

---

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Introduction

Jørgen Staun

Royal Danish Defence College, DK

[jmst@fak.dk](mailto:jmst@fak.dk)

---

**Keywords:** Strategic culture; international relations; remembrance

---

‘Who controls the past’, ran the Party slogan, ‘controls the future: who controls the present controls the past’ (Orwell 1984, pp. 37–38).

The fact that the past is distinctly important for politicians is old news. That authoritarian regimes are even more sensitive to their past than democracies and sometimes go to great lengths to control academic research, to limit or misrepresent public information to define key aspects of popular history, is also relatively well established. Stalin famously maintained strict censorship on all significant historical texts and personally read and commented on many publications (Merridale 2003, 15). Still, ever since Kenneth Waltz published his influential *Theory of International Politics* in 1979 (K. N. Waltz 1979), mainstream international relations theory has, with certain prominent exceptions, been somewhat dismissive of the influence of the past or representations of the past on foreign policy decisions. Historical narratives have for many years been side-lined along with other cultural influences and seen as less relevant, or even as blatantly irrelevant, to the decisions on foreign and security policy, or they have been brushed aside as mere by-products of the real forces behind states’ interests: balance of power, material interests and geopolitical factors. Thus, it was the general belief that when the deep structures led states towards conflict, historical narratives would support conflict. When the structures led states towards more peaceful times, the narratives would follow suit (Berger 2012, 11).

In recent years, however, history has been seeping back into international relations – not least due to the problems encountered in international relations theory (IR theory) to explain the tectonic shifts that occurred after the demise of the Soviet Union. This is not only the case with the now slowly waning unipolar situation which we have been witnessing since 1991, and which goes against the balance-of-power logic of neorealism. Also, Germany’s reluctance towards taking on a leading role in Europe vis-à-vis security politics, Russia’s persistent retention of its historical rights as a great power despite its diminished size and cut and the United Kingdom’s of late seemingly self-destructive behaviour pose problems for neorealism.

In 1993, the father of neorealism, Kenneth Waltz, prophesied that with the demise of the Soviet threat ‘NATO’s days are not numbered, but its years are’. And ‘once the new Germany finds its feet, it will no more want to be constrained by the United States acting through NATO than by any other state’ (K. Waltz 1993, 76). However, Germany has shown a marked degree of moderation and continuity in its foreign and security policy in the years following its reunification. It has shown considerable restraint, continued its cooperative approaches to security and continued its reliance on international institutions and organisations. It has used the so-called ‘peace dividend’ to lower its military capabilities to a minimum, it has done its utmost to emphasise non-military means whenever possible, and it has shown no interest whatsoever in acquiring nuclear weapons. According to neorealist logic, we are dealing with an anomaly: ‘For a country to choose not to become a great power is a structural anomaly. For that reason, the choice is a difficult one to sustain. Sooner or later, usually sooner, the international status of countries has risen in step with their material resources. Countries with great power economies have become great powers, whether or not reluctantly’ (K. Waltz 1993, 66).

We argue that this pattern is worth studying. Declining powers have historically been slow to accept the smaller role in the world which events bestowed on them. On the other hand ‘rising states have not infrequently failed to expand their external involvements in step with increases in the relative national power’

(Duffield 1999, 768). How can this inertia be explained? Over the years, scholars in the field of foreign and security policy have introduced a plethora of cultural variables, searching for explanations to what would otherwise be deemed 'anomalies' by neorealism. This special issue of *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* aims to add to the plethora of cultural variables by focusing on how the past affects states' foreign and security policy in various ways.

The special issue proceeds along two tracks. The first track focuses on the 'macro level' and consists of chapters focusing on how the strategic culture overall has evolved in each of the two great powers, and how these countries' strategic cultures are affected by their perceptions of the past. The second track focuses on the 'micro level' and offers two case-based approaches to how the strategic culture and security policy traditions of a country interact with specific historical events. Thus, on the 'macro level' we first contrast how two great powers – Germany and the United Kingdom – cope with central parts of their past, and how this affects their national interests and their willingness to use military force to achieve national interests. Jørgen Staub argues that the public remembrance of Holocaust still has a marked effect on German foreign policy and especially on its use of military force. Jan Werner Mathiasen explores how the institutional balance between Crown and Parliament from the formative period of British statehood still strongly influences Britain's security policy. This comparison between Germany and the United Kingdom offers a contrast between the manner in which two democratic countries deal with different parts of their past. On the 'micro level', we examine a minor European state, Estonia, who is very focused on the behaviour of its immediate neighbour, Russia. In the study by Kaarel Piirimaäe, it is argued that Estonia is affected by processes of nation-building, and it is shown how Estonian historians are actively involved in creating master narratives about the past that affect the country's strategic culture in the long run.

Thus, this special issue will present a set of novel approaches. First, in contrast to structurally inclined classical realist and neorealist thinking, it argues that states do not necessarily respond in the same manner to the pressures of the international political system. There is not necessarily a 'normal behaviour' for states or great powers – like power maximising or balancing – in the sense of a 'one-size fits all behaviour'. Even if the pressures which states face may to some extent be similar – although still depending on the geopolitical setting, the size of its economy, its demographic composition, its level of industrialisation, alliance patterns etc. – the way in which states respond to these pressures vary distinctively and often follow internal dispositions. The view presented here is inspired by the view of Thomas U. Berger who argues that cultural beliefs and values act as distinct national lenses which shape perceptions of events. Thus, 'information that reinforces existing images and beliefs is readily assimilated', whereas information which is inconsistent with the prevailing worldview tends to be 'ignored, rejected or distorted in order to make them compatible with prevailing cognitive structures' (Berger 1998, 24).

One of the factors influencing a state's view on and formulation of its national interests is how the past influences public debates, official statements and documents. Albeit not entirely without precedents in the field of foreign policy and security studies (Brands and Suri 2016), this approach also links up to rapidly growing literature on the influence of the past on international relations, written from the perspective of memory politics and collective memory, use of historical analogies, influence of traumas and other cultural aspects on politics. A significant finding in this body of research is that national processes of remembrance and history policy cannot be seen in isolation from the international level and may indeed have a significant impact on foreign relations – as is currently the case between Russia and her western neighbours, most notably Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states (Onken 2007; Poulsen 2007).

Germany represents a striking, although not exceptional case of a nation struggling to cope with traumatic and monumental episodes of its history. Despite being the largest, richest and most populous country in Europe, despite being situated at the centre of Europe and thus being affected by most developments in Europe, Germany is still somewhat reluctant to take on a leading European role – at least when it comes to security issues. The reason, it is here argued, is that German strategic culture is still highly influenced by the collective remembrance of the Holocaust and the lessons Germany has drawn from this.

In contrast, after it landed on its feet in the early 2000s, Russia has embarked on a course of regaining its former influence, in spite of its still weak and vulnerable economy which is only partly reformed and still highly dependent on the export of raw materials. Indeed, when seen from a realist or neorealist viewpoint, Russia does not look much like a great power. Comparing countries' GDP (nominally in US dollars), Russia ranks 12<sup>th</sup>, after both South Korea and Canada. Looking at the GDP per capita, Russia ranks even lower on the list and is generally placed below the 60 richest countries in the world by different international institutions (UNSTATS 2016; World Bank 2017). Add to this a low birth rate, stagnating public health and an industry that is largely dependent on oil and gas production – which in turn is dependent on international trade and

stable, high prices on natural resources – and Russia does not look like a great power at all. Still, the Russian government under Vladimir Putin demands to be recognised as exactly that, a great power in its own right, not only because of its military might, but to a large extent because it believes that it is historically entitled to. Thus, the Russian government actively fosters a positive image of the Soviet Union's role in the Second World War which in Russia is referred to as the Great Patriotic War. This taps into a patriotic agenda of presenting the Russian/Soviet state and its leaders as pursuing a justified and essentially realist security policy – while, to a certain extent, it also includes an apologetic approach to the reign of Josef Stalin. This way of framing Russia's history not only facilitates a state-centric narrative of great value when legitimising the current regime, but also presents Russia as historically entitled to great power status. Furthermore, it offers tangible benefits for Russia's foreign policy vis-a-vis its Western neighbours, for example by contrasting Russia's legacy of liberating Europe from Fascism with alleged neo-fascist tendencies in Ukraine and the Baltic countries.

Therefore, how Germany and Russia – as well as other states – deal with their past is not merely a matter of domestic policy, but also has strong foreign and security policy implications. One may even go so far as to say that the difference in the culture of remembrance between Germany and Russia – which reflects marked differences in strategic culture and political system – is a testimony that states do not act in the same way in the international system. In a sense, both countries are somehow anomalies to what one would expect, according to the structural logic of classical realism or especially neorealism.

The third interesting case is the path which Britain has embarked on by cutting itself loose from continental Europe, presumably in the hope of creating a glorious future, ignoring an overwhelming flood of expert prognoses that argue that Brexit will weaken its economy and reduce its political influence, and even overhearing warnings that it risks splitting up the country as the Scots are reconsidering their vote on independence. We argue that that past experiences from of the formative period of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the unification of England and Scotland in 1707 pay at least partly explain the Brexit turmoil.

## Contents

Introduction: 'Struggling with the past: How states address and use history in security and defence politics'. By Dr. Jørgen Staun, Royal Danish Defence College.

'The slow path towards "normality": German Strategic Culture and the Holocaust'. By Dr. Jørgen Staun, Institute of Strategy, Royal Danish Defence College.

'For Queen and Country! National Identity and British Security Policy'. By MSc, Major, Jan Werner, Institute for Strategy, Royal Danish Defence College.

'The Estonian armed forces' perspective on World War Two and the Soviet period', Dr. Kaarel Piirimaäe, Senior Research Fellow, General Laidoner Museum, Tallinn.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## References

- Berger, T. U.** (1998). *Cultures of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Berger, T. U.** (2012). *War, Guilt, and World Politics After World War II*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139109437>
- Brands, H., & Suri, J.,** (Eds.) (2016). *The power of the past: history and statecraft*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Duffield, J. S.** (1999). Political Culture and State Behavior: Why Germany Confounds Neorealism. *International Organization*, No. Autumn: 771–194. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081899551066>
- Merridale, C.** (2003). Redesigning History in Contemporary Russia. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38(1): 13–28. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009403038001961>
- Onken, E. C.** (2007). The Baltic states and Moscow's 9 May commemoration: Analysing memory politics in Europe. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59(1), 23–46. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130601072589>
- Poulsen, N. B.** (2007). *Den Store Fædrelandskrig: Statsmagt og mennesker i Sovjetunionen 1939–1955*. Copenhagen: Høst og Søn.

- UNSTATS.** (2016). *National Accounts Main Aggregates Database*. <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/snaama/dnlList.asp>
- Waltz, K.** (1993). The Emerging Structure of International Politics. *International Security*, No. Autumn: 47–79. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539097>
- Waltz, K. N.** (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. New York: Random House.
- World Bank.** (2017). *World Development Indicators database*. <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>

**How to cite this article:** Staun, J. (2020). Introduction. *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies*, 3(1), pp.80–83. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.36>

**Submitted:** 09 May 2019

**Accepted:** 18 October 2019

**Published:** 13 November 2020

**Copyright:** © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.