

Fainthearted concerns over provoking Putin



by Ralph Berry

As the military outlook for Ukraine grows weaker, the moral uplift side takes over the case. It has to. This involves condemnation of the feebletons running the supposedly friendly states. Hence 'Fainthearted concerns over provoking Putin' ('Ukraine's counteroffensive is stalling. The West must prepare for humiliation' (Richard Kemp, 'Sunday Telegraph', 10 September). I support the fainthearts—they are my team—and have no desire to chide Biden's 'failure to provide urgently needed weapons including combat planes'.

A scene in the film THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN comes to mind when the British leader of a flight of Poles discovers that his Poles have disappeared. They have peeled off to hunt Germans on their own. It couldn't happen today, with Russians replacing Germans and Ukrainian fingers on the triggers.

Quite sure?

The US 'obstinate resistance to NATO membership for Ukraine' is next on the charge sheet. Since when is a long-running, perfectly rational policy of State 'obstinate' because it does not accord with the wishes of Colonel Kemp? NATO cannot conceivably admit an expansionist state with a festering hatred of Russia. Its own rationale would be destroyed. All this is obvious and well understood. I do not understand why the *Telegraph* should pay to repeat this nonsense.

'The Russian "scorched earth" strategy—invented by Tsar Alexander I's general Barclay de Tolly to repel Napoleon's invasion in 1812—has been resurrected by Putin against what he calls the "Nazi" state of Ukraine.' The Tsar did not 'invent scorched earth'. Wellington did, in his retreat before the lines of Torres Vedras. Thousands of Portuguese died of it. Napoleon, reading about it in the *Times*, was impressed with Wellington's ruthless scorched earth policy. Yet Wellington is accounted a civilized general, always staying within the accepted rules of war.

Then, Prigozhin. 'It is a sign of weakness, not of strength, that Putin was left with no choice but to decapitate a mercenary force that had proved itself more effective than his regular military units.' I think it sign of strength that Putin has got away with eliminating a serious threat in what appears to be a flawlessly executed operation.

Then, of course, corruption. Kemp deals with the matter sweepingly.

'Corruption concerns do need to be addressed.' I love 'addressed' that workmanlike tool made of putty. Something must be done, and we prove it by mentioning it. Having 'addressed' the concerns, we are immediately told that 'they do not trump the West's overriding strategic interest in preventing a Russian victory.' Since the Russians are well on

the way to achieving a victory of sorts, there is not much point in knocking ourselves out in a vain effort at preventing it.

What, then, is to be done? 'A humiliated West will need a robust damage-limitation strategy. This would involve building up NATO forces, which still has not yet been seriously approached on either side of the Atlantic.' For 'robust' read 'increased defence expenditure'. The heart sinks at the prospect of more money being shovelled into the maw of Defence, there to enable a British carrier to leave harbour for its maiden voyage and British tanks to creep around enemy territory without being molested. A rather amusing instance came the other day. A British MBT, latest model, was gifted to the Ukrainians and was hit, probably by artillery and destroyed.

However, such was the excellence of the built-in safety features that the crew of four made their escape and survived. I am glad they made it. But the purpose of tank design is simply to end the combat: 'the tank it was that died.'

One final round in Johnson's array of dud challenges to the oncoming reality. 'The purge of generals that followed the insurrection has likewise done nothing to restore confidence in a war machine that has malfunctioned from the start.' Johnson believes that the malfunctioning parts should stay in place—to encourage the others, which it certainly would. Churchill believed that generals who do not deliver should be sacked.

Putin may be on the right lines there. In the 1930s Stalin purged the military top brass. Ninotchka, as played in the film by Greta Garbo, had a telling phrase. The purges would leave 'fewer but better Russians.'