

Opinion – The Rationale of Russia's ‘Special Military Operation’ in Ukraine

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, DEC 22 2022

Russia's war on Ukraine has sparked a variety of debates among scholars in the West. Basically, there seem to be two lines of thought, which can be further subdivided into different themes. The first is that the war is a brutal, unprovoked attack to which the West must respond, by providing Ukraine with the means to resist in the shape of various weapons, including the HIMARS and most recently the US Patriot missile. The second, and the subject of this commentary, is that Russia is fighting a defensive war to prevent further advances of NATO, and the danger of a nuclear strike on Russia, and to assert control over its natural spheres of interest, i.e., the territories of the former Soviet Union.

According to American political scientist John Mearsheimer, “the United States is principally responsible for causing the Ukraine crisis,” He adds further that:

My central claim is that the United States has pushed forward policies toward Ukraine that Putin and other Russian leaders see as an existential threat, a point they have made repeatedly for many years. Specifically, I am talking about America's obsession with bringing Ukraine into NATO and making it a Western bulwark on Russia's border. The Biden administration was unwilling to eliminate that threat through diplomacy and indeed in 2021 recommitted the United States to bringing Ukraine into NATO. Putin responded by invading Ukraine on Feb. 24 of this year.

French scholar, Marlene Laruelle, thinks that the West needs to consider its own role in the current war and repeats the Kremlin's mantra that the war derives from NATO expansion. Added to this second narrative are statements that this is a “normal war” that is not especially brutal and which can be compared to other wars taking place in the 20th and 21st centuries. Military historian Alexander Hill maintains that some Western scholars are taking an emotional stance based on a bombardment of media attention that is not accorded to other wars taking place in Yemen and Africa. The second narrative presupposes that a peace treaty is possible, even if it means forcing Ukraine to relinquish its territory, though the difficulties involved have been elaborated carefully by Eric Levitz and cites a statement from the Royal United Services Institute that a ceasefire is “tactically advantageous to Russia as it would allow the occupants to stabilize the lands they have occupied.

My purpose here is to make a case that the second narrative is deeply flawed, and that there is evidence to back up the claim that this is not a typical war or one linked to NATO expansion or neo-Nazism, but rather one initiated by Moscow and calculated to destroy a sovereign state regardless of civilian losses. It is also one conducted by a terrorist regime that does not engage in traditional diplomacy or its rules.

One can dismiss the various statements of Vladimir Putin, Sergey Lavrov and others early in 2022 that the goal was to de-Nazify and de-militarize Ukraine or that the war was a response to the expansion of NATO, particularly in the period 1999–2004, when its members could be found on the old Soviet western border as well as the inclusion of former Soviet republics Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. From the outset, the primary military goal was to remove a democratically elected government and replace it with one that would either be Russian or fiercely pro-Russian, and to destroy all vestiges of the current state of Ukraine. The initial attack came from the territory of Belarus and focused on capturing the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv.

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Russian optimism in military planning derived from the earlier conflict of 2014 when Russia easily annexed Crimea and imposed separatist regimes in the eastern Donbas. At that time, the Ukrainian army was badly led, corrupt, and inefficient, and loyalty to the provisional government under acting president Oleksandr Turchynov was at best questionable among the residents of eastern and southern Ukraine. Many Ukrainians in these regions opposed the Euromaidan uprising of 2013-14. Later, they were hardly satiated by the presidency of Petro Poroshenko, an oligarch who embraced the Ukrainian nationalist cause yet failed to address the country's economic needs. By 2019, Poroshenko was a very unpopular figure and Ukraine the poorest country in Europe.

Putin may have also gained confidence from the Minsk Accords of 2014, in which Germany and France appeared to acknowledge the legitimacy of the two breakaway republics in Donetsk and Luhansk – leaders of both signed the Accords along with Ukraine and Russia. The Accords forced Ukraine to demilitarize while Russia used the armistice to build up its army.

That Putin has an obsession with Ukraine had been evident for most of his presidency. He has never recognized Ukrainian independence or the very concept of Ukraine as a sovereign state. Rather, Ukrainian independence in his view was granted by Russia after the revolution of 1917 and the formation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic:

This Soviet national policy secured at the state level the provision on three separate Slavic peoples: Russian, Ukrainian and Belorussian, instead of the large Russian nation, a triune people comprising Velikorussians [Great Russians], Malorussians [Little Russians] and Belorussians.

Putin perceives modern Ukraine as a Western creation and the real Ukraine as component part of Greater Russia, along with Belarus. The three East Slavic states are linked, he believes historically, culturally, and linguistically, and united in a common Orthodox religion. But they are all intrinsically Russian, there can be no separate Belarus or Ukraine. Further, the mindset of the Russian leadership is crudely imperial. While the official narratives have focused on the "Great Patriotic War" and Russia's victory over the Nazi hordes, the mind of the Russian president more precisely is in the 18th and 19th centuries, when Russian lands were expanded at the expense of Poland and the Ottoman Empire. Other than Austrian Galicia with its capital Lemberg (Lviv), all Ukrainian lands lay in the Russian Empire. Even Lviv was occupied by the Russian army early in the First World War.

Rather than accept that Ukrainians have unified behind President Volodymyr Zelensky and rejected the Russian invasion, Putin and his Security Council anticipate a lengthy war of destruction to reach their goals, however long it takes. If the Russian armies fail on the battlefield, as they have repeatedly since February 24, 2022, then they intend to destroy Ukrainians per se: through missiles, deprivation of basic needs, deportation of children, massacres of prisoners, and annexation and Russification of its territory.

This war cannot be ended by what might be termed "normal diplomacy," or new Minsk Accords. No negotiations are possible when the leadership of a large country with a massive store of weapons, including nuclear ones, wishes to destroy a smaller one comprising its immediate neighbour.

Ironically, the attack undermines the concept of the Eastern Slavs, since fraternal partners do not destroy each other. Even in the largest conflict in history, the Second World War, the victors did not attempt to eliminate the German people when it ended; or the Japanese at the end of the Pacific War. No matter that the Nazi leaders had tried to destroy European Jewry, Roma, and other victims, there was still a Germany after 1945.

One should add that the leadership in Moscow is made up of former security officials of the Soviet Union, police, and oligarchs. They are linked to almost unimaginable crimes: poisoning their political opponents with radioactive Polonium—sometimes outside the country as well as within—amassing stupendous wealth at the expense of their people, and using social media to expand outrageous narratives about the leaders of Ukraine and their Western allies.

There can of course be counter-narratives about US military raids on various places, the 1999 NATO attack on Belgrade, which outraged many neutrals, the US-led war in Iraq, etc. The world's largest Super Power can hardly be

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held up as a model for world peace and one can acknowledge that. But there was always a stated goal that contained some logic, such as the removal of Saddam Hussein, the need to protect Serbian victims such as Bosnian Muslims or Albanians, or to combat terrorism, which was a preoccupation of Russia in the 1990s too.

The record is sad and riddled with errors but it is not that of a state bent on ethnocide, nor did it detract from the democratic foundations of the United States. Under Putin, Russia has become an authoritarian and repressive state, or what one analyst has termed “hybrid totalitarianism.” One can more realistically compare the sort of ethnic cleansing carried out in Ukraine with the genocide of Armenians in 1915, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the 1995 Srebrenica massacre, and others. These are logical comparisons, based on what we have seen in Russian occupied locations such as Bucha and Mariupol.

The scale of the current war lacks a precedent in the 21st century. Russia is the largest military power in the world in several areas. It has sophisticated weapons. It has the world's largest nuclear arsenal, which Putin and former president Dmitry Medvedev, now Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, have threatened repeatedly to use. Medvedev has also called for the “liquidation of Ukrainian statehood in its current form.” It is also a war in which a leadership expends its troops at will with Russian mortalities running into the tens of thousands. A new draft saw thousands more heading to the borders to avoid conscription.

Ultimately, the Russian army consists of those without means, unable to register in colleges or universities and usually from the regions of the Caucasus or Far East. Their morale is reportedly very low. The real effects of the war are invisible for the most part in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Putin's new conscription order in September led to a mass flight of potential recruits to neighbouring Belarus and Georgia.

The Russian leadership seeks to depopulate and destroy the entity that since 1991 has existed as the independent Ukrainian state, held regular elections with six different presidents to date, has shown the firmest of wills to resist, and believes its future. Ukrainians want to live in Ukraine, not Russia. By what possible argument can this situation be considered a typical war? And the inconceivability of coming up with a solution that can satisfy the desires of Vladimir Putin and his acolytes leaves open only one option: to support Ukraine until it has liberated its lands, whether or not that also signifies a change of regime in Moscow following Russia's defeat or whether it results in a period of political and social chaos for the world's largest country. The alternative is the end of independent Ukraine.

About the author:

David R. Marples is a Research Analyst in the Contemporary Ukraine Program, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and Distinguished Professor of Russian and East European History at the University of Alberta. His books include *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* (2020), *Ukraine in Conflict* (2017), *'Our Glorious Past': Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War* (2014), *Russia in the 20th Century: The Quest for Stability* (2011), and *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (2007).