

## **INVASION & AUTOCRACY IN THE EAST. Russian imperialism and Ukraine. Think also the failure of *Ostpolitik* for Germany.**

When Russia mounted a full scale invasion into Ukraine in late February 2022 there would have been many in the West that would have had to re-evaluate their relationship with Russia which up to then had been hesitant to fully give up on any chance of bringing Russia into a greater European fold so as to fully extinguish on a politically framed conceptual level the sharply polarising distinction of a West/East Europe that ominously existed during the Cold War.\* For instance Germany which from the time of West Germany had adopted a rapprochement policy towards Russia known as *ostpolitik*.

Various randomly selected links:

*How Germany lost the trust of Eastern Europe.* Lukas Paul Schmelter. International Politik Quarterly. (Jan. 2023).

<https://ip-quarterly.com/en/how-germany-lost-trust-eastern-europe>

*Germany must shake off its torpor and play its full role against Putin.* Simon Tisdall. Guardian. (April. 2022).

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/apr/10/germany-role-against-delusional-putin>

*The Nord Stream pipe dream: How an outdated Ostpolitik misguided Germany's foreign policy towards Russia.* The Korean Journal of International Studies. (August. 2023)

<https://www.kjis.org/journal/view.html?uid=292&&ymd=Full>

*After Ospolitik.* German Council of Foreign Relations. (Dec. 2023).

<https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/after-ostpolitik>

*Germany Remains in Denial Over its Russia Policy.* Matthew Boyce. Hudson. (Feb. 2023).

<https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/germany-remains-denial-over-its-russia-policy>

Although in 2014 the relationship between Russia and the West was strained there was for instance in Germany still an ongoing reliance on Russian gas as from how I understand it this would have been an admission of the failure of an attempted decades-long rapprochement with Russia. Crimea 2014 is often seen as Europe's Czechoslovakia 1938/39 moment (I include 1939 when nothing was done by the Allies when Nazi Germany occupied all of Czechoslovakia after through diplomatic guile the Sudetenland was acquired by Hitler in 1938) when this should have been the moment to impose tougher sanctions as would finally occur after the full scale invasion in 2022 which would have given Russia greater cause to rethink its imperious foreign policy towards Ukraine. This link which discusses if the 2022 sanctions would actually be much better points out how the 2014 ones were not effective enough:

<http://www.cpreview.org/blog/2022/4/2014-sanctions-against-russia-failed-is-the-second-time-the-charm>

*\*Yet as previously stated the prestigious World Cup in 2016 would still go ahead in Russia and as already said the Russian gas that was fuelling for instance the German economy was still being bought. Putin would think Western Europe and the U.S.A. would not be willing to commit (i) to a full scale war and (ii) German dependency on Russian gas would also stay thus (iii) it was thought the gamble to invade Ukraine in what would be envisaged as a quick 'three day' takeover. There was really nothing the West could do in Putin's mind other than another round of sanctions but – and to speak as a non-expert - any such economic cost would be offset by the domestic prestige of having returned Ukraine back to the Russian fold when since 2014 it had 'threatened' to ally itself to the West with talk of linking*

up with both NATO and the EU. As it is the West would not go to war over Ukraine but it has shown a willingness to supply Ukraine with war material – although it can be argued in not sufficient numbers – to aid the Ukrainian war effort which is occurring as although Putin was correct to surmise there would not be a major war there is an ongoing war in Ukraine as his ‘three day takeover’ has now lasted nearly two years and with no negligible territorial gains after what was gained in the first three days and with even a full retreat from what was gained on an advance towards Kiev from Belarus from the north. Also Germany which was originally criticized for being slow off the mark in fully supporting Ukraine has stepped up with the delivery of Leopard tanks and so forth and weaned itself off Russian gas; while NATO has expanded even further gaining two new members: Finland and Sweden. Furthermore, Russia has sustained heavy casualties which has come at great social cost to the Russians yet although it has not brought about any foreseeable threat to Putin’s hold on power it should be kept in mind that while the Russians in the Second World War famously tolerated the loss of tens of millions of its citizens to then finally achieve victory over Nazi Germany one of the drivers for revolution in 1917 in the First World War was the heavy losses the Russians were suffering which were not tolerated when it was seen that victory was not at hand. Thus while a long war of attrition may benefit Russia if Western military support begins to wane for Ukraine – which is what is feared – especially if in the United States support drops off – if Russia also keeps suffering high casualty rates over a lengthy time period then domestic pressure may finally build up to have perhaps a war strategy that is increasingly defensive in nature to limit war deaths.

As it is the only opposition that is occurring is coming from women worried about their loved ones as well as from regions of Russia which believe they are paying too high a human cost in providing recruits for the war. Such opposition, in general, is not yet openly rebellious against the war but the Kremlin may be worried. The Kremlin had immediately suppressed spontaneous anti-war protests after the invasion begun but if the scale of opposition grew substantially and became well organised then it would not be so easy to put down especially if the fighting in Ukraine reached the burdensome dimension of a so called ‘forever war’ i.e. a war seemingly without imminent end yet still costing an intolerable level of human lives. Of course, what I write is merely speculation but somewhat follows the parameters that brought down Tsar Nicholas when the population simply wanted an end to the fighting in WWI and which would ultimately also bring down the Provisional Government which stayed committed to the war. Putin’s authoritarian rule over the nation is remarkably still strong thus the talk of ‘speculation’ but always underneath not readily visible are tectonic social forces which are usually a long time in the making and can lead to sudden shifts and the few protests that occur now and especially in a country where a person can be threatened with imprisonment by simply holding up in public a blank piece of paper can be the first seismic murmurings of some grand social change that may yet occur if the opposition to Putin does actually grow and the military chooses to move with it and for its own reasons of survival. e.g. the security forces may shift their loyalty to someone else if Putin’s political downfall seemed inevitable even though he had done much to build up the security apparatus so as to survive and still thrive supporting someone who in a reciprocal relationship could each empower the other in Russia. Yet, as I keep saying such a scenario for now is speculation but it is interesting to see there is still some open dissent in Russia and there maybe more which does not get through to western media sources. However, one also reads how the cult of Stalin was encouraged upon Putin’s rise to power and one may also guess that with his association with the Great Patriotic War many ordinary Russians maybe prepared to put up with any increasing war-related hardship as it maybe seen as shameful not too when one thinks of the immeasurable worse suffering that the WWII generation went through in the war against the Nazis. (Thus, it has been of worth for Putin with the propaganda utilized to frame the ‘special operation’ in Ukraine in similar vein as a ‘pre-emptive war against fascism’ in a nationalist attempt to validate such obvious Russia aggression).

*Putin weaponizes history with new textbook justifying Ukraine invasion.* Atlantic Council. (August 2023).

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putin-weaponizes-history-with-new-textbook-justifying-ukraine-invasion/>

*Russia's Never Ending War Against Fascism. Memory Politics in the Russian-Ukraine Conflict.* IWM. (2015).

<https://www.iwm.at/transit-online/russias-never-ending-war-against-fascism-memory-politics-in-the-russian>

*How Vladimir Putin sells his war against 'the West'.* Politico. (Feb. 2023)

<https://www.politico.eu/article/siege-stalingrad-battle-bucha-vladimir-putin-russia-war-against-west/>

*Putin evokes act of 'self-defense' against 'fascist Ukraine' & 'war unleashed against our homeland'.* France 24. (May. 2023).

<https://www.france24.com/en/video/20230509-putin-evokes-act-of-self-defense-against-fascist-ukraine-war-unleashed-against-our-homeland>

*Prigozhin is mentioned in the above video who would have his Wagner forces briefly march towards Moscow until he inexplicably had them stop.+ It would not be long afterwards when the relationship between Prigozhin and Putin had been restored that he along with his closest associates would be blown out of the skies on a private business plane flight between Moscow and St. Petersburg. Thus a link which implies that what had been a military threat to Putin's power would ultimately help to stabilize Putin's firm hold onto the leadership:*

*Putin restores power base with Prigozhin killed in plane crash.* Bloomberg Special. (August. 2023).

<https://www.tbsnews.net/bloomberg-special/putin-restores-power-base-prigozhin-killed-plane-crash-688414>

*+This 'march onto Moscow' including its bewildering and confusing aspect as to what it actually signified and was meant to achieve (e.g. was it after all, meant to oust Putin from power or was it aimed at having Putin force a change in the military leadership of which Prigozhin had recently become more vocal in criticizing...?) as well as how it all suddenly came to a full stop almost as if it was a nightmare fleeting apparition of Russia's political soul is not so out of place when one looks back at recent Russian history and comes across General Kornilov's 1917 'march on Petrograd which was also a confusing affair as depending on one's point of view and who to believe it was either initiated to rescue the Provisional Government from a Bolshevik takeover (Kornilov's view) or it was an attempt to mount a political coup over the Provisional Government by the Russian military (Kerensky's view). It is an important chapter to look at in the eventual lead up to Lenin's eventual takeover of power and worthy of a few references to look at but for now will simply leave here a Wikipedia link to at least be aware of the Kornilov affair which Kerensky in the short term succeeded in being victorious but in the long term unwittingly laid the political groundwork for the Bolsheviks to take power having relied on them to 'save the provisional government' as it only enhanced the prestige of the hard Left who before hand had been seen as political pariahs:*

*Kornilov Affair.* Wikipedia.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kornilov\\_affair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kornilov_affair)

*In Russian politics – at least at that time – it seemed being seen as a hero or villain could wildly oscillate depending on circumstances and with such unpredictability possible nothing should really be taken for granted. (I should mention that I first came across the Kornilov Affair in Orlando Figes excellent book: *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924.* (1996. Published by Johnathan Cape).*

*A link to a summary on Kerensky and Kornilov:*

[http://www.orlandofiges.info/section6\\_TheOctoberRevolution1917/KerenskyandKornilov.php](http://www.orlandofiges.info/section6_TheOctoberRevolution1917/KerenskyandKornilov.php)

In Putin's lifetime one cannot imagine that there would ever be a voluntary withdrawal of all Russian forces from Ukraine territory. [Especially at 'time of writing' the frontline has more or less entrenched itself into a WWI static line]. One imagines it would be too humiliating and it would only happen if there was the possibility of an overthrow of his leadership which for now seems unlikely due to the tight level of authoritarianism that he maintains over Russian society and how thus far there is a weak opposition with every potential alternative leader being effectively dealt with either by assassination:

*Assassination of Boris Nemtsov. Wikipedia.*

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination\\_of\\_Boris\\_Nemtsov](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassination_of_Boris_Nemtsov)

or by internal exile:

(i) Alexei Navalny sentences to prison term for violating probation as protesters detained. CBC News. (Feb. 2021).

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/russia-navalny-court-1.5897347>

(ii) *Russia's Navalny describes harsh reality at 'Polar Wolf' Arctic prison.* Reuters. (Dec. 2023).

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-navalny-describes-harsh-reality-polar-wolf-arctic-prison-2023-12-26/>

As it is Alexei Navalny was to eventually die while imprisoned by the Kremlin at the Arctic Circle.

(iii) Alexei Navalny the daring Kremlin critic who died behind bars. France 24 English. (February 2024).

<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20240216-alexei-navalny-the-daring-kremlin-critic-who-died-behind-bars>

One should also keep in mind Kara-Muza Jr. (amongst others) an opposition figure who was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment for treason.

*A Kremlin critic was transferred to a Siberian prison and placed in a 'punishment cell,' lawyer says.* AP. (Sept. 2023).

<https://apnews.com/article/russia-opposition-crackdown-prison-kara-murza-76a4e94f6f2211850da5a0b7ed43bf8e>

What one has thus far stated is only theorizing as one does not know what the future holds as the rule of Putin is unique and will need to be thoroughly studied by historians in the future just as Lenin's Russia was thoroughly unique from Tsarist Russia which came before it and which in turn Stalinism was itself unique in its own way which magnified and built upon the terrors of the regime which were already being established by Leninism and then to be followed by the uniqueness of a post-Stalin USSR with such leaders as Khrushchev (who would at least 'de-Stalinise' the USSR whose limited thaw would also have thousands return from the gulag and who also sought – compared to Stalin - to be less hard line towards the West with for instance Russian troops leaving Austria (along with other Four Powers occupying troops) with the guaranteed promise that it remain neutral (e.g. it not join NATO and even after the fall of the USSR it has thus far chosen not to do so) although there would also be the Cuban Missile Crisis and within Eastern Europe there would be the Russian military crackdown of a potentially reformist Hungary in 1956) and Brezhnev (who would not pursue further liberal

reform leading back to repression but not to the ‘purge scale’ as was Stalinism and as well to economic stagnation while there was the Brezhnev doctrine of détente with the West which would for instance lead to significant nuclear arms treaties although defence spending did also escalate under Brezhnev and there was also an intolerance of internal dissent behind the Iron Curtain which would lead to the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 to put an end to the Prague Spring and then after a few short term leaders there was finally Gorbachev with eventually a glimmer of democratization with *perestroika* and *glasnost* (although the military was still hard line and politically there was still an intolerance towards any republic which sought national independence e.g. the Baltics) yet which unwittingly only brought down the downfall of the USSR. (It is interesting to see that the USSR did not have a fully predictable ‘monochromatic approach’ to foreign policy from 1945 onwards but there was some nuanced variation depending who was leader which is only pointed out as U.S. foreign policy has not also been uniform but a more aggressive or less adventurist approach depended on who was in the White House although it remains the case no matter the superpower a desire to be globally ascendant over any other competing power remains consistent but the nuances of each leader whether they be Russian, American, Chinese etcetera must also be taken into account.\*

*\*After all, to specifically keep focusing on the USSR no matter the leader would not tolerate any sign of independence within the USSR or from any nation on its side of the Iron Curtain while at the same time it would commit to supporting national movements that wanted to be independent of colonial powers on the ‘Free World’ side of the Iron Curtain. While the United States would not tolerate such independence movements fearing they would end up entering into a Soviet orbit (which often sort of became a self-fulfilling prophecy) it was also reluctant to fully support several partisan movements behind the Iron Curtain in Stalin’s time and would not risk political stability in Europe (or a nuclear war) when the peoples of Hungary; then Czechoslovakia hoped there would be some material intervention from the West on their behalf - but there would be nothing; just as now there is after the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine still an ongoing vital need for an activist President such as Zelensky to keep adamantly reminding the West of its importance to keep materially supporting Ukraine in its fight to throw out the invader Russia from all Ukrainian territory which also includes the eastern oblasts and Crimea. (If not for Ukraine’s sake at least for their own long term security interests.*

After the USSR there would then be Yeltsin whereby along with a democracy of sorts there was also the economic rise of an oligarchic class and then followed by a full return to yet another Russified version of authoritarian rule with Putin as Russia’s latest Kremlin Tsar. As for the Tsar of 1917 he would eventually lose power when the St. Petersburg garrison aligned itself with the protesters in the streets who were demanding peace and bread while Putin will certainly hold onto power while the military supports his Ukraine venture and for now it does look like that it seems highly unlikely that it or even the elites will turn against him.

*Why Russian elites are standing by Putin.* Olga Khvostunova Foreign Policy Research Institute. (July 2022).

<https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/07/why-russian-elites-are-hanging-together-for-now/>

In the above article is a link to a book by Andrei Soldatov & Irina Bordgan. *The New Nobility. The Restoration of Russia’s Security State & the enduring legacy of the KGB.* Hatchette. (2010) which is worthy of mention. The following link is a review of the book:

*The New Nobility. The Restoration of Russia's Security State & the enduring legacy of the KGB.* Book Review. Guardian. (September 2010).

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/sep/25/new-nobility-restoration-russia-security>

Also some commentary by various experts – including from Olga Khvostunova - immediately after Prigozhin's death and in relation to Putin's hold on power.

*Prigozhin's Death and the Future of Putin's Rule* Foreign Policy Research Institute. (August. 2023).

<https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/08/fpri-expert-commentary-prigozhins-death-and-the-future-of-putins-rule/>

A link to some other articles by Olga Khvostunova in relation to Russia which one may find of interest:

<https://www.fpri.org/contributor/olga-khvostunova/>

Furthermore, there is no modern day Lenin encamped in some European capital waiting for the anti-Putin moment to come back to Russia to spark an overthrow. (Perhaps, this is what Navalny had hoped to achieve after returning to Russia from Germany where he was restoring his health after being poisoned on an internal Russian flight but as it is his arrival back to Russia which as noted eventually had him in an Arctic high security prison to then - as many Putin critics point out - to then have been deliberately killed.

The link below which pictorially covers both 1917 revolutions points out how with the February Revolution there was an army mutiny which would lead Tsar Nicholas with no other choice but to abdicate. (Notably, in 1905 the military stayed loyal to the Tsar so he stayed in power although there was some reform such as the establishment of a State Duma).

*In the Footsteps of Revolution. Radio Free Europe.* Radio Liberty. (2017).

<https://www.rferl.org/a/footsteps-of-1917-revolution/28311776.html>

As an aside its interesting to come across this New Lines Magazine article which within it there is the cursory observation that Russia's leaders never fully trusted their soldiers as they had always played an important role in any overthrow.

*Inside Russia's Secret Propaganda Unit.* Andrei Soldatov. New Lines Magazine. (Dec. 2020).

<https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/inside-russias-secret-propaganda-unit/>

As the German invasion proceeded with its spectacular initial victorious results as mentioned Stalin had to rely on his political commissars to keep the army in check especially in this opening phase of the Great Patriotic War which was when the Soviet Union suffered its worse defeats (with the Russian winter to prove as the major saviour -rather than Stalin – as the *Wehrmacht* steamrolled its way to such major cities as Leningrad and Moscow yet ultimately was not able to capture them).

It would be dangerous for the West to hope that there would be sufficient internal dissent in Russia to bring down Putin so as to hopefully have a moderate installed who would entertain the possibility of a Russian withdrawal from Ukraine.\* As a lessening of any commitment to Ukraine – when actually the commitment should be increased – which would unthinkably lead to a Ukraine defeat would only embolden Russia with even a militarily aggressive approach being adopted towards 'retaking' other 'lost colonies' of its former empire that border Russia.

*Winter is Coming: the Baltics and the Russian-Ukraine War. Implications & Policy Recommendations.* LSE Ideas. (December. 2022)

<https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/reports/2022-12-05-BalticRussia-FINALweb.pdf>

*Ex-PM Kasyanov Warns Russian Victory In Ukraine Puts Baltics in Crosshairs.* RFERL. (June. 2022).

<https://www.rferl.org/a/kasyanov-warns-russian-victory-ukraine-baltics-next/31895774.html>

*\*As it is Putin is playing his own waiting game hoping that with changes of governments, especially in the U.S. – as he hopes - there will be an abandonment of commitments to Ukraine.*

*As the Ukraine war enters a third year, Putin waits for Western support for Kyiv to wither.* Associated Press. (Feb. 2024)

<https://www.rochesterfirst.com/news/ap-as-the-ukraine-war-enters-a-third-year-putin-waits-for-western-support-for-kyiv-to-wither/>

Russia's Bashkortostan protests: Separatism isn't the real threat facing Putin

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/russias-bashkortostan-protests-separatism-isnt-the-real-threat-facing-putin/>

Also province protests

**e.** *Russian Women protesting on behalf of their men recruited to fight in Ukraine. 2023.* This women's protest in Russia is an interesting development as it has occurred during the so called 'special military operation' when due to heavy state censorship a person can otherwise be arrested and imprisoned for simply holding a blank piece of paper as an anti-war protest. Two web links:

**i.** *In Russia, some women demand return of their men from Ukraine Front.* Reuters. (December.2023). <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-some-women-demand-return-their-men-ukraine-front-2023-12-05/>

**ii.** *How To Return A Husband From War?* Mikhail Khodorkovsky. (November 2023).

<https://youtu.be/1GISSWxR0zo?si=0SbUWRSipIN6hl7Q>