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Putin's War of Honour

Why the West Failed to Understand the Russian Invasion

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Master Thesis - International Relations

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Though the statesmen who plan the war may themselves regard it as a question of power-politics, in the great majority of cases the real motives are to be found less in the "necessities" of economic expansion, etc., than in pride and vainglory, the desire for prestige and all the poms of superiority. The great wars of aggression from antiquity down to our own times all find a far more essential explanation in the idea of glory, which everybody understands, than in any rational and intellectualist theory of economic forces and political dynamisms.

Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 90

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine marked the abrupt end of one of the most peaceful episodes in European history. In the ensuing war hundreds of thousands have already lost their lives. For months the Western world had seen Russian troops amassing along Ukraine's border. But despite these dark omens, the West could not comprehend why Putin would invade Ukraine. Examined through the lenses of the dominant schools in international relations, an invasion came across as a self-defeating enterprise. Yet Putin decided to launch the full-blown attack anyway.

The purpose of this thesis is to answer the question why the West could not comprehend the motives behind the Russian invasion. This question is addressed in the following manner. First of all, by recounting the prelude to the invasion, it is demonstrated that Americans and Europeans alike perceived a potential invasion as a deeply irrational endeavour. Then it is argued that this lack of comprehension can be traced back to two main arguments which are embedded in the two most dominant theories in international relations, namely liberalism and neorealism. The motivational assumptions present in these theories made the West believe that an invasion would be unthinkable. Yet when Putin proceeded anyway, these theories proved to be unfit to understand the reality. It is argued that in order to grasp the Russian invasion, a different conception of human nature is required. As classical realism is known for its concern with human nature, this theory is chosen to demonstrate that a more comprehensive notion of the human mind enables us to understand the attack. This thesis concludes that the desire for honour is the missing element in the Western analysis.

This study is situated at the intersection of political theory and international relations; it tests three theories using the Russian invasion as a case study. Because we are concerned with motives and beliefs, the most this thesis can achieve is to make one theory more plausible than others. The strongest evidence we have comes from the words and actions of the decision-maker. The circumstances are included in the analysis to lend weight to this evidence. Due to its large theoretical component, the literature review is embedded in the main argument. Moreover, classic theoretical works which are often considered as secondary sources are primary ones here. Besides these theoretical works, this thesis makes use of historical studies, speeches, works of journalism, reports, diplomatic documents, essays, databases and even a documentary.

As this thesis is concerned with understanding the Russian invasion, it is not superfluous to emphasise that understanding is not the same as justifying. Only one person bears full responsibility for the human tragedy unfolding on Ukrainian soil, namely Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. This study is built on the belief that every solution begins with a profound comprehension of the situation at hand. In that regard, the author is under no illusion to present completely new

insights. He is aware of the fact that the argument made in this thesis has been made by other authors in different words and in different times. The value of this thesis must therefore not be sought in its novelty, but rather in its retrieval of old insights in human nature, society and politics.

Chapter 2: Unbelievable Realities

I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

Winston Churchill, first wartime broadcast on *BBC Home Service*

Many in the Western world experienced the prelude to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as times of great confusion. While a considerable amount of intelligence pointed in the direction of a looming invasion, people still had a hard time of actually believing it. In these months the Western world gradually came to realise that there was something wrong at the Russo-Ukrainian border, but struggled to understand the motives behind Putin's actions.

The world was still battling the coronavirus when Vladimir Putin decided to mass troops along the Ukrainian border during the spring of 2021. In mid-April US intelligence officers began to take notice of the unusually high number of Russian troops being deployed. The troop assembly at that time exceeded all previous deployments since 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea. At the height of this new troop build-up, Russia had assembled over 100,000 troops. The US intelligence community was closely scrutinising these troop movements, but was simultaneously convinced that it was an exercise and no imminent invasion. On April 22, 2021, Russia's Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, announced that troops would withdraw by May 1. While this action initially lifted the tensions, the US intelligence community was still vigilant because Russia left many of its military vehicles at the border.¹ The remaining concerns about Ukraine were partly why the Biden administration wanted to organise a summit with Putin in summer.

At the Geneva summit in June, Biden and Putin met for the first time as presidents of their countries. Jake Sullivan, the National Security Advisor, recalled that "obviously the top story around that visit was the ransomware attacks and cyber, but a healthy amount of the discussion behind closed doors was about Ukraine."² Some progress was made regarding the first issue, but that could not be said about the latter.³ The summit had not led to a change in Putin's mind, as became clear a month later. In July he published a 5000-word essay titled *On the Historical Unity Between Russians and Ukrainians*, which became required literature for the Russian army.⁴ In this essay Putin argues that Russians and Ukrainians are "a single whole" and in fact denies Ukraine the right to exist as a sovereign, independent state. Although a few perceived it as a call to arms, the lengthy essay generated little attention in Western media at the time.

¹ Kramer & Troianovski, "Russia Orders Partial Pullback."

² Graff et al., "'Something Was Badly Wrong.'"

³ Ellyatt, "Biden and Putin conclude diplomacy at Geneva."

⁴ Putin, "Historical Unity."

In September eyebrows started to raise again in the US. The armed forces of Russia and Belarus held the Zapad exercise. This year's exercise, with 200,000 troops involved, was much larger in scale and scope than the previous one in 2017. In 2014 when Crimea was annexed, Russia had used military exercises to conceal its troop movements.⁵ Now it also seemed that Russia was preparing for something bigger than just an exercise. By October the inner circle of the US intelligence community gradually became convinced that Russia would invade Ukraine. During this month a top-level meeting took place in which President Biden was briefed in a very detailed manner about the latest intelligence analyses.⁶ As Ukraine was no NATO member, and therefore the US excluded direct military involvement, the US strategy became to make the prospect of an invasion as unattractive as possible for Putin. For that strategy to succeed, the US had to persuade their European allies of the looming danger.

One of the first occasions on which the UK, France and Germany were briefed on the matter was at the G-20 summit in Rome in late October. Here Biden shared some of the disturbing intelligence. The British did not need much persuading, because its intelligence service cooperates with the Americans, and thus they had access to roughly the same information. However, France and Germany proved to be harder to convince. Jake Sullivan and Anthony Blinken, Secretary of State, were assigned by President Biden to make the Europeans change their positions. Yet Avril Haines, director of US National Intelligence, recalled how they updated Biden after their first attempts: "What I remember before the NATO engagement [in November] was them coming back and saying to the Boss, 'They're really skeptical,' like, 'We're going out there, and they don't think that Putin is going to invade.'"⁷ At the NATO summit of November 14 in Brussels, it was Haines' turn to gather support for America's strategy. Talking to the North Atlantic Council, unsurprisingly, Haines encountered the same scepticism. A senior Biden administration official reported to the Washington Post that there were basically three flavours.⁸ Most of Western Europe held the belief that the Russians were essentially playing their own version of gunboat diplomacy: intimidation for the sake of maximum concessions. The newer NATO member states in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, however, could imagine that Putin would do something, but thought it would be of a limited scope similar to the annexation of Crimea. Only the UK and the Baltics believed that the Continent would be confronted with military action not seen in many decades. That made just four out of 27 European NATO members who were on the American side.

Michael Carpenter, who arrived in Vienna in late November for his new job as Permanent Representative of the US to the OSCE, confirmed the prevalent European scepticism: "I remember being incredulous that this [climate change] was what most people here at the organization were

⁵ Kofman, "Zapad-2021."

⁶ Harris et al., "Road to war."

⁷ Graff et al., "Something Was Badly Wrong."

⁸ Harris et al., "Road to war."

talking about, because all I wanted to talk about was the risk of a full-blown war in Europe that could be weeks away. ... There weren't enough people convinced of the gravity."⁹ Despite the risk of sensitive leaks, the Americans and British decided to share more intelligence reports with their European allies. Yet it should be noted that they still held back from sharing it all: "they withheld the raw intercepts or nature of the human sources that were essential to determining Putin's plans."¹⁰ But even this intensified intelligence sharing did not have the desired effect. "We knew that the French and Germans had the same reports that we had. We were puzzled by their insistence that he would not invade," declared Karen Pierce, UK's ambassador to the US.¹¹ This led to the painful situation where the Americans and British had to invest significant effort in convincing the Europeans that a war of a magnitude not seen since World War II was likely to occur on their own continent.

It was only when, in early December, the Americans and British started to bombard the Europeans, notably France and Germany, with alarming intelligence that they became willing to cooperate in preparing for the worst.¹² However, that the Europeans eventually cooperated and tried to deter Putin with economic sanctions, did not mean that they privately believed that an invasion was actually going to happen. Indeed, it is complicated to determine what the European political elites were actually believing, yet one way to gauge this is to observe their actions. The European insistence on the diplomatic path until the final moment and the light or absent weapon supply prior to the invasion indicate that the Europeans could hardly imagine the warnings to be true.

In early December the US and UK on the one hand and France and Germany on the other, simply agreed to disagree. The Anglo-American alliance would commit itself to the diplomatic track, while the Franco-German partnership would comply with preparing for an invasion, despite both sides still being convinced that their own assessment was right. In the December-February period multiple attempts were made by Western leaders to de-escalate. Biden had three calls with the Russian President, Emmanuel Macron visited Moscow on February 7, followed by the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz on February 15. In the meantime UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson spoke to Putin on the phone, while two of his ministers travelled to Moscow to meet their Russian counterparts. Yet none of these efforts resulted in a breakthrough. Time and again, the Western leaders ran into unacceptable Russian demands. These demands were summed up in Putin's ultimatum of December 17, addressed to the US, NATO and the OSCE. Effectively, Putin asked for veto rights in European security affairs. He demanded a formal agreement that NATO would never grant Ukraine the alliance's membership and, additionally, would remove its troops and nuclear

⁹ Graff et al., "Something Was Badly Wrong."

¹⁰ Harris et al., "Road to war."

¹¹ Graff et al., "Something Was Badly Wrong."

¹² Foy, "US intelligence-sharing convinces allies."

weapons from the territory of former Warsaw Pact member states.¹³ In a coordinated response on January 26, the US and NATO rejected these demands, but left the door ajar for negotiations about nuclear arms control and restrictions on military exercises.¹⁴ Russia reacted to this Western response on February 17. It lamented the lack of “a constructive response” of the US and its allies and concluded that the absence of legally binding security guarantees meant that “Moscow will have to respond, including by implementing certain military-technical measures.”¹⁵ The world was only days away from discovering the meaning of this ambiguous term.

Despite this diplomatic deadlock and Biden's February 18 warning that Putin had decided to invade, the Europeans remained committed to the diplomatic path, with Macron leading the way. The documentary *A President, Europe and War* shows a fragment of a phone call between Macron and Putin on February 20. After a tense exchange about the Minsk agreements, Macron gets to the point and asks whether Putin is willing to participate in a summit with Biden. At first, Putin avoids giving a clear answer, but as Macron insists, he eventually agrees in principle. Macron repeats Putin's comment eagerly and suggests having their advisers prepare a joint statement. Putin is allegedly about to play ice hockey, but he promises that he will call his advisers first. The words of the Russian President are well received at the Elysée. “Frankly, this went very good,” says Macron's diplomatic adviser Emmanuel Bonne after the conversation. Yet he also says to Macron during the debriefing that, “We can quickly be disappointed if we have to believe the Americans.” Macron is not willing to give way to this sentiment: “Yes, but if Putin agrees to this, it does have some value. If people say we've been deceived, we can prove that he has lied to us. *I just don't think he would do that.*”¹⁶

While the French incredulity was evident in the persistent hope for a diplomatic solution, the German disbelief, although related to the French strategy, manifested itself in an adamant refusal of weapon deliveries. In accordance with their early conviction, the US approved a \$200 million dollar security package for Ukraine in December.¹⁷ The UK followed suit in mid-January, albeit less decisively, with the delivery of anti-tank weapons.¹⁸ Of all the countries on the European continent only the Baltic states, the Netherlands and Poland certainly supplied Ukraine with weapons prior to the invasion, all of which were of a light and defensive nature.¹⁹ Whether France delivered weapons prior to the invasion is not formally made public. However, in the documentary, Macron is caught on camera conveying to Volodymyr Zelensky on February 23, “When it comes to equipment, our army provides you with what you have asked me for. It will be flown to Kyiv

¹³ Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*.

¹⁴ Crowley & Sanger, “U.S. and NATO Respond to Putin's Demands.”

¹⁵ MID RF, “Press release on submitting a written reaction to the US.”

¹⁶ Lagache, “A President, Europe and War,” emphasis added.

¹⁷ Al Jazeera, “US military aid arrives in Ukraine.”

¹⁸ Allison, “British weapon flights to Ukraine.”

¹⁹ Kiel Institute, “Ukraine Support Tracker Data.”

tomorrow.”²⁰ To what kind of equipment Macron referred remains unknown. Yet it is no secret that France has a history of arms supply to Ukraine long before the invasion, and therefore it is likely that France also supplied Ukraine with some weapons shortly before the invasion.²¹ Germany refrained from sending arms to Ukraine before the February 24 attack.²² In late January, when Russia was moving blood supplies to the Ukrainian border, German Defence Minister Christine Lambrecht told the press that there was consensus within the German government when it came to obstructing the supply of weapons to Ukraine.²³ Germany decided to offer 5,000 helmets instead, which aroused cynical reactions in Kyiv. The logic behind this reluctance was that weapon deliveries would only fuel the tensions while de-escalation via the diplomatic path was needed. The fact that Russia continued to transport troops and equipment to the border and showed no willingness to engage in meaningful diplomatic dialogue apparently did not alter this logic. This limited, and in most cases, absent arms supply supports the position that the European elites had a hard time believing that a full-fledged attack was imminent.

The Munich Security Conference, held on the eve of the invasion during the weekend of February 18-20, only reinforces this idea. Although evidence had been mounting for multiple months, many people still shared their scepticism in the corridors of the conference. Gideon Rachman, journalist of the Financial Times, who attended the conference, wrote: “Many diplomats and politicians [at the Munich Security Conference], predominantly Europeans, still refused to believe the intelligence-based briefings pouring out of the Anglosphere. The sceptics’ view was broadly that fighting would remain confined to eastern Ukraine”²⁴ “It felt otherworldly,” a British official told the Washington Post.²⁵ Representatives of the US and UK were certain of an invasion, but “that just wasn’t the mood in the hall.”

While the Europeans struggled to comprehend what the intelligence was telling them, the Americans and British generally believed Putin would invade but did not understand his motives. Avril Haines described this incredulity aptly: “There were things that really made this a much more compelling case — budget decisions that were taken, other forms of intelligence surrounding it, the information campaign that they were playing. It wasn’t until you brought it all together, you start to see how the picture pulls together. Then the second piece was, ‘OK, I still don’t understand why would he make this decision?’ It seems self-defeating.”²⁶ The evidence was in, but a major offensive seemed a military gamble and would come at massive economic costs. To the Americans and British it remained unclear in what terms Putin would benefit from this action – it

²⁰ Lagache, “A President, Europe and War.”

²¹ The Economist, “France is sending weapons to Ukraine.”

²² Kiel Institute, “Ukraine Support Tracker Data.”

²³ Deutsche Welle, “Germany rejects arm deliveries to Ukraine.”

²⁴ Rachman, “How Putin took Europe to the brink of war.”

²⁵ Harris et al., “Road to war.”

²⁶ Graff et al., “‘Something Was Badly Wrong.’”

was “a highly illogical and irrational thing” as Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer characterised it.²⁷ Jake Sullivan was also extremely puzzled despite his certainty on the matter: “It’s weird to process both of those at the same time: OK, this is going to happen, and it is really strategically, morally bankrupt, and bereft of common sense — yet, there they were, going off to do it. There was an element of ‘What the hell are you guys thinking?’”²⁸ François Heisbourg, a French foreign policy expert, told the Washington Post that, “The Europeans overrated their understanding of Putin. The Americans, I assume ... rather than try to put themselves in Putin’s head, decided they were going to act on the basis of the data and not worry about whether it makes any sense or not.”²⁹

The European reluctance to believe the intelligence reports and the Anglo-American lack of understanding can be traced back to two main arguments. During the months of troop build-up Western media were preoccupied with the potential economic costs of an invasion. Domestically, the stock market would crash, the rouble would tumble and there would be a run on the banks.³⁰ Western economic sanctions would destroy the already faltering Russian economy. Russian export to the EU, accounting to 27% of total exports, would be diminished. Germany would cancel the gas pipeline project Nord Stream 2, Russia would be kicked out of the international transaction system SWIFT, the Western assets of the Russian financial elite would be confiscated, and last but not least, the war itself would weigh heavily on the Russian economy. Besides these economic considerations, there were strategic considerations that prevented many in the West from imagining an all-out attack. First of all, despite NATO’s 2008 Bucharest declaration that Ukraine will one day be a member state, there was no realistic scenario in which Ukraine would gain membership of the alliance in the near future. This improbability of NATO expansion plus the insignificant defence expenditures in Europe deprived Putin from a strategic motive to attack. The overall strategic threat to Russia was simply modest. Furthermore, it was foreseeable that an invasion would only enlarge the strategic threat. The “brain dead” Transatlantic alliance would be revived with a new *raison d’être*, defence spending would go up, and Sweden and Finland might even join the alliance. Not to say that the invasion itself would be a massive military gamble, as the Ukrainian resistance could be fierce.

Perceived through these economic and strategic lenses it is understandable that many in the West experienced great confusion during the months that evidence for an invasion was piling up. But ultimately, these lenses proved unfit to see what was happening before everyone’s eyes. That these narratives became dominant in the public discourse is no matter of coincidence, as

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Harris et al., “Road to war.”

³⁰ The Economist, “Putin has harmed Russia.”

these narratives are embedded in the two most influential theories of international relations: liberalism and neorealism.

Chapter 3: Modern Theories and the Russian Invasion

A false notion which is clear and precise will always meet with a greater number of adherents in the world than a true principle which is obscure or involved.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 146

On the basis of their understanding of human nature and society, liberalism and neorealism can be considered modern theories. These theories portray humans merely as rational beings and therefore their conception of politics is scientific. In the modern mind, politics is a science in the sense that universal laws can be unravelled which enable us to predict the course of events. The motivational assumptions these theories make about humans (or states) bring forth certain logics in which some actions are rational and others irrational. Based on the logic of these two theories, the Russian invasion was sheer madness – just like the West thought in the months prior to the attack.

Rationality is a complex concept that should be clarified before we use it. Mearsheimer and Rosato distinguish between two kinds of rationality, namely ‘strategic rationality’ and ‘goal rationality’.³¹ International relations theory is almost exclusively about the former, because there seems to be a certain agreement on the latter. Strategic rationality is about whether a state’s strategies are suited to the fulfilment of a specific goal, while goal rationality is all about the sanity of the state’s chosen goals. Mearsheimer and Rosato hold that states are rational in a strategic sense when the policies they pursue are based on credible theories and are the result of a process of deliberation. Another necessary condition for a state to be rational is that survival must be the primary goal. Both liberalism and neorealism assume that states are rational in these two senses.

Liberalism is a broad political philosophy that encompasses many schools and authors. Most liberals share the assumption “that individuals everywhere are fundamentally the same, and are best off pursuing self-preservation and material well-being.”³² Obviously, it is only when self-preservation is secured, humans and states can focus on maximising their material well-being. Freedom and peace are two essential conditions for the realisation of both these pursuits. In the international sphere liberals are thus preoccupied with how peace can be established and maintained. In this regard liberals are relatively optimistic, as they hold that war and conflict can be overcome, or at least reduced to a significant degree, by the ‘Kantian restraints’ democratic government, international organisations and economic interdependence.³³ Here we focus only on the

³¹ Mearsheimer & Rosato, *How States Think*.

³² Owen, “How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace.”

³³ Russett, “Liberalism,” 74-76.

pacifying effects of economic interdependence, because those are the most relevant in the context of the Russian invasion.

It would be unfair to state that liberals believe that high levels of economic interdependence make war impossible; the liberal stance is more nuanced. Strong trade relations only make the prospect of war less likely due to the significant economic costs it would entail. Copeland caught the essence of this theory aptly by saying that “interdependent states would rather trade than invade.”³⁴ Yet the outbreak of World War I formed a tough challenge for this theory, because the economic interdependence on the European continent was remarkably high. By adding a second variable – trade expectations – Copeland tries to solve this anomaly in the economic interdependence theory. His more sophisticated theory holds that, “Interdependence can foster peace, ... but this will only be so when states expect that trade levels will be high into the foreseeable future.”³⁵ In sum, according to the liberal position it would be irrational for a state to invade when trade relations are strong and are likely to remain so in the future.

Prior to the invasion the Russian economy was entangled with the European economies to a high degree. Russia depended on the EU for 27% of its exports, whereas its exports to China accounted for only half of that amount.³⁶ To make things worse, 62% of these exports consisted of mineral fuels, which are regarded as sensitive goods in the security domain.³⁷ It was foreseeable that in the event of a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine the EU would impose an import ban on Russian oil, gas and coal – as indeed occurred. While economic interdependence was strong, positive trade expectations further strengthened the case for peace. A July 2021 briefing of the European Parliamentary Research Service observed that both the EU and Russia face difficulties in diversifying their gas import and export respectively.³⁸ As the EU’s gas demand was expected to remain stable until 2030 and its domestic gas production was expected to decline, it was forecasted that its demand for Russian gas would increase – especially given the lack of other competitive options. The forecasts even predicted that EU gas imports would increase with 37% by 2035, compared to 2021 levels. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline was emblematic of the anticipated increase in the EU’s demand for Russian gas. Thus on the eve of the invasion both variables - economic interdependence and trade expectations - pointed in the direction of peace. Following this liberal logic, an invasion would indeed be “a highly illogical and irrational thing.” Yet Putin still preferred to invade rather than trade.

Whereas the mismatch between liberal theory and the Russian invasion is rather straightforward, the imbalance between neorealism and Putin’s aggression is less so. Not to the least

³⁴ Copeland, “Economic Interdependence and War,” 5.

³⁵ Ibid., 7.

³⁶ The Economist, “Putin has harmed Russia.”

³⁷ European Commission, “EU trade relations with Russia.”

³⁸ Russell, “Nord Stream 2 pipeline.”

because neorealists have warned for Russian aggression in Ukraine in advance.³⁹ Contrary to classical realists, not human nature but the structure of the international system forms the bedrock of neorealist theory. The reason states pursue power does not necessarily originate from an innate human drive, but from anarchical nature of the international system. In an anarchy, “it makes eminently good sense for each state to be powerful enough to protect itself in the event it is attacked.”⁴⁰ But despite this initial divergence from human nature, neorealists, like all other political theorists, cannot avoid the need for assumptions about humans. It is only that they assign the motivational assumptions not to humans but to states. The first being that survival is a state’s primary object, because it first needs to exist before it can pursue other goals. Thus survival is the end, and power is the means to attain it. Additionally, neorealists assume that states are rational actors in the sense that they make and apply logic and coherent strategies in order to maximise their chances on survival. This – the primacy of survival and rationality – is the essence of a straightforward theory which has become very popular in the last decennia. But popularity is no guarantee for rigor.

Neorealism is a deterministic theory.⁴¹ It claims that it is able to predict the course of events with a high degree of certainty. Mearsheimer, for instance, has asserted that China cannot rise peacefully and that it will inevitably end up in a dangerous security competition with the US.⁴² Such statements reveal the neorealist understanding of the social world. They believe that the social world resembles the natural world in the sense that universal laws can be unravelled. However, that notion of the social world is wrong for two reasons. Firstly, human behaviour is often contradictory; humans do not govern themselves by universal, logically coherent laws. And therefore the social world is inevitably ambiguous and complex. Secondly, “Any single cause in the social sphere can entail an indefinite number of different effects, and the same effect can spring from an indefinite number of different causes.”⁴³ This makes predictions with a high degree of certainty impossible – especially on the international level. Hence the predictions neorealists make are often either one of the two fallacies revealed by Morgenthau.⁴⁴ The predictions are usually unspecified and only forecast how a broad trend will develop in the future. The possible outcomes of these trends are very limited – war or peace, victory or defeat, success or failure. If the prophet makes enough of these predictions, he “is bound to have been right at least once, or in a certain measure of time.”⁴⁵ The predictions that turned out to be untrue are simply ignored by the prophet. It is, for example, telling that Mearsheimer makes scant reference to his 1990 article in

³⁹ See e.g., Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault” and Walt, “Liberal Illusion Caused the Ukraine Crisis.”

⁴⁰ Mearsheimer, “Structural Realism,” 52.

⁴¹ Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future*, 11.

⁴² Mearsheimer, “Inevitable Rivalry.”

⁴³ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 112.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 120.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

which he predicts that Europe will succumb to war and violence in the decades to come.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Morgenthau points out that many of such predictions are, in fact, made after the event, leading to a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* argument. Mearsheimer proclaimed in 2014, after Putin had annexed Crimea, that the new Ukraine crisis “should have come as no surprise.”⁴⁷ Just after the 2022 invasion, he reiterated his claims on historical necessity by stating that, “If there had been no decision to move NATO eastward to include Ukraine, Crimea and the Donbass would be part of Ukraine today, and there would be no war in Ukraine.”⁴⁸

The argument Mearsheimer makes to strengthen this claim is based on his own offensive version of neorealism. According to Mearsheimer, Putin acted completely along the neorealist playbook and thus the Russian invasion of Ukraine was perfectly rational. It was the US and its allies that diverged from a rational course of foreign policy by pushing NATO eastward and making Ukraine a *de facto* member of NATO.⁴⁹ Mearsheimer believes that these policies formed such a threat to Russia that Putin had to invade Ukraine in order to guarantee Russia’s survival. But despite Mearsheimer’s claims to the contrary, Putin’s invasion was not rational at all when analysed from a neorealist perspective for two reasons.

Firstly, the security threat to Russia was not as significant as Mearsheimer portrays it. Mearsheimer describes the threat as consisting of two elements: NATO’s continuing efforts to turn the Ukrainian military into “a formidable fighting force” and the renewed enthusiasm in 2021 to bring Ukraine into the alliance.⁵⁰ In the years following the Crimea annexation, Mearsheimer observes, NATO trained the Ukrainian military, supplied the country with weapons and held joint military exercises. This is all true. The Ukrainian army was rapidly reformed from 2014 onwards with the support of Western allies.⁵¹ It is also true that Putin in all likelihood perceived this as threatening. Yet, as these reforms were a direct reaction to the Crimea annexation and the Donbas war, it was very plausible – even from a Russian perspective – that they were aimed at defending Ukrainian territory instead of attacking Russia. The imbalance between the two armies in early 2022 was so enormous that an offensive war by Ukraine against Russia was unimaginable, particularly when considering Russia’s nuclear arsenal.⁵² Moreover, NATO itself was not as threatening as it used to be. Defence expenditures, especially in the European member states, were historically at a very low level.⁵³ Macron famously captured the general sentiment by referring to the alliance as “brain dead”.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future.”

⁴⁷ Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault,” 77.

⁴⁸ Chotiner, “Why Mearsheimer Blames the US.”

⁴⁹ Mearsheimer, “Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War,” 20.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Sanders, “Ukraine’s third wave of military reform.”

⁵² Dewan, “Ukraine and Russia’s militaries.”

⁵³ Grand, “Defence spending.”

⁵⁴ The Economist, “Macron warns Europe.”

Furthermore, perhaps there was renewed enthusiasm on the side of Ukraine, but the same could not be said for the West. The relations between Putin and Poroshenko were dreadful and thus with the new president Zelensky hope arose for a breakthrough. Yet when, in December 2019, Zelensky and Putin met for the first time in the Normandy Format in Paris, it became apparent that the deadlock would continue. Zelensky, just like his predecessor, could not agree with Putin on the implementation of the Minsk agreements. During the Zelensky presidency Russo-Ukrainian relations deteriorated further and Zelensky set a firmer course towards West. The Ukrainian parliament reaffirmed Ukraine's NATO aspirations, and the Zelensky administration made inquiries about the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP), a move that purportedly influenced Putin's decision to deploy troops in April 2021.⁵⁵ The West, on the other hand, showed no renewed enthusiasm for bringing Ukraine into the alliance. Mearsheimer, in an effort to bolster his claim, cites an excerpt from the communiqué issued after the NATO summit of June 2021.⁵⁶ In this excerpt the NATO member states reaffirm the decision made at the 2008 Bucharest summit that Ukraine and Georgia will join the alliance. However, Mearsheimer fails to note that this position had been reiterated at almost every NATO summit since it was first formulated in Bucharest.⁵⁷ Therefore it cannot be considered as evidence for "renewed enthusiasm". At the press conference after the summit president Biden, when questioned about the matter, made clear there would be no MAP for Ukraine in the near future: "It depends on whether they meet the criteria. The fact is they still have to clean up corruption. The fact is they have to meet other criteria to get into the Action Plan."⁵⁸ Furthermore, Biden stressed that the US could not decide this question by its own, as NATO decides by unanimous consent. Even if the US wanted to grant Ukraine the MAP, it could be assumed that other member states would obstruct that highly sensitive measure, as was already demonstrated in 2008.⁵⁹ Moreover, the ongoing war in the Donbas was a significant obstacle to Ukraine's accession to the alliance, given NATO's principle of collective defence. In sum, the military threat was not as imminent as Mearsheimer portrays it and was by no means necessitating a full-scale invasion.

Secondly, and more importantly, even if it is accepted that there was a serious threat, it does not necessarily follow that an all-out invasion is the best means to guarantee survival. A flaw in Mearsheimer's theory makes him adhere to this fallacy. Mearsheimer argues that the best way to survive as a state is to be the hegemon in the system.⁶⁰ But, as observed by Kirshner, "What Mearsheimer elides is that there is a fundamental distinction between *being* a hegemon and

⁵⁵ Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*.

⁵⁶ Mearsheimer, "Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine War," 21.

⁵⁷ It was only left out of the official text at the 2014, 2017 and 2019 summits. The omission in the former was probably due to the increased geopolitical tensions, while the latter two issued no traditional, lengthy declaration due to a shorter agenda.

⁵⁸ Biden, "Remarks by President Biden in Press Conference."

⁵⁹ Wong & Jake, "Why NATO Won't Let Ukraine Join."

⁶⁰ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 33-35.

bidding for hegemony.”⁶¹ While being the hegemon is undoubtedly the ideal situation to preserve survival, making an aggressive bid for hegemony is often a recipe for disaster. Considering the cases of Napoleonic France, Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, there seems to be no faster way to imperil the state's survival than striving for regional domination. What is more, after 1945 political leaders have lost over 80% of the wars they started.⁶² Hence, such a strategy must often be regarded as deeply irrational – as was the case with Putin's invasion.

The Russian attack severely worsened Russia's strategic outlook and that could have been completely anticipated. Putin generally knew how the world would react to a full-blown war against Ukraine, because he had already tested the world's reactions with the Crimea annexation and the Donbas war. Prior to the annexation Ukrainians had been divided over the direction of the country's foreign policy. President Yanukovych, who held power from 2010 to 2014, believed Ukraine's security was best served by strategic neutrality, and thus opposed NATO membership. This was no uncommon position at the time, as in April 2012 only 12% of the Ukrainians supported NATO membership.⁶³ After the Crimea annexation this support reached 33% in May 2014, stabilising around 45% from September 2014 to December 2016.⁶⁴ Moreover, the Crimea annexation and the Donbas war kicked off accelerated reform of the Ukrainian army, resulting in a 73% increase in defence spending between 2014 and 2021.⁶⁵

The Russian aggression in 2014 also ignited a turning point in the defence spending of the European NATO members.⁶⁶ The defence expenditures had been decreasing since the 2008 financial crisis, but the Crimea annexation made the Europeans revise their budgets – albeit to a limited extent. These measures were accompanied by biting Western economic sanctions. The Crimea annexation invited visa bans and assets freezes aimed at certain individuals and companies, whereas the Donbas war triggered even harsher sanctions targeting the oil, finance and defence sectors. The US, EU and its allies tried to weaken Russia's economic power in an attempt to stop further military aggression. To make things worse, the Russian 2014 aggression not only antagonised Ukraine and the West, but also delivered a blow to Russia's reputation in the Caucasus and Central-Asia region. In both these two post-Soviet spaces Russia strives to maintain and increase its influence, yet the hostilities towards Ukraine made these regions more suspicious of Russia's true intentions.⁶⁷ Thus when Putin made the decision to overrun Ukraine with a large army, it was no surprise to him that he would worsen Russia's strategic outlook. He was already acquainted

⁶¹ Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future*, 185.

⁶² Lebow, "IR Theory and the Ukrainian War."

⁶³ Haran & Zolkina, "Demise of Ukraine's 'Eurasian Vector'."

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Tian, et al., "Military Expenditure in Ukraine."

⁶⁶ Grand, "Defence spending."

⁶⁷ Peyrouse, "Russia's Views."

with the potential backlash and could expect more of the same – albeit of a more destructive nature.

So when we accept the neorealist assumption that states are primarily concerned with survival, we cannot help to conclude that, contrary to Mearsheimer's assertions, Putin's invasion was deeply irrational. The security threat prior to the invasion was quite limited and an invasion would only deteriorate Russia's chances on survival.

It is not intended to dismiss liberalism and neorealism as valuable political theories in the realm of international relations. These modern theories are quite useful insofar as the system-creating powers think and act on the basis of the economic and strategic motives on which these theories are founded. It is only when an actor with a different value hierarchy disrupts the international system that these theories lose a great deal of their ability to understand. And that is exactly what happened on February 24, 2022.

Chapter 4: Classical Realism⁶⁸

[Man] is a very remarkable animal who cares more about his reasons for living than about life itself. ... If he is ready to sacrifice his own life for his ideals, he is even more ready to sacrifice the lives of others.

Raymond Aron, interview in *Encounter*, 73

Classical realism is a fundamentally different theory than liberalism and neorealism. It has a distinct understanding of man and society. Human nature is perceived in a pluralistic way, distinguishing between a biological, rational and spiritual dimension.⁶⁹ Classical realists, then, do not assume that human beings are merely rational actors. But they do believe that this pluralistic understanding of human nature is the most rational way of approaching politics. As humans are the creators of politics, classical realists believe the political world to be contingent and uncertain instead of deterministic and predictable. Politics is a question of time, space and circumstance. The politician and the scholar, in their effort to make sense of the political world, must take into consideration every dimension of the human mind and the circumstances under which a specific political situation presents itself before their eyes. The most a political theory is capable of “is to state the likely consequences of choosing one alternative as over against another and the conditions under which one alternative is more likely to occur to be successful than the other.”⁷⁰ While these conditions are subject to constant change, human nature is not. Hence the latter forms the bedrock of classical realist theory.

In the *History of the Peloponnesian War* Thucydides wrote about fear, honour and interest as the three strongest motives for the Athenians to expand their empire.⁷¹ This pluralistic conception of human nature is visible throughout the works of all classical realists. In *Discourses on Livy* Machiavelli, for instance, portrays man as driven by glory. At most, people strive for domination and, at least, want to evade oppression. In either case, our aspirations – both for ourselves and our states – extend beyond just material well-being.⁷² Niebuhr, on the other hand, emphasised that our desires reach further than self-preservation: “Man, being more than a natural creature, is not

⁶⁸ The argument made in this chapter lies close to constructivism (see e.g., Tsygankov, *Russia and the West*). There is a considerable degree of overlap between classical realism and constructivism, which is usually not acknowledged by the latter. Constructivism emerged as a reaction to neorealism, and therefore the foundational works of classical realism are often disregarded. Consider, for example, ‘Chapter 15: Morality, Mores, & Law as Restraints on Power’ in Morgenthau’s *Politics among Nations*. The specific differences between the two schools will not be covered here, as the author believes the argument can be completely based on the original.

⁶⁹ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 12; Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 14.

⁷⁰ Morgenthau, “Purpose of Political Science,” 77.

⁷¹ Thucydides, *History*, 38. ‘Interest’ is also translated as ‘profit’.

⁷² Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace*, 105.

interested merely in physical survival but in prestige and social approval.”⁷³ Liberalism and neo-realism tend to disregard honour, status or prestige as a legitimate motive for human action. When honour is analysed it is often only done in an instrumental manner, i.e., how it contributes to the pursuit of ‘rational’ goals, such as survival and material well-being. In the cases where it is evident that the act in name of honour does not contribute to the satisfaction of these rational goals, modern theorists characterise it as irrational, senseless or illogical. But to brand these acts in such a way “is to abandon research where it should start: exploring meaning, interpreting symbolic action, and mapping the historical and social context.”⁷⁴ Classical realists, on the other hand, acknowledge that honour, just like survival and material well-being, can be a legitimate end in itself.

Regarding honour in this manner has implications for the way classical realists approach politics. The importance of honour is culturally and historically determined. The desire for honour, or social approval, is universal, and thus honour, although sometimes disguised under another name, plays an important role in every society. Yet in so-called honour societies, like ancient Greece, behaviour inspired by honour is more broadly accepted. In these societies such behaviour does not require much justification; honour is an important concept in the nation’s literature, folklore and history. In other societies, including ours, honour has become obsolete in the public discourse, yet the need for esteem has not vanished. Honour is a social code formulated by the community, and thus, as MacIntyre observes, as this community starts to wane as a result of individualisation and liberalisation, honour loses a great deal of its prominence.⁷⁵

As with the importance of honour, the object from which it is derived and the practices used to restore it, vary across times and nations. For instance, in the *Iliad* Agamemnon appropriates Briseis from Achilles, who has captured her as a war prize. Agamemnon’s action violates Achilles’ honour, causing a feud between the two men. Briseis is perceived by Achilles as a status symbol that reflects his triumphs in battle. Yet to derive status from an enslaved woman who is treated only as a concubine would be unthinkable in our own times. In our societies such behaviour would be regarded as deeply dishonourable, leading to the social isolation of the man involved. The same can be said of the practices to avenge honour. Whereas a duel used to be a legitimate way to retaliate, nowadays such satisfaction is generally sought in court.

Honour is, besides to culture and history, also strongly linked to psychology. Everyone who has ever been violated in his honour knows that it comes with great anger, a certain moral outrage directed at another person. It causes a willingness to act – at the most violently, at the least pugnaciously. Some tend to easily give way to these emotions, yet the more sensible among

⁷³ Niebuhr, *Children of Light and Darkness*.

⁷⁴ Blok, *Honour and Violence*, 113.

⁷⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

us manage to control ourselves. Others control themselves in the moment, but are determined to seek revenge in the future. The manner in which one reacts is dependent on circumstances but also on character. The classical mind therefore also concentrates its inquiry on the personality of the political leader. It also takes into account the regime type of the specific nation. Is power concentrated in the hands of the few, or is power divided and checked? In other words, is the leader capable of acting on its own, possibly making decisions subject to emotions, or is decision-making delayed by democratic procedures? Furthermore, honour reveals a great deal about identity. What objects are able to violate someone's honour tells what one considers to be an inseparable part of him. It also uncovers what someone deems to be his rightful place in the social hierarchy.

Thus due to its ties to culture, history and psychology, accepting honour as an end in itself opens up a wide range of concepts that are generally disregarded by liberals and neorealists. It forces the classical realist to pay attention to the nation's culture, history, identity, ideology, regime type and leader(s).

As with survival and material well-being, honour as a goal implies a distinct logic in which certain actions are considered as rational and others irrational. In other words, by accepting honour as a legitimate goal, we also accept another strategic rationality. The logic of honour is tied up with the nature of the concept. Honour is the value of a person in the mind of others. One's honour is measured by "the tribute others pay to his goodness, intelligence, and power."⁷⁶ These tributes must reflect the position in the social hierarchy which the person himself deems justified. Thus whether the granted value is high or low is to be understood by the value the person attaches to himself.⁷⁷ As honour is always in reference to a social hierarchy, the competition for honour is a zero-sum game. "When everyone attains equal honour, then there is no honour for anyone."⁷⁸ Due to the universal desire and its exclusive nature, honour is a source of conflict. Such a conflict arises when someone's honour is being violated. In those cases the words or actions of the violator ascribe a lower status to someone than this person himself thinks is his due. Words and actions that have this effect are called a slight, which causes a feeling of humiliation. When this slight is not forcefully confuted, the lower status present in these words or actions becomes the new reality.

To restore honour two elements are vital. Firstly, in order to confute a slight, one's desired social status "must be asserted and vindicated by agonistic action in public."⁷⁹ Honour is a social construct, and thus the agonistic action would be in vain when it is not done before the public's eye. Challenging the violator in public communicates that red lines have been crossed and reasserts one's proper place in the social hierarchy. Secondly, inherent to the retaliation is the readiness to accept risks. By challenging someone for a duel or starting a war, one "proclaims his

⁷⁶ Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 73.

⁷⁷ Also described as one's personal honour.

⁷⁸ Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, 126.

⁷⁹ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 94.

willingness to sacrifice the ultimate asset, life itself, in order to avert the loss of social reputation.”⁸⁰ The disdain for life and its material pleasures implies a magnanimity of the soul upon which a respected reputation is built. Moreover, if the person being challenged is unwilling to engage in a duel or fight in a war, it immediately shows his weakness. Thus to fulfil the goal of achieving honour, one must resort to the means of agonistic action in public with risks to survival and material well-being. If honour is regarded as a legitimate goal, then these means are considered as a rational way to achieve this goal. It is here that the logic of honour is directly at odds with the logic of survival and material well-being. Liberals and neorealists who consider survival as the foremost concern of both humans and states would be very reluctant to take such risks. Existential risks can only be justified under exceptional circumstances under which survival is in severe danger. Hence most of the times such a toss of the dice comes across as deeply irrational to the modern mind.

This logic is both applicable to the personal and the collective level. People derive status from belonging to a group, such as a nation. It is generally accepted that, “Leaders and publics worry about ... the defense of national honor, and about the country’s status.”⁸¹ Moreover, political leaders who set the course of their country’s foreign policy, have a tendency to take violations of the national honour personally. This is particularly a trait of absolute rulers, as they tend to identify with the state to a maximum degree. Wilhelm II, for example, “tended to view policy in personal terms and was always on the lookout for insults.”⁸² They are also more inclined to use the foreign policy of their nations to satisfy their own desire for esteem. The most coveted trophy in the international arena is the status as a great power. Considerations about honour and status particularly arise when states lose their status as great powers.⁸³ Great powers also tend to be more sensitive to humiliation than middle and small ones.⁸⁴ Powerful states assign a high social status to themselves and therefore believe an honourable treatment is their due. Obviously, those high expectations are easier violated than the lower expectations of subordinate states. Essential for the status as a great power is a reputation for resolve.⁸⁵ Such a reputation is built upon ruthless retaliation and fulfilment of threats. Powerful states are thus more concerned about its honour and status, and are more likely to seek revenge. Restoring the state’s honour is often first sought in diplomatic intercourse. Yet when humiliation continues, the avenger may deem a holy war of honour justified to assert his rightful place under the sun.

It can nevertheless be hard to determine whether an act that seems inspired by honour has the attainment of honour as its ultimate objective. Indeed, the desire for honour is often

⁸⁰ Offer, “Going to War in 1914,” 217.

⁸¹ Dafoe, et al., “Reputation and Status,” 381.

⁸² Offer, “Going to War in 1914,” 218.

⁸³ Dafoe, et al., “Reputation and Status.”

⁸⁴ Lebow, “IR Theory and the Ukrainian War.”

⁸⁵ Dafoe, et al., “Reputation and Status.”

inspired by intrinsic and instrumental reasons at the same time – only the balance between the two tend to vary depending on the act.⁸⁶ The clue for this ambiguity lies in the fact that, on the one hand, social status is a source of power, and, on the other hand, power increases one's social status. A high social rank can be a means of exerting control over the actions of others. We tend to obey the orders of a king more willingly than the ones of a beggar. Bolstering one's own prestige can thus be identified as a power instrument. On the other hand, when one's power becomes apparent in public, this is directly reflected in his social rank. When power is demonstrated for the simply benefit of admiration, honour becomes an objective in itself.

This entanglement of honour and power is also present in the writings of Morgenthau. When discussing the *animus dominandi* Morgenthau writes: "This lust for power manifests itself as the desire to maintain the range of one's own person with regard to others, to increase it, or to demonstrate it. ... The desire for power ... concerns itself not with the individual's survival but with his position among his fellows once his survival has been secured."⁸⁷ In this passage it makes perfect sense to replace 'power' with 'honour'. According to Morgenthau, the lust for power is in reference to a social hierarchy present in everyone's mind. Put differently, the desire for power is directed at acquiring social recognition, or what we may call honour. Can the two genuinely be disentangled?

The most obvious answer to this question is found in cases where the pursuit of honour is accompanied by a loss of power. In those cases the actor seems to accept the risk of losing power for the sake of honour. In reality the actor does consciously accept those risks but at the same time plays them down. He is often the victim of another concept on which classical realists put much emphasis: hubris. Due to hubris the chances of success are inflated, while the risks of failure are underestimated. Honour and hubris are linked together. In Aristotle's virtue ethics honour is the golden mean, flanked by the excesses of shamelessness and hubris. Someone is hubristic when he is excessively greedy for honour. Cairns, when discussing Aristotle's handling of this concept, observes that, "*Hybris* is about how one projects oneself and one's own claims to others' respect, as well as about one's failure to show proper respect for others."⁸⁸ The victim of hubris fails "to realize that he is fallible, vulnerable, and subject to the same shifts in fortune as afflict everyone else."⁸⁹

Classical realists from antiquity to our own times have stressed the importance of hubris in understanding international relations. Kirshner holds that the most significant warning Thucydides puts forward in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* is that "the gravest threat to the security, integrity, and civilization of a great power lies not with the designs of its adversaries, nor

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Morgenthau, *Scientific Man*, 165.

⁸⁸ Cairns, "Aristotle on *Hybris* and Injustice," 170.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

the tragic implications of anarchy, but from the arrogance of power.”⁹⁰ Thucydides illustrates this lesson by recounting Athens' disastrous decision to invade Sicily. After describing the events, he concludes that, “This proved the most significant occurrence in the whole of this war, and, it seems to me, in the whole of recorded Greek history – unparalleled triumph for the victors, and unparalleled disaster for the vanquished.”⁹¹ The Athenians, blinded by hubris, miscalculated badly.

The classical realist, because of his truly ‘rational’ understanding of human nature and society, does not have to bother himself with all kinds of implausible strategic and economic explanations for such events, nor does he bereft himself of the duty to understand the event by dismissing the matter as irrational. Equipped with the right tools, he takes the issue in hand.

⁹⁰ Kirshner, *An Unwritten Future*, 30.

⁹¹ Thucydides, *History*, 414.

Chapter 5: Understanding the Russian Invasion

All of these guys, mostly from the KGB, never agreed that the Soviet Union lost the Cold War ... And now they think this [invasion of Ukraine] is their last decisive battle.

Andrei Kozyrev, interview in *News Line Magazine*

On January 28, 1992, in the State of the Union Address, US President George H. W. Bush triumphantly proclaimed: "By the grace of God, America won the Cold War."⁹² Just over a month earlier Mikhail Gorbachev, his Soviet counterpart, had resigned from office, effectively dissolving the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union proved to be a humiliating experience for the Russian political establishment. With the Soviet Union, Lenin and his successors had managed to keep much of the lands of the Russian Empire intact and, most importantly, maintained its great power status. Yet after the Soviet Union disintegrated into fifteen independent states, this status was in considerable peril. With its economy shattered and its politics degraded into chaos, "the [Russian] political elite ... aspired to a position of international prominence that would resonate with their views of Russia's rightful place in the global order."⁹³ Yet repeatedly, from the end of the Cold War to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia would be reminded of its diminished status on the world stage, eventually leading to the decision to avenge its honour.

In the first years of the Russian Federation two narratives were present to fulfil Russia's need for international prominence.⁹⁴ President Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Kozyrev represented the pro-Western narrative in which Russia would become the US' chief partner in world affairs. Russia would regain its great power status as second in command. It made Kozyrev remark to his senior diplomats that, "The most important thing is the partnership with the US. Furthermore, one has to be [America's] primary partner; otherwise, nothing will remain from [our] great power status."⁹⁵ Essential to this strategy was Russia's membership of NATO. In 1993 Yeltsin made clear to NATO General Secretary Manfred Wörner that Russia had to be the first to join the alliance and reiterated this wish to President Clinton at the end of the year.

The other narrative was outright anti-Western. The logic behind this narrative was that Russia would regain its international status if it became the chief competitor of the US – just like during the Cold War. This narrative was already present in the Russian public discourse from the start of the Russian Federation. It was expressed in November 1993 by Yevgeny Primakov, then the foreign intelligence chief, when he declared that Russia was not prone to the "primitive

⁹² Bush, "State of the Union."

⁹³ Radchenko, "Nothing but humiliation," 773.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 781.

thinking” that NATO enlargement would be used as a “springboard” for an invasion of Russia, but he stressed that the West nevertheless needs to respect Russia’s security concerns.⁹⁶ The Russian parliament was an even harsher representative of this narrative, especially when the nationalistic firebrand Zhirinovsky won the December 1993 elections.

These two narratives co-existed for a while, but it was only when it began to dawn that the US was unwilling to grant Russia a special partnership that the anti-Western narrative gradually became dominant.⁹⁷ Due to the US’ handling of the Bosnian War even Yeltsin and Kozyrev began to doubt their pro-Western strategy. The US wanted to lift the arms embargo and the Bosnian Muslim, while also conducting airstrikes against the Serbs. Strobe Talbott was assigned with the task to get the Russians on board with this strategy, but encountered an edgy Kozyrev, “You know ... it’s bad enough having you people tell us what you’re going to do whether we like it or not. Don’t add insult to injury by telling us that it’s in our interest to obey your orders.”⁹⁸ In April 1994, on a request of the United Nations Protection Force and without involving the Russians, NATO bombed the Serbs near the town of Goradze. Anger ran rampant in the Russian parliament, “What happened there [in Bosnia], is a slap in the face for the prestige of our country!”⁹⁹ Two of Yeltsin’s close advisers argued in a memorandum to their boss that, “Russia’s full-fledged return to the Balkans, from where it is being increasingly pushed out, will confirm its great power status. Otherwise, by abandoning the Serbs to their fate, Russia is losing face; its international prestige is declining.”¹⁰⁰

Besides the sidelining of Russia in the Bosnian War, another issue increasingly came to the fore that fuelled the anti-Western narrative. After gaining independence from the Soviet Union the political leaders of the Visegrad countries had made calls to join NATO. With the Clinton administration these calls found fertile soil. During a May 1995 summit at the Kremlin Yeltsin expressed suspicion about NATO’s potential expansion, snapping at Clinton, “I want to get a clear understanding of your idea of NATO expansion because now I see nothing but humiliation for Russia if you proceed ... What do you want to achieve with this if Russia is your partner? ... We need a new structure for Pan-European security, not old ones!”¹⁰¹ But Clinton managed to reassure Yeltsin by proposing “a clear statement from the U.S. that Russia should not be excluded from NATO membership.”¹⁰² He also stressed that he wanted “a clear partnership for you with the West that protects the rightful role of Russia and respects your security.”¹⁰³

⁹⁶ Erlanger, “Russia warns NATO.”

⁹⁷ Radchenko, “Nothing but humiliation.”

⁹⁸ Ibid., 790.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 794.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 794-795.

¹⁰¹ Clinton Presidential Library, “Meeting Clinton and Yeltsin,” 6.

¹⁰² Ibid., 7.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 9.

In the following years it became increasingly evident that the US was not going to deliver on these statements. At the July 1997 NATO summit in Madrid the alliance formally invited Poland, Hungary and Czechia to join. Russia was offered the NATO-Russia Founding Act, again an effort to assure the Russians that NATO was not plotting against them. Yeltsin tried to include a clause in the document that would give Russia veto rights over further NATO enlargement, but that clause was rejected. The efforts by the Clinton administration not to antagonise Russia would definitively fail in the spring of 1999. Just after Poland, Hungary and Czechia had officially joined the alliance, NATO started its bombing campaign in Kosovo. The Serbs, led by Slobodan Milošević, were committing numerous war crimes against the Kosovar Albanians, a Muslim minority in Yugoslavia. Determined to stop these atrocities, NATO wanted to intervene and sought approval of the UN Security Council. Yet Russia, which saw the Serbs as a fraternal Slavic nation, opposed NATO's proposal. NATO, thereby violating the UN Charter, proceeded anyway. Once again, Russia felt violated in its honour. Its interests and, more importantly, the Security Council – a crucial element in Russia's claims to great power status – were scorned. The Kosovo campaign marked, in the words of Sakwa, “a critical turning point in Russia's relations with the West.”¹⁰⁴ The pro-Western narrative experienced a significant setback.

With the turn of the millennium the Yeltsin era transitioned into the Putin era. Putin's tenure started with some gestures of goodwill in the fight against terrorism, but even then, “Putin's vision included Russia's return to the status held by the USSR in world politics.”¹⁰⁵ Putin wanted an end to NATO expansion and the international recognition that the post-Soviet states belonged to the Russian sphere of influence. However, in November 2002 NATO signalled it had other plans when it formally invited seven Central and Eastern European states to join the alliance, three of which were former Soviet republics. In the meantime the US invaded Iraq in 2003, again without authorisation of the UN Security Council. While Putin was consolidating his power by neutralising the remaining democratic elements in the Russian state system, Colour Revolutions were setting post-Soviet countries along Russia's border on an opposite course. The 2004 Ukrainian presidential elections were eventually, due to the Orange Revolution, decided in the favour of the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko. In April 2005 NATO launched the Intensified Dialogue on Ukraine's membership aspirations. In President George W. Bush Yushchenko had found a powerful ally who was willing to push for Ukraine's membership.

In Moscow anger was piling up. Putin decided to use the 2007 Munich Security Conference as a platform to express his grievances about the direction of international affairs. He stated that the US was acting unilaterally with “a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of

¹⁰⁴ Sakwa, *Lost Peace*, 82.

¹⁰⁵ Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 82.

international law.”¹⁰⁶ Reminiscent of Yeltsin’s remarks to Clinton, Putin called NATO expansion “a serious provocation.” Yet Bush was determined to grant Ukraine and Georgia the MAP at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, but this was obstructed by various European member states. A compromise was found in the wording that Ukraine and Georgia “will become members” in the future.¹⁰⁷ A Russian journalist recounted that Putin, present at the summit, “flew into a rage on the topic of Ukraine.”¹⁰⁸ He threatened that, “If Ukraine joins NATO, it will do so without Crimea and the eastern regions. It will simply fall apart.”

From a security perspective, Putin’s rage over Ukraine is hard to reconcile with his acceptance of, for instance, Estonia’s NATO bid – another post-Soviet republic along Russia’s border. At a press conference in June 2002 he said, “I think it would be absolutely wrong from the tactical and strategic points of view to try to prevent Estonia from joining NATO. ... Estonia is entitled to seek NATO membership. And I don’t think that circumstance need to lead to a deterioration of the relations between Russia and Estonia.”¹⁰⁹ To understand this difference, we have to look at what Ukraine means to Russia.

On February 21, 2022, Putin addressed the nation to recognise the independence of the two separatist regions Donetsk and Luhansk. He began this address by stating that “[Ukraine] is an inalienable part of our own history, culture and spiritual space.”¹¹⁰ It was a theme he had elaborated on in his summer essay, published in July 2021. The basis for this claim originates from the medieval state Kyivan Rus’. This polity, with its heart in Kyiv, was formed in the 9th century and encompassed the areas of modern Ukraine, Belarus, and European Russia. It fell apart in the 13th century, giving rise to several successor states, including a principality centred around Moscow, known as Muscovy. According to Putin, “Moscow became the center of reunification, continuing the tradition of ancient Russian statehood.”¹¹¹ The princes of Muscovy “cast off the foreign yoke and began gathering Russian lands.” In Putin’s mind “Russians, Ukrainians and Belarussians are all descendants of Ancient Rus”. These nations were all once again united under the flag of the Russian Empire, and subsequently the Soviet Union. Yet due to an alleged mistake by Lenin in the constitutional arrangements of the latter, Ukraine was able to become an independent country in 1991. But for Putin this partition does not diminish the unity of Ancient Rus. His belief that Ukraine is an inseparable part of the Russian identity is what triggered his rage at the 2008 Bucharest summit.

Another reason for Putin's fury has to do with his vision to return Russia to the great power status held by the Soviet Union. Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote: “It cannot be stressed strongly

¹⁰⁶ Putin, “Speech at Munich Conference.”

¹⁰⁷ NATO, “Bucharest Declaration.”

¹⁰⁸ Zygars, *Kremlin's Men*, 142-143.

¹⁰⁹ Putin, “Press Conference for Journalists.”

¹¹⁰ Putin, “Address, Feb. 21, 2022.”

¹¹¹ Putin, “Historical Unity.”

enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire.”¹¹² This was the case in the Russian Empire as well as the Soviet Union. During Soviet times Ukraine was the second most important republic after Russia in terms of population and economy.

And so Russia’s desire for international prominence and its feelings of humiliation all centred around Ukraine. When Ukraine diverted westward, Russia’s hopes of regaining its rightful place would perish. However, if it could somehow subordinate the Ukrainians to Moscow’s whims, Putin’s Russia would stand on equal footing with Kyivan Rus’, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Ukraine became the decisive battleground for Russia’s honour.

To Putin’s relief Viktor Yanukovich won the 2010 Ukrainian presidential elections, defeating the pro-Western Tymoshenko by a small margin. Unlike his predecessor, Yanukovich did not aspire to NATO membership. Although the new president was generally more oriented towards Russia, he was still committed to Ukraine’s EU membership bid. The EU was preparing an association agreement for Ukraine, but Putin had other ideas. During his four years as prime minister he had come up with the idea of a Eurasian economic space, and Ukraine was essential for the success of this new union. When the signing of the EU agreement seemed imminent, Putin put pressure on the Ukrainian president, presenting him two options. If he signed, Russia would not only start a trade war, but would also occupy Crimea and southeastern Ukraine.¹¹³ Yet if he abandoned the deal, Russia would offer cheaper gas prices and a \$15 billion loan to Ukraine, which it desperately needed at the time. Yanukovich capitulated. That decision triggered a series of protests and a violent revolution. On February 21, 2014, Yanukovich, fearing for his life, left the capital. The following day he was ousted by parliament and replaced by a member of the opposition, albeit unconstitutionally.

For Putin events had reached the boiling point. He was infuriated by the meddling of Western politicians in the protests and perceived the ousting of Yanukovich as a Western-inspired *coup d’état*. On the night of February 23 Putin decided it was time for action – agonistic action. Putin was determined, like the princes of Muscovy, to fulfil his historic task and gather ‘Russian’ lands. Just four advisers were present, but the decision was his alone.”¹¹⁴ That Putin was able to annex Crimea without consulting ministers or parliament showcases the concentration of power in the Russian regime. The one-man regime had become very susceptible to the *animus dominandi* of its thin-skinned ruler.¹¹⁵ In his March 18, 2014, address Putin justified the Crimea annexation by referring to the fraudulent plebiscite held after the annexation.¹¹⁶ The address is a case in point

¹¹² Brzezinski, “Premature Partnership.”

¹¹³ Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 105-106.

¹¹⁵ For Putin’s sensitive character see e.g., Taylor, *The Code of Putinism*, 30-35.

¹¹⁶ Putin, “Address, Mar. 18, 2014.”

of a man who has felt humiliated again and again and has now decided to stand his ground. Putin expresses all his resentment against the West, ranging from the Kosovo campaign to the Iraq invasion and from the "controlled colour revolutions" to a Western "well-equipped army of militants," terrorising the streets of Kyiv.¹¹⁷ It all came down to this moment in which Putin asserted that "there is a limit to everything. And with Ukraine, our western partners have crossed the line." Russia must be respected, and with the Crimea annexation he had made that clear to the whole world – or so he thought.

The Crimean gain made hungry for more. In April riots, orchestrated and funded by Moscow, erupted across eastern Ukraine. Despite the chaotic political situation, Kyiv was able to put multiple of them down, except for those in the Donbas. In Donetsk and Luhansk the Russian nationalists proclaimed the creation of two new 'people's republics'. Russian mercenaries and local separatist forces clashed with the Ukrainian army. When, after President Poroshenko took office, Ukraine was gaining momentum, Putin decided to increase his stake by sending regular Russian forces. Ukraine's offensive was crushed and after the massacre of Ukrainian troops in the Battle of Ilovaisk, Poroshenko felt obliged to negotiate. These negotiating resulted in the Minsk Protocol, signed on September 5, which provided in a ceasefire but failed to deliver. Another deal, known as Minsk II, was reached in February 2015, but this deal suffered the same fate as its predecessor. The war continued and decisively changed Ukraine's political landscape. Whereas Ukrainian politics had vacillated for a long time between pro-Western and pro-Russian political forces, now the latter were imploded. The Poroshenko administration steered the country firmly towards the West.

The election of President Zelensky in 2019 brought new opportunities to overcome the impasse with Russia. After all, Zelensky was elected on a platform that promised the end of the Donbas war. He seemed more willing than his predecessor to compromise with the Russian demands for the sake of peace. That is allegedly also what Putin was told by his key adviser on Ukraine Vladislav Surkov.¹¹⁸ Yet when Zelensky stood firm in Paris in December 2019, Russian hopes on a breakthrough perished. According to well-connected Russians who fled the country, this was reason for Putin to fire Surkov and start thinking about a full-blown invasion.¹¹⁹

Putin's urgent 2014 message to the world had altered the course of neither Ukraine nor the West. In December 2020 Ukraine's defence minister requested NATO to grant the MAP at the next summit in June 2021. Zelensky, fed up with Russian propaganda on Ukrainian television, shut down Moscow-backed channels in February 2021. In the same month the European Parliament issued a report on Ukraine's implementation of the Association Agreement.¹²⁰ Although very

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 140.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ European Parliament, "Resolution on Association Agreement."

critical and stressing that Ukraine is not yet ready for formal membership talks, it recognised the progress made and welcomed Ukraine's aspirations. The Zelensky administration aimed at 2024 as the year in which these formal talks should start. Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations were also underscored when Zelensky visited the White House in September. The visit resulted in a new strategic partnership between the two countries, issued a few months later.¹²¹ In Putin's eyes the West continued to deny Russia its rightful status – and there seemed no end in sight.

After months of troop build-up Putin recognised the two break-away republics in the Donbas on February 21, 2022¹²². In his lengthy speech he lamented the collapse of the Soviet Union and denounced Ukraine's cultural policies and NATO's eastward expansion.¹²³ Three days later he ordered the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although he framed the invasion as a pre-emptive strike to neutralise an existential threat developing along Russia's border, the anger of a humiliated man eager for revenge clearly shines through. Describing the West's disregard for Russia's security complaints, he asks, "Where did this insolent manner of talking down from the height of their exceptionalism, infallibility and all-permissiveness come from? What is the explanation for this contemptuous and disdainful attitude to our interests and absolutely legitimate demands?"¹²⁴ His answer is clear: the collapse of the Soviet Union created a world in which the US could scorn international law and other nations' interests without facing consequences – only power reigned.

Yet a full-blown war over status concerns is often not considered as legitimate, and even tends to work counterproductive. Indeed, in such a case one tacitly confesses that he is in dire need of social approval to feel psychologically secure. Such a lack of self-confidence is generally regarded as a weakness. Therefore Putin fully embraces the 'springboard theory', denounced by Primakov as "primitive thinking" in the 1990s. NATO would be preparing an attack on Russia, using Ukraine as its point of departure. "It's only a matter of time," Putin declares.¹²⁵ These statements must not be taken seriously, but must be regarded as a rhetorical device to persuade his audience of the necessity of the extraordinary operation he is about to announce. An existential threat creates an emergency situation in which people are ready to accept unprecedented measures. Putin himself has provided proof for this interpretation. Asked in 2018 what kind of conflict Russia fears, he responded, "We are not afraid of anything. Given our territory, our defence system, and our people that are ready to fight for independence and sovereignty ... Nobody can change these things, and this makes us certain that we can feel secure."¹²⁶ Even after the invasion, in 2023, he made the staggering comment that, "There is no situation imaginable today where

¹²¹ U.S. State Department, "U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Partnership."

¹²² For a full account of the prelude to the invasion see 'Chapter 2: Unbelievable Realities'.

¹²³ Putin, "Address, Feb. 21, 2022."

¹²⁴ Putin, "Address, Feb. 24, 2022."

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Putin, "Valdai Discussion 2018."

something would threaten Russian statehood and the existence of the Russian state.”¹²⁷ Hence it is safe to say that Russia did not invade to secure its existence as a state, it invaded to secure its existence as a great power.

And there he went on this hubristic adventure. The ordeals of the 1990s, the seething anger over Western contempt, the resentment over Ukraine's trajectory, and the incessant yearning for honour, had led the aging ruler to believe this was his finest hour – his *aristeia*. But it all turned out to be a criminal blunder.

¹²⁷ Putin, “Valdai Discussion 2023.”

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis started with the question why the West failed to understand the motives behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine. By describing the prelude to the invasion from a Western perspective, it first substantiated the assumption present in this question. Subsequently, it demonstrated that the West's incredulity originated from the two most influential theories in international relations, namely liberalism and neorealism. Considered through these lenses, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is indeed an incomprehensible action. The motivational assumptions present in these theories lead one to conclude that Putin's attack lies outside the rational framework. It is only when a more comprehensive view of human nature is used that the Russian invasion becomes understandable. By using classical realism, this study showed that the desire for honour is the lacking element in the modern analysis. Accepting honour as a motive, steers the eye of the scholar to culture, history and identity – concepts that are generally neglected by the modern theories.

Thus, to answer the central question, the West failed to understand the Russian invasion because it evaluated the situation based on Russia's prospects for survival and material well-being, while overlooking the significance of honour. Had the West included the concept of honour in its evaluation, it would have taken into consideration the heightened status concerns of the Russian elites in the 1990s, the alleged humiliation by the West, Ukraine's significance to Russia's identity and great power status, and the accumulating anger of its ruler over the trajectory of international affairs. It would have recognised that to restore honour, one must resort to agonistic action in public with risks to survival and material welfare – exactly the concepts on which the West was basing its analysis. Had it taken these considerations into account, the Russian invasion would have made much more sense during those confusing months, weeks and days before February 24, 2022.

The contribution of this study is twofold. As stated in the introduction, any solution starts with a proper understanding of the issue. Similarly, to formulate a wise foreign policy, one must first understand the actors to whom the policy pertains. This study contributed to the understanding of the current Russian regime and its reasons for invading Ukraine. It can therefore offer valuable insights for policy-makers tasked with addressing this international crisis. Besides these practical implications, this thesis made a contribution to the theoretical debate in international relations. It demonstrated that the motivational assumptions present in liberalism and neorealism are too narrow to make sense of a pivotal event in contemporary international politics. By doing so, this thesis, after being fairly overlooked for decades, put renewed focus on the importance of human nature in international relations theory. It therefore contributed to the

ongoing resurrection of classical realism, which has always situated human nature at the centre of its theory.

Obviously, there are multiple limitations to this inquiry; at least two deserve to be mentioned here. This thesis suggested that there is a direct link between the beliefs of Western foreign policy elites and the dominant theories in international relations. For reasons of scope, this suggestion, which can of course be challenged, has not been substantiated in-depth here. Furthermore, because this thesis dealt with motives and beliefs, it cannot claim to have undeniably proven something. Motives and beliefs are not directly observable, and sometimes even the actor himself is unaware of them. While this caveat cannot be entirely overcome, future work could incorporate insights from the field of psychology to provide a more empirical basis for the argument.

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