



Winfried Schneider-Deters

## RUSSIA'S WAR IN UKRAINE

*Debates on Peace, Fascism, and War Crimes,  
2022–2023*

With a foreword by Klaus Gestwa

*ibidem*

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# Foreword

Klaus Gestwa

## Russian Destructive Fury, Ukrainian Defensiveness and German Delusion

*"Interference is the only way to remain realistic."*

Heinrich Böll

On the evening of June 27, 2023, a Russian Iskander missile struck a pizzeria in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kramators'k. Twelve people were killed, including three children, and sixty injured. When the murderous projectile left the popular restaurant in ruins, the Ukrainian writer, Viktoria Amelina, was just receiving dinner drinks there with her three Colombian guests. The visit from far-away Latin America was meant to demonstrate that there is solidarity with Ukraine there, too. The Colombian guests survived the missile attack, but Viktoria Amelina did not. She succumbed to her severe injuries. The 37-year-old left behind her husband, her son, and a readership enthusiastic about her works.

In the weeks that followed, minutes of silence and readings were held in honor of Viktoria Amelina in many places, including Germany. The murder of the award-winning and politically committed woman of letters was another senseless death in Russia's war of imperial conquest, characterized by an excess of destruction and brutality, and instigated by a leadership who—in consensus with a largely zombified Russian population—wants to forcefully bomb Ukraine back under Moscow's yoke, and divert it from its own path to Europe and the 21st century.

While a Russian inflammatory talk show cynically celebrated the deadly missile attack in Kramatorsk as the targeted destruction of a Ukrainian army command center, Ukrainian President Zelensky declared: "Such terror proves to us and to the whole world again and again that Russia deserves only one thing for all its deeds: defeat and tribunal."



Since February 24, 2022, many people in Ukraine have gone to bed every night not knowing whether they will live to see the next morning. Again and again, the deafening air alarm robs them of their night's rest, demonstrating how much the terror of war robs everyday life of its predictability and order. The fact that the overtired and afflicted people nevertheless do allow themselves to sit in restaurants and cafés during the day shows their steadfast will to preserve a little normality even in the terrible times of war. However, it is hard to imagine what havoc the painful experiences of war will wreak on the psyche of the millions of people who have seen the incomprehensible with their own eyes, perceived the war-related sounds and smells, and experienced pain that they will never forget.

A high-rise building in Dnipro, an apartment block in Lviv, a park, and memorials in Kharkiv, holiday and harbor facilities in Odesa, a theatre and a maternity clinic in Mariupol, a shopping center in Kremenchuk, office towers in Kyiv, a home for the elderly in Popazna — this is only a small selection of the places where rubble and craters and pools of blood bear witness to Russia's cowardly attacks. Its invading army is trying to compensate for its lack of professionalism with contempt for humanity, harshness and war crimes before the eyes of an indignant world public. Thousands of Ukrainian school and university buildings, several hundred hospitals and medical centers, as well as a large number of libraries, museums, churches and other cultural institutions have now been damaged or completely destroyed by Russian missiles, shells and drones. More than ten percent of all housing in Ukraine is currently uninhabitable due to the war.

In the occupied territories, the Russian conquerors push for a consistent de-Ukrainianization of public life. Ukrainian books are burned, Ukrainian monuments toppled, streets and squares renamed. The Ukrainians reproach the Russian occupying power not for ridding them of "Nazis" but of their property, culture, and dignity.

The depths of the "Russian soul" were revealed by the intercepted telephone conversations of Russian soldiers. A young woman heartlessly urged her husband, who was fighting in

Ukraine, to rape Ukrainian women, but to make sure to use condoms. Obviously, the idiotizing hate campaigns by which the Kremlin propaganda wants to rally the Russian population behind leader and flag are having an effect. They turn well-educated and actually amiable people into fanatical zombies who renounce all political reason, glorify violence, and indulge in mercilessness towards the victims. Even opposition-minded Russians often lapse into self-victimization, lacking either empathy for the misery and devastation afflicting the people of Ukraine, or willingness to take responsibility for the terrible events of the war.

The Kyiv suburbs of Bucha, Irpin, and Borodianka, as well as the industrial and port city of Mariupol—which was demonstratively executed as part of an urbicide, and where almost 450,000 people lived at the beginning of 2022—are places of horror that will henceforth document the criminal Russian warfare with their torture chambers, mass graves, and streets full of rubble and dead bodies. And it is still unclear whether these sites of horror will not be followed by others. They symbolize that the turning point of February 24, 2022, was followed by an unspeakable breach of civilization with the annulment of the European security order that emerged after 1989.

In the autumn and winter of 2022/23, power plants, transformer stations, electricity centers and waterworks were the targets of Russian attacks to destroy what makes modern life possible in the cold season. There was a perfidious calculation behind it. The Ukrainian population was to be forced to leave its homeland in order to put the already overburdened social systems of Europe under even greater pressure through renewed mass immigration. The Kremlin hoped for “General Winter” and systematically used migration and the loss of one’s homeland as an inhuman weapon to pressure the West to abandon its support for Ukraine, and thus surrender the invaded, badly wounded country to Russian imperialism.

Even today, the Russian army continues to bombard urban infrastructure in order to force the Ukrainian army to deploy the state-of-the-art anti-aircraft systems supplied from the West far from the front to protect the cities. As a result, the battlefields in

eastern and southern Ukraine lack the necessary protection for the Ukrainian units, so that their counter-offensive is currently making slow progress. This explains the demand from Kyiv for fighter jets and more air defense systems.

When the Russian Iskander missile took the life of the talented writer Viktoria Amelina, the literary association, PEN Club Ukraine, and the human rights organization, Truth Hounds, wrote moving statements. In the German Newspaper, *FAZ*, author Kerstin Holm wrote that it was “as if a bullet had hit the language”. Language was one of the topics that particularly preoccupied Viktoria Amelina. When asked how the painful Ukrainian war experiences could be put into words, she replied:

We no longer use the word “war” as a metaphor. Our language became simpler and more direct. I myself, a prose writer, started writing poetry after a period of speechlessness. The short form became important for me to convey simple and direct messages. I have always been very direct because I don't remember ever being a peacetime writer. My debut novel came out in 2014, after the Russian invasion and the annexation of Crimea. I have no power to pretend. War is a time for sincerity.

Being sincere meant for Viktoria Amelina becoming a “war crimes researcher”. She was passionate about this until she herself eventually became the victim of a Russian war crime. Her concern was to interview victims and eyewitnesses of attacks, brutal Russian occupation and merciless torture in order to secure well documented, high-level testimony, in order to be able to file lawsuits against those responsible later. Viktoria Amelina trusted literature above all, in addition to international law. Literature offers the opportunity to focus on the experience of survivors and their lives, which have been smashed to pieces. Telling their “story is part of justice”. The “war crimes researcher” therefore recently worked on a book entitled *War and Justice Diary: Looking at Women – Looking at War*.

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Sincerity, whose time according to Viktoria Amelina has come with the war, denotes in German a characteristic of personal integrity. It means standing by oneself, one's values and ideals under all circumstances, and openly expressing one's views and convictions in

speech and action. Sincerity requires a high degree of courage of conviction, a clear stance, and uncompromising attitude; sincerity is therefore inseparable from honesty and credibility, from sympathy and commitment.

This is true of Winfried Schneider-Deters and his tireless commitment in and for Ukraine. The long-time employee of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung spent many years in Kyiv, where he headed the Foundation's "Ukraine Cooperation Office". Even after his retirement, his Ukrainian networks continue. Winfried Schneider-Deters regularly travels to Ukraine to get his own picture of developments on the ground in the city and the countryside through direct observation. He shares his extensive knowledge, which makes him one of the most distinguished analysts and experts on Ukrainian politics, in lectures and publications. In doing so, he does not dwell on the purely academic, but intervenes in public debates with his clear positions.

In the collective monograph published in 2008, *The European Union, Russia and Eurasia: The Return of Geopolitics*, Winfried Schneider-Deters presented a substantial, 170-page debate contribution on the situation in Ukraine. In it, he explained the causes and consequences of the "Orange Revolution" and then commented critically on the EU's Ukraine policy, under the title "Rapprochement without Accession". In another chapter, he addressed the gas war sparked by Moscow and the forms of political and economic intervention that served to draw Ukraine into the Kremlin's political project of "Eurasian integration".

Four years later, the knowledgeable monograph, *Ukraine: Power Vacuum between Russia and the European Union*, was published. In it, Winfried Schneider-Deters critically examined the policies of the then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. While, on the one hand, he was negotiating an association agreement with the EU, on the other hand, he created a repressive-authoritarian system and thus distanced his country from the European community of values. The strength of this informative study lay once again in Winfried Schneider-Deters's ability to show how closely Ukrainian domestic politics were linked to changing international relations with Europe and Russia. His assessment at the time that Ukraine

had to be understood not only in terms of security policy, but also in terms of internal society, as an unstable “intermediate Europe” from which a power vacuum emanated, was to prove accurate in the politically turbulent year of 2014.

In 2021, Winfried Schneider-Deters presented his magnum opus with his two-volume, 1,500-page work, *Ukraine's Fateful Years 2013–2019*, which is fundamental in every respect. While the first volume deals with the “People’s Uprising on the Maidan in Winter of 2013/14”, the second volume is entitled “The Annexation of Crimea and the War in Donbas”. For this, Winfried Schneider-Deters has evaluated numerous academic studies, public statements, internet sources, official documents and media reports in order to draw a detailed and knowledgeable picture of the events.

With verified facts and well-founded analyses, Winfried Schneider-Deters refuted the narratives spread by the Moscow propaganda machinery that the Euro-Maidan was a coup d’état initiated by the USA. At the same time, he described how Russia carried out its land grab in Crimea with an action that was well prepared by intelligence services. He also made clear that the war in Donbas, which by 2022 had already cost the lives of 14,000 people (mostly combatants on the front line) and caused 2.5 million people to flee, was far from being a civil war, but a war of Russian intervention that was repeatedly fueled by massive forces. Winfried Schneider-Deters’s two-volume publication is now considered an indispensable reference work. That is why ibidem-Verlag published an English-language edition this year.

Together with Karl Schlögel and Timothy Snyder, Winfried Schneider-Deters was one of those who understood early, with impressive foresight, that the Russian war against Ukraine had already begun in 2014, and that western politics, with its usual forms of political thinking and behavior, was ill-equipped for this military emergency. The western governments could not bring themselves to recognize that Moscow was meeting them on a confrontational course, to counter the neo-imperial expansionist urge of the Putin regime with political decisiveness and tough sanctions, and to contain it in time.

Throughout Europe, the reality that the year 2014 was a kind of caesura was deliberately overlooked—in politics, business and the wider public consciousness. This is why energy dependence continued to grow—especially in Germany—creating a weapon that the Kremlin would use without hesitation in 2022, and thus permanently destroying the European energy partnership handed down from the Cold War. Through Putin’s “weaponizing interdependence”, Helmut Schmidt’s often quoted political wisdom that those who trade with each other do not shoot at each other turned out to be a beautiful illusion. Trade with Russia had by no means brought about political change in Moscow. Rather, the Kremlin perceived the unwavering continuation of business relations after 2014 as a form of ingratiation and continued to arm its armed forces with western energy payments. Europe’s indecisiveness led Putin to believe that he could go on the warpath again in 2022 because—if push came to shove—western governments would sacrifice Ukraine on the European-Russian peace altar.

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In his new book, Winfried Schneider-Deters does not dwell long on the fundamental misunderstanding of European policy towards Russia in recent years. Instead, he directs his focus to the developments since February 24, 2022, in order to subject the proclaimed “turn of the times” of German, European, and US policy to a close analysis.

By way of introduction, he emphatically emphasizes that the causes of the Russian war of aggression certainly do not lie in geo-strategic great power rivalries, but solely in the neo-imperial ambitions of Putin’s revanchism, which is entirely geared towards his retention of power. Russia is fighting this war to Russify Ukraine; to seize its economic resources, land and population; and thus to reshape the European security order in its favour. What the Kremlin sells as “legitimate security interests” turns out to be nothing more than neo-imperial claims to power. Russian forces have invaded Ukraine without any necessity and for base motives. They

are committing unbelievable atrocities there, which have been defined as war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity since the mid-20th century.

With its imperial image of history dripping with war glorification, blood-and-soil pathos and persecution mania, the Moscow propaganda machinery – now morally completely uninhibited – is constantly producing ideological dazzle in order to sow doubts among the western public. This media drumfire, with its inhuman cult of sacrifice and death, makes it clear that Putin is determined to make history as a warlord and conqueror because he is unable to do so as a modernizer and reformer. In politics, nothing is more successful than a palmy foreign policy adventure. In Marxist jargon, this is called social imperialism. Because the Kremlin syndicate with its fossil dictatorship has failed to make Russia fit for the 21st century, the Russian army is trying to bomb Ukraine – and, with it, Europe – back to the darkest times of the 20th century. Seen in this light, a fierce struggle between the future and the past is taking place in Ukraine right now.

At the beginning of his book, Winfried Schneider-Deters describes how Putin far overestimated the power of his own armed forces along both with Ukraine's ability to defend itself and – this time – the unity of the "collective west" he despises. Therefore, when "Victory Day" was celebrated in Moscow on May 9, 2023, with a noticeably shrunken military parade, *The New York Times* called Putin "the world's most dangerous fool". The Kremlin boss, it said, had embarked on a daring war adventure but carelessly ignored the risks involved, only to find himself in a situation where he could neither win nor lose the war. Through a game of martial vabanque, Putin's political fate is now so closely linked to the attack on Ukraine that he is not even able to stop the war, but is throwing more and more resources and soldiers into the meat grinder on the eastern Ukrainian front in order to prevent his imminent loss of power. The Vagner mutiny at the end of June 2023 exposed the deep cracks in the Kremlin, which, however, have not yet seized the foundations of Putin's power, due to the lack of political alternatives.

In his account of German support for Ukraine, Winfried Schneider-Deters traces the Berlin government's long journey from the laughingstock of 5000 helmets to the heavy defense packages most recently adopted in the summer of 2023. The close solidarity between Germany and Ukraine emphasized during Zelensky's visit to Berlin in mid-June 2023 was supposed to settle old disagreements with a well-prepared aid and harmony offensive. Olaf Scholz's promise to Ukraine—"our history will continue together"—sent a clear signal, especially in the direction of Moscow, to Putin that he would not achieve his war aims under any circumstances.

Particularly around the question of war aims, there is always discussion in western politics. Winfried Schneider-Deters points out the "western ambiguity" and the fact that the war aims discussed in Germany are by no means congruent with those in Ukraine. It will be left to later historians, after careful evaluation of internal government documents, to judge the responsibility of German policy, with its careful but often slow decision-making, for the fact that Russian forces were able to reduce the industrial and port city of Mariupol to rubble with their fire *battage* in April and May 2023 and that the Ukrainian counter-offensive that began in the summer of 2023 claimed such high casualties. Using the neologism "scholzing", Winfried Schneider-Deters illustrates the Ukrainian frustration at Chancellor Scholz's tendency, since his speech on the "turn of the times", to "announce good intentions only to delay their implementation".

Much attention will be paid to the chapter entitled "German appeals for surrender". In it, Winfried Schneider-Deters addresses the smug lamentations of German intellectuals and media chatterboxes, that they were unfortunately mistaken about Putin, and had fallen for the shamelessness of his lies. The fact that this "mea culpa" is actually nothing more than proof of poor political judgement does not stop many of these Russia-trusting political naïfs from continuing to demonstrate a strength of opinion that stands in striking contrast to their knowledge of Russian and Ukrainian affairs.



It is shameful to see how often clueless scatterbrains dare to dismiss the immense war suffering in Ukraine with a few empty phrases and show hardly any empathy for the oppressed people. Those who do not talk about the fact that the Russian occupying power is mercilessly trying to eradicate everything Ukrainian and justify this by wanting to take a sober look at the situation beyond all indignation, reveal not only intellectual but also moral failure.

Karl Schlögel recently bitterly raised the question of how to explain to the Ukrainians – who are fighting for the survival of their nation at the risk of their lives, and at the same time defending the security of Europe – what is going on in the minds of those German cultural workers, intellectuals, and opinion-makers when they advise Ukraine to surrender or to leave almost a fifth of its territory and several million of its citizens to the Russian aggressor, so that Europe can finally return to its usual normality and its old Russian business.

Even if the Germans now view Putin much more critically than before, there are still plenty of downplayers and whitewashers of Putinism. They do not want to give up their shameless chumminess with imperial Russia and give unbroken credence to the propagandistic narratives designed for them in Moscow: Vladimir Putin as an anti-imperialist role model in the just struggle against western colonialism and as a champion of a multipolar world to show limits to the US empire. The eastward expansion of the EU and NATO is quickly at hand as an argument to justify that the West has constantly oppressed and humiliated Russia and therefore provoked it to war.

To great effect, these Russia-understanding voices demand shades of grey in the public discourse and in doing so – as Winfried Schneider-Deters rightly criticizes – indulge in the “foolish hope” that peace negotiations with Putin are certainly possible through western concessions. These German armchair diplomats do not want to understand that, in view of Putin’s imperial obsessions and his deep-seated resentment of Ukraine as a supposed “anti-Russia”, it hardly seems conceivable to conclude a lasting ceasefire with him. Moreover, with his bottomless lies, the Kremlin boss has meanwhile squandered all political credibility.

With their demand for quick negotiations instead of continued arms deliveries, the vociferous peace movements are constantly producing conceited clouds of discourse, in whose haze the unfortunate experiences of the Ukrainians seem to have less value than the preservation of their own convictions. Many do not want to admit to themselves that the hail of Russian bombs and missiles on Ukraine is causing the heavy ideological framework in their minds also to collapse.

Instead of facing up to the current change of times with all its painful truths, many German intellectuals (especially of the post-war generation, which is now getting on in years) remain in their political comfort zone. Secure in their familiar horizons of thought and experience, they evade the new present, whose monstrosity, overwhelming both sense and reason, turns many things upside down that were long thought to be reliable, lasting and stable. Peace and freedom are now acutely threatened. Their continued existence requires a self-sacrificing struggle and fortitude. This is made clear by the bloody war in Ukraine, where the new media have made us direct eyewitnesses and thus well-informed at all times. Instead of organizing and shaping the frightening new world in which we have all woken up on February 24, 2022, some reality-deniers indulge in a feel-good pacifism that finds expression in the various open letters that Winfried Schneider-Deters succinctly and aptly describes as “manifestations of useful idiocy”.

For this often profoundly ignorant and arrogant attitude of German intellectuals and their shameful betrayal of Ukraine, there is now the appropriate term “westsplaining”. It sums up the position of western know-it-allism, which seems immune to the hard struggle for survival of the people in Ukraine and is characterized by bottomless political naivety in its view of Russia. Winfried Schneider-Deters goes into detail about some of the particularly shameful westsplainers and describes their public aberrations.

The controversial debate on the US supply of cluster munitions in the summer of 2023 has once again shown that Ukraine has to be a “perfect victim” (Franziska Davies) in order to earn German solidarity. Why, then, have many who are now voicing their outrage remained silent all this time, despite the fact that the Russian

army has demonstrably used cluster and phosphorus bombs in Ukraine time and again since the beginning of its large-scale invasion, and has even mined children's rooms and washing machines in devious ways? Many seem to have no ear for the moral dilemma of the Ukrainian leadership, which urgently needs ammunition supplies and has therefore, with a heavy heart, resorted to using the insidious cluster munitions on its own territory (outside cities, sensibly dosed and well documented).

The intellectuals and politicians in the West who continue to be mild-mannered towards Putin and hope for his compliance only signal to Russia that public opinion in Germany, Europe and the USA remains fickle under the influence of Moscow's narratives. The growing war weariness in Europe and the United States gives the Kremlin the fatal impression that it can still gain something through the war. Only when the annexed Crimean peninsula—a Russian place of longing and imperial memory—is directly threatened will the Russian leadership be able to finally realize that it is now irreversibly on the losing side. The advocates of pacifist attitudes and a halt to arms deliveries, whom Winfried Schneider-Deters calls “defeatists”, are therefore only prolonging the war with their one-sided demands on the German and Ukrainian governments, because they are preventing Russia from finally learning how to lose and from withdrawing its troops from the conquered Ukrainian territories. Only this will create the preconditions for the longed-for diplomatic solution.

Winfried Schneider-Deters devotes the last chapter to the “German Angst” of nuclear escalation. This nuclear threat scenario has shaped German society since the 1980s to a far greater extent than can be observed in other European countries. This has its origins both in the politically particularly powerful German anti nuclear power plant movement and in the fact that Germany would have become a highly contaminated battlefield in the event of a nuclear war.

Putin is deliberately playing with this “fog of feeling” (Ute Frevert), which extends into the present day, when he regularly hints at nuclear war escalation as an unscrupulous fearmonger. That is why the global public is currently kept in the dark about the

situation around the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. After the blowing up of the Kakhovka dam on the lower reaches of the Dnipro, its cooling water supply is causing just as much concern as the rumors about possible explosives on the reactor buildings.

Despite Moscow's nuclear saber-rattling, the use of Russian nuclear weapons still seems unlikely. Nevertheless, there remains a residual risk that both western and Ukrainian policy-makers must take into account. At the same time, the world must not allow itself to be held to nuclear blackmail by Putin. This would set a dangerous precedent for the 21st century and thus open Pandora's box. That is why the US and NATO have threatened massive conventional retaliation in the event of the use of tactical nuclear weapons and a deliberately induced nuclear MCA (Maximum Credible Accident), to use the power of deterrence to keep the Kremlin from going to extremes.

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When the Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan received the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade at the end of October 2022, in his impressive Frankfurt prize speech he called on his compatriots to explain their emotions: "We can describe what has happened to us and continues to happen. We have to be prepared that this will not be an easy conversation."

Sentences like these show how much the war is shaking Ukraine. Many families will have to bear the heavy burden of the traumas they can hardly cope with. We, who have been spared this unspeakable horror of war, should therefore listen carefully to what people from Ukraine tell us about their painful experiences and expectations. If we allow ourselves to fall into the role of teachers, then we miss the opportunity to face the often uncomfortable questions of the people from Ukraine and to learn more about Eastern Europe, as well as about ourselves.

When, in mid-May 2023, at the invitation of the German-Ukrainian Society in Heidelberg, I discussed together with the Member of the European Parliament Michael Gahler (CDU, Chris-

tian Democratic Union) and Winfried Schneider-Deters, we answered the question posed to us about what Germany and Europe could learn from Ukraine: the value of peace and freedom, militancy, decency and solidarity. We wanted to remind people that it is not only in the East that there is something to catch up on.

Killed by a Russian Iskander missile, Viktoria Amelina complained in one of her last articles, written with great passion, that due to the "century-long, unimaginable distress," the world "hears little of great Ukrainian literature, drama and art. If you look at the map of Europe, you see [. . .] a huge gap where Ukrainian culture should be."

However, Ukraine has long since ceased to be a blank spot on the mental and cultural map of Europe. With his ruthless policy of de-Ukrainization, Putin has achieved just the opposite. Ukraine is by no means gone. With the much admired and indomitable will to resist of the people fighting for their survival, the country again and again attracts the attention of the entire world. "Out of the fog of war" (Kateryna Mishchenko/Katharina Raabe), we are confronted by a Ukraine, the second largest state in Europe by area and with a population of over 40 million people, that is strengthened by civil society forces, whose extent, dimension and weight have now become clear. It is now up to us whether this visibility and presence will last.

Winfried Schneider-Deters makes his contribution to this. His new book reads like a thoughtful guide to understanding, dialogue and honesty. The author's careful reading helps to discern hypocrisy and cronyism, blind spots, and misinterpretations resulting from the enduring German blindness towards Eastern Europe.

With his insightful studies, Winfried Schneider-Deters stands for scientific honesty; and he observes Ukraine with vivid sympathy on its difficult path to itself. His portrayals are always characterized by honest interest, deep empathy and reflected appreciation for the country that has now been shattered by the Russian army.

Russia's imperial war of conquest against Ukraine fundamentally and irreversibly shifted our perspectives. Today, the Eastern European periphery is the focus of our attention. From now on, the political center of Europe, like the future of the continent, is much

further to the east. Anyone who wants to better understand these tectonic movements in European politics will benefit from reading this book.

(Tuebingen, end of July 2023)

