

Opinion – On and Beyond Whataboutism in the Russia-Ukraine War

Written by Lorenzo Kamel

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/03/06/opinion-on-and-beyond-whataboutism-in-the-russia-ukraine-war/>

LORENZO KAMEL, MAR 6 2022

About 10% of the Russian population is composed by Muslims: it's the largest Muslim group in Europe. Notwithstanding this massive presence, Russia's brutality against Muslims is rooted in history and is still very visible in Chechnya and beyond. In his talk on February 21, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, mentioned the Ottoman Empire. He also stated that Crimean Tatars are "radical Islamic terrorists". History, however, reminds us that Crimea was not Russian. At least 300,000 Tatars had been expelled by the Russian authorities from the time of Tsar Alexander up to the reign of Stalin. Their lands were filled with Slavs and other Christians whose inheritors inhabit these areas up to the present.

In recent years, Putin has tried to co-opt Islam rather than antagonizing it. Chechnya's puppet ruler Ramzan Kadyrov is possibly the most glaring example of such a strategy. To be aware of these and many other problematic aspects, however, should not be used as a pretext to accept the many uncritical and hypocritical simplifications that can currently be seen in many Western – and particularly European – countries.

The ongoing illegal invasion of Ukraine has consolidated a number of concepts that in previous conflicts – from Yugoslavia to Iraq – enjoyed a much more limited support in Europe and North America.

The first one is the fact that "pre-emptive self-defence" (that is the pillar of the US's "War on Terror"), like any "pretextual invocation of force used in advance" (John Quigley's definition of the 1967's Six-Day War), are always illegal and immoral, and deserve coherent reactions. The second one is that massacres involving children and families are always the responsibility of those perpetrating them. Last but not least, there are no "collateral damages" when civilians are involved.

All this applies to Putin and his bloody and immoral plans. But also to the 78-day bombing campaign waged by NATO, without U.N. authorization, during the Kosovo War (between 80% and 87.5% of the victims of the Kosovo conflict died during or in the aftermath of the NATO operation), and to Ukrainian authorities as well. The relatively little-known story of the Italian journalist Andrea Rocchelli (1983–2014) who was deliberately killed, together with many other civilians, in Donbas by the Armed Forces of Ukraine is a case in point.

In a more striking way, it also applies to the war waged by the U.S. and their allies (Ukraine included) against Iraq, when hundreds of thousands of human beings were killed – for which no one is held accountable. In other words, today more than ever it's important to stress the immorality of bombing and/or sending tanks into foreign countries: war is terrible everywhere (and not more terrible when it happens in Europe) and to discuss whether the U.S. officials who deceived the world and invaded a sovereign country in 2003 were ever held to account should not be dismissed simply as an expression of whataboutism.

Invading a sovereign country (Ukraine) and "exporting democracy" are indeed two illegal and immoral sides of the same coin. Put it differently, Russia is today "exporting" what the U.S and their allies exported in many world areas for decades: their (strategic, political, economic) interests. And yet, such strategies have attracted extremely different reactions among "Western audiences". This appears even more meaningful if considering that many Western

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countries show today no problem in accepting hundreds of thousands of refugees. All this is part of an ongoing striking double-standard which would deserve more attention and a deeper critical understanding.

Ukraine, a sovereign country, is not required to coordinate its policies with Russia. This is even more the case if considering that Russia, where pan-Russian and “neo-Tzarist” nationalist groups are hardly unknown, hasn’t fulfilled the agreement it signed within the frame of the conflict in Georgia in 2008 and hasn’t withdrawn its forces from that country.

Notwithstanding this, in recent years, the US and its European and other partners have sent weapons worth billions of dollars to Ukraine. This process became increasingly evident after 2014, when the despotic, and yet democratically elected, government led by Viktor Janukovyč was overthrown in highly debated circumstances, which involved also figures like the far-right leader Andrij Volodymyrovych Parubij (who became the President of the Ukrainian Parliament in 2016), and the Azov Battalion, the “neo-Nazi” unit currently enlisted in the National Guard of Ukraine.

All this reminds us that there are not easy explanations, nor facile solutions, as there rarely were in previous global crises such as the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962. Regardless, a starting point would be for France, Germany and Italy – which, in contrast to the U.S., have much to lose from the current crisis – proposing a “security dialogue” which will confirm the “historical guarantee” that Nato won’t enlarge to include Ukraine. This would be in exchange for a pledge in support of Ukrainian sovereignty (including over the Donbas region) and a demobilisation along the Ukraine-Russia border.

500 years ago, Niccolò Macchiavelli wrote his cynical sentence “do not humiliate anyone which you are not sure to destroy”. The international community must act in a way so that none of the involved parties feel that they are without an exit strategy. The alternative might be the end of humanity as we knew it, until today.

About the author:

Lorenzo Kamel teaches Global History at the University of Turin. He is also the director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali’s Research Studies and a faculty member of the PhD programme in Global History of Empires. Among his books are *The Middle East from Empire to Sealed Identities* (Edinburgh UP) and *Imperial Perceptions of Palestine: British Influence and Power in Late Ottoman Times* (I.B. Tauris).