

Putin's War Playbook
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Putin's background was as a KGB spy, not a military expert. He uses war as a blunt cudgel, not what modern military professionals would do. His war decisions are a direct demonstration of his character. He gambles shrewdly, takes risks, and is never constrained by empathy or conscience. It has worked for him so far.

Mainstream media often invite both active and retired military officers to guide us through wartime events. Many of our top officers also have advanced academic degrees in history, and today's training emphasizes current norms of warfare: concern for civilians, humane treatment of prisoners, and concern for the well-being of the troops. America's record is not perfect, but it is an admirable work in progress.

American military men who have become presidents (George Washington and Dwight Eisenhower) served as civilians. We never have the military running the country, as so many other countries around the world have done.

Russia has had a different history. Its entire history has been autocratic, with the Czar being the unquestioned leader and his generals having total control over conscript armies. In the past century, however, the Russian officer corps had been exposed to the training and value of their opposite numbers in the west. They are well aware that mistreatment of their armies can result in bloody revolutions and collapse of governments.

Russia lost wars in the 19th century, and one in 1905 (won by Japan) gave rise to a revolt and the creation of a parliament. The disastrous military leadership in World War I ended in a revolt and the revolution that transformed the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union (empire).

Putin is a throwback to the older Russian history. He has morphed from an elected president to a total dictator, and like the autocrats of Russia's past, he listens to nobody. He also continues Russia's terrible tradition of abusing the military recruits. They are cannon fodder to him. He has no empathy for death tolls, except to prevent the numbers from being published. Body bags are returning to Russian families from a war they didn't know they were having. But not all the fallen in Ukraine are in body bags; just corpses in the snow. Putin doesn't care.

He has not become a monster overnight. Each appalling action has its counterpart in Russian history. Russia invented the "big lie," even before the Nazis adopted it. They lied about a global Jewish plot (in 1903) and made up a false document to "prove" it.

Putin went further: he secretly destroyed an apartment block in St. Petersburg, killing hundreds of Russians, and lied that the Chechens had done it. He then waged a scorched earth war on Chechnya, leaving nothing standing in their capital. His reason: to get himself reelected.

Russia's long-time enemy has been democracy, and the Russian Revolution accelerated the campaign. The 20th century has been a battleground between Communism and Liberal Democracy. With the fall of the Soviet Union, the world enjoyed a brief surge of new aspiring democracies.

Putin considered the fall of the USSR as the worst disaster of the 20th century and he set about revenge. He could not resurrect Communism, but he could sow division into democracies. Putin funded a campaign to encourage Britain's exit from the EU, a terrible mistake. He funded a neo-fascists party in France, but lost when Macron won. He succeeded funding neo-fascists in Poland and Hungary, only now being blocked by the resurrection of NATO, thanks to President Biden.

His most alarming success was in the United States: helping a totally incompetent entertainer, Donald Trump, to become president. Trump tried, but fortunately failed to carry out Putin's agenda turning America from a beacon of democracy into a poisonous version of "America First."

Now Putin has followed Russia's playbook in attacking a neighbor country to destroy its independence. He is using the big lie, claiming Ukraine is the attacker, bombing

maternity and children's hospitals, and conducting full sieges to starve and freeze whole towns.

Putin is a vampire, climbing out of the grave of the old Russian Empire.

679 words

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