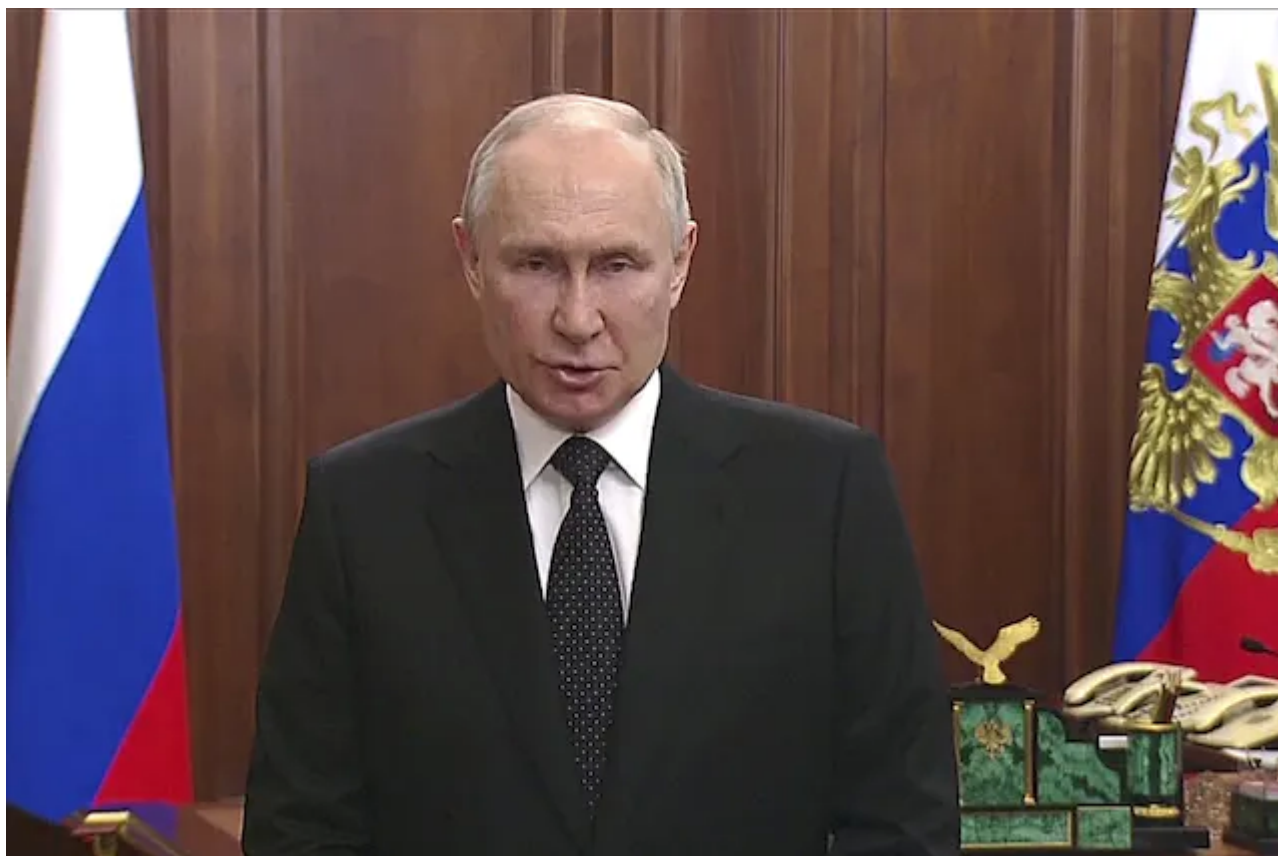


Covering Russia Has Become Like Watching Dogs Fight Under a Blanket



by Conrad Black

In Russia, there have only been a couple of successful *coups d'état* since the revolution of 1917. Alexander Kerensky was chased out by Lenin in 1917, and Nikita Khrushchev was given the high jump by Leonid Brezhnev and his supporters in 1964. There was an unsuccessful uprising against Mikhail Gorbachev shortly before the implosion of the Soviet Union, and the revolt was defeated by the premier of Russia, Boris Yeltsin.

The presumed basis for Stalin's affection for Russia, as a Georgian, was that they were historically prepared to tolerate almost any level of oppression. Certainly Stalin himself, both as an initiator of the policy of eliminating the small

landowners and other large groups, and also as wartime commander in the face of the Nazi onslaught, stretched the endurance of the Russian masses to its outer limits.

No one, though, could deny that Stalin was an effective leader of Russia, that he brought Russian military occupation into Germany and within 200 miles of the Rhine, and caused Russia to be recognized as sharing with the United States the status of the most powerful and influential country in the world. His successor, Khrushchev, was less barbarous and less prone to grievous misjudgments than Stalin, who did, after all, plunge into the Cold War, which could not be won against the skillfully executed American counter-strategy of containment.

Yet Khrushchev was effectively sacked by his colleagues for erratic judgment, chiefly because of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, although, as Khrushchev stated afterwards, prior to that incident there were NATO missiles in Turkey and Italy directed against the Soviet Union and no missiles in Cuba nor any guarantee that Cuba would not be invaded by the United States.

Shortly after the end of that incident, there were still no missiles in Cuba, the United States had undertaken not to invade Cuba and the NATO missiles in Turkey and Italy were being withdrawn. The skillful public relations handling of the crisis by President Kennedy made it appear like a humiliating American defeat of the Soviet Union, but in strategic terms it was nothing of the kind, as was observed by such perceptive analysts as Charles de Gaulle and Richard Nixon, who lost his race for governor of California as a result of it.

There have often been struggles for power within the Kremlin; Stalin outmaneuvered and ultimately evicted (and assassinated) Trotsky. When Lenin died in 1924, Stalin liquidated almost everyone who was a member of the Politburo. Khrushchev sacked almost all the other members of the Politburo when Stalin died in 1953, although only one, the police minister, Lavrenti

Beria, was executed.

It has always been difficult to discern what was going on in the internal politics of the Kremlin. It is like dogs fighting under a blanket. There is no doubt of the discord but it is impossible to detect how the protagonists are doing and even sometimes who the protagonists are, until an official announcement of senior personnel changes is made.

No one would underestimate Vladimir Putin's capacities as a Kremlin in-fighter; he has held his position longer than any post-Romanoff leader except Stalin. Yet Khrushchev, a skillful survivor of the mortal terror of Stalin's court, was sacked for a mistake far less grave and consequential than the Ukraine debacle.

Mr. Putin told the Russian people and the world 18 months ago that the Ukrainian government was composed of Nazis and drug addicts and that the majority of Ukrainians ardently wished to be reunited with Russia. He imprudently let it be known that the Russian plan foresaw a quick capture of Kiev and the absorption of the entire country of Ukraine back into Russia within a month or so.

He announced to the Russian public that it was a special action that would not generate significant Russian casualties or imply any burden of involuntary participation by the young men of Russia. Ukraine was a sitting duck, eager to be taken, he said.

The fact that the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, believed the same thing is a reflection on General Milley, not a mitigation of Mr. Putin's strategic blunder. Indeed, President Biden's initial reaction, presumably on General Milley's advice, was to offer President Zelensky and his family safe passage out of Ukraine and sanctuary in the West, since he assumed the Russians were unstoppable.

The whole world has watched with astonishment as Ukraine, which gave up Crimea in three days of uncontested action in 2014, fought the Russians to a standstill around Kiev and successfully resisted the Russian effort to take all of the Black Sea coast, and with NATO paying for the military equipment and munitions (and America two-thirds of that), Ukraine has fielded a much more motivated, imaginative, and resilient army than Russia, which has been exposed as having all the problems of not having fought a serious war since the fall of Hitler's Berlin in May 1945.

Their training, deployment, tactics, and command structure have all been exposed as flabby and obsolete, and Russian morale is dangerously low. The current Ukrainian counter-offensive campaign is only just underway and only two of the nine western-armed and trained brigades have been committed. These events can only encourage the Ukrainians. Mr. Putin set out to emulate Stalin and has better simulated Mussolini.

The backbone of Mr. Putin's army in Ukraine is Chechnyan; the mutineers are the principal single unit in the invasion force, a Chechnyan mercenary army of 25,000. A truce has, at time of writing, been made with them and they're apparently to go to Belarus and enjoy a permanent cease-fire there.

It was shocking that they occupied Rostov, a city of a million people, after they defected, with no resistance, were generally cheered by crowds on their route to Moscow, and took over, as mutineers, the district military headquarters without firing a shot. No Great Power in modern times, not France in 1940, Russia in 1917, nor the British at Singapore in 1942, has suffered such a humiliation.

At Saigon in 1975 and Kabul in 2021, it was America's ally that had been defeated, not the United States. It is extremely difficult to see how Mr. Putin can even maintain his military position without an imposition on the Russian population that they appear disinclined to accept.

Assuming he can keep his office, one can say that it is likely that Mr. Putin will have to retrench further to lines the Russians can hold and let it be known that unless a ceasefire and demarcation are reached, he will use his missile forces to rain such destruction down on Ukraine that it will never be able to evict the Russians. Mr. Putin's threats of nuclear weapons were always just hot air – he and his corrupt entourage won't risk all they've stolen on nuclear lunacy.

If Mr. Putin does not grasp for peace now, he is running an extremely high risk of being jettisoned. There is no enthusiasm in Russia whatever, beyond a few traditionalist Stalinist cranks, who would support a general mobilization and a war to the death to retake all Ukraine.

It must also be said that the Biden administration appears likely to emerge from Ukraine with a substantial political victory. That in itself may not reelect the administration – it is much more modest a victory than President George H.W. Bush scored in Iraq, but he still lost the next election. Once again, the paleolithic right, including Tucker Carlson, Pat Buchanan, and some of the remaining Fox News commentators, have been thoroughly debunked. It can only be hoped that everyone who should learn the lesson from Ukraine, in Russia and the West, will do so.

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