



## The invasion of Ukraine

On 25th of February Russia invaded Ukraine. It was officially announced as a “special military operation” and estimated to last 5 days.<sup>1</sup> Possibly that estimate was based on the duration of a previous invasion of a neighbouring country, Georgia, in 2008 [1]. At any rate it is lasting a great deal longer, continuing with undiminished ferocity, without any significant interruptions of hostilities.

We shall not dwell on details of casualties, both military and civilian, loss of ordnance, numbers of shells and missiles fired, perpetration of atrocities etc. After the first few days of conflict, reports became dominated by propaganda and it became extremely difficult to form a reliable impression of events. Nevertheless, one could still apply Pólya’s methods of plausible inference [2] in order to reach a somewhat objective assessment of the progress of the war. In a nutshell, Ukraine’s resistance has been far greater than one might have imagined from the numerical disparities of the resources on each side, but Russia is making slow but steady progress. The work of commentators is hampered by the difficulty of knowing what are Russia’s ultimate objectives.

The invasion is a clear violation of the so-called Budapest Memorandum—the *Memorandum on security assurances in connexion with Ukraine’s accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons*, signed on 5 December 1994 by Ukraine, the Russian Federation, United Kingdom and the USA. But that violation is perhaps no worse than that of the *Joint Declaration on the question of Hong Kong*, signed at Beijing on 19 December 1984 by China and the UK, which has being egregiously impugned by the Hong Kong National Security Law and other actions before and since. Clearly these international treaties are not worth very much.

### Why is the Russian army making such slow progress relative to initial expectations?

The army appears to be in a poor state, despite large defence allocations. Some of this may be due to disorder and corruption after the fall of the Soviet Union. Ever since then there have been reports of accidents, such as transport aircraft crashing because they were fueled with a lower grade than required, and the prominent loss of the nuclear submarine Kursk in 2000. Disorder could mean poor discipline resulting in a lack of maintenance of ordnance; corruption could range from outright

embezzlement of military funds to the unofficial sale, at all levels, of weapons, fuel and other supplies to third parties. Substitution of specified materials by inferior grades (e.g., of tyres for military vehicles) has also resulted in problems.

The army appears to be poorly trained, again at all levels, and what training there is is old-fashioned and rooted in obsolete practices. Furthermore, organization is heavily top-down, with minimal expectation of personal initiative at any level. In contrast, modern Western armies reduce as much as possible to protocols, sets of instructions and checklists, which are drilled into ordinary soldiers; the personal brilliance of the commanding officer is only needed for exceptional circumstances that cannot be answered by following drill. Field commanders are expected to show great personal initiative. When things started to go badly in the field the Russian response was to send generals to the front, where several have been killed. Many actions, such as the use of non-encrypted communications, and cellphones (allowing GPS coördinates to be intercepted) are redolent of rank amateurism. One has the impression that the Russian army cannot adapt strategically and tactically to complex modern warfare combining many different kinds of weapons. What success they are having seems to be mainly due to massive conventional artillery bombardments.<sup>2</sup>

Logistics appear to be remarkably weak, even down to the lack of pallets for moving supplies, which renders everything very cumbersome.

Finally there is the problem of the Russian mentality. It is noteworthy that in the past (e.g., in the Napoleonic wars), many of the top military commanders were foreigners. Georgians played a particularly prominent rôle, especially in view of their small population. Perhaps the only time when the entire Russian state had a clear direction was under Stalin, who was Georgian. The nearest Russian word for “plan” is *замысел*, which is closer in meaning to velleity rather than suggesting a high degree of volition and resolute action.

The initial order to invade may have been based on poor advice. One recalls Zhdanov’s advice to Stalin in 1939 that the Finns would collapse easily. The USA also seems to have misread the situation, offering to evacuate President Volodymyr Zelensky a couple of days after the invasion began. He refused and stayed to fight.

<sup>1</sup> <https://tass.com/pressreview/1410663>

<sup>2</sup> And, perhaps, to the legendary resilience of the Russian soldier [3,4].

While Russia's opponents in this conflict are gloating over its apparent discomfiture, we would do well to remember that large empires battling puny foes often seem to arrive at such a situation. A good example is the start of the Boer War in 1899. As Philip Guedalla wrote, "... the country reeled, and its European neighbours could be heard tittering at the discomfiture of a large Empire by a few determined amateurs" [5]. But as things progressed, "the immense, if slightly inaccessible, resources of the British Empire came gradually into play ... the slow machine of war creaked painfully towards the inevitable British victory over an agile but insubstantial enemy" [6]. Hence one should not be too sanguine about the ultimate outcome.

Another thought worth bearing in mind is that military incompetence seems to be intrinsic to armies [7], hence we should not be surprised when we observe it in action.

### What will happen now?

There has been a relatively feeble response from the West to the invasion but that is nothing new. One recalls the invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) by Italy in 1935. The League of Nations (predecessor of the United Nations), of which Italy was also a member, lined up bravely. Fifty countries, led by Britain, condemned the aggressor. Sanctions were applied promptly but collective action was thwarted by France. The invasion of Tibet by China in 1950 and consolidated in 1959 is a closer parallel because of the invader's recourse to arguments that Tibet was historically part of China, recalling those made now by Russia with respect to Ukraine. In that case, condemnation did not go beyond censure in the UN General Assembly in 1959 for China's disrespect for human rights. Abkhazia's secession from Georgia in 1992–3 with presumed Russian help attracted little international interest.

Russia is now subject to severe sanctions by the West. But sanctions usually end up strengthening those to whom they are applied, by forcing them to become more self-sufficient. Hence they promote ingenuity and innovation. One recalls a similar phenomenon in Rhodesia during its decade following the unilateral declaration of independence (UDI); during that time the country was far more prosperous and successful than present-day Zimbabwe.

Furthermore, as with the invasion of Abyssinia, collective action has been weakened, this time by what has been called the *Schröderization* of Western politicians, named after former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder who unprecedentedly entered the

commercial world after he stepped down as Chancellor in 2005; latterly he has been chairman of the Russian oil company Rosneft, and of Nord Stream, the company promoting a new gas pipeline from Russia to Germany.

The war could drag on for a decade or more—cf. Afghanistan. It is a tragedy for Ukrainians. The miseries that many are already experiencing recall those of the Thirty Years' War drawn by Jacques Callot in his *Les Misères et les Malheurs de la Guerre*; commenting on Caillot's drawings, Huxley describes some of the victims of military outrage—"peasants who had been robbed of everything down to their means of livelihood, ruined artisans, destitute shop-keepers and professional men. For a time they managed to subsist on carrion and grass. Then they died; or else, if they met with soldiers from either camp, they were killed—not for what they had, for they possessed nothing; just for fun ... the habit of committing atrocities had developed a general taste for atrocities" [8]. It is a sobering thought that much of the world now spends its leisure time playing computer games based on simulated killing and other atrocities.

### Is there any merit in the Russian viewpoint?

"The farther one travels south from Moscow the country becomes more and more undulating" writes Barnes Steveni [9]; "in passing through this part of Russia one's eyes are gladdened by the sight of vast plains covering thousands of thousands of acres of corn ... This is Little Russia the Blessed, the beautiful Ukraine ... What would Russia be without Ukraine? It would be England shorn of all that beautiful land south of the Thames; for Little Russia, the Crimea, and the Caucasus are the gardens of the Tsar's dominions". Scots may well feel that England has a similarly possessive attitude to their country.

Admittedly, the Ukrainian sense of nationhood is a relatively new phenomenon that essentially emerged after the 1848 Spring of Nations, whereas Tibet was independent for hundreds of years, and Ethiopia for thousands of years. Also of historical interest is the way that the Treaty of San Stefano that followed the Russian victory over Turkey in 1877–8 was substituted by the Treaty of Berlin, much less favourable to Russia, after pressure from the Great Powers, especially Britain; this created enduring distrust of the West. Perhaps it was such distrust that ultimately prevented the *rapprochement* that seemed so attainable in the closing years of the last century, when Russian membership of NATO was being mooted.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See ref. 9 further background.

### Could anything positive emerge?

Some of the infrastructure that has been at least partially destroyed, most notably the Azovstal steelworks in Mariupol (Figure 1), was long overdue for replacement. Ukraine suffered from considerable

corruption, ranking 117th out of 180 in 2020—Russia was ranked 129th.<sup>4</sup> One would hope that Ukraine will “build back better” [10], but without eliminating corruption the outlook is fairly bleak.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1. The Azovstal steelworks in Mariupol, Ukraine. After the fall of the Soviet Union it became the property of a Ukrainian oligarch, Rinat Akhmetov, and suffered from a lack of modernizing investment. Prior to its destruction in the conflict it was heavily polluting and extremely wasteful of energy.

Venal interests will likely favour a massive influx of Western capital if Ukraine retains its independence. It might even become a member of the EU. On the other hand financial and trade links between Russia and the West have been largely severed by sanctions. One recalls that it took the 1917 revolution to reverse the policy of what was, in effect, colonization of Russia by Western capital, the policy favoured by Witte. Such colonization again proceeded apace after the fall of the Soviet Union, but has now been arrested.

If Russia is to survive it also needs to eliminate corruption and vigorously foster indigenous talent and innovation, which seem to have been sadly neglected in the last thirty years. It may well be that Russia’s lack of a

plan is now operating to its advantage, given the present extreme world instability [11].

In his 1952 BBC Reith Lectures, Arnold Toynbee pointed out that the European concept of the nation state, with its rigid cultural delineations, is alien to much of the rest of the world. Peaceful coexistence of many different nationalities is the norm; such societies, favouring coöperative ties [12], should be resilient to adversity and need only minimal government.

Such a goal would also be worth striving for in the West. Most European countries are in the course of becoming multinational through large-scale immigration during recent years. At the same time they are becoming less democratic. This is well illustrated by the way that

<sup>4</sup> [https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/CPI2020\\_Map-globalindex.pdf](https://images.transparencycdn.org/images/CPI2020_Map-globalindex.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> In 2021 US President Joe Biden ruled out Ukrainian membership of NATO unless corruption was tackled.

massive urban construction projects tend to be forced through despite strong local opposition.<sup>6</sup> For the private citizen, whether his or her home is destroyed by an artillery shell or an oligarch's demolition man's wrecking ball may make little practical difference.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the proposed demolition of Millwall Football Club's stadium to make way for a large-scale housing development (B. Gartside, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 2022).