

## **Putin's war has laid many 21st-century paradigms to rest** by AGUSTINO FONTEVECCHIA

**The fall of the Soviet Union and the end of modernism made us believe that mass warfare was no longer possible in 'civilised' places like Europe and the United States, where the major physical threat came from terrorism and global warming. Putin's invasion has also laid that paradigm to rest.**

Just as the global Covid-19 pandemic appeared to be on the back foot, Lady Fortune has laid a new plot twist at our doorstep with war erupting in Ukraine, pitting Russian leader Vladimir Putin against the so-called West in what feels like a rerun of the Cold War. Global paradigms have been put into disarray once again, challenging our most axiomatic preconceptions of reality.

With death and destruction caused by war once again in Europe, and no longer in "far and uncivilised" places (as exposed pre-existing biases among Western media outlets indicated when comparing Ukraine to the Middle East or Afghanistan), we are thrust back in time with echoes of history, both to the Cold War and even World War II. The easy question is whether Putin is Adolf Hitler, which then again raises the issue of whether he is a madman or a Machiavellian genius. Several columnists seemed to suggest Putin had miscalculated as his invasion of Ukraine failed to achieve blitzkrieg speed, particularly in toppling major cities. The media savvy Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the staunch Ukrainian Armed Forces and general opposition managed to stop one of the world's most powerful armies, with Russian forces unprepared, badly trained, demoralised and essentially made up of conscripts. The media war goes both ways. It is improbable that Putin and his generals were not prepared for a drawn out war, even though that doesn't appear to have been their initial plan. Ultimately there seems to be little reason to believe the Ukrainian resistance will be able to support the Russian onslaught, unless Putin calls it off.

Yet, when it comes to analysing a leader and his circumstances, we all want to become Freud. The issue of Putin's genius or madness, coupled with the bravery and intelligence of Zelenskyy, simplify the issues, but they don't really get us any closer to the underlying causes. What led Putin to make the call to invade on February 24, 2022? In his speech the Russian premier alleged genocide was being carried out by the "neo-Nazi, drug addicted" US puppets in charge in Kyiv targeting Russian-speaking populations in the Ukraine. Furthermore, he denounced NATO for encroaching towards Russia while lashing out at none other than Vladimir Lenin for the historical mistake of creating Ukraine in the first place. The going interpretation seems to be that the expansion of NATO, coupled with Putin's intention to re-create the Soviet or even Czarist sphere of influence in Eurasia, has led him to stomach the knock-off effects that would derive from a military invasion. It would suggest he also calculated that NATO and the United States weren't in a position to militarily face-off with Russia, also a nuclear power, and that China would implicitly back him, or at least fail to stop him.

Nuclear deterrence, it seems, is alive and well. It's interesting how talk of nuclear war and nuclear in general has seeped back into our everyday analysis. Russian forces took Chernobyl and later the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, which suffered damage from shelling. Putin ordered his nuclear forces onto "high alert." NATO forces

won't directly engage Russians in Ukraine given the possibility of nuclear war. It feels like a return to the Cold War days of MAD (mutually assured destruction). Thus, the hypothesis would indicate Russia used its nuclear muscle to launch a 20th century-like attack on a Eurasian nation close to Europe and the US to pursue its geopolitical interests in creating a sphere of influence. But that still doesn't ask the "why now" question.

On the economic front, the war has already had severe consequences on the global economy, with energy prices soaring. This has a direct impact on everyone – from those living in Argentina to the US to the rest of the world. The post-Covid world had already fanned the flames of inflation in an ominous way, particularly in rich nations where it was thought of as an archaic disease akin to polio or smallpox. Several major European powers, including Germany, depend on Russian natural gas while the United States is an importer of Russian crude oil. Crude oil has broken past the US\$100 per barrel mark both in the US (WTI) and globally (Brent), while natural gas prices in Europe have skyrocketed to all-time highs. There should be no doubts that this was part of the calculation for Putin and his advisers.

As will be the cost to the Russian economy. Western sanctions have come in quick and hard, alienating the Russian economy and causing a severe devaluation of the ruble. Major Russian companies are in trouble including the largest commercial bank, Sberbank, and its largest search engine Yandex. Western firms have been pulling out of the country and banning exports including the likes of Toyota, Shell, and Apple. It will become increasingly difficult for Russian firms and individuals to get credit, while capital flows to the country will dry up, along with foreign direct investment. Imports will become increasingly scarce meaning Russian businesses and industry will suffer. The people of Russia will bear the economic brunt of Putin's decision to challenge US hegemony, much like the Argentine people have suffered the calamities caused by our leaders' incompetence.

The fall of the Soviet Union and the end of modernism made us believe that mass warfare was no longer possible in 'civilised' places like Europe and the United States, where the major physical threat came from terrorism and global warming. Putin's invasion has also laid that paradigm to rest, noting that war is indeed very possible and real, for all of us. The digitalisation of reality, a defining characteristic of the 21st century, has also been called into question – Russia's real-world and physical demonstration and illustration of power has clearly been the most effective. The propaganda war has played its part, but what matters is who has the guns. A proxy war being waged by the West involves the largest tech firms like Meta/Facebook, Google, and Twitter. As these outlets began to "limit Russian disinformation," they have clearly picked sides, labelling Russian outlets as state-owned or blocking them in certain geographies, as they did with Russia Today and Sputnik News. The power of these companies becomes evident once again, giving them the chance to act unilaterally while impacting the lives of nations and their citizens.

Ultimately we should have more questions than answers. Putin's invasion of Russia knocked us off our digital pony and forced us to recognise that many of the older concepts of modernity are still relevant, and maybe even dominant, today.