Putin's Historical War: Policy Failures, Precedents, and the Path to Ukraine

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Why did Russia suddenly invade Ukraine? Many people have discussed this question, but few have focused on the century of history that led up to the invasion. This is a war over history. Both Russia and Ukraine have long-standing claims and counterclaims over the same piece of land. Russia's own history of bloody civil war has also shaped its current aggressions in Ukraine. This essay will explore and analyze the history of the conflict, its root causes, and how European history in general has played a role in the invasion.

The Russian Revolution—though it took place over a century ago—is an indirect cause of the atrocities and violence we've seen in the Russo/Ukrainian War. When the czarist White Army tried to take back power from the newly established communist Bolshevik regime, it led to a bloody and violent three years of war and a death toll of about 12 million. The historian Adam Hochschild, in the *Atlantic* magazine, describes "the Whites stringing up Red bodies on telegraph poles" and "both sides brazenly displaying the corpses of their enemies" (Hochschild, 92). Both the Whites and Reds pillaged villages, raping women and mutilating and murdering anyone they could. This type of violence became normalized in Russian military culture - with brutal and tragic implications a century later. This is exactly the kind of violence we're now seeing in Ukraine. As Hochschild observes, "When Putin's right-hand man (and the former Russian president) Dmitry Medvedev called his critics in Ukraine and abroad "bastards and

Putin's Historical War: Policy Failures, Precedents, and the Path to Ukraine

scum," we can hear an echo of Lenin repeatedly speaking of the White forces as "lice," "fleas,"

"vermin," and "parasites" deserving of extermination" (Hochschild, 92). People across the world

have watched in horror as Russian forces commit war crimes, such as Ukrainian women and

children left dead on the streets, with no visible military goal; scores tortured; and women raped

in front of their husbands. What many people don't realize is that the Russian soldiers are

behaving in Ukraine the way the Whites and Reds did a century ago in the Revolution.

But what directly caused the Russians to suddenly attack Ukraine? One answer dates

back over 40 years ago, when Russia was part of the USSR. Again, history is our guide to the

present. Vladimir Putin, the all-powerful leader of Russia, was a high-ranking man in the KGB.

He was a huge nationalist, and the fall of the Soviet Union was a gut-punch to him. "Mr. Putin

has described the Soviet disintegration as one of the greatest catastrophes of the 20th century that

robbed Russia of its rightful place among the world's great powers" (Bilefsky, Perez-Pena, and

Nagourney 2). Ever since, Putin has believed that it's his God-given right to take back what

belonged to his motherland—including Ukraine. When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, NATO

continued to expand towards the East, with countries such as Romania, Poland, Latvia,

Lithuania, and Estonia joining. Putin considers this a great threat to his authoritarian rule in

Russia, and Ukraine joining NATO would be even worse for him. "The Russian president calls

NATO's expansion menacing, and the prospect of Ukraine joining it a major threat" (Bilefsky,

Putin's Historical War: Policy Failures, Precedents, and the Path to Ukraine

Perez-Pena, Nagourney, 3). In the past few years, Putin has seen Ukraine gravitate more and more towards Western ideologies, and this terrifies him. Putin wanted to put on a show of force against NATO's expansion east, and Ukraine's shifting ideology was his excuse. As we will see below, Putin's misplaced historical impulse backfired completely.

But Putin had a good historical reason to think he would get away with his invasion of Ukraine. Only eight years earlier, in 2014, he'd invaded Crimea—and the West did nothing about it. Russia invaded Crimea to, in Putin's words, "ensure proper conditions for the people of Crimea to be able to freely express their will" (Washington Post, Transcript: Putin April 17). Putin claims to have invaded Crimea because of the large Russian-speaking population, and he felt it was his obligation to "liberate" them. But that's just propaganda. Ukraine, including Crimea, declared independence after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and made it official with a referendum in which 92% of the population voted in favor of independence. Under international law, after independence and the referendum, Ukraine has the right to this land—it's internationally recognized as Ukrainian territory. Putin sent his forces to annex a free state because, in his nationalistic understanding of history, it was Soviet territory and therefore now Russia's. The West could've chosen to intervene to stop this violation of Ukraine's recognized sovereignty but did not.

Putin's Historical War: Policy Failures, Precedents, and the Path to Ukraine

This, sadly, is similar to what happened in WW2-era Europe. The Western powers didn't intervene when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, following Britain's appeasement policy. This mistake encouraged Hitler to blitzkrieg huge portions of Europe, and no one was ready for it. Like Hitler, Putin didn't expect any Western pushback, and so in 2022, he decided to come back for more. On February 24, 2022, Russia began to build forces surrounding the Ukrainian border. Soon after, the world witnessed a full-scale invasion of the peaceful country. "Peace on our continent has been shattered," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said, the morning after the invasion began. "We now have war in Europe on a scale and of a type we thought belonged to history" (Reals, Sundby, 2). But it's not only the scale and type of war that echoes Russian and European history. Putin's view of the invasion as Russia's national destiny—and his consequent refusal to withdraw, no matter how valiantly the Ukrainians fight back—has resulted in a bloody stalemate that recalls Hitler's ideologically driven determination to fight until the end. And, just as Lenin and Hitler spoke of their enemies as vermin, Putin regards Ukrainians as subhuman, making this a war he feels he has to win—even though it's proving much tougher than he bargained for. Like Hitler, who had assumed that he could conquer Europe before the Americans intervened, Putin miscalculated the timing and effectiveness of the support that the US and NATO have given to Ukraine.

Putin's Historical War: Policy Failures, Precedents, and the Path to Ukraine

At the beginning of the invasion, everyone expected Russia to easily move through Ukraine. In the same way that Hitler thought he could blitz London and all of Europe into submission, Putin wanted to "take Kiev in 3 days." But that never happened. This is partly because the Russians were simply unprepared. "The incompetence of the Russians, which has surpassed what I would have expected. They have simply failed to deliver logistics, a decent battle plan, [and] competent troops" (James Starvidis, 5-Star Admiral). Also, Ukraine has fought very bravely, with average citizens leaving their families and risking their lives. They fought on their own soil to defend and save their homeland, while the Russian army showed the world highly unprofessional and unethical war tactics far from home. Under poor command, a lack of discipline, and chaotic logistics, their advance has lasted two years instead of three days, and they are no closer to Kiev today than in February of 2022. As President Biden put it in a major speech about the war on October 20, "Putin thought he would take Kyiv and all of Ukraine in a matter of days. More than a year has passed—Kyiv is still standing." And Russia, like Hitler, has also faced quick, unexpected, and widespread opposition from across the globe. Ever since the war began, millions across the world have shown their support, and other countries (primarily NATO countries) have helped Ukraine militarily more than Putin may have bargained for. Not only has Russia been banned from Olympic events and had its products economically sanctioned, but Ukraine has also received billions in military aid. The United States is a main contributor of this aid, having sent a total of $113 billion worth of military aid since the invasion. Ukraine is

Putin's Historical War: Policy Failures, Precedents, and the Path to Ukraine

also receiving Western support in the form of troops. "A stealthy network of commandos and spies rushing to provide weapons, intelligence and training, according to U.S. and European officials" (Schmitt, Barnes, Cooper, 3). There are special forces units coming from the US, UK, France, and Canada. Some of these reinforcements are covert - yet widely recognized. "While the U.S. government does not acknowledge that the C.I.A. is operating in Ukraine or any other country, the presence of the officers is well understood by Russia and other intelligence services around the world" (Schmitt, Barnes, Cooper, 4). Knowing that Ukraine is receiving so much military aid, Putin is now realizing that he may have made a mistake invading a peaceful country against international law. Putin however, won't admit it.

In sum, echoing Hitler's European invasions, Putin's war has failed to accomplish its objectives and, in many ways, has actually backfired. Just as Hitler invited the wrath of the U.S., Putin's aggressive actions in Ukraine have led to a renewed sense of purpose and unity within NATO. This has prompted NATO members to reinforce their commitment to collective defense, as enshrined in Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which states that an attack against one member is considered an attack against all. NATO is in fact expanding, as the divide between Russia and the rest of Europe only widens. European countries have increased their defense spending in fear of Russian expansion and have imposed painful sanctions. Ukraine has been formally invited into the EU, and the Ukrainian army has been armed and trained into a powerful adversary.

Putin's Historical War: Policy Failures, Precedents, and the Path to Ukraine

But all of this has not convinced Russia to re-examine its war aims. Just like Hitler, Putin is engaged in a war to the death against an enemy he feels he cannot tolerate. So Russia continues its deadly daily assaults, with an estimated 300,000 casualties total. The tragedy for both Ukrainians and Russians is that today this has resulted in a bloody stalemate with no hope in sight for a fair or humane resolution. Instead, Ukrainian soldiers and civilians and tens of thousands of Russian conscripts continue to die bloody deaths. Every day, Ukrainian civilian towns are shelled and attacked by Russian firepower. Russia has bombed hospitals, schools, playgrounds, and housing, all of which are war crimes. "Though Russia said missiles targeted military and energy facilities, some struck civilian areas while people were heading to work and school. One hit a playground in downtown Kyiv and another struck a university" (CBS News, 1). It's perfectly evident that the Russians are fighting an immoral war, and are in constant violation of international humanitarian law. Putin's utter disregard for civilians (like Hitler's before him) is tragic for Ukraine; the longer this war drags on, the more innocent civilians will die.

And this is where the war is today. Putin's grim determination to eliminate his vermin-like enemies—and the unexpected resistance of the Ukrainians and their allies—has resulted in the current stalemate: of the little territory Russia has taken, 54% of it has already been taken back by Ukraine, according to the Institute for the Study of War. The Ukrainian Government said it has reclaimed "3,000 miles of territory" (Ellyat, 1). Ukraine's fate will likely

Putin's Historical War: Policy Failures, Precedents, and the Path to Ukraine

be decided by its ability to outlast the Russians. No one can foresee the future of this conflict.

But what we do know is that the past is prologue, and the parallels between the Russian invasion

of Ukraine, the Russian Revolution, and Hitler's quest to defeat his subhuman enemies promise

many more deaths to come. Knowing this, we must work to ensure a peaceful end to the conflict,

rather than rewarding a violent belligerent for their neo-imperialist behavior. Using Hitler-era

frameworks, it is essential to put a stop to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.