

# STRATEGIKA

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Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

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## THE RUSSIAN WAY OF WAR

IN THIS ISSUE

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# The Crusade against Ukraine: Eurasia's Last Medieval Power at War

By Ralph Peters

The Russian-Orthodox jihad in Ukraine adheres uncannily to the patterns of campaigning and giving battle that have defined the Russian way of war since Peter the Great fielded his empire's first modernized army and defeated the Swedish warrior-state of Charles XII at Poltava in 1709. Today's pretender to the throne of the czars, Vladimir Putin, has introduced a few new tools (such as drones) but no new behaviors. The list below of tactical and operational characteristics is as reliable as the Russian taste for vodka. Our misunderstanding of Moscow's latest aggression is not about hypersonic missiles or the massive deployment of land mines, but about a pre-modern state that can reach into space, a slumbering cult ever awaiting a prophet's call, and a friendless frontier land with a sense of divine purpose so enduring it shapes the worldview of atheists.

The date that continues to deform the *Russkaya dusha'* or Russian soul isn't 1917, or 1941, or 1991, but 1453, when Byzantium, the "Second Rome," weakened by the assaults of other Christians, fell to the Muslim Turks, inspiring a struggling duchy far to the north to assume the title of the "Third Rome" and the duty to recover all that had been lost over centuries.

We smirk at Putin's counter-factual interpretation of history, but we would be wiser to pay attention. He's telling us precisely who he is and who his subjects are. We merely roll our eyes because that's far easier than attempting to grasp the mythologized spiritual landscape of a population that looks more or less like us, but responds to events as souls from another cosmology.

Russian war crimes in eastern Ukraine should surprise no one. We see Ukrainians as patriots fighting desperately for their freedom. The Russians see separatist rebels and heretical apostates. We see a struggle to defend *de jure* sovereignty. Putin sees yet another uprising in a centuries-long chain of rebellions against Moscow's entitlement to rule the steppes. We imagine a resolution of this crisis within the framework of twenty-first-century diplomacy. Putin (like Stalin and many a czar) believes that the fiction of a Ukrainian identity must be exterminated. The rapes, torture, looting, and wanton slaughter in Ukraine are not lamentable corollaries but means to an end.

Nor should Russian campaign and battlefield traits bewilder us. They're an inheritance from a culture not only unchanging but unchangeable.

Here are a few of the consistencies:

*Unpreparedness.* Russian forces have rarely entered a conflict with a well-prepared military. Initial reverses consistently revealed hollow forces, faulty arms, poor training, incompetent leadership, and overconfidence. While Putin's Russia may be the worst grab-ocracy in all of that benighted land's history, extensive corruption



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has never been absent—it's a primary tool of state control, for creating dependencies. Thus, again and again, startling deficiencies have had to be redeemed with an appalling (to us) sacrifice of lives.

Yet, the Russians have also shown unexpected resilience and a knack for recovering as wars drag on. Awful at short wars, Russians have achieved "impossible" victories in longer conflicts, as the sycophants are cast aside and the capable rise to command. For example, the Red Army's catastrophic losses in the first months of the Great Patriotic War (World War II) should have finished Stalin's regime. But under the pressures of war, a terror-crippled military whose scrawled plans were laughably inept, managed by mid-war to produce solidly professional staff work that won battles. By the closing phases of the war, Red Army plans were the professional equal of those in Western armies and won campaigns. In war, Russians lose and learn. We have already seen the pattern in Ukraine, albeit still at an early stage.

The postwar pattern, too, is consistent: Earnest reforms are implemented and real improvements are made, but over time the reform impulse dissipates and the military bureaucracy reverts to its traditional apathy and thievery. The closest thing to an exception from the post-Napoleonic period to today was the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, when post-Crimean War reforms still retained some effectiveness. Despite superior Ottoman armaments, such as Krupp artillery and American-designed rifles, the Russians reached the outskirts of Istanbul and were halted only by threats of intervention on the Ottoman's behalf by European powers. On the other hand, reforms in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 did not have adequate time to recast the force before the outbreak of a far greater war in 1914 and the Russian dash to disaster at Tannenberg.

*Clumsy on offense, stalwart on defense.* On the attack, Russian forces are stiff, yet unsteady, and readily paralyzed by surprises (as we saw on the outskirts of Kyiv in the present war's first days). They rely on mass and the readiness to suffer "intolerable" casualties. In World War II, a prevalent comment was "*U nas naroda mnoga*" ("We have a lot of people."). Heartless it may have been, but that attitude got them to Berlin.

On the other hand, Russian soldiers over the centuries have shown themselves to be stalwart and steady on the defense when led with even marginal competence. We are witnessing that in Ukraine, as a "broken" Russian military nonetheless continues to prosecute an uninspiring war doggedly. Millions of land mines help, but, even if draconian punishments are part of the equation, Russian troops continue to man their defenses and will not be vulnerable to mass losses until they are displaced from their fortifications in disorder.

The fatalism and resolution of Russian infantry on the defense led to Frederick the Great's notable—and bloody—defeats at Zorndorf (1758) and Kunersdorf (1759), and the Russians were the toughest enemy Frederick faced. At Prussia's low point, Cossacks rode through the streets of Berlin, previewing repeat visits in the future.

From Napoleon and his crippling "victory" at Borodino (1812), through the frustrated Japanese plan for a lightning triumph at Port Arthur (1904), to the comeuppance of Hitler and his generals at Stalingrad (1942–43), the cost of underestimating the stubbornness of Russians on the defense has been agony at the least, a catastrophe at the worst.

The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 is particularly instructive: With superior training and equipment, shorter lines of communication, fierce confidence, and clear objectives, Japan expected to knock out Russia's slovenly Far Eastern forces swiftly, seizing Port Arthur in a *coup de main*. Instead, the Russians defended the city and its harbor for months, inflicting irreplaceable casualties on the Japanese. Port Arthur eventually fell, but the Japanese then faced a painfully costly, incomplete victory at Mukden that left Japan broke and almost bankrupt of manpower. The ensuing, American-brokered peace left neither side satisfied, guaranteeing that the initial assault on Port Arthur would not be the last Japanese surprise attack in the Pacific theater.

*Reliance on massive firepower.* Drastic losses in the early, botched phases of Moscow's wars consistently lead decision-makers to turn to firepower: artillery and now airpower (in one form or another). Russia's first gunners were European mercenaries, present in Muscovy from at least the sixteenth century onward, and only under Peter the Great did Russia begin to methodically develop its "native" artillery arm. Ironically, the professionalization of the artillery advanced because officers of noble birth—the handsomely uniformed

dilettantes—disdained the dirty, sweaty work of the gun crews, leaving gunnery to the untitled but ambitious and competent. The same applied to engineers, who would form another island of professionalism in a sea of mediocrity. Young noblemen wanted to serve in elite cavalry regiments or, at least, infantry regiments of the best lineage. Artillery and engineer officers needed to prove their worth.

This tradition of strong artillery and competent engineers is manifest in Ukraine today. Russian targeteers need not be up to Western standards of prissiness (we want the Ukrainians to fight politely, of course); on the contrary, the unbounded readiness to inflict destruction on anything or anyone within range is a great advantage for any military power—despite our ahistorical insistence otherwise.

*Poor command and control, weak coordination.* Russian deficiencies—and they are grave—in these areas are products of rivalries, distrust, and fear. The atmosphere of trust taken for granted within Western armies simply does not exist in Russian ranks. Officers do not know who they truly can trust, if anyone. The officer who acts on his own initiative becomes the scapegoat for those who wait too long to act. The mindset is difficult for an American officer to grasp—rather than chafing at constricting orders, Russian officers crave them.

The Russian vision for an effective military is stuck in the eighteenth century, where clockwork drills hoped to produce military automatons. Showpiece exercises, with an emphasis on scripts and rigid timetables, may provide impressive visuals for foreign observers and propaganda clips, but they do not build capable modern units and formations as free-play exercises and rigorous gunnery practice do.

Nonetheless, we can expect to see Russian forces improve their combat coordination under the pressures of wartime. Just as the Soviet Army of 1945 was not the one of 1941, so too, if the Ukraine war continues, the Russian combat forces of 2025 will not be those of 2022.

Time is on Russia's side, not ours.

*Poor intelligence.* Those responsible for Russia's military intelligence completely missed Japanese preparations for war in 1904; they misread German dispositions in 1914; they utterly misread Finnish determination in 1939 (as they did with Ukraine in 2022); terrified of annoying Stalin, they closed their eyes to Nazi Germany's impossible-to-hide preparations for a multi-front invasion; they underestimated American resolve and suffered the propaganda defeat of the Berlin Airlift; they repeated their underappreciation of American grit in the Cuban Missile Crisis; they expected a quick win in Afghanistan; and they wildly erred in predicting the NATO response to Ukraine.

It may seem incredible that the state (or the succession of states imposed upon the Russian people) that pioneered mass surveillance and political terror—the only fields in which Russia anticipated Europe—should have failed so consistently to provide warnings of foreign attacks, but it's readily explicable: Whether we speak of Ivan the Terrible's *oprichniki*, a merciless forerunner of the Soviet Union's terror executors; of the Romanov-era *Okhrana* secret police (whom we can also thank for "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," Russia's most enduring work of fantasy fiction); or of the Soviet Cheka'/NKVD/MGB/KGB and Putin's FSB, Russia's overwhelming security concern always has been the suspicion, detection, and suppression of domestic dissent. Military intelligence got the scraps, the leftovers. Today, the assets of the GRU—military intelligence—may appear extensive, but they're second-rate, bureaucratized to near-uselessness, and (as we have seen in Ukraine) whoppingly ineffective.

The timeless paranoia of Russian leaders and the relative weight accorded to various intelligence disciplines were perfectly encapsulated by Stalin's continued purging of his most-talented military officers as German tanks lined up on Russia's newly demarcated western border in 1941.

Paradoxically, the great danger for us is not the risk that Russian military intelligence will get things right, but that it will get some grave strategic issue tragically wrong.

*Ruthlessness.* The Soviet massacre of between fifteen and twenty thousand Polish officer POWs at Katyn and other sites early in the Great Patriotic War shocked even the Germans. For the Russians, it was common

sense. Crucial to the Russian way of war is the determination to win at all costs, to shy from no barbarism, and it always includes eliminating foreign elites. In comparison, the United States no longer has a way of war, only a checklist for operating under the scrutiny of a gotcha! media. We wish to wage war morally. For Russian leaders the only immorality is to lose.

\* \* \*

Above all this, and crucial, is Russia's deeply ingrained sense of a special destiny that elevates Russianness and assigns it a mission to expand, a physical and metaphysical imperialism. Russia is an aggressor state and has been one for half a millennium, profoundly convinced that its way is the sole right way, whether under reforming czars or reactionaries, Soviets or "new" Russians. To a degree today's Western think-tank caste simply cannot imagine, let alone accept, Russia's behavior in Ukraine is shaped by a religious imperialism and secular evangelism that have not progressed beyond the Medieval, a faith that never had a Reformation and a social order that never had a Renaissance. Only during Europe's Enlightenment did Russian rulers begin to impose a selective veneer of Western practices, and the instigator of that, Peter the Great, was interested in utility, not ethics. Nor did modernity make the slightest inroads with the general population, which remained mired in servitude, ignorance, and obscurantist religion that preached passive obedience and the virtues of suffering. The Soviet era merely secularized the vocabulary. Russia's metaphysical landscape is stuck in the Middle Ages. With smartphones.

A few years ago, an academic whose experience of conflict seems to have been a few faculty spats, wrote a book labeling the United States a "Crusader state." The notion was laughable. Crusaders are driven by uncompromising zeal (not necessarily incompatible with self-interest) and will go to any length to serve their god or their secular obsession. The only thing we uncompromisingly forced upon the populations our military recently visited was a great deal of money—which further corrupted the societies we meant to reform. Crusaders? We knelt—literally—before the shrines of our enemies and dreaded offending their faith in the slightest manner. Our sojourns in Kabul and Baghdad were hardly equivalent to the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099.

As for the Russians, their sense of destiny, of righteousness, of entitlement, of, yes, divine duty more closely resembles jihad in its purest, cruelest form than it does the mixed-motive Crusades of Medieval Europe. The single thing Russians share with the most-sincere of the Christian Crusaders is the conviction that any act is acceptable if it furthers a divine destiny.

We fall back on a few clichés from Russian history, primarily the scars left by the Mongol or Nazi invasions. This wildly misses the point that, far more often, the Russians were the invaders. Nor were they genteel guests.

From the sixteenth century onward, Russia fought routine wars of expansion in every direction—although the fiercest were waged against Turks and Tartars, the former the power that held Byzantium, the Second Rome, captive; and the latter the remnants of the Mongol yoke.

The wars with Catholic Poles or Lutheran Swedes, Balts, and Germans, were also intensified by the grip of faith. Polish Counter-Reformation Catholicism was all but a different religion from Eastern Orthodoxy's dour cult of suffering that still shapes today's Russian mentality.

Even if Putin does not really believe in religion, his view of the world and his mission is shaped by it. The Soviet era did not abandon that sense of destiny but merely substituted other gods and commandments. The endless debate over whether Russia is European or Asian misses the target entirely. Russia is neither. Russia is *Russian*.

Of course, all this is mystical nonsense to sober-minded Westerners. And it *is* mystical. But the horror in Ukraine isn't nonsense. Putin genuinely believes that he is doing the right thing, that he is serving his god—even if he doesn't believe any god exists. However out of kilter his facts may be, Putin is captivated by a deep sense of history—mythical as well as mystical. The Russian sense of history is sweeping and grand . . . Hegelian. We are the children of Dale Carnegie: The past is past, get on to the next sale. Win friends and influence people.

This recurring and now reenergized Russian higher-purpose imperialism is fully in play in Ukraine, as is a long, brutal history. Even Ivan the Terrible saw as-yet-unconquered Ukraine as a Russian entitlement, and Muscovy spent the next two centuries subduing it—facing down two dozen major Cossack revolts, the fiercest of which came as close to Moscow, as did the recent Wagner hall-of-mirrors insurrection. During the same historical period, Russia fought nearly constant wars against the Ottoman Turks, most on Ukrainian soil (those wars would, of course, continue down to the Great War and its immediate aftermath).

Of vital importance to understanding current events is that tradition of Cossack and Ukrainian resistance to Moscow. In those centuries of Russia's struggle against the Ottomans, the ancestors of today's Ukrainians sometimes sided with the Turks against the Russians (or Poles), ever intent on preserving their independence from the encroaching power of the moment—while Russia saw the same vast steppes as an entitlement.

For us, Putin's invasion of Ukraine is the violation of a sovereign state. *For the Russians, the war in Ukraine is the belated suppression of yet another Cossack uprising that began a decade ago on the Maidan in Kyiv, another traitorous rebellion in the long tradition of Ukrainian resistance, from Bohdan Khmelnytsky, to Nestor Makhno, to Zelinski.* (As often has been the case, rival Cossacks are fighting on both sides.)

The depth of the struggle grew still more profound as the Ukrainian branch of the Orthodox Church has separated from the bellicose, anti-Kyiv Moscow Patriarchy (generally, Ukraine is Roman Catholic in the west, Orthodox in the east). Thus, traitorous rebels became heretical apostates, as well. And we can't understand why Putin doesn't just accept defeat. Stop the reflexive mocking and listen to what Vladimir Putin says. Facts are irrelevant. What matters is what those at war believe.

We are not witnessing an anomaly but a reinvigorated tradition, a condition of existence. Russian oligarchs may have splendid yachts and European mansions (as did many a czarist-era nobleman), but their toys do not make them modern or Western. Romantic admirers of Russia's contributions to the arts miss the point that the DNA of those achievements was exterminated in the Gulag and—relevant here—not one of the artistic disciplines in which Russian authors or composers excelled was native to Russia—which remains a copy-cat culture, not a creative one. Heirs to endless grievances, a frustrated destiny, and ferocious envy of Western success, Russians can find neither peace nor place in the post-modern world. Historical time is out of synch between Moscow, Brussels, and Washington. In Ukraine, we are not opposing a contemporary power. We face a sullen people trapped in the Middle Ages and led by yet another false messiah.



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## The Russian Way of War

By Peter R. Mansoor

Russia, as with all nations, cannot escape its history, geography, and demography. These three factors have influenced its way of war from its earliest days. Russia has fought scores of conflicts in the past millennium, and since 1700 the great Bear battled four major invasions (the Great Northern War, the Napoleonic Wars, World War I, and World War II), in the end winning three of them convincingly. The Poltava campaign in 1709 left the Swedish Army in ruins; Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 ended with Tsar Alexander I's army in Paris; and the German invasion of the Soviet Union (of which Russia formed the major part) in 1941 ended with the Red Army in Berlin. Only the First World War resulted in outright defeat, and that was due to an internal revolution which overthrew the existing regime and brought Vladimir Lenin's communists to power.

Russia has used its geographic depth, forbidding climate, and large population to overcome its most existential adversaries. Peter the Great lost a major battle at Narva in 1700, only to modernize his army and decisively defeat Swedish forces under Charles XII, already suffering from one of the most severe winters in Russian history, at Poltava nine years later. Tsar Alexander I and his battlefield commander, Mikhail Kutuzov, likewise traded space for time as Napoleon's stronger Grande Armée attacked into the depths of Russia in the summer of 1812. Sickiness and desertion plagued Napoleon's army, as well as the inability to haul sufficient supplies to keep the soldiers fed. By the Battle of Borodino on September 7, the initially inferior Russian forces outnumbered their adversaries. Although Napoleon won the battle, he lost a third of his remaining forces in the process. The Russian Army lost even more, but Kutuzov could replace his casualties as he was fighting on home ground. He then ceded the capital city of Moscow to Napoleon and the Grande Armée, which waited for an offer to negotiate a truce that never came. Faced with the oncoming Russian winter and with Moscow in ashes, Napoleon retreated, losing most of his remaining army on the way back to the border.

For the Russian Army, World War I began inauspiciously with an ill-fated invasion of East Prussia that ended with a disastrous defeat at Tannenberg. The Russian Army, massive but ill-armed, trained, and supplied, fought for several years before cumulative losses led to mutiny at the front and revolution at home. The only bright spot had been the Brusilov Offensive in eastern Galicia in the summer of 1916, which decimated the Austro-Hungarian Army, convinced Romania to join the Entente Powers, and forced the German Army to relax its death grip on Verdun. The commander of the Russian forces in this offensive, General Aleksei Brusilov, used his artillery so skillfully that his German opposite number, Colonel Georg Bruchmüller, would adopt similar techniques when planning the German Spring Offensive on the Western Front in 1918. Indirect firepower has been a strength of the Russian way of war ever since.

World War II began quite differently for the Red Army, with an unexpected German invasion that by the end of the year had killed or wounded a million soldiers, with another three million languishing in German



POW camps. (Most of them would end up dead, too.) But once again, the depths of Mother Russia, the brutal climate, and a seemingly inexhaustible supply of manpower saved the nation from defeat. The Soviet state called up its reserve forces, transferred the Siberian Army led by General Georgy Zhukov to the west, and mobilized the nation for war. Zhukov's legions defeated the German Army in front of Moscow, and tens of thousands of Germans froze to death in the ensuing brutal winter.

After another blow in the summer and fall of 1942 left German forces arrayed along the Volga River and deep in the Caucasus, the Red Army counterattacked, surrounding the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad. From that point until the end of the war in May 1945, the Red Army showcased its way of war: Deep battle made possible by enormous armored juggernauts (supplied by tens of thousands of American-made trucks), defensive lines dozens of miles deep seeded with millions of mines, and massive amounts of artillery and rockets that overwhelmed attacking enemy forces and made possible penetrations of static defensive positions, all supported by excellent battlefield intelligence and *maskirovka* (deception) operations. The Red Army defeated the German summer 1943 offensive at Kursk, destroyed Army Group Centre in 1944, and crushed final resistance in Berlin in April and May 1945. (Stalin, when asked if he was satisfied with the outcome, replied sardonically, "Tsar Alexander made it all the way to Paris.")

Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year initiated its first major conventional war since then, and it has proven that the Russian military of today is a pale shadow of its former self. Outnumbered Ukrainian forces halted Russian armored columns short of Kyiv and then forced them to retreat. The Ukrainians, taking a page from the Russian *maskirovka* playbook, deceived their opponents time and again, leading to successful counter-offensives near Kharkiv and Kherson. The firepower equation has proven roughly equal, with Ukrainian use of precision munitions (provided by the West) making up for its lack of numbers. The Russian Army has proven more capable in defense lately, creating defensive lines that mirror those that stymied the Wehrmacht in the Battle of Kursk in July 1943. Whether it will win remains debatable, as two of the three systemic factors that have enabled Russian victories in the past (geography and climate) no longer favor Russian forces, and the third factor (a more numerous population) might not provide the advantage that it once did, absent an industrial base that can provide the weapons and munitions required to sustain large numbers of forces at the front.

But don't count the Russians out just yet, for they time and again have proven their ability to suffer and survive. Undoubtedly, those two qualities are also part of the Russian way of war.



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# Ukraine and the Russian Way of War

By Kiron K. Skinner

There are continuities between Putin's invasion of Ukraine and customary Russian approaches to the use of armed conflict in advancing the state's interests. These are important for understanding the contemporary conflict between Kyiv and Moscow. They invoke the old truism—you must deal with the enemy you have, not the enemy you want.

Two aspects of the war against Ukraine invoke reflection on historic precedents. First, Russia has traditionally never shied away from using force in attempts to overturn an international order not to its liking. Second, the rulers of Russia have always held that the security of the Eurasian land mass comes from establishing a hard sphere of security around the Russian space, one that also ensures access to the global commons.

## Russia and Global Conflict

Russia has always envisioned itself as a great power, an empire that eats geopolitics for breakfast when it finds an international order and balance of power that threatens its ability to exercise power and influence with freedom of action. There are innumerable examples of this in both the imperial and Soviet eras.

During the Napoleonic Wars, for instance, Russia considered French dominance of continental Europe as a prospect beyond the pale of what Moscow could accept. Thus, Russia defied Napoleon's continental blockade of Britain, though the emperor knew full well this could lead to war.

The Crimean War (1853–56) is another illustrative example. The official cause was a dispute over authority of the Orthodox Christians living in Ottoman territory. This was a pretext for a great power struggle to tip the balance of power, as well as ensure Russian access to the Black Sea.

Arguably, World War I also reflected this priority. Despite innumerable domestic challenges and a humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), Moscow plunged head on into the conflict rather than see the development of a global international order unfavorable to Russia.

The Soviet era saw more continuity than differences with imperial foreign policy. Though the Bolsheviks (Russian communists) presumptively withdrew from the war in December 1917, geopolitics quickly returned as a feature of Soviet policy in the interwar years. It culminated with the Soviets joining the Allied war effort.

While Moscow eschewed a direct conflict with the West during the Cold War, it was abundantly clear early in the postwar period that the Soviets saw American–British dominance as completely unacceptable. While Moscow did not attack the United States or Europe, consistently throughout the Cold War the Soviets underwrote armed conflicts as tools to degrade American power and influence, offsetting the Russian

disadvantages in global competition. These efforts include, for example, support for the Korean War (1950–53), the Vietnam War (1955–75), wars against Israel (1967 and 1973), and insurgencies in Africa and Latin America in the 1980s, as well as supporting terrorist attacks on the West in the 1970s and 1980s.

### Russia and Regional Conflict

Without question both imperial and Soviet Russia have had little aversion to use wars to either protect or expend a hard sphere of influence. Indeed, this is arguably an indisputable element of Russian grand strategy.

In the imperial age the wars and proxy wars on the Russian periphery are innumerable. As previously noted, the Crimean War was just as much about consolidating the Russian sphere of influence as tilting the scale in great power competition. Moscow's role in the Balkan Wars (1912–13) also included efforts to advance both its regional sphere of influence and the global balance of power.

Most notably during the Soviet era, Russia willingly used force to prevent countries from breaking away from the Soviet sphere of influence, including both military interventions in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968).

### Policy and Putin

It ought to come as no surprise that Putin would return to these priorities in formulating Russia's path forward in the modern world. First, if anything, Putin is the product of Russian strategic culture. He grew up in the Russian system. His whole life he looked at the world from a Russian perspective. He lamented Russia's loss of control over the post-Soviet space and bristled against Russia's declining influence in great power politics.

Indeed, there is more than ample evidence of Putin's perspective. It is present in Russian strategic writings, Putin's rhetoric, and in Russia's actions as well. Russia seized parts of Moldova, Georgia, and in 2014, part of Ukraine. All these actions reflect the traditional Russian dual agenda: expanding the Russian hard sphere of control and territorial acquisitions that Moscow could use to tweak relations with the West, becoming more aggressive or reasonable as suited its purposes.

The invasion of Ukraine was the logical next step. A successful invasion would have expanded Russia's hard sphere of influence, humiliated the Europeans and Americans, and impressed the Chinese—a boon to Moscow's great power status.

### Past as Future

If Russia suffers a catastrophic defeat in Ukraine, it will only steel Putin's resolve to come back and reverse the course of history, stealing victory from defeat, much like the imperial victory over Napoleon and the triumphal Soviet counter offensive against Nazi Germany. If, on the other hand, Russia wins on the ground or at the negotiating table, it will only whet Putin's appetite for more.

## POLL: Is there a Russian way of war?

- ☐ Russia eventually grinds down its enemies.
- ☐ The Russian Army is as incompetent abroad as it is unstopped at home.
- ☐ Russia's military has a mixed record, depending on circumstances.
- ☐ The Russian military is usually incompetent.
- ☐ National character does not influence military performance.



The end state that is most likely to emerge from the fight will likely not be too much different from imperial setbacks on the periphery or the ambivalent results of Soviet proxy wars. Ukraine is going to look like West Germany 1945 or South Korea 1953 or Israel 1967 with a stand-off and unresolved territorial claims. What will hold Russia at bay is not a negotiation, or a humbled, or a satiated Russia, but a Ukraine that has conventional capacity to deter future invasions, and an economy and political stability that is resilient against Russian pressure. This will be the least bad result, but an all-too-common outcome in dealing with Russia—a cold peace that holds the bear at bay.



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Skinner participates in numerous Hoover Institution projects, including the Shultz-Stephenson Task Force on Energy Policy and the Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict. She currently serves as the Taube Professor of International Relations and Politics at Pepperdine University's School of Public Policy. At Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), she served as the Taube Professor of International Relations and Politics as well as the founding director of these academic entities: Carnegie Mellon University Washington Semester Program; Center for International Relations and Politics; Institute for Politics and Strategy; and Institute for Strategic Analysis. In addition, Skinner holds courtesy faculty positions at CMU's Heinz College and the Institute for Software Research, an academic department in the School of Computer Science. She has also taught political science courses at Hamilton College, Harvard University, and the University of California, Los Angeles. Professor Skinner has served on numerous Defense Department and White House boards. From September 2018 to August 2019, Skinner served as director of the Office of Policy Planning and senior policy adviser to the secretary of state at the U.S. Department of State. In 2020, she was appointed to the U.S. Defense Department's Defense Business Board.

## Additional Related Commentary

- Victor Davis Hanson. "Have We Forgotten the Russian Way of War?" *American Greatness*. July 16, 2023. <https://amgreatness.com/2023/07/16/have-we-forgotten-the-russian-way-of-war/>.

## Discussion Questions

1. Is Russia's fighting in Ukraine typical of its past campaigns?
2. Will Russia eventually grind down the Ukrainian military?
3. Why did the Russians fail to take Kyiv?
4. Can Ukraine ever recapture Crimea?
5. Does today's Russian military resemble past Russian armed forces?





IN THE NEXT ISSUE  
Proxy Wars



## Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of “War, Revolution, and Peace.” Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: “The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life.” From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the “Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict” has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution’s dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

## Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

## Strategika

*Strategika* is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.



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