

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**ELIZABETH
WOOD:**

I want to welcome everyone to today's MIT Starr Forum and focus on Russia, featuring Vladislav Zubok who will be speaking about the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the seeds of the new European war. I'm Elizabeth Wood, and I'm professor of Russian and Soviet history at MIT. I direct Russian studies and the MISTI Russia program. Together with my colleague and co-organizer, Carol Saivetz, who is senior advisor in the MIT Security Studies Program, we will be discussing with Professor Zubok the breakup of the USSR in 1991 and the beginnings of this new European war.

Let me share first a few housekeeping notes. First I'd like to thank our sponsors, the MIT Center for International Studies, the Security Studies Program, and the MIT Russia program, and especially our fearless organizers, Michelle English and Laura Kerwin. We will have Q&A at the end of the talk, so please feel free to use the Q&A feature on the bottom of your toolbar to type your questions. We will try to get to as many as possible.

We already, I see, have 350 participants, and we will have perhaps even more, so please keep your questions short, if you can, and we will do our best. You may also look in the chat feature. You'll see bios, upcoming events, and other information that may be of interest to you.

Now, it's my great pleasure to introduce our speaker, Vlad Zubok. He's professor of international history at the London School of Economics and internationally known for his expertise in the Cold War, the Soviet Union, Stalinism, and Russia's intellectual history of the 20th century. He was born and educated in Moscow, where he got his undergraduate degree at Moscow State University and his PhD at the Institute for the USA and Canada.

Since 1994, he's been in the US teaching at a number of US universities, including Temple University, but has moved most recently to teach at the London School of Economics. His most well-known books include my personal favorite, *Inside The Kremlin's Cold War* from Stalin to Khrushchev, which is co-authored with Constantine Pleshakov in 1996. Then, in 2007, *A Failed Empire-- The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev*. Also, I highly recommend. 2009, *Zhivago's Children-- The Last Russian Intelligentsia*, *The Idea of Russia-- The Life and Work of Dmitry Likhachev* in 2017, and then, most recently, the subject of today's talk, *Collapse The Fall of the Soviet Union* in 2021. So please, Vlad Zubok, let's welcome you and take it away.

**VLADISLAV
ZUBOK:**

OK. Well, thank you very much. I'm overwhelmed. Many people, of course, showed interest in the subject, and I'm realistic enough to realize that without Putin's war, this interest would be not as considerable. So after thanking Elizabeth and Carol for arranging this event, I want to immediately plunge into the topic that probably is of interest for most of you who joined. How did we get from Mikhail Gorbachev, who was the laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990, to Vladimir Putin, who started his tenure in the Kremlin by brutal subjugation of Chechnya, and, of course, most recently, in February, launched an offensive against Ukraine.

Many say it's just volatility of Russian history. Many would mention path dependency. Russia keeps coming to its geopolitics, to its insecurity, to its aggressive self, and so on and so forth. I would like to focus instead to the circumstances of the Soviet collapse. Let me start with a very brief definition of what happened in 1991. It was unforeseen, it was radical, and it was very quick.

Why did the Soviet Union implode? I wish I had 40 minutes to explain it, but since I don't have this time, all causes aside, because mainly of the secession of the main Republic of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation. So the Russian Federation was meant to be the core, cementing the entire country, the Soviet Union, and instead it became the dynamite that tore the union apart. Ukrainian historians, and actually, some Western historians, at Harvard, among other places, marveled at the split among Russians at that time in the center. Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Russia was split, and their struggle led to the implosion of what they call the imperial center.

Then, of course people recall the unfinished Democratic revolution in Moscow, after the August coup of 1991, which is an iconic event with tanks and Moscow, not in Ukraine, but which ended kind of--

ELIZABETH WOOD: It looks like-- it looks like our speaker is having some technical troubles. Let's just wait a minute to see if he can come on. The breakup of the Soviet Union is obviously a very important topic, because it's an empire that's breaking up, and that affects how, in 2022, we are seeing a war coming on. So Carol, we can talk about that for a minute. We know the audio and visual have gone with Professor Zubok. He is in Italy, I guess.

Definitely-- I mean, I can say two words. I don't pretend to have the expertise he does. We'll obviously put him back on as soon as we can. The Soviet Union was an empire of over 100 different nationalities. And so when it broke up, it created conditions where the 15 main republics became 15 different countries. We can see that effect even today, as Ukraine insists it is an independent nation.

CAROL SAIVETZ: Can I jump-- can I jump--

ELIZABETH WOOD: Oh, wait I see.

CAROL SAIVETZ: Vlad, you're back.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Zubok is back.

VLADISLAV ZUBOK: Well, why it always happens to me? I don't know.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Thank you for coming back

VLADISLAV ZUBOK: I attribute it, A, to Russian hackers, B, to Vladimir Putin, and C, to poor connection. Which one is the preferable explanation? So let me continue where I stopped, I guess. At the time, in August 1991, first scholars were Ukrainians that noticed the split among the Russians. Then came this event that shook the Russian Democrats, who ended up victorious in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Ukrainian party officials in Kyiv, in the Supreme Soviet of Ukraine, together with Ukrainian nationalists, declared that any talks about the reform union were moot. They declared that they restored a historic Ukraine of 1917, 1918, and it's basically divorce without terms and conditions.

Naturally, this Ukraine would stay within its old Soviet borders. Now, the victorious Russian Democrats, at the time in Moscow, were led by Boris Yeltsin. They wanted to dismantle the Soviet Union totalitarian empire. They wanted to join the West. They wanted to join NATO. The main challenge to their plans was not the defeated KGB, the defeated Soviet generals, but ever present danger of Russian nationalism that was filling the vacuum left by communism. They feared that the Soviet Union would follow the path of Yugoslavia and descend into violent ethnic conflict. The Ukrainian challenge presented this very, very danger to them. As I said, for the Ukrainian nationalists, there was no interest in talking to Moscow at all. They didn't actually mind that the borders of Ukraine have been drawn up largely by Lenin and Stalin.

They didn't mind that Khrushchev had transferred Russian Crimea as a gift to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in 1954. So Yeltsin was immediately upset by that. Days after the Declaration of the Act of Ukrainian Independence, he issued an interesting declaration. Not him, but his press man. He sort of expected Russia and Ukraine at the time to stay in some kind of a union, much like England and Scotland, for instance.

In his declaration, which he authorized, his press secretary said that as long as Ukraine stays in some kind of union with Russia, there would not be territorial claims on Ukraine. If Ukraine decides to go alone, there would be. And there was a press conference after this in Moscow, because it was a big, big event. One Ukrainian journalist asked Yeltsin's press men why Russia continues communist imperialism.

Yeltsin's media man snapped back, you don't want to live with Russia in a union. This is a communist legacy for you. Then go. But return Crimea and Donbass to us, because they became part of Ukraine because of the Communist legacy. This was, I guess, the moment when Russian post-communist imperialism was born or reborn, depending on your historical view.

Was there a possibility of war at the time between Russia and Ukraine? At least, Yeltsin and some people around him thought so. In the following week, the media in Moscow and Kyiv exchanged barbs and various dire scenarios of war appeared in the mainstay name press. Independent Gazette in Moscow even published an op-ed piece where the author compared Russia's claims to the Crimean Donbass to Hitler's invasion of the Sudetenland in 1938.

Another author of another publication in that newspaper wrote that if Russia decided to claim territories from other republics, the Yugoslav scenario would be guaranteed for us. Two Russian empires were gone, this author prophecy. One in 1917. Another was collapsing right now, in 1991. If the Russian Federation continues along this path, he warned, it would suffer a similar fate.

So at that time, the war didn't start because the smartest of Russian liberals and Yeltsin himself realized that the dispute with Ukraine over territories could bury the prospect of Russian Democracy under a deluge of nationalist resentment. American and British diplomats in Moscow agreed with that. Galina Starovoitova, a liberal politician, advised Yeltsin to negotiate with Kyiv on a special status of Crimea with the proviso to hold a referendum there in a few years. This option would have placated the Russian nationalist opinions and left open the possibility of settling this territorial issue according to international law.

Yeltsin shrugged it off, but he did believe that Russia had sufficient political and economic means-- above all, cheap gas and oil-- to influence Kyiv's policies and choices. So we shouldn't worry too much in Russia about Ukraine's political independence, he argued. He recognized Ukraine's sovereignty.

Actually, Russia was one of the first states. At the time, it was not even sovereign fully. The Soviet Union still existed until December. But Russia nevertheless recognized Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity unconditionally.

But then happened the first version of Ukrainian flare up after the dissolution of the USSR. The Ukrainian leadership wanted to create its own army and navy. It asked officers of the ex-soviet Black Sea Navy with a main base in Sevastopol, Crimea, to take an oath of allegiance to Ukraine in Ukrainian language.

Soviet officers rebelled. They wanted to stay Soviet. Nationalist politicians in Moscow called for a separation of Crimea from Ukraine.

Yeltsin and Kravchuk had to meet again to settle the issue. The issue, however, as we understand today, was not settled. In a sense, the whole mythology of the peaceful, or relatively peaceful, collapse of the Soviet Union also needs to be revisited seriously by us, because what we're seeing today is the continuation of this story.

30 years after the Soviet collapse, Vladimir Putin, at a press conference on February 21, 2022, said the same thing that Yeltsin's men said in August 1991. I quote, "You want dehumanization? Very well. This suits us just fine. But why stop halfway? We are ready to show what real dehumanization would mean for Ukraine." So Putin's resentment was no longer limited this time to Crimea Donbass. He meant that the whole of Ukraine was the product of Communist experiments and was a failed state. He did not want to recognize Ukraine as a separate nation state at all. So three days later, he sent Russian army into Ukraine in a move that startled the world.

A few words-- what happened in between 1991 and 2022. I think-- and that's, of course, very brief, very insufficient analysis, but I want to stress three strands that I think conflate and combine in an explosive way. First of all, Putin's authoritarianism. Ukrainians and their friends in the West believe that Putin simply cannot tolerate a free democratic Ukraine existing next to his Russia. I think there is some grain of truth in it, but it's too linear and too simplistic.

I do think that Putin got transformed from the Soviet patriot, from the KGB officer, who did accept in 1991 the finality of the Soviet collapse. He transformed, ultimately, into a Russian imperialist who began to view history and the world through much different lenses than the Soviet imperialists had once done. I would remind you what you know very well. A long time ago, George F Kennan, in his long telegram in 1946, had famously drawn a difference between the world views of Hitler's Nazism and Stalin's Soviet communism. The latter-- that is, Stalin-- operated on a tight-- I'm sorry, Hitler-- operated on a tight now or never deadline reacting to a dilemma.

To use an imagined window of opportunity to build a 11th round for German race or perish in the global struggle. The Soviet view, Kennan stressed, was very different. It was based on the Marxist credo that history was on the side of the Soviet way of life as more progressive compared to capitalism. Stalin was reasonably cautious, Kennan argued, but also Stalin could afford to wait.

So at some point, Putin realized that he could not wait-- that he had a window of opportunity within which he had to strike. So it was more close to a nationalist imperialism than to Marxist Soviet imperialism. Two other strands have to get also combined to produce the explosion of violence that we're seeing today.

Two myths became intertwined in Putin's thinking by February 2022. The one is about Ukrainian Nazis that allegedly had seized power in Ukraine with the assistance of the West and they oppress Russians in Donbass. The other myth is about the US global hegemony whose main instrument is NATO and whose eager collaborators were the Nazis in Ukraine.

In his angry article of July 2021, Vladimir Putin wrote that Ukraine was dragged into a dangerous geopolitical game aimed at turning it into a barrier between Europe and Russia-- a springboard against Russia. He kept referring to Ukraine as an anti-Russia project designed and manipulated and guided by the West, primarily by the United States, he meant. So for him, the Nazis of Ukraine and the geopolitical calculations of Washington were the two sides of one coin.

Russia, Putin argued, had been continuously deceived, its influence in its very neighborhood ignored, and the only option to oppose it was to use force. Western leaders, all the way to December 2021, dismissed Putin's story in its whole and its particulars, yet Russian myths that Putin shares are not just a bundle of lies and deceptions. A myth, as social scientists know, is a powerful synthesis of actual developments-- just a biased one. Every myth has grains of truth enveloped in willful interpretations and self-fulfilling prophecies. So these two myths that I mentioned in particular influenced not only the mind of Putin but apparently the minds of his intelligence and his military.

So let me stop at this, because we have very limited time, and pass it back to the capable professors that guide this show.

CAROL

Great, Vlad that was terrific. Thank you so much. I didn't realize you were going to stop so soon. Let me just take a look at some of the questions. There are several questions here about the origins of Ukrainian nationalism.

SAIVETZ:

Was it realistic to expect Ukraine to want to be in the union as you described it, with Russia given the Holodomor and the earlier history from the Soviet period? And then I'd love to ask you about these myths that you're talking about seem to start today or within the last couple of years when you talk about NATO and the US hegemony veto NATO. It doesn't seem to take into account the much earlier history of Ukrainian-Russian relations. So maybe you could start there.

VLADISLAV

Well, as historians of Ukraine say and some Russian historians, you have many developments before 1918. Then Ukraine, which was not a proper state. It was getting in this direction, but then the Bolsheviks came first, the Germans and the Bolsheviks came in 1918.

ZUBOK:

That history that preceded the Russian Revolution and what now Ukrainian historians call the Ukrainian revolution was suppressed. That was largely accessible only for a few. And we know how difficult it was in the Soviet days to penetrate the Soviet mythology because I continue to think about myths, how powerful those myths are.

The Soviet myth basically excluded the possibility of the two fraternal Slavic nations to mistreat each other so badly, particularly Soviet propagandists, among them Ukrainian propagandists, among them the second secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party, Kravchuk, who would later become the founder of the Ukrainian independent state.

They fought the mythology of Holodomor tooth and nail, mythology and reality, we should say, of Holodomor. Because they fully realized once people start believing in mass death of Ukrainians, no matter what interpretation you attach to it, that's the crumbling of the entire myth of Soviet brotherhood of nations.

And what happened in 1991 is essentially already the confrontation of the two narratives, one in Moscow, where Democrats essentially who came to power after the August coup naturally, led by Yeltsin, they were prepared to address the atrocities of history.

But at the same time, they were not prepared to sacrifice the new Democratic mythology that they felt very proud of. They believe they ended the Cold War. They killed the totalitarian monster. They wanted to help Ukrainian, Kazak, Kyrgyz, and other Baltic brothers, Democrats to get rid of the remnants of totalitarianism.

So with this new mythology, they found completely themselves completely flat-footed when the Ukrainian nationalists simply said, we don't want to have anything to do with you because you're Russians. You have been oppressing and colonizing up for us for centuries, particularly ruthlessly during the 20th century under Stalin and so on and so forth.

So every year that Ukraine was part of the empire, Ukrainians suffered and were colonized. So that interpretation of history, even Russian liberal Democrats found very hard to accept. Of course, there were exceptions. I mentioned Starovoitova, I would mention Yelena Bonner. There were other, famous names at that time.

Starovoitova, in fact, on the day Yeltsin recognized Ukrainian independence-- and it's in my book-- she bought a bunch of flowers and went to the Ukrainian Cultural Center at the time then, soon to become an embassy, and gave the flowers to the Ukrainian representative. And later she laughed in remembering this episode and said, oh, they were expecting tanks. They never expected a lady to come with flowers to congratulate them on their independence.

So you have immediate clash of historical perspective. And in order to understand what happened 30 years later, I think we should dismiss on essentialist interpretation of history as Russia's past dependency and all those things. But look at history is more malleable, with bifurcation points and those ideas, not necessarily bound to become dominant ideas on one side or the other.

I even said in my talk that Putin in 1991, '92 did dismiss the Soviet Union and concluded that the empire fell at its finite fall. And later on he repeatedly criticized Lenin and Stalin, less Stalin than Lenin, but nevertheless Stalin as well for undermining the historic Russian state. So gradually, Putin became a recipient of another mythology, which had been suppressed, which had been in 1991 under what the rest of the world saw as the victory of Russian Democracy.

But that mythology was propagated by people like Alexander Baranov, like Alexander Dugin and all these names that we now know, and they are in the forefront. And then Putin, every time he spoke before the invasion, he said, I read [? Illene ?] from time to time and take his book and read him, the ardent Russian nationalist, but also imperialists who always said-- [? Illene ?] that is-- that Russia is doomed to be alone in Europe. Maybe Serbia would support it, but the rest of Europe is bound to be hostile to Russia as a state, is [? Illene ?] writing after 1945.

So this is a battle of ideas, and this is a battle of myths that happened as the two states became independent and history, yes, resumed its course, but also nationalism resumed its course as well.

ELIZABETH WOOD: So wonderful. So we have a couple of questions about the myths. One person asks, you've described Putin transitioning from communist imperialists to Russian imperialist. I certainly remember when he began saying, Lenin lit a bomb under the Soviet Union by creating the nationalities. But how would you explain that transition?

And then a related question. Do you think that the Siloviki, i.e. the intelligence, FSB, Military National Guard leaders actually believe these myths, someone asked-- I think it's an excellent question-- or do they fear the return of the great purchase? In other words, are they actively positively supporting Putin in this or are they afraid that there will be revenge against them if they don't follow him? And how do these myths play out in Putin and in his top leadership?

VLADISLAV ZUBOK: Oh, you mean the last question is about their mood before the invasion, on the eve of the invasion?

ELIZABETH WOOD: Yeah, today, do they believe the myths?

VLADISLAV ZUBOK: Today, I wish I know. But back to Putin's transformation, that's an easy question to answer because everyone exercises imagination and writes mental biographies of Putin in one way or another.

But it's crucial. It's crucial. And even international relations experts know that the person in charge may reflect the structure of international system or international relations, but it may get it completely wrong and completely haywire and cause disaster. So Putin's mythology and Putin's realism have to be carefully analyzed. Although I should add, they should have been more carefully analyzed before the war. Now of course, it's a little bit too late.

But a few words about his transformation. First, I think that two of the elements, his attitude to Ukraine and his attitude to the United States and NATO. And maybe let me start with NATO.

Putin mentioned after the war started that he responded to the remarks of Bill Clinton. And Bill Clinton revisited the old debate about NATO expansion of a sudden. He said, oh well, it's wrong that NATO expansion had any relevance for any kind of causality, was any causality factor for what is happening now, that is the war, is that I repeatedly offered and made it clear that Russia would be a member of NATO.

So OK. Putin then gave, I think, the first press conference after he launched the invasion of Ukraine and responded to Clinton and said, I should tell you something that I never told before. When I became the president, I met with Bill Clinton and offered that Russia would become a member of NATO, and he mumbled in response.

Now, someone had to be slightly more truthful in these two stories. So we have Clinton and Putin on this story. And Putin has lied on so many things that it's very easy for anyone to say of course he lied again.

But actually, the record says that this time he was more correct than-- let's put very mildly-- was more correct than Clinton, because the messages that Yeltsin and Putin later had been getting were not just maybe, not just if you do this, guys, you would become a member of NATO.

No. The message was a rather unambiguous no. And I think it came to the point when Russians recall that, hey, Lord Ismay in his famous sayings said that NATO has three purposes, to have Americans in, to keep Germans down, and keep the Russians out of Europe.

So inadvertently, of course, the whole geopolitical mentality of the Democrats that surrounded Yeltsin-- and Yeltsin himself, he was the biggest advocate of Russia joining NATO. He kept telling Clinton and Bush before, and then Clinton, Russia must be the first to join NATO. Please don't do it to the three Eastern European countries. Russia must be the first otherwise, what should I say to my nationalists? How should I hold the ground against them? And he had a point, but it didn't happen.

So the geopolitical factor of NATO enlargement-- I'm sorry. Some scholars would become angry at me at this point, but I think it cannot be easily dismissed. And it at least it made the job easier for Putin to claim time and again that Russia had been strung along, had been deceived, had been kept out of NATO.

That became the main architecture of European security since 1994 and late. And that's on NATO, but it's not the only and maybe not even a primary factor accounting for Putin's war. Because naturally, you have to combine all of this to understand the explosion of violence.

So then comes Ukraine. Then comes Ukraine. And when you look at Putin's early career in the KGB, in East Germany, and so on and so forth, I don't find any special exposure of Putin to Ukraine's language, culture, history. So it is just safe to say that he was one of millions of Russians who had this a mixture of incredulity, emotional denial of Ukraine's independence, and inability to cope with it somehow.

So for him, the prospect of Ukraine as a non-Russia, that became clearly right away was a non-go, as well as the prospect of a complete divorce between the two republics. But it doesn't mean that the early Putin, the first term or even the second term, Putin was an imperialist who wanted to solve this question by force.

In fact, he continued-- Putin, he continued Yeltsin's policies of using economic, political, financial inducements to keep Ukraine if not neutral, but within Russia's zone of security and influence. And he failed. And he failed. And we know very well the story of his failure.

And one may say that his worst enemy was not NATO, that his worst enemy was his own authoritarianism because increasingly, with his brutal beginning in Chechnya, with his ongoing actions, many more Ukrainians not only nationalists, but many more Ukrainians would say that's not exactly country we want to be close to. Our solutions are not in Moscow. Our solutions are elsewhere in Europe and in Democratic West and so on and so forth.

Did Putin acknowledge it? Of course not. Of course not. So the more he slipped into authoritarianism, the more his geopolitical thinking were being inflamed by NATO's constant and incessant expansion to the East, all the way to Russia's borders. The more he became neurotic about Ukraine.

So these three factors, if you separate them and deal only with one of them, such as Putin's authoritarianism, then it's too simplistic. When you put these three factors together, it explains the story, I believe, much better.

CAROL

OK. Thank you. Well, we had a couple of questions that pick up on the theme that you've just been discussing.

SAIVETZ:

One of our attendees asked whether or not today Putin is just defining anything that doesn't help him stay in power, anything that he perceives as being anti-Putin as therefore being instigated by the West, particularly the United States?

And then a related question that's looking forward towards a possible end to the war. Is the United States now promoting some kind of Ukrainian nationalism and respect for sovereignty, et cetera that would be totally unacceptable to Vladimir Putin in terms of a negotiated settlement?

**VLADISLAV
ZUBOK:**

Well, these are all important questions. And I think you can ask many more questions that approach our main concern right now about how long this war will last? What will be its outcome? Is there any way that a negotiated exit from this war is possible?

And we know that the latest news, you know, Blinken and now after visiting Kyiv sounded very optimistic about Ukraine's victory in the war all of a sudden. There's no talk about peaceful settlement, an even truce, even armistice. There's a talk about victory. So in a sense, they come to Kyiv and they hear Zelenskyy, they hear Ukrainians and they get all these vibes from the Ukrainians that creates a synergy that didn't exist before the war, I believe.

Because before the war, we all remember what Western intelligence said about the chances of Ukraine to survive in this war, three, four days. And this let me approach this question maybe not directly, but trying to give you my view how we should analyze this war and its dynamics.

And here I'm treading on very thin ice. This is not my book. My book was about something else. But in a sense, I think the end of the Soviet Union, the collapse of the Soviet Union in a sense, created too much optimism and created that idea that, hey, you know-- and I heard it many times from various interlocutors, Russians and Ukrainians-- once we press Putin hard, once we press his elites hard-- and that's back to the previous question about the elites that I didn't answer, but know I think about it, then that would be another collapse.

And that's a an underlying expectation of many people who care about it at all in the United States, for instance and certainly in Ukraine. Once we push, then this edifice will crumble again. I'm not so positive about it to begin with.

In my view, we should analyze this war on three levels. First, of course, is what we've just been talking about, the military dynamics. Before the war, everyone expected a very quick defeat of Ukraine, military defeat of Ukraine, and they spoke about guerrilla warfare, Ukrainians would never be subjugated. Very quickly, in 60 days, this scenario is changed to a much more optimistic because Ukrainians held the Russian offensive, and the Russian offensive clearly failed.

So if you follow this logic, you have declarations of Blinken. Take it at face value, then you think, oh, it may be the Balkan Wars. It may be the Korean War when all of a sudden, another side counter-attacks, and you have the front line moving back. You have all kinds of interesting scenarios.

But then you go to international and economic level. And I think it should be the second level, where you explore who are your allies, who are the allies of Ukraine? Who are the allies of Russia? Which resources Russia has in which resources Ukraine has.

And here as well, I should say, all of a sudden, not at the very beginning of this war, but all of a sudden now, you have a surge of optimism. But of course, Ukraine has all advantages now, people say. It has national mobilization. Putin did not declare it. Putin is isolated, and even China may help or may not help. India's vacillating and so on and so forth. And the entire West backs Ukraine.

Yes. Again, in this case, scenario might be let's say the Crimean War. Let's go beyond the obvious wars of the 20th century and go back to the Crimean War, which is, by the way, a good example of how the whole Europe at the time fought against the reactionary barbaric Russia. The language the British used and the French, exactly sending the soldiers to fight the barbarians of the East.

And clearly the war-- Russia, according to this scenario, is bound to lose. But then you get to the third level. And that encompasses the perceptions of Putin, his elites, and Russian people. And remember, we were all expected, oh, would that be a coup against Putin? Oh, would that be a coup against Putin? It, of course, didn't happen.

And now everyone got swung to the opposite pole. The entire Russia must be punished. The entire Russian culture must be canceled. Everything Russian should be canceled and things like that.

But this is exactly what I wanted to finish with on the analysis of this confrontation because in the first dimension, Russia fails, the military. In the second dimension, allies and resources, Russia is out resourced and also has no hope. Yet, this is a third dimension. And I simply cannot imagine that Putin would surrender and accept any meaningful defeat.

And I cannot see right now how Russia under him and with his propaganda tools would all of a sudden turn against the war and demand any sort of peace, any kind of peace, even a humiliating peace. If we go to this dimension, we read *War and Peace* by Tolstoy.

It's a Tolstovian dimension. It's a mythological and cultural dimension, where Russian people, who cares who's the Czar. He may be an evil monster, but it's Mother Russia and we should fight to the end. And all the mythology of 1812, Napoleon reaching Moscow and Moscow gets burned, all the mythology of 1941, when there's a lot of defeatism and Hitler attacks then the European armies reached Moscow. They are stopped.

All these things kick back and should I say fear? Should I say hope? Should I say what? But I somehow feel that this dimension simply cannot be ignored. And it is quite possible, even you reread how the Crimean War ended. If you reread some well known books like by Orlando Figes and others, you don't find Russians feel defeated, even after the surrender of Sebastopol. I know it's a completely different war, but they never felt defeated. They wanted to go on.

And in this there's, a certain mythological potential or if you like, psychological potential in a very vastly different society today for Russian nationalism to surge and make the war, even a lose-lose war continue, unfortunately.

And the fact that the West stopped using even the word "peace." The West stop using the word an exit from the war with some kind of saving face and strong support, but started using the language of victory. I think it could be a politically disadvantageous step for really ending the suffering of Ukraine and ending this war that can preserve a potential of expanding itself.

For Putin, it is a European war already. For Putin, it's a war against NATO already. So at some point, it may become one, unfortunately. And anyone should keep it in mind. So sorry for this indirect way of approaching this, but I guess it helps us to address this question in multifactor way from different historical perspectives.

**ELIZABETH
WOOD:**

I think this is absolutely fascinating. So I want to ask you about that last point. What language should the West be using instead of victory? Clearly victory was problematic leading up to, into Putin's early years. The West was always saying that they won in terms of the breakup of the Soviet Union and they won in terms of the collapse of communism, but that was seriously problematic. So what language should the West be using today?

And we also have a question from our many about the role of the Russian Orthodox church. They have clearly been silent on this war. Do you think that there's any chance that they will play any kind of mediating role?

**VLADISLAV
ZUBOK:**

Well Elizabeth, unfortunately the Russian Orthodox church was not silent. It was very vocal in the Russian Orthodox priests, and the patriarchal are very much in favor of the war. Yes, we register there are many dissenters or some dissenters, the heretics. There are people in the church abroad who are pro-peace and take all kinds of things.

But the church as an organization is very much, and quite predictably, I should say, going along the path of this Russian mythology and supporting this mythology. And one can hear from people in Russia. I know that the Poles give pretty high support of Russians for the war, and it's questioned by many people quite rightly. Are they afraid to say what they think?

And it's true. In these conditions, anyone would hesitate to talk. But to some extent, I should say the longer the war continues-- and paradoxically, the longer Russian troops suffer casualties and failures and all that, Russians do have this cult of the dead. Russians do have this tradition of resilience in favor of adversity and they are in their element in this. You may think it's wrong, but that's how it is how things are.

On what the West should say, here I'm the most pessimistic because A, I simply don't know. B, I think what happens in the language used by the West, and actually the amount of sanctions that happened against Russia, exceeded anyone's expectation. And it simply indicates that there's a certain-- how should I say-- politics, emotions, justified emotions of sympathy to Ukraine as a victim of Russia's aggression.

But these emotions take upper hand, so that politicians, instead of thinking strategically about the sanctions, they just follow these emotions. And I don't blame those politicians because we live in the age where headlines and politics, tweets unfortunately can help you or doom you if you're in politics.

So in other words, on the Western side, I see this almost inexorable sliding movement towards a victory language. It has not yet reached that World War II unconditional surrender people remember about nuclear weapons. And some people are still afraid of them, but it's getting this way. Many people act as if-- in the West, I mean-- people act as if there were no nuclear weapons.

Some Ukrainian bloggers, well known people, followed by thousands upon thousands say, don't be afraid of Russian nukes. Just go and defeat Putin. So that's contagious. It creates a discourse that leads from Ukraine's side, from the Western side to more confrontation.

And of course, the response on the Russian side, as I've just tried to analyze could be something commensurable, but opposite to such an extent that politicians may lose control of these events. I don't want to be a doomsayer. I think using tactical nukes is insane. I was born in the era when Reagan and Gorbachev declared famously that no nuclear war can be fought, waged or can be won, and I do believe in it.

But at the same time, we know how things go out of control disastrously. And right now, I don't think the West is in its best strategic element, that Western statesmen and stateswomen think clearly about this war. Their mind is clouded by emotions.

So hopefully, in one month's time, in two months time, we can get a better picture. But the war is a tough, tough fortune. So the war can load a few nasty surprises to us, and more emotional outbreaks are quite likely.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

Given what you just said about not using the word "victory" and the emotionalism, actually, on both sides that seems to be creeping in, we've had a couple of questions about whether or not we're engaged in a new Cold War, whether or not that's the appropriate term, looking back at the period between '45 and '91.

And a couple of people asked as well, what's the way out? How do we step back? How do we come to some kind of-- at least in my words-- a cease fire-- that's my word, not the questioner's word-- a cease fire if not an end and a resolution to the conflict?

**VLADISLAV
ZUBOK:**

Well, Cold War. Oh, boy, Cold War looks like a cozy thing to me right now. Would just bypass this stage. It's dangerous. It's real war. It stays within local environment. But this is a beast that can suddenly-- like flames that can burst out. And it can become a European war, unfortunately.

Yes, there were a couple of weeks when the Balks were quite scared by the immediate developments. The Poles-- I know even some Polish workers in England, they returned to Poland, to their families. So this has passed so far, but it can come back. It's highly dangerous.

We can have a situation like the Cuban Missile Crisis, with nukes being used on both sides for bluffing purposes, but also the fine line between bluffing and actual use can be blurred considerably. So unfortunately, we're now beginning to miss the good old Cold War, in my view.

There are no rules. All the rules are broken. At the worst times of the Cold War, there were no attempts to sanction the central bank of the Soviet Union. Now they are. In the West, people speak of financial warfare of mass destruction, unprecedented stuff, all kinds of precedents broken and being broken right now.

On what to do and how to exit, I began to speak about it. During the '80s, during the days of the Cold War, when everyone was hugely worried, people came up with this graduated reduction of tension. Carol, you remember better this, that best minds thought of steps by steps, when you step back from the precipice backward. And that's a nice theory. Unfortunately, I don't see how this theory can be applied right now.

People in Ukraine think that Putin is a monster. He is Hitler. He may be worse. Everyone should get rid of him, period. So you know what kind of negotiations with the Russian leadership, I don't know. So you sit and wait until the Russian leadership would change, until the regime would change. OK, keep on praying. But the war will then take over and drive you to it in the directions you don't want to go.

**ELIZABETH
WOOD:**

So I think we can take one or two more questions, and then we should wrap it up. We've got many interesting questions. One question is the question, what would it take for Putin himself to decide to declare victory? Which again, apropos of negotiations, made me think of your earliest work on the negotiations of the foreign ministry and how from 1917, they were very educated elites and had been in [INAUDIBLE] with Pushkov. Whereas, in the Soviet era, they were less experienced.

So maybe it would be interesting to hear if you have any comment on Madejski and Lavrov as waging two different sets of negotiations that don't seem to be going very well. Do you think it's really all in Putin's hands, or do you think there's any chance for negotiations at this point?

**VLADISLAV
ZUBOK:**

Well, during the first weeks of the war, I personally I don't know. Was I wrong or right? I don't know, but I personally didn't believe in any negotiations because I thought Putin set certain military goals, and he would not stop the war until he would-- I don't know-- take Kyiv. Then he failed to take Kyiv. Then he withdraw troops. He reformatted the war.

But then Ukrainians, of course, took heart and I said, full liberation of Ukraine, and this is the war for you. And this is the war where chances change quite unpredictably, but the impact on the morale of the sides, who is supposed to negotiate at the same time, the effects are huge.

So it's a little bit like the Korean War using this Cold War example in 1950, early 1951, and the front line moves South, and you have some Americans approaching Stalin-- I researched it a little bit, so let me say-- quietly, and let's sit and talk. And then Stalin dismisses this and says, my armies are marching. North Korean army is marching South.

And then, of course, after Inchon, Americans and the UN going North. And then Stalin quietly approached these people through his representatives. He said, let's sit and talk. And then Americans in the State Department said, no way we can talk with them at this point. So you see how it goes.

And I simply don't see, until the fatigue sets in. And for that, you need to have many ingredients, maybe other breakthroughs. And from Ukrainian sides, I'm sure they're hopeful for some kind of spring counteroffensive. I don't know.

And only after the stalemate happens, only after that, some kind of truce discussions, of truce can be possible. But this system, unfortunately, is much more dynamic than the system of the Korean War and even the Crimean War of the 19th century because when the Allied took Sevastopol in 1855, the British wanted to dismember Russia, get rid of Russia, give Poland to the Poles, Finland to Sweden. Caucasus should be free and all kinds of interesting things.

And the French said, no. We want to keep Russia as part of the concept of Europe. And then the Austrians thought the same. We don't have a concept of Europe anymore. We have Americans basically very active in Europe and being the strongest voice, and we have the EU going jingoistic as well, in my view. So this is, in a sense, much more volatile and much I am much less optimistic about the chances of cold-headed approach to talks than it had been before.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

It's a pessimistic note to end on, but there's an article just bearing out this point in today's *Financial Times* that argues or reports that Putin was prepared for some kind of negotiated settlement until the sinking of the [INAUDIBLE], at which point he seems hell bent for revenge at this point, which only goes back to your point, I think, about the fortunes of war dictating the willingness to sit down and negotiate with the enemy.

So as I said, I hate to end on such a pessimistic note, but I would really love to thank you for instead of "coming" in quotation marks to MIT today, we're delighted that you came, and thanks for revising the talks so that it would fit the current issues that were all been talking about. I'd like to thank our audience. I'd like to thank Michelle and Laura for helping us with all the publicity and the technical aspects and everything.

Please check the Starr Forum website so that you can find out about future events. We're close to the end of the semester, so there are a couple more events this year. But Elizabeth and I will be putting together another series for the fall about the focus on Russia series. And we'll see where we are then with the war in Ukraine. So thank you so much, Vlad. It's great to see you. We've known each other for a long time, so I'm really glad that you were able to participate today.

VLADISLAV Yeah, sorry for the snafu at the start, but the rest of--

ZUBOK:

CAROL Technology, it's a problem.

SAIVETZ:

VLADISLAV Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

ZUBOK:

CAROL Thank you to everybody. And thank you for attending. So take care everyone.

SAIVETZ:

VLADISLAV Take care everyone.

ZUBOK: