

Ukraine: Should we be worried that this is a *Stunde Null* for Liberal Democracy? An RLCF Book Club Appraisal

Despite weeks of assurances from the Kremlin, on the 24 February 2022 many woke to the news that Russian forces had started their invasion of Ukraine. War had come to Europe when many had thought that conflict was nearly outlawed as a mechanism of international relations. Over the next few years there will undoubtedly be an outpouring of publications and media diatribe about the Ukrainian War, its reasons, conduct and long-term effects. Many armchair generals, self-appointed military experts, consultants, politicians and news hacks will have a view. Whether this European conflict represents a *Stunde Null* (zero hour) for global liberal democracy remains to be seen. The only thing that we know for certain is that published quantity is unlikely to be aligned with quality. In an attempt to navigate through this publishing mêlée and media debris, the RLCF Book Club will try to answer the question of whether we should be worried about Ukraine and what sources Foundation members may wish to consult to help determine an informed view. Perhaps the easiest approach to measuring the threats posed by the war is to focus on three themed aspects. Firstly, the wider implications for Europe and the international community, secondly, the conduct and character of the conflict with its potential legacies, and finally, the West's attention span whilst in the hailstorm of widespread domestic economic and social challenges.

The War in Ukraine shocked the West, not so much for its ferocity, that came slightly later, but because many believed that war had been outlawed, at least in Europe. Hathaway's and Shapiro's *The Internationalists* (2017), offers evidenced insights into the dangers of returning to an earlier age of settling international disputes and the potential opportunities in the twenty-first century if war can be avoided. Watching the endless news cycle of the besieged Ukrainian cities is like stepping into a living past. Few would have thought that scenes reminiscent of conflicts in the twentieth century would have re-emerged in present day Europe. Liberal democracy is under an overt physical attack by an autocracy which threatens the balance of the world order. The problem for the West is that this order was created by institutions largely under the control of the leading liberal democracies at the end of the Second World War. The Bretton Woods System for example, spawned the IMF and World Bank and international trade relations were stabilised to a degree by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). Whilst no single initiative was perfect, they did offer the means by which individual states could work to stabilise the international system and their part in it. In effect, the post-war global institutions underpinned capitalism, facilitated global trade, encouraged broad cultural understanding and recognised shared values and standards. Liberal democracy had a framework plan to work to that offered betterment – or so liberal nations believed. The line was easily drawn between democracy *believers* and *the others*. The Cold War made it simple to visualise and politicians reaped the rewards of a clear communications strategy that people could understand. With this general comprehension, Kissinger's (World Order, 2015, p.37) view holds true in that to be stable, the international order has to reflect a uniform perception. Russia however has openly challenged this perception of the rules based system and usurped three-quarters of a century of law, order and accepted norms. Prior to this latest assault on Ukraine, President Putin was largely successful in sustaining his autocracy through bluff, cyber-attacks, assassinations, false-flag operations, energy leveraging and money laundering. Pursuit of this multifaceted war in the grey zone confirms the Kremlin's recognition that *might* is the preferred edged tool of Putin's governance.

Inadvertently, Putin may have undermined his regime and inadvertently strengthened liberal democracy with his latest actions in Ukraine. In 1988, a Russian political propagandist declared to the West that, 'we are going to do something terrible to you ... we are going to deprive you of an enemy' (Kominsky, 2011). Fukuyama (The End of History and the Last Man, 1993) unwittingly mirrored this prophecy when he declared that the cessation of the Cold War represented, 'the end of history'. With liberal democracy seemingly triumphant and denied an opposing ideology, it could be argued that since the demise of the Soviet Union the West has taken its liberal values for granted and its contingency preparations to defend its principles have withered accordingly. Of course, it should be remembered that from 1991, Ukraine's politics were not particularly coherent and its institutions of governance remained contested from a myriad of opposing quarters as it attempted to fill the void left by communism. Sakwa (Frontline Ukraine, 2016) provides a broad historiography of the country and the reasons why, what he terms, 'the Ukrainian crisis,' erupted in 2014 and how the situation was likely to get worse before it got better.

So what of the Russians? Much of Putin's rhetoric is centered on making Russia great again (an unwitting admittance of its decline). He has fabricated a historiography that the Kremlin believes supports a war narrative. To understand the paranoia that surrounds Putin and his acolytes, Roxburgh (Moscow Calling, 2018) offers a view from inside the country and cites Tyutchev (p.343) where, 'You can't understand Russia with the mind alone...In Russia you just have to believe.' And it seems Russians do believe, as Lawson (The Sunday Times, 2022, p.24) reports, 'domestic support for Putin has only grown in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine.' If we are to convince the majority of Russians that liberal democracy is not a threat to them, it seems we have some way to go to break through the apparatus of state propaganda and Putin's internal watching-eye. Whilst Ukraine is currently the regional focus, there is more to play for and Moscow knows this. Ukraine sits on an ideological fault line that stretches north to the Baltic and south east along the Belt and Road Initiative to Taiwan. If the cracks are allowed to travel – and they will likely follow the weakest path, other autocracies may also determine that war may once again be a credible mechanism to reshape the international system. So, Ukraine is important, not only for the future health of liberal democracy in Europe but also globally. To help sustain the West's liberal values we have to contest Putin's aggression and to do that we need to understand the conduct and character of a war that may be mirrored along the ideological fault line.

There has been nearly two months to assess the operational plans and combat effectiveness of Russia's forces. Many have been surprised at the perceived lack of tempo in securing what military pundits have identified as 'Ukraine's centre of gravity'. Urban areas, power plants, ports and transport nodes have been targeted but in many regions the fighting has lacked precision and developed into an attritional campaign. Much has been proffered over the capabilities of the Russian army and its blunt, blundering advances (and withdrawals). Perhaps to better understand the conduct of the Russian offensive, one has to take an historic view of conflict in Ukraine with that of other contemporary regional conflicts.

In WW2, the Russians eventually liberated Ukraine from the Reich in an operation which commenced on 25 December 1943. In total, five major offensives were conducted with one centred on Kiev – sound familiar? The Red Army ground to a halt 80 miles south-west of the city on 14 January 1944. Why? – in March 1944 the Germans adopted a *festung strategy* to defend the largest urban centres in a loose operational concept known as the Panther Defence Line. The defence of Korel and Brody in western Ukraine are examples of how cities can be

successfully defended – albeit at great cost. Similar scenes were played out in Grozny in 1995, where the Russians re-learned how hard it is to assault and subjugate a city (Grau and Thomas, *Marine Corps Gazette*, 1999). Perhaps the Russians knew that taking and holding Ukraine's large urban centres would be expensive given the scale and complexity of the task. According to *The Economist* (March 2022, p.15), US Army doctrine stipulates that 20-25 soldiers per 1000 people are required to hold down an insurgency. Presumably, these soldiers need to be well versed in counter-insurgency and capacity building in unison with essential governance regimes – the Russian Army has shown little skill in this area in Afghanistan, Georgia or Chechnya. If one needs to be convinced, Goltz (*Chechnya Diary*, 2003) offers a vivid, first-hand account of how the Russians operated in Chechnyan cities. If Russian forces did enter into the hearts of Ukraine's cities, the likelihood is that the complex terrain would nullify much of the fighting advantages that they enjoy in standoff engagements in semi-urban areas. Even with modern technologies such as drones and thermobaric weapons, the dehumanizing nature of fighting in urban areas has not significantly changed since WW2 and readers need only read Beevor's *Stalingrad* (1998) or Glantz's *Red Storm over the Balkans* (2007), to gain an understanding of why aggressors are reluctant to get embroiled in urban contests of will. Putin's generals will certainly want to avoid what Beevor (p.131) describes as a squalid *rat war* fought amongst the rubble. There will certainly be a cohort of Russia's political elite and Putin's inner military circle who are aware of the cost of fighting such a war from recent experience. In December 1979, Russia's planned short operation of liberation in Afghanistan, morphed into nearly a decade of contested occupation. In total, 15,000 of its soldiers died, 3,000 of them by friendly fire and suicide (BBC Podcast, online).

Whilst the kinetic lines of development are similarly contested in Ukraine, the West has adopted a dual strategy which maximises its soft power and monopoly of international institutions. As well as supplying lethal and logistic aid in conjunction with humanitarian assistance, it is also treading a well-worn path of *outcasting* through banishment from the recognised economic framework of the international order. Outcomes of penalising international defaulters through economic sanctions is neither immediate nor a demonstration of marshal commitment, but it can be effective. The array of ever increasing commercial punitive measures is yet to fully impact on the Kremlin's war but Mulder (*The Economic Weapon*, 2022) offers an historic view where sanctions can be lethal but may also prove less of a honed weapon than originally envisaged. The way that Moscow has attempted to choreograph the war has failed to break the will of the Ukrainians. A lack of coherent Russian combined arms actions, poor logistics, indiscriminate bombing, plunder, ill-discipline and low morale have proven counterproductive – at least so far. How multifaceted hard and soft power pressures can be sustained by the West may depend as much on domestic challenges and agendas as international ones.

Geopolitics has never been conducted in isolation and growing capitalism and globalization has increased the dependency and complexity of economic, political and social interactions. That said, domestic agendas can still affect and frequently eclipse global issues. One of the real concerns is that whilst we know Ukraine is important, conflating issues, such as the cost of living crisis, could relegate it and the sustainment of liberal values to a close second. A single mother in the UK who cannot afford heating through the 2022/23 winter is unlikely to be focused on defending liberal values over a thousand miles away. The view from her freezing window may not be one of urban warfare, but if she has no control over her offspring's immediate predicament, she might feel that concerning herself with geopolitics is somewhat of a luxury (if she feels anything at all). Why does this matter to Ukraine? Carville

(1992) when campaigning for Bill Clinton, explained it in a nutshell, 'it's the economy stupid' and specifically the domestic economy. Perversely, the single mother exercises her perspective on government priorities through her democratic voting rights. By prioritising her domestic issues over challenges to global liberal democracy, she unwittingly changes the government's international focus as more of the available political bandwidth is taken with alleviating home economics. Using this example, which will be played out in millions of homes over the coming winter, Ukraine seems to have a certain political and economic shelf life. *The Economist* (2021, p.7) captures liberal democracy's predicament where, 'Britain will not be taken seriously abroad if it is falling apart at home'. Supporting global democracy therefore may form part of the background landscape rather than the focal point. Ukraine will no doubt remain important – but only to a degree. Britain's (and many other European nations') domestic agenda will likely ensure that supporting liberal values abroad has a financial saturation point beyond which voters may refocus on domestic issues. Perhaps Europe can afford to sustain domestic and foreign policies with equal priority but nothing is certain in an out-of-control cost of living crisis.

In summary, Ukraine is important if the ideological struggle between liberal democracy and autocracy is to be sustained and western focused global institutions are to remain *primus inter pares* in their controlling influence over the rules-based international system. Unless Russia is subjected to punishing retributions that shape its behavior away from conflict, war could once again be back on the table as a bona fide mechanism for resolving international disputes. Ukraine's sovereignty is therefore paramount to influencing thinking in other autocratic capitals of the world. To support liberal values in the Ukraine, democracy must be seen to be credible at home, primarily through sound economics. Significant domestic malfunctions could threaten to curtail any sustained focus on international affairs. Closer to home, *global Britain* can only be projected from a firm economic base and some nimble domestic/foreign fiscal rebalancing is required before the autumn if Ukraine is to remain in focus. Alarmingly, despite all the deaths, destruction, war crimes, displacement and financial ruin, Ukraine could just be the calm before the storm – there is a growing spectre of autocracies threatening the international system. Attriting liberal democracy's enemies as far out as possible as part of a coalition still seems a credible strategy but sustaining good intentions through a financial crisis may be a challenging ask. Nonetheless, whether the heating is on or not, Ukraine should remain important. Instead of asking *should we be worried*, perhaps the real question is *how worried should we be?* Winter is coming, and while there is unlikely to be any clear winner in Ukraine, there is certainly potential for several losers – at home and abroad.

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