

Complicity: May Day, 2022

Let us acknowledge at the outset that the Russian government has committed war crimes in the Ukraine, and that it is altogether fitting and proper to condemn them. But as the weeks in this hideous war have gone by, it looks like our own officials have lost sight of the war's most essential questions, and the degree to which its own actions have lengthened the Ukraine's agony.

Both before and after the war's commencement, the United States government insisted that it had offered the Russians every reasonable opportunity to settle differences between Russia and the Ukraine, only to have Putin flatly reject those overtures. At the same time, the Putin government complained that the west was ignoring and slighting Russia's own security needs and failing to treat Russia as an equal. As the argument went back and forth, and Russia prepared its invasion, Russia insisted that Donetsk and Luhansk become independent republics, a precondition entirely unacceptable to the United States and NATO. At the same time, the United States insisted that Russia leave Crimea and that the Ukraine be allowed to join NATO, preconditions entirely unacceptable to the Russians. And so war came.

Once the war began, the United States was quick to remember Russia's centuries-long history of aggression against other countries, while it somehow forgot about Russia's own thousand years of injury from invasion, most often from the west. For century after century, Russia absorbed those invasions, along with 250 years of Mongol conquest and occupation. Also dismissed as flimsy excuses were Russia's worries about NATO expansion eastward. Along those lines, in 1991 this writer met Dmitri Donetz, a direct descendant of the Dmitri Donetz who led the first successful resistance against the Mongols in 1380. Somehow, the United States forgot that memories of insult and injury in Russia are long, that sooner or later, Russia would swear and take revenge.

There is a Spanish proverb which says, "If you seek revenge, dig two graves." And so we have Ukraine 2022, the latest episode in a long and dreary history, with aftereffects of suffering in Russia itself, relieved somewhat by brave protests against the war in that country. One might have thought that the chief task in this case would be to end the Ukrainians' suffering, based on a negotiated settlement tolerable to and respectful of all parties involved. But as the weeks went by, more and more government and media commentary in the United States centered around the resourcefulness and courage of the Ukrainian armed forces, Russian military incompetence, and a celebration of NATO's increased cohesion, its potential expansion into Sweden and Finland, and the recovery of US global leadership. Toward the end of April, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin let the cat out of the bag when they declared that the United States' main objective in Ukraine would be to weaken Russia so that the US would be freer to counter Chinese power in east Asia. And by way of putting our money where our mouths are, consider president Biden's proposed \$33 billion in additional aid to Ukraine. Twenty billion of it is for weapons, eight billion for humanitarian relief, and five billion for economic recovery. The proportions in the package speak volumes.

None of the foregoing is an apology for Putin's conduct in the Ukraine or for his crackdowns in Russia, but the essential task in this terrible fight is to end the Ukrainians' suffering as soon as possible. Their poor, flayed nation has been lacerated far too much, and to the extent we delay the healing for the sake of dreamt-of military glory, we too are complicit.