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Why Russians Are Hostages to Putin

How the Russian leader turned a hybrid war turned into a hot war.

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Anton Vergun / TASS

Russia has begun an invasion of Ukraine. What seemed impossible — "Do the Russians want war? But of course not, never" — has happened. A person who is ready to turn Russian boys into unknown soldiers, and in the absence of aggression against Russia cynically appeals to the memory of World War II, is using it as a historical shield to defend himself.

The "bombing of Voronezh" has begun. The evolution of Russia's political regime has reached the stage when its authoritarian character has done the impossible — converted a hybrid war with Ukraine, and in fact with the West, as well as with its own people, who for long years knew what war was only from the television, into a more specific hot phase.

Those who suggested that there would be no war and that an invasion was impossible were judging Putin by rational criteria, just as in the fall of 1939 the Finnish leadership judged Stalin by rational criteria before the beginning of the Winter War. But dictators are too

irrational by nature.

Putin is an armchair expert with the powers of the president of a nuclear power. And by the way, it was largely because Ukraine turned its nuclear weapons over to Russia that Crimea remained in Ukraine in the early 1990s. For this armchair expert it is insufficient to rule in his own country, where he has completely suppressed the opposition and civil society, he needs the whole world.

For the moment, this world does not live according to his rules, but now there will be an operation to enforce life according to these rules without rules. As Putin has put it, the "Soviet totalitarian regime" incorrectly divided the territory of the empire, limiting the rights of ethnic Russians, and now the time has come to redistribute the territory of the empire — already a former empire — anew.

An "escalation on the border," a provocation organized by the Kremlin itself, is being used as a pretext for the invasion. That old Stalinist recipe. As in the case of Finland in 1939, the most important task of a military campaign, a minimally rational goal, is absent.

In Putin's speech there is a motif with historical resonance from that year of 1939, when in September Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia were annexed and Poland dismembered. This is the concept of the "liberation" of fraternal peoples from a hostile government, in Putin's words, "the protection of people." In the case of 2022, external force will determine for the people, who chose a president for themselves in free elections, what kind of leadership they should have.

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The "demilitarization" and "denazification" of Ukraine — this is that very same Stalinist motif of "liberation," the representation of the legally elected authorities of a foreign country as enemies of its own people, in Putin's words, a "junta." And referring to the UN Charter and international law in this situation looks, to put it delicately, completely inappropriate.

"Strength and readiness to fight are the foundation of independence and sovereignty" – this really is something amazing. Putin has simply transformed the idea of sovereignty into a fetish, a justification for war. This amounts to extremely archaic thinking from the first half of the 20th century. The idea of an "attack" on Russia, when nobody is attacking it, is primitive, but for the indifferent majority of the population this is a sufficient explanation for Putinist militarism.

The cynical cloaking of aggression with the memory of the Great Patriotic War (World War II) is also a predictable tactic. While preparing for the invasion, Putin placed wreaths at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

A person who is ready to turn Russian boys into unknown soldiers, moreover in the absence of any aggression toward Russia, calls upon the memory of that great war, using it as a historical shield to defend himself. And he covers himself with a human shield, consisting of those who should have lived and not died, worked peacefully, and not fought. For Putin, the people of Russia are a cartridge, disposable material to diminish the imperial phantom pains that

torment him.

The so-called elites have discovered their managerial impotence in a rigidly authoritarian regime. None of those who surround Putin could stop the war, or even in some way influence this catastrophic decision by the president. His war cabinet only assented amid stammers. The "Politburo," sitting at a respectful distance from the president, was presented to the world and has now been "anointed" with overall responsibility for the war.

These people have not merely gone down in history, they have put their foot in it. No one asked the financial and economic elite, which are now raking in the consequences of the war. such is the real influence of these people on the most important political decisions — absolutely zero.

Since the suppression of protests in early 2021, there are no figures left in the Russian government who are capable of contradicting Putin. The final brick has been set in place in the house of autocracy.

The extreme cynicism of Russian propaganda, which ridiculed the very threat of invasion and the "hysteria" of the West, should have become obvious to Russians themselves. But they will deceive themselves, to justify their authorities, they will try not to see what is happening as a war and Russian aggression, and they will hope for a swift peace. Such are the contradictory qualities of Russian public opinion.

What is taking place resembles the Crimean campaign. But this is worse than Crimea, because this time the affair will not be resolved "without a shot being fired." Because Russian boys will place their lives in danger not for the Motherland, not to repel the attack of an aggressor, but for the arrogance of a political regime that has turned Russia into a world pariah, an international spoiler, a global nightmare.

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For "jubilant" Russians much will change. Russia's ruling elite is not afraid of sanctions. They have nothing to fear, but the standard of living for ordinary Russians may well degrade substantially, as well as their way of life, their psychology, their education, and their understanding of good and evil. Russians are now completely identified in the eyes of the world with the Kremlin. Discredited by the Kremlin. They are now on the side of evil, and if their national psychology permits them to justify war, it will spoil the nation, make it dysfunctional, unconstructive, uncreative.

War and its justification marks the degradation of a nation, a degradation that is spiritual above all, but also social and economic. Putin has set his nation against the entire world, turning Russian citizens into hostages of ideas that are hard to imagine in the 21st century. The global spoiler has turned into a global aggressor.

One of the most important characteristics of the Putinist regime are the games it plays with semantics, its ability to flip the meaning of concepts. The concept of "human rights," for example. Worse, the regime designates war as "peace" and aggression against the rules of the civilized world as a denazification and demilitarization operation. Demilitarization through

military means – this is a highly specific technology.

In Putin's mind, somebody has taken Ukraine hostage. In fact, it is Russians who are hostage to Putin. On Feb. 24 they woke up in what seemed to be the same Putinist Russia – but in fact they are now in another country, where the way of life and mass consciousness will change drastically. What has taken place is far more serious in its political, moral and psychological consequences than the operation in Georgia in 2008, the Crimean campaign and even the war in the Donbass in 2014-2015.

Of course, average Russians, "lazy militarists" watching the war on television or on the screens of their computers and listening to the history lectures of the commander-in-chief, have not yet realized this. The realization will come later. And perhaps they will even sober up.

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