

Leadership, incrementalism and the repetition of history: A Ukrainian tragedy in four acts

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Abstract

Leadership is often associated with a particular form of decision-making: being decisive. This paper reflects on the limits of decisiveness and the role of incrementalism in the Russian decision to invade Ukraine and the role of the West and NATO's decision-making over the prior 10 years. It suggests that incrementalism is both a legitimate mode and a significant problem in such scenarios, and focuses on the historical context to explain the decision to invade and the subsequent military failures.

Keywords

Leadership, Ukraine, dissent, incrementalism, logistics, shame

The prologue: Decision-making and leadership

Decision-making is often taken as the sine qua non of leadership: leaders are decisive, and if they are not then they are failed leaders. But this is to assume a capacity to see clearly through what Clausewitz (2008) called 'the fog of war' and take decisions even when the evidence is sometimes underwhelming and the threat overwhelming. Command, as a decision mode, is especially pertinent for those in uniformed organizations, such as the military, and the cultures of such organizations, including their reward and punishments systems, are often premised on the ability to command in a crisis: not 'to be or not be?', but to be decisive. Yet there are occasions when being decisive is the last thing that leadership should involve, except in the sense of deciding not to decide. Keats called this 'negative capability' by which he meant the ability to avoid being rushed into a decision if the consequences of an error were likely to be worse than the consequences of not making a decision (Simpson and French, 2006). For example, the British Fire & Rescue service made no immediate attempt to put out the fire at the Buncefield oil depot in 2005 (the worst civilian fire in British

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history) – despite pressure from the media ‘to do something!’ – because they did not have the resources or the information to know how to deal with it until 24 hours after the fire broke out.¹

In what follows, I trace the significance of decision-making and leadership in Ukraine in four ‘acts’. First, I consider the importance of contextualizing the decisions historically, and then I focus on incrementalism as a practice of decision-making. Next, I explore whether part of the explanation for the problems facing the Russian invaders is their preference for combat over logistics, and finally examine the role of dissent in deterring leaders from making mistakes. In each case, I suggest that we can learn something from the military decisions of leaders in Europe over the last two centuries. Let us start a hundred years ago.

Act one: Shame and rebirth

If Friedrich Ebert’s German Social Democrats thought they were doing Germany a huge political favour by taking power and signing the armistice with the Western allies in November 1918, Hitler insisted that the very same act was really an act of calamitous betrayal, ensuring the ‘defeat’ of Germany, by stabbing the allegedly undefeated German army in the back. That this was self-evidently untrue and the real responsibility for the failure lay with Hindenburg, the Kaiser and Ludendorff, and certainly not Social Democrats or Jewish bankers, was unceremoniously but effectively hidden from view. Hitler was also convinced that another reason for defeat in the 1WW, besides the ‘stab in the back’ myth, was that Germany could not feed itself properly under the Allied blockade. The Ukrainian wheatfields, in particular, were what would save Germany in any future war, and they would also provide the ‘living space’ for the thousand-year Reich that would be initiated under his leadership of the German National Socialist Party. In effect, the egalitarian and social elements of socialism would be framed not by a progressive internationalist perspective but by a regressive and fervently nationalist framework that would generate an *aufbruchsstimmung* – an awakening – that brought recompense for the *kollektivschuld* – the ‘collective shame’ of defeat in the 1WW. The Nazi boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’, therefore, would not be written in terms of antagonistic social classes across the globe – to that degree, the socialist element of National Socialism was unconventional. But instead, the focus was on the German nation, in short, German Aryans² against all ‘lesser races’ but starting with the Jews who would initially be debarred from the newly ‘restored’ civil service, teaching positions and so on, and ending with their exile, prior to the ‘final solution’.

The first five years of Putin’s Presidency of Russia, much like the first five years of Hitler’s control over Germany, were notable for many things, but one was the stabilization of a troubled economy and significant economic growth. But like Hitler on German history, Putin referred to the Russian recent past as disastrous. The collapse of the Soviet Union was, for Putin, ‘the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the Twentieth Century’ (*BBC News* 25 April 2005) which, given that this century embodied two world wars, is a bold claim. Indeed, some have argued that Putin’s goal is not to gain a little territory to protect Russia’s western border better, but to launch a ‘crusade’.

This crusade against a liberal European future is being fought in the name of *Russkiy mir* – ‘the Russian world’, a previously obscure historical term for a Slavic civilization based on shared ethnicity, religion and heritage. The Putin regime has revived, promulgated and debased this idea into an obscurantist anti-Western mixture of Orthodox dogma, nationalism, conspiracy theory and security-state Stalinism. The war is the latest and most striking manifestation of this revanchist ideological movement. And it has brought to the fore a dark and mystical component within it, one a bit in love with death. As Andrei Kurilkin, a publisher, puts it, ‘The substance of the myth is less important than its sacred nature...The legitimacy of the state is now grounded not in its public good, but in a quasi-religious cult’ (*The Economist*, 2022b).

Part of the motivation for that crusade is the predominance within the dominant Russian narrative for a rebalancing of claims about responsibility for ending the 1000 German Reich after just 12 years. Western narratives, according to this approach, severely underestimate the role played by the USSR in the defeat of German in what they call the Great Patriotic War, and consciously overestimate the role of the Western Allies, especially the USA. Thus, even though roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ of all the German military divisions fought on the eastern front and the Soviets inflicted at least $\frac{3}{4}$ of all German casualties, it is a common Western myth that it was the overwhelming technological firepower of the USA, and to a lesser extent the UK, that broke German resistance. In short, Putin's war in Ukraine is amongst other things an attempt to reclaim the unacknowledged might of Russia in its Soviet guise and simultaneously to initiate a new beginning, much in the same way that Hitler tried to do the same for Germany in 1933. In the 'new' colonial Russia, we can see the first symbols of this in Henichesk – in Russian-occupied southern Ukraine (or the People's Republic of Kherson', as the Russians call the town) – which now flies Russian flags and has a new statue of Lenin outside the town council Building (Harding, 2022: 12).

In both examples, shame is a powerful tool for organizational leadership (Clough, 2010), and it can also be useful for forging political identities in both senses of the word, 'forge'. In other words, shame can be used to 'burn' different elements together, but it might also be fraudulent. More importantly, non-violent resistance is largely dependent on the ability of the targeted leaders to actually feel shame. For example, if we consider the 2011 Annual White House Correspondents' Association dinner in Washington, D.C., President Obama challenged Trump's fraudulent claims about Obama's birthplace by shaming him – in public. 'I know that he's taken some flack lately', said Obama, 'no one is prouder to put this birth-certificate matter to rest than the Donald. And that's because he can finally get back to the issues that matter, like: did we fake the moon landing? What really happened in Roswell? And—where are Biggie and Tupac?' Trump's response, as described by Adam Gopnik (2015), was remarkable, for there was 'No head bobbing or hand-clapping or chin-shaking or sheepish grinning—he sat perfectly still, chin tight, in locked, unmovable rage.' Indeed, one might argue that much of Trump's presidency was based on reversing everything Obama had achieved in his presidency because of this evident public shaming. In the Ukrainian case, it seems that Putin is driven by the rage at collective shame of the desultory collapse of the USSR, just as Hitler was about the 1WW. Yet neither appear shamed by the deaths of thousands of innocent victims – which implies that simply protesting about the war is unlikely to dissuade Putin from his attack upon Ukraine.

Act two: Incrementalism in Hitler's Germany and Putin's Russia

Three years after Hitler came to power, on 7 March 1936, 3300 German troops marched back into the Rhineland, the demilitarized zone between Germany and France, in flagrant contravention of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles and the 1926 Locarno Treaties. But neither the French nor British military or political leaders – nor their respective civilian populations – were prepared to intervene, and this failure merely encouraged Hitler to assume that the Allies would not intervene in his subsequent plans. But it was a gamble. As he wrote, 'The forty-eight hours after the occupation of the Rhineland were the tensest moments in my life. Had the French back then entered the Rhineland, we would have had no choice but to beat a hasty retreat, because with the military equipment at our disposal, we could in no way have put up even a semblance of real resistance' (quoted Gellately, 2020: 269–70). Two years later, in March 1938, Hitler summoned the Austrian Chancellor, Kurt von Schuschnigg to his *Berchtesgaden* in the Alps and informed him that the *Anschluss*, the formal annexation of Austria by Germany, was imminent. Bowing to what he saw as the inevitable,

Schuschnigg agreed but then sought a prior plebiscite of the Austrian population on 13 March. However, the day before this, German troops crossed the border and while many Austrians greeted the German troops with flowers, 76,000 Austrians were arrested and sent to Dachau, before half of them were murdered at Mauthausen camp. The plebiscite was then held in April which returned the 'correct' result: 99.73 per cent in favour. Communists, socialists, trade unionists, Jews and members of the Romani people were forbidden from voting, but the vote was endorsed by Cardinal Innitzer of Vienna and even Karl Renner, the Austrian Social Democratic leader.

On 27 September 1938, Chamberlain demurred from intervening in the Czechoslovakian debacle and flew to Munich on 29 September 1938, ceding the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia to Germany in return for the much vaunted 'Peace in our time'. As William Shirer, the US journalist, noted despondently at the time, behold 'the delirious joy of the citizens of Munich – and Berlin – when they learned on Friday that it was not only peace but victory' (quoted in [Gellately, 2020](#): 280). In effect, three incremental decisions were insufficient – in and of themselves – to generate a robust response from France and Britain, and only when Poland was invaded on 1 September 1939 did the allies decide to act. Ironically, Hitler had wanted a war earlier – before the allies had time to rearm – but his individual decisions were insufficiently threatening to prompt that reaction, until September 1939. In fact, the switch from incrementalism to radical change might well be part of the explanation for why the resistance of the Dutch, for example, was so limited at the beginning of the German occupation in 1941. After all, Hitler's take-over of power and the shift from a democracy to a dictatorship in 1933 did not occur overnight but over a period of months. So, by the time the German population who remained hostile to the Nazis realized what was happening, it was too late. Similarly, the German occupiers and their Dutch collaborators were very careful not to alarm the local population precisely to prevent any kind of mass resistance, and little occurred until the forced labour legislation saw the first roundup of Dutch men for work in German factories in April 1943 ([Scharer, 2018](#): 55–60).

The incremental strategy at the heart of Hitler's assumption of power and territory clearly wrong footed Chamberlain in 1938, but the latter's incremental response seemed appropriate to him and a large section of the British population at the time. Indeed, Chamberlain might have considered the rise of Nazi Germany as a wicked problem ([Rittel and Webber, 1973](#)) where there are no clear answers to the problem and every solution tends to generate another problem. Under such circumstances, incrementalism is often a preferred response: if we get the decision wrong, we can reverse it without too much damage, but if we try and change the entire system simultaneously or attempt a radical rupture with the past, we risk a catastrophe. That level of risk is compounded when facing an existential crisis in the face of radical uncertainty, such as Ukraine in 2022.

Charles E. [Lindblom \(1959\)](#) first labelled most decision-making in organizations 'incrementalism' and suggested that, contrary to public opinion and that of policy makers themselves, most policy making occurred on an incremental basis; it did not align with the rational analysis that embodied value-maximizing nor did it suggest that policy makers were fond of establishing and then executing radically new ideas or directions. In effect, most decision-makers just 'muddled through'. Incrementalism, then, might be a friend of wicked problems when it is unclear what we should do, but it might also, ironically, be an explanation for the generation of that same wicked problem. For example, one of the main elements of [Milgram's \(2005\)](#) explanation for why ordinary people engage in extraordinarily dubious decisions, like apparently electrocuting subjects in an experiment, was the ability of the 'scientists' to get their subjects to engage in incremental harm. In other words, if you ask ordinary people to deliver an electric shock likely to damage or kill an innocent subject, they are unlikely to acquiesce, unless they have already delivered electric shocks that were initially insignificant and subsequently increasingly painful.

One thing is for certain: incrementalism can lead decision-makers to avoid category errors but also facilitates them making them. Thus, although an incremental approach by Putin has prevented an immediate and catastrophic response by the West, it has led him to make what is quite possible a terminal mistake in invading Ukraine. On the other hand, that same incrementalism previously lulled the West into a false sense of security, so the incremental and limited response of the West to Russian interventions in Chechnya, Syria and the Crimea was probably interpreted by Putin as evidence of Western weakness or indifference. So the important issue is not what the actors think they are doing but how their acts are interpreted by others.

If part of Putin's plan was to restore Russia to something like the old Soviet Union, then that plan looked like it was coming to fruition on 21 November 2013, when the pro-Russian Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich, decided not to sign the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement (against the wishes of the Ukrainian parliament) and instead opted for closer ties with Russia. But the resultant anti-government demonstration in Independence Square, Kyiv, continued in an increasingly violent spiral until an interim government was established on 21 February 2014 and Yanukovich fled the country. Within weeks Russian forces occupied Crimea and it was annexed after a referendum in which – like the German referendum in Austria – the local population voted to become part of the ‘motherland’ or ‘fatherland’. The USA and EU imposed incremental sanctions against Russia, primarily sanctioning individuals, but they appear to have been largely ineffective. Simultaneously, there were anti-Ukrainian protests in the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as in Kharkiv and Odessa. In the latter two regions, peace was restored by the Ukrainian government, but in the former two, military conflict broke out and once again the USA and the EU led both the protests and the imposition of sanctions against named individuals associated with the Russian regime. The incremental nature of decision-making on both sides facilitated the continuation of the status quo and probably encouraged Putin to take what appeared to him to be just one more relatively straight forward increment: Ukraine. Only this time, Ukraine, and most of the rest of the world, did not agree with Putin's assessment, never mind Russia's military action.

Act three: Logistics or combat?

In the event, the 2022 invasion of Ukraine has proved anything but straight forward for Putin, except in the sense that the conventional Russian penchant for incremental combat – an attritional process of grinding down an opponent over time – is being reproduced. This might only be because the initial attempt at a lightning war, a blitzkrieg, simply failed in the face of Ukrainian resistance, helped by Western weapons and the efforts of the Belarusian resistance who have undermined efforts to reinforce Russian forces by sabotaging the Belarusian railways (Sly, 2022).³ In effect, the triumvirate of forces at the top of the Kremlin, Putin's inner political circle, the Russian Intelligence Services and the Russian military, have all fallen short in their expectation that Kyiv would fall in two days (Epstein and Davis, 2022).

If Putin's forces fail to crush the Ukrainian resistance, he would not be the first authoritarian to fail in this region. Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 saw almost 500,000 French soldiers set off at the end of June that year, but within six weeks, half of them were dead, killed not by enemy action but by the weather, diseases and a totally inadequate logistical system for the terrain they passed over. In other words, Napoleon's careful planning for the campaign would only have worked had the campaign been across central and western Europe where his armies could live off the land if necessary. Across the plains of Russia, there were often no roads and no supplies, so the supply lines were simply inadequate for the conditions. What was left of the French army occupied what was left

of Moscow and then retreated before the winter set in, but once again, the supply lines failed and no more than 120,000 French soldiers returned to France (Roberts, 2015).

The British army during the Crimean War against Russia in 1854–55 was almost destroyed by a similar issue. The army had landed in September with only summer supplies, and it was ill-equipped to cope with the cholera and typhus that greeted them. Two months later, on 14 November 1854, a storm sank 30 ships in Balaclava harbour and took all the supplies to the bottom, leaving the British to survive in their summer uniforms and tents. About 40,000 of the British contingent of 110,000 did not return and most died of disease or the conditions, not from combat. Whether the British army learned much from the Crimean campaign is a moot point: the medical care provided by the likes of Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole did not generate a radical new response to healthcare in either the army or the country, and the policy of the army being run by aristocrats who bought their commissions did not change fundamentally until the Cardwell Reforms of 1871.

The reforms after the 1WW in the British military witnessed two primary changes: first, a reduction in the overall defence budget, not just because the war was over, but because the consensus was that there was not going to be another war; second, a switch in resources from the army to the air force because, despite the same consensus, if there was to be another war, it would be won and lost in the air through mass bombing. In the event, the budget reduction undermined the preparation so that British forces were woefully underprepared for the 2WW. Indeed, between 1935 and 1938, when every other European country was rearming for the looming war, the budget for the British army was never more than a third of that directed towards the German army. Then, like now, the British army leadership knew they needed a significant increase in expenditure, so they asked for £145 million, and received just £20 million because no war on the continent could be envisaged by the then Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain (Grint, 2008: 156).⁴

Since 1945, there has been a familiar decrease in British defence expenditure: in 1960, the British defence budget was 6.34 per cent of GDP; in 2010, it was 2.37 per cent; and in 2019, it was 1.74 per cent.⁵ Comparing military expenditure between different countries is notoriously difficult and not just because of the secrecy involved. Thus, Russia's official expenditure is not dissimilar to that of medium-sized countries such as the UK and France, but that is to measure the sum in the conventional dollar–rouble exchange rate. However, if the comparison uses 'Purchasing Power Parity' instead, when note is taken of the internal purchasing of weapons and the more autarchic nature of the Russian defence sector, then it is likely that the Russian defence expenditure is about four times higher than it appears (Kofman and Connolly, 2019). As Air Commodore Carl Scott, former British defence attaché in Moscow from 2011 to 2016, wrote in the *Financial Times* on 23 March 2022:

The evidence of Putin's chosen path was never concealed. His many declarations were meant to be heard and understood: the colossal rearmament programme, the demand for more complex, more lethal weaponry; the militarization of society; the distortion and seizure of the popular narrative; domination of education, the media and the courts to exclude contrasting views and, ultimately, the alienation and destruction of those among the Russian people who understood the folly of his declared ambition.

It was not then as if Putin's shift to rearmaments was any more of a secret than Hitler's rearmament of the Wehrmacht after 1933. Both were 'hidden in plain sight'.⁶

In June 1941, the Wehrmacht invaded the USSR in Operation Barbarossa, which was both the largest military operation in history (D-Day 1944 was the most complex but not the largest), and one that mirrored the prior French and British forays into this area: Hitler took no winter supplies and assumed his forces could both live off the land and complete the task in a few months at the most. He

was wrong on both counts: the Russian resistance was much more resilient than expected and, after Stalin had recovered from the initial shock, he ordered the destruction of all supplies as the Red Army retreated east to deny the German forces those supplies; the Russian winter then took its toll on troops inadequately supplied. This was not simply bad luck on the part of Hitler because the German penchant for combat rather than logistics was one of the reasons that the German Spring Offensive in 1918 failed, and why it was to fail again in the winter of 1944 in the Ardennes offensive which led to the Battle of the Bulge. In contrast, the Western Allies have always focused more on logistics than combat and while that might not generate victory in every battle, it is more likely to be successful in a long war (Grint, 2014). In turn, when the Soviet armed forces took the offensive in 1943 and bore down on Berlin, their success was rooted in a very different approach to war than was taken by the West. For Stalin, the extraordinary number of casualties taken by the Red Army and inflicted upon the Wehrmacht were less to do with strategic and operational skill and more to do with the willingness of the Soviet leadership to accept casualties amongst their own troops; something the Western allies were always more reluctant to do. ‘Russian’ victory by attrition was as important then and it seems to be now, and Putin’s plan seems to have assumed the Ukrainians were never going to be able to accept a similar level of losses – and they include the Russians losing eight generals since the war started – an unprecedented casualty rate for senior officers (Booth et al., 2022).

On 24 February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine, it was not the first time; there had been an invasion between 1917–1922 by the Bolsheviks after Ukrainian nationalists took the opportunities offered by the Bolshevik Revolution to proclaim national autonomy from Russia. The Russian Bolsheviks responded with an invasion in early 1918 and a war between the two sides continued until 1922, and in the midst of all this, an invasion of Ukraine by Poland in 1919 was rebuffed by the Red Army in 1920. This would not be the last time that Ukrainian resistance generated a brutal Soviet response. In 1932–1933, the effects of two poor harvests were compounded by the actions of Stalin (pre-empting Hitler’s desire for Ukrainian grain), in forcing the collectivization of farms. Stalin then prohibited the import of supplies and the confiscation of what was left led to famine (the Holodomor) being the cause of half the excess deaths at this time and most of these occurred within the ethnic Ukrainian population. As to the numbers who died, estimates vary from 3 million to 15 million, mainly either from famine or typhus, and at least 100,000 Russian peasants were moved into the Ukraine, particularly along the Russian border into what is now the disputed Donbas region.

So when Russian forces invaded Ukraine in 2022, it seems likely that Putin assumed his forces (the second largest military force in the world) would easily dispose of the Ukrainian defences which were no more than 10 per cent of their Russian foes. This was particularly the case if the shock of the invasion was so great that the morale of the Ukrainians collapsed before the West had chance to bolster their defences, without engaging in combat themselves. At the time of writing (April 2022), the Russian offensive has been recast towards the east, while rumours abound of large numbers of Russian casualties. Morale also seems to be stronger amongst the Ukrainian military – proportionately more of whom are now volunteers compared to their Russian foes – all aided no doubt by the sinking of the Russian cruiser the *Moskva* (Gardner, 2022). And throughout the campaign, the Russians seem to have been dogged by logistical failures and not just those related to Ukrainian interdiction. Again, this may well be related to Putin’s over-confidence drawn from his prior military successes. So how important is it to consider the inner circle of war leaders in explaining why this over-confidence is such a common trope amongst political and military leaders?

Act four, the chorus-constructive dissent and destructive consent

One of the features of much leadership research from [Carlyle's \(2007\)](#) Great Man theory has been an unerring focus on individual (usually male) leaders ([Spector, 2015](#)). Perhaps nowhere has this theme been more effectively skewered than in the poem of Bertolt [Brecht \(1981\)](#), 'A Worker Reads History' where he takes the assumption, that 'Caesar defeated the Gauls', and asks, 'Was there not even a cook in his army?' At least in Charles [Spencer's \(2005\)](#) over-romantic interpretation of the defeat of the French by a European alliance in 1704, we have progressed beyond a single heroic individual to discover *How two men stopped the French conquest of Europe*. In fact, Napoleon's attack upon European monarchies was extraordinarily effective in the early years, at least in part because he listened to the constructive dissent of his generals. But as Marshal Ségur's diary noted in Russia, 'His pride, his policies and perhaps his health gave him the worst advice of all, which was to take no-one's advice' ([Weider and Guegen, 2000: 39](#)). And by the time the Battle of Waterloo was fought, as [Chandler \(1966: 161\)](#) suggested, Napoleon was 'discouraging even his ablest generals from indulging in original thought'.

But despite the value of collective constructive dissent and the dangers of mass destructive consent, it remains the case that individuals make a difference. It would be difficult, for example, to assume that Germany would have taken the same trajectory without Hitler, that Russia would have invaded Ukraine against the wishes of Putin or that the Ukrainian resistance would have been quite so effective without Zelensky at the helm. However, we do need to explain how, for example, Putin made such a rash decision in the face of evidence that the invasion was never going to be as easy as he assumed. Did Putin not have one of Brecht's cooks to whisper in his ear: 'Boss, this is madness, eat the *shchi* (Russian cabbage soup) and let's talk about this'. Indeed, it would appear that Putin acted more like Shakespeare's King Lear in either not getting constructive dissent from his followers or ignoring the advice of his Fool to stay his hand. Rumours about Putin's advisers suggest that he originally only really listened to two people, Sergei Shoigu, Russia's Defence Minister, and Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the Russian General Staff, and neither are known for speaking truth to power but both seemed to have disappeared from public view at the time of writing after the initial Russian invasion stalled. And we should not assume the inability to speak truth to power is something restricted to the military leaders working under authoritarian political leaders. After all, this was precisely the complaint laid against the British military by the British [Chilcot Enquiry \(2016\)](#) into the Iraq War.

Of course we do not really know what advice Putin did or did not get, but if he follows the pattern common to long-lived authoritarians, such as Hitler and Stalin, then we can assume that he has surrounded himself with yes-people to the extent that what should be constructive dissent delivered by his immediate circle has turned into destructive consent. Certainly there were few military leaders in the top circle of Hitler's and Stalin's advisers who were willing to challenge their leader and even Churchill only learned slowly that bullying subordinates who disagreed with him was a counter-productive way to run a war cabinet. You only need to read Alan [Brookes' War Diaries \(2002\)](#) to recognize the role he played in deterring Churchill from making strategic errors, but prior to becoming Prime Minister, Churchill had made several catastrophic errors, especially when he was First Sea Lord and assumed he knew more about naval strategy on U-boats than the existing naval expert, Captain A.G. Talbot. Talbot had organized a system of convoys from the USA to be protected by British destroyers, but Churchill thought this emasculated the navy and he ordered the destroyers to leave the convoys and seek out the U-boats more pro-actively. That led to a significant increase in merchant ship losses while verified U-boat losses were half those portrayed by Churchill. When this was pointed out by Talbot, Churchill had told him, 'There are two people who sink U-boats in this war. You sink them in the Atlantic and I sink them in the House of Commons. The trouble is that you are sinking them at exactly half the rate I am' (quoted in [Hughes Hallett, 2018](#)). But Churchill then sent Talbot 'back to sea'. Fortunately, Churchill then became Prime

Minister, the Royal Navy returned to its prior anti-U-boat strategy and Churchill was persuaded to recruit people into his War Cabinet that were willing to speak truth to power (Roberts, 2019a). Indeed, this was not an overnight conversion, for Churchill was already well aware of the destructive consent that supported high command in the First World War and the fact that many who engaged in constructive dissent with Haig were prone to being ‘degommed’ (a French-derived word for ‘removed from post’) (Sheffield, 2012). As Roberts (2019b) reflected on Churchill’s ability to learn:

When visiting the headquarters of Gen. Haig on the Western Front, Churchill was deeply unimpressed by the way that the chiefs of Intelligence emphasized evidence to support Haig’s preconceived theories. ‘The temptation to tell a chief in a great position the things he most likes to hear is the commonest explanation of mistaken policy,’ Churchill later wrote in *The World Crisis*. ‘Thus the outlook of the leader on whose decisions fateful events depend is usually far more sanguine than the brutal facts admit.’ In the Second World War, Churchill deliberately appointed senior commanders such as Alan Brooke and Andrew Cunningham who made it their business never to sugar the pill for him.’

Conclusion

Incrementalism seems to be one of the explanations for why the Ukrainian tragedy has unfolded as it has. Had Putin been punished earlier on in his career for Russian military adventures, he might not have invaded Ukraine, but hindsight is a wonderful thing and incremental responses to wicked problems are often legitimate rather than self-evidently ‘indecisive’. Indeed, irony is also a wonderful thing and if Putin wanted to weaken the EU and undermine NATO, it looks like he may have achieved the opposite and the only European country not to be in the EU in the near future will be the UK. If imperial politics repeats itself, then the slow decline of the British Empire will have been accelerated by the invasion not halted by it. So does history repeat itself? I doubt it. It certainly does not occur ‘first as tragedy and then as farce’ as Marx suggested in the 18th *Brumaire* when talking about Napoleon’s coup against the French Revolution. But in the sense that Putin appears not to have read his history about either the French, British or German attacks on Ukraine and Russia, there may be more than a nugget of truth in this aphorism. Or perhaps a better aphorism is this one from George Santayana (1905), ‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it’.

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Notes

1. <https://www.hse.gov.uk/comah/buncefield>. Retrieved 25 April 2022.
2. Contrary to Hitler’s own Aryan ideal, he was dark haired and of average height. As the contemporary German anti-Nazi joke had it, ‘The ideal German should be: as blond as Hitler, as tall as Goebbels (he was 5

- foot 4 inches with a malformed right foot), and as slim as Göring (he weighed 260 lbs – over 18 stone)’ (Clay, 2020: 203).
3. Despite the claims of Prime Minister Johnson that the UK has led the way in providing weapons to Ukraine, it would appear that both his and the previous two Conservative administrations refused the persistent requests of Ukraine for weapons until it was all but too late (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ukraine-spent-seven-years-begging-three-pms-for-weapons-and-no-one-listened-58t5m9kkq>) Retrieved 2022-04-25. There have also been claims that the British refugee plan for Ukrainians was, according to a whistleblower, ‘designed to fail’ by ensuring that one child out of many families applying for visas was routinely rejected, ensuring that the government could claim a large number of visa were granted (40,000 by 24 April 2022) but only 6600 refugees had actually arrived in the country (Townsend, 2022: 1).
 4. This is resonant of the meeting on 17 November 2021, of the British Parliamentary Liaison Committee when, in response to a question about cutting the numbers of British tanks from Tobias Ellwood, the Chair of the Committee, Boris Johnson, the then British Prime Minister, said, ‘We have to recognise that the old concepts of fighting big tank battles on European land mass are over, and there are other, better things we should be investing in, in FCAS, in the future combat air system, in cyber, this is how warfare in the future is going to be’. Quoted in *The Chatterer* 25 February 2022. The video is available here: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2022/02/watch-boris-johnson-claimed-the-days-of-big-tank-battles-in-europe-were-over> Retrieved 2022-04-25.
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