DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 07.04.2022 | Michael Marder

The implosion of history

The war in Ukraine is rooted in a multitude of historical events and timelines that have been compressed into a single destructive phenomenon

Philosophers are supposed to comprehend events and phenomena from a rather detached standpoint, keeping in mind useful theoretical models and precedents. But the situation in Ukraine has made detachment difficult for me. Not only does more than half my family come from Ukraine, but I have also long been preoccupied – philosophically and personally – with the issue of nuclear and radioactive threats, centring on the Chernobyl power plant and the use of nuclear weapons.

Nonetheless, today's circumstances demand clear thinking. As I argued in my 2021 book *Senses of Upheaval*, in a chapter entitled 'The Unfinished Collapse of the Soviet Union', we need to develop 'a robust philosophy of history' capable of accounting for historical 'gaps, protracted subterranean processes, and time lags between causes and effects'. The urgency of this task has now become painfully obvious. We are witnessing the outcome of the time lag between the official end of the USSR in 1991 and its unresolved legacies. Those legacies are responsible not only for the war in Ukraine, but also for the simmering conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, and for the tragic fate of Belarus. And constantly looming in the background is the Soviet nuclear arsenal, which Ukraine agreed to transfer to Russia soon after becoming an independent state.

The Ukrainian war and what its meaning for history

But the historical implications of Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine are even more complex than the still indeterminate legacy of the Soviet collapse. To European observers, Russia's invasion is reminiscent of Nazi Germany's behaviour in 1939. To the Ukrainians themselves, it invariably calls to mind previous national catastrophes, from the 1932-33 Holodomor and World War II to the nightmare of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. And to the Russians, tighter censorship and

other internal repressive measures have awakened the memory of Stalinism. But this is not a case of history merely repeating itself.

What we are witnessing in Ukraine, then, is a tumbling of events into themselves – the convergence of different timelines in a single destructive phenomenon.

Repetition entails cyclicality and definite temporal rhythms, not to mention the completion of whatever is being repeated. Yet many of the issues underlying Putin's war are the comet tails of previous incomplete events – from the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the long-lingering effects of radioactive fallout. What we are witnessing in Ukraine, then, is a tumbling of events into themselves – the convergence of different timelines in a single destructive phenomenon. Russia's invasion has roots in the Soviet collapse, the Chernobyl disaster, and the two world wars, as well as the Ukrainian genocide and Stalinist repression of the 1930s. All this history is concentrated and condensed in the current war, much as an atomic bomb's fissionable material 'is suddenly compressed into a smaller size and thus a greater density'. The eruption of hostilities is, at its core, a historical implosion.

The three classical models for explaining the movement of history have included the conservative Fall, bemoaning the loss of past greatness; liberal Progress, celebrating the upward trajectory of living conditions and human freedom; and cyclical Repetition (sometimes combined with the first or second model in a spiral) of destruction and rejuvenation 'by water or fire', as in Plato's *Timaeus*. But implosion presents a fourth option, one that also borrows from physics to describe how history buckles under the weight of unresolved legacies. In a sense, the fourth model combines elements from the other three, pitting conservative against liberal visions and exhibiting aspects of repetition, owing to the centripetal forces unleashed in an implosion. That is why we hear simultaneous echoes of 'the restoration' of Russia's glorious imperial past; of the 'irrepressible' march toward market freedom and democracy in Ukraine; and of the tirelessly repeated mantra, 'History repeats itself'.

The lack of temporal and spatial constraints

The implosion of history is also palpable in today's environmental crises. The sixth mass extinction that is now underway is not merely a repetition

of the previous five. It also signals the historical collapse of the human species (along with countless other species). In the Anthropocene era, this collapse is self-induced and therefore bears all the marks of an implosion. The climate crisis and Putin's regime both stem from our own dependence on fossil fuels, suggesting that they belong in the same broader historical paradigm.

One characteristic of the implosion of history is that it draws everything and everyone into its vortex.

The perennial question of political action – 'What is to be done?' – cannot be raised seriously without at least a rough understanding of the historical context. Is the war in Ukraine a temporary setback for freedom's continued march around the world? Is it a temporary obstacle to the atavistic restoration of imperial Russia? Does it invert WWII, with the homeland's defenders now in the position of occupiers? Or is something else afoot on Ukrainian soil in 2022? One characteristic of the implosion of history is that it draws everything and everyone into its vortex. If the war in Ukraine is a tell-tale sign of this implosion, it is naive to think that the hostilities unfolding on Ukrainian soil are limited to that territory – even if it is still too early to talk about WWIII.

The presence of the nuclear threat in the conflict – including both power plants and weapons – is symptomatic of the conflict's lack of temporal and spatial constraints. Just as Europe and the United States initially saw Covid19 as a regional health problem in China, so now does NATO's 'defensive' position overlook the transnational threat of nuclear fallout or the use of biological or chemical weapons. The sooner the logic (or illogic) of historical implosion is grasped, the better we will be able to comprehend what must be done. We are at the end of an era defined by an acute sense that we had reached the 'end of history'. For now, all we can be sure of, as Bertolt Brecht put it, is that, 'because things are the way they are, things will not remain as they are'.

(C) Project Syndicate



Michael Marder

Michael Marder is a Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Basque Country and is the author of the forthcoming *Philosophy for Passengers* (The MIT Press, 2022).