

On D-Day 80th anniversary, Ukraine war rages amid shaky Western front

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As Western leaders assemble on Omaha Beach to celebrate victory over totalitarian forces, the continent is experiencing the deadliest fighting it has seen since WWII.

PARIS — As world leaders gather on the beaches of Normandy on Thursday to mark the Allies' final drive to defeat totalitarianism in World War II, war is once again raging on European soil.

Indeed, given the number of current geopolitical threats to the post-war global order, the mood in Normandy is unlikely to be buoyant.

The war's last surviving veterans will honor the thousands of young men who died during the June 6, 1944 Normandy invasion. But 80 years on, the peace they afforded to Europe has been shattered, with Ukraine's dogged fight against invading Russian troops offering a disheartening parallel to WWII.

In celebrating the D-Day landings Western leaders will showcase a united front, laying wreaths at the graves of the fallen while promising unfaltering support for Kyiv. But the mood on Ukraine's battlefields and the broad shifts in global politics tell a different story.

Russia is now conducting a brutal offensive in Kharkiv, a region in north-eastern Ukraine, where its troops have been chipping away at local defenses for months. Meanwhile, Western support, which until this year kept deliveries of arms flowing to Kyiv, no longer seems set in stone.

"The Ukrainians are very concerned about what the real objectives of allied nations are," said Nicolas Tenzer, a Sciences Po lecturer and author of "Our War," a book about Ukraine. "Are the Americans, the French and the Germans prepared to pull out all the stops so that Ukraine ultimately wins?"

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is expected to join world leaders at the Normandy ceremonies on Thursday, which will also be attended by U.S. President Joe Biden, French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. France, after initially floating the idea of inviting Russian representatives to mark the WWII sacrifices of Soviet troops, backtracked amid tensions with allied nations.

Zelenskyy was invited to attend in light of “D-Day’s historical resonance with the rightful combat of the Ukrainian nation today,” said an official with the French presidency.

On Friday, Biden will use the occasion to issue a rousing defense of democracy and of NATO that will cast the West’s support for Ukraine as driven by the same values that bound allied nations together during WWII. Along with celebrating transatlantic ties, Biden looks to use the speech to burnish his own democratic values in contrast to Donald Trump, his likely challenger for the U.S. presidency in November elections.

But the pledges of support and solidarity with Ukraine may ring hollow as the world braces for potentially seismic changes. If Biden loses the White House to Trump this fall, Europeans fear Ukraine could be deprived of its most important ally. Back in February, Trump threatened to “encourage” Russia to attack any NATO member that didn’t meet its financial obligations to the alliance.

“Even if Joe Biden is re-elected,” Tanzer cautioned, “not everyone in his administration wants to join forces with Ukraine and lead a victorious counter-offensive” against Russia.

Meanwhile, across Europe, traditional parties fear the far right could win big in this week’s European election, which will be seen as a bellwether for upcoming national contests.

“There are a lot of questions about what Trump would do in the White House, but there are other areas of vulnerability. Even if everybody hopes that the war will be over by the French presidential election in 2027, what happens if [National Rally leader] Marine Le Pen wins?” Tanzer asked.

The far-right Le Pen, whose lieutenant and EU election candidate Jordan Bardella is leading Macron’s party by over 18 points in POLITICO’s poll of polls, has been ambivalent about Ukraine aid. Meanwhile, in Germany, the far-right Alternative for Deutschland is set to grab 16 percent of the vote, on a par with the forecast result of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s Social Democratic Party (SPD).

In France, Macron, who has seized the mantle of one of Ukraine’s strongest allies, pledging support “until victory” and seeking to lead on military aid and NATO membership for Kyiv, is facing near-certain defeat in this weekend’s European election. [...]

The political appropriation of D-Day

www.spectator.co.uk, June 5, 2024, by Gavin Mortimer

If there is one place to avoid this week it is Normandy. The global elite are in town to commemorate the 80th anniversary of D-Day. Along with as many as 25 world leaders there will be upwards of 12,000 of their security staff invading this normally sleepy part of Northern France. In addition, 43,000 gendarmes, police and military personnel will be deployed on land, sea and in the air. A restricted traffic zone will be place throughout the region, and residents are being advised to stay at home on Thursday and Friday. Some schools will be closed on those days because of the disruption.

The Normandy American Cemetery, resting place of 9,388 Americans who were killed on 6 June 1944 and in the subsequent days and weeks of fighting, will be closed to the public on Wednesday and Thursday this week. That will be a disappointment to relatives wanting to pay their respects to their fallen family members. The British Normandy memorial will also be closed to the public on those days.

But the great and the good take precedence. President Joe Biden will be present for a rare trip abroad, and he is extending his sojourn in France for an official state visit. He and Emmanuel Macron will reportedly discuss 'the need for unwavering, long-term support for Ukraine' in the face of the ongoing conflict with Russia.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will be among the world leaders present in Normandy this week. The Elysée has made it clear that the 80th anniversary commemorations should 'echo all the struggles of peoples and nations who are still fighting to exercise their sovereignty and freedom against oppression and hatred'. For that reason Vladimir Putin has not been invited, and it was announced last week that contrary to an earlier statement from France about some form of Russia representation, there will now be none.

A spokesperson for President Macron explained that Russia's invitation had been withdrawn because 'the conditions for its participation are not there given the war of aggression

launched in February 2022'. One might argue that the conditions for participation are there, given that it is a Second World War commemoration, a conflict which cost the Soviet Union 25 million military and civilian lives'. Between them France, Britain and America lost 1.5 million people.

It should come as no surprise that Macron is attempting to make political capital out of this week's commemorations. He has used the second world war before in order to score political points: in April 2017 he visited Oradour-sur-Glane in central France, where on 10 June 1944 the SS massacred the village's 643 inhabitants. Macron made his pilgrimage just before voters went to the polls to decide whether he or Marine Le Pen should be president.

It is the European elections this Sunday, and right wing parties are predicted to be the biggest winners. During a state visit to Germany last week, Macron used a speech to warn of the danger posed by what he categorised as far-right parties: 'An ill wind is blowing across Europe, so let's wake up!'

Macron has been issuing such warnings for weeks, but they are falling on deaf ears. The 'ill wind' that many Europeans can feel blowing across the continent comes from the far left and their Islamist allies. Carried on this wind is an alarming rise in anti-Semitism and other forms of violence.

On Friday a man with a knife attacked several people in the town square of Mannheim in southwest Germany. It is alleged he objected to a rally that was taking place against Islamic extremism. Germany's Finance Minister Christian Lindner said the death of the policeman 'makes me angry about what is happening in our country. We must defend ourselves against Islamist terrorism with determination'.

President Biden will deliver an address on 7 June at Pointe du Hoc (a cliff-top memorial commemorating the capture by Americans troops of a German gun battery), about the 'importance of defending freedom and democracy'. Given that Biden is also on the campaign trail, he might be tempted to make an oblique reference to the present. In a statement last year to mark the 79th anniversary of D-Day, Biden urged Americans to remember the

sacrifice of those who died in Normandy and 'also recommit to the future they fought for – one grounded in freedom, democracy, equality, and opportunity for all.'

Earlier this year, Biden insinuated that his uncle, Ambrose J Finnegan, met a grisly end in Papua New Guinea after his aircraft was shot down during the Second World War. 'There were a lot of cannibals,' said Biden of Papua New Guinea, a remark that angered Papuan Prime Minister James Marape. He described the claim as 'loose' talk and said the pair had met several times and Biden had never previously mentioned his uncle.

Official records state that Finnegan's aircraft crashed inexplicably into the Pacific off New Guinea in May 1944. One airman was rescued, three bodies were recovered from the wreckage, but no trace was found of Biden's uncle.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will also be one of the leaders in Normandy this week, remembering the important contribution of Canadian troops on D-Day and beyond. 'On the beaches of Normandy, our troops fought valiantly for peace and democracy,' said a statement released by his office. 'Many gave their lives so we could live free – and we will do what it takes to preserve and protect our hard-won freedoms.'

Earlier this year, a court ruled that Trudeau had infringed Canada's charter of rights and freedoms by the imposition of the Emergencies Act. Trudeau rushed through the legislation in 2022 to criminalise a truckers' 'freedom convoy', provoked by the country's stringent Covid rules.

Frankly, who would want to be in Normandy this week? If 12,000 security men and women in dark suits and dark glass weren't bad enough, the political hypocrisy on show will be unbearable.

D-day deserter Rishi Sunak didn't do his duty, so why should gen Z be expected to do theirs?

The Guardian, by Martha Gill, June 9, 2024

Postwar generations grew up in comfort on gilded tales of heroic conflict. What hypocrisy to push for national service for the young

Rishi Sunak is in an unfortunate position. Anything he does that even slightly cuts convention will now be read as a terrible blunder. Once a narrative like this picks up steam it is hard to stop. The press wants to add to the story arc. A delighted Labour will help it along. And perhaps even some of his own camp, looking for a scapegoat in the coming election defeat, will be rooting for him to fail.

There's really no spinning his latest gaffe. It's quite the decision to aim your entire campaign at those who care about the second world war, and then to skip a D-day ceremony, leaving veterans standing.

Is this match-fixing, you wonder? Some wild scheme – a Westminster version of Mel Brooks's film *The Producers* – to turn the campaign into a notorious flop and then somehow profit? The Conservatives have sacrificed their chances with wide swathes of voters in pursuit of a traditionalist core. Insulting war heroes is rarely a wise move. But here it may be fatal.

What we saw last week was bad politics and appalling ethics. But what stood out to me was the hypocrisy of it all. It was only two weeks ago that Sunak announced a programme of national service for school leavers. Among this feckless bunch, he said, he wanted to “foster a culture of service”, “a renewed sense of pride in our country” and the urge to “contribute to their community”. But now it is laid bare: Sunak is urging values upon the young that he does not share himself. As one interviewer put it to his face: “These men made the ultimate sacrifice, and you couldn't even sacrifice an afternoon.”

The prime minister made a unique error last week. But there is something familiar about this story, which has the flavour of a three-part family saga: our middle generations, fearing they can never live up to their parents, unloading their anxieties upon their children.

There is a version of British identity – central to the Tory campaign – which is based entirely around the deeds of a generation that is now all but gone. Boomers grew up on gilded wartime stories and Commando comics, but went on to lead comfortable, unheroic lives. Gen Z catches the flak.

It is remarkable to what extent D-day has this year been co-opted to attack the young, mostly by people born decades after the war ended. Here's Nigel Farage at the launch of his campaign: "How is it that over 50% of 18- to 34-year-olds have never even heard of D-day?" Here's Lord (Shaun) Bailey deflecting criticism of Sunak: "We have a young generation that have no idea of our history, they hate the country." And it's not just politicians leaping on board. "As we remember the courageous D-day soldiers, I can't help but draw parallels with the young people of today," reads an article in the Express. Earlier this year the chief of the general staff, Gen Sir Patrick Sanders, floated the idea of a "citizen army" to bolster reserves. Large parts of the press were beside themselves with excitement: it was just what gen Z needed.

This is what comes of clinging to an idea of ourselves that is long out of date. It makes us insecure. Liable to lash out. The stoic, buttoned-up Brit who is "just going out" and "may be some time" no longer really exists except in novels and political speeches.

The reality is that Britain is now a nation of striving individualists, too cynical to be patriotic. Sunak dashing back from the beaches of Normandy to do a TV interview is symbolic of the times. The idea of duty and sacrifice no longer stir anyone's spirit – it would be an odd thing indeed if 18-year-olds rallied to the call.

After all, this version of the British character, with its stiff upper lip and readiness for battle, is a fairly recent idea, and was short lived. In the 18th century we were viewed by other Europeans as highly strung hysterics. Indeed, we cultivated the image: displays of sentiment

were in vogue and we flung ourselves on sofas and committed suicide at the least provocation. It was only in the late 19th century that Brits started to pride themselves on their stoicism, an idea that reached its zenith in the blitz. It was useful to tell a nation at war that it was good at putting up with unpleasant things like war. Brits learned to think of themselves as conveniently frugal and phlegmatic, the sort that would sacrifice themselves without a murmur.

After 1945, however, there began a slow unravelling of the myth. Britishness splintered by age and by geography, and by the time David Cameron took office it was barely definable. A “belief in freedom, tolerance of others, accepting personal and social responsibility, respecting and upholding the rule of law” was his effort at placing the nation. Since then the failure of Brexit has for many severed the last ties of belief in their country. Our values lie elsewhere.

If our politicians want to change this, there are better places to start than hectoring young people. Homelessness among veterans rose 14% last year and help for those with complex mental health problems falls far short. Army pay could rise; accommodation for soldiers could be much improved.

Politicians in mid life could look at themselves and the example they are setting when it comes to serving their country. And what about some positive reinforcement? During the Covid pandemic young people lost out on jobs, education and social opportunities in order to protect the old. If Sunak wants to foster a spirit of duty and self sacrifice, he could start by thanking them.

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