

Putin Has Ignored History – We Should Not Make the Same Mistake

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A new Guernica is being painted before our eyes.

This bloody canvas is the handiwork of Vladimir Putin's invaders, who seem under instruction to reduce the country to rubble.

Putin has violently betrayed the civilizational values he claims to espouse. He has delivered tendentious lectures on the supposed age-old unity of Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians in order to justify irredentist imperial pretensions.

Yet the ancient Ukrainian city of Kyiv — like Jerusalem — is a sacred multicultural site that must be protected, not desecrated, by anybody who cares about Orthodoxy or for what is great and beautiful in human civilization.

Putin has perversely embarked on destroying Ukraine in order to save it. Such barbarism is the hallmark of the worst sackers and plunderers of world history. In so doing, the Kremlin strongman has discredited and shamed the very "Russian Idea" he professes to uphold.

Why has Putin taken his country and the world to the brink?

Putin's history lessons are merely fake intellectual cover for naked great power revanchism and expansionism. Whatever one thinks of NATO enlargement — and I have long been a skeptic about its wisdom particularly in the former Soviet space — Putin's war of aggression is utterly unjustified and grotesquely out of proportion with any legitimate grievance Russia may have had about being excluded from Western clubs over a period of decades. Ukraine has done absolutely nothing to threaten Russia's security.

His masquerade of an "anti-Nazi" campaign evokes the darkest Orwellian satire. It must be obvious to Russian soldiers who have been swept into this ungodly invasion that there are no more "Nazis" in Ukraine than there are in Russia itself. The conquering troops encounter only innocent citizens who, like themselves, would naturally defend their own homelands from foreign attack.

The Russian president's truculent, fulminating performances on tv come across full of rage. This streak is not entirely new for him, but in recent weeks he has crossed into new parlous frontiers of recklessness and brutality. The world has long known how to identify this destructive seed in human nature. "Sing, O goddess, of the wrath of Achilles" is the opening line of Homer's Iliad, the epic poem of our penchant for war, destruction and self-destruction. Freud called it the Thanatos impulse, or death wish.

Putin is also a man of cold calculation — or, as President Joe Biden has said, miscalculation. Putin has assumed that the time is ripe to overturn U.S.-led global dominance. This has long been his goal, and it's shared by other authoritarian leaders such as those in Beijing who have bridled under U.S. moral tutelage and financial sanctions. The chaos of the Trump presidency, including an attempted self-coup to stay in power, the disarray of Europe capped by Brexit and the authoritarian leanings in Hungary and Poland, and most recently the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan have bolstered Putin's belief about the decline and fall of the West — and his decision to go for broke now.

This Kremlin leader will likely learn, the hard way, the lessons of Russian tsars before him who waged disastrous wars with the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France in Crimea and later in the Far East with Japan.

Typical of dictators, Putin has struck with surprising violence calculated to demoralize the other side. To his obvious dismay, it has done the opposite, by making things completely clear to all who bear witness: his aggression must be denounced and stopped in the name of human civilization.

It was the great 19th-century Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky who perhaps most clearly recognized the nihilistic demons dwelling within all human hearts that can unleash unspeakable cruelty and violence. Putin probably thinks he is beyond good and evil, but that is a form of hubris that sets up defeat. The only question is how much havoc will be wrought along the way.

Putin's nuclear taunts are a form of intimidation that must be taken with utmost seriousness. In his desperate isolation and enraged power grab, Putin has plainly chosen evil. His brazen actions call on the rest of the world — and indeed foremost the Russian people who have long suffered under his command — to choose good. The timing of Putin's undoing is fundamentally up to Russians themselves.

If there is one line Western leaders have mistakenly omitted in their statesmanlike comments on the crisis, it is that we in the West have no quarrel with the people of Russia. States wand regimes wage wars. People make peace and rebuild. There must be a future for all the nations involved.

What are the pathways out of the abyss?

Much depends on decisions taken by Putin in the next days. The strikingly brave Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelenskiy has proposed direct talks, and several key foreign leaders have offered to mediate. Diplomacy must be given every chance to prevent escalation or protracted stalemate. There must be no lack of effort to negotiate a ceasefire and peace settlement. Countries such as Turkey and Israel are particularly well positioned to play the broker role.

Despite delusional claims he makes about the course and consequences of the military campaign, Putin should be well aware that international sanctions are beggaring his economy and that his recently announced anti-U.S. strategic partnership with China is a faithless and shaky marriage of convenience. It is noteworthy that Putin's friend Donald Trump helped push China and Russia together through his reckless trade war on Beijing.

Even if Putin lies to his people about the war in Ukraine, the Chinese know the truth and tend to see Russia under Putin's direction as a retrograde power in Eurasia. Russia's mothers also know that so many of their sons will not be coming home.

If reasoned self-interest in survival can get the better of savage rage, Putin will want to avoid escalation of a conflict not going his way or an attempt at protracted occupation of a robustly defiant Ukraine with a puppet government.

If the path of negotiation is indeed open, subject to a complete ceasefire and withdrawal of invading forces, a future settlement should take into account the following imperatives:

Ukraine must survive as an independent country, with its own political system.

Ukraine's EU membership should be accelerated. The status of Crimea could be negotiable. A new Minsk agreement for federated autonomy in the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk should be on the table. A time-bound term of neutrality — and an indefinite voluntary suspension of Ukraine's NATO membership bid — would be worth the price of stabilization.

In designing the eventual exit from sanctions, it is essential to separate the treatment of the people of Russia from the fate of the Putin regime. Frozen assets should be kept for the work of reconstruction.

Related, the costs of the enormous physical and humanitarian damage perpetrated by Putin's forces must be addressed. This will require collective international donor efforts including on the part of Russia. It would be wise to avoid the mistake of the Versailles Treaty after WW1 which sought to impose long-term crippling reparations on the aggressor. Putin has ignored history; we should not make the same mistake.

None of this will be easy, and many of the terms might be distasteful in the face of all the human suffering and destruction being inflicted on Ukraine. In the interests of peace and sovereignty, the Ukrainian leaders would have to agree to the terms. Putin has brought us to a tragic place. Realism about what an achievable endgame could look like is essential for all parties. No country could have a rational interest in an escalating or wider conflict on the edge of WW3.