

# The Ten Hardest Truths About the War in Europe

The author of a bestseller on Russia, Ukraine, and links between the Russia-Ukraine conflict and U.S. politics reveals 10 terrifying things about the worst military crisis in Europe since 1945.

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52 year-old Ukrainian teacher **Olena Kurilo** following a Russian missile strike in **Chuhuiv**, Ukraine.

# Introduction

I've been nervous about publishing this article ever since I started writing it.

The reason for my anxiety will be familiar to anyone inside or outside the American government who's extensively researched **Vladimir Putin** and understands what the current atrocities in Europe represent: a terrifying new stage in the war against the West that Putin has been waging for over twenty years, and that he's been winning for for at least half that time in part because many in the West remain unaware they're at war.

To write at length about Putin and his twenty-first-century infiltrations of Western democracies and their institutions—as I did in the “**Proof**” [trilogy](#)—is to run the risk of seeming not just alarmist but almost ludicrously paranoid. It's only the fact that all the warnings those who've written extensively about Putin have been giving for years are now coming to horrific fruition that it even feels safe to write candidly about what we're all now experiencing.

Academics can debate whether our current period is in the umbra of the same **Cold War** that dominated the last century or a new one; whether we're on the doorstep of **World War III** or are already in it; whether the conditions on the ground in Europe today are most reflective of the eve of **World War I** or **World War II**; but what no one can deny is that what is happening in **Ukraine** is not merely a “news story” or even a spate of well-televised war crimes but a fundamental shifting of our age toward chaos.

There is no need to rehash the core facts beyond this brief summary: Putin is a former **KGB** agent and current murderous autocrat who is almost certain to be a dictator over **Russia** until his death; he has repeatedly said that the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century was the 1991 fall of the Communist **Soviet Union**; he seeks to reconstitute the land area of the Soviet Union by whatever means necessary and over however long a period of time is required, though he understands that this cannot be accomplished without the dissolution or destruction of the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** defensive alliance (**NATO**) and possibly both the **European Union** and the **United States**; the post-Soviet government in Russia, including (indeed perhaps especially) Putin's KGB, began searching for ways to collapse American democracy through asymmetrical warfare from the moment the Soviet Union passed into history;

and some significant portion of the current domestic political strife in the United States has been deliberately provoked by the Kremlin and its agents through acts of subterfuge, espionage, propaganda, and hacking that properly answer to the name *war*.

Yesterday, a former high-ranking official in the **Donald Trump** administration, **Miles Taylor**, said that the current Trumpist-Putinist **Republican Party** is far and away the greatest national security threat America has faced in his lifetime. That he is correct is confirmed not just by the January 6, 2021 attack on the **U.S. Capitol** by Trumpist irregulars or the fact that former president Trump—to please Putin and ensure his own future business opportunities in Russia—put every U.S. alliance and interest lying beyond our shores at risk, but the fact that we are now in a global conflict (call it the Cold War, World War III, or **Second Cold War**, as you like) at a time when Trump and Trumpism have quite deliberately put our body politic at the point of permanent fracture. That most Americans still do not understand what Putin is trying to do and the cost that will be exacted upon the United States as he seeks to do it means that the coming months and perhaps years will be the darkest and most fraught in a century.

Because Putin has now advanced from waging a “hot” cyberwar on America’s sacred electoral infrastructure to waging a hot *conventional* war on the European continent, everything is now in play that was previously only a harrowing specter in books like *Proof of Collusion* (**Simon & Schuster**, 2018), *Proof of Conspiracy* (**Macmillan**, 2019), and *Proof of Corruption* (Macmillan, 2020). Putin has already threatened the world with nuclear war; facing the most comprehensive sanctions ever leveled against a major global power, he has categorized those sanctions as themselves an act of war (thus, at least theoretically, permitting an immediate military response from Russia); there are already significant signs that the war in Europe will destabilize Earth’s international economy for the foreseeable future; the war has also shifted global alliances in such an extraordinary fashion and to such a dramatic degree that America’s supposed allies in **Saudi Arabia** and the **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** will not speak to the president of the United States, and the United States has now sent emissaries to negotiate with our long-time enemies in **Venezuela**. Gas prices just hit a historic high and show no signs of coming down rather than going up. Thousands of civilians are now being killed in Ukraine because they lack air cover, and yet the United States has just

declared that it has no appetite for aiding Ukraine in rebuilding its air force via **MiG-29s** from **Poland**.

In short, we're in the earliest days of a sequence of global events whose end none can know but whose present is a darkness deeper than anyone younger than 85 has known.

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By and large, American media has so far done yeoman's work covering the fighting in Europe. While certain news articles published in the United States have endangered the Ukrainian resistance by giving explicit descriptions of its defensive operations and placement, the fact that so many leading American journalists are now embedded in Ukrainian cities has given those of us who care about the indiscriminate killing of women and children—which at this point appears to be approximately half our nation at most—an unmistakable sense that the System of the World is unraveling. Ukrainian president **Volodymyr Zelenskyy**, who his aides say has survived more than a dozen assassination attempts in just the last two weeks, may be speaking first and foremost on behalf of the nation he leads when he says the Ukrainians are now fighting for the preservation of Western democracy—and against the global march of autocracy that our own president **Joe Biden**, has so often spoken of—but his personal investment in this framing does not make his claim incorrect. While the NATO alliance has refused (and will continue to refuse) to deploy its forces into Europe's current theater of war, this strategic decision in no way obviates the reality that right now the Ukrainians are indeed the world's foremost proxies for capital-“d” **Democracy**.

In the coming weeks and months, Americans will be repeatedly confronted with the question of how much we're willing to sacrifice to preserve our nation and preserve the very *notion* of democracy on the global stage. Unfortunately, during the COVID-19 pandemic we learned that at least half of America is unwilling to have its daily routine at all disturbed by a global or even domestic tragedy; there's no reason to expect we'll answer the call of history any more honorably now that it's a political principle and the integrity of American democracy at stake rather than hundreds of millions of lives.

Of course, the impact of what's happening now in Europe will fall upon the shoulders of hundreds of millions soon enough. Already we're learning that the war in Ukraine is

launching a refugee crisis the likes of which the West hasn't seen since World War II, with the near certainty that at least 5 million Ukrainians will ultimately cross a national border to flee the war crimes Putin is presently inflicting on their homeland. But beyond this ever-expanding refugee crisis, and the morally intolerable civilian deaths in cities like **Kyiv** and **Kharkiv** and **Mariupol**, lies the fact that many millions in European democracies like **Finland** and **Latvia** and **Estonia** and **Lithuania** now feel under military threat from Russian aggression, as will those in **Romania** and Poland if (or more likely *when*) Ukraine is annexed in its totality by Russia. The economic and geopolitical effects of having the world's largest country by land area—and its second-largest military—become a “pariah state” encompass the lives of hundreds of millions more than the tragedy in Ukraine has already affected. And that's only in the medium term.

This essay seeks to speak candidly about this medium-range outlook, and to do so in terms that American media has so far eschewed—in part because it is habitually and temperamentally “present-oriented,” and in part because it has missed the fact, as have most Americans, that our country is, sadly, *already* implicitly at war with Russia.

While this may seem an inauspiciously hot-headed and alarmist start to what intends to be a sober essay on the very geopolitics that I wrote three national bestsellers about over the last forty months, understand that with the advent of the internet and the establishment of a global economy there was *never a chance* that World War III would look like World War II or World War I. The war we are in now is very much a twenty-first-century war, which doesn't mean that there are no conventional components to it—as the Ukrainians are learning right now, with devastating consequences—but that if we fail to appreciate the *unconventional* components of international warfare in this century we are dooming ourselves to defeat at the very moment that the inchoate and unconventional aggressions of our enemies have become conventional and dire.

With all this said, here are ten truths that American media and American voters need to come to terms with immediately.

# The Ten Hardest Truths About the War in Europe

## (1) America is now in a world war.

If you're one of those people who—like the notoriously geopolitically unsophisticated Trumpists, who speak so often of courage yet categorically oppose any instance of it—have always thought that World War III would feature the same sort of military, para-military, and asymmetrical logistics that World War I and World War II did, you need to rearrange your thinking *immediately*. While major international military conflicts always bear certain hallmarks—for instance, war crimes, so-called *collateral damage*, and the threatened use (or use) of weapons of mass destruction—the chances that a global military conflict in 2022 would look like a global military conflict that began on September 1, 1939 (let alone one that began on July 28, 1914) were always zero. Don't be fooled by the fact that what's happening now indeed exhibits certain similarities to what happened when **Nazi Germany** invaded Eastern Europe at the close of the 1930s, whether it's the fact that Eastern Europe has again been invaded by a global military power with an autocratic leader, that fears of a genocide in Europe again dominate international political discourse, or that the use of nuclear weapons already hangs over the world like a glowering spectre. 2022 is, nevertheless, not 1939, and no amount of far-right Putin apologists whining about “liberals” wanting to drag America into a war with Russia will change the simple fact that America is *already* at war with Russia.

This war is a worldwide conflict that could last as many as a hundred years—think of the Hundred Years' War between **England** and **France** (1337-1453) rather than World War I or World War II—and began upon the conclusion of hostilities in the European theater of WWII in 1945. The principal disputants have from the start been the United States and Russia, and while one could certainly question the instances in which one or the other of those two parties pushed the dispute into outright military conflict (e.g., the **Korean War**, the disaster of the **Bay of Pigs**, the **Vietnam War**, or the 1979-to-1989 **Soviet-Afghan War** that the United States involved itself in by coordinating with men who'd later turn their violent attentions on America), one of the least-discussed errors that either side has made during this **Second Hundred Years' War** was made by America: many of our diplomats, generals, and politicians believed the war had ended when the Soviet Union fell. By the time GOP presidential candidate **Mitt Romney** was correctly telling Democratic presidential candidate **Barack Obama** that the Russians

were still America's foremost geopolitical opponents, it was all then-senator Obama could do not to laugh in Romney's face. And back in 2012, U.S. media scored the point for Obama.

Of course, the Cold War *should* have ended in 1991. But it didn't. And it didn't in large part because a former Cold War-era KGB agent spent the 1990s plotting his political ascendance and the reestablishment of the **USSR** (by land area, if not political ethos). In the deranged calculations of the young **Vladimir Putin**, the fall of the Soviet Union in December 1991 was due primarily to the perfidy and venality and cowardice of the **Communist Party**. He (Putin) would ensure Russia's return to glory by reimagining it as an autocracy and reestablishing its sphere of control through means *other* than military aggression—the road most likely to invite a violent response from the West.

As those who have written biographies of former president Donald Trump are well aware, the remnants of the Soviet-era KGB began plotting to dramatically destabilize the West—most notably, Europe and the United States—almost as soon as the **Berlin Wall** fell. These career soldier-spies never took themselves off a war footing, even as they knew that it would be many, *many* years before Russia could again assert itself militarily. Fortunately, they had the hard lesson of the Soviet Union's ignominious defeat in the Soviet-Afghan War to learn from: the side that wins a war is often the side most willing to fight in perpetuity and regardless of cost. So that is what Putin and his peers decided to do: fight in perpetuity, and without any consideration for the damage caused. They would play a "long game" well beyond anything the gluttonous, weak-kneed Americans could possibly stomach, and while this long game would take years or possibly decades to blossom into outright military confrontation, not a man in Putin's cadre ever doubted that it would eventually move from asymmetrical war to a more conventional (if localized) one.

Donald Trump's desperation to do business with two shockingly corrupt countries in the 1990s and 2000s—Russia and Ukraine—was in the first instance prompted by the fact that Trump is himself thoroughly corrupt, meaning that he saw instantaneously, through the lens of his jaw-dropping avarice, that the fall of the Soviet Union birthed new opportunities for graft in both Russia and the countries of the former Soviet bloc.

Nor did Trump limit himself to Russia and Ukraine. He recognized in **Azerbaijan** and **Georgia** two *other* destabilized states in which his grift could be fabulously lucrative.

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A few weeks ago, longtime Trump pal **John Daly** (yes—the former professional golfer) gave an interview that should have become international news. It revealed for perhaps the first time *exactly* what was going on in Trump’s private conversations following the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to Daly, he first met Trump at a celebrity golf tournament just a matter of months after the Soviet Union fell. And in this *first ever conversation* between two men who were total strangers to one another, Trump told Daly that he was going to become President of the United States. Trump did not say he *hoped* to become president or *aspired* to become president; rather, he assured a man who he’d never met before and had no reason to particularly trust that he could take to the bank that Donald Trump would one day become President Donald Trump.

There’s no reason to think that Trump’s pitch to corrupt businessmen, politicians, and—yes—even former KGB agents in Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Georgia was any different from his pitch to Daly: you should treat me and my business interests as internationally significant and worth investing in in part *because* they attach to a man who one day will be the most powerful man on Earth, and therefore someone in a position to do *you* a good turn in response. And just as Daly believed Trump’s boast, so too did the former Soviets Trump aggressively wooed overseas in the 1990s and 2000s. While by no means did this cadre of former KGB agents limit their outreach to Western businessmen to Trump (it’s since been well-established that the KGB-cum-**FSB**’s outreach to powerful Western figures in the post-Soviet era went well beyond a single real estate mogul from New York City) Trump offered to Putin and his peers something almost impossible to find anywhere else: a man so transparently stupid, venal, and emotionally insecure—yet somehow (anyway) *powerful* and *famous* and (in the view of some) *charismatic*—that manipulating him in spectacular ways was the sort of mindless bureaucratic work even an FSB *trainee* could do competently over years.



During Putin's only briefly interrupted twenty-two-year reign as Russia's autocratic leader—a reign that, it is now clear, will last until he dies or is deposed by force—the scope of the former KGB agent's ambitions and adventures has been breathtaking. He has turned **Belarus** and **Kazakhstan** into vassal states; sponsored a coup in **Moldova**; invaded **Georgia** and **Ukraine**; suborned almost unimaginable degrees of corruption in **Azerbaijan**; brutally repressed the **Chechen Republic of Ichkeria**; systematically destroyed democratic advances and the free press in Russia, jailing his enemies by the thousands; assassinated his opponents in politics and media via deadly gambits both inside and outside Russia; waged cyberwar on America's electoral infrastructure since at least 2016; and used propaganda, espionage, and bribery to promote the dissolution of NATO and the EU (NATO through his sponsorship of Trump's anti-NATO agenda, the EU through his interference in the **Brexit** campaign in England). In short, he has done everything possible to underline that he is at war with the world while somehow always stopping short of doing anything that'd make anyone fully appreciate that fact.

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Perhaps as a tangential outgrowth of the anti-autocratic **Arab Spring** (2011-2012), in late 2013 and early 2014 one of the former Soviet states Vladimir Putin had turned into a nation-state-sized personal and **Kremlin** ATM through its rife-with-corruption oil-and-gas industry—Ukraine—managed to shake Putin's yoke via the **Euromaidan Revolution**. The two men who had been running Ukraine on Putin's behalf up to that point, **Viktor Yanukovych** and longtime Donald Trump associate **Paul Manafort**, fled the country in early 2014. In less than 24 months, Manafort—still under a \$10 million-a-year- contract with Putin lieutenant **Oleg Deripaska** to advance Putin's interests in Europe and America—would be telling Trump's best friend, **Thomas Barrack**, that he needed to “**get to**” then-candidate Trump to offer him the very same political advising services he had previously been paid by the Kremlin to offer Yanukovych in Ukraine, this time *pro bono*. Manafort knew, as did Deripaska, that such work would neither be “free” nor come without significant cost; but that cost, like so many others, would be born by the American people rather than Trump. Despite knowing Paul Manafort's dodgy background and sinister connections, Trump hired him and within *three weeks* had put him in charge of his entire presidential campaign. Putin and the FSB finally had their preferred U.S. presidential candidate—and a Kremlin agent advising him.

Mr. Trump's historically pro-Russia foreign policy agenda, which included ending sanctions on Russia for invading Ukraine in 2014 and refusing lethal weapons to the Ukrainian soldiers fighting Kremlin-backed separatists in the **Donbass** region of eastern Ukraine, was written—as *Proof of Collusion* (2018) has since established via impeccable sourcing—by three Kremlin agents. And all the while candidate Trump told American voters, without ever being gainsaid by America media, that he had nothing whatsoever to do with the Russians. One imagines the normally taciturn Putin almost giddy over his good fortune.

Understand that Putin did not take Crimea in 2014 simply because he *could*. He also took it because, as a warm-water port on the **Black Sea**, it was *critical* to his future military plans. He knew that a second, southern launching point for a full invasion of Ukraine knew would be “necessary” once his puppets Yanukovich and Manafort were forced to flee Kyiv in February 2014. It should be noted, too, that Putin had *another* bit of valuable intelligence available to him in early 2014: he knew Donald Trump would be running for President of the United States in 2016, as one of his most trusted allies had successfully lured Trump to Moscow in late 2013, and during the trip Trump not only had told anyone who'd listen that he'd be running for president but made clear that anyone in Moscow who wanted to could ingratiate themselves to him at the dawn of his political career by promising to build a giant monument to his toxic masculinity in the heart of the Russian capital: **Trump Tower Moscow**.

Not only would Trump sign a Letter of Intent for a Trump Tower Moscow while he was in the Russian capital for the **2013 Miss Universe** pageant, he would be secretly negotiating such an edifice—the priciest and prospectively most lucrative of his entire career in business—for the whole of his 2016 presidential campaign, even as he told American voters that he had no connections of any kind to Russia. Trump was literally gifting American foreign policy to the Kremlin as compensation for a real estate deal.

None of this is disputed. You can Google any of it and quickly find a hundred major-media articles—and multiple reports from federal government entities—confirming it.

So when Putin embarked on a hot cyberwar against America in 2016, after decades of clandestine spycraft seeking to sow division in America and cultivate Western leaders, he knew that if he could get Trump elected he'd have virtually free rein in Ukraine.

Trump turned out to be exactly the U.S. president Putin wanted him to be, repeatedly refusing to enforce sanctions on the Kremlin for its invasion of Ukraine, destabilizing NATO and the EU, requiring bribes from the Ukrainians for any military weaponry to be transported to them, underscoring in public that the United States had no position whatsoever on Russian adventurism in Ukraine, and even helping to prop up the pro-Kremlin government officials in Kyiv. As his first term wore on, Trump declared war on his own diplomatic corps, hitting the brakes on the anti-corruption efforts of the **U.S. State Department** in Ukraine in part because the bulk of the corruption there—and there was indeed quite a lot of it—was coming from Putin’s allies there, whose interventions in the country’s judicial system and energy sector in particular helped ensure (a) that Putin would continue to suck Ukraine dry economically, and (b) that it would therefore be unnecessary to invade the country by force, as it was already being denuded and defiled on a daily basis economically. Why stab a victim in the chest, Putin calculated, when you can bleed him out across many years and a thousand cuts?

When Russia’s efforts to help Trump steal the 2020 presidential election—detailed in *Proof of Corruption* (2020)—ultimately failed, Putin lost one of his key allies in ensuring corruption in Ukraine would continue unabated. There was suddenly a real prospect that Ukraine, now aided by an American president who’d actually spent years *battling* corruption in Ukraine (**Joe Biden**), would permanently escape the Kremlin’s influence. If admission to NATO and the EU wasn’t imminent, it was certainly nearing, and as that couldn’t be allowed, Putin used his now well-established Crimean and Donbass footholds—as well as his vassal state Belarus—to launch the next stage of the Second Hundred Years’ War: a conventional land-and-air war on the European continent.

Those who publicly worry about America being “dragged into a war with Russia” have a **Sesame Street**-level understanding of geopolitics—and must be ignored. This said, the fact (and it *is* a fact) that we are now, and have long been, in a war with Russia does *not* mean that war must or will proceed in the same way that the world wars of the last century did. The United States need not, and indeed *should* not, engage the Russians militarily. But this doesn’t mean that the day won’t ever come when we will or should; it doesn’t mean that we’re not at war with Russia in every respect that matters; and it doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t use every lever available to us—economic,

diplomatic, technological, rhetorical, and cultural—to treat Putin’s Russia as the pariah he’s been gunning for it to become since he ascended to power at the beginning of this century.

And it certainly means that Putin’s willing accomplice Donald Trump can never again be allowed to enter the Oval Office.

(2) [If Donald Trump again becomes president in January 2025, America will lose the war we are currently in with Russia and our democracy may collapse.](#)

Recently, Trump’s odious but occasionally informative ex-National Security Advisor, **John Bolton**, told major media that in a second presidential term Trump would almost certainly withdraw the United States from NATO—an event that many believe (for a number of financial, logistical, and geopolitical reasons) would cause the collapse of the alliance altogether.

To those who wonder why **Sweden** and **Finland** now appear to be looking to join NATO; to those who wonder why the Baltic states—**Estonia**, **Latvia**, and **Lithuania**—have now put themselves on high alert; to those deeply discomfited by the fact that Putin was so easily able to use **Belarus** to stage his invasion of Europe, or that he very quickly turned to **Kazakhstan** and demanded it come to his aid militarily; or even to those wondering why **Poland** (which will border Russia if Russia swallows Ukraine) has been well out in front of the United States in seeking to help Ukraine beat back the ongoing Russian encroachment on its soil; all of this can be understood by the fact that if the Republican Party takes the White House in 2025 it is possible NATO will collapse and there will be nothing keeping Putin from expanding his grotesque military adventurism in Europe even further. Certainly, Putin has already made clear that if he had his way the Soviet Union would have remained intact, which is another way of saying that he’d prefer the Baltic states not exist independent from Russia and that Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and the other former Soviet nations are properly his whether or not he’s conquered them through military might.

In short, the possibility of the war in Europe spreading isn’t just a matter of whether NATO makes a critical strategic or tactical error that results in its forces coming into direct contact with the Russians—for instance, if NATO were to try to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine—but also a question of what direction *American politics* will take in

the next 36 months. Accepting that the United States is already in a global war with Russia that has seen the Kremlin seeking to end American democracy through direct interference in our 2016 and 2020 elections means accepting, too, that the decisions U.S. voters make in the next three years will determine whether we win our war with Russia, parlay our current losses into a stalemate, or suffer a final, ignominious defeat.

(3) All this is complicated by the fact that what we're witnessing in Europe is the start of the first genocide in the West since the Holocaust.

While the present world war is quite dissimilar from World War I and World War II in many respects, we mustn't be infantile in drawing this distinction, presuming that there are therefore *no* similarities between the conflicts. As U.S. military involvement in Europe will *always* be fraught, and as sociopathic autocrats such as **Adolf Hitler** or Putin instinctively turn to genocide at the first opportunity, it's not so surprising (even if it remains horrifying) that American thinking on how to engage an ongoing military conflict in Europe should unfold in 2022 against the backdrop of a genocide, just as it did in the early 1940s.

To understand why it's so important that we speak of what Putin is doing in Ukraine as *genocide* rather than "merely" a slew of conventional war crimes, we must consider the geopolitical history recounted above. Ukraine has not been randomly selected by Putin for the brutalities of war; Ukraine is the largest nation by land area wholly in Europe, has been (with Belarus) Putin's most useful strategic military bulwark against the West (NATO) since the fall of the Soviet Union, and is at once the most lucrative nation-state-sized ATM the Kremlin has—and also its most troublesome. Whereas the attempted rebellion against Putin's puppet in Belarus (**Alexander Lukashenko**) failed, the rebellion that drove Putin's puppets Yanukovich and Manafort from Kyiv not only succeeded but was so spiritedly supported by the Obama administration after its initial successes (largely through the person of Vice President Biden, who held the Ukraine brief for that administration) that Ukraine had advanced closer to NATO and EU membership by the start of the 2016 presidential election cycle than any former Soviet-bloc nation (excepting Armenia) not yet part of either of those Western entities.

In short, while Putin may have had to flex his muscles (as he would see it) in **Georgia**, and also in a conflict not wholly of his choosing inside Russia (the **Second Chechen War**), his current incursion into Ukraine is not about holding territory or issuing a

transient geopolitical statement: it is, rather, about (a) expanding Russian territory by adding to it the largest nation in Europe; (b) making an *example* of the Ukrainians in the eyes of other former Soviet-bloc nations that might seek to reach escape velocity from the Kremlin's sphere of influence; (c) *punishing* the Ukrainians for their perceived transgressions, most notably embarrassing him in 2014 by kicking out his creatures Manafort and Yanukovich; (d) permanently *reestablishing* Ukraine as a lucrative vassal of its much larger and poorer-than-you-may-realize neighbor; (e) *bolstering* an eldritch geopolitical narrative the Kremlin has long used to cover its crimes against the West—the false claim, spread in America largely by Trump and his far-right media minions, that it is Ukraine, not Russia, that has sought to interfere in American politics over the last two presidential election cycles; and (f) creating yet another critical *staging ground* for any future invasions—as controlling a swath of the Black Sea coast would give Putin new strategic access to Georgia and **Moldova** and create a land bridge to Putin's closest ally in the EU, **Hungary**, which is currently run by neo-Nazi autocrat and top Trump supporter **Viktor Orbán**. If Putin is to make inroads into his goal of destroying NATO and the EU, he will want Orbán's help to do it, so turning Hungary from a geographically remote ally to a neighboring vassal state (the FSB's European HQ is in Hungary) would be a major victory for Putin in the medium and long terms.

For all of these reasons and others (for instance, the rules of engagement Russia has used for years and even, arguably, centuries) it was always inevitable that Putin, an infamous sociopath, would commit war crimes in Ukraine. But it was *also* evident that he'd attempt to go still further than this: that he would seek to brutally *subjugate* the Ukrainian people in a way that—because they valiantly will not and will never accept it—will in Putin's mind “justify” him seeking to exterminate them in large numbers.

So when you see images of dead Ukrainians civilians on the front page of the *New York Times*; when you hear of the Russian military bombing civilian evacuation routes, maternity hospitals, and apartment blocks; when you discover that the Russians are routinely violating cease-fire agreements and using cluster munitions which (at least as to those that do not explode) will now plague Ukraine for decades; when you learn that several Ukrainian cities currently under siege are running out of food and water, and that civilians in these cities are melting snow to stay alive; you must understand that the terror and suffering Putin is inflicting upon Ukraine is not an accident or a coincidence.

We have only just begun to understand the scope of the atrocities in Ukraine, and as we learn more about them, the term “genocide” will come to seem inevitable rather than alarmist. Because Ukraine already showed Putin in 2014 that it won’t abide his yoke, a significant percentage of the Ukrainian population must be either driven from the country, brutally traumatized to the point of stultification, or outright exterminated in order for Putin to have any hope of holding the country once its initial military maneuvers have concluded. Putin’s “pacification” of Ukraine in the coming months and perhaps even years will merely be a euphemism for mass murder.

(4) [No one in the U.S. government, NATO, or the European Union believes Ukraine can win this war.](#)

While the Ukrainian military is by no means weak—it’s ranked twenty-second in the world in the latest **Global Firepower Index**—it’s no match for Putin’s second-ranked military. There is no imagined scenario, short of NATO interventions on Ukrainian soil, under which the Ukrainians defeat the Russians outright, assuming (a) Putin continues to *desire* the subjugation of Ukraine, (b) he isn’t deposed in a military coup led by generals enraged by his recklessness, and (c) the Russian military stays intact despite its present poor provisioning and lack of morale. These three things can be counted upon, more or less, which means that when NATO refuses to get directly involved militarily in Ukraine—which is the right decision, given that Putin is a sociopath, has the largest nuclear arsenal in the world, and would have no hope of pacifying the West in an all-out direct military conflict *except* through the mutually assured destruction of nuclear war—it is, in effect, *conceding* Ukraine to Putin.

And the lesson Putin will learn from this is that if he wishes to reconstitute the Soviet Union, he has an open runway to do so at *least* as to non-NATO countries **Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia** (the last of which is a longstanding NATO partner, but not a NATO member). That’s nine countries, some in Europe, that NATO is telling Putin he can have without a fight. It’s enough open trail to last Putin a few *decades* of pursuing his sole lifelong ambition, during which time he’d simultaneously be continuing his efforts to destabilize NATO, the EU, and the United States. The useless of Donald Trump to Vladimir Putin has certainly not expired, and will not expire anytime soon.

In view of all the foregoing, the West's position can only be termed "untenable." If it intercedes in Ukraine, nuclear war (not to mention the absolutely shocking loss of life among both soldiers and civilians that would precede it) would be almost inevitable, as Russia is no match for the combined military might of the West. If it does *not* intercede in Ukraine, it gives Putin a road map for how to accomplish his overarching *raison d'être*. While it's true that no nation on Earth has ever experienced the economic punishment Russia is now experiencing, (a) one need only look to a nation of starving **North Koreans** to understand how far a sociopathic autocrat will go to get what he wants and (b) Russia still has enough allies left that it remains unlikely to permanently falter under the weight of economic sanctions alone.

What NATO appears to be counting on now is that Putin cannot *hold* Ukraine, not that he can't *take* it. In this, NATO may be correct. Ukraine is geographically huge, its people are almost supernaturally resilient—and historically hostile to being under the thumb of the Kremlin)—and its strategic positioning in Europe is so critical to global security that it seems certain the West would help arm Ukrainian guerilla soldiers in perpetuity. And there's no sign that Russian soldiers—putting aside Russian civilians, who are being systematically manipulated with the same casual brutality **Fox News** manipulates Trumpists—have the stomach for a protracted, bloody campaign against folk who many of them consider brothers and sisters both historically and culturally.

And yet.

The odds that a years-long insurgency in Europe—fought inside the largest European country, and between NATO-supported guerillas and the second-strongest military in the world—would *not* eventually spill over into other nations is *remote* to say the least.

Momentarily putting aside the ongoing refugee and humanitarian crises, which will only get worse and require greater and greater Western engagement with the conflict in and out of Ukraine, as the fighting in Ukraine spreads to the western extremities of that country, at the borders of NATO countries Poland and Romania and Hungary, the odds of a miscalculation that draws NATO into the fight increase exponentially. Just so, as Putin's war crimes become so systematic that they universally earn the moniker of *genocide*, the pressure on the West to get more directly involved in Ukraine from the 50% of its citizenry that cares about human life—I exclude here Trumpists and their far-



right allies in Europe—will only increase. And as the fight in Ukraine drags on, Putin will only become more cornered, desperate, and enraged, therefore more likely to do something the West cannot under *any* circumstances ignore. In short, it is no solution to say that the bloodiest conflict in Europe since World War II will now rage at the heart of the European continent for years; such a scenario is unstable to the point of being a predictable precursor to apocalypse.

So in the West's widely held—but still unstated—belief that Ukraine *must* eventually fall lies a Pandora's Box of questions that can only be addressed if they are engaged with *now*. And these questions will only be engaged with now if the West accepts that its policy of non-intervention will *not* result in Russian forces withdrawing from Ukraine. In the absence of any willingness to publicly say what everyone already knows to be true, the West is merely forestalling calculations it must inevitably make in the medium term, in the interim lamely hoping Putin either gets bored, gets killed, or gets deposed. Global geopolitics can't subsist upon such a crossed-fingers approach.

(5) [The fact that Russia can stay in Ukraine long-term—and can weather sanctions long-term—underscores a key indicator that we are in a world war: global alliances are already shifting dramatically in response to the crisis in Ukraine.](#)

This week it was reported that the murderous tyrants who conspired with the Kremlin to try to steal the 2016 election for Donald Trump—**Mohammed bin Salman (MBS)** of **Saudi Arabia** and **Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ)** of the **UAE**; see *Proof of Conspiracy* (2019) for more—will no longer take phone calls from the President of the United States, even as they continue to speak directly with Putin. The odds that these men will help Russia evade and weather Western sanctions, that they will punish the West with their own countries' energy policies, and that they will again seek to partner with the Kremlin and one another in 2024 to re-install Trump in the White House are high. In the meantime, the U.S. is left sending emissaries to the pro-Kremlin government in **Venezuela** (having already had a wedge driven between it and the Venezuelans' chief enemies, **Brazil**, by Trump's collusion with Brazilian president **Jair Bolsonaro** and his son **Eduardo**) in the hope that the U.S. can replace a fading alliance with the Saudis and Emiratis with one with another oil-rich nation historically linked to the Kremlin.

While thus far the United States has dodged a bullet diplomatically in Europe—had **Germany** decided that the **Nord Stream 2** pipeline was more valuable to its

economy than staying in America's good graces, a wedge could've been shoved into the heart of NATO—it cannot be ignored that the ripples from events in Ukraine are now global. While we knew the Chinese would either support the Russian incursion in Ukraine or (at best) remain neutral in the face of it—China's historic philosophies on the integrity of national boundaries notwithstanding—it's unlikely President Biden anticipated two of the most powerful nations in the Middle East siding with Putin, though this would have been less surprising if the Democrats had ever appreciated that the 2016 Trump-Russia scandal was also a *Trump-Saudi Arabia* and *Trump-UAE* scandal.

Putin may have relatively little few things to threaten the world with—nuclear winter and a global energy crisis are just about the extent of it, though Russia's position on the **United Nations Security Council** gives it opportunities for international mischief-making via monstrously unethical vetoes—but what he *can* do is considerable in *scope*, even if it isn't in *variety*. Moreover, with Russia now a pariah state at least in the West, it makes Moscow an even greater magnet for autocrats the world over looking to form a even more collegial bloc of geopolitical villains. The damage such an evil axis could do economically, via cyberterrorism, and via global psyops intended to destabilize democracies around the globe is considerable. Indeed, while those who say that Biden has been wrong on international affairs more often than he has been right during his decades-long political career have an unnervingly good case to make, his willingness to identify the struggle of our age as one between *autocracies* and *democracies* may be his most responsible and prescient declaration as a statesman yet.

The problem is that there are so many powerful autocracies in the world, and there are so many burgeoning autocracies looking to forge new alliances with like-minded heads of state. It therefore isn't as clear as we would like it to be that democracy will emerge victorious in this ongoing worldwide tilt of political philosophies. After all, even here in the United States one of our two major political parties has become an autocratic cult with no interest in free and fair elections or the peaceful transfer of power; indeed, in a recent poll, 49% of likely American voters said they'd vote for the party of anti-democratic cultists on a Congressional ballot over the Democratic Party.

(6) The costs of the current world war may well be more than Americans are willing to bear—and if a majority of Americans come to wrongly believe that it's President Biden rather than Vladimir Putin and his allies (very much including Donald Trump) who've brought the world to its current pass, they'll punish the Democrats and reward the Republicans. Yet doing so would play into Putin's hands.

The **Biden administration** is eventually going to have to do much more to explain to Americans that we are, indeed, in a world war—if only as a desperate measure to try to convince Americans to remain steadfast and courageous as the effects of this world war become even more keenly felt.

Already, gas prices are at an all-time high. Inflation is out of control. Our one-time “allies” in the Middle East—who always did *just* enough to control gas prices to keep themselves in our good graces—are now headed by (even more) murderous thugs who would rather punish than aid America. Vladimir Putin has on his side some of the most thorough, committed, talented, and unscrupulous cyber-terrorists in the world, among them special units not just inside Russia but China and North Korea as well. Americans can expect the attacks on our electoral infrastructure that we saw in 2016 to now blossom into attacks on our markets, our infrastructure, and our institutions.

And amidst all this, the greatest threat to the United States—as the former Trump **Department of Homeland Security** official Miles Taylor said on **MSNBC** last night—comes from within: the **GOP**. Those who don't make a habit of following the rhetoric streaming from demagogues like **Steve Bannon** or Rep. **Madison Cawthorn** (R-NC) or **Dan Bongino** may not realize that approximately half of America is now receiving a steady, daily stream of pro-Kremlin propaganda. They are being told, falsely, that the events in Europe are the fault of NATO (for expanding eastward) and Barack Obama and Joe Biden (for making an enemy of Putin after he sought to end U.S. democracy in 2016); that a pro-Kremlin government, such as we could expect with a second Trump administration, would be better able to ensure “peace” in Europe (with “peace” here being a euphemism for capitulation to Putin in the same way far-right isolationists in the last century sought to appease Hitler); that American culture is being torn apart not by a long-term Russian psyops campaign but by American academics and leftist agitators who actually want to see the country they live in burn to the ground. So it is that Fox News' **Laura Ingraham** calls Ukrainian president Zelenskyy “**pathetic**” and Cawthorn calls the government in Ukraine “**evil**” and Zelensky a “**thug**”; Bannon rants

on his podcast that America “**shouldn’t give a cent**” to Ukraine as Trump opines on what a genius Vladimir Putin is for committing such brutal war crimes in Europe.

In short, America is now fighting this world war with one hand tied behind its back.

And as the costs of fighting a world war that no one will acknowledge is a world war increase—and remembering that it benefits the American Right to refuse to admit America is in a war at all, as such a refusal serves to make Biden’s sanctions on Russia seem unreasonable and unduly provocative—independent voters may well be seduced by the whispers of the Putinists inside America: *This could all go away if you’d simply put Putin’s U.S. friends back in power*, they will be told. *Trump can make the bad Russian man stop hurting you—and let you return to owning the libs at the low cost of your democracy.*

Americans are exhausted after two years of a pandemic mismanaged by Trump in a way that worsened it exponentially; an insurrection that Trump incited in response to losing a democratic election in a landslide; and a persistent domestic unrest Trump and his domestic and foreign allies have carefully engineered. Americans also have a habit of blaming whoever is in power for whatever ails them—even though most of the ailments Americans suffer from have developed over a period of years or decades and their authors therefore cannot be identified simply by looking at who occupies the **White House** or the **House** speakership. If, as expected, Republicans take over **Congress** in this November’s mid-term elections, they will spend the next two years using partisan investigations to advance Kremlin propaganda and pave the way for Trump’s triumphant return to being a useful idiot for Putin.

And the more America suffers from the unacknowledged world war it is participating in, the more U.S. voters will be inclined toward a political party that condescends and lies to them by misnaming the cause of their suffering and means of their deliverance.

(7) Putin has no exit strategy.

Media is correct to say that while U.S.-Russian tensions are fairly ancient, the present *military* component of what I here termed the Second Hundred Years' War is beyond question a war of Vladimir Putin's choosing. And we must be very clear in saying that he chose this war because he's a sociopath: he has made his life's work reconstituting a global power that did nothing but spread misery across the globe for the decades it was at its geopolitical zenith. There is, to be clear, nothing to miss about the Soviet Union—a sentiment shared by most Russians—but Putin pines for it all the same, and this deranged nostalgia is literally the *only* thing that has plunged the world into its current crisis. Putin's fetishizing of the USSR of the last century is the “**but-for**” cause of the present world war, Trumpists' effort to blame Joe Biden for the sake of political expediency notwithstanding.

It's important to understand that the sociopathic Putin is the sole cause of so much present suffering in the world—and that the Republican Party has been his domestic adjuncts here in the United States—because understanding this helps explain why under no circumstances can Putin back down from his current plan to subjugate and annex all of Ukraine. When I write here that “**Putin has no exit strategy**”, I believe this recognition should terrify us in the same way Hitler's fanaticism did in the 1940s. Just as Hitler's two options for the entirety of World War II—only the former of which he ever *publicly* acknowledged—were world domination or suicide, because the whole premise of Putin's political enterprise rests on the notion that the Soviet Union's land area *can be regained*, he can't back down from placing the world at the brink of nuclear annihilation.

Consider: in just two weeks, Putin has (a) threatened the world with nuclear war; (b) declared that *economic sanctions* on Russian are the equivalent of military aggression (implying that they could justify a military response); (c) turned a failed invasion of Ukraine—beset by grave logistical snafus grounded in him having stupidly made the decision to invade while living in a self-imposed bubble of isolation—into a budding genocide; and (d) arrested more than 10,000 antiwar protesters in Russia, shuttered the largest independent media outlet in that country, and blanketed the world's largest nation by land area with a psyops campaign so brutally effective that many Russians

(particularly older ones) believe that a country *headed by a Jewish president* (Ukraine) is in desperate need of immediate “**de-Nazification**” at the barrel of a Russian rifle.

Nothing in Putin’s behavior—*nothing*—indicates he has left himself an off-ramp, and since the present military stage of an ongoing world war is entirely of his devising, this means *none of us* have an off-ramp or exit strategy from this. And that’s terrifying.

(8) [The Biden administration is in denial about much of this—either deliberately or negligently.](#)

The White House says Putin’s invasion of Ukraine wasn’t in any way motivated by his outrage at NATO’s eastward expansion. Not only is this not true, the very fact that the administration would say it is a signal that leading Democrats are willing to respond to the crisis in Ukraine with political rhetoric rather than the hard truths Americans deserve and require.

While the White House is correct to say that Putin is largely motivated by a desire to reconstitute the territory of the USSR—a premise only bolstered when a Kremlin-backed media outlet mistakenly and prematurely published an article conceding as much during the early, largely disastrous hours of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—it is wrong to call this desire *disconnected* from Putin’s ire over NATO expansion. The fact is, if NATO expands to include Ukraine (again, the largest nation in Europe by land area) Ukraine can’t become the strategically located jewel in the reconstituted Russian Empire that Putin imagines it will one day be. I worry that one reason for the Biden administration’s recalcitrance in acknowledging the role NATO expansion played in the timing of Putin’s European adventurism is that this acknowledgment would cast a harsh spotlight on the failures of America, the European Union, and NATO to move as expeditiously as they might have toward admitting Ukraine to NATO and the EU.

Ukraine’s prospective admission to NATO and the EU is a very complicated question, of course, so it requires much more unpacking than this.

One of the ostensible reasons for keeping Ukraine out of both NATO and the EU has long been that the country has a corruption problem. To accept that the Ukraine-to-NATO question is—along with Putin’s yearning for empire—at the heart of what is now a transnational military conflict is to have to discuss publicly the valid concerns the United States has had about corruption in Ukraine. So why—you might ask—is acknowledging

that an ally has a ways to go in cleaning up its political and judicial and financial systems so politically explosive? Because this very issue has lain at the heart of American *domestic* politics for the last seven years. Indeed, the issue was at the core of the **first impeachment trial** of then-President Trump.

If the Biden administration reopens the thorny question of Ukraine's potential NATO admission, not only does it infuriate and further destabilize Putin by legitimizing his belief that Ukraine was on a path (if not a *glide path*) to NATO admission in the short or medium term, it also begs the question of why Ukraine hasn't made *more* progress in its bid to join NATO or the EU since the nation's 1991 founding. And that would require extensive discussion of whether Trump and his cronies were right to establish their virulently anti-Ukraine foreign policy agenda between 2017 and 2021.

The short answer to this question is that they were *not* right to do so.

And the longer answer is extremely problematic for political discourse in America.

Simply put, Donald Trump and the Republican Party leadership has been propping up pro-Kremlin elements in Ukraine through acts of commission *and* omission for years now—and these insidious pro-Kremlin elements by and large *are* the chief source of Ukrainian corruption. While it would be quite inaccurate to say that the pro-Western politicians and institutions in Ukraine are uncorrupted, it *is* fair to say that Ukraine's lingering associations with Russia are the origin-point of nearly all its lingering graft. And it *is* fair to say that the man who was President of the United States until just 14 months ago worked his entire presidency to *promote* corruption in Ukraine, even as he insisted America could not closely ally itself with Ukraine *because* of its corruption. If that sounds a bit like Trump doing the Kremlin's bidding—and mirroring its psyops— by suborning corruption in Ukraine as a means of exacting profit from it *and* keeping it ineligible for admission to Western alliances like NATO and the EU, that's because that's *exactly* what Trump and Putin were doing between January 2017 and early 2021.

The fact that Trump was decrying the corruption in Ukraine even as he was fostering it, and that he was engaged in this cynical two-facedness almost exclusively to please Putin—who's gotten unimaginably rich, as have his oligarchs, off the corrupt systems they've entrenched in Ukrainian culture—is an uncomfortable truth that the Biden

administration doesn't want to engage with because it might threaten any transient domestic unity over the matter of the war in Europe. If Joe Biden and his top officials acknowledge how closely linked Trumpism and Putinism are not just in rhetoric and disinformation but *actual U.S. policy during the Trump administration*, the war in Europe becomes politicized here at home in the same destructive way that the COVID-19 pandemic was politicized. It also risks pushing away what few borderline-sensible Republicans still exist in the GOP this side of Rep. **Adam Kinzinger** (R-IL) and Rep. **Liz Cheney** (R-WY).

It is much easier for the Biden administration to say—as Secretary of State **Anthony Blinken** now does—that Putin lied about being concerned about NATO expansion, than to admit that Putin is *extremely* aggrieved at the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO and thereby conclusively moving beyond his sphere of influence. Implying that partisan politics in the United States *hasn't* become inextricably entwined with Putin's ongoing war crimes in Ukraine avoids stating the most uncomfortable truth of all: that if the United States had not elected Donald Trump and allowed him to promote corruption in Ukraine for four years, Ukraine might have been much further along in gaining the protections afforded by NATO membership. As it is, Trump sent Ukraine backward in its previously robust anti-corruption efforts by actively rewarding that corruption with White House largesse; pushed Ukraine farther from membership in NATO; and inflamed the issue of NATO membership in Putin's mind by giving Putin a vision of a different kind of American leadership—the sort that would sell out U.S. allies and American democracy for covert election interference, future business deals, and a few flattering words from various unscrupulous autocrats on the world stage.

Biden also risks accusations—not just from Republicans, but from U.S. major media—of “politicizing” the war in Europe if he *underlines* not just the many ways American politicians can now help determine the outcome of that war, but also the many *past* decisions made by Republican leaders and far-right agitators that helped provoke it.

The result is that President Biden knows the United States is staring down the dire consequences of a world war but lacks the willingness to clearly frame it as such; knows that the outcome of the war in Europe and the fate of American democracy is on the ballot in November 2022 and November 2024 but cannot (or will not) make that case as



robustly as the facts warrant; and must implausibly frame what is happening in Ukraine as *merely* the deranged whim of a madman when—while it *is* that—it is *also* the work of a madman who is responding, in real time, to the unprecedented anti-American agenda being pursued in broad daylight by Joe Biden’s political opponents.

(9) Yes, America's "culture war"—launched by Republicans as a cynical rhetorical exercise in the 1990s, but ultimately reified as a discrete, personally and politically profitable phenomenon—is relevant to the ongoing war in Europe.

A major U.S. political party that has turned into a white supremacist, toxically "masculine", autocratic cult of personality is now, en masse, turning its adulation upon a white, toxically masculine autocrat in Russia who has developed such a substantial cult of personality around himself that the word "Putinism" can exist in political circles just as comfortably as the word "Trumpism." Putin even hates the LGBTQIA+ community, further endearing himself to the American Right. And like Trump and his cronies, Putin trafficks in anti-semitic conspiracy theories about **George Soros**, has little interest in being transparent about the dangers of COVID-19 (or the failures of leadership that exacerbated the pandemic in its early months), and wants to crack down on both Big Tech and free and fair elections. He's a Trumpist's dream come true.

It is increasingly difficult to see distinctions between "Trumpism" and "Putinism", which means that as the so-called "culture wars" rage on in America—because it profits the GOP to destabilize the nation in this way; destabilized voting populations often turn to the sort of strongmen the GOP now has on offer at the national level—they take on the character of a proxy war between autocracy and democracy. So it is that certain far-right firebrands now equate the Ukrainian government and the D.C. "swamp," use terms like "thug" to describe both Zelensky and poor Blacks in the U.S., disfavorably compare Joe Biden's alleged "weakness" psychologically and physically with Putin's supposed manliness, unfavorably contrast the beautifully diverse U.S. population with the more homogeneous Russian one, flirt with the idea of a dictator safe from federal elections the same way Putin is, and in general leverage a made-up rhetorical exercise from the 1990s into the early strains of a civil war in America. It would be laughably preposterous if it didn't also, possibly, herald the end of America.



**The Republican Accountability Project** @AccountableGOP

[. @CawthornforNC: "Zelenskyy is a thug. Remember that the Ukrainian government is incredibly corrupt and is incredibly evil and has been pushing woke ideologies." h/t @WRAL](#)

March 10th 2022

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What this means, just as a far-right (significantly Trump-appointed) **Supreme Court** prepares to exert autocratic control over women's bodies and end any semblance of free and fair elections in America; as far-right GOP voters aim to erase non-white and non-heterosexual Americans from America's national identity; as far-right media comes to seem indistinguishable from the bought-and-paid-for propaganda of **Russia Today (RT)**; is that the basic terms of the war in Europe—and the contours of Putin's sinister presence in the world—are now the core terms and contours of American political discourse. No good can come of this, even as it's yet another sign that we are in a global conflict whose ripples are felt, as has always been the case with world wars, virtually everywhere.

(10) Everything now happening is only the beginning.

Putin already treats Belarus as a vassal state, giving orders to its president and partially launching his illegal invasion of Ukraine from that country. Belarus, it is believed, will soon join Russian forces in their invasion of Ukraine. Yet if Putin takes Ukraine and next decides to annex Belarus—keeping on its autocratic leader as a puppet “governor”—NATO’s non-intervention policy would presumably still stand.

Just so, in the first few days of his invasion of Ukraine Vladimir Putin asked his allies in Kazakhstan to join him in committing war crimes in Europe, imploring them to send their forces into Ukraine alongside his. The Kazakhs refused. One imagines that there will eventually be consequences for the Kazakhs, too, possibly in the form of another partial annexation. Kazakhstan is the ninth-largest country on Earth (by way of comparison, Ukraine is forty-fifth) and is poor enough and incompetently enough run that it would be of great profit to Putin to spread his brand of kleptocracy there.

And needless to say, Putin has already invaded Georgia once—with absolutely no repercussions from the West. In other words, the lessons Putin is learning now will become Russia’s foreign policy for decades to come, precisely as the lessons Putin learned during his time in the KGB reflect the Russian foreign policy of the present.

Certain of these lessons will originate with the West, however, not Putin. Putin’s actions have launched a new conversation about Sweden and Finland joining NATO, and could lead to similar conversations involving Moldova and Armenia. Such talks, while richly warranted by Putin’s actions, will also be seen by him as provocative, and might escalate the conflict in Europe. By no means does this mean they should be avoided or abandoned—it simply means that the dire consequences of these incipient conversations may not be fully appreciated for years to come. The same may be said of Europe’s biggest refugee crisis since World War II, the dramatic realignment of global alliances noted above, and the lasting effects of an energy market quickly devolving into chaos. As Putin can’t actually be stopped short of his death or a coup, the West’s necessary responses to his ever-worsening war crimes will have to become more and more draconian, even as Putin’s responses to them become more and more unhinged.

It is difficult to see how any of us get off of this train, or when that might happen.

In lieu of acknowledging any of these hard truths, American officials seem set on pointing out (correctly) the implausibility of certain worst-case scenarios—nuclear war; a Russian invasion of Scandinavia or the Baltics—as a way of avoiding any discussion of similarly disastrous but far more likely scenarios (starting but not ending with the successful re-constitution of a significant percentage of the USSR, this time under a mentally unstable autocrat rather than an aged, venal *politburo*).

That neither NATO nor the United States has any plan to deal with these more likely scenarios keeps them out of the mouths of diplomats, and therefore out of the ears of Americans. What do we do when it becomes clear that what is happening in Ukraine is a genocide? What do we do if Russia attempts to annex other former Soviet states? What do we do if the Kremlin uses nuclear—or, more likely, chemical and biological weapons—on a *non*-NATO country? What further punishments can the West enact on Putin once all sanctions-based options have been exhausted and Russia's allies, both old and new, have helped it to stay afloat despite such a historic level of punishment?

NATO seems to have no plan for any of this. It can't even find a way to get some old **MiG-29s** to the Ukrainians so they can bomb a 40-mile-long Russian convoy that has been sitting—like a sitting duck—fifteen miles outside the Ukrainian capital for over a week. NATO's plan appears to be little more than hoping that, for the first time in human history, economic sanctions provoke regime change. Or perhaps NATO hopes that, for the first time in the history of *psychiatry*, a demonstrated sociopath trained to be an unfeeling KGB agent will be struck by a sudden bout of *empathy* for the millions of innocents living under his iron fist. If this were a Hollywood movie, it might yet be the case that one of these endings could come to pass; as it is, there's not only no medium- or long-term plan for dealing with the European crisis, but there appears to be no *short-term* strategy beyond sanctions, either.

The smartest play now available to NATO—arming Ukraine to the teeth, land and air and sea, on the likely reasonable assumption that Putin can't or won't do anything about it so long as NATO forces themselves remain off Ukrainian soil—is the very one the West seems to be failing most miserably at. Poland (of all nations) attempted to take the lead on this issue over the last 72 hours, and was struck down cursorily by Team Biden and the Pentagon. That may have been the most deflating geopolitical development in the war in the Europe thus far.

What the West is clearly hoping for is not that the Ukrainians will *win*—that would be incredible, and needless to say desirable, but it also, finally, is seen as impossible—but that Russia will become such a pariah state that Putin will either be assassinated by his own generals or oligarchs or else deposed via a nationwide armed rebellion.

Neither of which is at all likely to happen.

Instead, we're at the beginning of what is *actually* going to happen—which almost certainly has nothing to do with what would be the largest domestic rebellion in Russia since the 1917 **October Revolution** or the killing of the world's richest and most powerful man.

There are, of course, scattered signs of hope, though where these slender threads lead is anyone's guess.

For instance, it turns out that a surprising percentage of Putin's invasion force is made up of young conscripts who are ill-prepared for war, didn't know they were going to be deployed into a war zone, and are now backed by increasingly vocal parents back home outraged that their sons were sent into battle under such false pretenses. But can a homespun movement largely comprising Russian mothers bring down an autocratic regime? It's not unthinkable, but it's also not a *game plan*.

A third of Russians say they oppose the invasion of Ukraine, which is remarkable given the near-total blackout in Russia on media outlets reporting accurately and honestly on the war. The Pentagon estimates that between 2,000 and 4,000 Russian soldiers have died in the first two weeks of fighting, which is considerable. As noted above, 10,000+ anti-war protesters have already been arrested by Putin's government, and given that all of those protesters have friends and loved ones it seems only a matter of time before a significant swath of the Russian population realizes how brutally they're now being lied to and repressed. Putin had promised his people that Ukraine was just a time-limited “**special military operation**”; if it becomes, instead, an entrenched crisis like the Soviets' disastrous incursion into Afghanistan—which the elderly Russians most likely to support Putin vividly remember—it will make it that much harder for Putin to retain political control over Russia without resorting to hyper-provocative draconian measures.

There is, in other words, some dim hope that Putin's failure to gain a quick victory in Ukraine could turn him into a pariah not just internationally but domestically.

Indeed, within the past few days it was reported that a Russian businessman has put a \$1,000,000 bounty on Putin's arrest. This sort of sensational (if largely meaningless) gesture could be just the beginning. While the United States cannot openly support, let alone participate in assassination as a means of resolving international disputes—and that's a good thing, for a host of reasons—it can certainly create the conditions under which someone inside Russia will attempt precisely that. And it certainly can't be ignored that that *would be*, in fact, the easiest way to end this current world war.

Dethroning Putin would likely end the war in Europe for the simple reason that, as noted, Putin is making all the calls with respect to the invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, one reason things may have gone so poorly for Russia there—especially with respect to the training and provisioning of troops, the fueling and supplying of military vehicles, and the execution of even basic combat logistics—is that Putin didn't let his generals into his circle of trust as he was deciding whether (or perhaps simply when) to invade Ukraine, which left them unprepared when he finally made that call. This isolation of Putin from even his top lieutenants, as evidenced by the now-viral video of him dressing down the head of his foreign intelligence services in public, is one of the indicators that could make the White House believe Putin's hold on Russia is not as strong as he thinks—and can be weakened considerably with months of sanctions.

On the other hand, it seems that for every ally Putin loses in Europe, he gains one in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, the UAE) or in Asia (**India**). These nations are run by men with a penchant for brutal repression in their own countries, and who are very suspicious of Western meddling. Autocratic villains like **Xi Jinping**, Indian president **Narendra Modi**, MBS, MBZ, Filipino president **Rodrigo Duterte** or even certain far-right figures in Israel are more likely to try to stay on the sidelines—so long as doing so doesn't hurt their own economies—rather than publicly engage any peace effort.

This is especially true because the whole world is holding its breath to see whether Donald Trump again becomes President of the United States just 34 months from now.

If he does, the United States effectively joins Russia's side in the ongoing world war, with potential results similar—geopolitically, if not militarily—to what would have happened if America had let Nazi Germany take England, and our soldiers had never stormed the beaches of **Normandy**. Putin would have free rein over much of the world.



# Conclusion

With all the foregoing in mind, what the Biden administration really needs to see happen is the one thing it believes *can't* happen: the Ukrainians have to drive the Russians out by force. Either Team Biden quickly becomes a believer in this slim prospect—and it acts accordingly—or it goes down a path whose endpoint is even darker than everything we've already seen.

Unthinkable as it may be, if the West aids Ukraine in reconstituting its air force; allows foreign nationals to enter Ukraine on foot and by car to fight alongside the Ukrainian army and Ukraine's **Territorial Defense Force** (which has received so many volunteers in the last two weeks—over 40,000—that it has had to start turning people away); launches devastating cyber-attacks on Russian infrastructure; condones very carefully executed shows of force in response to Russian aggression (for instance, four Russian fighter jets [recently violated Swedish airspace](#) with no more result than a stern talking-to); and does its utmost to draw as many civilians out of Ukraine as possible, taking away the ubiquitous opportunities for war crimes that Putin seems to counting on to force the West to capitulate to him; there is a chance, if only a chance, that the Ukrainians could drive the Russians off their land by brute force. Or, failing that, they could fight the Russians to a sufficient stalemate that it causes what is now a hot war to devolve into a slow, uneventful, aimless partial occupation (picture camps of Russian troops idling in Ukraine's countryside, neither retreating nor advancing).

If it seems I'm proposing that the West commit to the success of the eventuality it currently deems the most unlikely, I am. There's a real danger that it is the very hopelessness within NATO about Ukraine's ability to fight off the Russian invaders that's making it so difficult to get the alliance to take meaningful action to aid that desired if improbable outcome outcome.

Another part of the problem, of course, is not a matter of *mindset* but cynical political calculation.

In the United States, Putinists within the Republican Party—and there are now many millions of them—are so adamant about the fiction that the U.S. is not *currently* in a war with their Russian hero (Putin) that it makes it that much harder for Biden, and therefore

NATO, to take the sort of steps they might take if they were able to publicly say what we all, this side of a pro-Trump rally, know to be true: a world war is afoot.

This cannot be said often enough: only those who *do not understand geopolitics* worry about America being “dragged” into some improbable, perpetually hypothetical world war. Meanwhile, American *adults* accept that, by whatever name you choose to call it, America is already engaged in a global conflict it cannot back out of. This does not mean America must engage our enemies with conventional military weapons—and again, anyone who thinks otherwise is stuck in the last century—but it *does* mean we must ignore those wishcasting us out of a hostile global engagement we’re already in.

I close with a quote from a popular film not because I believe we’re living in a dark fantasy—though it sometimes *feels* that way—but because the film in question comes from a franchise that is one of the twenty-five highest-grossing film franchises in the history of global cinema; is adapted from a book that remains one of the most widely read in the world; and dramatizes themes developed by a European soldier who fought in World War I. That *The Lords of the Rings* remains so close to the hearts of so many is precisely *because* it speaks to a global audience about the horrors of global conflicts.

From *The Fellowship of the Ring* (the film):

**FRODO:** I wish none of this had happened.

**GANDALF:** So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.

I find myself coming back to the exchange above again and again, not because these words are **J.R.R. Tolkien’s**—they are not, or at least not *quite*—but because a review of what Tolkien actually wrote, which the conversation above is an adaptation of, reveals a key truth about human existence.

From *The Fellowship of the Ring* (the book):

**FRODO:** I wish it need not have happened in my time.

**GANDALF:** So do I. And so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.

In the book *The Fellowship of the Ring*, **Frodo**'s comment to **Gandalf** is clearly about “**time**” in an *expansive* sense—that is, the “age of humanity” into which one is born. So when Gandalf speaks of deciding “**what to do with the time that is given us**”, he is at once speaking literally and figuratively: literally, we must decide daily what course of action to take; figuratively, we are always in a contest to fit our sensibilities and ethics into the age of humanity in which, through no fault of our own, we have been placed.

This passage marks, in a sense, the distinction between tactics and strategy. Tactics are the logistics—responsive or proactive—of the present. But it takes something far grander, like a profoundly personalized strategy (call it an ethos, a credo, a poetics, or a philosophy) to ensure that we are meeting the moment into which we've been born, howsoever it might be constituted.

In October of 1952, a man was born in what was then the Soviet Union who would plunge the world into a global conflict before he turned fifty. Innumerable conditions of his heritage, birth, upbringing, development, and personal elections put him in a position to stage a Second Hundred Years' War between his country and an alliance of countries to the west of his that he regarded, from an early age, as mortal enemies.

All of us living in the West today have been born into this “time”—the time of Putin.

I don't claim to know how each of us should spend our time in this epoch, but I know that lying about the circumstances in which we now find ourselves is no answer. Nor is declining to acknowledge that America faces significant threats from both within and without. Nor is refusing to fully and comprehensively acknowledge, encourage, and support the unparalleled bravery of the democratic David (Ukraine) fighting the philistine Putin. We may not be in a moment at which a no-fly zone or direct military engagement with Russia is appropriate, but until the United States and its allies have emptied out every option in our arsenal of resources short of such end-of-days tactics, we cannot say that *any* of us have met this moment with bravery.