Putin may have bitten off more than he can chew

PAUL MONK, The Australian, March 11, 2022

President Vladimir Putin has made himself a pariah. He must go and be replaced by a democratic Russia.

War, Clausewitz famously wrote, is the continuation of politics by other means. Vladimir Putin tried, for many years, to create a puppet regime in Ukraine by means of political subversion. He failed. Now he is trying war. He is floundering and paying a high price for his arrogance. This war, whatever its outcome, will entrench Ukrainian nationalism forever.

Morale among Russian forces is poor. Russian soldiers, told they were on a training drill or being sent into Ukraine to stop a genocide, ran into fierce mass resistance. Casualties and loss of military platforms have been heavy. Ukraine has been aroused and will not easily be crushed.

NATO has been galvanised. Germany – under a green/left government – has declared it will double its defence budget and send military equipment to Ukraine.

Neutral Sweden and Finland are seeking membership of the alliance. Serious Western sanctions have triggered a massive fall in the Russian stockmarket and the value of the rouble.

There is even widespread dissent in Russia against the war.

Putin and his inner circle appear to have fallen into the trap of believing their own propaganda about Ukrainian independence being some kind of Western plot to weaken Russia. In fact, what Putin has unleashed has not only triggered massive resistance in Ukraine, but has roused alarm about Russian imperialism in the Baltic states, Eastern Europe (especially Poland) and Scandinavia – for deep historical reasons. That history is Putin's nemesis.

The history in question dates back long before the Soviet Union. Putin, who is like an anarchic character out of Dostoevsky novel, is bringing its worst elements back to life for Russia's neighbours. In the intense information warfare, which is accompanying the savage kinetic (shooting and shelling) warfare, a knowledge of that history is important. Not only for strategists but for the Western public, who might otherwise be bamboozled by Putin's propaganda machine.

The borders of various states in Eastern Europe and what are now Russia, Ukraine and the Baltic states have changed enormously over the past millennium. Historical and cultural memories, on the other hand, have remained tenacious. Putin's assertions that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" are belied by the history of Ukraine, both before there was a Russia at all and during the years of Russian and then Soviet domination of Ukraine.

Dramatic though the daily news from the front may be, it's worth casting our minds back a thousand years in order to grasp the depths of what is going on. A millennium ago, stretching from the Finnish lakes to the Black Sea and from the Vistula to the Volga, there was a state called Kyivan Rus, with its capital in Kyiv/Kiev, the city now under siege.

Alongside it, between the ninth and 15th centuries, were other Slavic, Varangian and Khazar states in what are now Russia, Ukraine and the Baltic coast.

The principality of Muscovy did not arise, as such, until the second half of the 13th century and, even then, it was a vassal state of the Mongols.

Over the following 200 years, the Duchy of Muscovy imposed itself on a number of hitherto free cities, notably Novgorod (1478) and Tver (1485), even as it fought to shake off the dominance of the Mongols. During that same period, the kingdom of Kyivan Rus was replaced, over much the same territory, by a state called the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. That Grand Duchy included Ukraine.

Duke Ivan III of Muscovy (1462-1505) fought a series of wars against the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, tripled the territory of Muscovy, adopted the title "Tsar" (which comes from Caesar) and declared himself, in his final years to be the ruler of all "Rus".

Putin's claims, in short, date back not to the Soviet Union but to the first Russian Tsar, Ivan III. But Ukrainians and Lithuanians have a very different view of the matter.

Ivan III styled himself Tsar/Caesar because he was married to Sophia Palaeologa, a niece of the last Byzantine Emperor, Constantine XI Palaeologus – and, on that basis, declared Muscovy to be the successor state of the Roman Empire, the "Third Rome". Constantinople had fallen to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Putin years for those days, as Turkey's Recep Erdogan does for the Ottoman Empire.

This first Russian Tsar created the dream of a Russian Empire. But it took centuries for the Russians to conquer the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its successor state the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which was only created by the Union of Lublin, in 1569.

Putin's current war has its roots in that era. The Tsardom of Muscovy and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were, from the 15th century onwards, locked in a prolonged struggle for control of Ukraine. Tsar Ivan the Terrible (1530-84) fought relentlessly to impose Russian rule on Ukraine. He failed, lapsed into paranoia and, after a violent purge of the Russian oligarchs (the boyars), died defeated. His death was followed by the so-called Time of Troubles, in which the very future of the Russian state was in doubt.

NATO's resistance to Putin bears striking similarities to the resistance Ivan the Terrible faced from the Swedes, Poles, Lithuanians and Ukrainians long ago. Perhaps the outcome will be similar.

Following the Time of Troubles, a new dynasty, the Romanovs, came to power in 1613. Over the following 300 years, they gradually succeeded where Ivan the Terrible had failed. They asserted Russian rule over Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, Estonia and Finland – as well as the Caucasus, Central Asia and Siberia. It was not until the three partitions of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania, between 1772 and 1795, however, that Russian rule was finally stamped on Ukraine as a whole, along with much of Poland and all of Lithuania.

But that conquest no more made Ukrainians into Russians than it made Poles or Finns into Russians – or than British rule made the Irish into Anglo-Saxons.

Romanov control lasted until the Russian Revolution of 1917. Then the Russian Empire disintegrated. The Soviet Union, however, set about reconsolidating it and maintained its dominance until it, too, collapsed, in 1989-91.

Stalin's brutal treatment of Ukraine in the 1930s, during forced collectivisation, and again in 1944-45 as the Red Army drove the Nazis out, has never been forgotten or forgiven. But it was the collapse of Soviet power, in 1989-91, that gave Ukraine a chance to break free.

Lithuania declared independence in March 1990, following the collapse of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe. Latvia and Estonia did likewise. Gorbachev, goaded by hardliners, attempted, in early 1991, to reverse these declarations, sending in tanks that killed Lithuanians, but the invasion failed. Gorbachev fell from power himself, in an attempted hardline coup in August 1991. The coup was foiled by Boris Yeltsin, who took control of Russia, and the Soviet Union fell apart.

The authorities in Ukraine, throughout 1990 and into 1991, were involved in negotiations with Gorbachev and other republics about a possible reconstructed Soviet Union. In October 1990, however, tens of thousands of protesters assembled in the centre of Kyiv demanding that the talks be called off in the name of Ukrainian independence. By mid-1991, with Gorbachev trying to hold the USSR together, Ukraine was holding out for a looser confederation.

Former US President George Bush and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev at the German presidential Bellevue Palace in Berlin.

In this context, US president George HW Bush spoke in Kyiv on August 1, 1991, urging that Ukraine stay in the Soviet Union. Critics dubbed this his “Chicken Kiev” speech. But, in the wake of the Gulf War he believed he could work with Gorbachev’s Soviet Union. He feared a disintegration that could lead to nationalist wars between republics with nuclear arsenals. So much for Washington plotting against Russia.

Less than three weeks later, when Gorbachev fell and Yeltsin took over in Russia, Ukraine declared independence in the name of a thousand-year memory of statehood. In the Ukrainian parliament, 346 deputies voted for independence, five abstained and only two voted against. In December 1991, the declaration of independence was put to a popular vote. There was an 84 per cent turnout. More than 90 per cent of voters supported independence. Even in Crimea, where the population was 66 per cent Russian, well over half of voters supported independence.

In this decisive manner, in late 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist. It would be eight tumultuous years before Vladimir Putin rose to power. During those years, the economic and political transition in Russia was bungled badly. Putin’s own rise to power was made possible by that bungling – under Yeltsin. As Putin asserted power in the name of Russian nationalism, more and more states on Russia’s periphery sought shelter under the wings of NATO and membership of the EU. Why did NATO expand? It was wanted. Russia was not.

Putin and Russian revanchists, however, resented the drastic diminution of Moscow’s prestige and Putin went on record as declaring that the collapse of the Soviet Union had been “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century” – a grotesque statement, when one considers the competition for that description, such as the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Second World War, the Holocaust, Maoism in China (with its 50 or 60 million dead). The consequence was a stand-off between Russian resentment and the security interests of countries such as Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Georgia and, of course, Ukraine.

In 2022, all this history is on the table. Putin’s brutal attempt to reassert imperial sway by force, in the tradition of Ivan the Terrible, could bring about his downfall, but it could, prior to that, trigger a wider war and a very serious disaster for much of Europe.

If Putin can be brought to heel without a wider war, perhaps, at last, a chastened and democratising Russia could be brought into the Western and European world.

Mikhail Gorbachev spoke, in the 1980s, of a “common European home” including Russia. That is something worth aiming for. But Putin cannot be accommodated. He must go.

There is a longstanding tension within Russia between Slavophiles and Westernisers. That tension now needs to be resolved by Russia being embraced as a cherished member of the Indo-European world, in which Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff are honoured, alongside Cervantes and Shakespeare, Beethoven and Chopin. Putin’s nihilistic, destructive and needless war must be transcended.

Meanwhile, though, it remains to be won. The fact that severe sanctions have been imposed by a US-led coalition, rather than a military intervention in Ukraine itself being mounted by NATO, is not a sign of weakness or irresolution. It should be heralded as the harbinger of a better order and of less destructive means for bringing aggressors to heel. Although, in 1991, the Soviet Union disintegrated and the subsequent attempt to marketise and democratise Russia failed badly, it is possible that a much better transition can be brought about in the near future, if Putin and his kleptocratic cronies can be brought down. That will require a generous approach to Russia as such, despite the shocking things that Putin has done and is doing. The irony of Putin’s war is that it is hardening nationalism in all the states around Russia’s borders and reinforcing the case for NATO as a pan-European security structure. From the point of view of Russian prestige, security and influence, this is the very opposite of what any sound strategist should have wanted. Putin has shown himself, for all his ruthlessness and dissimulation, to be a failed strategist and nihilist. He has no future as a leader or interlocutor.

The immediate danger is that he will recklessly escalate this war and take us all to the brink of a nuclear war – or over that brink. The war must be contained. Putin must be checkmated. The costs for Russia must be calibrated, such that those with the most to lose in Russia decide Putin has to be removed from power. Then negotiations over a viable settlement can begin.

None of this will be easy and the dangers right now are very grave. And things could get worse before they get better.

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