



Salzburg Global Seminar
Henry Brandon Lecture

Special Address by Timothy Snyder
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Democracy on the Front Lines

Timothy Snyder, the Richard C. Levin Professor of History at Yale University, delivered the annual Henry Brandon Lecture during Salzburg Global Weekend on June 30, 2023. Since 1994, the Henry Brandon Lecture has taken place at Salzburg Global Seminar in honor of the renowned journalist and author Henry Brandon, whose international relations collection has been housed in Salzburg Global's library since then.

The following text is a transcript of a speech as delivered, rather than a prepared text by the author.

I chose to walk from the train station up here. There's an easy metaphor in here and you should always go for the easy metaphor when you're starting a lecture and warming up your crowd. Here's the easy metaphor. As I walked up the hill, I looked down on Salzburg. As I looked down on Salzburg, I thought about the past in a certain way. I appreciated the lovely buildings; I appreciated the surfaces of things. I appreciated the beauty of the city.

Just as I was starting to think, you should check yourself and you should remember your Thomas Bernhard and you should remember your Austrian history, it started to storm. But a storm isn't just a literary device. One of the criticisms of 19th-century naturalists or romantic literature was that every time something bad happened, a storm came down from the sky and you were meant to understand that this was a sign that something ill was afoot. But a storm, I'm thinking, is also a historical phenomenon. No less than the churches I was looking at, no less than the streets of Salzburg that I was looking at. Every storm, every piece of weather, everything that happens in the atmosphere, is a historical phenomenon. No less than anything else.

The storm which happened this afternoon is, more or less predictably, perhaps less, nevertheless causally determined by every other thing which has happened in the history of the world. So, what seems unpredictable to us, what comes to us out of the clear blue sky, what shocks us and what surprises us has less to do with whether something is historical or not, and more to do with the mood we are in ourselves. Obviously, I'm speaking about the war. I was walking up the hill to Salzburg wearing the clothes I was planning to wear for this lecture, which, wonderfully for my metaphor, included a Ukrainian embroidered shirt, a Vyshyvanka. That's what I meant to wear. This is my backup shirt.

I'm thinking about the war and I'm thinking about it in a certain way. I'm thinking about it in this way- and this is very much in the spirit of what my late friend Tony Judt said in 2002 and in many other places- the history that we choose to see, the past that we choose for ourselves as we generate a story of progress, isn't the same thing as the past. The phenomena which come out to surprise us and to break our story of progress, to break our narrative of progress, are just as real, if not more real, than the stories that we choose for ourselves.

Our problem in the 21st century, or one of our problems in the 21st century, has been to confuse what is convenient for a story of progress with what actually happened. Deeper than that, though, rests a second problem, and it's the one I'm going to focus on today. If you rely on a story of progress, not only are you making a historical mistake, but you're also making an ethical mistake. The historical mistake is that we're all wrong. Gandhi's wrong, Obama's wrong, the Victorians were wrong. They were all wrong. History is full of contingency and error. History is full of choices that we make. There's no arc. There's no pattern.

The moral mistake is if you think you're on the way towards progress, you don't have to ask the question "Progress towards what?" - It's as though the question answers itself - "We are forever on the way to that thing that is better." But you don't have to ask what that thing that is better actually is.

Given the subject of Salzburg [Global] Seminar, and in the spirit of providing intellectual entertainment for those of you who had to sit through two days of board meetings, which I'm sure were as fun as they were described as being, and I have no doubt about that. Nevertheless, in the spirit of offering something different, what I'm going to do is actually interrogate the idea of the good. I'm here to talk about the future of freedom and democracy.

What I want to start with by saying, is that question is a total banality unless we know what freedom is. In my language, especially as it's spoken in my country, the word freedom has been overused, well past the point of cliché. It's a dead horse which has been beaten well below the Earth's crust and is roasting somewhere around the core. It's a word which, almost every time it is pronounced, means either nothing or the opposite of what it's supposed to mean.

We are all so used to that, at least in the Anglo-Saxon world, that we don't even really stop to inquire what the word freedom actually means. Before I talk about the future of freedom and our current situation, I want to take a stab at what freedom actually is. And as you'll see, these reflections are very much informed by the war in Ukraine, but more specifically by particular Ukrainians who I've encountered as I've been trying to finish a book which is about freedom.

Freedom, I think, is the value of values. I wouldn't say the highest of values. I would say it's the value of values because freedom is that condition in which you are able to make choices among other values and realize those choices. So there really are good things in the world. Loyalty really is good. Patriotism really is good. Universalism also really is good. Honesty also really is good. In my view, those things are as real as the lake out the window, the trees on the other side of the lake, the mountain, or the fortress.

Life is such that the values that are real contradict one another. It's not that easy to be honest and loyal at the same time. It's not that easy to be a patriot and universalist at the same time, although they might both be good things. Freedom is the value of values in that it allows, if we are free, each of us the chance to navigate in our own way the choices between these contradictory values. And here I'm following some people who were also very important to Tony Judt, like Isaiah Berlin and Leszek Kołakowski.

Freedom therefore inherently involves responsibility, because if I choose to be honest about my friend in the first row, I may not be being loyal to my friend in the first row. And if I choose to be loyal to my friend in the first row, I may not be being honest about my friend in the first row, which means that even the good things that I do aren't perfect. Insofar as even the good things I do involve evil, that means that being free involves being responsible. It involves understanding that every light that you might be able to cast also involves a shadow. Freedom and responsibility come together. That's inherently part of freedom.

Because we live through time - we're born, we live, we die, we only move one direction in time - freedom also involves the creation of character, and this strikes me. Freedom involves a conservative - but conservatives don't even talk about it anymore - observation. Freedom

involves character in the sense that as you make the choices that you make among values over time, you become a certain kind of person. The choices that you've made stay with you.

Since that is true, you can then arrive at a moment where, precisely as a free person, it seems that there's nothing else that you can do besides the thing that you are doing right now. In my own mind, as I think about and write this book about freedom, I refer to this as the "Zelenskyy Paradox", because this is one of the things that I spoke about with the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

When I talked to President Zelenskyy - by the way, I had him for a good afternoon - it was an interesting conversation with the president. I've had numerous conversations with presidents, but this is the only time I've had a conversation with a president where he said, "So, what do you want to talk about?" Fortunately, I had an answer, which was "I want to talk about my book about freedom," and he said, "Let's talk about that." And we did for the rest of the afternoon.

One of the things I wanted to ask him about was his decision to stay in Kyiv in February of 2022. We spent a good deal of time talking about that. The apparent paradox is, he said over and over again in different ways, "I couldn't have done anything else. I wouldn't have been the same person if I had not remained in Kyiv."

How can you reconcile that apparent choicelessness with being a free person? Wouldn't you be a free person if you just ran? And the answer is no. If you just run, you're following impulse, and despite what American culture might 94% of the time be trying to convince you, just following impulse is not the same thing as freedom. It's very often the opposite. The apparent paradox resolves itself when we remember that the choices that we make over time are what build up a character and character can lead us into a situation where we really don't feel like we have a choice because the ethical structure that is our life tells us what the one thing is we ought to be doing.

Freedom is also, I think, positive and not negative. The idea that freedom is negative is a very easy, elegant solution. If I can just say freedom is about everybody leaving me alone, freedom is about getting the government off my back, maybe freedom is just about having no government, that's very elegant, and all elegant solutions are tempting. A libertarian solution is tempting in exactly the same way that the Marxist solution was, and the two of them are structurally very similar. The idea that all I need to be free is for the government to go away is very simple. But it's obviously not true for many reasons.

One of them is [that] in order for us to become individuals, we all need the help of other people. There is simply no way to become an individual on your own. There is no one here who became the individuals you are without an awful lot of help. In general, I'm going to venture to say, it was a lot of help and the people who helped you also had a lot of help. And they too probably had a lot of help, in some cases going back generations. If that's true, it's true of everybody.

That help that people need to become free, if we think freedom is the highest value, has to be part of freedom itself, which means that this thing which Ukrainians and other Europeans, or East Europeans, call civil society belongs to freedom. It also means that the way to legitimate government is that government is that structure which creates the conditions in which people can become free. Or at least that's what legitimate government would be.

That is what in my own mind, I think of as - the Ukrainians are going to follow me here and the rest of you don't have to for the next 45 seconds - that is what I think of as the Maidan paradox, because obviously people who decided to protest in 2013-2014 in Ukraine, that million or so people, they were free, but they could not have been free without the other 999,999 people. What you're doing when you're participating in a demonstration or other collective activities involves freedom, but you can't do it on your own. That's pars pro toto of a much larger phenomenon, which is that you can't be free without the right kind of common or collective action.

I hope the philosophy hasn't bored you too much because we need it. We're not going to get through the 21st century without it. If we blunder along with the technocracy and the neutral language, we're not only not going to be free, we're going to be extinct, in that order. We're going to need the philosophy. We're going to need the ethics. I hope it was able to keep your attention because if it couldn't, we're all in really bad shape.

I'm going to claim that these statements that I've just made are true, and later we can talk about them. But I'm going to claim that they're true because I think that truth is part of freedom. I think that the value of truth is something without the aspiration towards which we cannot possibly be free. I'll be talking more about that as we go along. That is my notion of freedom. You can have your own notion of freedom. We'll have time to talk about it.

Having laid that out, I want to spend the next few minutes of the lecture speaking about what I think the major problems of freedom are for the world now. Not the superficial things, not the things which you might immediately notice. I'm not even going to talk about the war in Ukraine directly now. I'm going to talk about what I take to be not the symptoms but the disease- what I take to be the four major problems.

The first - and I'm going to stay in the realm of the ethical for a moment because I think it's very important - the first is nihilism. I think nihilism is a tremendous problem for freedom, nihilism both of facts and of values. If one says that nothing is really true [and] it's impossible to say what a fact is going to be, you are disabling everybody else's life. You're making it very hard for people to situate themselves, let alone to resist.

To give a very simple example, the truth is the last resort for people who want to resist. I might have all the power and all the money, but so long as you have something true to say, for example, "Professor Snyder, you have all the power and all the money" - it's not actually true, but just in this hypothesis - but so long as you are allowed to speak truth to power, truth matters. But if there is no truth, then I've got everything. Because if I have the power and I have the

money and I have the spectacle and you don't have the truth to defend yourself- I'm not saying the truth always beats spectacle, it usually doesn't - but at least truth, if we acknowledge that there is such a thing as truth, it gives you a wall that you can use to resist. If there is no truth and you don't have the power and you don't have the money and you don't have the spectacle, where are you? You're nowhere. You're powerless.

Nihilism of fact is a big problem for freedom, as is nihilism of values. If I say, "It doesn't matter what you do, like decapitation and castration and kidnapping children, making half the population of a country leave and destroying whole cities, like that's really no different than other recreational choices." If I take that view of values, which many people in the world now do, and not only in Russia, there is a problem for freedom.

It disables freedom if, in effect, I am saying nothing is good or if, in effect, I am saying it's entirely just a matter of your personal opinion. Because if it is entirely just a matter of personal opinion, then Hitler's personal opinion is just as valuable as yours. If it's all just a matter of personal opinion, then Prigozhin's opinion or Putin's opinion is just as valuable as yours. If it is just a matter of impulse or statement or claim, then I'm basically saying "There is no such thing as a value. Values aren't real. They're not real like the lake is real or the forest is real. They're not real at all." That's a problem for freedom. Because if freedom is the thing that allows us to make choices among values and there are no values, then there isn't any freedom.

Nihilism is problem number one for freedom. It's not just nihilism, by the way, as a statement. It's nihilism not just as a human claim. It's nihilism as a matter of structures which we ourselves have created. There are certainly humans who are advocating this position.

I would argue that social media as such - we can talk about which ones are better and which ones are worse and "Do you like the Tik Tok or the Instagram or the Telegram?" - in general, social media moves us towards a world of nihilism about facts and nihilism about values. I'm happy to expand on that claim. But in general, that is the overall effect that it's had. It's not a coincidence, in my view, that since the Internet turned into social media in 2010, democracy has collapsed. There's a longer story to be told there, but I think that's a causation and not a correlation.

I want to make a point here that this thing that I'm calling nihilism of facts and values, that's kind of a long name for something that you could also refer to as pre-fascism. Because once you get to the point where you are saying that there are no facts and there are no values, you are just one little step from the fascist position. The fascists made a very similar move. They said, "The truth is what the collective says it is" or "The truth is whoever wins the war." That's the fascist position.

The truth is the same thing as power. When you say there is no truth, you're creating a vacuum which the people who like to talk about power, or who just like power, are going to fill. I would suggest that our various couch fascists, our various Silicon Valley couch fascists, and other couch fascists around the world are blundering into that space right now.

The second big problem for freedom now, as I understand it, is futurelessness. Like everything else in German, there's a word for everything, so there probably is a word like "Zukunftslosigkeit" or something. There probably is such a word and if there wasn't, there is now. In English, what I mean by futurelessness is the sense that there isn't really anything in the future, which takes various forms. It takes the global warming form [and] it takes the social media form where you're so focused on where you are right now that there really isn't any time. It takes the form of a lack of social mobility in very unequal societies like Russia or, for that matter, the United States, where social mobility is very slow and therefore the coming generation has trouble imagining a future that's better or different than the present.

If we have no sense of a future, we have a big problem because then our choices, even if we believe in values and truth and so on, our choices then become meaningless because where do our choices take place? They can only take place in the future, and if we don't believe a future is coming, then what's the point? What's the point of making free choices or believing in freedom? And if there's not going to be any future, then there's no sense in trying to create character because that better person that I will be as a free person is never going to exist anyway, because that future isn't out there waiting.

The other thing which happens with futurelessness, as you've probably noticed, is that when there is no future, a certain myth of the past rushes in to fill the gap. As social media arrives, as global warming creates anxiety, as social mobility stops, suddenly politics turns toward the past, but always in a very specific way, not in a way that historians like. In the following way, it always turns towards, "There was a moment in the past where we were innocent and everybody else was guilty, and that moment lasted a very long time. In fact, nothing ever really happened in the past except that we were innocent and our innocence was violated. We never started a war. Only other people started wars against us." This has an American version. It has an Indian version. It has a Russian version. It has a Polish version.

[With] this kind of story, we can talk about how it isn't history. People call it history, but it's really not. It actually hurts us physically - historians - this kind of stuff. I'm not kidding. It actually hurts me physically even to talk about it, to refer to it. It's like pinning a marine biologist in the corner and making him talk about mermaids for the entire party.

These kinds of stories are what rush in to fill up a futureless politics, and they are dangerous. The idea that we are innocent now because we were innocent in the past because we are eternally innocent is very dangerous, because it leads to the conclusion that no matter what we do, we remain innocent. This is a line of argument which one sees basically every day on Russian television in that form. If you think about it this way, Russian television actually makes a lot more sense than it might otherwise.

The third major problem for freedom, as I see it, is inequality. I don't see inequality and freedom as clashing. By the way, we can talk more about that. I don't see security and freedom as clashing either. I think all these tragedies are basically there to make it hard for us to think

about freedom. Inequality is a problem for freedom because inequality or radical inequality stops social mobility [and] makes it hard for people to think about the future.

Inequality or radical inequality is a problem for freedom because it creates clientelism. It makes most people clients of those who actually have all of the money, whether we like it or not. It makes cooperation in the sense of trusting cooperation across society very hard. As people from Plato to George Orwell have argued, radical inequality makes it impossible to have a language. It might seem that you're speaking the same language, but you're actually talking about entirely different things. You have entirely different preoccupations.

If you can't figure out what I'm talking about, I'll just give you a dramatic example, which is the realm of oligarchical fantasy. I don't know all of you personally, so I'm not going to speak for you. But for most of us, the idea of leaving earth is not a realistic response to global warming, but for some of us it is, or at least they think so. For most of us, Ukraine is a country, but for some of us, it's not. That's an oligarchical fantasy. There's certain things you need \$10 billion or more to believe because they're that stupid. And once you believe them, there's nobody who can stop you from believing them. People used to say there are certain things so stupid, you have to have a PhD to believe them. As an academic, I know that's true. I would happily take my department meeting to Elon Musk's Twitter feed any day of the week. He's going to beat us for stupid all seven days, all 365 and one quarter days of the year.

Oligarchical fantasy is something which can only happen in conditions of extreme inequality, and the oligarchical fantasies matter. The fantasy that there's no global warming, the fantasy that Ukraine is not a country, [and] the fantasy that we could all leave Earth. Those things not only cause immediate destruction and death, but they also draw our attention away from the plausible futures in which we could live as free people.

The fourth major fundamental problem for freedom is empire. I'll be very brief here because I will talk more about it when I talk about the war. The problem with empire and freedom is this. One of the ways that the word freedom is contaminated is that most of the time, in most of the traditions that are at least familiar to me, others of you will probably know other traditions much better than I, but in the Greek, Roman, European, American traditions, freedom generally means an exploitative condition in which I am free because I can get you to do stuff for me. Because you are slaves or servants or women or colonized people or something. It is very hard to find a sense of the word freedom when you scratch just a little bit to which that critique does not apply.

I would go so far as to say that a challenge of the 21st century is to find a sense of the word freedom in which that is not true. When I say that empire is a problem for freedom, I'm just compressing this very much right now, but what I mean is that the last 500 or 600 years of history, which have mainly been a history of colonization and colonialism, are also a history of the use of the word freedom to mean "I am free because you're my slave. I am free because you're subordinate to me, and that's what freedom is".

The next thing I want to talk about is how the war clarifies all of this, and by the war I mean the Russian war in Ukraine. I realize there are other wars going on, in Ethiopia and other places, in Syria, where many of the same dynamics are present. This is the war I know more about.

The claim I want to make is that this war is clarifying for some of these issues. It's certainly clarifying with respect to the issue of nihilism, because the depth and the sheer variety of kinds of lying in this war is impressive, even by historical standards. Honestly, it's impressive. There's the everyday lying of the propaganda centers. There is the routine assignation of one's own decent intentions to the other side. There is the painful lying about the past, or at least painful for historians, lying about the past, what I think of as the deep lying.

But there are other kinds of falsehoods which I think are even more damaging than that, like the falsehoods which take our landmarks and our points of certainty and invert them. For example, one likes to think that in Austria and in Germany and also in other parts of the world, the Holocaust is a kind of moral landmark, something that we have quite consciously created to decide what some limits of action might be. But what happens if someone then takes that tradition and uses it as a justification to carry out genocide, which is what's happening right now? Not only is the genocide bad, but using the Holocaust as pro-genocide propaganda - I'm speaking about Russia - is also bad because it calls into question, confuses, messes up for a whole generation what these landmarks were supposed to have been. That's a pretty deep nihilism. Of course, I'm not claiming that this is limited to Russia. It's a phenomenon that is present around the world.

We who observe this war are also affected, drawn in in some way by all of this. We may not do these terrible things that I'm talking about, but we do a lot of things that I think are related, like pretending not to know who the perpetrator is when we know perfectly well who the perpetrator is. Everyone knows who blew up that dam. Pretending not to know, deliberately both-siding things, confusing people who always lie with people who rarely lie and saying, "Well, how can I possibly know?" This is an escape from responsibility, and it's an escape from responsibility in which we take part.

I've been thinking and writing a lot about Yevgeny Prigozhin's little march on Moscow the other day. I realize the news cycle travels fast so let me just remind you - on Saturday, the Russian government was almost overthrown and probably could have been. I think it's really interesting as I say, "The Russian government was overthrown", and there's nervous laughter like, "Oh, yeah, I remember that. That was a thing over the weekend!" It is actually quite a serious thing. It's a sign that this regime is coming to an end.

The most interesting part for me was Yevgeny Prigozhin having a moment where he told the truth, and I think this has probably not been reported on enough. Prigozhin said, "All these rationales that the Kremlin has given for this war, they're not true. The reason for this war was to colonize Ukraine, install our own president, and divide up the resources among the Russian elite." Now, not only is that true, it has the ring of truth. And the reason it has the ring of truth is that it's consistent with the way the Russian system actually works.

Whereas all the other stuff that we have spent so much time talking about, like NATO and the fact that the democratically elected president of Ukraine, who's Jewish, might be a Nazi, all these things that we've spent so much time talking about, they were just there basically as catnip for our sense of irresponsibility. They were just there to draw us away from the obvious. In this case, as Prigozhin for a moment allowed us to see, the obvious is this was always a colonial war, which was always about destroying Ukraine, [and] always about installing a Russian leader. We even know who it was. It was always about that. Insofar as our minds have been anywhere else, that's because we've been drawn away.

This is a war of inequality. This is an oligarchical war. Putin is the "capo dei capi". Putin is the oligarch in Russia. Russia is a country of incredible economic inequality, far greater inequality, and this is saying something, than the United States of America. This is a war which is only possible because of his oligarchical fantasies.

There are many ways to talk about his view that because a Viking in Kyiv was maybe baptized a thousand years ago that therefore - how does this even work again? - A Viking was maybe baptized a thousand years ago, and that means that there's no Ukraine. It doesn't get better than that. That's the argument. This is what I mean when I say it hurts. That's an example. There are many ways to talk about that. I can spend hours, and I've been forced to explain why that's not true, and we can do that. But what it fundamentally is, is an oligarchical fantasy. It's the kind of thing you can only believe if you have \$10 billion or more. The problem is, if you have \$10 billion or more, or if you're the head of state or both, you can then try to make that fantasy come into reality. That's what I mean when I say it's an example of inequality. It is in other ways as well.

Russia has very close to no social mobility, and therefore the wars abroad are a kind of spectacle. They're a way for the government to stay in power by drawing attention away from the fact that you can't really get anywhere in Russia, or at least most Russians can't, but we can have a war of spectacle abroad in which we are good and they're evil. We can do that in Ukraine, and when we get tired of Ukraine, we can do it in Syria and when we get tired of Syria, we can do it again in Ukraine. And by the way, they're still bombing Syria while they're doing it in Ukraine. That's the way the system works, and it has to do fundamentally with the lack of social mobility.

Futurelessness is my third problem. There is no future. I'd be happy to be corrected, but I believe it's right to say there is no future in Russian political thought right now. I mean the political thought of the kind which is practiced by the people who matter in politics, not by my friends and colleagues who are Russian political theorists. Of the people who are actually in charge of Russia, there isn't a future. It's all about the past. It's all about things repeating themselves. The Second World War is repeating itself, the baptism of Rus is repeating itself, the Russian Empire is repeating itself. But there isn't any future in any of this. Putin does not talk about the future, even about what it's like when this war is going to be over. There's no discussion about that at all.

One way to understand this war is the export of that futurelessness to Ukraine or the attempt to export that futurelessness to Ukraine. If Russia has no future, in other words, Ukrainians can't have a future. But on the other side, it's very interesting to see that in Ukraine, although the Ukrainians also do talk about the past in all kinds of interesting ways, kind of creative ways, the Ukrainian discussion of this war is almost entirely about the future. It's about getting through this to that world we were supposed to have. It's about the future rather than about the past, and I find that interesting.

A symptom of this is the generational difference between the Russian and Ukrainian leaderships, or between Russia and Ukraine, at least generally. The people who are roughly 40 are now in charge in Ukraine. I don't just mean the people who are running the government, I also mean the civil society elites and those in business, a lot of people who matter in Ukraine are around 40. The people who matter in Russia are around 70, and that's not just some nice coincidence and it's not affirmative action for seniors.

It's because of the very sad phenomenon that the generation of Putin [and] Lavrov has crushed the next generation. They've crushed the next generation, they've put them in prison, they've forced them abroad. In the best case, they've driven them into private life. The generation after that, the people who are in their twenties, are now going off to die senselessly in Ukraine. So now they're going after the next generation after that. That generation in their seventies isn't big into the future. There's a generational element to this, let's put it that way.

The other way that this is related to the future quite specifically, is that this war is a kind of preview of what 21st-century global warming-related apocalypse is going to look like. What Ukraine looks like now is what the world looks like if the hydrocarbon oligarchs win. Putin is a hydrocarbon oligarch working out his own various fantasies of escape. That is what the whole world will look like if the other hydrocarbon oligarchs get to work out their fantasies of escape. Russia is giving us a chance to see what this will look like. This is another way that the war is related to my "Zukunftslosigkeit".

My fourth problem with freedom, empire, is the obvious one. Russia's war on Ukraine is like a 19th-century colonial war in the sense that, like the European powers everywhere, but let's say in Africa, you make two moves. The first is you say "The state that I've just encountered is not a state, and therefore, law doesn't really apply to this state because it's not a state. The people I encounter are not really a people, they're not a nation, they're a folk or a tribe, they're an indigenous group." That is the standard international law of colonialism, and that is exactly what's been applied despite the changes in law since 1948. That's exactly what Russia has applied in Ukraine.

It is also a 20th-century colonial war in the Hitlerian sense, where you do the same things that I've just said, but you also say, when it doesn't work, because colonial wars got harder in the 20th century - by the way, Germany's war against the Soviet Union in 1941 was a colonial war chiefly about conquering Ukraine - when Hitler attacked the Soviet Union, what he said was, "The Soviet Union's not really a state", and when the Soviet Union resisted, what Hitler said

was, "It's only still there because of the international Jewish conspiracy helping it out", and that is strikingly similar to what happened with the Putin regime in Ukraine. When they invaded Ukraine, they said "There's not really a state there", and when it turned out there was a state and there was a people, then the next move is to say, "Well, it's an international conspiracy." Depending on what social media channels you follow, that international conspiracy is NATO and EU and Americans, or it's the Jews. Very often it's the Jews. That's the way that it's 20th-century colonialism.

There's also a way that it's 21st-century colonialism. In the 21st century, a lot of late empires or former empires are anxious about demography. They're anxious about the nonwhite people coming and taking away their demographic majorities and so on. Here again, Russia is in the avant-garde, and you can see this in this war where, quite deliberately, the nonwhite Asian populations of the Russian Federation are being sent to die in horribly disproportionate numbers in Ukraine. Meanwhile, the "white", that is to say, assimilable children of Ukraine are being forcibly deported from Ukraine to Russia as one of the many violations of the genocide convention. That is explicitly racially motivated. They're not even trying to hide this. They're basically boasting about it. In that sense, it's a 21st-century imperial war.

On the other side, it's interesting to think about what it means for Ukraine to be a post-colonial state because being a post-colonial state is hard for a hundred reasons. One of the syndromes of the post-colonial state is that you sometimes repeat the things that just happened to you on a smaller scale. It's been interesting to watch the Ukrainians try to navigate this and not do it and try to think of some way to be a political nation. This is interesting with respect to language. It's a bilingual country, as much as people for various reasons now will try to deny this. The relationship with Crimea is also very interesting, where Crimea is par excellence a Russian colonial territory, and where the Ukrainian language about Crimea is all about decolonization. It's all about Crimean autonomy and things like this.

The larger point that I want to make has to do with the European Union. I spent a lot of time, and I'm doing it again today, talking to Europeans. I can tell who's not European by how you react when I say that, like immediately the North Americans look away in a certain way, like "Couldn't you tell? I'm from Alberta." What Europeans say about the European Union, which is 100% wrong, is that Europe arose as a group of nation states that had learned from the Second World War that war is bad. That's not true. There weren't any European nation states. They were all empires.

The reason that the European Union could come about - this is chapters six, seven, eight and nine of Tony Judt's "Postwar", which I recommend heartily to all of you - the reason the European Union could come about is because the Europeans lost their colonial wars beginning in 1945 with the German defeat in the Second World War. That is the first in a series of West European empires losing wars which continues with the Dutch, continues with the French, the Belgians, the Spanish, [and] the Portuguese.

You lose your imperial wars, you fight them, and afterwards, you say, "No, we haven't fought a war since 1945. Peace." You fight them until the Americans don't give you more money, like for the French in Southeast Asia. And then you go home and then you tell a different story. The different story is, "Oh, an empire? No, that's the Americans. We never had an empire. We had a war, and we lost it. And we learned peace is good and war is bad." That's the European story. It's a lovely story, right? But it's not at all true. It's important now that it's not true.

I am confronted again and again and again and again with this story. It's like a lot of nice stories. This is like one of these moral choices that I talked about before- are you nice or are you honest? In this case, in this particular moment, it's important to be honest. That story is not true.

The European Union is a post-colonial construction, a very successful post-colonial construction, which is not itself an empire because it has mutual recognition on a legal basis of its members. It is very different from an empire in that sense, but it's like an empire in the sense that it's a very big trade zone allowing for a lot of prosperity. The Europeans who came back from empire, whether it was the Germans in 1946 from Eastern Europe or whether it was the Dutch from Indonesia, or the French from Algeria, they were landing in a specific situation characterized by European integration. European empire ended as European integration started. It's one big process.

Now, the reason why this realism is very important [and] why it's important for Europeans to remember that they had empires is that you never win your last imperial war. You always lose your last imperial war. You never win your last imperial war.

This is very important for understanding the present situation because one European response to the present war is to say, "We should peace Russia". We should give them peace. Peace. Peace is the thing. But peace is not what the French got in Algeria. Peace is not what the Belgians got in the Congo. Peace is not what the Portuguese and the French got [and the] Spanish got. Peace is not what we gave the Germans - sorry, that's a very specific "we" in Austria - but peace is not what we gave the Germans in 1945. That wasn't peace. That was defeat.

Empires have to lose. They have to lose. So, the idea of victory is very important for freedom, along all the dimensions that I've been talking about. It's important because it invokes moral choice. There would be no Ukrainian resistance without human courage. There would be no Ukrainian resistance without courage [and] without certain kinds of moral commitment.

The idea of victory is not just a description of a state of affairs, it's a description of a kind of moral condition on both sides where people recognize that one side has won and one side has lost, something which was very important for the Germans and for the Austrians in a sort of longer-term more ambiguous way because we're in Austria. It's very important to know when you've lost. My country has a problem with knowing when it has lost wars. We have a big problem with that and it has slowed us down and caused us great problems that we don't realize when we've lost wars. Empires have to lose. That's a claim not just about a state of affairs, it's a claim about morality.

The other way this relates to my larger claims about freedom is that freedom involves these choices among values. Right now, Ukrainians are facing really painful choices, not just pain in general, but painful choices. You know, do the fathers fight or do they stay at home? Do the mothers fight or do they stay at home? Almost a fifth of the Ukrainian armed forces are women. That's a real choice. Loyalty to family is a value, you know, as is patriotism. Not wanting to leave your family is a value, and not wanting to leave your friends alone on the front is also a value. Those are values that clash. The legitimate purpose of government is to make those clashes as small as possible. Ukrainian civil society can do something about that. Ukrainian government can do something about that. But the more Europeans, and the more the European Union acts, the more can be done to resolve those terrible clashes and to make a country free.

What I'm trying to say is that victory in the war is about freedom, not just in the obvious negative sense of driving an occupier out, but also in the positive sense of making people's lives less tragic than they had been. And that doesn't end when the firing stops. The story of Ukraine has to be more like the story of what happens to other post-imperial states, whether they were peripheries or metropolises, whether it's the Czech Republic or whether it's Ireland or whether it's Britain or France, whether you're the metropole or whether you're the periphery. Joining the European Union is not the end of something. It's also the beginning of something.

Freedom for Ukraine involves these moral issues. It involves a sense of the future. I'm trying to describe a future which goes beyond empire. It also involves less inequality within Europe, but also within Ukraine. And those of you who have any responsibility or will have responsibility for the rebuilding of Ukraine, or you Ukrainians out there, should be very careful to make sure that the recovery is a redistributive process, beginning with the countryside and the oblast and the regions and not just a centralized process. That's a claim about inequality.

What I've been after here has been trying to illustrate an idea of freedom. I gave it to you at the beginning. I'm sure it sounded pretty abstract. I'm trying to illustrate it. I'm trying to claim that it's true by reference to everyday events. I'm finally trying to go after this specific thing, which is a non-exploitative idea of freedom, not just because the Ukrainians need it, but because I think we all need it. Thank you.