

WEEKEND ESSAY

Russia's Victory Day is make or break for Putin

Beyond the usual show of military hardware, the president must use Monday's parade to show his generals and his people he can deal with the mess he has created in Ukraine, says **Roger Boyes**



R euters reporters used to have a story about their former agency colleague Freddy Forsyth who for a brief moment in 1964 almost triggered the Third World War. Driving home one night the young East Berlin bureau chief was stopped and berated by Soviet military police. A large convoy of Russian tanks was about to rumble by, a second unit coming up to join it, heading in the general direction of the Berlin Wall. Forsyth dashed back to the office and telexed out an urgent report about Russian troops massing under cover of darkness on the most sensitive of Cold War borders. Across the world startled Nato defence and foreign ministers were stirred from their beds.

It turned out the Russian tank regiments had been rehearsing for a full-pomp parade to mark the anniversary of the end of the war, an event that was called Liberation Day in East Berlin but Victory Day in the rest of the Soviet bloc. The world survived this little misunderstanding and Forsyth went on to more lucrative employment as a thriller writer. But some traditions never die: for weeks on the night-time streets of Moscow, Russian units have been preparing a spit-and-polish celebration of the May 9 victory over Nazi Germany and checking their heavy metal machinery is still in working order.

The paradox is clear, as is the political portent. In Moscow, close to Red Square, the roar and clatter of the just-for-show Russian war machine. In Mariupol and a dozen other Ukrainian cities and townships, Russian troops rely on bombardment of civilians and ruthless military contractors to notch up any kind of advance. The Ukrainian military say they recovered the dress uniforms in the kitbags of dead Russian soldiers, so convinced were the invaders that on May 9 they would be marching into a liberated Mariupol.

This Monday, Victory Day looks more like Elusive Victory Day. It is billed as the moment when Vladimir Putin tells the country it is not actually engaged in a special military operation but is in fact at war with a militaristic, ultra-nationalist neighbour acting as a puppet of Nato. Many Russians will struggle to recognise this description. They will recall seaside holidays in the Crimea (which since 2014 has been annexed Russian territory), inter-marriages, the role of Ukraine within the Soviet Union, the Slav brotherhood, the bustling trade. But the almost hermetic media bubble inhabited by state television-watching Russians means the question they ask is not the logical, "what possible reason could Nato have to attack us?" but rather, "what evil conspiracy is poisoning Ukrainian minds?" Putin has weaponised history to make a case for war where none exists.

The Victory Day tradition established under the postwar Soviet regime was designed to deter the West with a bristling display of hardware. Defence attachés were invited, even from the West, and could be seen making notes about tank turrets and missile launchers. The first Victory Day was in June 1945 — 40,000 troops marched past Stalin — and from then

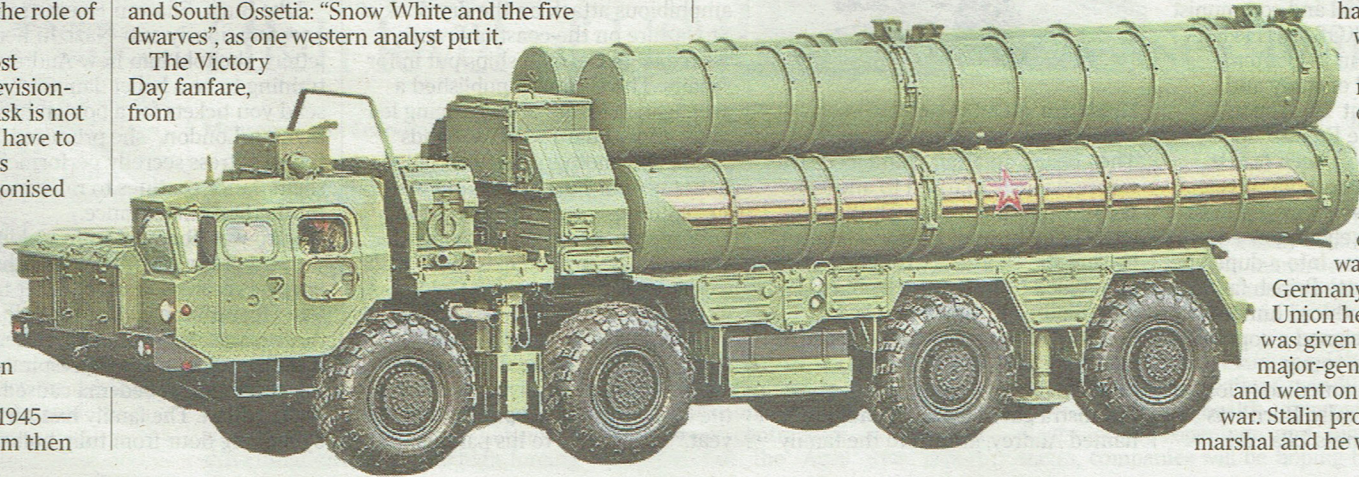
on it was May 9. In the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the parade seemed to lose its significance but Putin revived it. His purpose was plain: boost national self-esteem while preserving a sense of righteous victimhood. It was about the historic responsibility of the military leadership to defend the motherland and the duty of all Russians to do their bit when required.

That is where Putin is as Monday approaches. He can demand, or more likely prepare, the population for a general mobilisation. That would require a sacrifice from the parents of conscripts for whom the law — conscripts cannot be sent into action for four months — protects their sons from being rushed onto the battlefield. Putin's task is first to explain there is a war on, that it might be protracted and that the enemy, Nato-backed nationalists, is a complex one worthy of a Russian national effort. The Kremlin has played down the idea of a mass call-up but public bodies across Russia have been advertising for "wartime mobilisation specialists".

May 9 is not just about the march-past but also the speeches. Putin will have to perform a number of contortions before he can shift from "there is no war" to "there could be a war against everybody unless we show Ukraine who is boss". He may duck the challenge and hope that boasting of a cleanout of "fascists" in the tunnels of Mariupol steel works will keep the public happy. But people will want to know when the war, having been officially declared, will be officially over.

The parade is being choreographed to complement the Putin speech, to mute the Victory Day swagger. Military experts say only about 25 Russian combat systems will be on display, 130 ground combat vehicles and 25,000 soldiers. That's a third smaller than last year. There will be older kit and tank transporters will be used to make up for missing tanks. Putin's message: the army is busy elsewhere. The invitation list is likely to be meagre. Many western leaders boycotted the 2015 event to protest at Putin's first incursion against Ukraine; this time they won't even be invited. For sure, there will be the mini-Putins, the leaders of Russia's statelets in Donetsk, Luhansk, Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia: "Snow White and the five dwarves", as one western analyst put it.

The Victory Day fanfare, from



Stalin to Putin, has always had one crucial element: it is about making clear to the world that the regime has firm control over its military leadership. Stalin had Konstantin Rokossovsky, one of the founders of the Red Army, locked up in the Great Purge of 1937. In prison he had nine teeth knocked out, his fingernails torn out and his toes hammered flat. He was sentenced to death and sat out months in the condemned cell where he was subjected to mock executions. But on the eve of the war between Germany and the Soviet Union he was let out of jail, was given the rank of major-general of tank forces and went on to fight a brave war. Stalin promoted him to marshal and he was commanding



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Russian army cadets rehearsing for Victory Day and, left, Vladimir Putin with his defence chief Sergei Shoigu. Below, Soviet army marshal Georgy Zhukov signing the German Instrument of Surrender in 1945

officer of the Victory Day parade, sitting on his brown stallion. But the death sentence was not lifted; it remained an instrument of control.

Putin's grip of his military leadership is more subtle, though his final reckoning with the top brass may yet come. He could be waiting to see how many generals survive the Ukraine campaign. About 12 have been killed so far, in part because of American intelligence from Russia's mobile field headquarters which is being passed on to the Ukrainian operational commanders and their hit teams. The Ukrainians got wind recently that General Valery Gerasimov, chief of the general staff, was in the country and close enough to be a target. One Russian news outlet has said that Gerasimov was hit by shrapnel, although western sources suggested members of his entourage were injured, not him. Either way, the assumption is that Gerasimov will be on the podium close to Putin, if only to demonstrate that he didn't take a bullet on his excursion to the front.

So far Putin has been reluctant to have himself filmed as a commander-in-chief. His one notable television audience with Sergei Shoigu, the defence minister, depicted two uncomfortable and exhausted men making stilted conversation about a possible

storming of the Mariupol holdout of Ukraine's Azov brigade fighters. Putin, his feet beating a tattoo on the floor, his hands gripping the table as if he was about to fall over, ruled essentially that they should be starved out, thus avoiding unnecessary Russian deaths. Is he intervening on other tactical issues? More likely, he was signalling to the top brass that he had a grip on the detail of the invasion and they shouldn't mess up.

It's fair enough for Putin to put the squeeze on his military. After all, the essence of deterrence is that when Putin threatens force he can credibly deliver. The problem is that when you're a leader crafting policy so closely around military needs, you stand to share the blame when they come a cropper. Putin has passed the point where he can distance himself from his commanders and proclaim a Great Purge of the army establishment. If they fail, he fails.

That is why this Victory Day is so sensitive for him. It's not just an escalation pivot — mobilise all-out, threaten tactical nuclear weapons, spread the war in a way that rattles Nato. Rather it is



about demonstrating he understands and can deal with the five issues that have made the invasion such a mess. About 15,000 Russian dead may not seem much compared with the 27 million Soviet citizens who died in the Great Patriotic War against Hitler, but it is far too many for a ten-week campaign.

First up is the shortage of battle-ready soldiers. Nothing has been easy about getting men to the front. The spring draft has been brought forward but they won't be combat-ready by the summer, the critical time in the Donbas. Belarus is resisting sending ground troops. The national guardsmen of Rosgvardia are complaining that sending them to Ukraine exceeds their constitutional duty to defend the Russian homeland against disorder and terrorism. Splits are emerging in the security establishment.

Second, there is the related problem of how deep this war can go without alienating public opinion. Thousands of young tech-savvy Russians have been leaving for Istanbul, Yerevan and Tbilisi to find gig jobs for dollars (sanctions block western payments) and dodge what they fear is an imminent mobilisation. Wagner Group private contractors are filling in some of the gaps. Chechen fighters are likely to end up in the final showdown with the Mariupol defenders. Recruitment deals are on offer to central Asians. Anything, in other words, to help the middle-class Russians avoid getting their hands dirty or bloody.

Third, there is the risk of supporters of Alexei Navalny, the jailed anti-corruption campaigner, forming a broad stop-the-war crusade that stretches out of the cities into the provinces where the bodies of soldiers are already returning. Part of the failure of the invasion is the corruption of the military establishment. The embarrassing losses in the 2008 short war against Georgia were down to underinvestment. Huge funds were allocated to improve weaponry and battle-preparedness. The 2014 seizure of Crimea and the bombing of Aleppo a year later persuaded Putin the money was well spent. But vast sums were being diverted. It has shown up in Ukraine, with inadequate Chinese tyres and a shortage of encrypted radios. Shoigu's record cannot stand much scrutiny. Yet if he is forced out, Putin looks very vulnerable.

Fourth, the military caste system, its barrack-room bullying with recruits thrashed by their seniors, has remained resistant to change since Soviet times. The result: ground troops unable to adapt to a changing war, even on the most fundamental principles of combined arms fighting, of working together with tanks as they advance. That is leaving tanks vulnerable to ambush, eroding discipline in urban war and fuelling looting to compensate for broken food supply chains.

Finally, intelligence has been politicised. Both the FSB domestic agency and the GRU military service are in the midst of purges. There is an ideological problem at its core. Putin's 7,000-word essay on the "historical unity" of Russia and Ukraine became a compulsory text in the higher echelons of the spy services and army. The West, wrote Putin, forced a change of identity on Ukraine, comparable "to the use of weapons of mass destruction against us". The intelligence-gathering has to fit in with that and, sure enough, Putin was advised that Russian soldiers would be met with celebratory garlands. Hence the idea that Kyiv could be grabbed in days, just as Crimea had been.

What the Cold War teaches us is that crises, including this emerging European war, are a time of recalibration. The poor performance of the Russian army may persuade Nato to rethink its image of the Red Army as ten-feet-high fighting machines, and it may make us braver in our choices. It was part of the Nato calculus for decades that the Soviet army could grab Hamburg in 48 hours and dictate terms to West Germany. Now it is clear Russia has real problems grabbing and holding any properly defended space.

The Ukrainian film-maker Sergei Loznitsa warns us not to be complacent about this. "Putin had no valid reason for invading Ukraine," he says, "so why do you think he would need a valid reason to use nuclear weapons? This can only be stopped by force. Sooner or later, Nato will have to get involved, and the longer they wait, the bloodier the resolution of the conflict would be."

There's a grim lesson for Victory Day. The weaker Putin appears, the more cornered he feels, the greater are the chances he will find another battlefield.