



ON HISTORY, FREEDOM(S),  
AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE  
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My Wiko fellowship was greatly impacted by Russia’s full-fledged war against Ukraine, launched on the fateful morning of 24 February 2022. This report is an account of how the current war has altered several of my academic priorities, forcing me to think more about the “how” and “why” of historical writing. When writing this text, but especially when revising it, I had the acute impression that it speaks too little about how great a place Wiko is as an academic venue, but also as a safe haven for those scientists, writers,

artists, or activists who dare speak freely and thus openly contest – with their voices, texts, or art pieces – some of the ruthless political regimes around the world. This report, a bit too personal at times, is a modest tribute to honour Wiko’s commitment to support one of the greatest values of them all: “freedom.”

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February 2022 was an intense month. I had just arrived in Berlin, and the grey weather made it rather uninviting to explore the neighbourhood and the city. By mid-February, with rising numbers of corona infections within the Wiko community, seminars and academic events were switched to online only; soon, restrictions were extended to how meals were served in the restaurant. With little social life and confined to a nice, but rather isolated apartment in Villa Jaffé, research occupied almost all of my time.

I took advantage of Wiko’s splendid library services and got access to historical literature that had been unavailable to me before. My aim was to write a chapter for my long-planned volume on the coming of steamships in the Black Sea since the 1830s. The *Chernomorskoye morskoye parokhodstvo* (Black Sea Shipping Company), established in Odesa in 1833 after renewed discussions between local merchants and the imperial authorities, was an organisation that to my mind showcased imperial Russia’s use of modern technology as a tool of empire building in its southern Black Sea provinces at a time when the Romanov Empire advanced at a rapid pace towards the Turkish Straits, the crux of the so-called “Eastern Question.” The topic equally allowed me to employ many of the approaches (about technology, infrastructure, and connectivity) that I thought might shed new light on the coming of capitalism in the Black Sea region and its transformation into one of the world’s largest reservoirs of agricultural foodstuffs.

While looking at the history of steamships in Odesa and the routes that linked the Ukrainian outlet to ports around the Black Sea and beyond it, I was anxiously following news about Russia’s military build-up along Ukraine’s borders. Ukraine and Russia were a regular topic during all social events that I attended. I vividly remember such a conversation, during one of the few Thursday dinners served in February in the cosy Wiko restaurant, and the growing concerns that many of us had that the crisis might easily escalate into a full-blown war.

Vladimir Putin’s speech on 21 February was a surreal event. I followed it online, but I soon got lost in the twists and turns of his argument. The speech, an hour-long lament

about Ukraine's ingratitude, was full of historical allusions. Modern Ukraine was "entirely created by Russia or, to be more precise, by Bolshevik, Communist Russia"; Lenin and Stalin gifted Ukraine with various territories; Ukraine was "an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space"; Ukraine was an ungrateful inheritor, led by corrupt, far-right nationalists and oligarchs on the payroll of the West. References to the history of some of the places I was myself busily studying – such as the shipyard in Mykolaiv or the symbolic significance of Ochakiv (further downstream from Mykolaiv, on the banks of the Dnipro-Buh estuary) – clearly showed that for Putin there was no difference between imperial Russia and *his* Russia. It was, to my mind, a deeply flawed narrative (which he has further developed since his February rant), which purposefully concocted historical events, sacred spaces, national heroes, and global villains to form a toxic, explosive potion. In many ways, I felt that Putin's revisionist ideology was a direct attack on the work of all those historians – myself included – who were writing about various episodes in the long history of the Romanov Empire's expansion towards Europe.

Still, despite growing concerns of escalation, 24 February came as a shock. I spent long hours on the first day of the war glued to news outlets, expecting, like Putin himself probably, to see Ukraine's rapid capitulation. Interminable conversations followed – by phone or various messaging apps – with friends from Ukraine and with family in Romania. Some Russian strikes hit targets in south-western Ukraine, not far from my hometown of Galați, on the boundary between Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine. As the first refugees started to cross the border and the war scare made its way to my home country, I felt rather uneasy being away from loved ones.

25 February was the day I had long planned to fly back to Bucharest and return some days later, accompanied by my family, for the four remaining months of my Berlin fellowship. Romania looked somehow different, trying to accommodate the realities of a war raging on its borders. I watched some cable news programs, with contradictory comments about Romania's military readiness, broadcasts about panic buying of gasoline and foodstuffs, and displays of the huge popular support that Romanians showed for the Ukrainian refugees fleeing their homes. The next few days, I was busily engaged with preparations for our return to Berlin, while trying to provide support to some Ukrainian friends who had been connected with the Bucharest institute where I have been coordinating a fellowship program for scholars from the countries around the Black Sea. Their stories were simply overwhelming: in Kyiv, S. is sheltering in place, while watching bombs fall over various districts of the Ukrainian capital; she intends to take her

five-year-old son to Western Ukraine and God knows where further; in Dnipro, A. has been mobilised and is digging trenches close to Zaporizhzhia; in Bucharest, Y. is closely watching military developments in southern Ukraine, hoping that his wife and kid, caught in their flat in Kherson, a city assaulted by the Russian invaders, will be safe.

As for the military conflict itself, I grew particularly interested in one of the most spectacular battles of the war, that for control of Snake Island, the tiny islet near the north-western coast of the Black Sea about which I had written a couple of academic papers. When the warships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet attacked Snake Island on 24 February, the aggressors were received with utter defiance, turning the defenders' brave response into a symbol of Ukrainian resistance. With the sinking of the *Moskva* flagship in the region, the island gained further prominence.

We returned to Berlin on 2 March, and the plane, with dozens of Ukrainian women and children, carrying small backpacks and plush toys, was an early testimony of the huge displacement of people brought about by Putin's Russia's attacks against Ukraine. In the airport, sitting in the long queue to pass through border control, mothers would check their phones to see who had died and what had been destroyed in the past two hours.

I arrived at Wiko just in time for an (informal) "exchange of information and impressions" moderated by our fellow Fellows from Belarus and Russia. It was an excellent academic discussion, with many great questions about the war and its larger significance for the international order: "Is NATO's position wise enough?" "Are Germany's plans of remilitarization appropriate?" "What does the war change about China's global ambitions?" Loaded with my very personal and rather emotional view of the conflict, I felt everything was a bit too cold and analytical.

My colloquium was scheduled for a Thursday afternoon on the last day of March. I had little energy and inspiration to work on my presentation, distracted, beyond the war, by family obligations and the spring weather. In a more spacious and cosier apartment in Villa Walther, with a daily routine that involved going out a lot – from the kindergarten and grocery stores to playgrounds and tourist attractions – I employed my limited time to read about Ukraine and its history. I was seriously considering changing the topic of my seminar presentation from a boringly historical recount of "Steamship connections in the Black Sea (1830s–1860s)" to something more relevant for the political and military events in Ukraine.

By March, with Ukraine's incredible resistance, the conflict gradually turned into a war of attrition. Russia's control of Snake Island and of shipping routes to the outlets in

southern Ukraine started to raise new concerns: a lasting war would gravely affect the grain market and contribute to a global food crisis. I have long been interested in the grain trade of the Black Sea, and I authored several papers and books on the economic premises of the Crimean War; I analysed those episodes as part of the dispute between the Romanov Empire and the Western industrialised countries for free access to the food-stuffs of the Black Sea provinces, which imperial Russia had tried to weaponize, just as Putin's Russia has been doing with its gas and oil. It made sense, after all, to talk about steamship connectivity in the Black Sea by the mid-nineteenth century, with the transportation revolution as one of the main factors in the market integration of the region and its transformation into one of the world's largest reservoirs of agricultural goods.

By April, I was anxiously expecting to see the published version of a volume I had co-edited together with Olena Palko (at Birkbeck University at the time): *Making Ukraine. Negotiating, Contesting, and Drawing the Borders in the Twentieth Century*, as the book is titled, had been scheduled for publication by McGill-Queen's University Press in Canada for quite some time. Russia's full-fledged war in Ukraine made our volume, "the first comprehensive account of the making of Ukraine's borders during the twentieth century," as the marketing ad reads, equally timely and obsolete. Essays by fourteen contributors from around the world (myself included, with an essay covering some episodes of Snake Island's twisted history) are included in this volume, which we launched, via Zoom, in late May. Discussions with contributors and guests were excellent, but the event also raised the interest of a Russian troll, who briefly interrupted our presentation to play to us the Soviet anthem!

With the coming of several Ukrainian and Russian Fellows at Wiko since mid-March and with a return to more normal social life (despite a very persistent Covid that infected almost everyone in the community, myself included), Ukraine remained a hot topic on Wiko's academic agenda. In several public talks featuring prominent scholars in Ukrainian Studies and experts in Eastern European history and politics, the different facets of Russia's aggression were minutely analysed. I attended all such meetings, even when they were in German, using them as a further way of practicing my listening and understanding skills. No need to add that the war – with its military, political, and humanitarian dimensions – was one of the most common topics discussed during social meetings.

Our Wiko semester was invariably impacted by Russia's full-fledged war against Ukraine. It made me (and presumably many of us) look closer at contemporary political developments in the Black Sea region and the instrumentalization of history by Russia's

political elites. It has also encouraged me to pay more attention to long(er)-term historical analysis of the weaponization of foodstuffs and energy and to symbols of national resistance, such as Snake Island (about which I have completed an article that was included in the Winter 2022 issue of the *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*). As it clearly resulted from Putin's February rant, Russia's war is also an assault on history, and being at Wiko during such difficult times, we were even more privileged to meet and work together with Ukrainian, Russian, and Belarusian colleagues defending, with their scholarly articles, literary pieces, or music, some of humankind's greatest values, such as freedom, truth, and justice. Because Wiko is more than a hub of academic excellence, it is also a safe haven for those brave enough to fight for our freedom(s) and most importantly it is an oasis managed and inhabited by kind-hearted people who treasure these dear values.