

Russia's War in Ukraine Points to Another Historical Blunder

Written by Hamid Elyassi

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HAMID ELYASSI, MAR 9 2022

In the wake of Russia's 1996 presidential election and amidst murmurs in some Russian quarters in opposition to continued democratization, it was suggested that the country again faced a choice between repeating past historical blunders and a new path (Elyassi, 1997). Twenty-five years on, the wrong choice may have been made for the Russian people. Putin's 2022 attack on Ukraine betrays a duplicitous political mindset and will reflect badly on Russia. Negating Ukraine's independence on the grounds that it used to be under Tsarist and Soviet domination not only shows double-standards, it denies the right to statehood of many UN nation-states and supposes their re-colonization. Closer to home, it can legitimize separatist movements within the Russian Federation, a barely one hundred-year superstate of reluctant nations some with much older and richer histories and little cultural affinity with Russia.

In this age of international economic and technological competition, Putin's ambition to achieve national grandeur by territorial conquest is anachronistic especially for a country the size of Russia. And his yearning for Russia's past, if not intended to divert attentions from a corrupt and authoritarian rule, points to jingoistic historical fantasy. Because Russia's political history over the past two centuries is the tragic story of missed opportunities of a nation whose immense potentials to join the ranks of advanced countries have been ruined by vainglorious, incompetent and often suppressive rulers.

Having emerged wounded, but victorious from the Napoleonic wars, Tsarist Russia was invited by European powers to decide the future of the continent, but without any understanding of the political realities of the age. During the following few decades, Western states were pursuing industrialization to bring their nations out of the feudal-mercantile age into the age of modern capitalism. In the process, they embarked on intensive colonization to meet the need of their economies for raw materials and markets (Blaut, 1989). Feudal Russia joined the fray but with an obsolete mentality. It waged wars of conquest against weaker neighbors to build a white elephant of an empire with no organic connection with the domestic economy. Tsarist imperial expansionism inflated the ego and paid for the extravagant lifestyle of the ruling elite and supported a top-heavy giant of an army. The cost was imposed on a nation of serfs.

Not for the last time in Russia's history, the giant proved to have 'feet of clay' when, in the Crimean War (1853-6), the Russian army 'failed to defeat the medium-size French and English forces under very mediocre command' (Britannica, N.D.). Neither this, nor the more humiliating defeat in the Russia-Japanese (1904-5) awakened the Tsarist regime to the fact that military superiority was unattainable without supportive political and economic progress.

Russia entered World War I with the same oversized, underperforming army, this time to receive the final blow that brought down the Tsar (Gatrell, 2015). His Bolshevik successors promised to defend and promote the interests of the Russian proletariat under the Marxian banner of "scientific socialism" (See: Stedman Jones, 2018) even though to rationalize socialist revolution in a feudal society, they tampered with the central Marxian principle of historical determinism.

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Still, there were those in Russia and elsewhere who saw the revolution as an opportunity for the feudal, autocratic Russia to enter the modern age and the Bolsheviks' initial moves encouraged this impression. The new rulers launched a modernizing economic plan, not without some ideological compromise (See Rees, 2018), and declared the subjugated nations of the stagnant empire free from its yoke.

Yet, as if entranced by an ancient spell, the socialist regime rapidly changed course. The hinterland colonies were brought back under direct Russian rule by invention of the Russian Federation 'as the transitional form to the unity of all working people' (Lenin, June 1920). And more distant nationalities were effectively recolonized as Soviet "union republics" with the argument that 'backward countries can go over to the Soviet system and through certain stages of development, to communism, without having to pass through the capitalist stage' (Lenin, July 1920), provided that, in effect, they were under Russian rule. The argument not only placed the post-Tsarist Russia on a reverse course, to this day it has been the pretext for many despots to justify their corrupt rule by feigning adherence to the same so-called socialist, "anti-imperialist" ideology.

Over the following seventy years, the Soviet Union emerged as a military giant at the head of a global bloc of states under its suzerainty. For the Russian people, however, this was a mere change of status from exploited serfs in a feudal autocracy to impoverished soldiers of an oppressive, self-styled socialist state. Meanwhile, the Soviet rulers were claiming championship of Marxian ideology, promising freedom and prosperity to the "workers of the world". To the world at large, all they did was to bring a once credible school of economic thought into disrepute. In the process, they turned Russia into a lopsided edifice which outwardly challenged world powers on political and military grounds, while grappling with economic and technological stagnation at home.

The fall of the Soviet Union gave the Russian people the second chance in less than a century to use their country's immense developmental potentials. Realization of these potentials, however, required the catalyst of a rational, democratic political environment. The 1996 presidential election turned out to be the country's last chance to move in that direction. Soon, it was declared that Russian democracy had to conform to 'our history and tradition' (BBC WS, 2005) which, it transpired, meant an autocratic state behind a façade of democracy with vital democratic rights and values removed at the behest of "the strong leader".

Today, Russians are reliving their history except that instead of tsars, or party secretaries and their apparatchiks, their future is being recast in their past by an autocratic president and corrupt oligarchs who are draining the life of the nation from within while pointing to illusory foes beyond the borders. As the Russian President throws down the military and political gauntlet to Western powers, he is presiding over a Third-World type economy increasingly dependent on primary exports with a per capita income which is a fraction of those of advanced economies and below many East European countries. In parts of Russia, people still live in subsistence economic conditions. Meanwhile, in a world in which economic power brings international security and influence, Vladimir Putin harks back to Russia's past to build another empire with a backward-moving economy.

In the first half of the 19th Century, Russia was conquering new lands with the largest European land force which inspired fear in Western nations and forced them into inaction (Hartley, 2016). Two centuries on, while Putin was consolidating his one-man rule at home and putting his international designs into effect, Western powers similarly failed to stand up to him and defend the values they claimed to uphold. They turned a blind eye to Grozny being razed and in Syria, readily overlooked their "red line" against the use of chemical weapons by submitting to Russia's visibly disingenuous promise on behalf of the Syrian dictator (Strobel, 2013). They allowed Putin to embark on colonization of Syria as it destroyed opposition to its regime in the guise of fighting ISIS.

In Europe, Western non-response to the shooting of anti-Russian protesters in Kyiv and the halfhearted censure of annexation of Crimea did not fall short of consent. At the outset of the current Ukrainian crisis, nothing from the West threatened President Putin with serious consequence of blatant disregard for international law. Instead, the Russian President saw before him a divided, leaderless coalition in name only without the will to go any further than appealing to him to restrain his righteous wrath, sending envoys to Moscow and presenting a running commentary on how and when the final blow was to come. Russia's recognition of the separatists' so-called republics, too, brought nothing more than half-hearted sanctions. Even the full-scale invasion of the Ukrainian territories initially failed to arouse a

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robust response except for a few more sanctions, offer of prayers and suggestion of asylum to the Ukrainian president – presumably to make the decapitation of a sovereign state quicker and less gruesome to watch. The belated sanctions, needed at the start of the crisis, came only after Ukrainians demonstrated their indomitable will to fight with or without outside help.

Mr. Putin's argument that invasion of Ukraine is to stop NATO's eastward expansion may convince the gullible among his supporters, but to the rest of the world, it is only a hollow pretext for an act of aggression, which even now, seems to have backfired. Invasion of Ukraine, alongside the fear of renewed Sovietization (Radio Free Europe, 2021) can only alert Russia's near and far neighbors to the need for outside military protection regardless of the price. There is already 'Germany's dramatic reversal on defense' (Kirby, 2020) while even traditionally neutral nations are exploring closer relations with the Western military alliance (Wieslander & Skaluba, 2022).

If Putin expected Ukrainians to welcome his invasion, or cower and surrender to his soldiers, it has not happened. This is most likely because, not for the first time in history, an autocrat has fallen victim to his own version of reality shared by those around him. The invasion has done the people of Ukraine a hard to forget injury, but regardless of the outcome, it will do the Russians a more lasting harm. If this military adventure fails to reach its objectives, Russia will be a humiliated pariah state on the fringes of world economic and political power, needing a patron – perhaps China. And if it succeeds, it will be the beginning of the old story of turning Russia into a giant with the clay feet soon to crumble from within – unless those in charge wake up to the realities and imperatives of their time.

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