have seen the worst of it yet -- this is affecting the entire world" (Stringer, 2022). This is, to the say the least, an ominous warning without even centring the climate crisis itself, something to which I turn in the end of this paper.

Famine

The global food crisis does not have its origins in Russia's invasion of Ukraine; other factors have already brought the world, and some regions in particular, to the brink of catastrophe. Russia's assault on Ukraine and blockade of Ukrainian food shipments does, however, make it all worse. The World Food Programme (2022) puts it succinctly:

"A global food crisis, fuelled by conflict, climate shocks and the COVID-19 pandemic is growing because of the ripple effects of the war in Ukraine driving rising prices of food, fuel and fertiliser. Millions of people across the world are at risk of being driven into starvation unless action is taken now to respond together and at scale."

Nonetheless, Ukrainians have been relatively effective in making the argument, together with Americans and other allies, that Russia is, in this context of war, solely at fault (RFE/RL 2022). In that context, Turkey has positioned itself as ever more central, where its role in assuring safe passage of grain exports from Ukraine, past Russian warships, seemed promising already in June 2022. While there is considerable effort focused on that resolution, there is an abiding recognition:

„When the history of the Ukraine war is written, Russia’s reckless action in weaponising food & deliberately disrupting global supplies... may be counted a bigger crime than even its unprovoked attack on its neighbour” (Tisdall, 2022a).

Acknowledging that the global famine is not caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is necessary (Walsh, 2022) but at the same time, one needs to attend to how Russia’s weaponising food is part of a larger argument about Russian criminality in this war.

Ramifications of the war’s prosecution

Beyond the question of who wins this war, regardless of its outcomes, the criminality of Russia’s prosecution of this war must be, and will be, recognised. We do not know how it will, but we need to keep it foregrounded, for it frames the interpretation of this conflict and its repercussions.

War crimes

The invasion itself, experts argue, was illegal. Already on March 23, 2022, one month after Russia’s invasion, US Secretary of State Blinken (2022) identified the targeting of innocent civilians alongside indiscriminate attacks in population dense areas, with disproportionate harm caused by some of the weapons used, notably cluster bombs, as war crimes.

Russian soldiers have looted the homes of, and raped, tortured, and massacred the defenceless, most notoriously in Bucha, where evidence has been gathered after Ukrainian military resistance forced the Russians to retreat. Russian military forces, it is charged, have also forcefully deported Ukrainian citizens, including children, to Russia.

Criminal treatment of prisoners of war have been noted on both sides, but Russian claims that the bombing of a detention facility holding Ukrainian soldiers was committed by Ukrainians is ludicrous. Murder of prisoners of war like that is another instance of brutal, criminal, behaviour.

Charges of genocide itself have been levelled (Hook, 2022), with Putin not even trying to hide that he wished to eliminate the Ukrainian nation as such. Days before the 2022 invasion he declared, again, that Ukraine, as a nation, was a fiction (Schwartz et al., 2022). His invasion seeks to confirm that historical academic argument with Ukraine’s military destruction.

Weapons of mass destruction and information warfare

Putin has himself warned in a variety of ways that he could use nuclear weapons in the event of danger to Russian security. Chemical and biological weapons are also possible, and, in fact, have already been used by Russian forces in Syria. Some argue that the effects of these weapons’ discharge might even happen accidentally and are of much more critical concern (Sokov, 2022).

On Twitter, I have termed this the “escalation debate”, because it has become so familiar. Fearing nuclear or other cataclysmic weapons, its publicists reference escalation, because they fear that by arming Ukraine, having it push “too far”, could lead Putin to use, by design, such weapons. Their argument’s opponents rather declare that Russia has already crossed the threshold of feared cataclysmic response, and that conceding to his demands bears great analogy to Chamberlain’s response to Hitler. Fear of the Other leads to domination by that Other, they argue.

It is in this context that we see extensive discussion of what Putin really wants, whether he is mad, whether he might be contained with compromise. It represents a complex set of signals

that diplomats and experts use to influence their own authorities, and, together, to influence others in information warfare.

These debates about escalation are also closely tied to concerns that the fight within Ukraine could become a World War as NATO countries supplying weapons to Ukraine could be accidentally, or even purposely, attacked, which, in turn, could lead to fall scale NATO response.

These debates proliferate, with an effect of containing the contest about the war into a 'too much vs too little' support for Ukraine debate. It is a smooth extension of the past into the present and future, where echoes of the Cold War logic reverberate in a cage of militarist logic that seems impossible to escape.

Militarism

In the end of the 1950s, one of my intellectual forbearers, C. Wright Mills (1958), wrote about the causes of World War III. He declared that its most immediate cause was preparation for it. He anticipated a series of public interventions that sought nuclear disarmament and reduction of weapons more generally in the pursuit of peace. Gonzales et al. (2019) extend that work along a number of dimensions, including distinctions between militarisation and militarism, where the first refers to the process, and the second to the military's dominance in defining problems and solutions.

The public case for de-nuclearisation and nuclear non-proliferation has been severely weakened by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Too, the importance and value of continued investment in weapons technologies for countering assaults by larger and more massively armed neighbours have been extraordinary. The names of weapons and their utility in fighting the Russian army has become part of a global public discourse: Javelins, Neptune Missiles, and HIMARS rocket launchers illustrate.

I find all of this convincing, but I also find terribly under-attended the results of this growing belief in the power and value of weapons technology for securing peace and justice. As weapons manufacturers make ever more profits, as nations who support them depend ever more for their reputations and influence on their production and trade, and while Ukraine's defence can rely only on Ukrainians willing to fight and die with ever more powerful and precise weapons supplied from without, the movement towards diplomacy in lieu of violence is likely to be strained. I do not know where it is going, but it is going to reshape the next epoch.

The concluding narrative of this war, should Ukraine win or at least defend its sovereignty and join the NATO, will be organised around the value of militaries and their technologies to assure independence, peace, and democracy. The precarity of diplomacy and negotiations when weapons become ever more consequential in deciding futures is something to attend.

Militarisation, or militarism, in the world will escalate even more, regardless of this war's outcome. For now, however, it appears to be the least threatening of the number of global consequences heralding epoch end.

Global military, colonial, and environmental contexts

Here I move beyond the immediate consequences of the war, and its institutionally-distant but socially-proximate effects, to consider global military, colonial, and environmental contexts with varying distances from the war.

There are a number of publications that work to figure the geopolitical effects of this war on different places and relationships (e.g. ORF, 2022). However, when Western scholars and policy-makers articulate those ramifications, they focus first on international security regimes while considering the need for Western powers to refigure the NATO while putting the transformation of its force posture towards China on relative hold. China had dominated the geopolitical intellectual imagination before the invasion (e.g. Economy, 2022), but now those interpreting global crisis through military powers must figure what China's alliance with Russia means.

It could solidify and make it a critical element in the definition of European, and US, security (e.g. Polyakova et al., 2022). But this is a matter of great debate. Bobo Lo (2022), for example, doubts the "axis of authoritarians" argument that democratic powers are likely to foreground as a basis for their own solidarity; instead, he sees their relationship as one based on "strategic calculus" itself strained by the war. Goldstein (2022) by contrast sees the relationship as more durable, notably by the institutional coordination of their military forces even beyond Xi's Russian affinity. Regardless, Westad (2022) typifies Western policy debates by encouraging the West to watch for the cracks in that authoritarian alliance and magnify them.

Taiwan's status in this conjuncture is increasingly apparent. Western experts on the Chinese military present evidence that the Chinese are paying close attention to what Russia's failures have been in its Ukraine operation with an eye towards an amphibious assault, with close air cover, on Taiwan, even while they state their concern that such a conflict could result in nuclear war (e.g. Goldstein, 2022a). It is clear, however, that the results of Russia's invasion of Ukraine will shape Taiwan's fate.

Far closer to the conflict, the situation in Belarus is deeply implicated in the war in Ukraine. Russian ground troops and missiles are stationed in Belarus, with the country's dictator increasingly dependent on Putin for staying in power. The opposition to Lukashenko identifies very much with a sovereign Ukraine. Belarusian volunteers have mobilised and joined other international fighters in the struggle against Russia. For Belarusian civil society, however, this is a much more proximate solidarity than for Taiwan, since Belarusians see a Ukrainian victory as one that takes one critical peg out of the support on which their own dictator relies.

These concerns for global consequences are, however, framed by those ruling the global order through their historical, and emerging, imperial legacies.

One of the most striking outcomes of this war has been Ukraine's identification with anti-colonial struggles and decolonising knowledge. This is not just a matter of sovereignty, but, rather, a framework that seeks to link Ukraine's own struggle for cultural recognition over and above and in opposition to Russian declarations that they are merely a part of Russian history and/or Soviet anti-Western practice.

This is of terrific consequence, because Russia has long been able to rely on its Soviet past and claims to have been an anti-colonial, anti-imperial, force. One of Russia's persistent messages mobilising support not only from its explicit ally, China, but also from ostensibly democratic India and other nations in the Global South has been that Russia fights in this war against Ukraine also against the NATO and Western hegemony. That continues to resonate in ways too many in the West overlook (Shryock, 2022).

Russia's anti-imperialist stance is an old story, and one that does not recognise new forms of Russian imperialism in Africa (Harshe, n.d.). Likewise, not all decolonising efforts recognise forms of Russian colonialism in Ukraine and other parts of the former Soviet Union. Indeed, some propose that decolonising Russian political discourse & culture "will debunk the myth

of Russian imperial innocence & victimhood & restore dignity of the colonised" (Kassymbekova & Marat, 2022).

This broader effort to reframe global cultural and power relations so that the USA and the West are not the only imperial agents worth resisting is a critical step in undermining the cultural frames that allow, for example, India to retain its ties to Russia under a lens of the Global South solidarity.

Finally, the most obvious global context to consider in this world historic conjuncture is the environmental one. During the summer of 2022, David Wallace-Wells (2022) wrote that "one disaster often seemed layered over the last, with newspaper front pages almost identical across the Northern Hemisphere. In July, Carbon Brief's Simon Evans began compiling them on Twitter, running out of steam when he got past 100. Climate segments of newscasts cut quickly from one part of the world to another, telling almost identical stories, day after day". This is the biophysical environment in which the War in Ukraine is prosecuted, and the effort to recover from the pandemic pursued.

The eventfulness of COVID-19 did not translate into a greater environmental consciousness about the climate crisis surrounding us now, and even more, into the future. Some have also argued that COVID-19 had a relatively positive impact on the environment, and was so named with "anthropause" to indicate the reduction in environmentally-harmful human activity with reductions in consumption, consequent production, and mobility across various distances (Rutz et al., 2020). With stimulus packages as a means of restoring economic activity following the pandemic, many nations have introduced green economic policies, too. The range of effects from the pandemic and its policies and practices in response, both positive and dangerous for environmental well-being, is considerable and deserves wider attention.

By contrast, the environmental catastrophe unleashed by the war in Ukraine is evident and disastrous, even if regionally-focused. Ukrainians are fully aware of the climate crisis happening in their lands, in their water, in their air. "The shelling of forests, land and marine ecosystems, industrial facilities, transport infrastructure and houses, as well as water, sanitation and waste management infrastructure, has caused widespread and severe damage, with immediate and longer-term consequences for human health and eco-systems" (OECD, 2022). The methods of war that Russians deploy might themselves be considered environmental war crimes (Jones, 2022).

Optimists argue that this crisis could be the spark that moves not only Ukraine, in reconstruction, but also Europe, towards renewable energy (Larsson, 2022). It is hard to predict, and there is dissensus within the European Union, but the war has broken Europe's ideological if not actual reliance on cheap Russian energy to relatively green effect. But that is in the long run. There is some danger, then, that the focus on energy transition might become an after-thought to the war in Ukraine and its energy and economic consequences (Wallace-Wells, 2022a).

The environmental catastrophe associated with global warming, with floods and heat waves as among their most obvious manifestations in 2022 summer, is its own event, its own epoch end.

What narrative of epoch end might complement that sense of climate crisis alongside cataclysmic war and deadly pandemic with all of *their* consequences?

Rearticulations of crisis in epoch end

Actually existing democracy is not the answer. Global solidarity is the start.

One of the initiatives undertaken in 2021's end by the Biden administration was to work to establish an Alliance of Democracies in order to "support independent news media overseas,

combat corruption, aid activists, advance technology, defend fair elections, combat digital authoritarianism...” (Crowley & Kanno-Youngs, 2021). That, even then, hardly seemed enough, and was made even worse by the realities of geopolitical alliance with allied dictatorships. Saudi Arabia stands out in the summer of 2022, but it was just as obviously problematic then.

Democracies may claim to share certain values, but one value to avoid is to instrumentalise democracy’s principles through the definition of alliances. Open Society Foundations organised a panel to discuss Biden’s initiative, where the problems readily anticipated were reproduced (Abramowitz et al., 2021). Joe Asunka’s contribution was particularly important: he declared that violations of democratic principles need to be challenged regardless of where they take place. Although his reference was to Africa, it deserves wider application.

OSF President Mark Malloch-Brown was part of that discussion, and rather seemed to affirm the value of Biden’s approach pitting the world’s democracies in solidarity against the world’s autocracies. In an era where Ukraine defends itself from a Russia (what Timothy Snyder has helped to popularise) defined by *#Пашизм*, where Taiwan’s distinction rests in declarations to be at the heart of global democracy’s defence (Chen, 2022), claiming democracy’s value seems to articulate global solidarity as such. But it must be more than words, it must be more than military defence, and it must be more than an alliance of actually existing democracies.

As Mark Malloch Brown himself offered on July 4, 2022, “By treating the global food, energy and debt pressures as secondary to the war in Ukraine, the Group of 7 missed a golden opportunity to help the world’s hungry and disprove Vladimir Putin’s narrative of the liberal world order as a spent force that cares nothing for the poor. Rich countries may already be losing that battle for hearts and minds.”

Malloch-Brown’s concern might also be found in the treatment of the global pandemic, and the priority given to the rich and powerful in the pandemic’s treatment. Some called that vaccine nationalism, but one might extend that concern, especially in epoch end’s rearticulation, especially in the redefinition of nationalism in Russia’s war on Ukraine.

Nationalism in this world is the trump card of all identities (Calhoun, 1997). Indeed, it figures powerfully in Ukraine’s defence from Russian invasion – Ukraine fights for a sovereign nation, one defined by its own self-determination and invitation for broad and inclusive redefinition. *Слава Україні*, easily associated with a fascist past by those familiar with Polish and Jewish suffering, has been redefined by a Ukrainian Jewish president in defence of Western democracy. Poles have transformed lingering suspicions of Ukrainian otherness into an embrace, manifest in refugees’ welcome and diplomatic and material support. Abandoning pretences of neutrality in a Europe, and the world, at risk of barbaric assault and criminal invasion, Finland and Sweden redefine their nations and their neighbourhoods to join an alliance organised around the military defence of democracy and freedom.

This is a world transformed, or at least a Global North transformed. But if it remains within that regional reference, the epoch end we see will be the continuation of injustice for those in the Global South.

The global transformation intimations of epoch end’s promise cannot be limited by reliance on the generosity of those most powerful and privileged in it. If anything, the repercussions of global famine, energy crisis, unprecedented migration, and environmental catastrophe reveal that sovereign democracies are no solution, especially when it becomes a fortress for the defence of existing rules organising the distribution of power and privilege. If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic should remind us of the futility of those boundaries, especially with growing catastrophes on

epoch end's horizon. Solidarity must be recast in order to develop policies and practices suitable to the next epoch.

Ukraine's example in this, then, is key. It could very readily inspire us to extend the "rule-based order" that the West is so eager to defend from Putin's disruption of it to include more of Europe. That *would be* the beginning of a great new epoch for some. But it is hardly sufficient to address the injustices apparent in the global pandemic, militarism, energy, food, migration, and environmental crisis that, no matter how you look at them, articulate epoch end in 2022.

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