

War in Ukraine Backstories You Don't Hear (Part Three)

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This is the third episode in a series of podcasts about critical aspects of the war in Ukraine which are rarely, if ever, mentioned in media or political discussions of the conflict. Among other things, I'm using the war as a case study to illustrate why leaders must never assess conflict in their organization superficially. The aggravating factors may be many and deep.

In the first two programs we focused on the Ukrainians themselves. We looked at historical and cultural factors which have shaped their psyche and made them so determined to stand up against an enemy that dwarfs them in terms of size, population, and resources.

Today we change our vantage point. We look at the war through the eyes of Russia. We examine perceptions of Ukraine and Ukrainians which I commonly encountered in Russia. And since the United States has allied itself so closely with Ukraine during this conflict, I will venture into how the U.S. is viewed by many Russians on the street.

For those who may be joining this series for the first time, let me share how my life has intersected with Russia and Ukraine for decades. I hold a master's degree in diplomatic and military history, most of my study centered on world affairs ten years either side of the Second World War. Of course, Russia figured large in the diplomatic arena during that period. Later, I completed a PhD at UCLA in the intellectual and cultural history of early modern Europe, with considerable study of eastern Europe.

Concurrently, I was serving as a intelligence officer in the naval reserve. Because of my academic background, I was frequently tasked to provide strategic and geo-political assessments of Russia. Once the Iron Curtain fell, several American non-profits turned to me as an advisor to help them develop humanitarian initiatives both in Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. Eventually this led to me serving as CEO of a humanitarian organization operating throughout Eastern Europe. I managed offices in St. Petersburg, Russia and Donetsk, Ukraine and smaller satellite operations in several Russian cities.

As an adjunct to this work, I wrote three textbooks at the request of ministries of education in sprawling regions of Russia. These books supported a concerted effort by Russian educators to

reintroduce Judaeo-Christian ethics to the curriculum of their classrooms to replace the communist ideology of the past seven decades.

In support of this effort, I routinely taught weeklong seminars for hundreds of secondary teachers and university professors in major cities like Tomsk, Novosibirsk, and Barnaul, Siberia. Needless to say, a week of give-and-take about ethics with several dozen highly educated teachers drew me into countless revealing conversations about how Russians felt about themselves, their country, the world, and Americans in general.

It's against that background that I am offering my observations in today's program. Thanks again for joining me for this episode of Upsize Your Leadership.

Even though my sympathies are with Ukraine in the current conflict, I tell you that I am amazed at Russia and some of the things that the Russians have been able to accomplish. Not the least of these is their success at simply holding together a nation of such immense size for so long.

We Americans think of the U.S. as a big country, with our 48 contiguous states spanning four time zones. Russia, by contrast, covers eleven time zones. In size, it dwarfs any other nation on the planet. And had Russia not sold us Alaska in the nineteenth century, it would today stretch halfway around the globe.

The sheer fact that they have been able to hold a nation of that size together for centuries is a striking feat – especially when you consider that within that expanse, 35 official languages are spoken. As you might presume, Russian is the primary language and is also the language of national discourse and literature. But the recognition of 35 official languages speaks to the ethnic diversity within Russia.

Why do I begin by emphasizing the immense size of Russia? I do so to underscore that Russia has long been an expansionist country. The invasion of Ukraine is simply another instance of Russian military expansion which dates back centuries.

One impetus for this expansionist spirit has been protection. Internally, Russia does not abound with lines of defense imposed by nature – things such as long, daunting mountain ranges or sprawling deserts. Consequently, invading armies have faced few physical obstacles in marching great distances across Russia.

The most pivotal of these invasions came from the east in the 13th century, when the Mongols swept in, crushed the Russian military, and ruled the country for 240 years. Russia then rid itself of the Mongol yoke, only to be invaded by Napoleon in 1812. At great loss of life and fortune, Napoleon was repulsed. But a century later, Hitler made an even more devastating invasion, resulting in the infamous battles of Leningrad and Stalingrad, some of the most horrendous urban warfare ever seen.

These invasions and the heroic effort to resist them have sculpted Russian nationalism and outlooks. It's indicative that the Russian name for Napoleon's invasion is the Patriotic War and the name for Hitler's invasion is the Great Patriotic War. In the Russian mind, defense against invasion, patriotism, and nationalism are all tightly bundled together.

Moreover, the memory of these invasions has left an enduring stamp on the Russian spirit. In a word, I found Russians at all levels of society paranoid about the world, both east and west. They look with a suspicious eye toward China, sensing (not without cause) that China would love an opportunity to seize Siberia, which holds the largest trove of untapped natural resources in the world.

Likewise, they see the NATO alliance in Europe as the staging ground for some future invasion from the west, an invasion which they see as following in the steps of Napoleon and Hitler. We think of NATO as a defensive alliance, to be activated only in the event of attack. Russians see it as an offensive alliance, merely waiting for the right opportunity to attack.

For the Russians, therefore, the great strategic question is how to fend off invasion. We Americans rarely give that question much thought, because the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the Gulf of Mexico serve as massive buffers against any would-be invader. But with the Russians, preoccupation with the danger of invasion is ever-present. To them, no one outside their borders is a genuine friend in the sense that we think of Canada and Great Britain as friends.

Long ago, therefore, the Russians concluded that without oceans or deserts to protect their European cities, they had to put distance between themselves and potential invaders by controlling huge swaths of protective territory. This vastness was crucial to their defeat of both Napoleon and Hitler. By mounting a fighting retreat over an extensive expanse, they stretched out the invaders' lines of supply. Eventually the enemy's starvation and lack of supply and reinforcement turned the tide in Russia's favor.

During the Cold War, day-to-day Russians saw the Warsaw Pact as a buffer against another invasion from the west. When the Soviet Union collapsed and former Warsaw Pact nations began joining NATO, Russia was initially in too much chaos to offer anything more than verbal objections to this development. But once Russia stabilized its government and its currency, the old paranoia about NATO came to the fore once more. They saw NATO as stripping them of their western buffer zone.

And that's where Ukraine enters our discussion today. The name Ukraine comes from a word which sometimes meant "territory" or "country," but could also mean "borderland." And that's how imperial Russia viewed Ukraine: it was the borderland that buffered Russia from invasion from the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

My older listeners will recall the days when we referred to Ukraine as "the Ukraine." That's how we and the British Anglicized the Russian terminology which made Ukraine "the borderland," or "the buffer."

When the United Nations was formed, the Soviet Union demanded that Ukraine be treated as a separate nation from the USSR. They did it, of course, to give the Soviet bloc an additional vote in the U.N. General Assembly. Many in the West thus began to think of Ukraine as a separate entity from Russia. But in their heart of hearts, the Russians never saw it that way.

Yet, because Russia and Ukraine held separate seats in the U.N., many in the West began to think of Russia and Ukraine as different nations. Thus, it was only natural that, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, voices were soon heard suggesting that Ukraine should join NATO, as Poland, its neighbor to the north, had already done. It goes without saying that this prospect stirred up Russian paranoia even more. In the Russian worldview, Ukraine membership in NATO would put the potential invader (i.e., NATO) literally on Russia's doorstep.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Russia reversed course. No longer did it insist that Ukraine be treated as an independent nation. Rather, the Russian argument now is that Ukraine has always been part of historic Russia and should be part of it in the future. Putin has openly spoken of reannexing Ukraine in its entirety. And given his initial attack on Kyiv (immediately turned back by the Ukrainians), it appears that the total absorption of Ukraine was his original war aim. Nor has that aim been forgotten. Some of Russia's most prominent political figures are currently calling for the complete annihilation of Ukraine. Former president Dmitry Medvedev did so in a widely publicized speech within just the past three weeks.

It's difficult from afar to judge the degree to which Russians as a whole share the official view that Ukraine must be completely reincorporated into Russia's sphere of influence, if not its borders. Censorship of dissenting voices is now as tenaciously enforced under Putin as it was under the Communist era, so much so that accurate gauges of Russian public opinion are hard to come by.

Some in the West would dismiss statements like those of Medvedev as mere political bluster and rhetoric, with no real substance or support behind them. The Ukrainians can't take the chance that his words are only bluster. That's why they push back against any peace proposal which would partition Ukraine into an independent region and a Russian-controlled zone. Under such a settlement, they fear, Russia will merely regroup and set out afresh to absorb the entirety of Ukraine.

For the sake of this podcast, however, let's imagine a scenario in which the Russian people do not support the forced annexation of Ukraine. Does that lessen the likelihood that Russia will curtail its efforts to absorb Ukraine? In my judgment, what the population feels on this matter is largely irrelevant to how events will play out. One of the things which struck me most about the man and woman on the street in Russia was their resignation to the ultimate dictates of Moscow.

Because so much of my work was in Siberia, many people with whom I associated were descendants of dissidents banished to Siberia by either czarist or Communist regimes. As was true throughout Russia, these acquaintances of mine were bright and extremely well-read people. One genuine benefit that Marxism bestowed on Russia was an amazing literacy rate. And with long, bitter, dark winters, Russians read vociferously to pass the time. Even common laborers were often deeply familiar with the world's literary masterpieces. Being so literate, Russian citizens frequently formed opinions of their own which ran counter to prevailing policies in Moscow.

Yet, even when they dared to express dissenting views about governmental policies, my friends in Siberia often did so with a shrug of the shoulders. "But what can you do?" they would say. They saw themselves with few options other than acceding to government directives. Because Russia has historically made such exceptional contributions to art, literature, music, theater, and science, I was unprepared for the level of resignation which I encountered in the general populace.

To make matters worse, Communist totalitarianism had made people horrendously suspicious. Spies were everywhere during the Marxist era. In fact, when the Soviet Union fell, some 200,000 people learned for the first time that their spouse was a KGB operative.

This gave rise to an intriguing phenomenon. Almost everyone lived in apartment complexes, and in the side yards of many apartments were rows of metal sheds about the size of a single-car garage. They fulfilled no function as garages, since few people could afford an automobile.

But there always seemed to be several men crowded around the door to these buildings or, in bitter weather, huddled inside around an open fire. When I asked about these gatherings, my landlady (whose family members had spent time in Soviet gulags) explained that the men knew that the KGB did not usually bug these metal sheds. Therefore, they were the one place where men could meet and talk freely.

Because spying was so rampant, people were slow to trust strangers or newcomers. My seminars with teachers typically lasted five days. I came to expect that for the first two days, people would sit staring expressionless at me, often with arms folded across their chest, many of them refusing to make eye-contact with me, and no one daring to laugh at my attempts at ice-breaking humor.

My first translator, who had doctoral degrees from universities both in Russia and the U.S., warned me not to let the non-responsiveness of my audience discourage me. “They are sizing you up,” she said, “to see if they can really trust you. They will only let down their guard when they feel that they can do so safely.”

And she was right. Usually about midway through the third day, I could sense a relaxed feeling settling into the room. By the end of the day, the atmosphere had changed entirely. The people who had sat stone-faced and stone silent over the first two days were suddenly animated, jovial, smiling, inquisitive, and delightfully pleasant. They were even responding to my jokes with jokes of their own.

Having worked with Russians for years before my initial visit to Ukraine, the first thing which I noticed about Ukrainians was how they had so little of the resignation which I had come to expect in Russia. The Ukrainians were optimistic, innovative, and experimental, largely due to historical processes which I’ve traced in previous episodes. They, too, were cautious initially with strangers, but much quicker to warm up.

While I found Russians untrusting toward outsiders, their attitude toward Ukrainians often bordered on outright disdain. I won’t say that this attitude was universal. I can’t even tell you how widespread it was. But I encountered it with regularity. It would express itself in little ways, such as snide remarks from others at the table if I ordered a Ukrainian dish in a restaurant.

When I decided to open an office in Donetsk, several Russian acquaintances who were otherwise quite supportive of me belittled the idea. They viewed Ukrainians as more or less the “country bumpkins” of the Slavic world. After all, what great generals had Ukraine produced? What great literature or composers? What world-renowned artists? Many of my Russian friends thought of Ukrainians the way a Wall Street broker might think of poor families along the Louisiana bayous – backward, unsophisticated, and not very bright.

It must therefore be something of an embarrassment in Russia that those country-bumpkin Ukrainians have held off the might of the Russian military for over two years. And injured pride generally makes people more determined to prevail.

Moreover, if Russian pride is truly being injured, it’s the second major blow to nationalist pride in a lifetime. The previous one resulted from the way that the Cold War ended. On my early visits

to Russia, in casual conversations and comments, one easily heard a tone of injured pride in how ordinary Russians talked about the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even those who welcomed its demise felt a certain embarrassment that the dissolution of the USSR threw their country into such economic and political disarray.

In general, Russians laid blame for the disarray at the feet of Mikhail Gorbachev, Russia's president when the Soviet Union fell apart. Today Russians do not remember him as a great leader. At his death, there was little official acknowledgment of his life. In the mind of Russians, his actions and decisions needlessly robbed Russia of its prestige as a Great Power. It continued to have a place at the table of Great Powers only because it retained a nuclear arsenal. In conversations about the Gorbachev era, the injury to national pride was palpable.

And that injured pride is one reason that Russia was susceptible to the reemergence of rigid authoritarianism under Putin. From my personal observations and conversations with hundreds of Russians, I perceive a prevailing bias among them toward strong, authoritarian rulers. In a nation so vast and so diverse, they are inclined to believe that only a firm, strong hand can preserve order.

At the same time, even when they speak approvingly of democracy, they have misgivings about it, especially Western-style democracy. In fact, before I wrapped up my work in Russia a decade ago, I was dealing with outright hostility toward the American way of life.

Initially, that was not the case. In the wake of the Soviet collapse, Russian people were eager to sample all things American. My work in Russia happened to begin about that time. Having long been denied access to Western literature, entertainment, and news coverage, Russians seized on every opportunity to learn more about us.

Unfortunately, much of what we exported to Russia violated their sense of moral and personal propriety. They could not believe how American movies celebrated explicit sex, gutter language, and violence. And sadly, much of the entertainment fare that Hollywood poured into Russia was absolutely sordid. In addition, the older Russian generations, who had highly sophisticated tastes in music, were completely taken aback by the glorification of drugs and debauchery in music which was popular with American youth.

Based on what they saw and heard in our entertainment, Russians concluded that the U.S. was culturally debased and that this condition arose in large measure from excessive personal and political freedom in Western democracies.

As a result, I saw the attitude toward American values change markedly. From the beginning, my leadership workshops there emphasized the importance of leaders maintaining integrity, exemplary behavior, and moral character. Early on, I always received a respectful hearing. But toward the end of my work, when I would speak along these lines, I would sometimes be openly mocked. "I've seen your movies and TV," people would say. "I know what America is really like, and it's nothing like what you're describing."

And let's be honest. These skeptics had a point. Most of us know that day-to-day life in typical American communities is far removed from how Hollywood depicts our society. But Russians did not have that frame of reference. As a consequence, they took the immorality, vulgarity, and violence in American entertainment as indicative of who we are. Thus, the day is now long past when Russians in general and their government in particular are open to our thoughts on how they should comport themselves.

I'm not suggesting that Communist Russia had been a paragon of morality and virtue. Far from it. I've often said that by the time the Iron Curtain collapsed, only two universal values still held sway in Russia: the value of survival and the value of family. Corruption and heavy-handedness were so embedded in the Soviet system that people had resorted to whatever it took to stay alive and to provide for their families. And "whatever it took" included lying, stealing, cheating, swindling, bribery, extortion, perjury, seduction, and betrayal, along with other things far worse. People conditioned themselves to do whatever it took to survive, honorable or not, and to do it without a guilty conscience.

All the while, the moral code espoused by the Communist Party was almost Puritanical in many respects. Not that the Communists themselves lived by that code. But it's what their propaganda promoted. And motion picture producers, theaters, and television had no choice but to conform with this strict moral code.

Accordingly, Russians came to think of movies and TV as upholding societal ideals. The uglier motifs in American entertainment thus came as a shock to their sensitivities. If what they saw in American media was indicative of American values, Russians quickly lost respect for the American way of life.

Thus, our support of Ukraine complicates the eventual settlement of this conflict. I'm not saying that our support is a mistake. I'm simply saying that it's a complicating factor. As I read the tea leaves, our decisive involvement makes it easier for Putin to maintain popular support for his prosecution of the war. He may not be forthright with his people about the extent of Russian casualties and the heartless way in which he's using Russian troops as cannon fodder. But he knows the psychology of his people. And so far he has proven adept at using that psychology to maintain backing for his war.

Next week, I will wrap up this series by looking at the road ahead for Ukraine. However this war eventually ends, the cost of mine-clearing, disposal of unexploded ordnance, and wholesale reconstruction of cities will be staggering. If the war has demanded exceptional leadership, the challenges of its aftermath will make this demand no less urgent.

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