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The Crusade Against Ukraine: Eurasia's Last Medieval Power At War

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The Russian-Orthodox jihad in Ukraine adheres uncannily to the patterns of campaigning and giving battle that have defined the Russian way of war since Peter the Great fielded his empire's first modernized army and defeated the Swedish warrior-state of Charles XII at Poltava in 1709. Today's pretender to the throne of the czars, Vladimir Putin, has introduced a few new tools (such as drones) but no new behaviors. The list below of tactical and operational characteristics is as reliable as the Russian taste for vodka. Our misunderstanding of Moscow's latest aggression is not about hypersonic missiles or the massive deployment of land mines, but about a pre-modern state that can reach into space, a slumbering cult ever awaiting a prophet's call, and a friendless frontier land with a sense of divine purpose so enduring it shapes the worldview of atheists.

The date that continues to deform the *Russkaya dusha'* or Russian soul isn't 1917, or 1941, or 1991, but 1453, when Byzantium, the "Second Rome," weakened by the assaults of other Christians, fell to the Muslim Turks, inspiring a struggling duchy far to the north to assume the title of the "Third Rome" and the duty to recover all that had been lost over centuries.

We smirk at Putin's counter-factual interpretation of history, but we would be wiser to pay attention. He's telling us precisely who he is and who his subjects are. We merely roll our eyes because that's far easier than attempting to grasp the mythologized spiritual landscape of a population that looks more or less like us, but responds to events as souls from another cosmology.

Russian war crimes in eastern Ukraine should surprise no one. We see Ukrainians as patriots fighting desperately for their freedom. The Russians see separatist rebels and heretical apostates. We see a struggle to defend *de jure* sovereignty. Putin sees yet another uprising in a centuries-long chain of rebellions against Moscow's entitlement to rule the steppes. We imagine a resolution of this crisis within the framework of twenty-first-century diplomacy. Putin (like Stalin and many a czar) believes that the fiction of a Ukrainian identity must be exterminated. The rapes, torture, looting, and wanton slaughter in Ukraine are not lamentable corollaries but means to an end.

Nor should Russian campaign and battlefield traits bewilder us. They're an inheritance from a culture not only unchanging but unchangeable.

Here are a few of the consistencies.

Unpreparedness. Russian forces have rarely entered a conflict with a well-prepared military. Initial reverses consistently revealed hollow forces, faulty arms, poor training, incompetent leadership, and overconfidence. While Putin's Russia may be the worst grab-ocracy in all of that benighted land's history, extensive corruption has never been absent—it's a primary tool of state control, for creating dependencies. Thus, again and again, startling deficiencies have had to be redeemed with an appalling (to us) sacrifice of lives.

Yet, the Russians have also shown unexpected resilience and a knack for recovering as wars drag on. Awful at short wars, Russians have achieved "impossible" victories in longer conflicts, as the sycophants are cast aside and the capable rise to command. For example, the Red Army's catastrophic losses in the first months of the Great Patriotic War (World War II) should have finished Stalin's regime. But under the pressures of war, a terror-crippled military whose scrawled plans were laughably inept, managed by mid-war to produce solidly professional staff work that won battles. By the closing phases of the war, Red Army plans

were the professional equal of those in Western armies and won campaigns. In war, Russians lose and learn. We have already seen the pattern in Ukraine, albeit still at an early stage.

The postwar pattern, too, is consistent: Earnest reforms are implemented and real improvements are made, but over time the reform impulse dissipates and the military bureaucracy reverts to its traditional apathy and thievery. The closest thing to an exception from the post-Napoleonic period to today was the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, when post-Crimean-War reforms still retained some effectiveness. Despite superior Ottoman armaments, such as Krupp artillery and American-designed rifles, the Russians reached the outskirts of Istanbul and were halted only by threats of intervention on the Ottoman's behalf by European powers. On the other hand, reforms in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 did not have adequate time to recast the force before the outbreak of a far greater war in 1914 and the Russian dash to disaster at Tannenberg.

Clumsy on offense, stalwart on defense. On the attack, Russian forces are stiff, yet unsteady, and readily paralyzed by surprises (as we saw on the outskirts of Kyiv in the present war's first days). They rely on mass and the readiness to suffer "intolerable" casualties. In World War II, a prevalent comment was "*U nas naroda mnoga*" ("We have a lot of people."). Heartless it may have been, but that attitude got them to Berlin.

On the other hand, Russian soldiers over the centuries have shown themselves to be stalwart and steady on the defense when led with even marginal competence. We are witnessing that in Ukraine, as a "broken" Russian military nonetheless continues to prosecute an uninspiring war doggedly. Millions of land mines help, but, even if draconian punishments are part of the equation, Russian troops continue to man their defenses and will not be vulnerable to mass losses until they are displaced from their fortifications in disorder.

The fatalism and resolution of Russian infantry on the defense led to Frederick the Great's notable—and bloody—defeats at Zorndorf (1758) and Kunersdorf (1759), and the Russians were the toughest enemy Frederick faced. At Prussia's low point, Cossacks rode through the streets of Berlin, previewing repeat visits in the future.

From Napoleon and his crippling "victory" at Borodino (1812), through the frustrated Japanese plan for a lightning triumph at Port Arthur (1904), to the comeuppance of Hitler and

his generals at Stalingrad (1942–43), the cost of underestimating the stubbornness of Russians on the defense has been agony at the least, a catastrophe at the worst.

The Russo–Japanese War of 1904–05 is particularly instructive: With superior training and equipment, shorter lines of communication, fierce confidence, and clear objectives, Japan expected to knock out Russia’s slovenly Far Eastern forces swiftly, seizing Port Arthur in a *coup de main*. Instead, the Russians defended the city and its harbor for months, inflicting irreplaceable casualties on the Japanese. Port Arthur eventually fell, but the Japanese then faced a painfully costly, incomplete victory at Mukden that left Japan broke and almost bankrupt of manpower. The ensuing, American-brokered peace left neither side satisfied, guaranteeing that the initial assault on Port Arthur would not be the last Japanese surprise attack in the Pacific theater.

Reliance on massive firepower. Drastic losses in the early, botched phases of Moscow’s wars consistently lead decision-makers to turn to firepower: artillery and now airpower (in one form or another). Russia’s first gunners were European mercenaries, present in Muscovy from at least the 16th century onward, and only under Peter the Great did Russia begin to methodically develop its “native” artillery arm. Ironically, the professionalization of the artillery advanced because officers of noble birth—the handsomely uniformed dilettantes—disdained the dirty, sweaty work of the gun crews, leaving gunnery to the untitled but ambitious and competent. The same applied to engineers, who would form another island of professionalism in a sea of mediocrity. Young noblemen wanted to serve in elite cavalry regiments or, at least, infantry regiments of the best lineage. Artillery and engineer officers needed to prove their worth.

This tradition of strong artillery and competent engineers is manifest in Ukraine today. Russian targeteers need not be up to Western standards of prissiness (we want the Ukrainians to fight politely, of course); on the contrary, the unbounded readiness to inflict destruction on anything or anyone within range is a great advantage for any military power—despite our ahistorical insistence otherwise.

Poor command and control, weak coordination. Russian deficiencies—and they are grave—in these areas are products of rivalries, distrust, and fear. The atmosphere of trust taken for granted within Western armies simply does not exist in Russian ranks. Officers do not know

who they truly can trust, if anyone. The officer who acts on his own initiative becomes the scapegoat for those who wait too long to act. The mindset is difficult for an American officer to grasp—rather than chafing at constricting orders, Russian officers crave them.

The Russian vision for an effective military is stuck in the 18th century, where clockwork drills hoped to produce military automatons. Showpiece exercises, with an emphasis on scripts and rigid timetables, may provide impressive visuals for foreign observers and propaganda clips, but they do not build capable modern units and formations as free-play exercises and rigorous gunnery practice do.

Nonetheless, we can expect to see Russian forces improve their combat coordination under the pressures of wartime. Just as the Soviet Army of 1945 was not the one of 1941, so too, if the Ukraine war continues, the Russian combat forces of 2025 will not be those of 2022.

Time is on Russia's side, not ours.

Poor intelligence. Those responsible for Russia's military intelligence completely missed Japanese preparations for war in 1904; they misread German dispositions in 1914; they utterly misread Finnish determination in 1939 (as they did with Ukraine in 2022); terrified of annoying Stalin, they closed their eyes to Nazi Germany's impossible-to-hide preparations for a multi-front invasion; they underestimated American resolve and suffered the propaganda defeat of the Berlin Airlift; they repeated their underappreciation of American grit in the Cuban Missile Crisis; they expected a quick win in Afghanistan; and they wildly erred in predicting the NATO response to Ukraine.

It may seem incredible that the state (or the succession of states imposed upon the Russian people) that pioneered mass surveillance and political terror—the only fields in which Russia anticipated Europe—should have failed so consistently to provide warnings of foreign attacks, but it's readily explicable: Whether we speak of Ivan the Terrible's *oprichniki*, a merciless forerunner of the Soviet Union's terror executors; of the Romanov-era *Okhrana* secret police (whom we can also thank for "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," Russia's most enduring work of fantasy fiction); or of the Soviet Cheka'/NKVD/MGB/KGB and Putin's FSB, Russia's overwhelming security concern always has been the suspicion, detection, and suppression of domestic dissent. Military intelligence got the scraps, the leftovers. Today, the assets of the

GRU—military intelligence—may appear extensive, but they're second-rate, bureaucratized to near-uselessness, and (as we have seen in Ukraine) whoppingly ineffective.

The timeless paranoia of Russian leaders and the relative weight accorded to various intelligence disciplines were perfectly encapsulated by Stalin's continued purging of his most-talented military officers as German tanks lined up on Russia's newly demarcated western border in 1941.

Paradoxically, the great danger for us is not the risk that Russian military intelligence will get things right, but that it will get some grave strategic issue tragically wrong.

Ruthlessness. The Soviet massacre of between fifteen and twenty thousand Polish officer POWs at Katyn and other sites early in the Great Patriotic War shocked even the Germans. For the Russians, it was common sense. Crucial to the Russian way of war is the determination to win at all costs, to shy from no barbarism, and it always includes eliminating foreign elites. In comparison, the United States no longer has a way of war, only a checklist for operating under the scrutiny of a gotcha! media. We wish to wage war morally. For Russian leaders the only immorality is to lose.

Above all this, and crucial, is Russia's deeply ingrained sense of a special destiny that elevates Russianness and assigns it a mission to expand, a physical and metaphysical imperialism. Russia is an aggressor state and has been one for half a millennium, profoundly convinced that its way is the sole right way, whether under reforming czars or reactionaries, Soviets or "new" Russians. To a degree today's Western think-tank caste simply cannot imagine, let alone accept, Russia's behavior in Ukraine is shaped by a religious imperialism and secular evangelism that have not progressed beyond the Medieval, a faith that never had a Reformation and a social order that never had a Renaissance. Only during Europe's Enlightenment did Russian rulers begin to impose a selective veneer of Western practices, and the instigator of that, Peter the Great, was interested in utility, not ethics. Nor did modernity make the slightest inroads with the general population, which remained mired in servitude, ignorance, and obscurantist religion that preached passive obedience and the virtues of suffering. The Soviet era merely secularized the vocabulary. Russia's metaphysical landscape is stuck in the Middle Ages. With smartphones.

A few years ago, an academic whose experience of conflict seems to have been a few faculty spats, wrote a book labeling the United States a “Crusader state.” The notion was laughable. Crusaders are driven by uncompromising zeal (not necessarily incompatible with self-interest) and will go to any length to serve their god or their secular obsession. The only thing we uncompromisingly forced upon the populations our military recently visited was a great deal of money—which further corrupted the societies we meant to reform. Crusaders? We knelt—literally—before the shrines of our enemies and dreaded offending their faith in the slightest manner. Our sojourns in Kabul and Baghdad were hardly equivalent to the conquest of Jerusalem in 1099.

As for the Russians, their sense of destiny, of righteousness, of entitlement, of, yes, divine duty more closely resembles jihad in its purest, cruelest form than it does the mixed-motive Crusades of Medieval Europe. The single thing Russians share with the most-sincere of the Christian Crusaders is the conviction that any act is acceptable if it furthers a divine destiny.

We fall back on a few clichés from Russian history, primarily the scars left by the Mongol or Nazi invasions. This wildly misses the point that, far more often, the Russians were the invaders. Nor were they genteel guests.

From the sixteenth century onward, Russia fought routine wars of expansion in every direction—although the fiercest were waged against Turks and Tartars, the former the power that held Byzantium, the Second Rome, captive; and the latter the remnants of the Mongol yoke.

The wars with Catholic Poles or Lutheran Swedes, Balts, and Germans, were also intensified by the grip of faith. Polish Counter-Reformation Catholicism was all but a different religion from Eastern Orthodoxy’s dour cult of suffering that still shapes today’s Russian mentality.

Even if Putin does not really believe in religion, his view of the world and his mission is shaped by it. The Soviet era did not abandon that sense of destiny but merely substituted other gods and commandments. The endless debate over whether Russia is European or Asian misses the target entirely. Russia is neither. Russia is *Russian*.

Of course, all this is mystical nonsense to sober-minded Westerners. And it *is* mystical. But the horror in Ukraine isn’t nonsense. Putin genuinely believes that he is doing the right thing,

that he is serving his god—even if he doesn't believe any god exists. However out of kilter his facts may be, Putin is captivated by a deep sense of history—mythical as well as mystical. The Russian sense of history is sweeping and grand...Hegelian. We are the children of Dale Carnegie: The past is past, get on to the next sale. Win friends and influence people.

This recurring and now reenergized Russian higher-purpose imperialism is fully in play in Ukraine, as is a long, brutal history. Even Ivan the Terrible saw as-yet-unconquered Ukraine as a Russian entitlement, and Muscovy spent the next two centuries subduing it—facing down two dozen major Cossack revolts, the fiercest of which came as close to Moscow, as did the recent Wagner hall-of-mirrors insurrection. During the same historical period, Russia fought nearly constant wars against the Ottoman Turks, most on Ukrainian soil (those wars would, of course, continue down to the Great War and its immediate aftermath).

Of vital importance to understanding current events is that tradition of Cossack and Ukrainian resistance to Moscow. In those centuries of Russia's struggle against the Ottomans, the ancestors of today's Ukrainians sometimes sided with the Turks against the Russians (or Poles), ever intent on preserving their independence from the encroaching power of the moment—while Russia saw the same vast steppes as an entitlement.

For us, Putin's invasion of Ukraine is the violation of a sovereign state. *For the Russians, the war in Ukraine is the belated suppression of yet another Cossack uprising that began a decade ago on the Maidan in Kyiv, another traitorous rebellion in the long tradition of Ukrainian resistance, from Bohdan Khmelnytsky, to Nestor Makhno, to Zelinski.* (As often has been the case, rival Cossacks are fighting on both sides.)

The depth of the struggle grew still more profound as the Ukrainian branch of the Orthodox Church has separated from the bellicose, anti-Kyiv Moscow Patriarchy (generally, Ukraine is Roman Catholic in the west, Orthodox in the east). Thus, traitorous rebels became heretical apostates, as well. And we can't understand why Putin doesn't just accept defeat. Stop the reflexive mocking and listen to what Vladimir Putin says. Facts are irrelevant. What matters is what those at war believe.

We are not witnessing an anomaly but a reinvigorated tradition, a condition of existence. Russian oligarchs may have splendid yachts and European mansions (as did many a czarist-

era nobleman), but their toys do not make them modern or Western. Romantic admirers of Russia's contributions to the arts miss the point that the DNA of those achievements was exterminated in the Gulag and—relevant here—not one of the artistic disciplines in which Russian authors or composers excelled was native to Russia—which remains a copy-cat culture, not a creative one. Heirs to endless grievances, a frustrated destiny, and ferocious envy of Western success, Russians can find neither peace nor place in the post-modern world. Historical time is out of synch between Moscow, Brussels, and Washington. In Ukraine, we are not opposing a contemporary power. We face a sullen people trapped in the Middle Ages and led by yet another false messiah.

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