



The West is using the wrong analogy for Russia's invasion“and worsening the outcome, writes Anatol Lieven.

It often seems as if the hawkish elements of the U.S. establishment have only ever heard of one war: World War II in Europe. This is because whatever else they forget or get wrong about that war, they are right that it was planned and initiated by a deeply evil and megalomaniac force which posed a threat to the entire world, which had to be completely defeated, and with which no morally acceptable compromise was possible.

The perennial and exclusive references to that war allow U.S. hawks to portray every conflict in which they wish to involve America as an existential struggle against evil, which if not engaged in will lead to catastrophic consequences for America and the world. This has been true of their approach to Vietnam through Iraq to the present war in Ukraine, with disastrous results for America and the world. This, however, is precisely what makes World War II so exceptional.

The great majority of wars in modern history and indeed in American history have been far more morally complex in their origins, and have ended not with the complete victory of one side but with some form of messy compromise. Most wars (and this includes World War II) also illustrate the law of unintended consequences. The end results are very often not those predicted or desired even by the ostensible "victors."

From this point of view, World War I is a far better historical analogy than World War II for the present war in Ukraine. The years 1914 to 1918 saw the deaths of more than 20 million people,

around half of them civilians. Even the French and British victor nations emerged ruined. The consequences of World War I—including the Communist Revolution in Russia and the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire—paved the way for World War II.

Of the various leading figures, only Vladimir Lenin, who predicted that war would lead to revolution, can be said to have been accurate in his analysis prior to the war. Nobody else's predictions came true. If it had been given to the governments in 1914 to see the future, not one would have thought the war worthwhile. Or as a French farmer near Verdun remarked simply a half-century later to Alistair Horne, the British historian of the Battle of Verdun, "Ils etaient fous, ces gens-la": Those people were crazy.

Today, no serious historians—or educated people in general—would argue that this conflict was necessary and in the real interests of any of the participants, nor that continuing the war in order to gain complete victory was necessary or wise, nor that the Versailles Settlement that ended the war turned out well for the victors, let alone the defeated. From the perspective of a century later, it seems obvious that in adopting the policies that led to war and persisting in its continuation, all the ruling elites of Europe fundamentally and disastrously misjudged the true interests of their countries.

As to moral guilt for the war, even in Germany, most historians today would accept that this lay principally with the German government. Germany's encouragement to the Austrian government to attack Serbia in response to the assassination of the heir to the Austrian throne was the decision of Berlin alone. Germany was even more culpable for its legally and morally indefensible invasion of Belgium that brought the British Empire into the war.

At the same time, however, very few historians today would attribute sole blame for the war to Germany. In particular, one should stress the criminal folly of the Russian imperial government in forming an alliance with Serbia that emboldened Serbian nationalists to advance their irredentist claim to Austrian-held Bosnia, and emboldened the Serbian secret service covertly to back a terrorist campaign against Austria that led to the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and provided the spark that ignited the war.

Russian support for Serbia was indifferent not only to the fanatical and reckless character of Serbian nationalism, but the fact that nationalist claims directed by different Slavic peoples against the Austro-Hungarian Empire threatened that crumbling empire with destruction and thereby threatened to destroy the entire German geopolitical and ethnic position in Central

Europe. It should have been obvious to any sensible Russian official that this was an issue over which Germany would in the last resort engage in a war that threatened Russia with destruction. Indeed, some Russians did point this out, but their advice was ignored by a Russian establishment committed to geopolitical ambitions that went far beyond both Russia's real strength and Russia's real interests.

In the area of war crimes, the German strategy of unrestricted submarine warfare, intended to starve Britain into surrender, was treated in Britain and America as a monstrous and obvious war crime. The Germans argued, not without reason, that it was a response to the British strategy of starving Germany into surrender through blockade of Germany's maritime trade by the Royal Navy. The German submarine strategy was extremely stupid, because it eventually brought America into the war against Germany and thereby ensured Germany's defeat. But stupidity, however extreme, is not a war crime.

The Germans also pointed out that the British tactic (wholly in keeping with the traditional laws of war by the way) of disguising British warships as unarmed merchantmen (the "Q ships") and then sinking German submarines that tried to check on them made it necessary to torpedo all ships without warning. Once again, a century later, we can regret all the suffering involved, and honor the brave men who died on both sides, without taking a high moral stance one way or the other.

Today we can all agree that principal responsibility for the war in Ukraine lies with the Russian government, which invaded Ukraine. But will historians of the future attribute sole responsibility to Russia, and exonerate the U.S. and NATO member governments of all blame for trying to integrate Ukraine with the West, and thus threatening what both Russians and a long row of Western experts (including the present head of the CIA, William Burns) warned were seen in Moscow as vital Russian interests?

Concerning war crimes, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the forced annexation of Ukrainian territory, are both clearly very serious crimes under international law, for which I hope that President Vladimir Putin will one day be brought to account. Russian soldiers have committed numerous crimes against Ukrainian civilians, for which the Ukrainian authorities are correct to put them on trial. The Russian high command has at the very least displayed indifference towards civilian casualties in its air campaign against Ukraine. However, we should be very careful not to portray these crimes as in some way culturally special to Russians, or as "genocide," if only for the very obvious reason that Western forces have themselves repeatedly carried out similar actions. To use the "genocide" label in this way would put American and British commanders and air crews in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Syria on the same level

as Hitler's SS and the Rwandan Hutu militias, a morally and historically grotesque proposition.

The Amnesty International report criticizing both Russian and Ukrainian actions in the war was justly attacked, but for the wrong reason. The correct charges against it were legal illiteracy and practical naivety. The fact that a war is illegal does not make everything the aggressor does a war crime. Under the laws of war, it is not a crime for Ukrainian forces to establish positions in populated areas, otherwise they could not defend their country at all. But nor is it a crime for Russian forces to bombard those positions. All of this is stated quite clearly in international treaties and conventions on the laws of war. Above all, we should not let justified moral outrage become hypocritical moral hysteriaâ€”as during World War Iâ€”because this can very easily become an obstacle to seeking a peace settlement that may be in the best interests of ourselves and the victims of the war.

The same goes for negotiations over territory. If today it seems lunatic almost beyond belief that millions of German, French, and British soldiers should have died in a war that began over whether Austrians or Serbs should rule Sarajevo, let us consider the contemporary example of Sevastopol, the Russian naval base in Crimea. The present line of the U.S. administration and most of the U.S. establishment is that negotiations for peace are purely a matter for the Ukrainian government. And the Ukrainian government has repeatedly declared that its aim is to drive Russia from all the territory it has occupied in Ukraine, including Crimea. Recent military advances by Ukraine mean that such complete Ukrainian victory now seems at least possible.

Thirty years ago, the overwhelming majority of Americans would have simply assumed that Crimea was part of Russia, as indeed it was until the Soviet government transferred it by decree to Ukraine in 1954. Before the Russian conquest of 1783, the peninsula was ruled by Tatars, before that by Byzantines, before that by Scythians, and before that, well, whoever it was, it was certainly not Ukrainians.

Every officially connected Russian with whom I have spoken, and most ordinary Russians, have said that to defend Crimea, Russia should in the last resort use nuclear weapons, as the United States would to defend Hawaii and Pearl Harbor. This would very likely begin a ladder of escalation that would lead to the destruction of America, Russia, and civilization itself in a nuclear war.

We should not need to wait a century for historians (if there are any) to tell us that this is not an outcome that would serve the interests of any country, including Ukraine, and that the risks

involved colossally outweigh any conceivable benefits to the United States. By repelling Russia's invasion, Ukraine, with Western help, has already won a great victory and secured its independence and freedom to try to join the West. For the Biden administration to go beyond this, and aim at total victory for Ukraine, looks like unwarranted hubris on the part of Washington. And we should also not need historians of the future, or the lessons of the World War I, to tell us that hubris invariably leads to nemesis.

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