

MYTHIC HEROISM AS A BALM FOR PARANOID ANXIETY: UPDATES

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AN ANALYTIC EXTRA FOR *STILLPOINT MAGAZINE*

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Endless hours of BBC and CNN, on the 4th day since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The commentators seem to be converging on the following analysis:

1. Putin is surprised by the intensity of the Ukrainian resistance, both by its army and its civilian corps.
2. His prime objective was clearly a decapitation strategy: to capture Kyiv and install a puppet government along the lines of Belarus, then deal with the rest of the country later, however...
3. The Russian military has made a rather botched incursion after all with tenuous and collapsing supply lines.
4. Also, Putin is very surprised by the extent and seriousness of Western sanctions and this must be unnerving him, especially because...
5. Putin is now becoming very worried about the growing protests at home.
6. Putin's activation of a crisis-level of nuclear readiness, therefore, is a kind of posturing even if it reflects an emerging desperation in his own mind due to points 1 through 5.

If any of these conclusions were true they would be very reassuring. However, these all smack

of wishful thinking. Let's start with point 6, then return to it after reviewing the other five.

SPECTER OF NUCLEAR ESCALATION

Historically, when use of nuclear weapons is mentioned, it is usually accompanied by dismissive, disclaiming words such as "unthinkable." Unfortunately, what is "unthinkable" has been shown to have, in fact, been thought by whoever asserts its unthinkability. What is missing in our comfort with nuclear war being unthinkable is a lack of distinction in at least two areas.

First, there is the unanswered question of whether Russia's new contingent of hypersonic nuclear warheads fundamentally destabilizes the mutual assured destruction (MAD) that has kept the world from going up in flames since the 1950s. It appears from unclassified sources that these hypersonic missiles are so fast that they can indeed elude radar, eliminating the capacity to know that they are coming or defend against them with existing missile defense systems. Despite these advanced technologies, targeting the EU or the US would still result in a catastrophic nuclear retaliation since not all response capacity could be eliminated at once.

Perhaps more worrying is the important distinction between the massive, city-incinerating weapons that we associate with "nuclear" as

opposed to Tactical Nuclear Weapons (TNW), which are much smaller in explosive power and could be launched in a variety of ways—from a plane or sub, on a cruise missile, or even by artillery. They have never been used in practice, and in the late 1980s many were decommissioned due to concerns they could too easily lead to all-out nuclear war. The majority of these TNWs, upwards of 2000, are held in Russia's arsenal. These weapons could be used to target military bases, concentrations of opposition forces, small cities, or sections of large cities.

What would France, Great Britain, or the US do if Russia detonated just one TNW with a modest blast radius as a warning to Ukraine? Probably with a false-flag pretense for its own populace—that such an attack was a preemptive strike against a Ukrainian plot to attack Moscow using fissile material hidden since the fall of the Soviet Union or sent subsequently by the United States. Indeed, the pretext for this—that Ukraine is pursuing nuclear re-armament—has already been laid down in Russian propaganda over the last few weeks. What would Ukraine do if Putin told them that he would keep repeating a series of surgical nuclear attacks until their government surrenders? They would have no real choice but to do what Japan did after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, then hope for rebellion later. Even then, would the US, France, and Great Britain have any nuclear response option without risking the annihilation of civilization as we know it, and perhaps the very habitability of the planet itself (i.e., nuclear winter)? Let's come back to that question after thinking more about points 1 through 5.

1. Putin is surprised by the intensity of the Ukrainian resistance, both by its army and its civilian corps.

Ukraine has been fully penetrated by Russian operatives since its independence, both spies as such and those insinuated into a pan-Slavic criminal network of ruthless oligarchs. At the same time, the increase in arms to the Ukrainian army has been quite transparent, especially since the 2014 Donbas and Crimea annexations. Indeed, one US president was impeached over a controversy surrounding when and how much aid to send. The increased capacity of the Ukrainian military should have come as no surprise whatsoever to Putin, or to the international intelligence community. Similarly,

the development of a decentralized civilian corps in Ukraine has been one of its explicit goals since 2014. How else were those cases of military rifles so conveniently ready to be handed out? Indeed, as the self-proclaimed seer of the Slavic soul, Putin would have understood very clearly how intransigent would be the tribal pride and loyalty of the Ukrainian people.

So, if Putin was not surprised, why would he have allowed the generals to go forward too lightly at the beginning to achieve their objective? It was only too-light based on the assumption that they intended it to be miraculously swift. One possible explanation is that more of a sledgehammer approach would have likely damaged the assets they set out to obtain, including the industrial and agricultural wealth of Ukraine. Furthermore, a devastating second wave would be even more disheartening and subjugating to a populace that had gotten its hopes elevated by apparently successfully resisting Russian invasion. A more disturbing option is that Putin had factored in the eventual use of tactical nuclear weapons from the beginning. His 2019 annual address to the nation featured centrally his celebration of Russia's claimed lead in hypersonic nuclear weapons. After all, he presaged a nuclear connection to the invasion just days before with an unabashed display of nuclear missile prowess.

2. Putin's prime objective was clearly a decapitation strategy to capture Kyiv and install a puppet government along the lines of Belarus and deal with the rest of the country later, however ...

3. The Russian military has made a rather botched incursion after all with tenuous and collapsing supply lines.

These second and third conclusions presented by Western media sources have already essentially been undermined in the preceding section. That is, as soon as the presumption of a rapid, shock and awe approach is questioned, it's not at all clear that anything is being botched. Rather, a closer analysis reveals that Putin may simply be prosecuting his war differently than what would traditionally be expected from a multipronged attack of overwhelming force. He is adroit at, if anything, misdirection.

4. Also, Putin is very surprised by the extent and seriousness of Western sanctions and

this must be unnerving him, especially because ...

5. Putin is now becoming very worried about the growing protests at home.

No-fly zones, SWIFT restrictions, unprecedented flows of arms coming from the EU—this is all very dramatic. But is it remotely plausible that any of these were not alluded to during the several months of negotiations between high-ranking officials, not to mention the private conversations between Putin and Biden, Macron, Johnson, Sholz and others? No, these details would come only as surprises to the rest of the world that had not been privy to the confidential discussions, certainly not to Putin. These potential countermoves were all most likely factored in from the beginning. After all, US President Biden and US Secretary of State Blinken had warned over and over in the months leading up to the invasion that Russia would face sanctions unlike anything ever seen before were they to invade Ukraine.

Nor is it plausible that he wouldn't have expected a few thousand people in a country of 144,000,000 to protest military aggression. People have gone to the streets against him before, and in larger numbers. Since the start of the invasion, he has already arrested around six thousand people and, be sure, the leaders among them will be kept out of action and in prison for a long time.

We would like to believe that Putin has faltered and over-reached, not expecting the blowback that Russia is experiencing. But this wish also belies some projected humanitarian sense that the plight of the average Russian would register in significance to him. That represents potentially very dangerous miscalculations. Recall that Putin has framed his justification for the invasion in three main ways. First, as a response to an existential threat from the West. This one is clearly false, but presents some cover for the underlying emotional complex associated with the second justification, namely that the West has humiliated Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union—the “greatest catastrophe,” he says, of the last century. Finally, he claims to be compelled to have launched this “special military operation” in order to protect the Russian diaspora in Ukraine from genocide.

This last justification is perhaps the most worrying since it suggests he may be in fact, himself be planning a genocide. Putin and

his administration has shown an unrelenting pattern of asserting the opposite of the truth and projecting their own reprehensible choices onto the West: The buildup of troops over the last nine months was defensive, not offensive. There were no Russian forces in the Donbas even as they were coming home to Russia in body bags. It is the US who is called the “empire of lies”—by the very ones lying continuously about what they are doing in plain sight.

6. His activating of a crisis-level of nuclear readiness, therefore, is a kind of posturing that probably reflects an emerging desperation in his own mind.

We in the West would like to believe that this is posturing in the same way that we wanted to believe Putin wouldn't invade Ukraine further at all, let alone attempt a whole nation's conquest. But here is a man who has become so isolated in his own paranoid/grandiose bubble, apparently fancying himself a Napoleonic figure riding above mortal limits on the steed of history. Putin's overarching goal is to establish a new world order, clearly one involving the rule of the strongest. What better way to demonstrate that he is the strongest than to be willing to do what to all the rest is unthinkable?

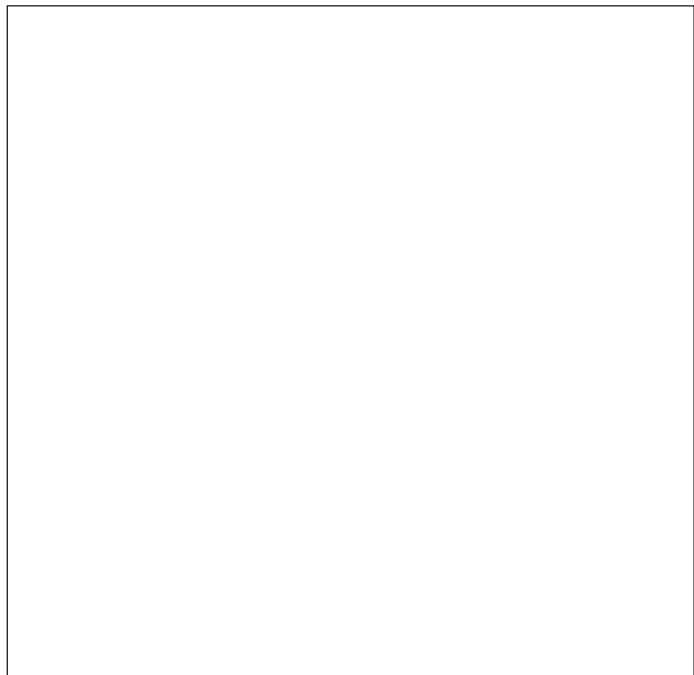
Sadly, and with great trepidation, I find it most plausible that Putin carefully planned this so far half-hearted invasion of Ukraine to be just that. Meanwhile, Putin prosecutes his broader goal of asserting Russian greatness, demonstrating a will to power so cold and calculated that it would even risk triggering the annihilation of civilization, gambling on the West's unwillingness to risk escalation against his use of Tactical Nuclear Weapons to force surrender in Ukraine. Still, all of this is about much more than Ukraine. Using TNW would constitute a reverse humiliation of the West that returns Russia to a redefined center of the world stage, with Putin going down in history as having carried its torch. Western leaders have called Putin's invocation of a nuclear threat unacceptable, irresponsible, and aggressive. These are good descriptors of everything he has done so far vis-à-vis Ukraine. And nothing predicts future behavior better than past behavior.

3 MARCH 2022

DAY 8: As of yesterday, Russia has both the Chernobyl nuclear disaster site and the largest active nuclear plant in Europe at Zaporizhzhia under its control. It was puzzling that the Russian army invading from Belarus made securing Chernobyl one of its first priorities. Capturing the Zaporizhzhia plant makes a disturbing contingency more apparent. Russia now has two opportunities to stage a radiation leak disaster which it can blame on Ukrainian forces. With radioactive debris already in the air it can claim no additional ecological harm would be done by use of a TNW and that the Ukrainian “Nazis” have brought it on themselves and on the world.

10 MARCH 2022

DAY 15: In the past days, the possibility that the Russian propaganda canard of genocide by Ukrainian fascists was a projection of Putin’s underlying intent has been confirmed. Refugees trying to escape Mykolaiv have been specifically targeted by artillery and a maternity hospital has been bombed. Indiscriminate shelling of residential areas has commenced in multiple cities. Kharkiv has had its water, food, heat, and electricity cut off for a trapped population on the brink of starvation. Putin, a child born into the aftermath of the horrific WWII Nazi siege of Leningrad, reigns down anew the historical trauma that shaped him on the people of Ukraine.



AN ANALYTIC EXTRA FOR STILLPOINT MAGAZINE BY DR STEPHEN SETTERBERG

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