

Why Russia Went to War and Why Ukraine Must Win

By Don Sutherland

Today is Day 40 of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine and its continuing attacks on Ukraine's civilians and civilian infrastructure. Although Russia's attack was unprovoked by anything Ukraine had done—unless one considers its democratic character and aspirations for further into the West provocations—Russia's naked aggression is a product of its history and its leader's despotic ambitions.

Russia's history has long been defined by conquests. Indeed, in his seminal work written during Russia's Crimean War, Ivan Golovin wrote of Russia, "The history of Russia is the history of its conquests... [O]ffering only a military despotism--the Russian Government is not easy in a state of peace." Golovin continued, "Russia represents a principle, despotism, and she will defend herself against liberty by stifling it in birth."

Russia under Vladimir Putin is frozen in the 19th century. Its worldview is stuck in a dangerous combination of imperial ambitions and pathological insecurity. President Putin saw Ukraine's desire of a shift to the West and its efforts to build a vibrant democracy as posing a mortal threat to Russia's increasingly totalitarian political model. Despotism and democracy are incompatible. Putin chose to try to suffocate Ukraine's nascent democracy. Not surprisingly, Ukraine's people are fighting fiercely to defend their land and government.

At the same time, Putin seeks to rebuild a Russian empire. During his tenure, he has taken a growing number of increasingly aggressive risks to do so. Putin invaded parts of Georgia in 2008. Russia invaded parts of Ukraine in 2014 culminating in its illegitimate annexation of Crimea.

Putin, like many despots before him, has an ambition that goes far beyond what the limits of international principles—including long-established principles pertaining to state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-aggression—permit. Again, Golovin nailed that dynamic, explaining, "[T]here are no limits to a despot's ambition."

Garry Kasparov wrote of Vladimir Putin in his prescient *Winter is Coming*:

Like most dictators, Putin has good animal instincts when it comes to evaluating his rivals, and he knew he would face no real opposition from other world leaders. And, also like all dictators, Putin grew bolder with every successful step. Dictators do not ask why before they take more power; they only ask why not.

That is who Putin is. That is why he launched his destructive war. That is why he has pushed ahead with his latest war despite steep and growing Russian battlefield losses and increasing isolation from the global economy.

That Russia's floundering but brutal invasion of Ukraine has everything to do with Putin's longstanding designs was revealed Kremlin-friendly *RIA Novosti*'s accidental publication of an

essay that prematurely celebrated the rapid Russian victory that ultimately did not occur. That essay read, in part:

A new world is being born before our eyes. Russia's military operation in Ukraine has ushered in a new era... Russia is restoring its unity - the tragedy of 1991, this terrible catastrophe in our history, its unnatural dislocation, has been overcome. Yes, at a great cost, yes, through the tragic events of a virtual civil war, because now brothers, separated by belonging to the Russian and Ukrainian armies, are still shooting at each other, but there will be no more Ukraine as anti-Russia. Russia is restoring its historical fullness, gathering the Russian world, the Russian people together - in its entirety of Great Russians, Belarusians and Little Russians... Vladimir Putin has assumed, without a drop of exaggeration, a historic responsibility by deciding not to leave the solution of the Ukrainian question to future generations.

With the nature of Putin's invasion clear, the United States, Europe, and any nation that legitimately stands for a rules-based international order cannot accommodate any Russian gains from its latest war. Any nation that prefers a rules-based and peaceful international order to a chaotic alternative where exercises of brute force regularly write and rewrite the rules through bloodshed and brutality should support Ukraine. Any nation that credibly claims to embrace democratic governance should stand by Ukraine. To again borrow from Golovin, "If liberty... does not destroy despotism, despotism will destroy it." That's what is at stake.

Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Ukraine in 2022 are the symptoms of a growing struggle for primacy between the despotism of Putin's Russia and liberal democracy. If Russia again succeeds, even if by merely being permitted to retain part of its territorial gains from its current war, it almost certainly will look for additional opportunities, both to expand its territory and to undermine democratic governance along its borders. Moreover, an ever insecure, increasingly ambitious, and aging President Putin, could become even more aggressive in pushing his ambitions in pursuit of building the historical legacy he seeks. Pressed by the diminishing time left on his biological clock, he could pursue dangerous, if not catastrophic short cuts to try to realize his desired legacy.

In sum, Ukraine must win. Its victory must be unambiguous to the world. Its territorial integrity must be regained and the fullness of its freedom as a sovereign state must remain intact. Compromise on either of those terms will almost certainly plant the seeds for Putin's next war.