Is History Rhyming ?

The Putin-Hitler Analogy, Ukraine, and Euro-Atlantic Security

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Introduction

At the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict in 2014 when Russian President Vladimir Putin's forces invaded Crimea, there was a torrent of criticism from the West, accompanied by economic sanctions. A speech Putin delivered on March 18, 2014, attempting to justify the takeover, prompted further criticism from a wide range of Western politicians, media, and academics. President Barack Obama responded to Putin's speech one week later stating that Russia had no right to dictate Ukraine's future and rejected Putin's suggestion that the Russian minority in Crimea was in danger.

Hilary Clinton delivered an even stronger rebuke but added that Putin's actions in Crimea were like Adolf Hitler's during the Sudetenland Crisis of 1938. Russian historian Andrey Piontkovsky said Putin's speech used "the same arguments and vision of history," as Hitler had articulated in 1938. More recently, at a news conference on October 5, 2023, following his removal as the House of Representatives Speaker, Kevin McCarthy, when asked about Ukraine, gave the media a concise account of the rise of Hitler and made a direct comparison to Putin – a position seemingly at odds with the current presidential nominee for the Republican Party and many elements within that party.

This piece will focus on the Hitler-Putin historical analogy in the context of the Russian leader's use of de-Nazification as a casus belli for his war against Ukraine. It will reinforce the widely accepted belief that Putin's de-Nazification argument is largely a smokescreen intended for domestic Russian consumption. The supreme irony of Putin's claim is that a more detailed examination of the Russian leader's motivations, means and methods closely mirror those of the Nazis and Hitler in the mid to late 1930s.

The piece also argues that with a "Hitler-like" political actor as a major player, the current geopolitical environment presents the possibility of cascading conflicts: where an initial conflict metastasizes, emboldens aggressors and ignites conflicts in other regions. The current conflict dynamic pits Russia and its Chinese, North Korean and Iranian arms suppliers against Ukraine, supported militarily and financially by NATO. Insofar as Putin has characterized the conflict as existential for Russia, it has also taken on an existential quality for NATO. Considering the many points of convergence between Hitler and Putin, and the strategic decisions that lie ahead for countries like Canada, the United States and NATO generally, the essay poses the rhetorical question: "What would Churchill do?" Zelenskyy is fighting for the survival

of Ukraine in 2024, just as Churchill was in Britain in 1940.

Historical Analogies – Learning Past Lessons

There have been many articles and commentaries which touch on the Vladimir Putin – Adolf Hitler historical analogy and which are generally confined to Putin's modus operandi in the lead-up to his campaign of aggression against Ukraine. Even a cursory examination of Putin's methods reveals a playbook very similar to Hitler's before the cataclysmic events of the Second World War.

Putin's emphasis on Russian history to explain current events calls to mind Mark Twain's often-cited remark that "history never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme." Twain could have been an early proponent of applied history – an area of study that Harvard University's Belfer Center describes as "the explicit attempt to illuminate current challenges and choices by analyzing historical precedents and analogues." Since every historical event is unique and subject to different perspectives, no perfect analogies exist. When comparing past and current events, there will always be points of convergence and divergence. Nevertheless, public policy, debate and political decision-making, especially in times of war and crisis, can benefit when the past is analyzed to illuminate how leaders succeeded or failed in responding to events that resemble today's.

While the final chapters of Putin's aggression in Ukraine have yet to be written, the judgement of history on Hitler is clear. In the seemingly endless, sad, and sordid saga of human conflict and cruelty, Hitler is sui generis. William L. Shirer, in "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich" probably said it best. He observed that Hitler's regime "caused an eruption on this earth more violent and shattering than any previously experienced…it instituted a reign of terror over the conquered peoples which, in its calculated butchery of human life and the human spirit, outdid all the savage oppressions of previous ages." Hitler 's nemesis Winston Churchill described him as "a monster of wickedness" and mused that: "If Hitler invaded hell, I would make at least a favourable reference to the devil in the House of Commons."

History and the De-Nazification Narrative

In an interview with right-wing media commentator Tucker Carlson in Moscow in February, Putin confirmed that history is important to him. It forms the justification for his war in Ukraine. Russia watchers were unsurprised that Putin spent much of the Carlson interview on a self-serving and distorted ramble through 1,000 years of Russian history some of which focussed on what the Russians refer to as the Great Patriotic War (1941 to 1945) and the fight against Naziism. When Russia invaded Ukraine for the second time on February 24, 2022, Putin gave as his reason for the "Special Military Operation" the de-Nazification and demilitarization of Ukraine. He likely calculated that this would resonate strongly with the Russian people based on stories and documentaries from an earlier generation. It would conjure up patriotic memories of the defence of Mother Russia, the sacrifices and courage of the Red Army, and the Soviet Union's important role in the Allied victory over Nazi Germany.

As early as 2014, Putin was making references to the need to "de-Nazify" Ukraine. In a speech to Russian parliamentarians on the process for annexing Crimea, Putin spoke of Stepan Bandera, the wartime leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. It was, he said, "already pretty clear to everyone what the ideological heirs to Stepan Bandera, Hitler's helper during World War Two, intended to

do in the future." The implication was obvious. The government of Petro Poroshenko, which replaced that of Putin ally Viktor Yanukovych following the Maidan revolution, was, in Putin's view, the ideological descendant of Bandera, and, by definition, a nest of Nazis.

Putin's reference to Bandera exemplifies the Russian leader's manipulation of historical facts. While there is no doubt that there was widespread Ukrainian collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War, Bandera's story is as complicated as Ukraine's. As a Ukrainian right-wing nationalist and anti-communist, Bandera's primary focus was on creating a free Ukraine separate from the Soviet Union. To Ukrainian nationalists, the country's historic struggle for independence post World War One was galvanized by the horrors of the Holodomor – the man-made Soviet famine that killed millions of Ukrainians in the early 1930s. Bandera's collaboration with the Nazis early in the war, like that of many other Ukrainians, was a means to an end – the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

However, Bandera's pro-Ukrainian activities ran afoul of the Gestapo. Putin's narrative does not include the fact that Bandera spent two and half years in Hitler's Sachsenhausen concentration camp. The Nazis released Bandera in October 1944 as they sought Ukrainian help to repel an advancing Soviet Red Army. With the allies closing in from the east and west on a retreating Wehrmacht, Bandera and other Ukrainian nationalists understood that their erstwhile confederates were on the verge of defeat so no Ukrainian assistance was forthcoming. While Bandera was a right-wing Ukrainian nationalist, his credentials as a Nazi are far from convincing. After the war, Bandera continued his pro-Ukrainian activities in West Germany and was protected from extradition to the Soviet Union by the CIA. But CIA protection wasn't perfect. Considered a long-standing enemy of the Soviet state, Bandera was assassinated by the KGB in Munich in 1959.

Zelenskyy and Umerov – Unlikely Nazis

Putin's de-Nazification argument appears nothing short of ludicrous to Western observers when it is pointed out that Ukraine's president is Jewish. Volodymyr Zelenskyy's grandfather Semyon Ivanovych Zelenskyy served in the Red Army during the Second World War attaining the rank of colonel in the 57th Guards Motor Rifle Division. Grandfather Semyon's three brothers enlisted in the Red Army, but none survived the war. In a March 2022 interview with CNN's Fareed Zacharia, Zelenskyy said that his great-grandparents had been killed after German troops burned their home to the ground during a massacre. As for Zelenskyy's Minister of Defence, Rustem Umerov is a Crimean Tatar and a Muslim. His family history involved forced deportation by the Soviets during the Second World War. And while both Zelenskyy and Umerov could be described as Ukrainian nationalists, unsurprisingly neither fit the description of white supremacists, anti-Semites or purveyors of Nazi or fascist ideology.

While the idea of Putin de-Nazifying Ukraine is a tough sell for those in the West, that is not necessarily the case for most Russians. With a filtered historical knowledge of the Holocaust, for the average Russian de-Nazifying a state with a Jewish president is entirely plausible. The Holocaust and the murder of two million Soviet Jews during the Great Patriotic War were downplayed by Stalin and subsequent Soviet leaders. A sanitized official Soviet version of the Babyn Yar massacre, for instance, omitted the mention of Jews and simply described the victims as Soviet citizens. Attempts to commemorate the Jewish lives lost during the war and the Holocaust in the post-war period were discouraged by the Soviet regime which criticized and sought to suppress what was described as Jewish "particularism."

Ukraine's Political Orientation

The real litmus test concerning Ukraine's supposed Nazism can be found in the country's political orientation and electoral results. In the 2019 parliamentary elections, the right-wing National Corps Party of Biletsky joined another right-wing party, Svoboda, but still received only 2.15 percent of the vote, which left it without a single seat in Ukraine's Parliament, the Verkhovna Rada. Ukraine is in many respects no different from other European states with extreme right-wing parties such as Alternative for Germany, CasaPound Italia, the Netherlands' Party for Freedom, and the UK's Reform Party. The lack of electoral success of right-wing parties in Ukraine speaks to a broader commitment to centrist politics, arguably stronger in Ukraine than in many other parts of Europe.

More broadly, Putin's de-Nazification rationale purposely ignores the political evolution of Ukraine in the 79 years since the end of the Second World War. Ukraine has transitioned from a Soviet republic to an independent state. The last ten years have seen a growing desire in Ukraine to be part of a liberal democratic Europe with membership in the European Union and NATO. Rather than the de-Nazification and demilitarization of Ukraine, it appears that the real reason for Putin's aggression in Ukraine is to prevent a free and democratic Ukraine from sharing a border with Russia.

Ukraine as an Inflection Point

There are good reasons why the war in Ukraine continues to occupy the geopolitical spotlight. A broad review of the strategic environment is beginning to look increasingly and disturbingly like the prelude to World War Two. The Ukraine conflict is putting a severe strain on the rules-based international order. It is testing Russia's ability to wage war and Ukraine's ability to defend itself. It is also testing the West's resolve and determination to contain Russian aggression and the underlying solidarity of the NATO alliance. Two critical questions for NATO are: "How do we maintain allied solidarity? and What is the appropriate response to blatant aggression threatening international peace and security?" The stakes are high, especially when the aggressor is a permanent member of the Security Council and possesses thousands of nuclear weapons. NATO's response could determine whether Ukraine survives as an independent democratic nation with its pre-2014 borders intact or becomes a frozen conflict or a Russian vassal state on NATO's eastern border. The worst-case scenario is that it is unceremoniously wiped off the map as an independent state with the Ukrainian nationality subsumed by Russia.

It is no exaggeration to say that this could also be an inflection point for the future of NATO, the defence of democracy and the prospects of sustained global peace and security. Although some NATO allies are not treating it as such, the unqualified defence of Ukraine must be considered an existential issue for NATO. Also at issue is respect for the UN Charter and the application and enforcement of international humanitarian law. If unchecked authoritarian aggression is on the rise around the globe, what future does democracy have in Africa, Asia and South America? Countering unprovoked aggression and ensuring a Russian defeat in Ukraine has become essential for NATO and the West. Half-hearted, bureaucratic foot-dragging and partially funded support measures for Ukrainian forces will likely lead to their defeat on the battlefield and merely postpone an inevitable and larger regional conflict. A Ukrainian defeat could have critical knock-on effects of cascading conflicts where, as noted earlier, the outcome of one war emboldens other aggressors and sparks wider conflict.

A Russian victory in Ukraine, and by implication the defeat of NATO's efforts, would very likely encourage Putin to continue to pursue his vision of a "greater Russia." If we look ahead to a possible Trump Presidency, U.S. abandonment of NATO could lead to more aggression in Eastern Europe, Moldova, the Baltics or other former Warsaw Pact and now NATO countries. A Russian victory could also embolden Putin's allies, China's Xi Jinping, and North Korea's Kim Jong Un to pursue their territorial ambitions in Taiwan and on the Korean peninsula. Iran's cordial relations with Russia and China, and its anti-Israel and anti-Sunni militancy, also threaten to produce greater global instability. The Russia-China "friendship with no limits", combined with junior partners North Korea and Iran is starting to look eerily like a 21st-century version of the Second World War's Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis.

Suppose NATO can summon the resolve and resources to thwart Russia in Ukraine and degrade its military capability. In that case, there are good reasons to believe Xi Jinping and Kim Jung Un would be less inclined to pursue territorial conquest in Asia. Iran has already demonstrated its aggressive intent in the Middle East and would no doubt be prepared to exploit any indication of U.S. or allied weakness. A demonstration of unequivocal allied solidarity backed by overwhelming military force and providing Ukraine with the capabilities necessary to defeat Putin could significantly reduce or even eliminate the possibility of cascading or wider conflict.

Cascading Conflict – In Retrospect

The lead-up to the Second World War is an example of cascading conflict. A weak League of Nations, relatively isolated wars, and incidents of aggression spawned shifting alliances and fed the desire for territorial expansion and regional hegemony among authoritarian regimes. The brutal Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 was followed by the Italian conquest of Abyssinia in 1935. The illegal German re-occupation of the Rhineland ensued in 1936. The German Anschluss (union) with Austria in March 1938 and the takeover of Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland in September of that year caused alarm in Paris, London and other European capitals. But it resulted in no firm response to Hitler by the former Allied powers. By March 1939, all of Czechoslovakia was under Hitler's control. To the astonishment of his generals, Hitler's daring diplomatic brinksmanship had produced spectacular and unexpected results. But after seizing Czechoslovakia, Hitler's relatively bloodless campaign of conquest could only be satisfied by armed force.

The coming together of autocrats and aggressors was sealed with a series of agreements in the late 1930s resulting in the previously mentioned Berlin, Rome and (later) Tokyo Axis. The agreements purported to recognize German and Italian dominance in Europe and Japanese dominance in Asia. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed in August of 1939 created an economic agreement and a non-aggression treaty between the German Reich and the Soviet Union which temporarily reduced the possibility of Germany facing a two-front war. The history textbooks in Putin's Russia have conveniently removed any reference to this important document which contained a secret protocol dividing Eastern and Central Europe between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Croatia also joined the Axis powers early in the war – some from coercion, others from opportunism. The stage was set for a major confrontation.

Hitler's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, was the flashpoint for what became a global conflict. British and French declarations of war followed two days later. Operation Barbarossa, the German attack

on the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, saw Stalin and the Red Army switch sides and join the Allies, while the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, ended U.S. neutrality and brought the Americans into the war. Opposing the Axis powers were the Big Four Allies – the United States, Britain (including the Commonwealth), the Soviet Union, and China. By the end of the conflict, virtually every country had chosen sides. Approximately 125 million combatants took part in the hostilities with estimates of the dead – civilian and military – running from 70 million on the low end up to 85 million, making it by far the most violent conflagration in human history.

The Importance of History – Hitler and Putin

History mattered to Hitler as it does for Putin. For the Nazi leader, the German defeat in the First World War was a seminal and catastrophic historic event. German diplomatic historian Ulrich Herbert observed that Hitler has been described as “an offspring” – “the outstanding legacy of World War One.” Herbert wrote that the Treaty of Versailles ending the First World War reduced German territory by 14 percent and its population by 6.5 million. The sense of grievance engendered by the Treaty was instrumental in spawning Hitler and the Nazi movement’s weltanschauung (world view).

Even though the Kaiser’s Army was a spent force and in full retreat for three months before the Armistice in November 1918, the German capitulation resulted in many conspiracy myths. One of the myths was the “stab in the back theory” (dolchstoßlegende) claiming Jews and Marxists espousing ‘Jewish and cultural Bolshevism’ were behind Germany’s defeat. This was central to Nazi propaganda in the 1920s and ‘30s. To the Nazis, the post-war Weimar Republic with its more liberal and social democratic attitudes represented a betrayal of the traditional values of the Imperial German Reich. The Nazis described cultural Bolshevism as anything secular, progressive, and modernist as expressed in art, literature, film and music. Related to this was what the Nazis described as ‘sexual Bolshevism’ which they associated with promiscuity, degeneracy, and homosexuality – all of which were seen as a direct threat to so-called traditional German family and societal values.

Hitler’s Mein Kampf (My Struggle), published in 1925 and 1926 in two volumes, contains the philosophical foundation of Naziism. Although there was already an undercurrent of antisemitism in post-war German society, Hitler took the hatred of Jews to a new level in Mein Kampf. Written in Landsberg prison after Hitler had been convicted of treason for the ill-fated Beer Hall Putsch in Munich in 1923, it is an autobiographical manifesto for the Nazi movement with antisemitism as the primary theme. It was also a reaction to what Hitler saw as the democratic decadence of the Weimar Republic. This virulent antisemitism became public policy soon after Hitler took power. It evolved from excluding Jews from certain professions and public service to violent events like Kristallnacht and the destruction of hundreds of synagogues in 1938. It culminated in the infamous action plan at the Wannsee Conference in 1942 for the extermination of European Jews. Mein Kampf should be read and understood for what it was – a roadmap to the genocide of the Holocaust.

Lebensraum (living space) for a future Germany was another of Mein Kampf’s themes. As Hitler noted: “We National Socialists consciously draw a line beneath the foreign policy tendency of our pre-war period. We take up where we broke off six hundred years ago. We stop the endless German movement to the south and west and turn our gaze toward the land in the east.… If we speak of soil in Europe today, we can primarily have in mind only Russia and her vassal border states.” Before the expansion to

the East, Hitler's foreign policy of Heim ins Reich (home to the kingdom) was focused on pan-Germanism. This meant uniting all German speakers from border areas and countries such as the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland under one regime. The Nazi motto "Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer" – one people, one realm, one leader – became Hitler's pan-German rallying cry.

Historical Grievances and Action Manifestos

Hitler's fixation with Germany's defeat in the First World War is very similar to Vladimir Putin's obsession with the demise of the Soviet Union. In a 2005 speech to the Russian Parliament, Putin described it as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century". "As for the Russian people," he said, "it became a genuine tragedy. Tens of millions of our fellow citizens and countrymen found themselves beyond the fringes of Russian territory". In Putin's mind, this historical grievance lays the foundation for and justifies pan-Russian activism and territorial conquest. The historical imperative – the mission – is to correct the wrong if Russia's historical destiny is to be realized. Putin's pan-Russianism echoes Hitler's pan-Germanism and amounts to a master plan for the destruction of Ukraine.

The ideological foundations of Putin's Russia, with its ultra-conservatism and rejection of anything seen as progressive, bear an eerie resemblance to those of Hitler's Germany. One of the more recent examples was a Russian Supreme Court decision which designated the LGBTQ movement as an "extremist organization" and banned their activities. In Putin's Russia, there has been an increased emphasis on so-called family values and a steady erosion of LGBTQ rights, including a 2020 constitutional amendment which banned gay marriage. Perhaps this explains why Putin has some support among ultraconservative religious parties and Christian nationalists in Europe and the United States. One of Putin's powerful institutional allies has been Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church who has openly supported the war in Ukraine. The church's preachings, which link family values with patriotism, Russia's identity, obedience to authority and service to the country, dovetails nicely with Putin's nationalist, revanchist and imperialist agenda.

Hitler's Mein Kampf and Putin's 5,000-word essay of July 2021 entitled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," are both calls to action. Putin's treatise might have been longer had he, like Hitler, spent 264 days in prison. Published a mere seven months before Russia attacked Ukraine, Putin's essay described his pan-Russian philosophy, tracing its origins back 1,100 years. Taking a page from Tsarist nation-building dogma, Putin argued that Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians from Great Russia, Little Russia and White Russia respectively were one people belonging to the historic "triune" Russian nation.

Like Hitler, Putin placed the blame on the Bolsheviks. They, Putin said, were responsible for the fragmentation of the Russian nation, for "chopping the country into pieces," and for the mistake of allowing Ukraine its post-WWI borders. "One fact is crystal clear," said Putin, "Russia was robbed." Unsurprisingly, Putin's thesis was described as "bad history" by Yale professor Timothy Snyder and many other reputable historians, political scientists and legal scholars.

Putin and the Issue of Genocide

The years following the end of the Second World War saw the United Nations attempt to place

international humanitarian law on a firmer foundation and to expand the protections afforded to civilians in armed conflict. Consequently, the four Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, were adopted as well as The Genocide Convention. The latter was proposed by a United Nations General Assembly Resolution in 1948 and entered into force in 1951. While Hitler's responsibility for genocide is an established historical fact, the question of whether Putin's actions in Ukraine constitute genocide is starting to come into sharper focus. For some legal analysts and observers, there is little doubt that the facts point unquestionably in that direction. In part because of Russia's status as a permanent member of the Security Council, it remains for many one of the most sensitive legal and political issues facing the international community.

Russian actions and statements before and after the February 2022 invasion were closely examined by the New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy and the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights. Their report released in May 2022, entitled An Independent Legal Analysis of the Russian Federation's Breaches of the Genocide Convention in Ukraine and the Duty to Prevent, seems largely to have been forgotten amid the intense media coverage during the early part of the conflict. The New Lines and Wallenberg initiative enlisted the expertise of 36 international legal scholars, open-source intelligence investigators, genocide experts, and linguists who were able to compile an extensive primary source record which included communications intercepts, testimonials and publicly available open-source material.

The two principal findings of the report were: "1) there are reasonable grounds to believe Russia is responsible for (i) direct and public incitement to commit genocide, and (ii) a pattern of atrocities from which an inference of intent to destroy the Ukrainian national group in part can be drawn; and 2) the existence of a serious risk of genocide in Ukraine, triggering the legal obligation of all States to prevent genocide." It is noteworthy that 153 nations including all NATO countries have signed and ratified The Genocide Convention. So too have Ukraine and Russia. The report also drew attention to the status of Ukrainians as a "Protected Group" and stated that "the Ukrainian national group is recognized domestically, internationally, and expressly by Russia in formal interstate relations and is thus protected under the Genocide Convention. Importantly, the report stated that under Art. III (c) of the Genocide Convention, direct and public incitement to commit genocide is a distinct crime whether or not genocide follows.

The report provides some very important insights on Putin's "denazification" claims and raises the interesting concept of "Accusation in a Mirror" which, it says, "is a powerful, historically recurring form of incitement to genocide. A perpetrator accuses the targeted group of planning, or having committed, atrocities like those the speaker envisions against them, framing the putative victims as an existential threat makes violence against them appear defensive and necessary. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian officials did exactly this, making the utterly false claim that Ukraine had committed genocide or exterminated the civilian population in Russian-backed separatist-controlled areas, as their pretext for invading Ukraine." Putin's accusations against Ukraine are very similar to those made by Hitler in a speech the German leader gave at Nuremberg on September 12, 1938, claiming that Sudetenland Germans were "subject to a slow but steady extermination" by the Czechoslovak Government.

The report also detailed how Putin and the Russian state apparatus have used "denazification" to portray Ukrainians as "zombified," "bestial," and "scum," making them legitimate targets for destruction. Official Russian statements have consistently portrayed the Ukrainians as an existential threat. The New

Lines/Wallenberg report notes that “the State-orchestrated incitement campaign overtly links the current invasion to the Soviet Union’s existential battles with Nazi Germany in World War II, amplifying the propaganda’s impact on the Russian public to commit or condone mass atrocities.” It also records that “On April 5, 2022, Dmitry Medvedev, current Deputy Chair of the Russian Security Council, posted: ‘having transformed itself into the Third Reich … Ukraine will suffer the same fate’….”

The International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Genocide Investigation

“The wheels of justice grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine” is a phrase often attributed to ancient Greek or Chinese philosophers. But it might also be said to apply to the work of the ICC. On February 25, 2022, one day after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, ICC Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan QC issued a statement on the situation in Ukraine where he, on behalf of the ICC, claimed jurisdiction to investigate acts of genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes committed within the territory of Ukraine. This was necessary because neither Ukraine nor Russia are States Parties to the Rome Statute which created the ICC. However, in September 2015, Ukraine gave the ICC authority to investigate any crimes on its territory beginning in November 2013.

On February 28, 2022, Khan indicated his intent to open an investigation. He said: “I am satisfied that there is a reasonable basis to believe that both alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed in Ukraine.” He added that the investigative process would be expedited if a State Party to the Rome Statute would refer the matter to the ICC. The official ICC investigation in Ukraine commenced on March 2, 2022, and within a month 43 States Parties to the Rome Statute had referred the situation in Ukraine to the Court.

On April 27, 2022, Prosecutor Khan addressed the UN Security Council on ensuring accountability for atrocities committed in Ukraine. He told the Security Council: “I think, in short, it’s not an overstatement to say that this is a singular moment. It’s a critical juncture. The implications, as I said at the outset, are profound in Ukraine, but they extend beyond Ukraine. It’s a time to cling to the law. It is a time to uphold the law. If we don’t cling with the greatest of respect to the law, in this moment, we will be left with nothing to cling to except despair, except suffering, and individually, we cannot allow that to happen. Collectively, we must not rest until it stops. And that sanity and justice prevails on all sides.” By mid-May of 2022, the ICC had deployed a team of 42 investigators, forensic experts and support personnel to Ukraine which constituted the largest single field deployment by the Prosecutor’s office.

On March 17, 2023, the ICC made headlines with the news of arrest warrants issued for Vladimir Putin and Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belova, Russian Commissioner for Children’s Rights. The warrants alleged that both bear “individual criminal responsibility” for the crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation. Both these crimes are covered by The Genocide Convention. The warrant against Putin is the first ever against a leader of a Permanent Member of the Security Council. The warrant requires all 124 States Parties to the Rome Statute to detain and transfer to the court both Putin and Lvova-Belova if they set foot in their territory. In commenting on the issuance of the arrest warrants, the ICC Prosecutor Khan said: “As I stated when in Bucha last May, Ukraine is a crime scene that encompasses a complex and broad range of alleged international crimes. We will not hesitate to submit further applications for warrants of arrest when the evidence requires us to do so.”

On March 5, 2024, the ICC's Pre-Trial Chamber II issued two arrest warrants for Sergei Ivanovich Kobylash, a lieutenant general in the Russian Air Force, and Viktor Nikolayevich Sokolov, an admiral and commander of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, for several war crimes and crimes against humanity. As the ICC's investigations continue, more arrest warrants will likely be issued. While no court has yet rendered a verdict on the actions of Putin and Russia, there is mounting evidence that Russia may be guilty of massive violations of international humanitarian law under The Genocide Convention as well as three of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949.

The Stolen Children

In addition to the work of the ICC, the UN Human Rights Council was seized of the issue of the kidnapping of Ukrainian children. It was the subject of a March 2023 report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine. The report, which should be required reading for elected representatives in NATO nations, noted that "The body of evidence collected shows that Russian authorities have committed a wide range of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law in many regions of Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Many of these amount to war crimes and include wilful killings, attacks on civilians, unlawful confinement, torture, rape, and forced transfers and deportations of children." The report also noted a small number of violations by Ukrainian forces.

The statistics on the number of children subject to forced transfers and deportations vary greatly. According to the report, both Ukraine and Russia say that "hundreds of thousands of children" have been relocated from Ukraine to Russia. However, the official figures from the Government of Ukraine, which the Commission has not been able to verify, state that as of February 2023, 16,221 children had been deported to Russia. The Russian Government, and more particularly Putin and Lvova-Belova, have made no effort to conceal these violations of Article 2 (e) of the Genocide Convention and Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. With a complete disregard for international humanitarian law, policy instruments were approved by Russia which allowed for the placement of Ukrainian children in Russian foster homes and a widely publicized Presidential decree, which granted Russian citizenship to these children "for humanitarian purposes." The report also noted that in July 2022 Lvova-Belova told the media: "Now that the children have become Russian citizens, temporary guardianship can become permanent."

The Putin regime's kidnapping, transfer and removal of children from their Ukrainian parents has a precedent in the policies and practices of Nazi Germany's Lebensborn (fount of life) program. The program was initiated on the orders of SS Reichsfuhrer Heinrich Himmler on September 13, 1936, and was inspired by Nazi race and eugenics theory. Himmler's orders, which were part of a huge collection of Nazi documents used at the Nuremberg trials. One of his orders stated: "Should unfortunate circumstances deny a married couple their own children, then every SS leader should adopt racially and hereditarily valuable children, educate them in the spirit of national socialism, let them have education corresponding to their abilities."

With the onslaught of war in September 1939, the Nazis started the process of stealing "racially valuable" children from occupied countries including Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Yugoslavia, Estonia, Latvia and Norway. Himmler was reported to have told SS officers in a speech in Posen in 1943: "It is our duty to

take their children with us, to remove them from their environment, if necessary, by robbing or stealing them." After the children were seized from their parents they would be photographed and analyzed against a set of criteria to determine whether they were sufficiently Aryan. For those who passed the test, false birth certificates were produced, German names were assigned, and the process of Germanization would then begin. This would entail erasing any memory the child would have of their former life and placing them in a German home. Those deemed unsuitable were sent to concentration camps. It is difficult to estimate the number of children who were abducted under Lebensborn since the SS destroyed the organization's records as Allied forces closed in at the end of the war. The figures for Poland alone range from 10-20,000 children.

Treaty Violations – Hitler and Putin

For Hitler and Putin to launch their step-by-step pan-German and pan-Russian territorial grabs, it was necessary to repudiate treaties and agreements respecting sovereignty and borders signed by their political predecessors. Shirer's The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich provides some interesting insights regarding how Hitler likely saw himself and his role as a leader.

According to Shirer, the intellectual roots of the Third Reich can be found in Hegel's theory of "heroes" and Nietzsche's "Übermensch." For Hegel, "world-historical men" were a fusion of doers and thinkers – soldiers, philosophers, and politicians in the mould of Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon. "The Heroes of an epoch," said Hegel, "must therefore be recognized as its clear-sighted ones; their deeds, their words are the best of their time." Hegel contended that "private virtues" are irrelevant to great rulers. Shirer notes that in Hitler's writings and speeches, "there runs the theme that the supreme leader is above the morals of ordinary men". Nietzsche takes things a step further: "When a man is capable of commanding, when he is by nature a 'Master,' when he is violent in act and nature, of what importance are treaties to him?"

Treaties have meant little to either Hitler or Putin. Hitler's first violation of the Treaty of Versailles came with the re-occupation and re-militarization of the Rhineland in 1936. Twenty thousand German soldiers marched into the slice of land on the west bank of the Rhine bordering Germany and France. Most historians agree that if the French Army had intervened to stop the occupation, Hitler would have retreated. Hitler's orders to his generals specifically called for a withdrawal of German troops if the French made a move to resist the occupation. Hitler gambled on French paralysis and won. With this move, Hitler also violated two lesser-known treaties, the Locarno Pact of 1925 and the idealistic Briand-Kellogg Pact of 1928, which sought to outlaw war.

To consummate the Anschluss (union) with Austria in 1938, Hitler violated Article 80 of the Treaty of Versailles. The article stated that "Germany acknowledges and will respect strictly the independence of Austria." He also violated similar provisions in the Treaty of Saint-Germain-En-Laye, which officially ended the First World War for the successor states of the former Austro-Hungarian empire. The Austrian Anschluss was particularly important for Hitler in adding territory, population, and about 1.3 million conscripts to the German Army.

In one of the stranger quirks of history, in the process of moving troops and equipment to occupy Austria, Hitler's much-vaunted Wehrmacht encountered similar problems to those the Russian Army faced with

their 64-kilometre-long convoy on their ill-fated journey to Kyiv in February and March of 2022. The Nazis planned a triumphal entry for Hitler into Vienna on Saturday, March 12, 1938. But the troops didn't arrive. As Churchill recounts in The Gathering Storm: "The German war machine had lumbered falteringly over the frontier and come to a standstill near Linz. In spite of perfect weather and good conditions, the majority of the tanks broke down. Defects appeared in the motorised heavy artillery. The road from Linz to Vienna was blocked with heavy vehicles at a standstill." Hitler was furious, but his procession through Vienna was only delayed. As we know, the Russian Army's plan to take Kyiv in three days was a colossal failure even as Putin claimed that: "Everything was going according to plan."

In the case of Putin, the invasion of Crimea violated several agreements and treaties including the 1991 Belavezha Accords, which dissolved the Soviet Union. Central to Ukrainian sovereignty was the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of 1994. The Budapest Memorandum was linked to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and, importantly, gave signatories Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan security guarantees in exchange for relinquishing the nuclear weapons they inherited from the former Soviet Union. The other signatories – Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom – pledged to respect the independence and sovereignty [of] the existing borders… "and refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of the signatories." In 1997, the Partition Treaty on the Status and Conditions of the Black Sea Fleet and the interestingly titled Russian–Ukrainian Friendship Treaty were signed within a few days of each other.

Lies, Lies and More Lies

Blatant and shameless lies and pervasive disinformation characterize the tactics of Hitler and Putin. One of the first references to "the big lie" can be found in Mein Kampf, where Hitler claimed that the Jews concocted the big lie that German General Erich Ludendorff was responsible for Germany's defeat in the First World War. On the alleged Jewish deceit, Hitler wrote: "In the big lie, there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus, in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie."

Under Joseph Goebbels, the Nazis perfected the big lie. There are many examples of Hitler's mendacity. One of the most flagrant was in a speech he gave at the Berlin Sportspalast on September 26, 1938, at the height of the Sudetenland Crisis. In the process of delivering ultimata to the Czechoslovak Government of President Edvard Benes demanding that he cede to Germany border areas with ethnic German populations, Hitler declared that the Sudetenland was "the last territorial demand I have to make in Europe." Five months later Hitler effectively occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. A year later, the German Army invaded Poland.

If Hitler is one of the fathers of the big lie, Putin is certainly one of its most avid practitioners. The sheer volume of lies emanating from Putin and the Kremlin might even surpass Hitler's. In the months before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, there was a steady stream of falsehoods flowing from Kremlin officials denying any possibility of Russian aggression against its neighbour despite the massing of 130,000 troops on Russia's border and in Belarus. Among the well-documented list of Russian liars were Foreign Minister Lavrov, Defence Minister Shoigu, Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov, Dmitry Peskov, Kremlin spokesman, Maria Zakharova, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman and Russian

ambassadors to Washington, Ottawa, the UN and the EU. In a face-to-face meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron in Moscow on February 7, 2022, just weeks before the invasion, Putin lied about Moscow's invasion plans and repeated the lie in a February 12 phone call with President Joe Biden.

The Use of Fifth Columns – Germany and Russia

The term "Fifth Column" originated during the Spanish Civil War to describe a group inside a country working to destabilize and undermine a government in favour of an external actor. Fifth columns, agitators and paramilitaries were very much a part of Hitler's modus operandi in Czechoslovakia and have been evident as a part of Putin's efforts to destabilize Ukraine.

Leading the fifth-column effort in pre-war Czechoslovakia was Konrad Henlein, a World War One veteran and German nationalist. In 1933, after Hitler's rise to power, Henlein established the Sudeten German Homeland party and its paramilitary adjunct, the Freiwilliger Schutzdienst, also known as Ordnersgruppe. He became the most active and influential Sudeten proponent of German annexation. The Ordnersgruppe was modelled after the Sturmabteilung, also known as the SA, the original paramilitary wing of the German Nazi party. The group was implicated in terrorist and criminal activities in the Sudetenland and was outlawed by the Benes Government on September 16, 1938. Henlein became the Nazi Gauleiter and Reichsstatthalter (a local Governor) in the Sudetenland when it fell under the Nazi occupation. Henlein's gubernatorial duties ended abruptly on May 8, 1945, VE Day, when he committed suicide.

Fifth-column tactics to foment separatism, political unrest and violence have been evident in Ukraine for decades, much of it actively promoted by Putin. As recently as 2023, the Ukrainian magazine Universum observed that: "The current subversive activities of Moscow's fifth column in Ukraine – an extensive network of spies and saboteurs, collaborators, traitors, FSB and General Staff agents – are essentially a reflection, a copy of the history/consequences of the sinister operations of the Abwehr, Gestapo, SD, and supporters of Hitler's National Socialism outside Germany." The truth of this statement was further underlined by the recent plot (one of many) to assassinate President Zelenskyy and several other high-ranking Ukrainian officials which was thwarted by the Ukrainian Security Service.

Former president Viktor Yanukovych was, perhaps less a "fifth columnist" than an outright puppet of Putin. Yanukovych sparked protests in Kyiv that became known as the Orange Revolution over his alleged voter intimidation and fraud during the 2004 presidential election. That election was subsequently won by Viktor Yushchenko. Yanukovych, a member of the pro-Russia Party of Regions, ran again for president and won in 2010. His democratic backsliding, cronyism, and corruption alarmed Ukrainians, but his decision to withdraw from EU negotiations in November 2013, under pressure from Putin, led to widespread demonstrations and violence in Kyiv's Independence Square. Yanukovych was held responsible for the deaths of almost 100 protesters killed by security forces. He was removed from office through a vote of the Verkhovna Rada on February 22, 2014. Two days earlier, Russian operations in Crimea commenced. On February 24, 2014, a warrant for Yanukovych's arrest was issued, but by then he had fled to Russia.

The Fate of Rivals

The last year in Russia has seen the demise of two very high-profile rivals to Putin, one military and the other political. The military rival, Yevgeny Prigozhin, mentioned above, had a long history with the Russian President dating back to the 1990s. Once known as “Putin’s chef,” Prigozhin grew wealthy from his catering business serving the Kremlin. He and Dmitry Utkin built the Wagner Group into an international mercenary force. Often acting as a proxy for the Russian Government, the Wagner Group was in Crimea in 2014 and subsequently in the Donbas. It has also been involved in conflicts in Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Mali and Mozambique.

Shocked and angered by the wholesale slaughter in Ukraine of Wagner’s poorly trained conscripts, many of whom were convicts, in human wave attacks, Prigozhin went rogue in June 2023, when he pulled Wagner troops out of Ukraine and headed toward Moscow with a column of vehicles. He demanded that Putin replace Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Vasilyevich Gerasimov, lamenting their incompetence and blaming them for the destruction of his Wagner forces. In the process, Prigozhin questioned Putin’s rationale for the war, which effectively sealed his fate. His aircraft exploded in mid-air in August 2023 taking Prigozhin, Dmitry Utkin, Wagner’s military commander, and Valery Chekalov, Wagner’s head of logistics and seven others to their deaths.

Alexei Navalny, a survivor of a poisoning attempt by the FSB, was unquestionably one of the Putin regime’s most prominent and determined political critics. He had many titles – lawyer, opposition leader, anti-corruption activist, human rights campaigner and political prisoner. Navalny’s death on February 16, 2024, the cause of which remains the subject of speculation, came as attempts were being made to release him through a prisoner swap. The list of some of Putin’s more prominent opponents who have been murdered or disappeared includes politicians, human rights campaigners, journalists and anti-corruption activists. Among them are Anna Politkovskaya, murdered in 2006; Aleksandr Litvinenko, murdered in 2006; Sergei Magnitsky, murdered in 2009; and Boris Nemtsov, murdered in 2015.

Putin’s disposal of Yevgeny Prigozhin was eerily similar to Hitler’s 1934 murder of Ernst Rohm, the chief of the SA Sturmabteilung. Like Pregozhin and Putin, Rohm had a long and close association with Hitler dating back to their involvement in 1919 in the German Worker’s Party. An infantry captain during the First World War, Rohm used his SA stormtroopers (also known as Brownshirts), who numbered over a million, in violent street campaigns against communists, Jews, socialists and other political rivals. Despite the Nazi’s public condemnation of “sexual Bolshevism”, Hitler turned a blind eye to Rohm’s homosexuality. However, after the Nazis rose to power in 1933, Hitler could not tolerate Rohm’s questioning of his leadership and his call for a national socialist revolution. The widespread urban violence instigated by the SA and the alienation of Hitler’s rich industrial supporters and his allies in the German military were particularly problematic. On June 30, 1934, in what became known as the Night of the Long Knives, Hitler had Rohm shot in Munich’s Stadelheim Prison. From June 30 to July 2, hundreds of other SA leaders were murdered.

Germany and Russia – The Warning Signs in Munich

Germany’s involvement in the Spanish Civil War and its testing of weapons and tactics should have been another warning sign of Hitler’s intentions. In the years leading up to the Second World War, the Allies

that had defeated Imperial Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire at tremendous cost had no desire to confront Hitler as he violated the restrictions the Treaty of Versailles imposed on its armed forces and armaments. France and Great Britain sought peace at any price and the U.S. was firmly in the grip of isolationism.

For historians and political commentators, Munich – a city which plays prominently in the Hitler and Putin eras starting with the ill-fated Beer Hall Putsch in 1923 – is synonymous with appeasement. No newsreel of the origins of the Second World War would be complete without the grainy film clip of a cheering crowd greeting British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain as he stepped off a plane from Munich on September 30, 1938. He was waving the Anglo-German agreement he and Hitler had recently signed, pledging that their two countries would never go to war against each other. Later, in front of 10 Downing Street, Chamberlain told reporters: “I believe it is peace for our time.”

Almost seventy years later, Munich was the site of another warning sign – this time from Putin. At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, the Russian president targeted the U.S. and what he decried as the American’s “almost uncontained hyper use of force in international relations.” Putin denounced American dominance in world affairs saying “No one feels safe!… Of course, such a policy stimulates an arms race.” In a retrospective Wall Street Journal article in 2022, political scientist Andrew A. Michta said that Western leaders failed to recognize Putin’s Munich speech for what it was – “a declaration of war against the West”. In 1938 and 2007, Munich could have been a turning point in the respective Allied responses to Germany and Russia.

Warning Signs Unheeded?

Were NATO and the West guilty of appeasement during this period? Nothing in recent history can compare with the disastrous policy of appeasement pursued by the French and British as Hitler’s troops marched into the Rhineland, Austria and Czechoslovakia. At the end of the first decade of this century and the beginning of the second, the focus of the U.S. and NATO was on the “War on Terror” being fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. Consequently, there was no real appetite or inclination to seriously confront Putin during his war with Georgia or the subsequent invasion of Crimea and the Donbas. The West enriched a potential adversary in Russia by consuming their oil and gas and empowered China through the voluminous consumer goods and technology trade. All the while, they were ignoring the actual and potential aggression of both.

Some measures were taken against Russia in 2014 for its aggression in Crimea and the Donbas. Sanctions applied by the West against Russia were estimated to have cost that country’s economy $140 billion US. These were followed by further sanctions in 2018 – with a ratcheting up of additional sanctions after the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia is currently the most sanctioned country in the world with over 16,000 sanctions on individuals and companies. And while Russia’s economy contracted by 2.1 percent in 2022, the most recent IMF projection is for the Russian GDP to grow at 3.2 percent in 2024 and decline to 1.8 percent in 2025. Oil revenues have cushioned the effect of sanctions, as have Russia’s creative workaround strategies.

The absence of a forceful collective response to German aggression in the years before the Second World War has been widely recognized as a contributing factor to that conflict. Despite the overwhelming

desire for peace among the former allies, their inaction in the face of aggression inadvertently created the conditions for a global conflagration and cataclysmic death, destruction and human misery. Historians broadly agree that the Second World War might have been prevented or the trajectory of events altered with the vigorous application of deterrence, especially in the mid to late 1930s. It remains one of history's great "might-have-beens." The Second World War offers a costly history lesson for present-day Western allies; that peace can best be guaranteed through active deterrence which requires military strength. This lesson was a catalyst for the 1949 Washington Treaty which created NATO. Peace through strength, alliance solidarity and deterring potential aggressors was at the core of NATO's raison d'etre which, despite its issues, remains the most successful and powerful military alliance in history.

Quite the opposite occurred at the end of the First World War. Even though U.S. President Woodrow Wilson was one of the architects of the League of Nations, the U.S. Senate refused to endorse American involvement in the League. To what extent U.S. policymakers at the time may have been guided by George Washington's admonition in his 1796 Farewell Address to avoid "entangling alliances" remains a point of historical debate. So too does the question of whether subsequent American isolationism during the 1920s and '30s and a pronounced lack of Allied solidarity played a role in undermining the concept of collective security upon which the League was based. The issue for policymakers today is how to confront a geopolitical environment that is more and more resembling the 1930s especially if the US retreats into isolationism.

The Erosion of Allied Solidarity and Collective Security in Europe and the U.S.

The Covenant of the League of Nations was a precursor to NATO's Article Five since the League sought to uphold the idea that "an aggressor against any Member State should be considered an aggressor against all the other Member States." The demise of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact was a testament to the effectiveness of deterrence, allied solidarity, collective security and prima facie evidence of NATO's success. Except for the 1990s Balkan War, which erupted with the demise of the former Yugoslavia, the general peace in Europe over the almost eight decades since the end of the Second World War can be directly attributed to NATO. With that peace has come unprecedented economic growth, and, until recently, steady increases in global stability and human security. The relatively recent addition of Finland and Sweden to the Alliance underlines NATO's continuing relevance. However, the rise of right-wing nationalist, populist regimes, and authoritarian leaders in several NATO countries such as Hungary, Slovakia and Turkey have chipped away at alliance solidarity to the point where not all agree on an approach to Ukraine.

Probably the most disturbing development for NATO has been the partisan excesses and divisions in the U.S., long recognized as the anchor of NATO. These domestic political positions have profoundly impacted U.S. defence and foreign policy – not to mention its domestic social and political cohesion. The dysfunctional presidency of Donald Trump added to the domestic political acrimony. On foreign and defence policy, Trump's coddling of authoritarian leaders and his open antagonism towards NATO sent shock waves through the alliance and led to questions about America's strategic leadership. While President Biden has sought to stabilize and enhance relations with NATO partners and re-assert U.S. leadership, the possibility of another Trump presidency after November looms ominously on the horizon and continues to be a source of great apprehension and anxiety within most of NATO.

The U.S. presidential election has brought additional attention to the ‘what if’ question. Donald Trump has boasted that he would end the war in Ukraine in a matter of hours. While there continues to be a complete absence of clarity around Trump’s position on Ukraine, unconfirmed speculation suggests that his “peace plan” would entail Ukraine ceding Crimea as well as the Donbas region of Luhansk and Donetsk and perhaps Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. This flies in the face of President Zelenskyy’s stated goals of recovering all the occupied territories and restoring Ukraine’s 1991 boundaries, having Russia pay reparations and putting Russian leaders on trial for war crimes. It is also completely contrary to NATO’s position which is to support Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

It is doubtful that Trump’s plan would result in anything more than a temporary suspension of hostilities since Putin’s stated war objective, apart from the bogus de-Nazification rationale, is to destroy Ukraine as a sovereign entity and thus prevent it from joining the EU and NATO. Another recent statement by Trump that he would encourage Russia to do “whatever the hell they want” to any NATO member country that doesn’t meet NATO’s two percent defence spending guideline is a stunning and disturbing repudiation of Article Five. Donald Trump is responsible for many historic “firsts” not the least of which is a double impeachment, dozens of indictments and most recently his status as a convicted felon on 34 counts related to falsifying business records to illegally influence the 2016 election. In addition to being a clear and present danger to American democracy based on the “stop the steal” January 6 events and his refusal to commit to abiding by future election results, he now enjoys the dubious status of being the first presidential candidate to be a bona fide threat to international peace and security.

Trump has adopted the “America First” slogan coined by Woodrow Wilson which, although ultimately unsuccessful, was aimed at keeping the U.S. out of the First World War. The slogan was subsequently used by the “America First Committee,” another isolationist group formed before the Second World War. Trump’s ill-conceived utterances and half-cocked foreign and defence policies undermine allied solidarity and the fundamental architecture of Euro-Atlantic security. Worse still, his position is an open invitation for further Russian aggression. It is also an alarming echo of pre-World War Two U.S. isolationism and marks an abject failure to recognize the hard-learned lessons of history which were bought and paid for by the lives of millions of Allied soldiers, including hundreds of thousands of Americans. It is very difficult to believe that choosing the same isolationist path will have different consequences.

It is not an exaggeration to suggest that there is currently a “Fifth Column” operating in the U.S. based within the Republican Party and the right-wing media that is very sympathetic to Vladimir Putin and does not wish to see any further aid to Ukraine. Some of this right-wing antipathy to Ukraine can be traced to tacit support for Putin’s form of ultra-conservative anti-feminist, anti-gay Christian nationalism. Some can likely be traced to Russian disinformation campaigns around the time of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and subsequent influence campaigns in American elections and American politics generally. But Trump’s animus toward Ukraine, and that of his sycophantic Republican party soared to stratospheric levels when Trump was impeached for attempting to coerce Volodymyr Zelenskyy into initiating a bogus corruption investigation into Joe Biden.

With Trump’s current stranglehold on the organization and direction of the Republican Party, Russia’s Fifth Column in the U.S. has been institutionalized within a large portion of the Republican Party which can now be accurately described as isolationist, anti-NATO and anti-Ukraine. A total of 112 Republicans in the House of Representatives voted against the Ukraine assistance package and 15 Republican Senators opposed the aid bill which bundled the aid for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan together. The almost

seven months it took for House Speaker Mike Johnson to bring the aid package to a vote dealt a serious blow to Ukraine's defence, contributed to the further loss of territory to Russia and likely cost many Ukrainian lives.

The vote also laid bare the divisions in the Republican Party on America's role in the world. Many Republican House and Senate representatives rejected support for NATO and Euro-Atlantic security. History could not be clearer in pointing to the fact that such a position would have been completely unthinkable and inconceivable for past Republican presidents from Eisenhower to George H.W. Bush. The other President Bush was quoted in US News and World Report in 2021 as saying that the Republican Party had become "isolationist, protectionist and, to a certain extent, nativist."

The Biden Administration has steadfastly supported traditional U.S. defence and security posture which sees America as the backbone of the Alliance. Ukraine's survival as a democratic nation even after two years of agonizing war against an immoral and unconstrained adversary can be attributed almost exclusively to the financial and military support provided by the Americans. The EU's recent support of €50 billion over the next four years is significant, and other nations have made military and financial contributions. But without question, it has been American military hardware and financial assistance that have been critical to Ukraine's survival thus far. The months ahead will determine whether Ukraine will be able to recover lost ground and regain the offensive to repel the Russian invaders. If Ukraine fails in this effort, a substantial portion of the blame for this loss will rest firmly on the shoulders of Donald Trump and segments of the Republican neo-isolationist congressional caucus.

What would Churchill do?

The erosion of Allied solidarity emanating from some factions of the U.S. Republican Party takes us hauntingly back to the period immediately before the Second World War when courageous political leadership was badly needed and sorely lacking. Among the politicians of his day, Winston Churchill was one of the few determined to warn of the threat posed by Hitler and the measures required to prevent a larger conflict. Despite his moral clarity and stirring eloquence, his call for British rearmament in the pre-war period along with a foreign policy which would confront Hitler fell on deaf ears. Still living with the effects of the horrid slaughter of a generation of young men in the First World War, the British public and their governments of the day were unprepared and unwilling to challenge Nazi aggression. All of this is well-chronicled in The Gathering Storm, the first volume of Churchill's famous six-volume memoir, The Second World War.

As the United States, Canada and other NATO allies confront what should constitute the next steps in a broad strategy to confront Russian aggression, perhaps a pertinent question is: "What would Churchill do?" The question is worth asking if only to further expose the extent to which Putin's motivations and actions in the invasion of Ukraine mimic those which Churchill so resolutely opposed from Hitler. While speculative and hypothetical, it is still worth asking even if the answer is glaringly obvious. There can be little doubt that if Churchill were alive today, he would see rallying the Allies behind an effort to unconditionally defeat war-mongering dictators as a principal task. At the top of that list of dictators would be Vladimir Putin.

The debate over aid to Ukraine provoked much finger-pointing in the U.S. Congress. In The Gathering

Storm, Churchill was not averse to identifying those in the British Parliament whom he saw as "blameworthy" for not recognizing and acting upon the threat Hitler posed, for failing to re-arm Britain in the face of Nazi aggression and, by extension, for the calamity of the Second World War. The words chosen to condemn some of his fellow M.P.s from all parties for their failure to confront aggression could apply equally to the present-day actions and policy positions of parts of the U.S. Republican Party and other NATO allies who have been slow to respond to Ukraine's needs.

Churchill identified the blameworthy as having exhibited a "delight in smooth-sounding platitudes, refusal to face unpleasant facts, desire for popularity and electoral success, irrespective of the vital interests of the state, genuine love of peace and pathetic belief that love can be its sole foundation, obvious lack of intellectual rigour…" These factors, Churchill said, "constituted a picture of British fatuity and fecklessness which, though devoid of guile, was not devoid of guilt" in contributing to the onset of war. In their failure to support Ukraine, parts of the Republican Party and leaders and factions in some NATO countries cannot be said to be devoid of either guile or guilt.

If one is looking for Churchillian insight and inspiration on how he would respond to unprovoked aggression, perhaps the best place to find that would be speeches he delivered during 1940 and 1941 in radio broadcasts to the British House of Commons, and, after the attack on Pearl Harbour, to the U.S. Congress and the Canadian House of Commons. As President John F. Kennedy observed, Churchill "mobilized the English language and sent it into battle." Churchill's speeches from that period were masterpieces of tone, rhythm, content and delivery.

In his speech to Congress on December 26, 1941, Churchill said he found "an Olympian fortitude which, far from being based upon complacency, is only the mask of an inflexible purpose and the proof of a sure, well-grounded confidence in the final outcome." In describing the shared threat, Churchill said: "You do not, I am certain, underrate the severity of the ordeal to which you and we have still to be subjected. The forces ranged against us are enormous. They are bitter, they are ruthless. The wicked men and their factions, who have launched their people on the path of war and conquest, know that they will be called to terrible account if they cannot beat down by force of arms the peoples they have assailed. They will stop at nothing. They have a vast accumulation of war weapons of all kinds."

Turning to the question of Allied resources, Churchill said: "It is quite true that on our side our resources in manpower and materials are far greater than theirs." This is as true today for the conflict in Ukraine as it was in 1941 during the Second World War. In 1941, the U.S. GDP was at $1.1 trillion, the UK's at $344B, the USSR at $360B with Canada's at less than $100B. In contrast, in 1941, the GDP of the Axis powers had Germany at $440B, Japan at $196B and Italy at $144B – less than half of the Allied GDP (all figures in 1990 dollars). Jumping ahead to the present day, the combined GDP of all 32 NATO members amounts to approximately $46 trillion – which is just under half of world GDP. By comparison, Russia's GDP is approximately $2.2 trillion. If we factor in potential adversaries, China's GDP is approximately $18 trillion, Iran's is $413B and North Korea's $28B. As it was during the Second World War, this figure is still less than half of the NATO Allies.

Many other aspects of Churchill's speech to Congress resonate today. He spoke of the flow of munitions to Britain from the U.S. and the need to transition quickly to a war economy. The next two years, said Churchill, "will see us quite definitely in a better position than we are now." He continued: "Some people may be startled or momentarily depressed when…I speak of a long and a hard war. Our peoples would

rather know the truth, sombre though it be. And after all, … we are doing the noblest work in the world, not only defending our hearths and homes, but the cause of freedom in every land." He continued: "Sure I am that this day, now, we are the masters of our fate. That the task which has been set us is not above our strength. That its pangs and toils are not beyond our endurance. As long as we have faith in our cause and an unconquerable willpower, salvation will not be denied us."

Churchill's remarks on the military setbacks both the U.S. and Britain faced in the wake of Japanese aggression in the Pacific echo those experienced by Ukraine. Said Churchill: "Of course, it would have been much better, I freely admit, if we had had enough resources of all kinds to be at full strength at all threatened points. But considering how slowly and reluctantly we brought ourselves to large-scale preparations, and how long these preparations take, we had no right to expect to be in such a fortunate position." Very few military experts expected Ukraine to withstand and hold as much ground as they have. Few foresaw an ongoing conflict two years after the initial Russian invasion. But delays in getting arms and ammunition to defend against Russian offensives have jeopardized earlier gains made by the Ukrainian Army.

On Japanese aggression, Churchill said, "Many people have been astonished that Japan should in a single day have plunged into war against the United States and the British Empire." He added: "Viewed quite dispassionately, in spite of the losses we have suffered and the further punishment we shall have to take, it certainly appears an irrational act." Putin's war on Ukraine can also be seen as an 'irrational act.' The Russian leader failed to predict Ukraine's resolve to defend itself. He failed to predict the response of NATO in support of Ukraine. He failed to predict the tremendous destruction and loss of life on both the Russian and Ukrainian sides. He also failed to predict the damage that has been done to Russia's international reputation and trade relations. He failed to predict Finland and Sweden's response to his aggression and their applications to join NATO. And, finally, he could not have foreseen that he and others in his regime would be subject to ICC arrest warrants. No rational leader in weighing the risks to his country and people would have embarked on the calamitous venture that Putin saw as Russia's destiny.

In his concluding remarks on Japan, perhaps the most important question Churchill raised in his speech to Congress was: "What kind of a people do they think we are? Is it possible that they do not realize that we shall never cease to persevere against them until they have been taught a lesson which they and the world will never forget?" That is a question as pertinent today as it was in 1941. Putin might have felt that he would have a free hand in Ukraine. In the shadow of the disastrous American withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, the internal political divisions in the U.S. and indications that NATO solidarity was fraying, he was entitled to expect the same response as his annexation of Crimea received a decade before. French President Emmanuel Macron's comment in November 2019 that "What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO," could also not have escaped Putin's attention.

Putin might have badly overplayed his hand, but the question of what kind of people "we are" remains relevant today. Do the individual members of NATO have the stomach to make the necessary sacrifices – political, economic and military – to replicate what "the greatest generation" did in defending freedom and democracy from unhinged and megalomaniacal authoritarian dictators? On a personal level, are we as citizens of democratic countries prepared to demand of our leaders the type of strategic decision-making that will punish aggressors and uphold what is referred to so often as the rules-based international order? These are questions that remain unanswered.

In concluding his Washington speech, Churchill reflected on the collective folly of the previous 20 years following the Armistice of 1918. He said: “If we had kept together after the last war, if we had taken common measures for our safety, this renewal of the curse need never have fallen upon us. Do we not owe it to ourselves, to our children, to tormented mankind, to make sure that these catastrophes do not engulf us for the third time?” In retrospect, it seems that if NATO and the West had been more forceful in their response to Russian aggression in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014 perhaps the February 2022 invasion might have been averted. Taking the necessary steps to ensure there is no third time is the question NATO leaders must confront.

Through his inspirational leadership, courage and selflessness, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has been compared to former Polish President Lech Walesa and former Czech President Vaclav Havel. But the most immediate comparison is to a fellow war leader – Churchill. Zelenskyy has done nothing to discourage this. In his speech to the British House of Commons via video link in March of 2022, he chose words that echoed some of Churchill’s most famous lines. He said: “We will not give up and we will not lose. We will fight until the end at sea, in the air. We will continue fighting for our land, whatever the cost.” He concluded his remarks by flashing the Churchill ‘V’ for victory. Just as Putin is not Hitler, neither is Zelenskyy Churchill. As mentioned earlier in this paper, there are no perfect historical analogies.

Conclusion

This piece aimed to explain in more detail what was already largely known to those following the Ukraine conflict in recent years. First, it sought to demonstrate that Putin’s claim that the Ukrainians were Nazis was baseless and completely without foundation and intended primarily for a Russian audience. Second, it sought to illustrate just how similar Putin’s Ukraine modus operandi is to the rationale, means and methods of Hitler. The third aim of was to highlight the dangers of cascading conflict by identifying the similarities between the current geostrategic environment and that which existed before the Second World War. The fourth was to underline how this conflict has become existential for NATO. By revisiting the speeches of Winston Churchill, the essay also sought to drive home the point that for the Western alliance allowing a dictator like Putin to destroy Ukraine will, in the judgement of history, be seen as a catastrophic failure. NATO was, after all, founded to defend the basic architecture of Euro-Atlantic security and the rules-based international order. NATO must, consequently, do everything in its power to ensure a Ukrainian victory.

In closing, I would invite the reader to imagine Churchill standing in the British House of Commons as the newly appointed Prime Minister on May 13, 1940, delivering his “Blood, Sweat, Toil and Tears” speech. A portion of that speech could just as easily have been written for President Zelenskyy:

“We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I can say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory, victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival…. But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail among men. At this

time, I feel entitled to claim the aid of all, and I say, “come then, let us go forward together with our united strength.”

Notes

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