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Russia Must Stop Glorifying War in Ukraine

By Vladislav Inozemtsev

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The ruble's rapid collapse at the end of 2014 — and the resulting rush to buy foreign currency, the mobs of shoppers snatching up consumer goods and the panic on the financial markets — somewhat overshadowed the main event of the outgoing political season: the fact that Russia is once again at war.

Ever since former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev pulled the last Soviet troops out of Afghanistan 25 years ago, Russia has waged only one, brief war beyond its borders: the five-day conflict with Georgia in 2008, which was a short operation that then-President Dmitry Medvedev tried to quickly downplay and push from the public spotlight. The current situation is very different.

By occupying and annexing Crimea, covertly deploying troops to eastern Ukraine and arming and supporting separatists in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics," Russia has not only become involved in a new war in Europe, but has even plunged into an all-out apology in defense of war. The rhetoric of aggression and arguments justifying the use

of force have become part of Russia's standard informational milieu and the most significant and dangerous change this country has undergone.

The ability to achieve and maintain peace is the most important feature distinguishing a civilized people from savages. Murder does not and cannot have any justification. Every human life is priceless. In arguing on behalf of a "just" war, Russian leaders deny this basic truth and treat people as a faceless mass to be used in their political game. And it is only a short step from that position to justifying any crime — no matter how heinous.

This is the step that the Russian authorities took this past year. The Russian people will have to cope with its consequences far longer than with the problems caused by this government's incompetent economic policies or the inept actions of the West in its attempt to curb Russian aggression in Ukraine.

War has always been, is now and will forever remain the greatest crime that humans can commit. It is not justified by any considerations of national security, the supposed need for territorial expansion, the desire to restore "historical justice" or any ethnic or religious dogmas. A nation is simply a very large community of individuals, and leaders' claims that they are acting to protect citizens' lives and security by pursing aggressive policies abroad is nothing but demagoguery.

History concerns the past, whereas human life is focused on the future — and it is for the sake of the future that we must strive to improve and perfect ourselves, and thereby society. War is never noble and just. It always brings tears, blood, death and misery.

The only thing that could justifiably motivate a person to take up arms is the prospect of the mass extermination of his people, the threat of genocide or the scourge of ethnic "cleansing." Every other territorial, historical or political claim, according to the ethic of the modern era, must find resolution solely through diplomatic means.

War has shifted to the periphery of world affairs, the unfortunate fate of many less developed nations.

In addition, the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st have witnessed not only a sharp decline in the probability of war in developed countries, but also a decline in the effectiveness of military force. Just 100 years ago, a few empires successfully ruled the whole world with the help of armies whose sizes pale in comparison with the massive armies of today.

The situation has changed radically. All of the world's great powers have lost wars that they waged during the last half century. First France and later the United States suffered humiliating defeats in Indochina. The Soviet Union significantly shortened its own allotted lifespan with its venture in Afghanistan — from which it was ultimately forced to withdraw, leaving its puppet government there to the whims of fate.

Decades later, the coalition forces striving to eliminate al-Qaida in Afghanistan essentially met defeat. And it is now quite clear that the U.S. and Britain have lost the war in Iraq, thereby facilitating the rise of an Islamist resistance movement that could prove a headache for the world for many years to come.

Because the people who start wars have only a remote understanding of morality, they might instead be swayed by the fact that war in the 21st century is not only outdated, but also terribly ineffective. However, I understand that with such leaders, appealing to reason is no more productive than searching for signs of morality in their character.

Political leaders have been exploiting military history in recent years more than any other subject, but they forget that Russia, like any other European state, was no paragon of peacefulness during the past 500 years. Russia was always the aggressor in the series of wars it fought against Turkey that began in the late 17th century, and it used each confrontation to incrementally increase its territory.

Russia also fought a war of conquest against Sweden in the early 18th century. Even Russia's war against Napoleon began not at Neman in 1812, but at Austerlitz in 1805. And as for the conquest of the North Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia's actions speak for themselves.

World War II put an end to European military history. It would seem that Russia, as a country that suffered the full horror of that war, would have no interest in starting another military conflict. Now Moscow has not only begun the forceful repartitioning of another country's territory, but also a large-scale campaign to justify and even glorify those actions.

A European country that nobody intends to attack and yet revels in military adventurism and fosters a culture of violence has no future. I repeat: No territory is worth aggression and death. Under no circumstances should Europe — including Ukraine — attempt to appease Moscow or stoop to its level of behavior.

Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko is correct in not directly opposing Moscow with military force and in essentially giving up the breakaway regions to Russia. Any people that seize territory belonging to another country will never prosper or find any measure of happiness. In fact, such actions rob them of their own status as "a people" and reduce them to a mob united only by a blind belief in their leader.

I am infinitely saddened that Russia chose the path of a rogue state this past year. It will bring neither glory to its leaders nor happiness to its people — not this year or in the years to come.

Vladislav Inozemtsev is the director of the Center for Post-Industrial Studies in Moscow and a newly appointed non-resident Senior Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington.

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