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REFLECTIONS ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE BY A RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN IMMIGRANT'S SON

George Osol

When my wife, daughter and I visited Kharkiv in August of 2010, we stayed with relatives in their apartment a few miles from the city center. Walking around this beautiful city, with its many parks and churches, I found myself thinking about my father and mother. Both were born in Kharkiv and lived there before the second world war. In March, my relatives sent me a picture of that same apartment. Struck by a missile, it was ablaze, orange flames shooting from every window including the one in the bedroom where we had slept. They all fled and are now safe in Germany.

The main question on their minds is: WHY? This essay attempts to answer that question by critically evaluating Vladimir Putin's allegation that this 'special military operation' had to be conducted in the interest of Russian national security. It also examines Putin's strategy and considers what may lie ahead.

Background: Russia began amassing troops and tanks on the border with Ukraine in the Spring of 2021. By early February of this year, their number approached 200,000. Although Vladimir Putin denied that he was planning to invade Ukraine, our intelligence suggested otherwise.

Meanwhile, Putin complained about NATO infringing on Russia's border and submitted a series of demands. We rejected most outright since they were fundamentally unrealistic. After all, the expansion of NATO into the Eastern bloc countries was old news; could Putin really expect us to undo something that had been in place for almost two decades? Some of the other demands garnered counterproposals, as negotiations usually do, but they were unable to gain any real traction.

But Putin's core gripe was directed at Ukraine. In a long, detailed and well-organized but fundamentally inaccurate essay posted on the Kremlin website in July 2021, he set up his argument by insisting that Russians and Ukrainians were "one people – a single whole," and that the growing discord between the two countries was the result of external forces imposed upon Ukraine by the West, driven primarily by the United States. In his mind, by becoming a well-armed proxy of the West, Ukraine was becoming a clear and present danger to Russia's national security.

While praising the talent and industry of the Ukrainian people, Putin laid the blame for Ukraine's economic deterioration on the government that was established after the 2014 Euromaidan revolution. He declared it to be illegal and illegitimate because it came to power by overthrowing a democratically-elected leader. He also accused it of propagating anti-Russian policies such as banning the teaching of Russian in schools, and committing genocide against ethnic Russians in the Eastern Donbas region.

Putin further vilified the Ukrainian government (and its military) by claiming that they have been permeated by fascist elements that glorify Nazism. As proof, he cited the government's repeated refusal to support a UN General Assembly resolution condemning the glorification of Nazism and honoring SS war criminals. Incidentally, the U.S. and Canada also refuse to support this resolution because - however distasteful - it is a violation of free speech policy. Putin also cited events that occurred in Odesa in May of 2014 in which "Ukrainian neo-Nazis burned Russian people alive."

He concludes his essay (which is now required reading for every Russian soldier) by stating that Russia respects the Ukrainian language and supports Ukrainian sovereignty, but that it cannot continue to tolerate an anti-Russian, pro-Nazi regime whose sizeable military is being trained and armed by the West on its borders. Ignoring the implicit contradiction, he asserted that true Ukrainian sovereignty is only possible in partnership with Russia because Russians and Ukrainians are "one people".

If we examine Putin's claims, some are indeed true. He provides considerable historical detail that is accurate and largely undisputed. But his essay is pernicious in its sly blend of fact and opinion, subjective interpretation of events, critical omissions, and purposeful misreading of history.

In considering whether there is any legitimacy to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, one must consider Putin's principal beliefs (each followed by the corrective action he seeks):

- That Ukraine is historically not a real country, rather, it is historically and spiritually inseparable from Russia (and must be returned to Russia in its entirety).
- That the current Ukrainian government came to power illegally and is therefore illegitimate (and must be replaced with a pro-Russian government similar to the one that was deposed).
- That the Ukrainian government is riddled with neo-Nazis and fascists, and that its national policies and military actions are anti-Russian and genocidal (Ukraine must therefore be "de-Nazified").
- That NATO moving closer to Russia's Western border and arming Ukraine is an existential threat to Russia (Ukraine must therefore be "demilitarized" by declaring its neutrality and agreeing to never apply for NATO membership).

Let's consider each of these arguments in some detail and context.

Ukraine ‘belongs’ to Russia: The belief that Ukraine is ‘historically and spiritually’ part of Russia is easily discredited. Ukrainians and Russians lived as two separate states until 1654. According to Frank Sysyn, historian and director of the Toronto office of the *Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies* of the University of Alberta, “for almost 400 years, from the 13th to the 17th centuries, they were not in the same political structure and lived under different religious influences.” A complex history followed, with the territory of Ukraine being at times under Polish or Russian occupation. For hundreds of years, the Ukrainian language and any expression of Ukrainian culture were suppressed by the occupying powers, whether Polish, Russian or Soviet.

Ukraine declared its independence after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, and maintained that status for three years (1918-1921). This was a tumultuous and unstable period, with the government in Kyiv changing hands five times in 1919 alone. Ukraine became part of the *Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)* in 1921. For the next seventy years, Ukraine was governed locally by its own branch of the communist party and existed as a highly centralized one-party state, thereby retaining its own identity, but only up to a point since the Ukrainian Communist Party had jurisdiction over domestic affairs, but foreign policy, commerce, and defense were controlled by Moscow.

There were difficult times. For example, the great famine (the *Holodomor*, which means ‘death by hunger’) occurred under Stalin during the winter of 1932-1933 and resulted in the death of more than 4 million Ukrainians. Part of the broader Soviet famine and the result of failed Soviet agricultural policies, Ukraine was especially hard-hit, and some historians have speculated that it was intentionally exacerbated by Stalin in order to squelch a Ukrainian independence movement.

This period impacted my own family since my grandparents were Russian-Ukrainians who lived in Kharkiv at the time. They had owned a grocery store and lived a comfortable, middle-class life before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Their store was seized by the communists in 1919, leaving them with no income, and they often spoke about the vicious combination of hunger and political persecution during those dark days. Postboxes were mounted on every corner for individuals to deposit anonymous complaints against whomever they wished; neighbor could complain about neighbor and, whether true or not, each complaint could be followed-up by a visit from the militia, usually in the middle of the night, that often ended in an arrest, after which point that person might never be seen again.

Stalin’s network of informants was extensive and ubiquitous. As a result of being interrogated several times on some alleged minor complaint (e.g. saying something unfavorable about Stalin), my great grandfather developed a fear of persecution, and his paranoia culminated in his killing himself by jumping off of a six story building in 1935. Putin is reinstating some of these same practices in today’s Russia as a way of controlling the population, furthering the effectiveness of his propaganda, and maintaining a firm grip on power.

Ukraine finally became a sovereign and independent country after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and has existed as an independent, sovereign nation.

Thus, the concept that the Russians and Ukrainians are ‘one people’ and that the territory of Ukraine should be ‘returned’ to Russia is fallacious. Putin’s attempt to rewrite history – his Big

Lie – ignores fundamental and irrefutable truths. If anything, Ukraine history has been one of oppression and victimization by Russia. As the early days of the current war clearly demonstrated, Putin's beliefs about Russian and Ukrainian spiritual and social unity are not shared by the Ukrainian people. There were no flowers or chocolates waiting for the Russian soldiers when they invaded on February 24th, only hatred and condemnation and resistance.

The current Ukrainian government is illegitimate: Key to Putin's claim that the current Ukrainian government is illegitimate is his insistence that it came to power illegally in 2014. As a review of the facts shows, there is some truth to this although, if one considers the circumstances, the situation becomes quite nuanced and is not at all categorical.

Viktor Yanukovich became the President of Ukraine in January of 2011 after he beat Yulia Tymoshenko - who supported Ukraine's integration into the EU and membership in NATO - by a narrow (3%) margin. Although the election was declared fair by both the Ukrainian Central Election Commission and international observers, Tymoshenko accused Yanukovich of election fraud. The Yanukovich government retaliated against her, and she was tried and convicted a year later on charges that were said to be contrived. The United States and the European Court of Human Rights protested the validity of her trial, but she was nevertheless given a seven-year sentence and imprisoned.

During the run-up to the election, and early in his presidency, Yanukovich expressed an openness to the West and a willingness to partner with the EU. After being in power for two years, and reportedly being pressured by Putin, he backed out of signing a political association and free trade agreement with the EU, and announced that he would instead seek closer ties with the *Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)*, which is administered by Moscow. This pivot towards Russia and away from Europe occurred in November of 2013.

Sparked by this decision and fueled by the perception of widespread corruption and violations of human rights by the Yanukovich government, peaceful demonstrations started shortly thereafter and grew in size during December and January and, on January 16th 2014, the Yanukovich government introduced a series of repressive laws restricting civil society and the right to protest. Meanwhile, the number of protesters on the streets of Kyiv continued to swell, numbering more than 20,000 by mid-February.

Their three principal demands were that: (1) the Ukrainian government sign the trade association agreement with the EU as originally promised, (2) the Ukrainian Constitution, which had been repealed by the Constitutional Court of Ukraine after Yanukovich was elected, be restored to its earlier (2004) version, and (3) political prisoners be freed.

Frustrated by governmental intransigence, the Euromaidan demonstrations grew increasingly violent, and a state of emergency was declared on February 19th. The violence escalated further on February 20th, when the Minister of Internal Affairs authorized the use of live ammunition against the protesters, and Ukraine appeared to be on the brink of a civil war. More than 100 protesters (dubbed "the Heavenly Hundred") and 18 policemen were killed by snipers, and in street clashes; thousands more were injured. Later that same February day, the chairman of the Ukrainian parliament signed a parliamentary decree condemning the use of force and urging a

cessation of military actions against the protesters, and announced that the Minister of Internal Affairs has been suspended.

The next day, on February 21st, President Yanukovych signed a compromise agreement with the leaders of the parliamentary opposition agreeing to hold early elections, make changes to the constitution, and form an interim unity government. In spite of this, the demonstrators took full control of the government district that same day and introduced a bill to oust Yanukovych.

The next day (February 22nd), the Ukrainian parliament then voted 328 to 119 (73%) to remove him from office and issued a warrant for his arrest. In attestation to the extent of his corruption, Yanukovych's worth was estimated to be \$12 billion, although his annual salary was just \$24,000/year. He and his associates, known as 'the Family', are thought to have embezzled billions of tax-payers' money. His estate contained gilded bathrooms, an eleven-million dollar chandelier, private zoo, fleet of luxury cars, and a yacht. Yanukovych fled the country with Putin's help on the same day and exiled in Russia.

Putin's claim that the current Ukrainian government is illegitimate is based on these events, and has some merit. For example, the constitutionality of Yanukovych's removal has been questioned and faulted by constitutional experts for its violation of protocol, which mandated a review of the case by Ukraine's Constitutional Court and required a three-fourths majority vote by the Parliament, i.e. 338 votes. As noted, the actual number was ten votes short. The parliamentary resolution to oust Yanukovych also did not follow proper impeachment procedure because it stated that Yanukovych "withdrew from his duties in an unconstitutional manner" under "circumstances of extreme urgency." These reasons were not stipulated as being valid for the removal of a President by the then-extant Ukrainian Constitution. Hence, federal laws were not strictly adhered to, and the constitution enacted at that time did appear to be violated.

Further, the events of the Euromaidan (termed the "Revolution of Dignity") were, of course, illegal. All revolutions are.

The demonstrations grew out of popular frustration with a president who reneged on his word and acquiesced to the will of Russia, and whose regime was decadent and corrupt. But there is also no question that both Washington and the European Union favored the demonstrators and attempted to meddle the process. Senator John McCain not only traveled to Kyiv to speak in favor of and show solidarity with the demonstrators, he dined with members of the ultra-right *Svoboda* (*Freedom*) party, and appeared in public with its leader, Oleg Tyagnibok.

The same and more can be said for the Europeans. Victoria Nuland, the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs traveled to Kiev multiple times, and Russian intelligence intercepted and leaked a telephone conversation between her and the U.S. ambassador to the Ukraine (Geoffrey Pyatt) in which they were heard discussing their preferences for who should be appointed in a post-Yanukovych government (e.g. talking about "Yatsy" - Arseniy Yatsenyuk, who subsequently became prime minister).

This scheming occurred at a time when Yanukovych was still in power. Although allegations of U.S. and European covert financial support for the demonstrators have also surfaced,

their validity is more difficult to parse since many were sourced to the Kremlin. The U.S. has provided billions of dollars in support of Ukrainian democracy (beginning in 1992), but the specific amount that was targeted to fueling the Euromaidan revolution has not been made public.

Putin convened an all-night meeting in the Kremlin the night that Yanukovych was voted out of power (February 22nd), and declared the events in Kyiv to be the illegal deposition of a legitimate government by pro-Western revolutionary forces. Pro-Russian demonstrations were held in Crimea on the next day. Russia invaded Crimea on February 27th, and annexed it a month later, declaring the annexation to be legitimate after organizing a referendum on whether the population wanted Crimea to be part of Russia or Ukraine. Although the official result from what was now called the *Autonomous Republic of Crimea* was a 97 percent vote in favor of integration of the region into the Russian Federation, the plebiscite was not recognized by most countries in view of the coercive presence of Russian troops. A UN General Assembly resolution declaring the referendum invalid was adopted by a vote of 100 countries for and 11 against, with 58 abstentions.

Also, the fact that the invasion of Crimea was clearly an illegal action according to international law (as is Russia's current invasion of Ukraine) was conveniently disregarded by Putin, who doesn't mention the forceful annexation of Crimea in his July 2021 essay. Neither does he mention fomenting civil war in the Donetsk region by arming the separatists, a conflict that also began under his direction in 2014, and which has reportedly claimed more than 14,000 lives.

Continuing with the events in Ukraine in that fateful February of 2014, once the new government was established, Yulia Tymoshenko was released from prison and ran for president a in the early (May 2014) election. She lost to Petro Poroshenko (54 to 12 %). Poroshenko, a popular figure in the Euromaidan opposition, was instrumental in organizing and financially supporting the protests, and his decisive victory is indicative of popular sentiment being firmly on the side of the Euromaidan protesters.

Poroshenko's term ran from May of 2014 to May of 2019. During this time, his foreign and domestic policies promoted closer ties with the West, a primacy of the Ukrainian language over Russian, fervent nationalism, decentralization, and the return of Crimea to Ukraine. Cooperation with Russia in the military sphere was prohibited. He also separated the Ukrainian Orthodox church from the Moscow Patriarchate. Poroshenko signed a *Ukraine-European Union Association* agreement a month after he was elected and sought membership in NATO. Thus, one could say that his policies were unfriendly, even hostile to Russia and favored closer ties with Europe and the United States.

But aren't these decisions something that the democratically-elected head of an independent, sovereign country can rightfully make?

As Petro Poroshenko's five-year term drew to a close, thirty-nine candidates ran in the next scheduled presidential election that was held in March of 2019. Several far-right nationalistic parties (such as *Svoboda*, *Right Sector*, and others) banded together to form a unified bloc on the initial ballot, but garnered only 2.3% of the popular vote, precluding their participation in the run-off election and their poor showing undermines Putin's claim that Ukraine is a hotbed of neo-fascism.

The April runoff election pitted Petro Poroshenko (the incumbent) against Volodymyr Zelensky – a political newcomer. Ironically, Zelensky, ran on an independent platform of promising to end conflict with Russia, and to engage in constructive dialogue with Putin. He soundly defeated Poroshenko, receiving 73% of the vote, and was inaugurated on May 20, 2019.

The 2019 election is viewed by the international community (and internally) as being entirely legitimate. Therefore, on sum, Putin's claim that the Zelensky government is illegitimate and illegal does not hold up since: (1) the 2014 *Revolution of Dignity* was driven by the populace rebelling against a corrupt and unpopular government that betrayed its promises, and (2) Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's current president, was elected by a wide margin in a fair election.

The Ukrainian government is riddled with neo-Nazi fascists and is committing genocide against ethnic Russians: In building his case for war, Putin insists that the current Ukrainian government has been permeated by fascists and neo-Nazis who are committing genocide against ethnic Russians, and insists that the country must be “de-militarized and de-Nazified”. No one seems to really know what that means, but the idea that Ukraine hates Russia has been propagated by Putin for well over a decade and been effective in turning the average Russian against Ukraine (and the West).

Sadly, this includes my own relatives in Moscow who – convinced that Putin is correct - are incensed at the alleged bullying and genocide against ethnic Russians. Through his extremely well-funded, relentless, and effective propaganda, and now-complete suppression of free press, the average Russian citizen is also convinced that the West is evil, immoral, and seeks to destroy Russia. Disinformation works, and Putin is a master of it. Consequently, my Russian relatives are no longer speaking to their Ukrainian counterparts, and vice versa. They simply cannot find any common ground. In conversations with my cousin in Moscow, I have had no luck convincing him of anything. As he recently (and aptly) put it after one of our conversations: “we are breathing different air.”

Ukrainian Neo-Nazism: Siding with Hitler in the second World War is a dark blotch on Ukrainian history, although the main reason for their doing it was because the Nazis promised to grant them independence from the oppression Soviet domination. Once it became clear that Hitler's true intent was to enslave and not liberate, their association with the Nazis was broken off.

Regarding Putin's neo-Nazi/fascist claims about the current Ukraine, while there are undoubtedly white supremacist and neo-Nazi elements in the Ukrainian army, these are also present in most every European country, as well as here in the States. The key questions are: how prevalent is Neo-Nazism/fascism, and what power does it wield?

If it were rampant and supported by a substantial fraction of the population, one would expect this to be reflected in the outcome of elections in which neo-Nazi candidates participate. As already mentioned, there is no evidence for this on a national level since the candidate representing the neo-Nazi/fascist bloc received barely 2% of the popular vote in the last election. Also, Zelensky is Jewish. How likely is he to be receptive to antisemitic neo-Nazism, especially since his own grandparents were murdered by Hitler's forces during the second world war?

One could argue that a poor showing in a national election does not preclude a particular faction having an outsized, disproportionate influence on governance. If a neo-Nazi minority has permeated the Ukrainian military and the government, could it be fueling genocide and steering state policy in a nationalistic/fascist/white supremacist/antisemitic direction? If true, one would predict its influence being evidenced in the implementation of anti-Russian, hyper-nationalistic, and intolerant policies.

Here, the truth is more complicated.

The Ukrainians *are* historically fiercely nationalistic and, understandably, wary of Russian influences. Accordingly, several anti-Russian policies were enacted by the Ukrainian government under both Poroshenko and Zelensky, particularly those aimed at marginalizing the Russian language. Because Russia claims that the separatist movement in the Donbas arose precisely because of Ukrainian governmental oppression of both Russian language and culture, this issue deserves closer examination.

Ukrainian marginalization of the Russian language: During the Soviet years, Russian was the language of governmental administration and public life in every soviet republic, including Ukraine. After 1930, the Soviet policy toward Ukrainian wavered between promotion and suppression. Although Ukrainians were entitled to study and learn the Ukrainian language, the language of formal education was Russian. In truth, most citizens - including my parents and grandparents - spoke both languages.

Since the time of the Euromaidan (2013-2014), however, several laws intended to marginalize the usage of Russian language were adopted by the Ukrainian parliament. Importation of books from Russia was banned in 2017, when it was also decreed that most media broadcasts should be in Ukrainian; the 2017 *Law on Education* established Ukrainian as the language of education and, in some areas (Kherson, Kharkiv), even the status of Russian as a secondary (regional) language was abolished; in January of this year, a law requiring all print media to be published in Ukrainian came into force.

These changes understandably disenfranchised the country's ethnic Russians, especially in the southeastern part of the country where the majority of the population is Russian-speaking. Thus, there is some truth to the claim that the current Ukrainian government seeks to suppress Russian language culture by forcing changes to the law. While it is arguably within the rights of a sovereign country to regulate the official use of language within its borders, it is understandable that these actions are viewed as being hostile by its ethnic Russian population, and by Ukraine's neighbor to the north.

The Azov Battalion: To support his claims about the military being neo-Nazi, Putin often refers to the Azov Regiment. Based in Mariupol, this far-right militia is thought to number approximately 900 fighters. Although it is small by comparison with the size of the Ukrainian army, estimated at 250,000 soldiers with an equal number of reservists, the Azov fighters have been incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard since 2014 and praised by Poroshenko as being "our best warriors." Ultra-nationalists accused of harboring neo-Nazi, antisemitic and white

supremacist ideology, they are partly funded by Ukrainian oligarchs of similar ideology, and led by Andriy Biletsky, who was elected to parliament in 2014.

They also have support from white supremacist organizations in countries outside of Ukraine. According to *Wikipedia*, the members of the Azov battalion come from 22 countries, and include 50 Russian nationals. During the current invasion of Ukraine, they have been the primary unit defending Mariupol and were recently routed and captured during the Russian assault on the Azovstal steel plant.

The relationship between the Azov Regiment and the U.S. has been uneven. Allegedly the first to be trained by our Army beginning March 2015, support was withdrawn 3 months later by an amendment passed by the House of Representatives blocking any aid to the battalion due to its neo-Nazi background. This amendment was removed five months later under pressure from the Pentagon. *Facebook* designated the Azov Battalion as a “dangerous organization” in 2016, but loosened this designation after Russia invaded Ukraine, although it is still banned from using *Facebook* for messaging, advertising and recruiting; in 2018, the U.S. Congress passed a bill banning arms sales to the Azov Battalion, although the effectiveness of this is uncertain since they are part of the Ukrainian military and have certainly shared in the 3 billion dollar bounty of weapons that we have shipped to Ukraine. Subsequent attempts (2019, 2020) by congressmen to designate Azov as a “foreign terrorist organization” (FTO) have thus far failed.

On the other hand, the existence of the Azov battalion and its membership in the Ukrainian military has played a major role in Russia’s propaganda about the neo-Nazi nature of the Ukrainian government and military. Based on several recent analyses, this is an exaggeration. The average Ukrainian values the Azov Battalion for its paramilitary effectiveness, not its ideology and, although it has received disproportionate attention, it represents less than 1% of the Ukrainian military.

There is otherwise little evidence for widespread fascism or neo-Nazism among the Ukrainian population. For example, Andreas Umland, an analyst at the *Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs*, told *Factcheck.Org* that: “Ukraine has a far right like most countries of the world have, but their organizational strength and electoral support are smaller than in many other European countries and in Russia.” He added that there has been an intensive campaign of demonization of Ukraine by Putin because “the defeat of the Nazis is the high point of modern Russian history. It is a major reference point for Russian national identity and...a principal source of Russian pride.”

Ukrainian genocide against ethnic Russians: Regarding the allegation of genocide against ethnic Russians by the Ukrainian army in Donbas, Alexander Hilton, Director of the *Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights at Rutgers University*, writes that Putin’s claims, which are “baseless but not unprecedented,” represent a misappropriation of the term to justify invading Ukraine.

Of the 14,000 people killed in the Donbas region since Putin began fomenting the unrest by arming the separatists, about 3,000 were civilians. The remainder are separatist rebels and Ukrainian soldiers embattled in a war on sovereign Ukrainian territory. Since the separatists are

integrated into the Donbas cities and towns, it is understandable that some civilian casualties will occur as a result of reckless or indiscriminate fighting. This is unfortunate, tragic even, but because the separatists are on the offensive, defensive military action against them does not qualify as genocide and cannot be used to justify the invasion of a sovereign country, even if it is dubbed a “peacekeeping operation” (as done by Putin in February).

Russia filed a lawsuit with the European Court of Human Rights over “war crimes of the Ukrainian army” in the Donbas, describing findings by special committees set up in Donetsk and Luhansk that reported finding the bodies of nearly 300 Russians in a mass grave. To date, there has been no confirmation of this by independent observers. Putin’s claim that Ukraine does not have a right to exist as an independent nation certainly has a genocidal ring to it. And his shelling of residential areas, apartments, hospitals and schools, and the discovery of mass graves in which Russian soldiers have buried civilians is, if not outright genocide, then certainly evidence of major war crimes.

More broadly, is there evidence that the Ukrainian army is committing atrocities targeting ethnic Russians in Ukraine? Going back to his July 2021 essay, Putin insists that the separatists had to take up arms after “the riots that swept through the cities of Ukraine, after the horror and tragedy of 2 May 2014 in Odesa where Ukrainian neo-Nazis burned people alive.”

The May 2, 2014 events in Odesa were indeed tragic. Like Crimea and the Donbas region, Odesa is largely populated by ethnic Russians, who were naturally antithetical to the pro-Maidan demonstrations in Kyiv that sought to depose a government that was favorably inclined towards Russia and Ukrainian Russians. Mostly-peaceful demonstrations by pro-Maidan (Ukrainian) and anti-Maidan (Russian) factions began in Odesa after Yanukovych was ousted in February, and continued into March and April.

On May 2nd, the street fighting grew particularly violent, and included the use of firearms and Molotov cocktails by both sides. There are reports of police officers making little or no effort to stop the violence, and of siding with the anti-Maidan protesters. Following a day of battles, including the torching of an anti-Maidan camp in the center of town by pro-Maidan sympathizers, a group of anti-Maidan protesters were surrounded and forced to take shelter in the five story *Trade Unions House* in the city center adjacent to where their camp had been earlier. The fighting continued, with the anti-Maidan militants on the roof reportedly firing down at and tossing Molotov cocktails into the pro-Maidan crowd below.

What happened next is less certain. One version is that the building was intentionally set on fire by pro-Maidan demonstrators; another is that the building caught fire from the Molotov cocktails tossed from the roof. Either way, hundreds of anti-Maidan militants were trapped within, and forty-two died from smoke and carbon monoxide poisoning, or from leaping out of windows to escape the flames. The local police were slow to respond, and fire crews were kept from extinguishing the fire by the frenzied pro-Maidan crowd.

Regardless of whose side you take, the events of that day were violent, ugly, and rife with mutual accusations, and the consensus is that the Ukrainian government’s response was decidedly lopsided in favor of the pro-Maidan demonstrations. A 2016 report by the UN Human Rights

Office stated that: *“The investigations into the violence have been affected by systemic institutional deficiencies and characterized by procedural irregularities, which appear to indicate an unwillingness to genuinely investigate and prosecute those responsible.”*

The anti-Maidan protesters, who were fervent in their support of Yanukovych and antipathy to the Ukrainian nationalist movement, called for the federalization of Ukraine, i.e. allowing each region of the country to have authority over its own language, education, economy, and culture. This represents a coarse weakening of the national government due to decentralization, and is therefore a precursor to separatism. It is interesting that Putin echoed and supported the anti-Maidan protesters’ demands, since he has no interest in federalizing Russia, instead preferring autocratic centralization of legal and political power in Moscow. He has also provided both military and financial support to the separatist factions.

Putin further claimed that it was “Ukrainian Nazis” that had burned their fellow citizens alive. In truth, the violence in Odesa was the result of a fierce and popular nationalistic movement opposed to the excesses and corruption of the Yanukovych government (and its pivot away from Europe and towards Russia) clashing with an ethnic population that felt rightly wronged by the new post-revolutionary (and, in their eyes, illegitimate) Poroshenko government.

NATO’s Eastern expansion and arming of Ukraine is an existential threat to Russia and must be stopped: As Putin began to accumulate troops and materiel on the Russian border with Ukraine in March of 2021, he issued two principal demands directed at NATO and the United States. The first was that NATO pull back its military infrastructure to its pre-1994 borders. The second was that Ukraine forego membership in NATO, declare neutrality and disarm. These are not new complaints, as Putin has often groused about NATO breaking its promise to Russia to never expand eastward for years, and has frequently objected to our providing military assistance to Ukraine.

Fourteen countries have joined NATO since after the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991; eleven of them formerly members of the Soviet Union-allied Warsaw Pact. Each has done so on its own volition. Their acceptance into the alliance required them to comply with NATO’s criteria for membership, which include promising to uphold democracy and treat minority populations fairly, make progress toward a market economy, keeping military forces under civilian control, and respecting other countries’ sovereignty.

Putin’s claim that NATO broke some kind of official promise to not expand to the East is inaccurate. That idea was based on a phrase uttered by James Baker (our Secretary of State under President George Bush) to Mikhail Gorbachev in February of 1990 during their discussions about the reunification of East and West Germany. At the time, Baker’s statement about NATO not moving “one inch eastward” only referred to their not deploying any non-German forces on the territory of East Germany, not Europe in at large. His hypothetical ‘what if’ helped convince Gorbachev to abide by reunification but was never formalized in any agreement or treaty.

Although NATO’s progressive eastern expansion over the last 30 years did not violate any treaties, if one looks at a map of Europe, it has certainly moved considerably closer to Russia’s Western border and might understandably feel threatening since NATO’s military infrastructure

(troops, weapons, including nuclear) is now on Russia's doorstep. Moreover, from Russia's standpoint, the NATO expansion was done in a way that was, if not offensive to, then at least disregarding of Russia's concerns. But this began over 20 years ago and was largely completed more than a decade ago. Expecting NATO to now pull back to its pre-1999 borders is neither reasonable nor realistic. Putin surely understands that, but it does play well into his messaging about the anti-Russian ambitions of the West.

Putin's second demand - that Ukraine sever its military relationship with NATO and declare neutrality is more understandable. As Putin often notes, although it is structured as a defensive alliance, NATO has taken offensive military actions against several countries since the Cold War ended. These have included naval blockades, enforcement of no-fly zones, air campaigns, and establishment of peace keeping forces in Serbia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Libya. NATO, and especially the United States have also provided Ukraine with arms and have – presciently, in retrospect - helped train its army to withstand a Russian invasion. While the idea of Ukraine invading Russia borders on the absurd (in view of Russia being a nuclear power with a much larger conventional military), one can see how having a well-armed adversary on its southern border that is closely allied with the United States and NATO may be viewed as troublesome.

By way of analogy, imagine if Russia began to arm Canada with billions of dollars of weapons, including missiles, and sent in advisors to train and expand the Canadian army (as Britain has in the Ukraine as part of *Operation Orbital*). Would we have allowed this to continue?

Although the scenario is imaginary, you will probably agree that, had it occurred, it would be both deeply concerning, and likely *not* be allowed to continue. Of course, to make this analogy more balanced, we would have to add that the U.S. military had forcefully and illegally annexed a coastal Canadian province (say, British Columbia) eight years earlier, and has been fomenting separatist unrest against the Canadian government by its native U.S. subpopulation.

Would that not at least somewhat legitimize Canada's seeking military help?

Evaluating Putin's case for war: Based on the information above, Vladimir Putin deserves some credibility on three points:

- First, that NATO has expanded in a way that brought it closer to Russia.
- Second, that NATO (which is seen by Putin as an extension of U.S. power) has helped build a substantial, well-trained and well-armed Ukrainian military, and has funneled billions of dollars of modern weapons to arm it.
- Third, that the internal and foreign policies of Ukraine's current government are antithetical to Russia.

The truth is, however, that while it may not please Putin, NATO has a right to conduct its business as it chooses to, as does Ukraine.

The facts *do not* support Putin's following claims:

- Ukraine somehow 'belongs' to Russia based on history and is therefore not qualified to exist as an independent, sovereign country.

- That the current Ukrainian government is illegitimate and should therefore be overthrown.
- That the Zelensky government is run by neo-Nazis and fascists and is committing genocide against ethnic Russians living within its borders.

Wars of choice – however misguided and illegal - usually have a clear purpose. Our actions in Vietnam were predicated on the domino theory of Communist expansionism. Our invasion of Iraq was justified (incorrectly, in retrospect) by the belief that Saddam Hussein had acquired weapons of mass destruction and was allegedly forming a partnership with *Al Queda* in a way that could lead to terrorist actions against the homeland. The same can be said for our post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan in terms of the intent to prevent it from becoming a haven for anti-American terrorists, and therefore a threat to national security.

In contrast, Vladimir Putin’s latest incursion into Ukraine has the world scratching its collective head. Russia’s war against Ukraine is a war of choice based on selective and biased interpretation of history, and a flagrant violation of international laws and norms of civility.

If Putin believes that Ukrainians and Russians are “one people,” why is he killing thousands of innocent civilians, and doing so with incredible savagery? These actions can only increase Ukrainian anti-Russian sentiment. He assumed that Russian soldiers would be greeted with vodka and pierogi by grateful Ukrainians; instead, they encountered strong resistance and were greeted Molotov cocktails and Javelin anti-tank missiles...miscalculation #1.

If his desire is to weaken NATO and convince it to push back its borders, this war will only strengthen, unify and likely enlarge the alliance (Sweden and Finland are applying for NATO membership, which would only ‘surround’ Russia further). By attacking a sovereign country, Putin has renewed NATO’s sense of purpose and, after being battered by the Trump administration, has given it a new life...miscalculation #2.

If Putin’s true goal is to go down in history as a great leader – a modern-day Czar - wouldn’t he want to make Russia stronger economically and create a society that is admired by the international community? Russia’s own history attests to these aspirations: Peter the Great built St. Petersburg, thereby creating “a window to Europe” back in the 1700s, and fostered education and international relations. He is viewed by historians as being the greatest Russian czar of all time primarily for these reasons, not for his military conquests. Instead, Putin’s brutal invasion of Ukraine have made him a modern-day pariah to much of the civilized world.

By invading Ukraine, Putin will pay a severe economic price by losing its best energy customer (Europe) and depriving Russia of significant revenue. Coupled with the severe sanctions, Russia’s economy will surely worsen and, in the minds of some, may even implode in the years ahead. Miscalculation #3.

Even if he manages to annex additional Ukrainian territory, its maintenance will require significant resources and constant vigilance to quell a native guerilla resistance that will seek to undermine his puppet government. The conflict will fester. His recent destructive actions will take years or decades to undo, and have resurrected the Cold War view of Russia being a dishonest, deceptive and aggressive country with expansionist ambitions. Putin himself has proven to be

entirely untrustworthy by lying repeatedly about: having no intention to invade Ukraine and not targeting civilians and urban infrastructure. He has also denied atrocities committed by Russian troops, absurdly insisting that the numerous corpses left in the streets after Russia withdrew from the region north of Kyiv are not real, and are being faked by Ukrainians.

Putin is also tightening the screws on his own people by squelching internal dissent (according to recent reports, some Russian citizens have been arrested and imprisoned for simply wearing blue and yellow workout clothes, or even fingernail polish); Soviet-style repression is alive and well in Russia. Yet, even as he represses his own people, Putin has managed to increase his own popularity by fanning the flames of patriotism while generating unrelenting propaganda against the West, especially the United States. As my own relatives demonstrate, he has been successful in convincing the Russian people of his false narrative and revisionist approach to history. We can only hope that between the internet, the ubiquity of cameras and cell phones with voice and video apps, and time, the truth will seep out.

What is Putin's strategy? Putin's initial goal was to invade and annex the entirety of Ukraine and make it into a part of the Russian Federation, or at least a compliant puppet state like Belarus. At the time of this writing, Putin's military ambitions have been scaled back to 'liberating' (and likely) annexing the eastern Donbas region and the coastal plain. These are areas in which the majority of citizens are ethnic Russians and in where Russian is the dominant language. Accomplishing this would create a 'land bridge' between Donbas and the Crimea (an area historically called *Novorossiya*, or 'new Russia' based on Russia's annexation of these territories from the Ottomans back in 1774).

The most credible strategy is that Putin will seek to gain as many additional economic resources and territory as he is able to before looking to negotiate an end to this war. The southeastern part of Ukraine is particularly rich in hydrocarbons, which are important for a petrostate such as Russia. On the world stage, Ukraine is also a major producer and exporter of valuable agricultural goods such as potatoes, wheat, and sunflower oil. It also exports various ores and metals such as titanium, mercury, and iron. Acquiring substantial new resources and being able to easily export them by controlling the major ports would have clear strategic and economic benefits for Russia.

For all its vastness, the European (Western) side of Russia is mostly landlocked, with limited access to all but the most northern of seas. Controlling the Ukrainian Black Sea ports (Mariupol, Berdyansk, Yuzhny, Chernomorsk and, possibly, Odesa) would afford easy access to the Mediterranean (and Atlantic). Russia already has a large naval base in the Crimea, but annexing some or all of the major seaports and linking them to the Donbas region would facilitate delivery of resources via road and rail, and export via ship. Also, Russia currently controls (and will certainly try to annex) the Kherson region north of Crimea in order to provide the Crimea with a vitally-needed fresh water source. Needless to say, controlling the eastern and southern coastal areas of Ukraine would utterly cripple it economically.

The question on many people's minds is whether Putin will be able to seize substantial Ukrainian territory. If so, might this not be only the beginning of a Russian pushback against the

West? One Russian official recently admitted that there are also plans to re-take Transnistria, a Russian enclave that is part of neighboring Moldova. A sliver of land adjacent to the Ukrainian border, its capture would be an easy target if Putin manages to annex the much larger and adjacent Donbas and Novorossiia territories.

What lies ahead? The *most frightening* scenario is that Putin extends his aggression to a NATO country like Estonia or Poland, which would invoke Article 5 and almost certainly start a third world war that could escalate into an outcome that is unthinkable in its horror. Some right-wing hawks in the Russian media have floated images of a nuclear holocaust with casual conviction, even humor. But although the average person (and, hopefully, every governmental and military official) understands that this is a suicide scenario in which no one wins, Russia's waving the nuclear card is both dangerous and irresponsible.

I believe (and hope) that this worst-case scenario is unlikely for several reasons:

First, the Russian military has been underwhelming in its performance in the first two months of the war against Ukraine. They were unable to take Kyiv, and were forced to severely scale back the scope of their objectives. Expanding the scope of this war at this time into NATO territory would be a difficult task for the Russian military. Putin understands Article 5 and, as much as he may despise NATO, it is unlikely that he would be willing to start a third world war.

Second, because I can speak Russian, I have gone back and watched several of Putin's press conferences and public pronouncements. He comes across as being ambitious and self-assured, but also quite coherent. He has a sharp, intelligent affect, which is probably why the average Russian is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. He does not appear deluded or mad, although Putin does appear to be increasingly bitter and angry (fueling questions about his psychological stability) and, as of late, his unhealthy (bloated, pale) appearance is spurring rumors that he may have cancer.

The *most likely* scenario is therefore that, if and when the Russian military succeeds at taking over some or all of Donbas and the coast, Putin will wrest whatever concessions he can from NATO and Ukraine before winding down the war with a face-saving exit. He will insist that he has taken out an evil movement in Ukraine, and that we are all better for it and likely mock us for our alarm. He may turn reasonable at some point in an attempt to again be viewed as a citizen of the civilized world. Yet, after all the stories and images of brutality, it's hard to see how the political and economic damage could recede anytime in the near future.

Whether or not he is terminally ill, however, it has become increasingly clear that Putin *is* terminally evil. It's hard to imagine not caring about killing tens of thousands, and displacing millions of innocent civilians, ravaging a neighboring country, and - premising all these actions on a set of lies - becoming a pariah to much of the civilized world. And yet, history is full of similar scenarios and, if 'past is prologue,' as the saying goes, we have good reason to worry.

With that in mind, perhaps the *most favorable* scenario is that Putin is somehow deposed.

The Russian army must be having a difficult time fighting in Ukraine. Many surely have relatives or friends that are Ukrainian, and it's hard to imagine that this war is not deeply distasteful

and troublesome. There is a lot of historic precedent for military coups, but can/will it happen in Russia?

Another powerful faction is the oligarchs, who are losing investments (and yachts) due to the sanctions, although many are allied with, and in some way dependent on Putin's good will. Who will lead them?

And then there are the Russian people, thousands of whom are being jailed for dissent (a penalty of up to 15 years in prison for a journalist who has the audacity to refer to this special military operation as a war), and many of whom (11 million, by some estimates) have close relatives in the Ukraine. Sadly, Putin's extensive propaganda machine appears to be remarkably effective in concealing the truth from everyday Russians and it's hard to lead when you are in the dark. But truth has a way of seeping out with time, and it's hard to believe that Putin's lies will be sustained indefinitely.

Presently, however, Putin's message about the West seeking to destroy Russia is resonating with his people and, sadly, is being aided by our own leaks and disclosures. For example, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's statement that "We want to see Russia weakened to the degree that it can't do the kinds of things that it has done invading Ukraine," or – in an odd twist on the old 'loose lips sink ships' saying - the more recent disclosure that our intelligence helped sink Russia's flagship *Moskva* only play into Putin's messaging about Ukraine being used by the West to weaken and destroy Russia, and that this is, indeed, a war of proxy.

At the same time, the coarseness and brutality of this unjust war is mind-boggling, and the extent, severity and impact of its repercussions in terms of world hunger, economy, and politics have yet to be realized.
