

# Putin's Pestilence

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**O**N 1st March, Russian schools introduced new lessons in which teachers were instructed to explain to their students that Russia was forced to start 'a special military operation' against 'a fascist regime in Ukraine'. Many posts have also appeared on Russian social media in which schoolchildren pose for pictures forming Z signs, the military marking that has become a symbol of public support for the invasion. The irony is that Russia is now the real fascist state and the Z sign is the modern equivalent of the swastika.

A stated rationale by Putin for attacking Ukraine is to 'denazify' the country. This is Orwellian language as in truth Putin is a modern Hitler seeking a greater Russia, just as Hitler sought a greater Germany. Indeed, the opposite of what Putin and his spokesmen currently say is generally the truth. But then, of course, **systematic lying** is itself a feature of fascism.

Another basic component is **strength through unity**. The individual is nothing, the state or community is everything. The ideal individual is motivated by duty, honour and self-sacrifice and dedicates his life to the glory of his nation or race. Hence Putin's March address at a patriotic rally in Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium when he praised the 'unity' of Russia's troops and paraphrased the words of Jesus (John 15:13) "There is no greater love than giving up one's soul for one's friends". To many, Putin's use of the Gospel to justify rape, torture, death and destruction and the placing of nuclear forces on special alert is a travesty of Christianity. They point to other words of Jesus, such as: "Blessed are the peacemakers". Perhaps Shakespeare explains it well in *The Merchant of Venice* (1:3): "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose".

Another essential characteristic is **aggressive nationalism/imperialism** that seeks to expand a country's influence and power. Fascists see national strength as the key feature that makes a country 'great'. There is often a nostalgia for a mythic past in which the 'nation' – narrowly defined in terms of ethnicity, race, language, culture etc – had an empire. Putin has declared that the collapse of the USSR was the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century, but he seeks to resurrect the bones of the old imperial Russia set in train by Ivan the Terrible even further back in the 16th century. Putin dreams of a revived slavonic motherland under Russian hegemony ruling over countries like Ukraine as vassals.

National strength, is above all, demonstrated in military terms and the **glorification of war and terror**. Fascists generally believe in the **myth of redemptive violence**. It is the belief that not only is it somehow 'beautiful' but also that evil and chaos can only be defeated through the use of violence to establish peace and order. The evil is often an ethnic or religious minority, which is represented as a disease that must be eliminated. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler called the Jews a 'dangerous bacillus'. In Putin's mind evil is all the people of Ukraine who wish to maintain the country's independence. In the town of Bucha a Russian soldier told a Ukrainian woman: "You are the dirt and we are cleaning the land of the dirt". Putin calls it a 'noble' cause, but the real pestilence here is his illegal and barbaric onslaught on Ukraine, which has deliberately targeted homes, hospitals, schools and train stations. The aim is to terrorise the population into submission and to this end women and children have been particular objects of Russian barbarity.

The fascist perception of an enemy as 'evil' is often bolstered by, or perhaps even derived from, religion. In fascist states, **religion and government are usually combined** to combat the 'evil'. Thus Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf* that "by defending myself against the Jew, I am doing the

Lord's work". Patriarch Kirill, leader of 110 million Russian Orthodox Christians, who called Putin's election a 'miracle of God', justified the invasion of Ukraine by saying that it is a spiritual battle between the East and the ever encroaching liberal consumerist West and its depraved values, such as gay rights, which Ukraine was embracing.

In Russia there is a ban on the promotion of 'non-traditional sexual relations' and persecution of gays has increased.

So fascism is also a **rejection of modernity**, specifically in its espousal of the Enlightenment, pluralism, individual rights, checks and balances on executive power, diversity and democracy. In 2019 he told the *Financial Times* that liberal democracy has 'outlived its purpose' and that liberalism as an ideology has 'come into conflict with the overwhelming majority of the population'. Tim Costello, a fellow at the Centre for Public Christianity in Sydney, quotes Putin in *Eternity News* (28th February): "We see many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilisation. They are denying the moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual". Putin, like Kirill, believes that the West is decadent and has turned away from God.

A rejection of modernity connects with a further key fascist feature, **dictatorial power**. A fascist state may have a few trappings of democracy, but it is essentially a totalitarian society in which there is an all-powerful leader, suppression, imprisonment and killing of opponents, the banning of strikes, control and censorship of the media, regimentation of society, and disrespect for intellectuals and the arts. The cult of the leader is seen in portraits, parades, march-pasts, slogans, songs and uniforms, —>

and the cult of physical strength, violence and brutality. All these elements are clearly present in Putin, who is regarded in Russia as the embodiment of the spirit, will and virtues of the people. His brutality is demonstrated by the treatment of opponents. Navalny was the latest in a long line allegedly poisoned on Putin's orders. Earlier victims included Verzilov, another opposition activist, in 2018, Anna Politkovskaya, a journalist who was poisoned in 2004 and gunned down two years later, Tsepov and Litvinenko, both of whom were poisoned and died in 2004 and of course Skripal and his daughter in 2018.

Putin is even admired in democracies by people such as Trump, Farage and Le Pen. He likes to be seen topless on horseback and has – or rather had until it was revoked – an honorary black belt in taekwondo. He has already been in power for 22 years and under the new constitution to be introduced in 2024, where a President can serve a maximum of two terms of six years each, he could theoretically be Russian President until 2036.

It is tragic that Russian people are still in thrall to 'strong men' and are so brainwashed that they view Putin as a hero. They see Ukraine as the very fascist state that their own country has become. Yet in that country a coalition of three right-wing parties received only 2.4% of the vote and no seats in the Ukrainian parliament in 2019, and the far-right candidate for the presidency also gained a poor percentage and came in ninth place. Both President Zelenskyy and Prime Minister Shmyhal are Jews.

As for the Azov regiment in the Donbas, around which accusations of Nazism have often centred, most experts say that the neo-Nazi core of Azov has been diluted by new recruits who have increased the regiment's size to 5,000. Like Ukraine's other soldiers, they are fighting the real Nazis, who have already invaded and laid waste Georgia, Chechnya and Syria. Indeed, as Lara Marlowe, quoting a Ukraine expert in the *Irish Times* (2nd April) notes, there are far more right-wing Russian extremists fighting on the side of the Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas region than there are neo-Nazis in Azov.

There are those who will maintain that there are two sides to every conflict and that the West is partly to blame for seeking to expand NATO and thus threaten Russian security. Yet the fact is that if Ukraine had been allowed to join NATO, Russia would not have invaded it. And, as a result of the invasion, other countries in Europe, like Sweden and Finland, are now thinking that they are exposed to Russian aggression and perhaps should seek to join as well.

Like Bush and Blair about Iraq, Putin believed that conquering it was doable because Ukraine was weak and would not resist. This was clearly a mistake. Many of Russia's former client states including Ukraine have tasted 30 years of independence and have no desire to rejoin

a greater Russia. They have also become burgeoning liberal democracies, seeing it as the fairest and wisest political system yet devised. They understand that it is a necessary compromise which ensures that individuals and minorities have some fundamental rights as well as majorities, and that political life is a constant negotiation between them.

Last year Putin wrote an essay entitled *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, outlining his belief that they are one people divided artificially by borders and outsiders. He has now repeated this claim on Russian TV.

It is true that in the early 1990s Russia and Ukraine were friendly neighbours. In the 1994 Budapest Memorandum Ukraine actually gave up the nuclear weapons on its territory, the third largest nuclear arsenal on earth. In exchange for this major concession, Russia and the West pledged to respect its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Russia has now proved that its promise was empty.

Relationships soured after Putin came to power, especially when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. The Russian President's aggressive approach created a strong sense of

Ukrainian national identity imbued with deep anti-Russian sentiment even before the current 'special military operation' began. So bombing and shooting people into unity is likely to be entirely counterproductive, as the IRA eventually realised here.

In the modern world, invaders often make this same mistake, as Russia, the US and the UK found in Afghanistan and the 'coalition

of the willing' discovered in Iraq. Initial military conquest may be easy but maintaining control over the defeated country can become an insurgent quagmire which ultimately leads to a humiliating withdrawal.

The last thing that Ukrainians desire is to return to autocratic Russian rule. Sure, they will probably pay a heavy price in lost lives for their adherence to western values, and Putin may win his brutal war if only in the Donbas, but ultimately he will lose the peace.

The sad truth, though, is that ruthless warmongers – not to mention their appeasers – are very slow learners who are not always prevented from wreaking havoc on the world. It may take years for the penny to drop in the crazed brain of Vladimir Putin or his successors in the Kremlin.

At the time of writing, Russia's onslaught on the Donbas is imminent and, if successful, it will claim a victory, even if it has not conquered all of Ukraine. Putin's style of leadership may gain more imitators, leading to more dictatorships, military threats, land grabs and assassinations. The West will need to show that liberal democracy is not weak and out of date. That is the challenge that Putin's barbaric aggression has created. □