

Lecture Timothy Snyder (Yale University, Fall 2022):

The Making of Modern Ukraine

01 - Ukrainian Questions Posed by Russian Invasion

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJczLlwp-d8>

00:00 Okay, greetings. Happy Thursday.

This is my first day of teaching, so I'm like slowly making the transition from, you know, summer to fall and public stuff to teaching stuff.

I'm very glad that I can teach a class on Ukraine.

I'm very glad that you all are here to at least try out this class on Ukraine.

Let me just say a word about the way the class is going to work and see if you have any questions about that, and then I will jump into, you didn't always have a beard.

I'm going to jump into a kind of introductory lecture about what some of the major themes of the class will be.

So this is a straightforward survey lecture class.

We're going to cover a lot of, we're gonna cover a lot of time.

01:00 We're gonna be focused on Ukraine, but not in the sense that we're trying to prove that Ukraine as it exists now had to exist, but rather we'll be concerned with the things which made it possible, and the other kinds of entities which were important on the territory along the way.

And more abstractly, we'll be concerned with the question of why this nation, why nations in general, how do you get from something, how do you get from nothing to something? Why are there nations in general? Or if there have to be nations, why the ones that we have to have? Which is the ultimate thing, which seems self-evident, like if you're produced in the given educational culture, then the existence of the educational system and the state that created it seems self-evident, but it's not really.

Like that's the existence of the United States or Ukraine or Russia or any country is highly contingent, and frankly, pretty darn unlikely.

And so, the burden of proof is really on us as historians to show how these things are possible, as opposed to taking them for granted.

02:03 So, as I say, this is a straightforward lecture class.

You're expected to come to lecture.

In week three, we'll have section.

You're expected to come to section.

You're not expected to bribe your TFs, but you are expected, oh, look at all those heads that perked up.

I was like, there are like, yeah, there are geographical lines where, you know, there are places where that would be expected, but I'm having to announce that Yale University is not one of those places.

I'm noting like (class laughing) - I'm noting like undergraduate wisdom, which I'm ignoring.

There are things that I don't want to know.

So where was I? So lecture class.

Two exams. Map quiz next week.

Map quiz, take that very generally.

I might ask you questions on the map quiz, very simple questions which have to do with the readings assigned up to that point.

If you do the reading and you look at the maps, it's gonna be very straightforward.

If you don't do the reading and you don't look at the maps, you're gonna be baffled.

03:02 You're not going to be able to fake it.

It's gonna be a terrible experience and you'll go home crying.

Okay. So it's meant to be easy, and the reason why I do a map quiz is because geography is kind of one of the great missing things from the way that we do history, along with military history, which has gone missing, which is a bit awkward right now that nobody does military history anymore.

No, I mean, it's a serious problem, actually that we have a lot of history of like the discourse of war and the culture of war, which is interesting and important, but we have relatively little straightforward battlefield history, which means that the journalists writing about the war now tend to move very quickly into, "Oh, what's Putin thinking?" Or you know, like all the things that we find comfortable, like the psychology of people we don't know.

We move very quickly into those things as opposed to how do logistics work and why does it matter if it's a steppe rather than hills, and what is partisan warfare like, and these things that used to be known, but which we've kind of discarded in the 21st century.

04:01 Okay. That was my big conservative move for the day.

I'll go back to being myself now, but it is actually very, very important.

So what we're gonna be doing is moving through time, starting the next lecture.

Well, next lecture, this is just, I'm gonna be giving a very general introduction this time.

Next lecture, we're gonna talk theoretically about the origins of nations.

Try to open up that question, go through some of the thinking about where nations come from.

Our guiding thinker on this is gonna be a fellow called Ivan Rudnytdky, who is a very important Ukrainian thinker and kind of uniquely situated to address this question for reasons which are going to become clear to you, I hope, over time.

And then beginning, then you'll have the map quiz, and then beginning September 13th, we are going to start moving through time, beginning with the ancient world, into the middle ages, into the Renaissance, and so on.

So it's all pretty straightforward.

I don't wanna spend too much time talking about it, but if you have a question about the form of the class, please go ahead and ask.

05:08 Yeah? It's all clear? Okay.

All right.

So what I'm gonna do now is I'm going to just enter into some of the big questions that are raised by the moment that we are in now.

So history is not about how everything has to be the way that it is now.

Nevertheless, it would be naive not to notice that the way that we start thinking about history has to do with the predicaments and the questions that are raised by the present moment.

You can't get away from the present moment.

As you might have noticed, it's very hard to get away from the present moment, but what you can do is you can use the present moment to reflect, right, to reflect, and then when you've reflected, the history that you learned might make the present moment more comprehensible.

So I'm not gonna say that the purpose of this class is to make the Russian war against Ukraine make sense.

06:00 What I am going to say though is that the war perhaps is an occasion for us to go back and understand this history.

Some of the things which might seem mysterious, like how is a war like this possible might seem less mysterious.

Some of the claims that are made about the war might seem easier to dismiss or easier to understand once we have the history under our belts.

So let me start with where we are.

Where we are right now, it is what, the 31st of August or something like that? Where we are right now is that the Ukrainian armed forces are undertaking a limited offensive in the the Kherson oblast of Ukraine, which is right in the Southern part of the country.

Kherson, it's an interesting name, if you think about it, it doesn't actually, if you have, if you know anything about Slavic languages, it doesn't sound particularly Slavic, and that's because it's not.

Kherson was named after an older ancient Greek settlement on the Crimean peninsula.

07:01 It was named by Katherine the Great when she founded the city.

By the way that ancient Greek city.

which was also called Kherson, is now, the ruins of it are now in a suburb of Sevastopol, which is another city name which you might be hearing of.

Things are exploding there at the moment.

Sevastopol is part of the territory in the extreme south of Ukraine and Crimea, which was occupied by Russia in 2014.

So these place names which seem exotic and mysterious point us back to a history which is actually durable and comprehensible.

So the Greeks are the oldest documented inhabitants of Ukraine.

I'm not gonna say the oldest inhabitants, because they're the Scythians and they're are all kinds of other people who left other kinds of traces, but in terms of continuous documentation of presence, the Greeks have been there for the longest, along with the Jews.

So the Jews and the Greeks are the longest documented inhabitants of Ukraine, which suggests that familiar concepts of classical history, whether coming from a Greek side or coming from a Jewish side are going to turn out to be useful in application to Ukraine.

08:17 The history of Ukraine as we're going to see is about an axis of south to north.

Okay, I realize I'm now getting into geography and heads are spinning already.

North is like, when you're looking at a map, it's the up one.

(students and professor chuckling) - I'm sorry.

(students and professor chuckling) - And south is the other way.

So when we think of it, people talk about Ukraine in terms of east and west, and that, I just wanna say, that's a very recent phenomenon.

The axis on which early Ukrainian history is going to emerge, or the history of Kievan Rus', which is the first big documented polity in this region is a north, a south axis.

- 09:03 It has to do with Vikings, which is a major theme in European history, right? The Viking age, which begins in the eighth century.
- It has to do with the encounter of the Vikings and the continuation of the Roman empire, which is known as Byzantium, which is capital in Constantinople, which is now Istanbul.
- It's the Kievian Rus', our history, begins with an encounter of this major Northern development and this major Southern development, which meet in Kiev and sets something off, which is in some way continuing.
- This something that is set off, we're gonna be following for a thousand years.
- The state, which is founded, as I've said, is called Rus' or Kievian Rus', I will describe, I'll talk about why it's called Rus' later on.
- It's very interesting, but the territories in question are also going to be governed by other entities like the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the biggest state in Europe for quite a long time.
- Poland major, the major power of the region for quite a long time, the Ottoman empire, which we cannot forget, and if I get through the middle of this class and I haven't talked enough about the Ottomans, I want you guys to call me on it because like there's this whole thing about Kievian Rus' and I'm Putin talks about it, then Zelensky talks about it, and both Putin and Zelensky are named after the guy who was baptized, maybe, in order to found Kievian Rus', who's is called Valdemar, because of course he was a Viking and not a Russian or Ukrainian, cause Russia and Ukraine didn't exist at the time.
- 10:29 But the Viking who got baptized, who was called Valdemar in 988, that name then becomes Velodymyr in Ukrainian and Vladimir in Russian.
- Right, so that contemporary heads of state of these two countries are named after this figure who a thousand years ago maybe converted to Christianity.
- So there's this Kievian Rus' business, and we're gonna follow Kievian Rus' and it's fascinating, but we have to remember that the whole south of the territory that we're talking about was never actually part of Kievian Rus' right? So Putin is now making this war in Ukraine, and part of his logic, as I'm gonna talk about is that Russia and Ukraine have always been one people because of a Viking maybe got baptized a thousand years ago, which I want you guys to understand is not a persuasive historical argument, okay? If we get one thing out of this class, it's gonna be that if a dictator tells you a thousand years ago, somebody got baptized, that doesn't mean your nation is the same as his nation.
- 11:21 If we can get through that, we'll have done a good job.
- So at least for the first 15 minutes of class.
- But my point is that we cannot forget that these Southern territories were not part of Kievian Rus' at all, where the fighting is happening now was not, it was part of the ancient Greek world.
- It was part of the ottoman world for a long time, but it was not actually part of Kievian Rus'.
- Russ Southern Ukraine has a different history and it is brought into this larger Ukrainian thing later on.
- So let's just saying that because we have to mark the Ottoman empire and we have to mark Islam, and in general, by the way, we have to mark Ukraine as a major center, not just of Christian history, because when you focus on Kiev and the conversion to Christianity, then you're in this kind of Christian teleological arc.
- 12:13 Somebody, maybe or maybe didn't get dunked in water and therefore it's Christian forever, but Ukraine is actually a center of Muslim and Jewish and Christian civilization, and this is one of the things which makes it interesting and of note and in the ancient period, it was a center of what you could think of as a contest between those three monotheistic traditions to convert the pagans who lived there, which we'll get to in a later lecture.
- For now though, what I wanna make sure that we get to is this issue of how you get to be nation.
- Okay, so that's gonna be one of our major themes, and I don't mean it teleologically, just to

stress, I don't mean why Ukraine had to be, because that's a terrible question.

As soon as you're in the world of why a nation had to be, you've obliterated, you've eliminated, you've erased all human agency in the whole story, right? If I'm able to say right now from the pulpit Ukraine had to exist, then we're removing everything which makes history interesting, right, the human choices along the way.

13:17 The way people saw the circumstances they were in, what people thought was possible, what they thought they were doing, and what they sometimes even did.

All that goes away.

If I can say, "Oh, there had to be America or there had to be Russia, or there had to be China." There didn't have to be any of these things.

We can explain how they came into being, but what we can't say, and this is what Putin does, we can't say that it's predetermined.

As soon as we say it's predetermined, this is no longer a history class, it's in some kind of, we're in some kind of exercise in, you know, applied physics or something.

Okay, but the bad, so there's a bad answer to why, you know, to where history comes from, which is that things had to be the way they are, and that bad answer is closely related to this war because Putin gave that bad answer in July of 2021, when he wrote an incredibly long, for a politician, not long for you guys, an incredibly long essay which he called "On the historical unity of Russia and Ukraine" and his bad answer is that things are the way they are because they had to be this way basically, right? Russia and Ukraine have always been together, and if they're not together, that's the result of alien, non-historical forces.

14:28 This is really important, by the way, because when a tyrant makes an argument about how history has to be, then some of the forces that are actually resident in history, then classified as being ahistorical or non-historical or exotic or alien, right? So in Putin's telling you the story, all the Lithuanian stuff and all of the Polish stuff and all of the Jewish stuff, for that matter, all the things which aren't about Christianity or Russia are now suddenly exotic, alien, foreign.

15:02 They're not really history.

They're the things that have to be removed so that history can go the way that it's supposed to go, and that is precisely a rationale for war.

In fact, it is the rationale for this war, because the argument for this war is that Ukrainians don't know who they really are because they've been polluted by all this Polish stuff or Lithuanian stuff or Hapsburg stuff, or maybe laterally European Union stuff or American stuff.

So you have to peel away all this artificial things to get down to who they really are, and they may not know who they really are and that's tragic and we have to apply enough violence so that they can understand who they really are, right? And once you're in that way of seeing things, then of course the war makes perfect sense to you, right? And so the way that history is presented has an integral connection with the decision to make a war, and also for the way that a war seems to make sense while it's going on, right, while it's going on to people who are taking part of it.

16:03 So the point is though that is not that we're gonna start with this bad history because it's the right kind of history, the point is that the bad history or what I would prefer to call the myth or the political memory gives us an occasion to see how history might actually have been.

It's a kind of, the bad history is a kind of invitation to what might actually be more interesting.

Okay. So what's wrong with the idea, let me just open this up to you guys very quickly.

What's wrong with, this is kind of a trick question.

I'm sorry. What's wrong with an essay which is titled "On the historical unity of Russia and Ukraine?" Go for it.

- [Student] There is no historical unity of Russia.

- Okay. That's alright.

I'll give you that.

But I'm looking for yes. Okay.

Why not? I mean, why not? Cause you don't think so.

17:01 - [Student] No, I think it's been forced, but the unity has been forced.

- Okay.

- [Student] Doesn't never like substantial.

- Okay. All right.

I'm going for something more fundamental. Yeah? - [Student] Russia and Ukraine might not have existed in the way we talked about them.

- Good. Okay. That's good. That's good.

Russia and Ukraine as nations definitely didn't exist in the year 988, right? The nation is a modern historical construct characterized by the notion that you feel a kind of solidarity with people you don't know.

That's Benedict Anderson imagined community.

It's a good argument that you, somebody else is American or Ukrainian or Chinese, and you think you have something in common with them, even though you don't know them personally, that's the nation.

The nation also involves a certain, at least a certain notion of equality.

We may not be equal in every ways, but I'm not more American than you are, right, if you're American We're, at least in the, at least notionally, we're equal as members of a nation, right? That does not exist in the ancient world, or it doesn't exist in the medieval world.

18:16 So that's a good one.

Now, can we go even deeper than that? All right, I'm gonna have to enter my own trick question.

Yeah, go for it.

- [Student] This might be a long shot, but this statement itself is inherently contradictory.

Can you say the unity, but he's also recognizing Ukraine sovereignty by saying that Russia and Ukraine is separate entities.

- That's kind of where, I mean, I'm gonna give you like extra credit points for that, cause I think you're right.

And I think what I'm aiming for is the actual language of the statement.

The way that "On the historical unity of Russia and Ukraine" lays a certain trick.

The trick is that if I begin a title with, "On" the thing that's there is supposed to be real, right? So if the title is "On the historical unity of Russia and Ukraine" the trick is that, well, since it's "On" this, that thing must exist, right? If I write a book which says "On quick chess strategies to defeat Garry Kasparov" then it's like, that thing must exist, right, even though it doesn't exist, right? But if I say on this thing, then it exists and so that kind of language, the kind of implicit assertion of existence is non-historical language.

19:38 It's the language of legend, the language of myth.

It's tricky language which gets you thinking in terms of categories of eternity, categories of durability, categories which isn't changed, what things which don't change, which leads you to where Putin is, which his idea that some things are, as he says, predetermined, right, which is a very strong word.

20:01 His idea is that because there was a baptism in Kiev in 988, the rest of it is predetermined

and anything which doesn't go the way it's supposed to go is somehow exotic or foreign and has to be suppressed, and then historical unity, I mean, I'm gonna make your point a little bit more strongly.

It's not just that Russia and Ukraine, there's no such thing as historical unity, right? History is not about unity.

History is about, okay, I'm gonna throw this one open.

What's history about in two words? You can have two, you have three if one of them's an "and." War and peace.

I guess that's what I deserve for my military history comment earlier on.

(students laughing) - I mean, it's not bad. It's not a bad answer by the way.

It's a pretty good answer.

Anything. Anyone else wanna go for it? Yeah.

- [Student] People.

- Did it in one word.

That's good. It's people who can write stuff down, actually, that's where history stops is the line between history and archeology or anthropology.

History is all about written records.

21:01 So we're gonna do a lot of warmup before we get to written records, but one of the reasons why baptism is important in the history of Eastern Europe or Europe in general is that with baptism and Christianity comes written language and with written language comes the ability to make different kinds of interpretations where historians are comfortable.

All right, I'm gonna give this one more shot.

What's history about? Don't you guys dream of, isn't this like your dream you're gonna come to Yale and a professor's gonna ask you what history's all about and you're gonna raise your hand and say something brilliant? (class laughing) - Like isn't that what you guys dream about? This is your moment.

Yeah, Jack.

- [Jack] States in society.

- State in society.

That's good. That's good.

That's pretty good. Okay.

So what I'm thinking about is something even more basic and dumb, which is change in continuity.

Okay, so you don't have to write that down.

It's a very fundamental thing that sometimes things change and sometimes they don't and history is aware of both of them, right, and you're in, history is aware, so the historical unity is a non-historical concept because what it does is that it's a trick because historical doesn't mean historical, it means unchanging, right? Historical unity in that phrase means forever.

22:12 It means eternal, right It doesn't actually mean historical, cause historical would mean it changes.

Maybe there was some unity at some point, but if it's historical, then it would change because that's what history is.

History is change as well as continuity.

So history is about change in continuity, which means it's about ends and beginnings, and it's also about unpredictability.

Okay, so as you might have gathered, this lecture is also because we're doing this big question, we're handling this big subject of war, and we're trying to do this big question of

where nations come from at the very beginning.

I'm trying to do just a little bit about what history actually is, cause we're gonna need it.

So one of the things which, since history is about beginnings and endings, it's also unpredictable, right? It's about things that you couldn't expect, and that may seem counterintuitive, because you probably think, well, okay you probably don't, cause I know you're all very sophisticated, but someone in some other classroom might think history is about old dusty books and we know what's gonna happen in the old dusty books.

23:11 But here's the thing, even if you read all the old dusty books that you wanted about the year 1439 and you became the world's leading expert on 1439, you still would not know what happened in 1440, right? That's the level you wouldn't have, and that's the level of unpredictability of history, and it comes up to the present.

You can read all, I mean you could know everything you could possibly humanly know about 2021, but you wouldn't know what's gonna happen in 2022.

You just wouldn't.

It's only afterwards that it all seems like it had to happen, right? Like up until February 24th.

"Of course Russia's not gonna invade Ukraine." After February 24th.

"Oh, of course Russia was gonna invade Ukraine." That's how our minds work and history is there to remind us that actually we're wrong pretty much all the time, that things are not actually predictable, right? That what people expect to happen is generally what doesn't happen, and that novelty is an authentic thing, that there are new things which come about all the time.

24:08 In our case, the new thing that we'll be thinking about the most is nature. I mean, sorry is the nation.

Now one of the things which gets alighted, and I've already mentioned this and it's pretty important in the notion that history is some kind of eternity or some kind of repetition.

Like you may have heard the phrase, you may have heard the idea that history repeats itself.

I don't know about you guys.

I hear it all the time.

Because whenever I talk about the past, then people say, "Well, history is repeating itself" because this thing is this thing, but if history really, oops, I'm getting out of the camera view probably.

I'm not used to doing this.

If history repeats itself, that would mean that nothing we do matters, right? If history literally repeated itself, then there would be no human agency.

It's the same thing as saying things never change.

25:01 If things change according to a pattern, that also means no human agency, right, and so the notion that history is a cycle, right, there was a time when we were great and now we have to make ourselves great again, like the notion that there's a cycle, that there was a Golden Age and then something went wrong and then we correct it.

That's also not historical.

That's also a way of eliminating human agency, right? So history doesn't repeat.

It doesn't repeat.

You learn things from history which can then help you recognize other things.

You might see some certain patterns, but history doesn't repeat.

Okay, so the thing which goes missing in these accounts, which I want us to get better at recognizing over the course of this class, and as we think about the nation, is the notion of human agency.

Not volunteerism, like not the idea that you can do whatever you want, but the notion of human agency that you, history helps us to identify the structures as best we can, and then the better we understand the structures, the better we see what humans can and can't do or could imagine that they can do within those structures.

26:12 So when we do history, we're trying to, as it were objectively, understand the situation around a person, but we're also trying to subjectively understand what that person might have been thinking or trying to do, and we never give up on the second part, right? So to take the example of this baptism in 988 to, don't worry, we'll return to it over and over again, but when Valdemar got himself baptized, we know he was not thinking about Russia and Ukraine a thousand years later, like that we can be sure about.

We can be pretty sure he wasn't even thinking about Christianity because we know enough about his predicament to say what he was probably thinking about was geopolitics and what form of conversion would be best to preserve his own rule, right? And we'll try to explain how that all works out, but what we're always trying to do is to understand the situation around someone which is, so to speak, of an objective undertaking.

27:10 But then we're also trying to get inside the individual actors and their own minds and recognize that they have a subjective appreciation of these, and you can never quite do away with that tension between what I'm calling very simply the objective and the subjective forms of history.

Okay, so we've already talked about many of the ways that this kind of myth of eternity is wrong.

Another way that I wanted to talk about it is in terms of diversity or in terms of change.

If I give you a myth of a Golden Age, I'm usually getting rid of diversity.

I'm usually getting rid of all the interesting stuff.

28:00 If I'm talking about how, and this is, by the way, all myths of a Golden Age are pretty much structurally the same.

Interestingly, it always turns out that we were the good guys.

Right, like try to think of a myth of a Golden Age where the other guys were the good guys.

If it's, funnily, it all kind of comes down to the same.

It's always, we were the good guys.

We were innocent, and then the bad people came and they polluted us or they did something very bad.

It's structurally always the same, and it doesn't even matter whether you're an empire or not.

You can be the most powerful empire in the world, the most powerful empire in the most powerful country in the world, hint USA, and you can still come up with a story of how you were the victim and the other people came and they polluted you, but the structure is always the same, and so when you have a story of which Putin's version of the baptism in Kiev is one example.

You have a story about how everything was always static.

Everything was pure, right? That's why the baptism, by the way, is so attractive.

29:01 It's not that Putin actually goes to church or that the Russian church really exists as such, but baptism is a notion of, it's a cleansing, right, it's a purifying, it's a starting again, and that's why it's such an attractive image in this story.

The baptism allows us to forget all the things that happened before and present history or the past as this kind of clean unity where anything which was polluting came from the outside, and that is a way of getting rid of diversity or getting rid of the things which might, as historians or as students of history, we might actually find to be interesting, where it gets rid of things coming from other places.

It gets rid of origins.

It gets rid of innovation.

It gets rid of all of the interesting stuff.

Like, for example, the alphabet.

The alphabet might seem like something which is eternal.

I mean, when was the last time you guys thought about the alphabet? All right, that's not the question that you were dreaming your professor was gonna ask you the first week of Yale.

30:08 "He was asking me about the alphabet, mom.

I can't believe it. I studied so hard." So the alphabet is a really interesting creation.

It was actually only invented once a lot of things that we take for granted and then copied a bunch of times, the specific Cyrillic alphabet, which came to Kiev after the baptism, was invented by a couple of, we'll talk about this, a couple of Byzantine priests who were trying to convert, not Kiev, but Moravia, not then, but a couple centuries before, and they had an interesting career and it wandered and ended up in Kiev, and then suddenly you have this alphabet.

And then that Cyrillic alphabet can seem like a kind of eternal marker of like east and west or whatever once it's established, but it's actually an innovation which came from the outside, right, like, for that matter Christianity itself.

31:00 So when you focus on how things, or if you pretend that things are static, what you're doing is you're excluding all the diversity, all of the innovation, and all the things which came from the outside.

What we're gonna be trying to do in this class is make the opposite point.

That what's interesting about Ukraine is that rather than being part of somebody else's myth of purity, right, is that Ukraine actually embodies in a very intense form most of the major themes of European history and some of the major themes of European history, of world history.

What we're gonna try to be arguing.

is that as a result of Ukraine's geography, as a result of this north-south access at the beginning, and then east-west access later on, all of the themes of European history appear in Ukrainian history, just in a slightly more interesting form, right? So the Vikings, for example, if you're interested in European history, you may be interested in the Vikings.

32:06 The Vikings, let's face it, they're interesting. Okay.

So you have this mainstream of European development where the Franks start a state and the Vikings react to the Franks and they start raiding the Franks and they invent these boats and they travel all over the world. Very cool.

But maybe the single most lasting trace of the Viking Age is Kiev, right? The Vikings founded states.

They knocked over states.

They found the states all over the place.

Normandy, for example.

Normandy, as you might remember, invades England and establishes England in the form that we know it today.

Vikings matter a lot, but Norwegian democracy, it also began with Vikings, but Kiev may be the single most interesting legacy of the Viking Age, maybe the most durable legacy of the Viking Age.

When you look at pictures of wartime Kiev now, which, you know, where San Sophia is still standing, thankfully, like that's a legacy of Viking civilization.

33:03 That's a legacy of Vikings converting to Christianity.

If you think about the history of the reformation, right? Oh the reformation, we all know the reformation is a big theme of European history.

Suddenly there are Protestants as well as Catholics, and maybe there's a Hundred Years War and a third of the population of Germany is going to get wiped out and the printing press comes along and suddenly there can be disputations which seem to lead to a lot of violence.

This whole thing about the internet causing trouble so far is like nothing compared to the printing press.

Like we may get there, but like the printing press came along and that was a mess.

But in Ukraine you have the reformation, but it's not Catholics and Protestants, it's the Orthodox and the Greek Catholics and the Catholic and the Catholics and the Protestants and all kinds of Protestants.

And you have a religious war in 1648, which is also a proto national war, and an anti-colonial war and something which is extremely interesting.

So basically everything that happens in European history happens in Ukrainian history, just slightly more intensely and sometimes slightly earlier.

34:05 And indeed one of the themes or one of the things that I hope you'll notice as we go along is that George Orwell said this, that the hardest thing to notice is what's right in front of your nose, right? I don't know, this is your first week at Yale, maybe like 50 years from now when you're an alum, you'll be like, "My professor told me the hardest thing to notice is what's right in front of your nose." If you take that away, I'll also be happy, but that's true.

The things which are most intensely obvious are very often the things that are hardest to take on and history in a way is actually like, "Oh, America's an empire." I mean, history is a way of picking up on the obvious because it gives it to you from a whole bunch of different angles at the same time, and then maybe the obvious will eventually come through, right? So the point is that Ukraine is at this absolute center of a lot of things, which we regard as central.

35:02 I've given you the Viking Age and the reformation, which may seem a little exotic.

It's absolutely at the center of the First World War.

It's absolutely at the center of the Second World War.

It's absolutely at the center of Stalinist terror.

It's absolutely at the center of the Holocaust.

It's absolutely at the center of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

It's at the center of major historical developments, not just ancient and medieval, but also very contemporary.

But the fact that it's, precisely the fact that it's at the center of the development makes it hard to see and hard to notice.

It's sometimes hard to direct your gaze at the thing which is most important sometimes, because where things are most important is also where things are darkest, right, and very often Ukraine is going to be a kind of heart of darkness.

Who wrote "Heart of Darkness" by the way? - [Student] Joseph Conrad.

- Where is he from? - [Student] From Poland.

- Give you one more try.

- [Student] Ukraine? - You're guessing though, right? Yeah. So you're not wrong that he was from Poland, but it's a very interesting trajectory.

36:04 So "Heart of Darkness" is a famous, famous book about the race for Africa.

It's a remarkable novel.

Conrad's a remarkable writer.

Conrad is a Pol.

How does he know about colonialism? Because he is from Ukraine, right? There's a recent Polish history book about Ukraine, which is called "Poland's Heart of Darkness" which of course the Poles really didn't, in general, like to hear, but it's a very valid point.

During the Renaissance period, as we'll see Polish colonialism in Ukraine was incredibly intense, and that gives Conrad the background to understand the European race for Africa, and in turn Hannah Arendt's "Origins of Totalitarianism" is basically one long riff on Joseph Conrad's novel "Heart of Darkness." And so it's not surprising that Arendt actually understands that Ukraine is important.

Just kind of closing the loop here, but a heart of darkness is something which is hard to see, but that doesn't mean it's unimportant, right? So things get wiped out of the history that are precisely the things that we have to see, okay.

37:11 I'm getting towards the end of the main themes that I wanted to make sure we got introduced here.

So we've talked about what history is.

We've talked about what a nation is.

We've talked about the difference between history and myth.

I've mentioned this sort of trigger question of Ukraine exists, why? Or Ukraine exists how? Which is a lot trickier than it seems at the beginning.

So if you're living for the 21st century and I realize like this is the only century that you guys have lived through, which I find very troubling.

One of the, no like, if you're me, like think about this for a second, okay, if you're me, you guys never get older, right? Every September I show up and you're always the same age.

That is really weird, right? It's very strange.

38:01 And every year I get, every year I get older, which is very, it's very troubling.

But if you're in the 21st century, there are these moments where you say, "Oh, look, Ukraine exists." Like 2004, what Ukrainians now call the Revolution of Dignity or sorry, the Orange Revolution, 2014, the Revolution of Dignity or 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

It's very easy and tempting when Russia invades Ukraine and Ukraine resists to say, "Oh, look, now Ukraine exists." But that wouldn't be a very Ukrainian perspective, right? The fact that you recognize something because someone else acts doesn't mean that they just came into existence.

On the contrary, I think the argument probably runs better the other way.

The fact that Ukrainians were able to resist the Russian invasion suggests that the nation or the civil society had already consolidated to a pretty impressive degree, right, and the fact that we, and that would be my American "we," but it was a general assumption, all thought that Ukraine would collapse in three days might say more about our misunderstanding of the place than it does about the place itself.

39:12 And after you misunderstand it and you say, "Well, it doesn't really exist.

It's gonna collapse in three days" and then it doesn't collapse, what's your next move? Your next move in order to rescue your position is to say, "Oh, well Ukraine must have just been created by the Russian invasion" of which is something that if you've been following this war at all, you will have heard journalists and others say.

"Well, you Putin and Putin united Ukraine with this invasion" right? And of course it's true that there's a lot of solidarity and so on that wouldn't have happened without the war, but the idea that Putin created Ukraine by invading it is ludicrous, right? You can invade lots of places, that doesn't mean that they start to exist as nations.

That's not how history actually works.

So that itself, that whole move that journalists then made to say, "Oh, well, Ukraine exists because Putin" is just a way to keep talking about the thing, which people are very comfortable talking about, which is Putin.

40:02 If you're a writer in a democracy, you're very attracted to authoritarians.
 I don't know if you've noticed this trend, but there's a kind of seductive lure of the distant authoritarian.
 No, it's true.
 Like, the twenties and thirties, if you go back to the twenties and thirties and you read about the way Americans wrote about not just Stalin, but also Hitler, you'll see this tendency.
 If you're in a democracy, you're very kind of tempted by this idea that, "Oh, there's somebody over there and everything is orderly and they have a vision, and this is kind of interesting" and so on, we fall, we go for that again and again and again, and with Putin even now though, it's much weaker now than it was before February.
 There's this idea that, "Oh, he's interesting."
 It's kind of seductive.
 He's a strong man, and let's talk about Putin" right? Let's talk about Putin and then saying, "Oh, Putin created Ukraine by invading" is one more way of talking about Putin rather than talking about Ukraine.
 In other words, it's one more colonial move that you're making.
 Well, okay. They didn't exist, but if they do exist, it's the paradoxical result of a foreign dictator, right? Okay. So there are these triggering moments, but what I'm trying to suggest are these triggering moments should be triggers of our asking ourselves what actually happened, you know, as opposed to jumping to easy conclusions that are convenient, with which are consistent with what we already, which what we already think.

41:19 Okay. So we've done history.
 We've done what history is.
 You guys feel like, you know what history is now? Cause I hope so, cause we only have one lecture for this.
 We've talked, we've introduced a little bit, the difference between history and myth.
 There's one more theme which I wanna just introduce very quickly, and it's a 20th century theme which I want you to have in mind.
 The theme is genocide.
 And the reason it's a 20th century theme is that the 1948 definition of genocide assumes that there's such a thing as a people.
 So Raphael Lemkin, who is the lawyer who's educating what's now Ukraine, by the way, Polish, Jewish lawyer, who's educated in the university, and what's now Lagu, when he made up the word genocide, he's assuming the existence of a people, right, because genocide is about the intentional destruction of a people.

42:10 So it assumes that there is such thing as a people, right, what we might call a nation or a society.
 So it's a 20th century construction.
 I mean genocide is the antipode of the creation of a nation.
 We think of nations are modern and any attempt to destroy a nation is also modern, right? The theme of genocide is a late theme, but I want you to keep it in mind because of this war and because of the way that genocide also asks questions about where nations come from.
 This war is a strangely genocidal war.
 It's strange in the sense that it's very rare for the authors of a war to actually say at the beginning that the aim of the war is the destruction of another people.
 That doesn't happen very often.
 That might be the aim, but for it to be announced openly, as it has been in this war, is pretty unusual.

43:00 and that's the intent part of genocide.

The practical part of genocide one can find very easily in the hundred thousand dead in Mariupol, as it appears unfortunately, in the 3 million Ukrainians deported, including a quarter million children, at least who were to be forcibly assimilated into Russian culture in the systematic campaign of rape and the murder of local elites in the territories that Russia controls and maybe more banally, but I think also very importantly, in the systematic attempt to destroy publishing houses, libraries, and archives, which are the way, of course, that nations or societies or people remember themselves.

So there is a genocidal aspect to this war, and I want you to keep this in mind as a theme because this concept of genocide, though it's a modern concept, it also points us backwards towards other questions, which we're gonna be thinking about, which have to do with colonialism and which have to do with why people recognize or do not recognize other people.

44:00 Why, what were the, if we're gonna ask the positive question, a Ukrainian nation exists how? Which I think is a really interesting question, not just about Ukraine, a Ukrainian nation exists.

How was that possible? The converse question is what were the things which were thrown up along the way and why? So why was there particularly Ukrainian famine in 1933 in the Soviet Union? Why that? Why did Hitler particularly think that Ukraine would be a good site of Lebensraum? Why in the 1970s were Brezhnevian assimilation policies particularly applied to Ukraine, right? What is it about this place which has put it at the center of so much colonial pressure over the centuries and the decades? I don't want you to apply the word genocide to things that happened before there's a nation.

That's not my point.

My point though is that I want to introduce some concepts, which are what is history? What is a nation? And then the kind of pendant or counterpart to what is a nation, is what is genocide? What are the things which lead to nation? If there are things that lead to nation destruction, what are the things which, sorry, to nation creation, what are the things that lead to nation destruction? What are the deeper impulses? Not just a war which is happening now or a famine which happened then, or a terror which happened some other time, but what are some of the deeper forces which push us in that direction? So it's, Ukraine is a heart of darkness in that sense, right? It's a way to collect those kinds of events as well.

45:33 They're not the only things we're gonna be talking about, but the concept of genocide can help us to remember that this is an important part of the history that we're gonna be investigating.

Okay. So much for introductions.

Thank you all for being here, and I hope to see you again next week.