History Will Neither Forget nor Forgive Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Roger Moorhouse,
Historian and Author

Abstract:

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has had a significant impact on the West's perception of Russia. The resilience and leadership of the Ukrainian people, as well as the inflow of Western support, has challenged the long-held assumptions about the political leadership of France and Germany and Germany's self-proclaimed status as a moral superpower. This essay suggests that the Russian invasion may be the beginning of a new era for Ukraine and a fundamental shift in the moral centre of the European Union.

Key words: Russia, Ukraine, Germany in the EU, Western perceptions of Russia

When Russian forces invaded Ukraine in the early hours of 24 February 2022, the assumption shared by many of those around Vladimir Putin was that the resulting campaign – dubbed a "special military operation" by the Kremlin – would be over very swiftly. Advancing on four fronts, from close to Kyiv in the north to Kharkiv and the Donbas to the east, to Mykolaiv and Kherson in the south-east, Russian forces initially advanced quickly, despite spirited resistance from the Ukrainians.

At the time, the Russian assumption – that Ukraine would crumble – was not confined to the Kremlin. Germany's Finance Minister, Christian Lindner, for example, was reported by the Ukrainian ambassador in Berlin, Andriy Melnyk, as saying that the Zelensky regime in Kyiv would fall "within hours" and that members of the German government were ready and willing to talk to an incoming Russian occupation administration (The Kyiv Independent 2022). According to former British prime minister Boris Johnson, the idea that Kyiv would fall to the Russians in short order was not only Berlin's assumption, but it was also the German government's preferred outcome (The Guardian 2022). The logic, one must assume, was that in that

way the Moscow-Berlin relationship – and key energy supply infrastructure – could be preserved with minimal disruption – even if Ukraine was to be abandoned in the process.

For a time, in those early days of the war, it did indeed appear that Ukrainian resistance would – for all its tenacity and bravery – be rather fleeting. Western assumptions about the numerical and technological prowess of the Russian Army were widespread, not least in the fact that Russia deployed as many tanks in its initial invasion as the total that are operated by all Western European nations combined. Little wonder then that when the media began reporting the existence of a 40 kilometre-long column of Russian vehicles, seemingly bearing down on the Ukrainian capital, many Western commentators were already composing their obituaries not only of the Zelensky regime, but of Ukraine as a whole.

For some, however, that column of Russian armour did not so much presage Ukraine's collapse as summon forth thoughts of the Red Army's disastrous "Winter War" against the Finns of 1939–40, a moment when – once again – Moscow's military might foundered on the resistance, determination, and ingenuity of a smaller neighbour. So it proved in this case. Far from preparing their ceremonial entry into Kyiv – as some reported they were – Russian soldiers in that column found themselves subjected to such a mauling from the Ukrainian Army that they were eventually forced to withdraw to the frontier, leaving the rusty, pockmarked remnants of their vehicles in their wake. If one needed a visual representation of the Kremlin's humiliation in 2022, that was it.

Russia, then, clearly miscalculated. Underestimating not only the determination of the Ukrainians themselves to resist, but also that of Kyiv's Western partners in providing not just warm words but a thoroughgoing programme of military and humanitarian assistance. This latter point, I think, is crucial. When Russia annexed Crimea and sent its proxies into Donetsk and Luhansk back in 2014, the Western response was so muted that it amounted to little more than a gentle slap on the wrist for the Kremlin. A few sanctions were imposed, but not enough to really hurt the Russian economy. Nord Stream 2 went ahead – with Germany seemingly deaf to the protests of its Central European partners – and the football World Cup played out in Russia, in the summer of 2018, unaffected by boycotts or significant protests. The message that Vladimir Putin appears to have heard from the West was one of resigned acceptance.

That insipid Western response was nothing new, of course. The same passivity had followed the murder of Aleksander Litvinenko, in London, in 2006, Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, the Putin-Medvedev musical chairs of 2008 to 2012, and the downing of MH17 over eastern Ukraine in the summer of 2014. At every turn, it seemed, western myopia and gullibility, and an unwillingness to disrupt trade connections with Russia, were expertly exploited by the Kremlin's disinformation machine, which would muddy the waters, sow countless wild conspiracy theories to deflect blame, and preach about Russia's exceptionalism and its right to unilaterally police its "near abroad."

Given that the West had done so little to curb Putin's ambitions in 2014, it was entirely reasonable to assume that it would again do little in 2022. Of course, like any gambler, Putin was perhaps lulled into a false sense of confidence by his earlier successes, spurred by the apparent spinelessness of his opponents, and the ease with which his *dezinformatsiya* campaigns could befuddle them. Consequently, it was perhaps inevitable that he would be seduced into running ever greater risks.

Yet, in addition to that, much else had changed in the intervening years and the position of the West appeared markedly more fragile and imperilled in 2022 than it had been eight years earlier. For one thing, the internal bloodletting collectively described as "the culture wars" had disrupted and demoralised many Western societies, culminating in the race-charged convulsions of the summer of 2020, when the murder of George Floyd and the rise of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement appeared – at least temporarily – to mark a revolutionary moment in US politics.

That spasm of radical navel-gazing was not an isolated example, and though the United Kingdom and the wider "West" have thus far been spared many of the worst excesses of the United States' culture wars, the direction of travel is nonetheless clear. As is often said, "When America sneezes, Britain catches cold." In all of this, of course, the Kremlin has been no impartial observer. Indeed, in 2013, Putin was already positioning himself as the "champion of conservatism," damning the "genderless and infertile" liberalism of the West and seeking to give financial and political succour to those who would resist the onward march of Progressivism. This, of course, was a perfect wedge issue for the Kremlin, designed to not only garner support in the developing world but also speed the political polarisation of the West.

That polarisation was part of a wider malaise; a crisis of Western confidence which has arguably been ongoing for some years, but was typified

perhaps by a 20 percent *decline* in British defence spending in the three years after 2014 (The World Bank, 2022) – the very years following the first Russian invasion of Ukraine – and by an opinion poll from 2015, which found that less than 20 percent of Germans declared themselves willing to fight for their country. Britons – at 27 percent – were scarcely more belligerently patriotic (Gallup International 2015). That crisis of confidence was perhaps typified by the chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, an event that appeared to mark the final humiliation of US military might and an end – for the time being at least – to US "foreign adventures." Putin and his advisors, watching such events, would have been all too aware of the inherent weakness that Western institutions and societies appeared to be displaying. They were under no illusions about the strategic capital to be had in exploiting them further.

Moreover, Russia's penetration of Western economies – via the medium of energy dependency – was continuing apace. Most grievously affected was Germany, where a popular rejection both of coal-sourced energy and, in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster, of nuclear power, left that country dangerously reliant on Russian gas, and seemingly blind to the political consequences thereof.

Germany, indeed, appeared to be almost uniquely exposed to Russian manipulation. The problem was exemplified by the murky role played by former Chancellor turned political lobbyist Gerhard Schröder, whose service as a board member of both Rosneft and Gazprom would see him described by one commentator as a "political prostitute" (Dunphy 2007). Chancellor Merkel, too, imagined herself to have better insight than her hawkish neighbours in "understanding" the Kremlin and was – throughout her time in office – a keen advocate of the policy of "*Wandel durch Handel*," promoting political change through trade, despite the mounting evidence that, far from exporting civilisation, such contacts tended instead to import corruption.

More than that, Germany's continuing agonies for the crimes of Nazism left that country perceiving some nebulous moral debt to Russia, which left it seemingly unable, or unwilling, to be politically robust in its dealings with the Kremlin. This perception was as historically illiterate as it was politically dangerous. Of course, the Russian Federation had positioned itself as the political successor to the Soviet Union – all the other former Soviet republics had developed new national narratives of their own after 1991 – but a breakdown of the Soviet dead of World War II by republic would demonstrate that it was the Belarussian and Ukrainian peoples – rather than the

Russians – that were most grievously affected by the war. After all, most of the fighting between 1941 and 1944 took place, not on Russian soil, but on that of Belarus and Ukraine (Davies 1987). If Germany insists on carrying a "blood debt" for the depredations of its grandfathers, therefore, it should really be paid to Kyiv and Minsk, rather than Moscow.

In addition to all those factors, the COVID pandemic in 2020 catalysed and metastasised those social and economic challenges by squeezing already straitened budgets, disrupting already fragile economies and clogging the political cycle with worries about vaccines and the utility of lockdowns. In these circumstances, it would be easy for an outsider to assume, perhaps, that the West was too distracted and too demoralised to mount any meaningful defence of its values in the face of challenge. For the Kremlin, then, 2022 represented something like a perfect storm, an opportunity to wrest Ukraine away from its westward pivot once and for all.

So, what went wrong?

Firstly, contrary to the expectations of many, Ukraine defended itself with remarkable guile and vigour. It did not hurt, of course, that Ukraine – unlike most of Western Europe – has not yet passed into a "post-heroic" phase in its national development; its soldiers were willing and proud to defend their homeland from outside aggression. More seriously, perhaps, Ukrainian forces had received training and material support in the period since the invasion of 2014 from NATO members. Crucially, in withstanding the initial Russian onslaught in February and March 2022, they laid the essential groundwork for a wider Western collaboration.

While ceding territory in the south-east, especially around Kherson and the coast of the Sea of Azov, Ukrainian forces mounted a spirited defence of Kyiv, not only resisting the initial Russian paratrooper landings at Hostomel airport, to the north-west of the capital, but allegedly also interdicting several attempts to assassinate President Zelensky. Crucially, too – like Stalin in 1941 – Zelensky made a very public show of remaining in his capital in those early days, ensuring he was photographed in front of recognizable buildings, and famously answering US President Biden's offer of evacuation with the line; "I need ammunition, not a ride" (Braithwaite 2022). The resulting boost to public morale was incalculable.

So, Ukraine's resolute defence in those early days and weeks gave a spur to the growing Western consensus that the country deserved to be materially assisted. There were still dissenters, of course. Israel has been curiously reticent, wary of alienating its large Russian immigrant population,

and – more seriously – of upsetting a delicate balance in the Middle East, where Russia, too, is now a player. Germany, meanwhile, only grudgingly declared a *Zeitenwende* (a turning point) in its foreign policy principles that February and has been glacially slow in implementing any actual change thereafter. Yet, elsewhere in Europe there was near unanimity, in tone if not always in content. Britain, under the unusually principled leadership of prime minister Boris Johnson was something of a trailblazer.

Britain had, arguably, already been stung out of its complacency regarding Russia by the murder of Aleksander Litvinenko in London in 2006 and the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal, using the nerve agent Novichok, in 2018, an attack which would directly result in the death of a local woman, Dawn Sturgess. Less dependent on Russian energy than some, Britain was therefore able to view the Kremlin's actions with a moral clarity that some of its partners lacked and did not hesitate to directly accuse the Kremlin of being behind those attacks. In due course, Britain would deliver anti-tank weapons and good will while Johnson was fêted in Kyiv.

Ukraine's neighbours have also led the way. Poland donated huge amounts of military hardware, while its people opened their doors to Ukrainian refugees – a remarkable act of generosity given that the Polish-Ukrainian relationship has not always been a happy one. A Polish offer to transfer its fleet of MiG fighters to Ukraine was derailed only following the intervention of the Chinese with President Biden (The Spectator Australia 2022), while Warsaw has also been pressing for Patriot missiles to be sent to Ukraine to defend against Russian missile attacks.

Lithuania, meanwhile, has offered military and logistical assistance, and crowdfunded drones for the Ukrainian military, while Latvia and Estonia top the list of aid donors by proportion of GDP (The First News 2022). To those with an understanding of Central European history, this overwhelming support for Ukraine in the region will not be surprising. Poland and the Baltic states – with their collective histories of Russian and Soviet occupation and subjugation – have long been warning their Western partners about the risks of trading with Russia, and of treating the Kremlin regime as if it is anything other than a rogue state. Yet, until the spring of 2022, they were condemned to play the role of the classical Cassandra – their prophecies disbelieved and dismissed by their Western allies.

The influence of the Central European states was arguably of profound significance. Without their input, the attitude of the rest of the EU would most likely have been that preferred by the Germans and the French – one

of earnest hand-wringing and impotent expressions of concern, but little in the way of genuine action. Berlin and Paris, one suspects, would have been content with a modern, more compassionately-worded reprise of the infamous rhetorical question posed by the French press in 1939 – "*Mourir pour Danzig?*" After all, who in Paris wants to die for Kyiv?

It was Poland and the Baltic States, I would suggest, who made that political position untenable. Their principled, historically evidenced rejection of the Kremlin's malignant mendacity, being coherently voiced from *within* the corridors of power of the EU, meant that Brussels was unable to look away and so found itself honour-bound to discover its backbone. "*Mourir pour Danzig?*" would be drowned out by the rather nobler sentiment of "*For Our Freedom and Yours,*" itself a throwback to Poland's interminable 19th-century struggles against Russia.

As a result, it is tempting to imagine that the principled defence of Ukraine advocated by Poland and the Baltic States is symptomatic of a profound eastward shift in the moral centre of gravity of the European Union; a challenge to the long-assumed and long-accepted political leadership of France and Germany, and to Germany's self-proclaimed status as a "moral superpower." While Emmanuel Macron has nonetheless insisted on trying to take a diplomatic lead in seeking to resolve the conflict – most recently suggesting, rather bafflingly, that Russia should be given security guarantees in any negotiated settlement – one suspects French "leadership" is ringing rather hollow for many in the east of the European continent. The days of the "lesser" members of the EU meekly taking instruction from Paris and Berlin, one suspects, are well and truly numbered. One must wait and see what effect this might have on the future development of the European Union.

As well as the support of Ukraine's neighbours, another decisive factor in Putin's evident miscalculation is the parlous state of the Russian army. The Kremlin's forces – supposedly ranked second in the world for their military might – have so far proved themselves to be decidedly fallible. Inflexible decision-making at a battlefield level, along with poor training, ill-motivated, ill-trained conscripts, and the ravages of a thoroughly corrupt army hierarchy have conspired to hamstring the Russian army to an extent that Western observers would scarcely have imagined prior to February.

A salient example of the seemingly endemic corruption is that of Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch and Putin confidante, whose catering business was awarded the billion-dollar-a-year contract to supply food the Russian armed

forces in 2012 yet a decade later was found to be supplying rations to serving soldiers that were more than seven years out of date (iNews 2022). Other examples abound. Understrength Russian motorised units barely had the manpower to defend themselves from infantry assault (Matthews, 2022). Meanwhile, Russian military vehicles were discovered to be so badly maintained that avoidable battlefield breakdowns became commonplace, while the new conscripts called up in October 2022 were often sent into battle with obsolete equipment and only minimal military training (Sauer 2022).

To some extent, this is all symptomatic of the Kremlin's historic lack of care for its fighting men; a phenomenon that predates even the Soviet Union's remarkable profligacy with the lives of its soldiers. Yet, it is also indubitably a symptom of the corruption that infects Russian bureaucracy at every level, where officials are almost expected to skim off whatever they can and even conscripts will sell their kits for profit. The cynic might be tempted to wonder what proportion of Russia's $66 billion annual military budget is currently invested in Moscow dachas, Algarve villas, or floating in the yacht playgrounds of the Caribbean.

Whatever its precise origins, that culture of corruption can only have a profound effect on the morale and fighting effectiveness of Russian forces. Desertions, encouraged by the Ukrainians, are commonplace, while Russian losses – estimated by the Ukrainian general staff at over 90,000 killed (December 2022) – are far outstripping those of their opponents. It all serves as a potent demonstration to Ukraine's Western partners that the Russian giant still has feet of clay.

In such circumstances, lapses in military discipline should not be surprising, yet the moral failings of Russian troops have only served to spur Ukrainian defiance and Western aid efforts still further. The massacres witnessed at Izyum, Bucha, and elsewhere, as well as the horrific siege of Azovstal works in Mariupol, the rapes, the targeting of civilian infrastructure and the seemingly systematic deportation of Ukrainian children to the Russian interior, have all shocked Western opinion.

In addition, the conscription of convicted felons and the prevalence of Chechen fighters and "Wagner" mercenaries in the Russian ranks has dismayed those in the West who are more accustomed to their armies being staffed by disciplined, professional soldiers. All of this has seriously undermined Russia's claim to be a serious, modern state. More significantly, it has become a key component of the Western narrative of aid and resistance

for Ukraine; proof positive of what happens when Western values are not actively defended when challenged.

So, how will history view the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The brief answer is that it will be viewed very differently from its predecessor from 2014. While Putin, deluded by his own wild dreams of Russian ethnonationalism, certainly expected a similar situation to the previous invasion – a supine West and an isolated, divided Ukraine – the reality has been rather different. In short, the invasion of 2022 has already provoked, and will continue to provoke, profound change.

On the one hand, of course, Ukrainian successes on the battlefield, combined with the exemplary wartime leadership of President Zelensky, with its clear political and moral messaging, have created a platform for the inflow of vital Western material and humanitarian support, thus further bolstering Ukrainian resistance. On the other, meanwhile, the poor performance of Russian forces, their parlous record as occupiers of Ukrainian territory, and the clumsy, incoherent propaganda messaging of the Kremlin – variously describing their opponents as Nazis and Satanists – has fatally undermined whatever support Putin might previously have enjoyed on the West's political fringes. The result is something like a virtuous circle, in which the West sees the moral and material worth of its support for Ukraine, while Russia appears only to demonstrate its own mendacity and depravity.

More than that, crucially, the Russian invasion of 2022 has served to shake the West from its complacency as regards Russia. For much of the last decade, Vladimir Putin had expertly toyed with Western opinion; using every weapon in his hybrid-warfare armoury to divide, confuse, and hamstring his opponents. At every turn, he would deny and deflect, dismissing Western complaints as so much "Russophobia," while once again presenting a reasonable face to the world. What is perhaps most surprising about the events of this year is that he has abandoned that policy – one which had previously brought him considerable success at comparatively little cost – in favour of the high-risk gamble of launching the largest military conflict the European continent has witnessed since 1945.

In taking this step, Putin has not only underestimated the resolute defiance of the Ukrainians, but I also suggest he has fatally misread the West. Objectively, he had good reason, perhaps, to imagine that Western societies were so exhausted and divided amongst themselves, following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the upheaval of the culture wars, and the COVID pandemic, that they no longer had the stomach to fight for their principles.

But his invasion of Ukraine has proved that assumption spectacularly misplaced and – more than that – it has brought the old piecemeal strategy to a crashing halt, galvanising Western opinion in the process. As Boris Johnson has suggested, a key realisation for Western leaders after the invasion was that the Kremlin was not interested in negotiations. Putin, then, has exposed Russia as the gangster state that the Poles, the Baltic states, and others had always considered it to be. Indeed, in a highly symbolic move, the European Parliament designated Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism in November 2022. As a result of all that, there can now be no return to "business as usual" with the Kremlin, however much some Western countries might silently see that as a desirous solution. By invading Ukraine, the Putin regime has surely ensured its own demise.

Most importantly, perhaps, what is being witnessed this year – and is less violent form since 2014 – is the birth pains of a new Ukraine. Though that country achieved its independence in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has since then been viewed – by the Kremlin at least, if not by parts of the wider West – as a part of Russia's self-declared "near abroad," a key component of the *Russkiy Mir* – the "Russian World," a successor to the spurious "spheres of influence" so beloved by Stalin. Following Ukraine's westward pivot, demonstrated most decisively at the "Revolution of Dignity" on the Maidan in Kyiv in the spring of 2014, Putin's clandestine seizure of the Donbas and annexation of Crimea were an attempt to halt that shift, fixing Ukraine in the Kremlin's orbit, while exploiting the grievances of the country's Russophone population to perpetually undermine the Ukrainian government.

The invasion of 2022 marked the failure of that policy, and its defeat will in due course likely see the collapse of the idea of the *Russkiy Mir*. Ukraine's Russian speakers, forced into a crude binary by the Kremlin's aggression, have overwhelmingly opted to take Ukrainian identity, with some even abandoning the Russian language altogether. With the defeat of Putin's invasion, Russia's failing cultural draw will be nullified, along with its political and military power, and Ukraine will be free to chart its own course, without reference to its erstwhile masters in the Kremlin. In attempting to halt Ukraine's westward pivot, then, Putin has most likely accelerated it, rendering it even more potent, more determined, and perhaps irreversible. Without wishing it or understanding it, Putin has cast himself as the malevolent midwife of the Ukrainian nation.

For all these reasons, then, history will neither forgive nor forget the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. By launching a full-scale military conflict against a sovereign neighbour, on European soil, Putin has embarked on a course of action which was impossible for the West to ignore, the consequences of which – one expects – will be profound, both for Russia and for the wider region. Paradoxically, in seeking to maintain an unwanted status quo, Vladimir Putin had made epochal change inevitable, foreshadowing not only the end of his own rule but the emergence of a sovereign, free Ukraine.

Works Cited

Braithwaite, Sharon. 2022. "Zelensky Refuses US Offer to Evacuate, saying 'I Need Ammunition, Not a Ride.'" CNN. February 26, 2022. https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/26/europe/ukraine-zelensky-evacuation-intl/index.html.

Davies, Norman. 1987. Norman Davies, "Neither Twenty Million, nor Russians, nor War Dead," *The Independent*, 29 December 1987.

Dunphy, Harry. 2007. "Lantos Raps Former European Leaders – USATODAY.Com." *USA Today*. https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2007-06-13-2870151492_x.htm.

The First News. 2022. "Poland Ranks Third in GDP-Related Aid to Ukraine – Analysts." https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/poland-ranks-third-in-gdp-related-aid-to-ukraine---analysts-33717.

Gallup International. 2015"WIN/Gallup International's Global Survey Shows Three in Five Willing to Fight for Their Country." *Gallup International*. May 7, 2015. https://www.gallup-international.bg/en/33483/win-gallup-internationals-global-survey-shows-three-in-five-willing-to-fight-for-their-country/.

The Guardian. 2022. "France Was in Denial about Putin's Invasion of Ukraine, Says Boris Johnson – Video," November 23, 2022, sec. Politics. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2022/nov/23/france-was-in-denial-about-putins-invasion-of-ukraine-says-boris-johnson-video.

The Kyiv Independent. 2022. "Ambassador Says German Minister Was against Helping Ukraine, Thought It Would Fall within Hours." The Kyiv Independent. March 29, 2022. https://kyivindependent.com/uncategorized/ambassador-says-german-minister-was-against-helping-ukraine-thought-it-would-fall-within-hours.

Matthews, Owen. 2022. *Overreach: The inside Story of Putin's War against Ukraine*. London: Mudlark.

Sandhu, Serina. 2022. "Putin's Troops given Food 7 Years out of Date as Low Morale and Military Flaws Hinder Invasion." *Inews.Co.Uk*. March 2, 2022. https://inews.co.uk/news/ukraine-russian-troops-low-morale-military-weakness-hinder-putin-invasion-1494160.

Sauer, Pjotr. 2022. "'We Were Completely Exposed': Russian Conscripts Say Hundreds Killed in Attack." The Guardian, November 7, 2022, sec. World news. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/07/we-were-completely-exposed-russian-conscripts-say-hundreds-killed-in-attack.

The Spectator Australia. 2022. "The Red Line: Biden and Xi's Secret Ukraine Talks Revealed." *The Spectator Australia*. November 26, 2022. https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-red-line-biden-and-xis-secret-ukraine-talks-revealed/.

The World Bank. 2022. "U.K. Military Spending/Defense Budget 1960–2022." https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/GBR/united-kingdom/military-spending-defense-budget.