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Editorial

AN AVOIDABLE WAR?

THE REMORSELESS shelling of the cities; the bodies unburied in the streets; the terrified refugees, atrocities, grief; the blackened, smouldering ruins; in Ukraine, the UN reports nearly 2,000 verified civilian deaths so far, a number certain to rise, perhaps tenfold or more. The horrors of the Russian invasion have dominated the news for weeks, galvanizing an international upsurge of solidarity, at once anti-war—to halt and reverse Moscow's murderous advance—and pro-escalation: calls to quicken the stream of Javelins, drones and Stinger missiles into a torrent of bombers and fighter jets; at the limit, for the US Air Force to bomb Russian airfields and impose a no-fly zone. Twitter is alight with blue and yellow flags. Hundreds of millions in charitable donations are flowing to help the refugees, matched by the unending columns of trucks heading east with fresh munitions.

It's worth pausing here to register the proportionality of scale and response. Even as Russian forces bombard Ukrainian cities, the Ethiopian Army is shelling Tigray, under military blockade for a year, cut off from electricity, food and medical supplies, with an estimated 50,000–100,000 deaths from direct killings, plus 150,000–200,000 more from starvation. So, too, in Yemen, children are dying of cholera in ruined towns after seven years of near-perpetual air strikes and shelling by the Saudi–UAE coalition, with US–UK support. Casualties are estimated at around 260,000 direct and indirect deaths. That world responses have been in inverse proportion to fatalities scarcely needs saying. Yemen gets hand-wringing UN reports, the odd inside-page headline of a short-lived ceasefire; Tigray and its surrounding regions are cast in outer darkness.

If Russia's invasion looms larger in Western consciousness, one reason is the scale of media coverage. In the Ukraine war's first month, the major US networks devoted 562 minutes of airtime to the conflict, over a third of their news coverage. This compared to 306 minutes for the first month of the US invasion of Afghanistan, 414 minutes for the US–UK invasion of Iraq and 345 minutes for the US exit from Kabul in August 2021.¹ Density of coverage has combined with empathy of viewpoint. For once, this is not a NATO war, but—metonymically speaking—a Russian war against NATO. For the first time since the 1990s, the Western media is embedded on the side of the victims, the defenders. It provides a global platform for Zelensky as their leader, an eloquent emblem of the Ukrainian resistance. Few in the West can summon up the image, engraved in local memory, of an Afghan wedding blasted to carnage by US bombs, or picture the gruesome reprisals by Anglo-American troops in their siege and subjugation of Fallujah. The bodies on Bucha's streets remain imprinted on the screen.

A single narrative, implicit in news reports and explicit in editorial comment, drives the media coverage. This is an unprovoked Russian attack in which, contrary to Putin's declarations, NATO's eastward enlargement played no part. For the *New York Times*, it is 'an unprovoked invasion', for the *Financial Times*, a case of 'naked and unprovoked aggression', for the *Guardian*, 'an unprovoked assault'. 'Russia's president has launched an unprovoked assault on his neighbour', agreed the *Economist*. 'He has come to believe that NATO threatens Russia and its people'—'he is obsessed with the defensive alliance to his west.'²

Sustaining the argument that NATO expansionism played no part in the crisis required some casuistic contortions on the part of the broadsheet press. 'Analysts and historians will long debate whether Mr Putin's grievances had bases in fact, whether the United States and its allies were too cavalier in expanding NATO, whether Russia was justified in believing that its security was compromised. There will also be heated questioning over whether Mr Biden and other Western leaders could

¹ Jim Lobe, 'Networks Covered the War in Ukraine More Than the US Invasion of Iraq', *Responsible Statecraft*, 8 April 2022.

² Editorial Board, 'No Justification for a Brazen Invasion', *NYT*, 23 February 2022; Editorial Board, 'Putin Opens a Dark New Chapter in Europe', *FT*, 24 February 2022; 'The *Guardian* View on Putin's War in Ukraine: A Bleak New Beginning', *Guardian*, 24 February 2022; 'History Will Judge Putin Harshly for His War', *Economist*, 26 February 2022.

have done more to assuage Mr Putin', admitted the *New York Times*. 'The wisdom of NATO's post-Cold War enlargement to the east will be debated in years to come', the *Financial Times* agreed, while insisting that, contrary to Kremlin claims, the West had never given any guarantees that this would not happen; that enlargement anyway responded to requests from the ex-Warsaw Pact countries; and that in any case, despite the fact that NATO had announced Ukraine's forthcoming membership in 2008, it was not on a path to join, even if the Western powers had encouraged the country 'to integrate more closely with their institutions.'³

Here a second line of argument blends with the first. On the hallowed principle of sovereign national self-determination, Ukraine has every right to elect to join NATO, taking its place within a defensive alliance of liberal democracies. That Putin disagrees merely demonstrates his autocratic hatred for democracy. Opinions diverge on Biden's policy of staying out of the war, while arming Ukraine and pressing Europe to join in punitive sanctions on Russia. If none have gone so far as the *NYT*, which has acclaimed Biden as 'the resolute face of the world's premier democracy and most powerful nation', managing the crisis 'with toughness, patience, resolve and dignity', no major Western news outlet is pressing for an immediate ceasefire and a negotiated settlement.⁴ The only question is how far to escalate.

This double issue of *NLR* offers a series of critical perspectives on the dynamics of the war and its possible outcomes. Charting the catastrophic effects of the Russian invasion, the political sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko provides a detailed account of the forces that came to the fore through the 2014 Ukrainian uprising: an alliance of westernizing liberals and Russophobe nationalists, political oligarchs and rebuilt security forces, that helped to derail the Minsk Accords and embed membership of NATO in the Ukrainian constitution. Tony Wood weaves these developments into a fine-grained tripartite analysis of the forces in play: Russia's assertion of its sphere of influence, NATO and EU expansion into Eastern Europe, and Ukraine's political evolution, tugged between the two.⁵ This contribution tackles the claims of the dominant narrative:

³ *NYT*, 'No Justification for a Brazen Invasion'; *FT*, 'Putin Opens a Dark New Chapter'.

⁴ *NYT*, 'No Justification for a Brazen Invasion'.

⁵ Volodymyr Ishchenko, 'Interview: Towards the Abyss', *NLR* 133/134, Jan–April 2022; Tony Wood, 'Matrix of War', *NLR* 133/134, Jan–April 2022.

that the US has played no role in provoking the war; that NATO is a purely defensive alliance; and that joining it is a matter of Ukrainian national self-determination.

Armed for victory

Putin's lurch to war, disastrous for Russia as well as for Ukraine, is unjustifiable. But it was not unprovoked. NATO enlargement has been an aggressive operation and Moscow has always been in its sights. In calling for a stable settlement of military borders, the Kremlin has a good case. From its foundation in 1949, NATO was always an offensive, not a defensive enterprise, whose ultimate objective in American eyes was the restoration of a normal capitalism in the Soviet bloc.

After the Second World War, if two colossi faced off against each other, as Isaac Deutscher put it, the US had emerged strengthened from the global conflict, 'in full-blooded vigour', while the Soviet Union lay almost prostrate, bled white, with over 20 million dead; its army rapidly demobilized from 11 million troops to under 3 million, and struggled to remobilize in 1949. The initial moves to rearmament came from the West—as did the initial purge of elected communist deputies from the post-war governments in Italy and France; Stalin was following suit when he ejected anti-communists from the coalition governments in Eastern Europe and instituted one-party rule.⁶ But NATO was always a political and hegemonic project as well as a military alliance. While West Germany, America's chief trophy of the War, lay defenceless and disarmed, Britain and France, faced with the loss of their empires, were concluding their own security alliances in the treaties of Dunkirk and

⁶ Isaac Deutscher, 'Myths of the Cold War', in David Horowitz, ed., *Containment and Revolution: Western Policy towards Social Revolution, 1917 to Vietnam*, London 1967, pp. 13–25. The shooting war against communism had already begun in Greece—Churchill and Truman slaughtering the anti-Nazi partisans of EAM–ELAS from 1945—and the political campaign to remove elected communist deputies from post-war governments in Italy and France was completed in 1947. It was only after this that Stalin evicted the anti-communists from coalition governments in eastern Europe—often posited as the aggressive move to which NATO was the defensive response—and instituted single-party police states, executing independent-minded socialists in spectacles such as the Slánský trial and putting an end to the Bolsheviks' hopes that socialist societies in Europe would be able to develop on a higher plane than backward Russia.

Brussels. This was the context for Washington's move to turn the North Atlantic Treaty signatories into an 'Organization', a multinational military structure that would arm Western Europe against communism and, at the same stroke, bring it under American supreme command. The armies of the member states did not add much to US firepower, but their territories offered forward emplacements for US planes and missiles, 4,000 miles to its east, and NATO command-and-control systems penetrated deep into their military structures. The European lefts opposed this remilitarization from the start. Social-democratic Sweden baulked at joining. The Spanish left fought hard for a No vote in the NATO referendum after Franco's death. In the early 80s, a pan-European movement of movements mobilized against Reagan's Cruise and Pershing missiles in the final spurt of the Cold War arms race that accelerated the Soviet Union's demise.

If, as the claim goes, NATO won the Cold War without firing a single shot, this indicates the plethora of military, political and economic instruments which the US had—and still has—to hand, rather than the pacific nature of the Alliance. The Cold War was fought on the American side by sustained support for West European capital, covert operations, ideological offensives and a ferocious arms race, as well as proxy and overt wars in the Third World, political and military backing for dictatorships to crush local left forces and the diplomatic coup of Nixon's China policy.⁷ Although NATO was primed for a hot war in Europe, it never had to be put to use.

After the Cold War, NATO's political and hegemonic drive came to the fore; its targeting of Moscow was more residual. In principle, the liberalization of Russia should have made it fittable into the 'common European home'. But Russia is not a conventional nation-state.⁸ The largest country in the world, with a population nearly twice that of Germany, it dwarfed the other EU members, while its nuclear capacity towered over that of France and Britain. Besides, the prospect of a united, sovereign Europe risked marginalizing Washington. With the collapse of communism, the menace from the east that had justified US

⁷ The NATO nuclear strategy known as 'massive retaliation' in fact envisaged massive anticipatory and pre-emptive strikes: Richard Betts, *American Force*, New York 2012, p. 43.

⁸ Perry Anderson, 'Incommensurate Russia', *NLR* 94, July–Aug 2015, p. 42.

command over the continent disappeared, and the possibility emerged of Western Europe forging independent relations with its eastern half; and of a newly powerful Germany re-ordering the region according to its own designs, as Kohl would immediately begin to do in Yugoslavia.

Sovereign self-determination?

It was in part to maintain its strategic hegemony over Berlin that Washington engineered the expansion of NATO from 1990, first into the GDR, then the Visegrád states, the Balkans and the Baltics. For the US to command Europe still involved dividing it against Russia, and in the countries subjugated under the Warsaw Pact it found eager recruits. Brussels would also admit these countries into the European Union, but this was not just a slower and more expensive process; crucially, it did not include the US. NATO was a vehicle for extending American power deep into Europe, creating a corridor of Atlanticist powers in between Germany and Russia. Enlarging NATO was cheap and easy, as the ex-Comecon countries were suing for admission, and Clinton and Bush could discount the Article Five commitment to defend them, given Russia's post-Soviet *écrasement*.

Here began the myth of NATO as a political club for democracies, which a country like Ukraine might freely elect to join on the principle of self-determination. But on several counts, this is wishful thinking. First, democracy has proved dispensable for NATO, where the governing logic remains that of a hegemon's military instrument. NATO's longstanding south-eastern pillars, Greece and Turkey, remained in place under ferocious military dictatorships—and in Ankara's case, despite its extinction of democratic will in Cyprus. Second, to join NATO is precisely to surrender sovereign self-determination to external military command—the reason de Gaulle pulled France from NATO integration. There may be a case for small countries, knowing themselves to be prey, to surrender their sovereignty to a greater power in exchange for protection; the weak do what they must. But those proposing it for Ukraine should be frank about what is entailed: not the exercise of sovereign self-determination but its abrogation, and a willingness to see Ukrainian territory become a militarized front line against its giant neighbour. Third, the era of cost-free NATO enlargement has come to an end. Whatever the outcome of the 2022 war for Ukraine, its price tag will be unignorable.

Nor was NATO ever a merely political project. Even as it expanded in the new unipolar world, it was repurposed as a military posse for the global sheriff, fighting hot wars in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Libya, with upgraded munitions, logistics and command structures. Neither NATO's vast real-estate footprint—its 'dignified' component, the sprawling glass palace outside Brussels; its 'efficient' military HQ in Norfolk, Virginia, and forty-odd major bases—nor the third-rate European politicians (Stoltenberg, etc.) who serve as civilian figureheads for its burgeoning bureaucracy, or the pomp of the US Supreme Allied Command—Europe—should be hypostasized. NATO remains one of many American instruments, and not the fastest or most flexible. It serves as multilateral cover for some US operations, but has been dispensable in others, like the invasion of Iraq.

Yet post-Soviet Moscow remained a constant NATO target. The Kremlin's grand strategy was to offer Washington significant, if not invariable assistance—logistics for the occupation of Afghanistan, pressure on Iran to forgo nuclear arms, collaboration with Israel to keep Syrian Islamists out of power—and expect in return due respect for it as a great power, with its own version of the kind of regional sensitivity the US has historically displayed in the Caribbean. But as Atlanticist commentators were quick to point out, this was not just a presumptuous over-estimate of its standing in the world, but an outdated conception of the interstate order. The self-evident principle of the 'international community' obtaining since 1991 was the leadership of a single super-power, not a collection of equals. To claim a say in determining where NATO's advance should stop was as good as trying to give orders to Washington. Hence the contemptuous responses to Putin at Munich in 2007 and Bucharest in 2008—where Putin, naively, was offering transport for what would become Obama's surge in Afghanistan—at which Ukraine and Georgia were slated for entry into NATO.⁹

The Kremlin's response to these humiliations became an increasingly unstable compound of a rationalist defensive sovereignty, the case put to stronger powers, and a tyrannical expansionism, threatened for weaker

⁹ The Russian paper *Kommersant* published an insider report of the Bucharest summit in its edition of 7 April 2008 speculating on the links between Moscow's assistance in transporting NATO cargo to Afghanistan and the NATO Membership Action Plans for Georgia and Ukraine.

ones—expressive of what Lenin denounced as Great Russian chauvinism.¹⁰ This had been on full display in Putin’s subjugation of Chechnya as he ascended to the presidency in 2000.¹¹ In 2008 a massive show of firepower to defend the micro-states on Georgia’s borders against Saakashvili’s incursions left Tbilisi limping away.

This volatile combination of defensive and aggressive postures runs through Putin’s political writings, which contain a weird admixture of conventional attempts to strike a partner’s deal with the US and neo-tsarist bullying of small states. The thuggery—in Chechnya, his generals deployed *kontraktniki* soldiers, recruited from Russia’s prisons—speaks to the Petersburg milieu in which Putin rose up, while the expansionist motif has historically been a constitutive feature of the Russian state.¹² But the Frankensteins who colluded with the fraudulent 1993 referendum that implanted a hyper-presidential constitution in the heart of

¹⁰ Lenin’s account of class-conscious national feeling remains the best antidote to chauvinisms great and small. ‘Is a sense of national pride alien to us?’, he asked of Russia’s revolutionary socialists in the opening months of World War One. ‘Certainly not! We love our language and our country, and we are doing our very utmost to raise *her* toiling masses (i.e., nine-tenths of *her* population) to the level of a democratic and socialist consciousness. To us it is most painful to see and feel the outrages, the oppression and the humiliation that our fair country suffers at the hands . . . of the tsar’s butchers, the nobles and the capitalists . . . We are full of a sense of national pride, and for that very reason we *particularly* hate *our* slavish past (when the landed nobility led the peasants into war to stifle the freedom of Hungary, Poland, Persia and China), and our slavish present, when these selfsame landed proprietors, aided by the capitalists, are loading us into a war in order to throttle Poland and the Ukraine, crush the democratic movement in Persia and China, and strengthen the gang of Romanovs, Bobrinskys and Purishkeviches, who are a disgrace to our Great-Russian national dignity. Nobody is to be blamed for being born a slave; but a slave who not only eschews a striving for freedom but justifies and eulogises his slavery (e.g., calls the throttling of Poland and the Ukraine, etc., a “defence of the fatherland” of the Great Russians)—such a slave is a lickspittle and a boor, who arouses a legitimate feeling of indignation, contempt and loathing’: V. I. Lenin, ‘On the National Pride of the Great Russians’, *Sotsial-Demokrat* 35, 12 December 1914, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 21, pp. 102–3.

¹¹ See Tony Wood’s incisive account in ‘The Case for Chechnya’, NLR 30, Nov–Dec 2004, at a time when many of those now baying for Putin’s blood studiously looked away, or merely tut-tutted; Clinton actually celebrating the ‘liberation of Grozny’, and Blair rushing to Moscow to congratulate Putin on his election victory.

¹² Georgi Derluguian, ‘Recasting Russia’, NLR 12, Nov–Dec 2001, and ‘A Small World War’, NLR 128, March–April 2021.

post-Soviet Russia, and who oversaw the shock therapy and crash privatizations which set it beating, hail from Clinton's State Department, Rubin's Treasury and Harvard Square.

Streets of Kiev

The catalyst of the present crisis was the 2014 Maidan uprising in Ukraine. The overthrow of Yanukovich, after sniper fire¹³ against peaceful protesters galvanized an uprising against him, saw US State Department officials in Kiev actively choosing members of the new government. Putin's reaction was to annex Crimea. That was not a Chechnya *redux*. Lacking bloodshed and probably enjoying majority support, it was visibly unlike the famously ruthless annexations of East Timor, Northern Cyprus, Western Sahara and East Jerusalem, all condoned without tremor by the 'international community'. But for Obama, the loss of Crimea was a direct blow to the authority of the regime installed in Kiev and hence the will of the West. Sanctions were imposed on Putin's associates and Russian businesses, costing the country some \$170 billion by mid-2016, with another \$400 billion lost in a precipitate fall of oil and gas prices after 2014, sometimes held to have been engineered by Washington through Riyadh.

Covert fomenting and arming by Moscow of breakaway 'republics' in the Donbas, following its take-over of Crimea, was from the start another matter, leading to a bloody civil war within Ukraine. In military terms, it would in due course be outmatched by a concerted US military training and armament programme. In 2016 Obama redoubled American military aid and appointed John Abizaid, the commanding general in Iraq during the early years of its occupation, as senior adviser to Ukraine's Minister of Defence in a planned five-year partnership. Abizaid's executive officer,

¹³ The general belief has been that Yanukovich's security forces opened fire on the protesters, even though the gatherings were starting to wind down. Yet what to date seems to be the only extensive examination of witness testimony, video footage, forensic examinations and ballistic evidence argues the sniper fire of 20 February 2014 came from buildings held by the far right. See Ivan Katchanovski, 'The Maidan Massacre in Ukraine: Revelations from Trials and Investigation', paper presented at International Council for Central and East European Studies, Concordia University, Montreal, August 2021; and 'The Hidden Origin of the Escalating Ukraine–Russia Conflict', *Canadian Dimension*, 22 January 2022, which have yet to be rebutted.

a veteran of special-forces operations in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, has described the American makeover of a ‘decrepit’ Ukrainian military into a professionalized Western army, with US-organized command-and-control systems, operations planning, IT and logistical infrastructures, plus significant anti-aircraft capability. As Stephen Kotkin would rejoice in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Ukraine might not be in NATO, but NATO was in Ukraine.¹⁴

Since 2013, every move Russia has made on the Ukrainian front has been jujitsu’d by the combination of Kiev’s radicalized ruling bloc—the amalgam of Westernizing liberals with radical nationalists, both powering the country in the same direction, described by Ishchenko below—and the growing flood of US money, arms and military training. The 2015 Minsk peace accords, representing an advance for Russia in the Donbas but also a possible exit from militarization, were undermined by the Obama ‘surge’. Neither Obama nor Trump had any interest in the accords; absent American will, France and Germany failed to push them forward. Putin’s grandstanding mobilization on Ukraine’s borders from November 2021 was dismissed by Biden, who could no doubt have prevented an invasion had he been willing to negotiate a serious agreement on military frontiers. According to the latest US intelligence accounts, Putin only made the final decision on the invasion at the start of February—throwing the dice on a ‘small victorious war’, as Nicholas II’s minister said of the 1904 Russo-Japanese debacle—six weeks after Blinken had metaphorically torn up his negotiating drafts.¹⁵

The result has been an explosive lurch into a vengeful adventurism, proclaiming war aims that are a grim satire of Washington’s justifications in Kosovo and Bush–Blair’s in Iraq—stopping genocide, demilitarizing, and saving the population from despotism with regime change. The Kremlin’s catastrophically misjudged invasion has generalized the bad-jujitsu logic. Moscow has succeeded in uniting Ukraine on a pro-West, nationalist basis and tightening Washington’s hold over

¹⁴ Stephen Kotkin, ‘Freedom at Stake: How Did Russia and the West Fall Out?’, *TLS*, 11 March 2022. See also the interview with Col. Liam Collins, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 23 March 2022; ‘Who Are you, General John Abizaid?’, *Ukrinform*, 14 September 2016.

¹⁵ James Risen, ‘US Intelligence Says Putin Made a Last-Minute Decision to Invade Ukraine’, *The Intercept*, 11 March 2022.

Berlin. Fukuyama sees new light on world history's liberal horizon, as regime change in Russia comes into view.

America's proxy war

In Ukraine, Obama's erstwhile Director of the CIA has candidly explained, the US is fighting a proxy war with Russia.¹⁶ In such a conflict, the war aims of the great power and those of its proxy may not coincide. For the Ukrainian leadership, the goal is to expand the war in order to end it faster—with the imposition by the US or NATO of a no-fly zone, knocking out Russian jets and air defences to relieve the pressure on Ukrainian fighters and citizens. Already NATO steel and popular courage have altered the course of the war in Kiev's favour, at a price of high devastation and mounting Ukrainian casualty rates.

For the Biden Administration, on the other hand, the strategic logic could be to keep the Russians pinned down as long as possible, or at least until Putin is ousted from the Kremlin. Putin has blundered into a bear trap, and for the time being it suits the US to keep him there. Brave Ukrainians make perfect proxy forces, and every Russian atrocity broadens the case for regime-change in Moscow. While Zelensky has suggested that saving lives is more important than land—'ultimately it's just territory'—North Atlantic war-gamers like Lawrence Freedman speak of the need to take back the Donbas, if not Crimea.¹⁷ In Europe, the price of a longer war has been lowered for the time being, thanks to Biden's deal with Scholz to keep Russia's oil and gas flowing to German homes and plants. In the US, higher wheat prices will benefit the politically sensitive Midwest. Russian cyber operations have so far failed to materialize.

Putin's war aims demonstrate the same compound of the rational and the delusional that drove him forward. Had he wanted simply to reinforce the need for serious negotiations on a forward boundary for US arms, an Israeli-style blitz on the military infrastructure the NATO powers have been constructing in Ukraine would have sufficed to send the message,

¹⁶ Leon Panetta on Bloomberg TV: 'It's a proxy war with Russia, whether we say so or not', 17 March 2022. See also Jeremy Scahill, 'The US Has Its Own Agenda Against Russia', *The Intercept*, 1 April 2022.

¹⁷ Zelensky interview in the *Economist*, 28 March 2022; Lawrence Freedman, 'Peace in Ukraine will be elusive unless one side makes a breakthrough', *FT*, 1 April 2022.

avoiding civilian casualties. Instead, his initial move—premised on a lightning-strike regime change, backed by a display of infantry shock-and-awe—was fatally based on FSB fantasies of a non-existent Ukraine. Russia now appears to be trying to regroup and dig in, besieging, one by one, the grimy Ukrainian-held cities of the Donbas. In doing so, it continues to play into Washington's hands.

The most thoughtful critical writing on the war—by Anatol Lieven and Keith Gessen, for example; as well as some of the powerful experiential work published by Gessen and his colleagues in the online *n+1*—is most alive to the tragedy that this onslaught of Great Russian chauvinism is inflicting on the breadth and richness of Russian culture itself. To bomb Kharkov or, if it comes to that, Odessa in the name of gathering Russian lands makes a nihilistic mockery of the battles fought here in World War Two; all the more terrible because the missiles are aimed at cultural kith and kin. Lieven has gone farther than some of his colleagues at the Quincy Institute in calling for a ceasefire and negotiated settlement, in which sanctions would be lifted and neutrality status for Ukraine agreed. There is no sign that Biden is ready for that.