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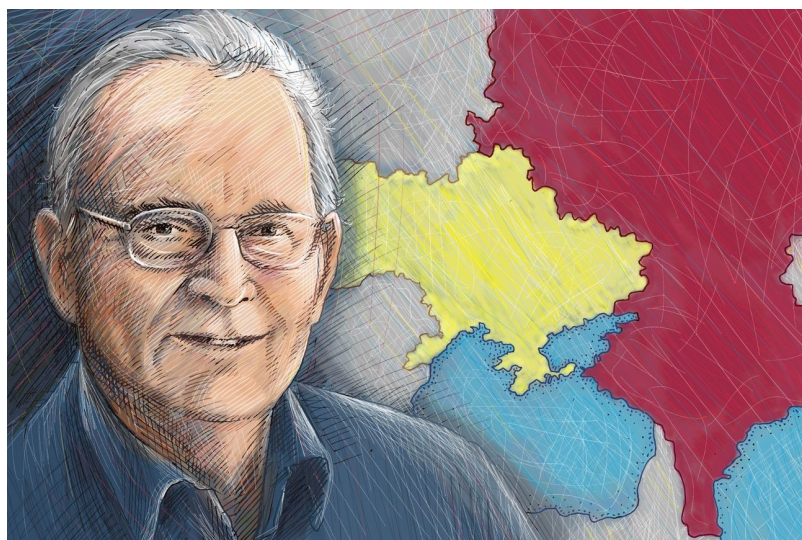
OPINION | THE WEEKEND INTERVIEW

# *The Two Blunders That Caused the Ukraine War*

Robert Service, a leading historian of Russia, says Moscow will win the war but will lose the peace and fail to subjugate Ukraine. How Putin could be deposed.

By Tunku Varadarajan

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Robert Service

PHOTO: BARBARA KELLEY

The Russian invasion of Ukraine resulted from two immense strategic blunders, Robert Service says. The first came on Nov. 10, when the U.S. and Ukraine signed a Charter on Strategic Partnership, which asserted America's support for Kyiv's right to pursue membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The pact made it likelier than ever that Ukraine would eventually join NATO—an intolerable prospect for Vladimir Putin. "It was the last straw," Mr. Service says. Preparations immediately began for Russia's so-called special military operation in Ukraine.

Mr. Service, 74, is a veteran historian of Russia, a professor emeritus at St. Antony's College, Oxford and a fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution. He has written biographies of Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky. The last work, published in 2009,

attracted the ire of die-hard Trotskyites world-wide for saying that their hero shared many basic ideas with Lenin and Stalin on the “one-party, one ideology terror state.” Mr. Service says they still “mess around” his Wikipedia entry.

The November agreement added heft to looser assurances Ukraine received at a NATO summit five months earlier that membership would be open to the country if it met the alliance’s criteria. Mr. Service characterizes these moves as “shambolic mismanagement” by the West, which offered Ukraine encouragement on the NATO question but gave no apparent thought to how such a tectonic move away from Moscow would go down with Mr. Putin. “Nothing was done to prepare the Ukrainians for the kind of negative response that they would get.”

After all, Mr. Service says, Ukraine is “one of the hot spots in the mental universe of Vladimir Putin, and you don’t wander into it without a clear idea of what you’re going to do next.” The West has known that since at least 2007, when the Russian ruler made a speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy that was, in Mr. Service’s words, “a rage against Ukraine ever joining NATO.” He was about to step down from the Russian presidency (to become prime minister for four years), “so it was his last lion’s roar in the jungle.” When he returned as president in 2012, he made it clear again that “the Ukraine-NATO question wasn’t negotiable.”

In July 2021 he wrote an essay that foretold the invasion. Mr. Service sums it up as saying, “more or less, that Ukrainians and Russians are one people.” Mr. Putin had said so many times before, “but not as angrily and punchily—and emotionally.”

It rankles Mr. Putin that Ukraine would seek to join the West—and not merely because he wants it as a satellite state. He also “can’t afford to allow life to a neighboring Slav state which has even a smidgen of democratic development. His Russian people might get dangerous ideas.”

As a result of the invasion, which began on Feb. 24, “the U.S. has started to get its act together,” Mr. Service says. “But I don’t think American diplomacy covered itself in glory in 2021.”

The second strategic error was Mr. Putin’s underestimation of his rivals. “He despises the West and what he sees as Western decadence,” Mr. Service says. “He had come to believe that the West was a shambles, both politically and culturally.”

He also thought that the leaders of the West were “of poor quality, and inexperienced, in comparison with himself. After all, he’s been in power 20 years.”

In Mr. Putin’s cocksure reckoning, the invasion was going to be “a pushover—not just in regard to Ukraine, but in regard to the West.” He’d spent four years “running rings around Donald Trump,” and he thought the retirement of German Chancellor Angela Merkel left the West rudderless. That set the scene for the “surprise he got when he invaded Ukraine, when he found that he’d inadvertently united the West—that what he’d done was the very opposite of what he wanted.” Mr. Service calls Mr. Putin “reckless and mediocre” and scoffs at the notion that he is “some sort of genius.” What kind of Russian leader, he asks, “makes it impossible for a German leader not to build up Germany’s armaments”?

Mr. Putin evidently “hoped there wouldn’t have to be a war” because the massing of troops on the border would lead to the collapse of the Ukrainian government. He underestimated Volodymyr Zelensky, whom he’d met in Paris in December 2019, six months after the Ukrainian president took office. Mr. Putin had “done his usual brutal discussion performance with him. Zelensky came out of these talks obviously shaken.”

Mr. Service says the key to understanding Mr. Putin is his adamant belief that Russia is “a great global power” and that the Russian sphere of influence should extend to as many of the former Soviet republics as possible: “There’s no state that’s more important to him than Ukraine.”

The historian describes the Russian ruler as “not a communist but an anticommunist.” In Mr. Service’s telling, Mr. Putin regards the Soviet period as “a rupture” with the path to greatness that Russia should have taken. “Putin believes in Eternal Russia” and regards Lenin with “ridicule and detestation” for stunting Russia’s expansion. While Mr. Putin may say “occasionally pleasant things about Stalin, he has never said anything positive about Lenin.”

In Mr. Putin’s view, according to Mr. Service, Lenin committed a primordial sin in 1922 when the Soviet Constitution set up a federation of republics with their own boundaries within the Soviet Union. “This made possible the breakup of the U.S.S.R. into separate independent states in 1991,” Mr. Service says. Mr. Putin, like Stalin—who fell out with Lenin over these constitutional arrangements—would

have liked all these republics to have been merged into a Greater Russia, ruled from Moscow.

“Putin despises democracy,” Mr. Service says. “He believes in the right of the leadership to impose the authority of the state on society.” In the Russian president’s view, this is good for citizens because it brings stability and predictability into their lives. He also believes in the importance of the secret police as an adjunct of government. In this, Mr. Service points out, many of his methods are “reminiscent of the Soviet period,” even if his ideology isn’t.

Mr. Putin “sees himself messianically,” Mr. Service says—as a leader come to deliver Russia to its destiny. He runs his government like “a court, though the czars were much more polite to their ministers.” Unless they go into political opposition, he doesn’t get rid of people who don’t share his vision. Instead, he “bats them down, and overawes them, treating them like schoolboys.” He “peppers them with questions” to keep them on their toes. He was a senior officer in the KGB, and the KGB is still in his soul. Rebranded as the FSB, “it’s the one agency from the old Soviet Union that has survived.”

As the Russian invasion continues into its second week, Mr. Service is pessimistic, certain that we’re heading into a prolonged war that will end in the subjugation of Ukraine. “He’ll win the war,” Mr. Service says, “by flattening Ukraine. By devastating a brother people, he could win the war. But he won’t win the peace. The task of tranquilizing the Ukrainians is beyond the Russians. There’s too much bile that’s been let loose in the stomach of Ukraine.”

Looking to history for analogies, he rejects Czechoslovakia in 1968, preferring instead the example of Hungary in 1956, when Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest to quell a major uprising. “When the Soviets suppressed the Hungarian Revolution, they had to pay for it economically,” Mr. Service says. “They had to subsidize Hungary with oil and gas.” Moscow bore a huge economic burden for “the retention of Hungary within its political orbit, and that would be the case with Ukraine. And they’d be hated at the same time—hated.” Not to mention taking on the weight of appeasing a conquered people at a time of impoverishment in Russia itself.

“Putin’s got to be removed from power,” Mr. Service says. That is the only way to

end Ukraine's torment. But how?

It could happen in two ways. The first is “a palace coup,” which at the moment “looks very, very unlikely” but could become plausible. The second is a mass uprising, “a tremendous surge in street demonstrations as a result of the economic hardship” imposed by the war and Western sanctions.

For a palace coup to succeed, there would need to be palpable disaffection in the Russian establishment. Mr. Service notes that the Russian Orthodox Church hasn't yet condemned the war, nor has the Academy of Sciences. “By and large, the establishment has been quiescent.” But the “personal and collective interests” of the ruling elite are at stake. Not only will sanctions stop them from traveling to the French Riviera or sending their sons to England's Eton College; they'll have to line up behind “a really reckless line of policy, which will require Russia to patrol the biggest state in Europe, now full of angry, vengeful people.”

Reaching for the history books again, he cites the case of Lavrentiy Beria, Stalin's all-powerful state security chief, who was almost certain to succeed the latter on his death in 1953. But the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, as the Politburo was known at the time, got together with Nikita Khrushchev and decided that they “weren't safe with Beria.” With the help of the army, they arrested, tried and executed him. “The thing that makes me think about this,” says Mr. Service, “is that the Presidium at the time seemed to be working under the impetus of Beria's various initiatives quite peacefully.” His end came as a surprise to the world—and undoubtedly to Beria himself.

“So it's quite possible,” Mr. Service continues, “that the apparently overawed associates of Putin in the Kremlin could decide that the Russian national interest and their collective interest will best be served by getting rid of Putin.” Yet Mr. Putin is surely aware of the history of Beria, and is accordingly prepared: “He's very elusive, and very, very edgy. I should imagine his security orders are quite severe.”

The longer the war goes on, the more likely it is that Russia will see protest movements that are hard to contain, Mr. Service says. “Especially if the police themselves have elements in their ranks who sympathize with the people they're meant to be suppressing.”

There have been frequent uprisings in Russian history, and Mr. Service lists them. “In 1905, they nearly led to revolution. In February 1917, they did.” There were also “very, very powerful” street demonstrations in the early 1930s that shook Stalin; disturbances in the labor camps in the late 1940s, and also at Stalin’s death. “There were whole cities that erupted against the Soviet order in 1962, because of high meat prices, and there were strikes in 1989 among the coal miners, which destabilized Soviet politics.” And in 1991 an attempted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev prompted a demonstration outside Parliament, where future Russian President Boris Yeltsin famously faced down a Soviet tank.

He acknowledges that only twice did opponents succeed in toppling the political establishment, but he says that “if there’s a combination of political disorder on the streets and political unease in the ruling group,” as in 1917 and 1991, these factors could converge to powerful effect: “This is a distant possibility at the moment, but it can’t be ruled out.”

Mr. Service is certain, however, that the Russians will find conquered Ukrainians as difficult to control as free ones. “The Ukrainians have become more nationally conscious over the 20th century, and they’re a proud people who’ve seen what happened to them when they were subjugated by the U.S.S.R.” It is inconceivable that they will accept subjugation again. “They had it in the early 1930s, when millions died under Stalin’s famines. They had it again in the late 1940s, after the war ended. I don’t think they’re going to let history repeat itself.”

The invasion of Ukraine, Mr. Service says, is not a tragedy for Ukraine alone. It’s a tragedy for Russia. “Russian people don’t deserve a ruler like Putin. They’ve not had very much luck with their rulers in the last 150 years. In fact, they’ve had appalling luck.”

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