



Consequence of being clueless in Ukraine

March 3, 2022 **E. Wayne Merry** *The Hill*

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The invasion of Ukraine is the worst foreign policy misjudgment to come out of Moscow since the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.

Yes, of course, later conflicts were of much greater importance for Russia and the world. But in both World Wars, the Russian and Soviet leaderships had a broad, general understanding of what they were getting into. Their blunders in both wars were colossal from the outset, but they were not clueless in the way the Czar and his advisors had been in engaging the newly-emerged Japanese “great power” in East Asia.

Putin and his advisers bear comparison with Nicholas II and his team for unleashing a war that cannot but inflict massive and long-lasting damage on the Russian nation and empire. They are truly clueless in a way which bears little comparison with Stalin, Hitler, Milosevic, Saddam or such. They also will do great harm to the Ukrainian people — but will reinforce the identity and integrity of the Ukrainian nation and republic. What kind of Russian state may emerge is harder to predict, but grim to anticipate.

Putin’s speeches on Ukraine are very odd in comparison with his normal presentations. Usually the man is well-prepared, logical and coherent. Whether you agreed with his argument or not, he was impressive. In his recent justifications for war, however, he has just been scary. Putin’s rhetoric has been shallow, internally rambling and aimed in part — seemingly — at himself.

The public session of the Russian Security Council in the grandeur of the Kremlin’s St. Catherine Hall on Feb. 21 was bizarre. In my six years as a political reporting officer at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, I witnessed many political performances, from Brezhnev through Yeltsin. This one was in a class of its own, in no small measure because most of the participants transparently were embarrassed, either because they knew what they said was false or because they knew the Russian people watching on television must suspect it was false. Even Brezhnev treated his politburo with more collegial respect. The St. Catherine’s Hall spectacle was conducted for one obvious purpose: to establish collective responsibility among the participants so they all are stuck with the ship if it should go down.

In his two decades atop the greasy pole of power, Vladimir Putin has often demonstrated genuine popular leadership abilities. The broad consent of the governed he enjoys has not been that of a Stalin (based on fear) or a Brezhnev (based on habit), but on positive performance in management of the economy and restoration of Russia’s status in the world. His error, as that of many others, was not exiting the political stage while still ahead.

In recent weeks, however, there has not been a tincture of genuine leadership in Putin’s public appearances. He has been the man in command, but not the leader. His subordinates displayed anything but teamwork. At best, they communicated through their faces and gestures that they just hoped for the best — for themselves, but not necessarily for their country.

Putin’s extensive diatribes about Ukraine are replete with error. To me, it is apparent the man knows very little about the place. I have visited Ukraine many times over four decades, and I now suspect I have had more Ukrainian mud on my shoes and many, many more conversations with Ukrainians than has Putin. I do not claim expertise on the country, but at least familiarity. Putin cannot. He is consumed with a vision about Ukraine based on stereotypes, bias, error and falsehood. It is easy to misjudge Ukraine because it is a large, diverse, dynamic place undergoing multi-generational transformation. But, for Putin, none of that exists.

Putin is, therefore, as clueless about the country he is invading as Nicholas II was about the dynamic and modern Japan that had emerged from the Meiji Restoration. Whatever the consequences of war in either case, the outcome of Russian policy misjudgment must be failure.

Russia endured defeat on land and sea in 1904-05, but the real story of that war was the revulsion of the Russian people when they learned what their government had sent their sons into. Their blame was targeted at the top — the Czar and his immediate government — in the Revolution of 1905. Nicholas survived the uprising through massive use of force against his people, but his days and those of his dynasty were numbered.

How Putin’s war in Ukraine will develop remains to be seen. However, the Russian public is already learning what their government has sent their sons into.

In a world of social media, there is no hiding the images of dead Russians killed by volunteer Ukrainians rallying to their country’s defense, even if they die as well. What can happen in 1905, can happen in 2022.

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