

Is war in their blood?

by GWYNNE DYER

The geopolitical views of my grandmother, Florence O'Driscoll, could have been summed up in seven words: 'The Germans Have War in their Blood'. Even as a child I suspected that the world must be more complicated than that, but I never contradicted her. She came by those views the hard way.

Most Irish Catholics of her time hated England, but she reserved her hatred for Germany because half the young men she had known were killed in the First World War. She had to make sense of why Newfoundlanders were being killed by Germans thousands of kilometres from home, and that was her answer.

During the Second World War she ran a boarding house where naval officers on the North Atlantic convoy run stayed between trips. The only surviving baby picture shows me in the lap of a young Canadian lieutenant who was dead less than a month later, torpedoed by a U-boat right outside the harbour-mouth. Germans again. She never forgave them.

She was wrong, of course, and nobody talks about the Germans like that nowadays. Well, some Russians still do, but a lot of people in the West are in the process of transferring that slander to the Russians themselves. They now believe – largely thanks to the invasion of Ukraine – that it's the Russians who have war in their blood.

What dragged this growing conviction out into the light was Joe Biden's unfortunate remark that Russian President Vladimir Putin 'cannot remain in power.' That was widely interpreted as an incitement to regime change in Moscow, which would be a good idea but is not a permissible comment in terms of international diplomatic discourse.

The White House duly issued denials that Biden was threatening to overthrow Putin, and the news cycle moved on to the next topic. However, public discussion of the possibility that Putin might be toppled has raised a different and more fundamental question: would getting rid of Putin actually make any difference?

There are doubtless another dozen people writing articles about this right now, but the first one to catch my attention was in the 'i', the London paper which claims to be for 'lapsed readers of quality newspapers.' Its title was 'Getting rid of Putin is not the answer' – this runs deeper', and it is fairly representative of its kind.

It was written by Mark Wallace, chief executive of the ConservativeHome blog, who asserts that 'the uncomfortable truth behind (Putin's) retention of power, and what he chooses to do with it, is that a large and powerful portion of Russian society actively likes what he does.'

'Putin assessed what would make him a popular leader and set about doing it. The bloody trail of conflict he has drawn from Moscow through Georgia, Syria and Ukraine...is inherent to his pitch to his constituency, both at the top of Russia's economic, military and political establishments and to the man and woman on the street.'

In other words, the Russians have war in their blood.

Even the polls say so. In a telephone survey two weeks ago by Lord Ashworth Polls, 76% said that they supported the 'special military operation' in Ukraine, 81% said it was necessary to protect Russian security, and 85% had a favourable view of Vladimir Putin.

The numbers are untrustworthy, of course: would you always tell the truth to a stranger ringing up out of the blue and asking dangerous questions? It was also striking that a majority of the youngest age group (18-24-year-olds) actually opposed the war, so there's some hope there if you want it. But a clear majority of Russians strongly back the invasion of Ukraine.

The Russians are deluded, but it's a delusion that has struck almost all the former European colonial powers after they lost their empires. You might call it 'post-imperial muscle memory', like the phantom sensation that an amputated leg is still there even after it's gone. It generally involves several foredoomed wars.

The peak period for this was 1950-1975, when the French, the British and the Portuguese each fought several futile wars to hang on to their colonies, or at least to ensure that 'friendly' regimes inherited power after independence: Algeria and Vietnam; Kenya and Cyprus; Angola and Mozambique.

The Russian empire died much later (1991), partly because it was a land empire, with lots of Russians settled in all the colonies, and partly because it pretended not to be an empire for its last seventy years, calling itself the Soviet Union instead. So most Russians don't even grasp the connection with decolonisation elsewhere.

But it is really the same transitory phenomenon, with the same inevitable outcome. The Russians don't really have war in their blood permanently. No more than everybody else does, anyway.