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The Stakes Couldn't be Higher:
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Richard Arnold

Master's Programs in International Relations
Faculty of Social and Political Science
Jenderal Achmad Yani University

The Stakes Could Not Be Higher: The Allied Response in Ukraine¹

Richard Arnold

Associate Professor of Political Science, Muskingum University

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Why are the United States and other western NATO allies so invested in the war in Ukraine? Why have NATO partners provided such enormous military assistance? This short essay argues that Russia's attempt to override the sovereignty of its neighbour poses a threat not just to Ukraine (although it is, of course, principally that) but also a threat to the modern world order which is built on fundamentally liberal institutions. Nor is it just the fact of Russia's invasion (второжение) but also how the war is being prosecuted. The essay then examines President Volodymyr Zelensky's attempts to cultivate his image in line with Western heroes like Washington and Churchill before turning to rebutting potential criticisms. In all, the essay concludes that the stakes for the world could not be higher.

Why are the United States and other western NATO allies so invested in the war in Ukraine? Why have NATO partners provided such enormous military assistance? As demonstrated by figure 1 below since the Russian invasion became unavoidable on January 24th, 2022, until August 3rd of the same year, NATO partners have provided \$33.08 billion of military assistance. Even more clearly than Georgia in 2008, Russia's invasion of Ukraine gives the lie to the conceit that the Cold War ended with the "bloodless defeat" of the USSR (Ioffe, 2016). While the bulk of this has come from the United States and Britain, countries that are clearly contributing outsized amounts include Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic nations. The amount of aid given has increased since this data was collected and shows no sign of stopping. Yet while the fact of aid has been acknowledged, the motivations of the Western alliance in giving it have been less questioned to date.

¹ An earlier version of this essay was given in the form of a presentation to a conference of young scientists at Prekarpats'kii Natsional'nyi universitet imeni Vasilia Stefananka (Precarpathian National University named for Vasili Stefananka) on 12th December 2022.

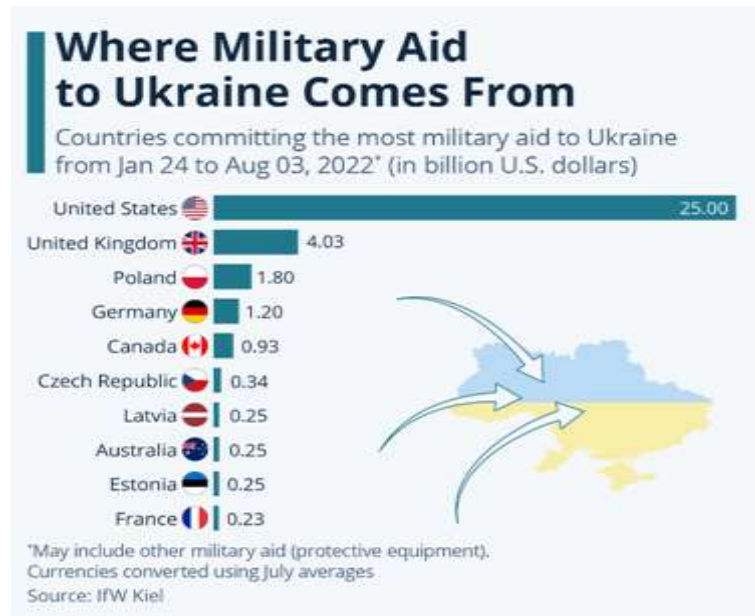


Figure 1. Military Aid Given to Ukraine

Such questions are important in both theoretical and empirical terms. Theoretically, Putin's initiation of the largest war in Europe since World War Two (and increasingly being fought with the trench warfare methods of World War One) presents a major challenge to optimistic speculation about the "inevitability" of a global state (Wendt, 2003). The horror undermines the teleology sometimes associated with the Liberal paradigm (Wendt, 2001) and demonstrates the enduring power of realism to explain international politics (Mearsheimer, *Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault. The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin*, 2014). Empirically, the motivations are also important as they suggest the point at which such aid might stop or increase—when Western goals for the conflict can no longer be achieved, for instance.

This paper argues that the Western alliance NATO, led principally by the United States, is supporting the Ukrainian armed forces to the extent that it is because the war presents an existential threat to the Liberal International Order which has existed since 1945. Bluntly, the war of choice is a threat to the world and not just one country. This is not to say that Baltic fears of Russian invasion are realistic, but rather that the success of the "Special Military Operation" (the Russian term for the invasion—the word 'war' being banned) would re-legitimate the settling of disputes by force. The United Nations may have feet of clay, but it is the best alternative to the law of the jungle that we have. This brief commentary first makes such a claim and how

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has encouraged this interpretation before rebutting prospective criticisms.

Russia's War as a Threat to the International Order

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is fundamentally a challenge to the international order as well as an assault on a neighbor. It is the crime of aggression and a return to great powers using force to overwhelm weaker neighbors. This comes despite several Russian official recognitions of Ukraine in various international fora. Similarly, the way in which the Russians went about preparing for the war as well as prosecuting it makes a mockery of international norms. In all these ways, then, Russia's war is a threat to the international order.

“Aggression is the name we give to the crime of war... aggression is remarkable because it is the only crime that states can commit against other states” (Walzer, 1977, p. 51). The prohibition of aggression is the primary reason for the existence of the United Nations as outlined in Article 2 of the Charter. The idealistic creation of the United Nations was supposedly meant to put paid to a world in which the strong do what they like and the weak suffer what they must. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a textbook example of the crime of aggression, challenging all other “rights that are worth fighting for” (Walzer, 1977, p. 53). Committing aggression undermines the world order.

This is a world order which is based on the idea that words and agreements have weight in influencing and rendering state actions predictable. Such predictability aids stability and helps state action, similar in many ways to Hale's (2008) “foundational” theory of ethnicity. Thomas Hobbes (2009) is often quoted in reference to the idea that “covenants without the sword are but words” yet in his theory of the social contract there is also acceptance of the idea that words can build institutions- and not just in domestic politics, but also in international relations. The most basic way in which this works in international relations, however, is recognition of a state's claim to existence implicit in its acceptance into the United Nations.

It was this point which Russia violated both in 2014 and, more egregiously, in 2022. Russia officially recognized Ukraine in 1991, upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Not opposing Ukraine's entry into the United Nations, the country took on certain obligations in how it would treat Ukraine or any state worthy of the name. Further, this initial recognition was followed by an explicit agreement for Ukraine to return to Russia 3,000 nuclear warheads it had inherited from the Soviet Union in what

would have been the world's third largest nuclear arsenal. This was the Budapest Memorandum, under which the United States, United Kingdom, and Russia all agreed to uphold Ukraine's sovereignty in the event of outside threat.

Infamously, Putin has not recognized Ukrainian claims to nationhood, believing it to have been a state created by the Bolsheviks and a distortion of people who have forgotten their true identity as ethnic Russians. In 2008, Putin is reputed to have told George W. Bush that "*Ukraine is not even a state*". Certainly, by 2021 Putin claimed that "*modern Ukraine is entirely the product of the Soviet era*" (Putin, 2021). Putin repeated this line again just days before the invasion in February (Schwartz, Verenikov, & Gladstone, 2022). Further the way he did so- justifying the invasion on the grounds of entirely fabricated "neo-Nazis"- removed the imperative of evidence from international politics and stood as direct assault on the idea of fact and reason.

This norm-busting and hypocritical attack on Ukraine is underlined further by the way the war is being fought. At the time of writing, there are too many alleged Russian human rights abuses to list, including mass killing and rape of civilians as well as looting. Having failed to take Kyiv in its initial blitzkrieg and having endured the drudgery of the summer months, Russia seems to have put its hope in "general frost" to let the winter kill off and demoralize Ukrainians. The tactic of targeting civilian life-support infrastructure such as power and water stations is designed to assist this. Yet such tactics are themselves violations of the rules of war- because there can be rules in Hell. For instance, they violate the principle of non-combatant immunity (Walzer, 1977) and enlarge the battlespace.

There have, of course, been other wars in the post-World War Two period that have been started on a lie and seem similar in many ways to the invasion of Ukraine. As horrific as it is, other troops have committed human rights abuses, including against civilians. One need only think of the 2003 war on Iraq, for instance, to see a war premised on a lie and with significant implications for civilians. Given these considerations, then, one might be tempted to ask what makes the war on Ukraine so different? Leaving aside the geographic locations of the countries- Europe having been the host of the two world wars, if nothing else, there are at least a few differences.

First, while there was opposition to the way the United States removed Saddam Hussein, only a few declared that Hussein was innocent and disagreed that the world would be better off without him. It was the means, rather than the end, with which they disagreed- which is distinct from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Second, although it

was a small coalition, the United States did receive begrudging support for its war from some other countries- the “coalition of the willing,” in the words of Colin Powell. The United Kingdom, most of Eastern Europe, and some states in North Africa all supported the war in Iraq both in sentiment and with materiel. In attacking Ukraine, however, Russia is using only its own troops and appears to have arrogated to itself a unique right to intervene whenever and wherever it likes.

Which leads to a discussion of the third principal different between the two cases: the American attack on Iraq did not follow hostile actions with the rest of the world, which stands in stark contrast to the Russian actions. In hindsight, Russia’s invasion seems like the latest move of a country which respects no sovereignty or international norms. The 2006 murder of Alexander Litvinenko violated the prohibition on the hostile use of fissile materials, as the target was poisoned using highly radioactive polonium-210. Likewise, Russia was the principal suspect in the 2018 murder of Sergei Skripal, again in the United Kingdom, using a poison unique to the Soviets/Russians. The hacking of and intervention in the British EU membership referendum and the 2016 American Presidential election were similarly unprecedented moves which made a mockery of the norm of sovereignty. Even in the sporting world, Russia violated international norms against doping in the Sochi Winter Olympics of 2014 and in sending FSB-trained hooligans to beat up England fans at the 2016 Euro Championships in France (Arnold & Foxall, 2018). If Russia would not even abide by international sports norms, then invading the second most populated country in the post-Soviet space confirmed the country was a law unto itself.

This section has argued that Russia’s assault on Ukraine should be interpreted as the culmination of an assault on the rules-based international system that has structured the world since 1945. By invading its neighbor, Russia made mockery of a system that sought to banish armed conflict among great powers for good. It follows that the defense of Ukraine is not solely a defense of a single country (though it is, of course, principally that) but also the defense of an entire system of sovereignty and norms-based collective action. The stakes could not be higher. The next section argues that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has cultivated a Western-aligned image of a state that wants to maintain the system, thus providing further support for the thesis.

Zelensky’s Artful Image

Perhaps only an actor could have done such a good job in aligning Ukraine with previous narratives familiar to people in the West. At once, Zelensky has encouraged

narratives portraying the conflict as one of David versus Goliath, a re-run of the American Revolution, and of himself as Churchill standing up to Hitler ('Putler'). This section recounts the last two images to argue that Zelensky is himself encouraging the thesis that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a war of civilization against barbarism and one for the survival of the current international system.

First, the comparison of the Ukrainian fight against Russia as a re-run of the American Revolution rests on some solid historical parallels. In both cases, weaker newly independent powers fought against former colonial masters for a recognition of their independent identities. Ukrainian independent obviously took a somewhat more circuitous route than the declaration of independence, needing the two revolutions of 2004 and 2014 to make it a reality, but the parallel stands. Indeed, the name given to the 2014 revolution against Victor Yanukovych, the 'revolution of dignity' really makes this point.

Indeed, political theorist Hannah Arendt (2006) discussed two kinds of revolution- those based on passion and those based on compassion. The former were seen throughout history in the form of the French Revolution, the Nazis, and the Bolsheviks and inevitably ended with violence and the reformation of society. The latter, those based on compassion, Arendt aligned to the American Revolution (a distinction which the historian Simon Schama also endorsed). Without getting into the weeds of the empirical cases, it seems that the "color revolutions" which have characterized the post-Soviet space in the last 25 years- and of which Putin is so afraid- also belong to this category. The 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, and the 2011 failed white-ribbon Revolution in Moscow itself (Kolsto, 2022, pp. 167-189) are all cases which fit this pattern. Mostly bloodless revolutions, they used the pressure of popular protest to force unpopular Moscow-aligned elites to leave office.

A preliminary glance at the discourse confirms this. One discussion in the American media compared Volodymyr Zelensky and George Washington in the early stages of the war. In particular, Zelensky's defiant video released to the Ukrainian people showed him in central Kyiv and telling the people that "here we are, we are defending Ukraine" (Motil, 2022). Another comparison is the merging of the pre-revolutionary American Gadsden flag and its Ukrainian counterpart (see figure 2 below), there are efforts to encourage this perception. Indeed, from personal experience in Ukraine in 2018 and 2019 the author can testify to strong pro-American sentiment in Ukraine, including people who wanted to join the American military.



Figure 2. Merging of Ukrainian and Gadsden Flags

The other comparison that is made is between Zelensky himself and Winston Churchill. Perhaps not by accident, such a positioning also reinforces the comparisons between Putin and Hitler. Zelensky’s famous response to the American offer of evacuation just before the invasion- “I need ammo, not a ride” (Reilly, 2022)- and his decision to stay in Kyiv despite the dangers from outside have been compared to Churchill walking the streets of London during the Blitz. Zelensky himself has encouraged this comparison such as in his address to the British Parliament when he directly invoked the ghost of Churchill (see figure 3 below). While Churchill may have his detractors, the story of World War Two as essentially a morality tale is deeply embedded in many Western education systems- a point which further supports the notion that the stakes could not be higher.

This brief section has argued that both discursively and intentionally, Zelensky has been portrayed as the heir of such Western elder statesmen as Washington and Churchill. Those historical figures led nations that would come to determine the world order and its current basis. Both by aligning himself and being aligned with their personalities, then, Zelensky himself makes the case that the current war is existential not just for Ukraine, but for the entire world order.



Figure 3. Zelensky compared to Churchill

Rebutting Criticisms

Any theory has its critics and that will be true of this one as well. I have offered a description of the situation as I see it, not an absolute or definitive truth. But in the spirit of debate, it seems appropriate to consider other interpretations of the conflict. Accordingly, this section takes up realist- and identity-based alternatives to the explanation I have given.

First, the realist explanation championed by people such as John Mearsheimer argues that far from being a defense of world order, the West actively pushed Russia to invade through its incessant emphasis on NATO expansion. In fact, Mearsheimer's (2014) essay "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault" was circulated by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in defense of its actions regarding Ukraine. It follows from this premise that the West sees in Ukraine a chance to weaken Russia, and have it exhaust its military might- better dead Ukrainians than dead Americans or Europeans, goes the thinking.

Such an explanation presumes an enormous cynicism on the part of the West, but that is the wont of realist scholars. Yet the argument also fails on its central premise- that the Russian invasion was in some sense 'provoked' by NATO expansion. On the one hand, NATO is a defensive alliance so it is unclear why such a situation would threaten Russia. On the other hand, this explains the timing of neither the 2014

nor 2022 interventions. The 2013 protests on the Maidan were triggered by the overturning of the EU accession agreement and not any moves to join NATO. The 2022 intervention came after there had in fact been NATO training of Ukrainian troops (prompted, in its turn, by the earlier Russian intervention, and which accounts in part for the proficiency of the Ukrainian defense) and not before it, as such an argument would suggest. So much for the realist claims.

Identity-based explanations might emphasize the role of the far right in Ukraine and particularly the prominent role they played in the Euromaidan. This explanation takes Putin's words about fighting neo-Nazis at face value, sending Russians once more to fight against the eternal enemy of fascism (Laruelle, 2021). It is true that the war with Germany is a central component of modern Russian identity, and that Ukraine has a small neo-Nazi fringe. However, the size of the Ukrainian fascist element has been overstated and even the much-vaunted Azov battalion is overstated. Further, if Russia is so keen on fighting Nazis, then one has to ask why they are encouraging them in countries other than Ukraine (Shevkovtsov, 2018)? Indeed, why did the Russians allow the creation of the largest neo-Nazi skinhead movement in the world in their country as late as 2009 (Arnold, 2015; 2016)? This is not even to mention the rumors that Kremlin eminence grise Vladislav Surkov oversaw the development of the skinhead movement as political project. While Russia's simple uttering of an explanation might not be reason enough to doubt it, combining it with hypocritical actions is.

Conclusion

This brief essay has argued that the West is backing Ukrainian resistance to Russia's invasion because it threatens not just that state but also the entire liberal international order. By presenting justifications that are patently false and committing the crime of aggression against a neighbor, Russia is undermining the edifice on which international politics rest. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky encourages such interpretations by the persona he adopts, and the parallels made to famous historical figures. Just as Churchill held back the German fascist threat, so too Zelensky's nation leads the fight against resurgent Russian fascism (otherwise known as 'Rashism' or 'Ruzzism'). In other words, the stakes could not be higher.

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