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In Ukraine, Any Accident Could Turn a Crisis Into a Catastrophe

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On 2 December 1943, 105 German bombers made a surprise air raid on Bari in southern Italy, where they sank 27 Allied cargo and transport ships. One that blew up was an American "liberty ship", the SS John Harvey, carrying a secret cargo of 2,000 mustard gas bombs intended for retaliation against German forces in the event of them using poison gas against the Allies.

After the destruction of the John Harvey, liquid mustard gas spilled out of the bombs, mixed with the sea water and floating patches of oil in the harbour, and inflicted terrible burns on surviving sailors in the water. Many of those rescued were wrapped in blankets that became impregnated with the liquified mustard that made their injuries worse.

The gas vaporised and mixed with clouds of smoke that drifted over Bari, poisoning soldiers and civilians alike. The presence of chemical weapons on the allied side was a closely held secret, so doctors did not understand what was killing their patients. The American and British political and military leadership at first tried to keep the disaster a secret, with British soldiers killed by the mustard gas being officially described as having died as a result of "burns due to enemy action".

Pundits assert that Putin is bluffing

The cover-up continued long after the raid, though an excellent book entitled *Disaster at Bari* by Glenn B Infield was published in 1967. I became interested in the event because an uncle of mine, Major Richard Myles "Teeny" Arbuthnot, who was with the 8th Army, died in Bari at about this time and was buried there in late 1943. I wondered if he might have been an undisclosed victim of mustard gas, but he turned out to have died – reportedly from malarial meningitis – a couple of months before the German raid.

The Bari disaster has modern relevance because it provides pointers about the potential use of weapons of mass destruction in the Ukraine war. A widespread assumption, false to my mind, is that they would be used only as the result of a decision by President Vladimir Putin, making good on his vague threat to use them.

Pundits confidently assert that he is bluffing, since to escalate the conflict to a nuclear level would be against Russian interests and military traditions. It is therefore safe "to call his bluff" on the general schoolyard principle that a bully is always a coward.

As an argument, this goes against Putin's track record in wartime, which is one of a gambler but not a bluffer, as when he launched his doomed invasion of Ukraine on 24 February. His decision-making is all too demonstrably dangerously ill-judged, but I want to make another point, which is illustrated by what happened at Bari.

Ingredients for a calamity

Real calamities – in war as in peace – occur for multiple causes, some culpable and avoidable and some accidental and unforeseeable. Accidents happen all the time, but particularly in wartime. At Bari, almost nobody knew about the lethal cargo in the harbour on board the John Harvey. Combine this with an inability to unload the ship in the congested harbour and a gross underestimate of German air power and one has the ingredients for a calamity.

On the day that the raid took place, hubris was riding particularly high, with the Allied air commander, Sir Arthur Coningham, telling a press conference that the Germans were

defeated in the air and he would “consider it a personal insult if the enemy should send so much as a single plane over the city [Bari]”.

Mocking this overconfidence is easy enough, but over the past half-century few military conflicts have gone as was confidently expected by the protagonists. The few successes were usually small in scale and in confined geographical areas, such as the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, the Falklands War in 1982 and the Russian invasion of Chechnya in 1999.

Spectacular failures

Most invasions that I have reported on have been spectacular failures from the point of view of the invader, from the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Foreign interventions using air power and local proxy forces, as in Afghanistan in 2001 and Libya in 2011, produced ruin for the Afghans and Libyans and frustration for the intervening powers.

It is conventional wisdom to say that dictators like Putin and Saddam Hussein are particularly prone to an exaggerated idea of their own strength and of the weakness of their enemies. This is true enough of Putin in Ukraine, as it was for Saddam Hussein’s invasions of Iran in 1980 and Kuwait in 1990. But George W Bush and Tony Blair were equally hubristic in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003.

Georges Clemenceau, the French prime minister during the First World War, famously said that “war is too important to be left to the generals”, but politicians tend to be just as bad.

Belittling the enemy

The politics of war are very different from the politics of peace: politicians deal in words which unravel on the battlefield. Most are too prone to believe their own propaganda, lauding their own side while belittling the enemy. Wars have too many moving parts to take on board, so even a leader as intelligent as Blair never seems to have understood much about the multiple conflicts in Iraq. Going by his memoirs, David Cameron never made any effort to learn about Libya.

The media is equally at fault, liking wars because they provide news and drama, but it is not very good at understanding them because it dilutes complex reality. It divides the protagonists into white hats and black hats, over-praising one and demonising the other.

Systematic bias and wishful thinking cumulatively produce a distorted picture which may wholly differ from reality. In Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, the US and Britain thought that they had won wars which were only just beginning.

Overconfidence and crass error

The same certitude is in full flower in our perceptions of the war in Ukraine. When Ukrainian men of military age are prevented from leaving the country, it is taken as an encouraging sign of military determination. When potential Russian conscripts try to leave the country, it is portrayed as a sure sign of collapsing morale and opposition to an unpopular war. This interpretation may well be correct, but there is no certainty about it.

Wars are usually reported as if those waging them are in control, but more often conflicts develop their own momentum. Putin appears not to have known what to do since the first days of the war, when his expected walkover failed to materialise. Late in the day, he is mobilising and desperately looking for policy options that are by now very limited in number.

One of them is to use weapons of mass destruction, which is certainly sabre-rattling at this stage, but his threat retains credibility only if the sabre is finally produced and looks as if it might be used. As in Bari so many years ago, overconfidence and crass error can easily combine to produce a catastrophe.

Patrick Cockburn is the author of War in the Age of Trump (Verso).

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