

Part One: Research Project Experience

Structure and Methodology

My initial research proposal identified three instances of Russian Military Aggression which would be analysed and compared, with the intent of identifying common causal factors and warning signs. The case studies were the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the 2022 Ukraine Crisis. At the time, the latter crisis was limited to a mobilisation of over 100,000 Russian troops to the Ukrainian border between November 2021 and February 2022.¹ However, by the time I began my research project, Russia had invaded and the situation had escalated to war.

This research project was constantly evolving. At times this was due to new information revealed by the literature, which allowed me to view the relationship between these events through new eyes; at others, as above, the ongoing conflict invited me to change my focus and further explore the nearly unprecedented war. However, throughout my project, two things remained constant. Firstly, the methodology of analysing secondary literature and news coverage of these events stayed the same. Secondly, the unwavering support of my supervisor, Dr. Noah Buckley, persisted, offering guidance and insightful commentary at our weekly meetings and through our email correspondence.

By the end of the six weeks, I had narrowed my focus to the latter two case studies; the invasion of Georgia was too far removed from the other two, both by time and political. I continued analysing the context leading up to both conflicts, the warning signs of military action that were seen, and the arguments from scholars who believed a Russian invasion would not occur in 2022. All my research was intended to identify similarities between these cases that could contribute to a framework for predicting acts of Russian military aggression in the future.

Findings

The events leading up to both cases of military aggression shared a number of similarities. Firstly, public statements about Ukraine in the months before each conflict dismissed the state's right to exist. In September 2013, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that Russia and Ukraine "are one nation" with "common historical roots and common destiny".² Similarly, in 2021, President Putin published an essay entitled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians". The sentiment was

¹ Anton Troianovski and David E Sanger, "Russia Issues Subtle Threats More Far-Reaching Than a Ukraine Invasion," *The New York Times*, January 16th, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/16/world/europe/russia-ukraine-invasion.html>. Troianovski, Anton; Sanger, David E

² "Interview to Channel One and Associated Press news agency," September 4th, 2013. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19143>. [Audio Transcript].

echoed in Putin's speech on February 21st, 2022, just days before the invasion, which claimed that the state of Ukraine was created by Russia under Vladimir Lenin's rule.³

Secondly, Russia undertook military action before military conflict officially began in both cases. In 2014, Putin claimed not to order the military to take action until February 23rd, but had in fact ordered the Black Sea Fleet and special operations forces to begin a "peacekeeping operation" as early as February 20th.⁴ The 2022 invasion was preceded by four months of Putin stationing hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers on the Ukrainian border. Russia's declaration of invasion — while released on February 23rd, prior to the February 24th invasion — was suspected to be pre-recorded.⁵ On both occasions, conflict had begun before Russia officially declared its intentions.

Thirdly, most Western leaders and states were taken by surprise when the conflict began. Western nations were entirely unprepared for the 2014 Annexation of Crimea; just one month earlier, a NATO Defence College expert had remarked that Russia's military was chronically underfunded and "neither a threat, nor a partner".⁶ In the months preceding the 2022 War in Ukraine, many expert academics predicted that Russia would not invade Ukraine based on speculative frameworks of how Putin makes political decisions.⁷ While United States military intelligence was aware of Russian plans to invade from October 2021, many nations (including Ukraine) did not consider invasion a legitimate threat until days before it occurred.⁸

These similarities would indicate that in the short- to medium-term, Russia was similarly dismissive of Ukrainian sovereignty and international law norms. However, the West largely

³ Kristaps Andrejsons, "Putin's Speech Laid Out a Dark Vision of Russian History," *Foreign Policy*, February 22nd, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/22/putin-speech-ukraine-war-history-russia/>.

⁴ Daniel Treisman, "Crimea: Anatomy of a Decision," in *The New Autocracy: Information, Politics, and Policy in Putin's Russia* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 277-297.

⁵ Joshua Rhett Miller, "Putin's declaration of war against Ukraine taped days earlier: reports," *New York Post*, February 24th, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/02/24/putin-taped-declaration-of-war-against-ukraine-days-earlier/>.

⁶ Ofer Fridman, "On the "Gerasimov Doctrine": Why the West Fails to Beat Russia to the Punch," *PRISM* 8, no. 2 (2019): 100-112.

⁷ See, for example: Dmitri Trenin, "Looking out Five Years: Ideological, Geopolitical, and Economic Drivers of Russian Foreign Policy," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, August 22nd, 2017, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/72812>; Eugene Chausovsky, "How Russia Decides When to Invade," *Foreign Policy*, December 27th, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/27/how-russia-decides-when-to-invade/>; Jeff Hawn, "Russia Isn't About to Attack Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, November 17th, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/17/russia-isnt-about-to-attack-ukraine/>; Jeff Hawn, "Stop Panicking About Ukraine — And Putin," *Foreign Policy*, January 24th, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/24/russia-ukraine-putin-panic-war-unlikely/>.

⁸ Shane Harris et al., "Road to war: U.S. struggled to convince allies, and Zelensky, of risk of invasion," *The Washington Post*, August 16th, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/interactive/2022/ukraine-road-to-war/>.

underestimated the likelihood of conflict occurring; an invasion in 2022 was not deemed more likely despite similar Russian behaviour to the 2014 Annexation of Crimea.

Achievements and Challenges

This research project was not without challenges. The types of literature available on my two case studies differed. Large amounts of analysis on Crimea were written in hindsight, after the military conflict had occurred, while analysis on the War in Ukraine was written before or during the conflict; articles were proven wrong and predictions became outdated. This led to interesting results in the latter case, but ultimately provided different types of perspectives. As a result, I ended up using findings on Crimea as a framework to understand the context of the 2022 invasion, as direct comparisons were somewhat less fruitful.

I also struggled with time management and project planning. Without any prior experience of self-directed research, I had created an ambitious plan for the six weeks that I was unable to adhere to. In part, this was due to the changing focus of my research between my proposal and the end of the research period. Competing commitments over the summer and a highly optimistic assessment of how long areas of research would take, or how easy it would be to reach a conclusion within an area of the literature, also contributed to this challenge. As a result, I was unable to complete the research report that I had planned to write at the end of the six weeks, which initially disappointed me. However, the experience taught me about my own limits and the necessity of being more realistic when planning such projects, which I believe will help me manage more successful projects in future.

My research included reading the news coverage of the War in Ukraine in order to stay on top of the crisis. At times, this was difficult and demoralising, especially when my news sources published interviews with Ukrainian refugees or reported on the largescale sexual assault and human rights violations of civilians throughout the conflict. There was also a personal aspect of this challenge. My family had opened our home to a Ukrainian refugee family between February and May 2022, who had shared stories of their experience with me, and who remained affected by the conflict throughout their stay. Their father had stayed in Lviv to fight, and his family remained terrified for his safety; all three children had downloaded an app that alerted them to air raid sirens in Lviv so that they could call their dad afterwards to make sure he was alive. My experiences before the research period, as well as the material I was reading during, opened my eyes to the human element of this conflict, which is often left out of the academic articles that I was reading. On one hand, this prevented me from detaching the events taking place from the real people harmed on the ground. However, it was also

emotionally demanding and upsetting for me to engage with, sometimes requiring me to step away from my desk or take an unplanned break before I could work again.

Part Two: Leadership Attributes and Personal Development

Having completed my first summer of the programme, I have a much stronger idea of what leadership really means. The first two days of leadership workshops allowed me to reflect not only on the kind of leader I wanted to be, but also the kind that I didn't want to be. Discussing the subject with the other Laidlaw scholars at these workshops and throughout the summer has been enlightening. For many of our class of Laidlaw scholars, this is the first time that we have been invited to actively think about leadership as more than an abstract concept or quality. While we don't always fully agree with one another, the exposure to other scholars' opinions has both challenged and encouraged me, allowing me to actively reflect on my beliefs and to allow them to change. I have also found it very interesting to learn about leadership theory from a multitude of perspectives, ranging from a Trinity Business School lecture to a more emotive discussion of Associate Professor Helen Sheridan's personal experiences with leadership throughout her career.

The Laidlaw programme has also given me the tools to introspect on how I have engaged with leadership roles before, and where certain habits have created more stress and difficulty than necessary. Prior to this, I preferred to work alone in group projects and workplace environments, only working with others when I did not understand something or when they asked for my help. I also had a tendency to take on more extracurricular commitments than necessary. Both these habits brought me closer to burnout and caused undue stress. One summer into this programme, I am better equipped to recognise when I am falling into unproductive work patterns and change my behaviour. Attending the individual coaching session and filling out the strengths profile also helped with this by introducing an outside perspective, which further challenged me about these habits.

Additionally, I have learned practical skills which have helped in many other areas of my life. I have a much stronger idea of how I work and study, developed through trial and error across the research period. While I found time management and project planning difficult due to the novelty of this experience, I learned from the challenges I faced. I developed independent research skills – where to find sources, how to assess the trustworthiness of an article or author, how to critically assess a reading. I also learned how to network and properly introduce myself to other academics in professional settings. I look forward to the remaining leadership workshops, which I hope will allow me to further develop as a leader and as a scholar.

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