

## **“The future of European Security after the war in Ukraine”**

**Annual Lecture, St Anthony’s College, Oxford**

**17 May 2022**

**By**

**Rt Hon Lord Robertson of Port Ellen KT GCMG HonFRSE PC  
(10<sup>th</sup> Secretary General of NATO and former UK Secretary of State for  
Defence)**

The Victory Day parade in Red Square last week looked – and was meant to look – impressive. Troops goose stepping, formidable tanks and armoured vehicles spitting fumes, rockets of immense size and lethality. It was all meant to cover up the grim reality of the mud and smoking ruins of Mariupol and Kharkov.

Perhaps it did impress those watching the spectacle shown simultaneously on all the Russian state TV stations. For the rest of the world and especially those in Ukraine, there was another sentiment abroad. There was no representation that day of the 15,000 dead Russian soldiers including very young conscripts. No mention of the dozen dead Generals or the thousand destroyed tanks. Or even the sinking of the Moskva, the Russian Navy’s precious Black Sea flagship.

Certainly no representation on the parade of the thousands of Ukrainians who were part of that victory against Nazi Germany in 1945 and who are in 2022 fighting for freedom in the trenches and the cities against today’s aggressor.

I have been to a Victory Day parade in Red Square. Not an ordinary one but the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War in 1985. I was there with Denis Healey when Mrs Thatcher boycotted it in protest at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

One particular memory stands out. The noisy applause and cheering which complimented the TV coverage of the parade was not real or genuine or spontaneous - it was completely manufactured. While the crowd in the square was numerous, it was silent. The crowd sound was provided by recordings played over huge loudspeakers. It was the eerie experience of a Potemkin crowd supposedly appreciating the assembled military might of the USSR.

Russia does do big military parades and it does well drilled marching. It does flaunt large rockets and the Army was assumed to be expert at doctrine and planning. What it seems incapable of doing is fighting and winning against people who don't want them. People who now detest a Putin created invasion and who are determined and motivated to stop and reverse the attempt to eliminate their country and its identity. The spectacle of 9 May cannot cover the clear failure of the war so far in Ukraine.

And yet seeing that display of military regimentation in Red Square stimulated a few thoughts in my mind.

First is that victory over Nazi Germany was not Russia's alone. It was our victory too even if we mark it in November not May. And the huge sacrifice and heroism of the Soviet people - Russian, Ukrainian and the rest, in the Second World War should be recognised by us as well. Without their efforts and the 24 million of them who died, today this lecture – if allowed at all – would be given in the German language.

The Second thought is that we make a mistake if we conflate Vladimir Putin with the Russian people – to whom, as I have said, we owe so much. He has appropriated that part of his country's history and has personalised it and we need to separate him and the small clique around him from the decency and the integrity of the people he leads - but also lets down.

The third thought is that we give too little credit to Russia for the relatively peaceful end to the collapsing Soviet empire. The 4 June 1989 is a day to remember. That is the day Solidarity was elected in Poland ending four decades of Communism. There were 55,000 Red Army troops in Poland at that time and the Soviet Politburo decided that they would stay in barracks. Power changed peacefully. In contrast, on that very same day, Deng Xiaoping, Leader of the Chinese Communist Party ordered the massacre in Tiananmen Square, snuffing out the thirst for democracy in China.

These were the two sides of the same Communist coin.

As the Berlin Wall was breached and the wires cut in the fences between Hungary and Austria that same year, the knee jerk military responses to the Prague Spring and the Hungarian uprising were vetoed. The inevitable

bloodshed was avoided. There were 340,000 Soviet troops in East Germany at the time. The Politburo ordered them not to intervene.

We rarely give proper credit to the Russians for such acts of self-restraint – even if history forced it on them.

Basil Liddell Hart, one of the twentieth century's finest strategic thinkers made a point which is relevant to the current situation.

*'Inflict the least possible permanent injury, for the enemy of today is the customer of tomorrow and the ally of the future'*

In relation to the war he was engaged in we now see the truth in what he said. But it applies equally today, even if the 'other' side in the Kremlin has ignored the message.

But rhetoric matters too. Putin's language in relation to Ukraine and the Ukrainians plumbs new and indecent depths. The characterisation of the Ukrainians as Nazis is as counterproductive as it is dishonest. Some recent semi-official propaganda touches on the disgustingly bizarre. For example RIA Novostni

*"Any organisations that have associated themselves with the practice of Nazism should be liquidated and banned. However, in addition to the above mentioned, a significant part of the masses, which are passive Nazis, accomplices of Nazism, are also guilty. They supported and indulged Nazi government."*

But we too must guard our language. The man in the Kremlin has a remarkably thin skin and we should avoid provoking him into even more reckless violence against the Ukrainians. I have seen him in the meetings I had in what were good times, display an emotional side which surfaced from the cool, controlled approach he took to most matters. Today, closeted away from the virus and from the real world, that emotionalism has been boiled up with a partial view of history and a messianic obsession with Russian greatness. It has produced a dangerous mind-set.

There is no doubt that he has convinced himself without foundation that the West is a threat and that every insult perceived or real is a stab wound. Words matter and they are magnified and distorted and the reaction to loose

language from Western countries can lead to an “I’ll show them” response. Our politicians need to be firm, decisive and supportive but leave the objectives of this war to those who will have to live with the consequences.

British and American politicians must restrain the temptation to set objectives only the Ukrainians themselves should make. The same Ukrainians who captured the votes of the Eurovision audience on Saturday – and then went home to fight and defend their country

And as we look to the future of European security we have a duty to think beyond the present conflict and the malign motives behind it, to what comes next. Russia, for good or ill, will still be there and will still be a factor in whatever the new ‘abnormal’ exists after this grim episode in our continent’s history.

Our argument is not with the Russian people, even if they temporarily link arms when the country is at war. The argument is with Putin and the narrow, small clique around him who are driving this act of war.

Our mission – as a country and as an Alliance is to defend Ukraine; not to attack Russia.

Again the great Basil Liddell Hart, said this;

*“The highest level of Grand Strategy is that of conducting war with a far-sighted regard to the state of the peace that will follow.”*

*Wise words, deserving of our present attention.*

Vladimir Putin will not last for ever, nor will the brutal authoritarian model he has created. Russia will still want to be a player in the world and in our own interest it has to be factored in. The younger generation of Russians who have been seduced by Putin’s nationalism and the manipulative traducing of Ukraine’s government, and even its right to exist, will not want to live with the stain of his aggression.

However, they deserve an idea, a narrative that articulates where a civilised and constructive Russia will fit in to the future global setup. If we are to separate Putin from the Russian people we need to be, as Liddell Hart says, far sighted on Russia’s role in European security.

Frankly, I thought we had found that role in 2002 when we created the NATO Russia Council. Putin sat as an equal round the Council table with the then 19 other Presidents and Prime Ministers of NATO, under my Chairmanship, and started off a process of constructive cooperation which might well have led to a common understanding of mutual security. And it was not all based on rhetoric.

For several years after the Rome Summit - and its endorsement of the right of nations to choose their own security arrangements, - below-the-line working together was producing results.

Two joint conferences on the military aspects of counter terrorism, working parties on telemedicine in disasters, training for anti-narcotics officers, piracy, medical care for the military, supporting the OPCW on the use of chemical weapons in Syria, the disposal of excess ammunition, nuclear doctrine and strategy, crisis management, proliferation, search and rescue at sea, and much more. It was formidable agenda and were all bringing a practical collective approach to security.

That agenda, compromised by the ideological obstruction of US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney and abandoned after the attack in Georgia, remains as work to be done.

So, the question I pose to you tonight is this. How do we persuade the younger, globally thinking Russians to Make Russia Great Again? We have no quarrel with them, only with the delusionists in the Kremlin – and we want them on our side as the world faces the urgency of climate change, global terrorism, organised crime, migration, instability, pandemics – and all the afflictions we all after this latest lethal virus attack.

We need to remind them that Putin was the architect of this present humiliation and the breach of the international order. They can be the architects of a new and more positive and productive Russian future.

Before Vladimir Putin took a sabbatical leave from reality the Russian people were connected to the world. The official press was slavish to the Kremlin but there were other voices too and access to the global internet. The fact that they are silenced and dissent even of the most modest kind is violently outlawed provides evidence of the fact that Putin cares about, and fears,

Russian public opinion. His worst nightmare still is another colour revolution in the streets of Moscow.

Therefore we need to reach out and over him and into that space with the prospect of a better future for the Russian people. We found ways in the Cold War to speak to ordinary Russians; we can do it again.

Tell them of a future where their contribution to the 1945 victory is appreciated and where we pay tribute to the way in which the end of Communism was conducted without bloodshed.

A future where we recognise that we have shared destinies and the collective means to shape them.

A future where the educated, trained, skilled and civilised people of Russia don't have to emigrate to find an open society to use these skills. A society using them at home and not emigrant fodder for the western need for skilled workers to feed the energy transition.

A future for Russians whose values are also those we treasure and they envy – of the rule of law, private property, a free press and free speech. And a future Russian society where there is a right to choose those who govern and the expectation that they will transfer power when told to by the people.

The idea that on 'sex, religion and public order', as I was told by a senior Russian, there is a new Berlin Wall between West and East is a fiction invented by a ruling elite enriching and protecting itself and its lifestyle. A future Russia – beyond this present catastrophic crisis would, and should, be a different model to the present one characterised as it is by bureaucracy, corruption and spectacular incompetence.

Making Russia Great Again need not involve land grabs, acquiescent spheres of influence, nuclear sabre rattling, grey zone intimidation and election meddling. That is a diminishing, sordid, demeaning role for the true spirit of Peter the Great's descendants.

Russia, as a positive power and influence in the world, can make a difference in so many spheres and activities and in doing so gain and retain the attention it deserves. At the end of World War Two and at the end of the Cold War Russia

stood proud and had the world's respect. A new generation of Russians need to reclaim their country and rescue it before too late.

They should perhaps pay attention to the words of President Putin himself. Standing beside me at the Press Conference in Rome almost exactly twenty years ago at the NATO Russia Summit, when he said, speaking of the previous fifty years,

*“Nothing good came from that confrontation between us and the rest of the world. We certainly gained nothing from it”.*

Let the Russian public listen to that and reflect. It was right that sunny day in Rome.

It's still right today.