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Paul B. Mojzes
Rosemont College

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EDITORIAL

BLENDING OF DELUSIONS IN RUSSIA RATIONALIZING ITS WAR TO ANNEX UKRAINE

While it is obvious that Russia's motives for the unprovoked brutal war against Ukraine are complex, what is not quickly apparent is the incendiary intermingling of a collective delusion of persecution and the delusion of grandeur of an individual.

Delusion of Persecution

After the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. the Russian Federation remains the geographically largest country in the world. Ethnic Russians were both during Imperial Russia as well as the Bolshevik Union of Soviet Socialist Republics the core of this vast country, so much so that in common parlance most people simply referred to it as Russia and the people as Russians, whatever their ethnicity. The Russian language was dominant and at times the required means of communication. In all parts of that enormous Eurasian landmass, ethnic Russians were both a significant and influential presence.

Those of us who have frequently visited the country quickly observed that tourist guides, lecturers, and common people more often talked about the invasions of Russia by hostile enemies than of Russian expansion and military ventures against other countries over the centuries. The most frequent reference are the times of the "Mongol yoke" or "Tatar-Mongol Yoke" (13th-15th centuries). On some of these travels the references to this time "of yoke" were so numerous that we could anticipate when and how it would be told; it became somewhat of a joke. Whether the narratives about these times are true or fictitious is debated among historians but clearly it has left a traumatic memory among Russians.

Another impactful invasion was that of Napoleon in 1812, lasting about six months, penetrating all the way to Moscow. The Russians mostly avoided direct battles (except the battle at Borodino), correctly anticipating that the harsh weather and the lack of supplies would force Napoleon to retreat, proving that he was not invincible.

There were other invasions such as by the Teutonic Knights, Crimean-Turkish forces, Sweden, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Hapsburg Empire, and Japan. More memorable were the battles of World War I after Imperial Russia collapsed in 1918, forcing the Bolsheviks to cede Ukraine, Belarus, and the Baltic states to Germany.

By far the most traumatic was the invasion by Nazi Germany and the Axis powers during World War II, where the Soviet Union suffered enormous human losses (estimated at over 25 million Soviet citizens) and, at first, significant territorial losses. The Red Army finally pushed

out all the invaders in 1944, contributing along with Western Allies to the total surrender of Germany in May 1945.

Clearly the Russian people suffered much over the centuries from foreign countries that had designs on their territories, and these experiences left a deep imprint on the Russian psyche. But these were not all of Russian involvements in wars. While we shall not endeavor to enumerate all of Russia's foreign military actions, it suffices to point out that neither Kievan Rus' nor the Principality of Muscovy were large at first; quite small when compared to Russia's later maximal territories. Nearly all these territorial gains were the result of wars against their neighbors.

There were nearly five centuries of on and off Russian wars against the Byzantine Empire, Bulgaria, Ottoman Turkish Empire, Sweden, Lithuania, Poland, Tatarstan, Astrakhan, conquest of Siberia, Persia, Kazakhstan, Austria, Finland, France (Russian troops entered Paris), Caucasian wars, conquest of Central Asia, crushing of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, wars in China, Russo-Japanese wars, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Georgia, Mongolia, two occupations of Afghanistan, several partitions of Poland, occupation of Karelia, Bessarabia, and Bukovina, crushing of the Hungarian Revolt of 1956 and Czechoslovak Spring in 1968, war in Moldova (Transnistria), Abkhazia, Chechnya, and current intervention in civil wars in Syria and Central Africa. This is an incomplete list, the point being that over the centuries the Russians engaged in many more wars of conquest than in defensive wars.

So how come the Russians fear being conquered without being equally aware of their distant and recent expansionism? The discrepancy between the numbers of invasions of Russian territory and the number of military conquests of other countries is so great that one may correctly conclude that Russians suffer from an unrealistic perception of reality, namely a delusion of persecution. Their traumas of having been invaded do not allow them to feel secure in the size of their country, their status of a great power, and the possession of an enormous conventional and nuclear arsenal and the means to deliver it no matter how far from their own country.

Vladimir Putin and his inner circle are aware of this delusion, and might even experience it themselves; however, they are deliberately exploiting it for their imperial ambitions. They are convincing the Russian people that the Russian Federation needs a cordon sanitaire—the way the USSR enhanced its security by creating the Warsaw Pact. Putin is demanding that the neighboring countries must be either part of Russia or at least militarily neutral. That is why Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO frightens Russian leadership. And that is why nearly all neighbors of the Russian Federation feel especially threatened since February 2022. It also explains why all former members of the Warsaw Pact rather quickly joined NATO. Seeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine, they feel glad they did so—even tiny Montenegro, traditionally very pro-Russian, calculated that it is in their interest to be a member of NATO.

Delusion of Grandeur

The current President of the Russian Federation is an unusually ambitious man who has set out to correct what he perceives as the “greatest geo-political catastrophe of the twentieth century,” namely the disintegration of the U.S.S.R. That in itself is a very unrealistic appraisal, knowing that the twentieth century witnessed two world wars with unprecedented numbers of casualties, the Bolshevik Revolutions, Stalin’s mega genocides, the Holocaust, Mao’s Communist Revolution, the tumultuous dissolution of colonial empires, and numerous other genocides. Very methodically Putin is reversing and undoing almost all of the reforms undertaken by Mikhail Gorbachev, whom he blames for allowing the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and seems to despise Gorbachev so much that he is unwilling to even attend his funeral.

Putin publicly displays an exhibitionist trait of super-masculinity, such as horseback riding bare-chested, playing ice hockey with professionals, cuddling a jaguar, fishing and hunting, and other symbols of aggressive masculinity, which has been satirized by Western media, but is generally admired by many citizens of his country. He likes to be seen in the tsarist splendor of the refurbished Kremlin, usually in settings where he is not merely the central but the sole figure. He eliminates his rivals or perceived enemies often by assassination or poisoning. In war he is exceptionally brutal and deceptive, as illustrated by the wars against Chechen uprising, Georgian territorial issues, Syrian conflicts, and by the current ruthless war in Ukraine (e.g., Mariupol, Bucha, Volnovakha, Borodianka, and Izium). Putin seems untouched by appeals for moderation and ceasefire or by reports of largescale destruction, civilian deaths, refugees, and forcible deportation of Ukrainians to Russia, whose fate is unknown for the time being. Brazenly he uses the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church in his efforts to restore the legendary baptism of Kievan Holy Rus’ and the rebuilding of the Russian Empire at its maximal borders. His first step is to bring Belarus and Ukraine back into a Great Russian nation. Under the motto *Russkiy mir* (Russian world), wherever Russians live should be in union with the Motherland, thus claiming that many, if not most former Soviet Republics be annexed or otherwise affiliated with the Russian Federation (with the three Baltic republics and Moldova prioritized in the landgrab.) Next in line would be former communist countries of Eastern Europe, i.e., Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, with additional aspirations for Russian spheres of influence on the Balkans. There have been threats against Finland and Sweden should they join NATO. Obviously the “great dictator” (if only Charlie Chaplin was still alive!) intends to remake the map of Europe—again, as he thinks that the United States and its Western allies are too influential. His smokescreen is that the USA with its NATO allies intend by deception and threat to destroy Russia in a manner similar to Hitler’s attack on the Soviet Union.

These ambitions would be farfetched if Russia did not have nuclear weapons which Putin openly threatens to use or if he were a normal person to whom catastrophic loss of human life, including of his own people, mattered. But the above behavioral and character traits shows that Putin is a deliberately “mysterious” person whose plans are unpredictable (even most Russians were utterly shocked when he launched the “special military operation”). He displays traits of one

who suffers from a delusion of grandeur. There are other rulers and even common people who display delusions of grandeur but rarely are any of them so unrestrained in power and ambition. His ascent to power was meteoric, and his ambitions are astronomical.

The consequences of these two delusions are tragic even for Russia, and even more so for Ukraine and other neighbors. There is a potential for a widening global conflict, and ultimately a real risk of nuclear holocaust. Hopefully, our worst forecasts will not happen; nevertheless, there is good reason to be anxious about Putin's bloodthirsty, grandiose plans.

Paul Mojzes, Editor-in-Chief