

Ukraine: after the pause

by GWYNNE DYER

Two weeks since Russia invaded Ukraine, and still no 'decapitation' of the Ukrainian government, no city captured except Kherson (which no non-Ukrainian had ever heard of before the war), and maybe 2,000 military dead on each side.

It's not exactly a stalemate, since the Russians have more tanks, more artillery and more air power, and they have not yet used them as aggressively as they might. So we can use this (relative) pause in the fighting to examine Moscow's remaining options.

The Ukrainians have no option except to stay on the defensive, keep fighting and hope for the best, but the Russians have a plethora of choices ranging from 'quit and go home' to 'use nuclear weapons'. Neither of those extremes is a likely choice, but with a little work we can figure out what they will probably choose to do.

What the Russians have done up to now is contrary to their own military doctrines. Indeed, it was probably imposed on the military by President Vladimir Putin, because it was based on magical thinking.

Standard Russian doctrine for attacking a country the size of Ukraine would require a methodical advance, with massive artillery and air strikes paving the way and logistical support following close behind. Instead, they sent tanks and motorised infantry on cross-country dashes to grab key targets with only the food and ammunition they could carry.

It would have worked if most Ukrainians had really been praying for Russia to liberate them from the drug-addled Jewish Nazi gangsters who Putin said ruled their country, but it's unwise to believe your own propaganda. The Ukrainians resisted and the Russian armoured columns stalled. By Day Five Russian troops were buying or stealing food from the locals.

The sixty-km.-long military convoy that has been stuck on the road north of Kiev for a week could serve as a logo for the whole misbegotten operation. Now there is a pause while scapegoats are found (because Putin must not be blamed) and new plans are being made (perhaps by new commanders). But there will be a second phase.

It will probably be 'by the book', which means that the defenders will be crushed by massive firepower in order to spare the lives of Russian troops.

So far only Kharkiv and Mariupol have had the full treatment, with only occasional rockets hitting other big cities. This is probably because Putin thought he could win without destroying iconic cities like Kyiv and Odessa and killing tens of thousands of people. Even the man who levelled Grozny and Aleppo understands that too much blood is bad PR.

That possibility no longer exists (indeed, it probably never did), so now his choices are retreat or mass slaughter. Since retreat would probably mean he also loses power ? 'he led us into a needless war, he brought shame and humiliation on us, and he lost the war' ? Putin will see that as no choice at all, so the mass slaughter will probably commence.

Beyond this, the questions multiply. How long will the sieges last? When will the guerilla war against the Russian occupation start? Will the Ukrainian government retreat to Lviv? Will Russia invade western Ukraine too? Nobody knows the answers, but my guesses would respectively be a) weeks; b) months; c) yes; and d) yes.

Here's a more fundamental question: could all this have been avoided by some different choice in the past?

Not by refusing to let the formerly Communist-ruled countries of eastern Europe join NATO. Having suffered under Russian overlords for forty-five years after the Second World War, and in some cases having been invaded to bring them back into line ? Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1967 ? they desperately wanted the protection of Nato membership.

Some of them had even longer experience of Russian imperialism ? Poles spent the entire 19th century under Russian rule ? and they knew Russia's reflex is always to build a buffer zone of obedient vassal countries around it. It would have been unthinkable to leave them out in the cold.

That whole debate about whether NATO should have refused to let them in ignores the history. A better approach might have been to let Russia join NATO too, but it would have had to be a very different Russia.

Such a Russia may have been within reach in the 1990s if the country had been treated with respect, the carpet-baggers had been kept out, and the West had not put its money on that drunken fool Boris Yeltsin. But many people think all of that was inevitable, and maybe it was.

In any case, we are where we are, and the task for NATO now is to protect Ukraine, the country it kept out, while avoiding a nuclear war.