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CEPS EXPLAINER

Tsar Nicholas I's Crimean War and Putin's in Ukraine

Plus ça change

Michael Emerson



SUMMARY

With President Volodymyr Zelensky's statement on 11 May that more time is needed before Ukraine's long-awaited counteroffensive can begin, everyone is implicitly being invited also to pause and reflect on what might or should become the outcome of the war. Ukraine's declared political objective is to regain all of its occupied territories, including Crimea, but the actual outcome will only be revealed first on the field of battle and then in peace negotiations.

Such reflections may include noting the region's history, and notably the experience of the Crimean War of 170 years ago, with several striking analogies with President Vladimir Putin's war. Two solitary autocrats, Tsar Nicholas I and Putin, both launched their wars of choice, both claiming their sacred destiny to defend Russia from Western liberalism.

Yet Ukraine's forthcoming counteroffensive, to be a second stage in the war, also invites comparison with how the Crimean War saw two stages. Its first stage was entirely on the mainland between present-day Ukraine and the Ottoman Constantinople. The French and British allies had the option in mid-1854 to stop after the Tsar's retreat from trying to take Constantinople, and to declare victory. But instead they made the fateful decision to move on to Crimea and take Sevastopol. History never repeats itself exactly, but it is worth remembering, as Ukraine and its Western allies weigh their strategies for the endgame.




Michael Emerson is an Associate Senior Research Fellow at CEPS.

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History never repeats itself exactly, but it offers some comparisons and lessons. On reading Orlando Figes’s superb history of the Crimean War of September 1853 to April 1856¹, comparisons with President Vladimir Putin’s current war in Ukraine jump out from almost every chapter. But then there is one final, huge difference of existential significance.

NICHOLAS I AND PUTIN

Both stand out as exemplars of the solitary, absolute and long-term autocrat. Tsar Nicholas I ruled for 30 years from 1825 to 1855, dying just before the end of the Crimean War, while Putin has so far been president or prime minister for somewhat less, from 2000 to 2023, but appears to be in good health, ready for re-election in 2024.

Nicholas began his reign with brutal suppression of the Decembrist uprising, and went on to eliminate any potential political opposition with the aid of his secret police (the Third Department of his administration), a forerunner of the KGB. No significant rivals to Putin have emerged, given the assassination of Boris Nemtsov in 2015 by unidentified persons, and the Novichok poisoning and then imprisonment since 2021 of Alexander Navalny.

Both have self-identified with Russia’s sacred destiny, illuminated by the ceremonial grandeur of the Kremlin and palaces of St Petersburg. Putin’s ceremonies and ritual procedures at the Kremlin invite comparisons with tsars from Ivan the Terrible onwards. In April 2023, Putin graced President Xi Jinping of China as at best his equal if not supplicant, with the pantomime of the visitor having to proceed along an endless red carpet on TV before reaching his host.

This self-identification goes well beyond the ceremonial into the spiritual and mystical domains. Nicholas believed himself to be destined by God to represent the unique essence of the Russian soul and to protect all of Orthodox Europe from the deadly peril of Western liberalism.

Putin, the ex-KGB agent, makes humble appearances at Moscow’s cathedral of Christ the Saviour, sometimes at Easter, and shares televised meetings with Patriarch Kirill, also with the holy objective of protecting Russia from decadent Western liberalism. In presenting his foreign policy strategy in September 2022 Putin himself actually brought the two wars together. Speaking of the victims of the Crimean War, he declared: ‘We have a sacred duty before us which consists in making sure that the sacrifices made by previous generations are justified. It is in our hands today. We must do this today, we must’².

¹ Orlando Figes, *Crimea – The Last Crusade*, Penguin Books, 2010.

² Putin also hangs a portrait of Nicholas I in the ante-chamber to his Kremlin office.

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Nicholas was encouraged by Professor Mikhail Pogodin of Moscow University to believe in his vocation as leader of a Christian pan-Slav movement to overthrow the Ottoman Empire. In 1842, he wrote to the Tsar: 'Here is our purpose – Russian, Slav, European, Christian! As Russian we must capture Constantinople

for our own security'³. In 1853, Field Marshall Ivan Paskevic advised that a Russian attack through the Danubian provinces would raise as many as 50 000 Christian Slav soldiers from Serbia to Greece for the Tsar's army⁴, and quickly lead on to the conquest of Constantinople as a holy site of Orthodox Christianity. This did not happen.

Putin expected his invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, with a 40-kilometre convoy of tanks, artillery and military transport streaming in from Belarus, to trigger the fall of Kyiv in a matter of days. It did not happen. The military operation was grossly incompetent, as the convoy proved fatally vulnerable to Ukrainian counterattacks by portable anti-tank missiles and artillery. The convoy became a gigantic military traffic jam, a sitting duck for Ukrainian fire. An equally gross failure was that of Russian political intelligence, which had presumably predicted the rapid collapse of President Volodymyr Zelensky's regime and installation of a pro-Russian protégé leadership. Whether Putin had received cautionary advice to the contrary remains to be uncovered.

Both Nicholas and Putin struggled to raise troops for their armies. Nicholas resorted to conscription of 1.4 million serfs, who received promises of freedom. But they went into battle untrained, under-armed and under-fed. Putin has mobilised 300 000 mainly men and deployed new conscripts likewise with little training, weaponry or food. The notorious Wagner semi-private army has even relied on the release of criminals from prison, also with promises of freedom upon return from 6 months at the frontline – a striking analogue with the promise of freedom for the serfs.

Further, in April 2023 Russia passed a new law rendering it a criminal offence for anyone failing to register after a week following the issue of an electronic conscription notice,

³ Figes, op. cit., p. 91. In a remarkable archive, a letter along these lines from Pogodin was marked by the Tsar in the margins with 'absolutely right' (ibid., pp. 133-135).

⁴ Figes, op. cit., p. 115.

whether or not it has actually reached the person. Russian commentators speculate that this will induce a huge new wave of corruption, with the rich able to buy their way out of this fate, while the less well-off will be unable to do so – closer still to the 1850s when the serfs could not escape the draft.

Employment as frontline cannon fodder has been the fate of conscripts of both armies, with Nicholas and Putin seeming to be equally indifferent to huge losses of life in support of their holy objectives. In the Crimean War, Russia suffered 450 125 killed, while the allies suffered a total of 163 197 killed, with French losses of 95 615 predominating, the Ottoman Empire losing 45 400, and Britain 22 182. US intelligence documents leaked in April 2023 assessed Russian casualties in Ukraine at 220 000 (43 000 killed and 180 000 wounded), with Ukraine having fewer than 140 000 casualties (17 500 killed and 113 500 wounded)⁵.

The Crimean War thus saw as many as 10 times killed as in the war in Ukraine so far. However, when taking the total of the killed and wounded, the numbers get much closer, since most of today's wounded would not have survived the inadequacy of medical services in 19th century Crimea. This was notwithstanding the pioneering work of Nikolai Pirogov in field surgery on the Russian side, to be compared with the legendary role of Florence Nightingale on the British side.

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The carnage of 'cannon fodder' at the siege of Sevastopol in 1856 has been seen as prefiguring the terrible trench warfare of the Western Front in World War I, as at Ypres. And now the carnage at Bakhmut and other parts of the eastern frontline is being described as a recall of World War I – from Sevastopol to Bakhmut via Ypres.

In addition, around 900 000 Russians, mainly prime-age professionals (including many IT workers), are estimated to have fled the country to avoid conscription, with Georgia, Armenia, Serbia, Turkey and Dubai receiving especially large numbers. Russia's total demographic losses from the war in Ukraine already far exceed its deaths from the Crimean War. The numbers become more comparable with the great emigration of 'white Russians' fleeing the Bolsheviks (around 1.3 to 2 million).

⁵ *Financial Times*, 'Russia and Ukraine tighten conscription rules ahead of spring hostilities', 11 April 2023.

ENDING WAR

The two wars in Crimea and Ukraine have raised similar questions about alternative models for ending them: decisive victory and crippling punishment of the loser, versus victory without humiliating the loser. Once again, Crimea is the key. In today's war in Ukraine, the question is how far the expected Ukrainian counteroffensive should try to

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go, whether crucially just to recover territory on mainland Ukraine, or to go for Crimea as well.

On the eve of the Crimean War, triggered by Russia's failing invasion of the Danubian principalities of the Ottoman Empire in July 1853, Louis-Napoléon tried in

conjunction with Austria to negotiate. On 29 January 1854, they offered the Tsar a deal under which the French and British would withdraw their navies from the Black Sea if Russia withdrew from the Danubian principalities. When the Tsar rebuffed this proposal, Britain played the next card, issuing on 27 February an ultimatum – withdraw or it's war. When the Tsar again refused, after some hesitation by Louis-Napoléon, Britain and France joined together to declare war in March.

The crucial battle was when Turkey successfully confronted the Russians at Silistria in today's Bulgaria in May 1854. By June, the Tsar was forced to order retreat. He was offered an Austrian four-point peace plan of 8 August 1854⁶, but when negotiations over this stalled the French and British debated what to do next. Louis-Napoléon wanted to seize Sevastopol as a prize, even wanting to lead his troops there in person, until dissuaded by his advisers. But Britain wanted to go much further. Later, Lord Palmerston wrote on 9 October 1855 about the 'real objects of the war': to cede the Danube delta and Danubian principalities to Turkey; for Russia to lose its naval bases in the Black Sea, the territory of Crimea and its bases in the Caucasus and Central Asia; and for Poland to gain independence.

At this point, there was still the option of declaring victory and negotiating peace conditions with the Tsar from a position of strength. A second option was to go on with the aim of at least destroying the Sevastopol naval base and strategically curtailing Russia as a Eurasian imperial power. Fatally, France and Britain chose the latter, leading to further hundreds of thousands more pointless deaths.

⁶ Figes (op. cit.), p. 195. The four points were as follows: (1) Russia was to give up its protectorate over the Danubian principalities. (2) The Danube was to be opened up to foreign commerce. (3) The Straits Convention of 1841, allowing only Ottoman and Russian warships in the Black Sea, was to be revised. (4) Russia was to abandon any claim to interfere in Ottoman affairs on behalf of Orthodox Christians.

In September 1854, allied forces landed in Crimea, with the siege of Sevastopol lasting a whole year until the Russians retreated from the city and naval base in September 1855. Facing defeat, Tsar Alexander II (having succeeded Nicholas in March 1855), wrote on 23 December 1855 using some of the words echoed by President Emmanuel Macron today: 'We have reached the utmost limit of what is possible and compatible with Russia's honour. I will never accept humiliating conditions, and am convinced that every Russian feels as I do'⁷.

On 16 January 1856, the Tsar accepted Austrian proposals for what would become the agenda of the Peace Congress in Paris, which concluded on 30 March 1856. These essentially provided:

- restoration of the Danubian principalities to the Ottoman power;
- restoration of Sevastopol and other Crimean ports to Russia;
- neutralisation of the Black Sea, meaning that neither Russia nor Turkey could arm militarily any port bordering the sea.

This was a relatively mild settlement, far less than what Palmerston had been advocating. But Britain's terms were judged exorbitant by France and Italy, and could not prevail as France had contributed much more to the battlefield than Britain.

Even so, the terms of the Treaty of Paris were indeed considered to be humiliating by Russia, and the following 15 years saw its successful efforts – with the aid of a tactical alliance with Prussia – to unwind the restrictions imposed by the Treaty. The Treaty of London of 1871 abrogated the restrictions against renewed militarisation of the Black Sea imposed by the Treaty of Paris.

These examples saw France in the past (alongside Austria) and now again under Macron seeking to negotiate either an alternative to war or non-humiliating outcomes. Britain has consistently been the keenest on military action – in the current case of course working behind and with the United States. Britain has been in the lead among Europeans in supplying weapons, including tanks, with Macron and Chancellor Olaf Scholz holding back until pushed by diplomatic pressures and public opinion, Macron repeatedly warning against humiliating Russia. France and Britain seem to have been sustaining if not deepening their respective geopolitical stereotypes.

In Washington, there are hawkish voices advocating a decisive defeat of Russia, to the point that it would cease to be a world power, although such sentiments skip over the complication that Russia remains a formidable nuclear power. President Joe Biden is

⁷ Figes (op. cit.), pp. 406-407.

more restrained in his language. But for sure the nuclear factor is where the comparability of the two wars finally breaks down.

IN WASHINGTON, THERE ARE HAWKISH VOICES ADVOCATING A DECISIVE DEFEAT OF RUSSIA, TO THE POINT THAT IT WOULD CEASE TO BE A WORLD POWER, ALTHOUGH SUCH SENTIMENTS SKIP OVER THE COMPLICATION THAT RUSSIA REMAINS A FORMIDABLE NUCLEAR POWER. PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN IS MORE RESTRAINED IN HIS LANGUAGE. BUT FOR SURE THE NUCLEAR FACTOR IS WHERE THE COMPARABILITY OF THE TWO WARS FINALLY BREAKS DOWN.

Since the early months of 2023, there have been numerous references from Kyiv to a forthcoming counteroffensive. While of course there has been no indication of the precise military objective, many past statements have alluded to regaining all the occupied territories.

On 5 April 2023, there was a first sign of a Ukrainian government official speaking about compromise over Crimea, departing from the familiar speech that the objective is to regain all the occupied territories including Crimea.

Andrei Sybiha, deputy head of Zelensky's staff, is quoted as saying '[i]f we will succeed in achieving our strategic goals on the battlefield and when we will be on the administrative border with Crimea, we are ready to open [a] diplomatic page to discuss this issue'⁸, even if a colleague promptly rebuffed his statement.

It is just as well to remember the Crimean War, which saw Sevastopol become one of the most sacred sites of Russian identity. If there were one scenario maximising the chances of a deranged Putin using nuclear weapons, despite Xi's presumed warnings to the contrary and against all rational calculations, it would be Ukraine's attempt to take Sevastopol. As an alternative outcome, maybe Russia stays in Crimea while Ukraine gets back mainland territories and full NATO membership as basis for a sustainable peace?

⁸ *Financial Times*, 'Ukraine "ready" to talk to Russia if counteroffensive succeeds' 5 April 2023.

CEPS
Place du Congrès 1
B-1000 Brussels

