

Russia expert explains the riddle of Russia's chaotic war in Ukraine

By William Horsley, AEJ UK chairman and former BBC Europe correspondent

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The AEJ's meeting on March 28 with Keir Giles of the UK's Conflict Studies Research Centre shed light on the astonishing failures of Russia's armed forces in Ukraine. And he gave an excoriating account of the self-deception of the West and its failure to prepare for a "war of re-conquest" that was clearly advertised by Vladimir Putin for more than a decade in advance. Putin's ultimate goal is to re-build the Russian empire. And that is why the West "must ensure Russia is defeated" in Ukraine.

Keir Giles' research, including his 2019 book *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West*, explores the human factors that motivate Vladimir Putin to confront the West. Putin's behaviour is driven by his belief in a set of myths about Russia's destiny as a great power. At the core of those myths is that Ukraine can never be separate from Russia and its people yearn to be reunited with the Motherland.

It is clear that he and those around him fell for their own propaganda, says Giles. Thanks to Ukraine's fierce defence of its separate, democratic identity, Russian military forces have clearly failed to achieve their main objectives in a month of war. On 25 March Russia publicly announced what it called a drastic scaling back of its operations around Kyiv – claiming, despite all the evidence, that its goal had always been to conquer Ukraine's eastern provinces.

Yet Keir Giles warns that Putin's long-standing goal is to eliminate Ukraine as a separate state, and fundamentally that has not changed. Putin may be forced in the short or medium term to redefine the purpose of his "special military operation" in order to declare a victory with the intention of finishing the job later. But history is full of examples of Russia suffering disastrous reverses in the early stages of a war, but pressing on regardless of the consequences in terms of casualties and the deprivations of her own people to emerge as the winner in the end.

The most striking failures of the Russian invasion relate to the military campaign itself, the intelligence behind it, and the extent of Russia's isolation that has followed.

Keir Giles says it became clear quickly that Russia's much-vaunted military doctrine was failing spectacularly in key areas, including command and control, logistics and re-supply, equipment and morale. Cyber-ops have been conspicuous by their absence so far. Russia was unable to secure dominance in the air so had mostly to rely on artillery to shell targets from a distance. And the false belief that Russian troops would be welcomed by Russian speakers with little resistance meant that soldiers were sent in without the training or means to fight a real war. Raw conscripts entered enemy territory unaware of the hostile environment so they got "hammered".

Particularly worrying for Vladimir Putin are the critical failings of Russia's intelligence. Not only did Putin and his strategists apparently have no idea that Ukraine would be so united and militarily capable. He has been forced to search for informers or traitors within his own security and intelligence apparatus. Ukraine and its western backers knew a lot about Russia's deployments and battle plans in advance. Western intelligence foresaw and loudly publicised the "false flag" operations which the Russians hoped would give them a pretext for making bold advances on the ground. So their propaganda campaigns fell flat.

By contrast with the West's limp response to the seizure of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine in 2014, NATO and the EU have publicly displayed a rare degree of unity and determination, and imposed a range of economic sanctions which have had immediate impacts and threaten in time to severely weaken the Russian economy.

Keir Giles reckons that Putin's game plan in the near term will depend in part on the reliability of the information he receives from those around him in the Kremlin. But in essence he is now probably directing the war himself from his own "Führer bunker". And in his terms he has banked some significant achievements for his long-term strategic objectives.

Once the original invasion plan went awry, Russia quickly switched to its "default" tactic, as before in Chechnya and Syria, of inflicting indiscriminate devastation on towns and cities in Ukraine triggering a humanitarian disaster. As expected, that has led to western countries mobilising massive resources to relieve the human suffering and heaping more pressure on their Ukrainian allies to sue for peace by making concessions. Now Ukraine's President Zelensky has felt impelled to hold out the prospect of Ukrainian neutrality and an end to its ambitions to join NATO.

And Putin has masterminded his own propaganda campaign to make NATO and its member states stay out of the conflict by threatening a sudden escalation to the use of chemical, biological or even nuclear weapons. Keir Giles observes that, as has often happened before, such threats yield the gratifying result for him that the West backs down. This time NATO leaders have renewed their commitment to avoid direct conflict with Russia, and talked up the urgency of ceasefires and peace talks. Lately Putin has also intensified his threats of direct strikes on western shipments of arms and other vital supplies into Ukraine.

Giles says that unlike western leaders, Vladimir Putin has little to fear from Russian public opinion, despite the shortages already affecting Russian consumers and industry from international sanctions. Russian army deaths and other casualties are already reported to have reached tens of thousands, but official information is scarce and military funerals do not feature on Russia's state-controlled TV channels. The last of Russia's independent media have been effectively silenced, and even the protests from the mothers of Russian soldiers have been muted after years of draconian laws banning dissent.

Putin may have created a broad enough range of options for himself – despite the setbacks of the past five weeks – so that if necessary he can declare Russia's objectives have been met at a time of his choosing. At the least they should include Ukraine's long-term separation from NATO and his consolidation of the land corridor

between Crimea and southern Russia. But if so, it is likely that the respite would be short-lived and in time he would be back again to further his attempt to reconstitute the Russian empire.

On the western side, despite the present show of togetherness, in the long run Putin might be counting on reaping the rewards of his strategic actions over the past twenty years to gain the upper hand. His assets include the divisions he has sowed within the West, the likely unwillingness of Germany and other European countries to endure the hardship of life without Russian oil and gas, and the network of those figures of influence whom Giles calls Russia's "useful idiots" in the West.

Keir Giles laments the unwillingness of many western leaders and strategists to read the signs before now. Everything now depends on their ability to see through a major and long-term re-think of the West's priorities towards effective deterrence as well as self-defence.