



## **Mirroring the Present From the Past: Diplomatic Reflections on Totalitarian Challenge in Twentieth-Century Europe**

By

**ADEBILE, Oluwaseyi Paul**

**Department of History and Diplomatic Studies,  
Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo.**

[opadebile@gmail.com](mailto:opadebile@gmail.com)

**+2348037934052**

### **Abstract**

History is a discipline that connects a supposed 'forgotten' past to the present. The wake of the global system to a full-blown Russo-Ukrainian war on Thursday, February 24, 2022, and the geopolitical intricacies influencing the diplomatic approach of Russia's Putin in beginning and sustaining a conflict scenario, in what may be termed 'Russia's Renaissance' in global politics, appears driven by totalitarian values, which is in contrast to the celebrated liberal alternative – democracy. This is, however, evident in its age-long hegemonic Communist socio-ideological formation, a formidable and functional military strategy laced with nuclear artillery and, more importantly, well-sponsored propagandised causal narratives, objectives, and press renditions via supposedly credible international media platforms. Given the current happenings arising from a traceable historical antecedent in European diplomacy, this paper connects the Russian regime under Vladimir Putin to such totalitarian experiences around Europe during the interwar period (1918 - 1939). Using the event study and comparative approach in historical research, the study attempts a reflection on the totalitarian challenge in twentieth-century Europe to capture the totalitarian dimension of the extant diplomatic siege. Its findings suggest that Russia's war in Ukraine is contributing to the resurgence of totalitarian regimes in Europe and potentially other geo-strategic regions of the world, resonating the dynamics seen during the interwar era and raising ambiguous concerns for international security, connected to the factors that led to World War II (1939-1945). Hence, the paper submits that the aggressive and un-conciliatory approach of the early twenty-first century Russian statesman suggests a new wave of a more global totalitarian order.

**Keywords: Defence, Diplomacy, Hegemony, International History, Military Strategy, Totalitarianism**

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## Introduction

History is characterised by bringing life to a supposed 'forgotten' past. Scarcely does any discipline share the exclusive characteristics of connecting the present to the past and vice versa. More often, the adoption of multidisciplinary and/or transdisciplinary orientations in historical methodology has proven to inform a more nuanced understanding of past events and their connections to existing developments, both locally and globally, making such analysis both insightful and rewarding. Moreover, the complexities of global diplomacy, for instance, have often paved the way for different interpretations, and historians are arguably settled with the idea of history repeating itself.

In this respect, the war between Russia and Ukraine presents a fitting scenario. Years before the eventual declaration of war, Russia's diplomatic policy towards various regions in the global arena focused on seeking opportunities to proliferate its influence and demonstrate its political and military power for national preservation and global relevance (Adebile, 2021, pp. 35-36). However, following the declaration of War by Russia against Ukraine and the consequent invasion of Russian military forces from Belarus, Crimea and Russia, various documentation, including magazine articles, official reports, and even books, has been published. Kuzio (2024) and Mankoff (2022), for instance, explored the origins of Russia's invasion of Ukraine within the remit of nationalities. Mimiko (2022) analysed the contours and insinuations of the conflict from a realist paradigm. These narratives and analyses, among others, have centred on its historical roots, contemporary applications, philosophical strides, ideological inclinations, and the diplomatic implications of the war. As a result, the present study attempts to add a perspective that seems to have been silent in scholarly discussions and analysis. This bothers the totalitarian dimension of the extant diplomatic siege.

That said, totalitarianism, as commonly accepted in political parlance, is an authoritarian regime that operates through the platform of a single ideologically inclined minority political party or group, with specific instruments, usually propaganda or use of force, to influence and compel public accord and submission to the agenda of the ruling party. However, early totalitarian theorists like Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski provide an interesting perspective in *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. In their analysis,

they identified a 'six-ring model' of totalitarian regimes, these are: “an overarching, all-encompassing ideology; a single party state; a police [military] force willing to use terror to enforce the will of the state and its ideological vision; a monopoly on communications to manage this society; a monopoly on weapons within the state; and a centrally directed economy to work in the interest of the state” (Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1956, pp. 21-22). By this, totalitarian regimes exercise complete and absolute control over their state, commonly through its fraternised structures, the party and its advocates, a strong and effective force, schools and colleges, the mass media and other significant cliques in the state, either of economic, social, religious or cultural predisposition.

Totalitarian systems, obviously anathema of liberal values, often erode respect for human social and political liberties. However, the knowledge of Communist Russia driven by Marxian Socialism, Nazi Germany agitated by the Aryan Chauvinist ideology. Fascist Italy motivated by integral nationalism as well as the inherent contrasting capitalist orientation in the Fascist and Nazis pursuit, which was defamed in the communist manifesto has influenced a generalised notion of an unsatisfactory clarification on the appropriate usage of term 'totalitarianism' (Communist Manifesto, 1884, English translation (1888)). It is pertinent to note, notwithstanding that these variances are mainly expressed in the ideologies and opinions of the ruling parties in the different states, and do not affect their common feature of dictatorship, absolutism, and sometimes, bloodletting approaches.

For the present study, the depiction of totalitarianism is extended beyond the boundaries of the typical nation-state and applied to the global geo-political context. However, this is not intended to obscure the traditional perception of totalitarian regimes as a product of national political ideologies but to depict the abrasive expansion of totalitarian ideas in geo-strategic spaces and global politics. “Mirroring the present from the past”, the article, within the context of totalitarian philosophy, draws from the historical experiences of totalitarianism in European diplomacy to bring a perspective on the current development in global diplomacy. The paper adds the totalitarian discourse, which has been shied away from in literature, to the analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian war by using the event study and comparative methods in historical research. Thus, the following section focuses on European totalitarian experiences during the twentieth century to foreground

totalitarianism's ideals and dynamics in practice. In a subsequent section, this will provide insights for constructive comparative context with the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

### **<b>The Past: Totalitarianism in Twentieth Century Europe</b>**

The emergence of totalitarian regimes became a pivotal development that would shape international politics in the interwar years and the rest of the first half of the 20th century. Shortly after the armistice of WWI, several powerful European states—Russia, Germany, and Italy—including Japan in East Asia—were taken over by dictators. These events began to stir up similar sentiments in Spain and other places across the world.

### **<b>Why Totalitarianism in Post-World War I?</b>**

The era of totalitarianism surfaced in the annals of history following the end of WWI (1914-1919). By 1939, Europe had hitherto grown conservative and absolute monarchical governments and had already experienced significant political transformations. In France, Britain, Switzerland and some other places, liberal democracies had found their footing, while in Germany, Italy, Russia, and, by far, Japan in East Asia, totalitarian despots had grabbed the reins of power. Perhaps this could be due to its radical approach to challenging the 'incompatible norms' of the post-WWI international arrangement. Totalitarianism soon became fashionable and a wave of the future. In several ways, WWI experience occasioned the emergence of an era of totalitarian regimes in Europe. Following the defeat of Germany in the war, the Allied Powers- Britain, France, Italy, and later the United States met in Paris to make a constructive arrangement for peace and global stability (Kennedy, 1988, pp. 275-277). The ideological differences between the United States and the European powers would constitute a challenge in the process. The presentation of a fourteen-point agenda by Woodrow Wilson, influenced by the Monroe Doctrine and American democratic creed, contrasted the balance of power scheme, which European powers had hitherto practiced (Library of Congress, n.d.). The Wilsons' ideal emphasised collective security, self-determination, and the establishment of a global organisation, the League of Nations, coupled with reconciling Germany, which, according to him, was the best prescription for sustaining global peace and security.

Although the European powers did not receive this well, they seemed to be left with no

alternative other than embracing these ideals (Kissinger, 1994, pp. 218-223), probably in gesture for the messianic role the United States played in piloting the war to a successful end. Be that as it may, the European powers resorted to making slight modifications to match their collective and personal interests. Notably, the European powers would have preferred a peace arrangement that would guarantee their security and forestall threats from Germany in the future. France, in her case, would not easily forget the humiliation she suffered from Germany in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, specifically the seizure of Alsace and Lorraine, which constituted grave economic implications for her. Thus, France was interested in a settlement that would degrade Germany. For Britain, Germany was the aggressor; therefore, she must be punished and held responsible for the war. In addition, the growing German naval force portended a threat to Britain's security; as such, Britain wanted a reduction of German military, specifically its navy (Knock, 1998, p. 120). Having stepped out of the war in 1917 at the commencement of the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia had since been preoccupied with her domestic affairs, so she was not involved in the Paris settlement.

The deliberations and consensus made in Paris produced the Treaty of Versailles (Olmstead, 2018; Graebner & Bennett, 2011, pp. 1-5). The 1919 Versailles arrangement had already taken a modified version from Woodrow Wilson's prescription, such that it has been received among historians to be too harsh on Germany, owing to the provision of Article 231 of the treaty, which contained the war guilt clause and its accompanying grave reparations. The terms of the treaty were indeed unbearable for Germany. Thus, she sought to break loose from the Versailles scheme, which was considered a *diktat*. Britain and France were left, following the walk away of the United States (for reasons of her isolationist policy), to enforce the Versailles terms and confront Germany's defiance of the treaty. Essentially, the repressive conditions placed on Germany in Europe, coupled with domestic hardship and apprehension, stirred the Germans' desire for a change, which Hitler's rise appeared to offer.

Correspondingly, these nations' engagement in WWI drained the economy of Europe. The economic depression that followed the 1929 Wall Street Crash led to an overall economic collapse. Russia, Italy, and Japan suffered severe economic turmoil during this period. The

endemic unemployment, loss of properties and general devastation made it difficult to make ends meet. (Graebner & Bennett, 2011; Kennedy, 1988, pp. 278-279). Thus, they were at the mercy of militant leaders as Stalin in Russia, Hitler in Germany, and Mussolini in Italy, who promised to facilitate change.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was an event that demonstrated the ability of a devoted and zealous minority to exercise dominance and instil its ideology on the state. This became evident in the victory of the Bolsheviks over the majority of the white army. Again, under Vladimir Lenin, it was shown how liberal values can be subjected to the will of a single minority party and leader. This way, Lenin had already laid the foundation for a minority party dictatorship that would be adopted by other minority leaders in other states. However, the context of the current study, drawing from the European experience of totalitarianism during the interwar era (1919-1939), seems identical, as will be demonstrated, with an extant development in global politics in the 21st century, the Russo-Ukrainian war.

#### **<b>Totalitarian Challenge to the Versailles International System, 1919-1939</b>**

Several factors have been considered in the analysis of issues resulting in the disruption and collapse of the Versailles order. While it has been argued that the absence of the United States in implementing the Versailles arrangement was the primary factor in this respect, others have attributed the sinister outcome to the economic depression of the late 1920s. (Link, Edwin, & Anderson, 1978, p. 593). However, none of these factors appeared to have influenced the tide of happenings that culminated in the disorganisation of the Versailles order and the eventual failure of the League of Nations as the emergence and doings of totalitarian regimes, which resulted in the outbreak of WWII.

It would be needful to remember that the development of the Versailles arrangement was influenced by the ideologies and interests of some 'big four', side-lining the contributions of other powerful states within the system it tends to re-order. The term 'Big Four' describes the statesmen of the four main allied powers: British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Orlando, French Premier Georges Clemenceau, and U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. These leaders played a key role in the Paris Peace Conference and shaped the Versailles Peace Treaty of 1919 following World War I. The outcome of this

'utopian' peace arrangement was the exhibition of irreconcilable interest in favour of some against others. Since Britain and France were 'architects' of the Versailles scheme, it opened up to satisfy their interest at the expense of such powers as Russia, Japan, and Germany in particular, which was compelled under international pressure to sign the treaty (Henig, 1995, pp. 1-13). Thus, the lop-sidedness of the Versailles order naturally developed discontent for it on the part of its victims; therefore, instead of defending the order, they aligned on the offensive, staging up defiance to offset it (Malcomson, 2025, pp. 23-24). The development and spread of totalitarian ideals became platforms of pursuing their interest in the post-Versailles era.

In Russia, the triumph of Bolshevism in 1917 and the subsequent institution of the communist system under the auspices of Vladimir Lenin were instrumental to the proliferation of totalitarian ideology. It allows states to exist in isolation of globally accepted norms and take the state's interest as paramount above all other considerations. Following the demise of Lenin in 1924, other leaders aspired to ascend to the reins of power; notable among them were Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin. As the event turned out, Stalin established himself as a dictator of the Soviet Union, enforcing totalitarianism in the USSR. Unfolding events in Russia culminated in a period known as the **Red Scare** between 1919 and 1920 in the United States. This was a period of fear and anxiety on the possibility of a similar revolution in the United States by the Communists from Russia. More so, bombings in certain American cities and the assassination attempts on Attorney General Mitchell Palmer and John D. Rockefeller during the period further intensified the apprehension. Thus, the United States had to forestall the possibility of such an occurrence by passing a bill in Congress on the **restriction of immigrants**, arresting and deporting suspected communists in what has been regarded as the **Palmer Raids**. At the time, thousands of immigrants were also extradited from the U.S.

Essentially, the influence of Russia within the architecture of international diplomacy before the commencement of the Great War and the Russian Revolution particularly, was undoubtedly significant such that her non-partisanship in the armistice of WWI due to her new nomenclature as a communist state held a significant challenge to the post-Versailles order. Although Russia joined the League of Nations, it could not contain the dominance of



France and Britain and the inherent inhibitions placed on it, especially on concerns of interest. This came to a head when Russia went against the League's consensus on the Finland issue, which subsequently earned her an expulsion from the League in 1939.

In 1922, events in Italy had taken a similar turn with the emergence of a new fascist regime. Benito Mussolini had proclaimed himself as the absolute dictator of Italy, having discredited the old order through propaganda, coercion, and violence, lending widespread credence to his emergence. Fascist ascendancy in Italy posed a daunting challenge to the post-Versailles order (Bosworth, 1998). Although Prime Minister Vittorio Orland of Italy was one of the significant delegates of the Paris Peace Conference, he could not achieve the desires of the Italians, probably because of so much domestic pressure and the assertiveness of his colleagues at the Conference. Their quest for additional territories on the Coast of Adriatic was not entrenched in the treaty. These formed the basis for Italy's dissatisfaction and defiance in the post-Versailles era. By the mid-1930s, Mussolini had started pursuing his sinister interest in establishing a Roman Empire where Italy could assert its dominance. In this light, Mussolini deployed Italian troops to invade Ethiopia in October 1935. The League condemned the act and imposed economic sanctions on Italy to curtail her mission. Italy disregarded the League's positions and continued its aggressive policy in Ethiopia. By May 1936, Emperor Haile Selassie had already been exiled from Ethiopia and had integrated into the Italian Empire.

In 1926, Japanese Emperor Hirohito ascended to leadership in Japan. Although he did not exercise total control over the government- that is, Japan did not officially adopt fascism- the military's powerful position in the government enabled them to enforce a similar type of totalitarianism. Following the Great War, Japan had been poised to develop Western diplomacy in East Asia and institute itself as its vanguard. In the Versailles arrangement, Japan's interest was not captured as it only consented to Japan's possession of China's Shantung. This never satisfied the hegemonic aspiration of Japan in East Asia and engendered Japan's conflictual stance in the post-Versailles era. Since Japan would not gain support from America, Britain, and France in her expansionist policy, she chose militarism after the order of Russia and Germany (Graebner & Bennett, 2011, p. 102). In this respect, Japan started to expand its military, especially its naval force in the Pacific. To control this,



Charles E. Hughes, then United States Secretary of State, initiated a conference in 1921 where the **Nine Power Pact** was ratified to reduce arms racing and curtail Japan's naval expansion, particularly.

All these did not seem to have limited Japan in pursuing her hegemonic interest; she furthered her goal toward subjugating China economically and, by far, politically. On 18 September 1937, the Japanese troops occupied Manchuria and changed it into a vassal state called Manchukuo. Hovering on the appeasement policy of the League, Japan continued its expansion to other Chinese ports. These actions were indeed confrontational to the Versailles order, specifically its clause on disarmament and an outright disregard of the Nine-Power Pacts of 1921, which largely disorganised the sanctity of the Versailles Treaty.

Totalitarian characteristics in Germany during the inter-war years were profound. Although Russia, Italy, and Japan reserved their dissatisfaction with the Versailles arrangement, Germany's case was beyond mere dissatisfaction; it was the most disgruntled state in the post-Versailles era. An outstanding peculiarity to Germany in the treaty was that it was based on the fact that Germany was accused of destabilising peace and instigating the Great War. Therefore, Article 231 of the Versailles treaty established a **war guilt clause** on Germany; consequently, Germany was to take full responsibility for the cost of the war (Kissinger, 1994, p. 245). Having been obliged to ratify the Versailles treaty, Germany was ushered into an era of severe economic and social hardship. The untold burden Versailles imposed on Germany, coupled with German popular public discontent against the arrangement, paved the way for the effectiveness of Hitler's propaganda in Germany. The rise of Adolf Hitler in the Nationalist Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi Party) in 1921 and his eventual emergence as German Chancellor in 1933 dealt a grave blow on the Versailles arrangement. However, before the triumph of Nazism and Hitler as the German figure several diplomatic interplays had featured toward the nuances arising from the ill-fated peace settlement.

German foreign minister Gustav Stresemann's advocacy of the **fulfillment policy** in 1923 focused on the recovery of Germany from the inhibitions of the Versailles treaty. The policy upheld that Germany would only respond to the payment of reparations when the

restrictions in the Versailles against Germany were reviewed. Since Germany was not responding in the payment of reparations, not just on policy grounds but really because of her economic disability, France occupied the Ruhr, the German industrial sector, to explore steel and coal. This action further angered the Germans. In a bid to limit France's assertive implementation of the reparation payment, the **Dawes plan** was introduced in 1924 (Kissinger, 1994, pp. 278, 282-283). The plan sought to lessen the burden of the reparations imposed on Germany by providing loans from America to offset some percentage of the reparations. Although this programme was not well received by Germans, considering it as a form of enslavement, it was adopted such that by 1925, France had withdrawn from the Ruhr.

In the same year, a congress was held in London to foster the security of Western Europe. In the meeting, the standard frontiers of France, Germany and Belgium were established, notably the neutralisation of the Rhineland. The consensus of this congress was ratified in what is to be known as the **Locarno Treaty** of 1925. By 1929, the **Young Plan** had replaced the Dawes plan, premised on the need to further facilitate the reparations payment (Kissinger, 1994, pp. 282-283). The dissatisfaction of the Germans to the various so-called external alleviation economic policies made the activism of Hitler and the Nazis party fashionable to the Germans. Essentially, Hitler's book, *Mein Kampf*, where he expressed his intense antipathy toward all inhibitions and odd impositions against Germany's freedom and dominance in Europe, became trendy as Germans perceived him as their Messiah (Tucker, 1965, pp. 558-59).

By 1933, Adolf Hitler had emerged as the absolute leader of the German state. Immediately, he structured a cabinet of seasoned technocrats, outstanding industrialists and ranking military officers to support his restructuring and defiance campaigns. Soon, Hitler commenced his **Saturday Surprises** – a campaign to cast off the shackles of Versailles, for instance, the reoccupation of the Rhine on Saturday, 7 March 1936 (Shore, 1999, p. 5). It was usual of him to launch his defiant operations on Saturdays when major political players have resorted to domestic relaxation. In addition, he commenced the rearmament of the German military and conscripted about 550,000 men into the various tiers of the military apparatus (Collier & Pedley, 2000, p. 143). The turning of events in Germany became of

growing concern to the allied powers, France and Britain specifically, so they condemned Hitler's disobedience to the Versailles Order. Hitler's justification for his action was the need to curtail Russia's communist influence in Germany. This excuse was not satisfactory to Britain and France; as such, they wanted a corporate effort towards calling Germany to order (Collier & Pedley, 2000, p. 143). Thus, the **Stresa Conference** of 1935 was conveyed in France with the attendance of Britain and Italy. Unfortunately, the Conference could not achieve its purpose owing to Italy's expansionism in North Africa. Following the failure of the Stresa Conference, France turned to Russia, which seemed to share similar fears about Germany's military recuperation. At the time, it became clear to Hitler that the Allied powers were not interested in adopting an aggressive approach to preserve the Versailles arrangement (Shore, 1999, pp. 5-6). Therefore, Hitler went on to demilitarise the Rhineland, and the allied powers took no decisive action due to their appeasement policy for peace.

In furtherance of a pacific approach to peace, the **Munich Pact** was signed in Germany. As its terms dictated, Sudetenland, a region in Czechoslovakia occupied by German-speaking people, was handed over to Hitler to keep him from further expansion in Europe. Scarcely had one year passed that Hitler revoked the agreement of Munich when he held claim to major parts of Czechoslovakia as a German province in March 1939. While the allied powers were still trying to gather momentum to address his possession of Czechoslovakia, on September 1, 1939, he proceeded to invade Poland. At this point, the defiance of the totalitarian regime had come to a head that the international order could no longer contain; the outcome was the outbreak of WWII. The extant Russo-Ukrainian war, as seen in the following section, shares stark similarities with totalitarian schemes in international politics during the interwar years (1919-1939). What has remained a cold concern is the anticipation of whether or not the war would precipitate a Third World War. The perception of history repeating itself seems to be brought to the fore as hands are crossed with events unfolding.

### **The Present: The Russian-Ukraine War**

Since the end of the Second World War (1939-1945), and the Cold War especially, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been the most envisaged threat to European, if not global, peace and security. While it has generated fearful concerns about the possibility of it resulting in a Third World War, its impact on the global economy, food security and energy market stability has been profound (Umar, Riaz, & Yousaf, 2022; Mbah & Wasum, 2022). The war was taken to have started in February 2014, when a clash ensued between Russia and Ukraine on the official position of Crimea and Donbas (Walker, 2023, pp. 4-5).

While these grievances included the long-simmering dispute over the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the shape of the post-Cold War security architecture in Europe... a worldview Putin had long expressed, emphasizing the deep-seated unity among the Eastern Slavs—Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, who all trace their origins to the medieval Kyivan Rus commonwealth... The corollary to that view is the claim that distinct Ukrainian and Belarusian identities are the product of foreign manipulation and that, today, the West is following in the footsteps of Russia's imperial rivals in using Ukraine (and Belarus) as part of an “anti-Russian project.” ...The salience that Putin and other Russian elites assign to the idea of Russian-Ukrainian-Belarusian unity helps explain the origins of the current conflict, notably why Moscow was willing to risk a large-scale war on its borders when neither Ukraine nor NATO posed any military threat. It also suggests that Moscow's ambitions extend beyond preventing Ukrainian NATO membership and encompass a more thorough aspiration to dominate Ukraine politically, militarily, and economically (Mankoff, 2022).

The above equally offers valuable insights into Russia's justification for the War in Ukraine within the context of an aged long historical, cultural, and political collectivism that became fractured by the collapse of the Soviet Union around the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century. Another deduction from Mankoff's (2022) submission paints the interplay of a West-propelled anti-Russian project, which Moscow under Putin is determined to dislodge in pursuit of a geopolitical unity that must be reinforced and preserved, void of interference from the West. In doing this, Moscow's interest “to dominate Ukraine [and by extension, the entire Eastern Slvas, including the emerging Eurasia geo-strategic spaces] politically, militarily and economically” underscores the totalitarian

ideology that goads Russia's ambition.

### **Origins and Totalitarian Dynamics**

The present war between Russia and Ukraine can easily find geopolitical interpretations rooted in historical trajectories regarding Russia's geostrategic, if not hegemonic, interests in Europe and global affairs. Its origin can be traced to the beginning of the post-Soviet era, especially with Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991, which was decisive in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the two countries deepened diplomatic contacts till the end of the first decade of the 2000s (Walker, 2023, p. 6). It is important to note that what eventually became the Russo-Ukrainian war began on February 24, 2022, following the Russian military invasion of Ukraine through Belarus, Russia, and Crimea. It was the fallout of a protracted eight years of conflict between Ukrainian forces and some Russian-supported separatists in eastern Ukraine (Walker, 2024, p. 4).

To be sure, the geopolitical complexities of the conflict are not only evident in internal and regional dynamics, but have reconfigured geostrategic alignments, unsettled global security policy preferences, and reflect the resurgence of a broader perception such as totalitarianism, if not the beginning of a new ideological confrontation as the Cold War in global politics (Lucas, 2014, pp. 170-175). Though a near origin of the War has been commonly traced to 2014 in received documentation, the long-term antecedent to the conflict lay in Moscow's dissatisfaction with the manipulation of international politics, which have consistently undermined Russia's interest; to say, from the permutations in the Cuba crisis in 1962, to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and afterward the unceasing eastward expansion of NATO. The latter has especially joined with the existing discontent of the Russian state to goad decisive military operations to defend its national security interests and its position in the global system (Mimiko, 2022). However, from a national point of view, the Russian Statesman Vladimir Putin, in his February 21, 2022 address, elaborates on both historical and contemporary paradigms of an anti-Russian agenda intended to obfuscate the nation's historical heritage, geopolitical influence, and diplomatic relevance. In his address, he pontificates on the origin of the Ukrainian state:

Ukraine is not just a neighbouring country for us. It is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space... Modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia. This process started practically right after the 1917 revolution. Then, both before and after the

Great Patriotic War, Stalin incorporated the USSR and transferred to Ukraine some lands that previously belonged to Poland, Romania and Hungary. In the process, he gave Poland part of what was traditionally German land as compensation, and in 1954, Khrushchev took Crimea away from Russia...and also gave it to Ukraine (Putin, 2022).

He added that this was “how the territory of modern Ukraine was formed”. This position on the origin of Ukraine has not been so disputed by sources, except for those raised by Ukrainians. They claim a separate nationality with their unique language, culture, traditions, and shared civic principles (Kuzio, 2024, pp. 234-235). To be clear, the ethnic connection between Russia and Ukraine is overtly complex, and it embroils a blend of historical, cultural, linguistic, and even political dimensions. However, what has been expressed in recent history as Ukrainian distinct national identities and experiences are arguably formations emerging from apparent events and changes in both national and global spheres. In essence, Ukraine's supposed unique cultural identities developed during the late twentieth century, especially from 1991 when it assumed statehood status, consequent to the Soviet Union's disintegration.

Moreover, Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan protests and the subsequent re-direction toward the European Union were considered a threat to Russia's geostrategic and, particularly, cultural clout. Thus, Russia's response with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, which eventually snowballed to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, has expectedly shaped the heightened nature of political and ethnic tensions between the two states. Since then, relations between the two have continued to evolve, making ethnicity complex and violently complicated. The multifaceted complications of these developments have equally featured a growing slope of totalitarianism.

Indeed, there have been perceptions of totalitarian stereotypes in Eastern Europe, especially Russia, for more than a decade now. Particular attention has been drawn to the attempt of Vladimir Putin using the COVID-19 induced conditions to flag up totalitarian ideals. For example, the Russian government threatened the public/citizens with heavy fines or jail terms for spreading any form of fake information, let alone the strict lockdown regimes justified on COVID-19 restrictions (BBC, 2020). Although the lockdown as a result of the pandemic is understandable given the attendant threat during the COVID-19

commotion, more so, the policy option was not limited to Russia or Europe but a global option to mitigate the spread of the virus. On the other hand, the issue of the spread of fake news may be scrutinised. Since the authenticity of news or information is only ascertained by state authorities, the authorities choose what is taken to be fake or not. By this, the right to freedom of speech is trampled, more importantly with the heralded punishment of either fines or imprisonment attached. This is nothing short of an attempt to suppress liberal ideas. In this connection, the perception of utilising COVID-19 restrictions in Russia to create and stabilise a non-liberal socio-economic model may not be entirely discountenanced.

Meanwhile, it has been suggested that it is difficult to know when exactly Russia began to mutate into totalitarianism (Davies, 2024). Critical observations, however, showed that from around the 2010s, the Kremlin gradually eroded the growing structure of civil liberties in Russian society. For instance, in 2012, the norm of public demonstrations commonly known as the Bolotnaya protests ended (Davies, 2024). Besides, ambiguous legislations were enacted, which regulated civil liberties in the long run and slowly imposed a highly autocratic and militarised society. On this account, mention can be made of the foreign agent law. The law, signed by Putin on July 20, 2012, and enforced four months after, necessitated non-governmental agencies getting financial aid or support from abroad and participating in “political activities” to register with the Russian Ministry of Justice as “foreign agents”. This law designates “foreign agents” to be subjected to stringent operational regulations, which include “extensive annual audits, quarterly financial reporting and voluminous reporting on all activities every half year” (The Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2014, p. 1). By this, state information control intensified, and organisations considered detrimental to Russia's new politico-economic and social ideals were dismantled. It may be of some relevance to mention that the reaction of Russians to these developments of continued repression and erosion of civil liberties seem passive. This could be adduced to the atmospheric fear slowly created by the Kremlin, supported by a few influential minorities. In addition, Putin's obsession to restore Russia's presupposed destiny as a global superpower matches the common interest of Russian nationals. This tends to weld support toward a common Russian interest, the Russian renaissance.



Further, Putin's military operations in Ukraine are suggestive of a rejoinder of the European totalitarian challenge of the twentieth century, which may also be labelled neo-totalitarianism. Sharing from Guriev and Treisman's (2022) argument in *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*, Kolesnikov (2022) commented thus:

. . .modern dictators rely more on the manipulation of information than on traditional methods such as repression, especially on mass scale. This is true of Putin up to a certain point, but it became clear back in 2020 – the year Russian constitution was changed to allow him remain in power beyond his present term... From 2014, wellbeing was replaced by something akin to “making Russia great again” . . . Ultimately, however, wherever there is a central thesis about a state's greatness, there will always be mobilization: in support of the government and the flag, and now, as it turns out in support of military “feats”.

Unpretentiously, this nature of totalitarian interface has been in the national and diplomatic glare since the outbreak of the extant Russian-Ukraine War. In this sense, some famous anti-war patriots are either dead, exiled or imprisoned (Kovalev, 2023). These socio-political manifestations in Russian society under the leadership of Vladimir Putin suitably capture Guriev and Treisman's (2022) explanation of *Spin Dictators*.

Comparably with twentieth century European totalitarian experiences, while some pro-Russian renaissance school students are used as snitches for the state, others that are anti-war have been victims of state persecutions. In this regard, a commentary has it that:

Russian schools are being militarized. ...forced labour at drone factories using press gangs of students from a local technical school in Alabuga, Tatarstan. State propaganda justifies and idealize this kind of militarized childhood with references to World War II, when Soviet children aided the war effort by assembling artillery shells after school. ... A new law on military conscription makes it much harder for men up to age 30 to leave Russia (Kovalev, 2023).

These, altogether, are identical to Stalin's approach before and following the outbreak of the Second World War. The use of violence, fear and a centralised autocratic ideology

engaged by European twentieth century totalitarian despots are being shrewdly reinforced to keep pace with a more sophisticated global system in the twenty-first century. This has been the experience in Russia since the second decade of the present century. It is pertinent to add at this juncture that Putin appears to draw inspiration from Stalin's state-building idea of a "strictly centralized, absolutely unitary state" (Putin, 2022). Moreover, his perceived desire to correct Stalin's undoing of not codifying "corresponding changes to the backbone documents, the constitution of the country." According to Putin, it seemed unnecessary to Stalin because "under the conditions of totalitarian regime, everything worked anyways, and outwardly it looked beautiful, attractive and even super democratic" (Putin, 2022).

Thus, attention needs to be drawn to the extant political ideological preference of the Russian state. It is gradually isolated from the rest of the world's common political and economic ideology. Russia unpretentiously has developed a somewhat totalitarian structure with a dictatorship that is under the sole control of a despot, Vladimir Putin, who to a large extent is established as the ruler of 'a Russian era' implementing totalitarian means not merely in domestic affairs, but also the nation's relations in region and global diplomacy.

### **Conclusion**

The fields of international relations and strategic diplomacy are arguably among the most dynamic, marked by unceasing eruptions occurring from time to time. These unfolding events are better interrogated with the historical lens due to its rich and robust perception from hindsight. Thus far, certain deductions can be made. In the same way that the Versailles arrangement contributed to the emergence of totalitarianism during the interwar years (1919-1939), the dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1990/91 and the unceasing expansion of the West in NATO's garb remains at the root of the extant Russo-Ukrainian war. Further, discussions on the texture of totalitarian regimes among which are Bolshevism in the Soviet Union, Fascism in Italy, Militarism in Japan and, of courses Nazism in Germany in twentieth century Europe is identical with the approach in which Russia's Putin is pursuing his geostrategic interest. In addition, the extant choreographed confrontation between Russia and Ukraine highlights the profundity of Russia's national

security concerns and its relevance in the architecture of international diplomacy.

Not surprisingly, Russia is adopting a globally unpopular ideology to the 21st century to gain geopolitical and global attention. While this has been well achieved given its aggressive military adventures since 2014, Moscow's un-reconciliatory stance despite international sanctions foregrounds a new wave of a more global totalitarian order. Just like the totalitarian dictators of the twentieth century, Vladimir Putin has assumed and created for himself an unchallengeable figure, better still, dictator of the Russian Federation, strengthened the military with unpredictable nuclear capabilities, propagandised diplomacy and repression of liberal ideals in Russia. Notably, this assumed figure has begun to export these ideals beyond European borders by creating a network of comrades/dictators across various geopolitical spaces. To be sure, emergent military dictators from the West Africa Sahel have begun to draw inspiration. It is hoped that the current diplomatic siege clothed in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine will not snowball into a globally undesired conflagration – a Third World War – just as totalitarian regimes in Europe contributed decisively to the outbreak of the Second World War.

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