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Putin Can Learn 3 Big Lessons From World War I

By Konstantin Gaivoronsky

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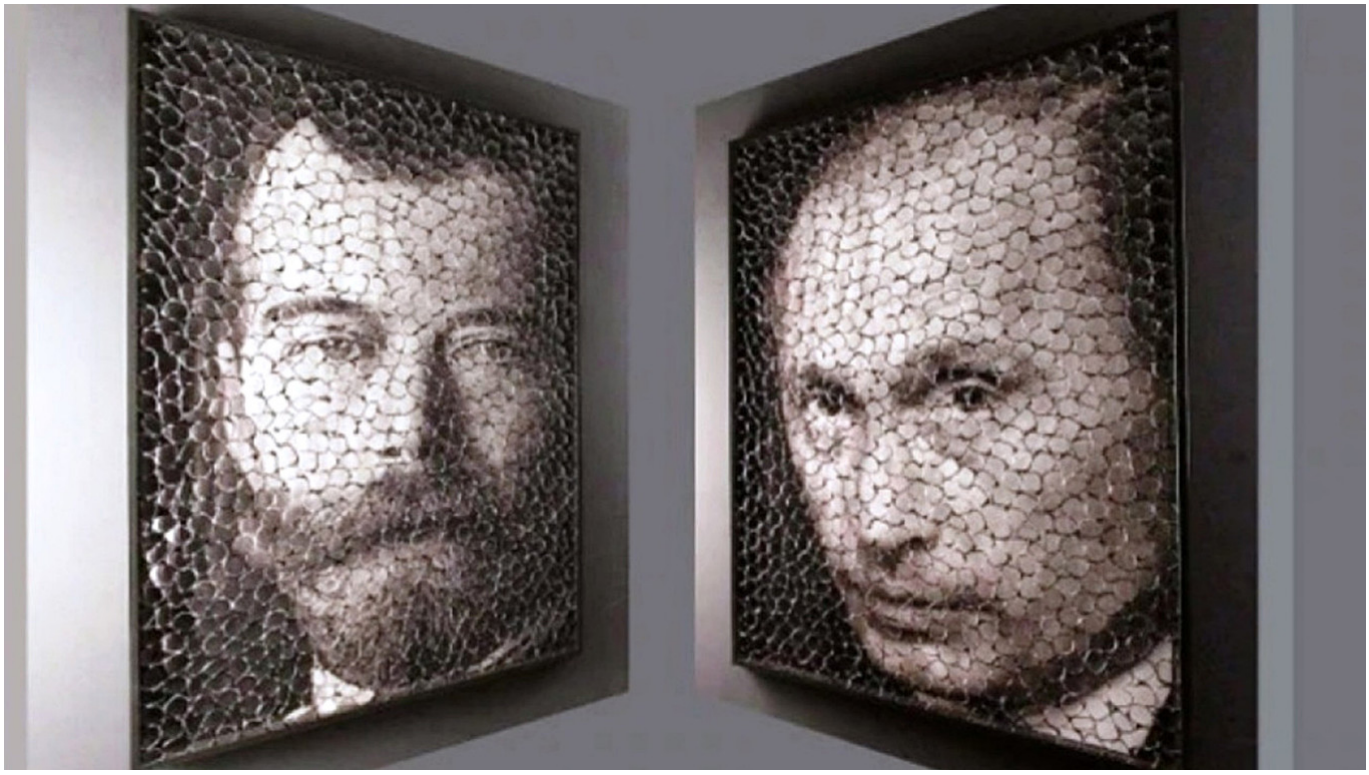

Tsar Nicholas II of Russia and Vladimir Putin. **David Datuna**

It has become commonplace to compare the war in Ukraine to World War I, with its desolate blasted landscapes and grinding trench warfare. Beyond the battlefields, there are political parallels as well.

Last year, Alexei Bayer, editor of The Globalist publication, published an article in which he argues that President Vladimir Putin is ignoring the lessons of that war.

In his view, Putin may soon discover that Russia is too exhausted to keep fighting and, just like Kaiser Wilhelm, may face a full-scale uprising by a people he dragged into an entirely unnecessary, stupid and bloody war.

Bayer even wonders how Putin, who speaks fluent German, failed to draw the key lessons from German history as they relate to Russia.

The answer is very simple.

Firstly because Putin likely considers the collapse of the Russian Empire in February 1917 more important than Germany's interwar fate.

Second, people often draw whatever lessons they want from history. Putin, it seems, has indeed drawn the conclusions that matter most to him. One only has to try to look at it through his eyes.

Russia lost World War I in part because of excessive mobilization. That truth is not obvious today, but 100 years ago it was clearly articulated by analysts and direct participants alike.

The Russian Empire mobilized around 15.5 million men into the army, which allowed it to maintain a force of roughly 7 million at any one time. Such numbers were hugely excessive for that war and left the country with too many unproductive mouths to feed.

World War I very quickly turned into what the Germans called "Materialschlacht" — a battle of materiel — whoever fired more explosives in metal casings at those trenches, not how much cannon fodder they packed into them. By that measure, the Russian army lagged behind the Germans throughout the war by a factor of two to eight.

According to Soviet military specialists, the ideal size for the war would have been 3-3.5 million men. Officers at the time put the figure at 4.2 million, believing they could compensate for the shortage of shells and heavy artillery with "human material."

With so many men mobilized and 5 million horses procured for the army, the country ran short of labor and draught animals and logistics began to crack. At the same time, railway infrastructure collapsed and the resulting lack of transport led to bread shortages in Petrograd, mass unrest and the fall of the monarchy.

Lieutenant Colonel Verkhovsky concluded that the only way to continue the war would be to demobilize partially, as "absurd" as it sounded. In 1917, some military men proposed exactly this to the Provisional Government.

That promising plan could not be implemented for political reasons. Everyone understood that such a volunteer army would hang their supposedly provisional leaders themselves as soon as the war ended.

Today, Putin faces no such political constraints. We are witnessing the implementation of precisely the idea that Russia has a volunteer army, fighting in relatively small numbers.

Small numbers, because the Russian command is conducting combat operations along a strictly limited front line. It is not trying to stretch that line at all, precisely in order to avoid mobilization. The first attempt at mobilization in autumn 2022 also turned out to be the last. Tellingly, even when Ukraine opened a new front in the Kursk region in summer 2024, Putin preferred to turn to North Korea for help rather than raise billboards in the cities calling on Russians to defend their Fatherland.

It is possible that the Kremlin will have to conduct a new round of mobilization in one form or another. But for now, Russia's mobilization efforts then and now are simply incomparable to

their scale in World War I.

The February Revolution in Russia did not begin when soldiers sent into the streets of Petrograd to suppress unrest shot their officers and sided with demonstrators. It began at the moment when the Provisional Committee of the State Duma proclaimed itself the new authority in the capital.

The Duma legitimized the soldiers' revolt across the country. As soon as this happened, the supreme command of the Russian army briefly turned into an independent political actor, choosing between loyalty to two branches of power: the legislative branch, represented by the revolutionary Duma, and the executive branch, represented by the Tsar. The Duma's legitimacy in the eyes of the generals prevailed, and Nicholas II was offered an ultimatum he could not refuse and signed the manifesto abdicating the throne.

Before February 1917, the State Duma already possessed what political science would dryly call its own political agency. As people would say today, its approval rating was much higher than Nicholas II's. At a moment of crisis, this proved enough, with some help from the military, to snatch the levers of government from the emperor's hands.

"Victory was stolen by those who called for the defeat of their own army, sowed discord inside Russia, rushed toward power and betrayed national interests," Putin said on Aug. 1, 2014, at the unveiling of a monument to the heroes of World War I in Moscow. Judging by those words, he learned this lesson well too.

Today, all opposition that might have "rushed toward power" have been crushed and pushed beyond Russia's borders. And since it is easiest to rush toward power when one is already built into its structure, the power vertical has also been purged until it resembles the Alexander Column: a lone figure at the top, with no one not only beside him, but even below him within sight.

Not one branch of government allows itself even a hint of opposition to the general line. It is absolutely impossible to imagine today's Duma thunderously asking "Is this stupidity or treason?" Nobody but the president has any real power. As for the pro-war bloggers venting their frustration, they can screech as much as they like in their Telegram channels.

To paraphrase the main ideologue of Russian autocracy, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, today's Russia is an icy political desert. Any dashing horseman galloping across it — even if his name is Prigozhin — will find no alternative legitimacy in the surrounding 10,000 kilometers. Compared with today, the February of 1917 was a blooming sociopolitical garden: there was the Duma, the military-industrial committees, Zemgor and other points around which systemic opposition could gather.

If Putin examined the fall of Kaiser Wilhelm II, he would find the factors outlined above: excessive mobilization and a passive Reichstag that awakened at the worst possible moment. Plus a third factor: a powerful, charismatic military leader.

The victory at the Battle of Tannenberg, won under Paul von Hindenburg's formal command, instantly made the field marshal into an icon. Formally, Wilhelm II remained commander in

chief, but in the public mind, Hindenburg became the embodiment of the German Empire's military will.

His predecessor as chief of the General Staff, General Falkenhayn, warned the kaiser: "If Your Majesty agrees to appoint Hindenburg to this post, Your Majesty will cease to be emperor."

But Wilhelm II could no longer refuse: the country placed all its hopes in Hindenburg and saw him as the guarantee of victory. The kaiser himself understood that he was gradually being transformed from the source of power into its ceremonial decoration, but he could no longer force the political system to revolve around him again. It had independently changed orbit.

As often happens, the country remained loyal to its idol to the end. In November 1918, no one cared anymore what would happen to Wilhelm. All eyes were fixed on Hindenburg. Would the field marshal remain at the head of the supreme command? He would! Well then, splendid: if Hindenburg exists, Germany exists.

The lesson is obvious to any autocrat: over time, a popular commander becomes not an asset, but a threat. It is not even clear which is more dangerous: to win with such a Hindenburg, or to lose without him. So there will be no Hindenburgs in the form of Surovikins, Petrovs and others whose names we will therefore never know. There will be no new Brusilovs or Kornilovs in this war.

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With the modern development of the repressive apparatus, Putin's system clearly does not face the threat of a popular uprising. The danger, if it exists, is more likely to come from within the system itself. Only a very superficial observer would have mistaken Yevgeny Prigozhin's mutiny for a popular uprising.

And here it is Putin himself who should instruct his elites to study and learn from Germany's effort to soften its inevitable punishment at the hands of its victorious opponents.

By the end of World War I, the kaiser had become toxic for the German establishment. In the collective imagination of the Allies, he had become the Antichrist incarnate, the man who single-handedly plunged Europe into a monstrous slaughter.

Logically, in autumn 1918, a cunning plan matured among Germany's leadership: if they could not get rid of this mark of Cain on the country's forehead, perhaps they could at least disguise it. They decided to turn the Second Reich into something resembling the British constitutional monarchy. Democracies supposedly do not fight each other, after all.

Externally, this looked like the transfer of real power to the Reichstag, from whose majority parties the new government was formed. But the experiment quickly spun out of control, turning into the real November Revolution. Second and most importantly, it made no difference. The peace terms read out to the Germans at Versailles were exactly the same as they would have been had Kaiser Wilhelm II never abdicated.

I can almost hear Putin pointing out to Russia's elites that if they turn on him, they will suffer all the same.

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If the history of World War I as it applies to the Russian and German empires teaches autocrats anything, it is that losing wars is not as dangerous as allowing independent centers of legitimacy to exist. Everything else — shortages of bread or gasoline, failures at the front and so on — merely determines the moment when power seems to flow by itself from one such center to another.

So military triumphs are a good thing. But control over political institutions is more reliable. Military defeat in itself rarely topples authoritarian regimes. It merely creates the conditions that divide elites and pits them against each other. So long as the question is not asked, the regime is stable.

Two obvious examples lie on the surface.

In October 1941, the situation on the Soviet-German front could be described with one word: catastrophe. Compared with that, in purely military terms, the position of the Russian army in February 1917 was quite stable.

Likewise, Germans in early 1945 were living much worse than in late 1918 — if only because carpet bombing of cities was not yet practiced in World War I — and there is nothing to say about the situation on the fronts closing in like pincers.

Nevertheless, it was not the Soviet Union that collapsed, but the Russian Empire. Kaiser's Germany crumbled before a single Entente soldier had set foot on its territory, while the Third Reich fought until the end of its physical existence, with the army and the people obeying unquestioningly.

That is because both dictatorial regimes — Soviet and Nazi — had developed repressive apparatuses and powerful systems for indoctrinating the population, while lacking even a hint of a competitive political system.

So, contrary to Alexei Bayer's view, Putin has not merely learned the lessons of World War I. He has put them into practice.

What will happen next, we do not know. But there will certainly be no analogue of February 1917 in Russia or November 1918 in Germany.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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