

Reflections on World Politics #2

John A. Bernbaum

March 3, 2022

PUTIN'S MISCALCULATIONS

Journalists and analysts have reported that Putin expected the victory over Ukraine's forces would be swift and devastating. Some claim that Russian intelligence sources indicated that Putin thought the battle would be over in two days. This partially explains why there was a significant delay in the initial invasion aimed at Kiev, because supply lines were not adequate.

Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, notes that there are two types of wars. The first are wars of necessity, when a country fears that their vital interests are being threatened and their leaders use military force as a last resort. The second are wars of choice, which involve armed interventions in the absence of vital interests or other options. Putin's decision to attack Ukraine is obviously a war of choice.

Putin's arguments justifying the attack are based on lies and a false historic narrative. Protecting the rights of Russian speakers in Ukraine is one of these ludicrous lies, since Russian speakers in Ukraine are much freer than in Russia. For a leader who has an interest in his country's history and who appears to view himself as "Vladimir the Great," Putin should know that wars of choice often start well but end badly. Aggressors who invade another country frequently underestimate what it takes to win or how success on the battlefield will result in improvements in the leader's regime.

Russian history is quite clear on this subject. Military setbacks for Russian forces lead to regime change – and this is what Putin fears the most. Defeat in the Crimean War of 1853-1856 resulted in the new tsar, Alexander II, instituting major reforms and freeing the serfs. The loss to Japan in 1903-1905 forced Nicholas II to give in and form a constitutional monarchy, only to be replaced in 1917. The setbacks in World War One set up the opportunity for the Bolshevik coup in 1917. Russia's disastrous war in Afghanistan opened the door for Gorbachev's reforms and the collapse of Communist Party rule. Apparently, Putin skipped over these lessons from his country's own history.

The Ukrainians did not roll over and lay down their weapons – they are putting up a heroic resistance, which has unified their country in ways never experienced before. The invasion has also helped to unify the 30 NATO countries, who are working together in close cooperation to assist the Ukrainians by supplying them with weapons, intelligence reports, food, and badly needed medical supplies. NATO and the European Union are demonstrating a unity that I am sure Putin never expected. Neither did he expect President Biden to be able to bring these partnerships together.

Putin also miscalculated what it will take, even if he is able to completely occupy Ukraine. Ukraine, with its population of 43 million, is roughly the size of Texas and will be very difficult to control militarily and politically. The Ukrainian government organized reservists and provided weapons to civilians who have been trained to fight urban and guerrilla warfare. This will result in substantial casualties for both Ukrainians and Russians. Putin fears that a large number of Russia's sons brought home in caskets could undermine his regime. He blocked information about the death of many soldiers after Russia invaded eastern Ukraine in 2014, but he will not be able to hide these deaths from the global media sources tracking this aggression.

It should be clear to Western leaders that Putin's attack on Ukraine's democracy will be for him a "forever war," as long as he is in power in Moscow. He will use Russian military forces, sabotage, disinformation, cyberattacks and bribery, if needed, to prevent Ukraine from existing on Russia's border as a legitimate independent state. The attack on Ukraine is not about Ukraine's possible membership in NATO. Putin is threatened by a successful democracy in Ukraine, and he will do whatever it takes to prevent Ukraine from flourishing as a democratic nation on Russia's border. Michael McFaul, the former U.S. Ambassador to Russia, is correct: "The Kremlin will remain committed to undermining Ukrainian (and Georgian, Moldovan, Armenian, etc.) democracy and sovereignty for as long as Putin remains in power and maybe longer if Russian autocracy continues."

There are difficult days ahead for Ukrainians, and the West must not back off from full support of their struggle against the Russians. As Pete Wehner has noted, in this terrible human drama, we are witnessing "ordinary people – including the young and the elderly – acting in extraordinary ways to defend the country they love, against overwhelming odds." There are lessons here for us.