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[Mahir Ali](https://www.dawn.com/authors/322/mahir-ali) Published February 1, 2023

Mahir Ali

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GERMAN tanks on the borders of Russia. Why does that ring a distant bell, in fact, an alarm bell? The last time that happened may have been 80 years ago, but the so-called Great Patriotic War still resonates loudly in the collective Russian consciousness, partly as a consequence of relentless state propaganda, but also because for some survivors it’s still a living memory.

It’s likely the German government’s reluctance to supply Ukraine with Leopard 2 tanks was in part an oblique acknowledgement of that horrible history. Germany invaded Russia twice in the 20th century; it’s understandable why it might not wish to be seen as the driving force behind a third attempt in the 21st century.

The government of Chancellor Olaf Scholz, which has already been supplying plenty of military aid to Ukraine, much of it surreptitiously, finally caved in last week after relentless bullying by its Nato allies. It also does not want to be singled out as a stumbling block in Western assistance for Kyiv’s resistance. Last week, it agreed to supply 14 of its coveted Leopards, in “lockstep” with allies such as Poland, the UK and US.

America’s M1 Abrams tanks were high on Volodymyr Zelensky’s Christmas wish list when the Ukrainian president visited Washington in December. Santa was happy to bounce young Volodya on his knee, but prepared to provide him only the smaller war toys — armoured vehicles, missile launchers and defence systems, and the like. Joe Biden relented last week: 31 Abrams tanks will wind their way to the war zone at some point. It could take months, if not years, The New York Times quoted military sources as saying.

Can more Western weapons ‘save’ Ukraine?

The Leopards could reach Ukraine much quicker, certainly in time for the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the Battle of Kursk in western Russia in July-August 1943, which effectively turned the tide against the Soviet Union’s Nazi invaders. It is remembered as the largest tank battle in history: 6,000 tanks, 4,000 aircraft and 2,000,000 troops were involved, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica.

The difference this time around is that Russia is the invader. Notwithstanding serial Nato provocations over the previous three decades, the hostilities launched this month last year were Vladimir Putin’s choice. It would have qualified as an extraordinarily dumb choice even if his initial assumptions of a cakewalk to Kyiv had proved to be realistic.

They turned out instead to be absurdly inflated. Russian military adventurism has come a cropper on almost every front, and frequent changes of command have not helped. Raw recruits thrust onto front lines with little training can hardly be blamed for their poor performance, and too many of them will not live to tell their tales. Both sides are estimated to have lost more than 100,000 military personnel each. And for what? The Ukrainians can at least credibly claim to be defending their homeland. The Russians lack a viable excuse for their enforced sacrifice.

The Western attitude towards the conflagration of which it is incontrovertibly a part is broadly divided between those who consider the steadily increasing weaponisation of Ukraine to be a means of pushing Putin to the negotiating table, and an increasing number of others who envisage a decisive Russian defeat. But what exactly does a Russian defeat look like? Would driving Russian forces out of the territories occupied since last February suffice, or would it involve a reversion to the pre-2014 status quo ante? Both aims could be justified, the latter on the basis of the 1991 agreement between Russia, Ukraine and Belarus that demolished the Soviet Union.

There could be ambitions beyond that, though, which could feed into Putin’s claims of threats to the Russian Federation’s integrity. Ultimately, though, Putin himself is the biggest threat to Russia. Putin must go, and the impetus for that needs to come from within Russia, not from Washington, Brussels or Berlin. His reign since the turn of the century has been disastrous in many respects, but the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine takes the (poison) cake.

A Kremlin without Putin could potentially benefit both Russia and Ukraine. But there is no clear indication that such a development is imminent, and it is far from clear who will take over if, by hook or by crook, he departs. Among the possible successors is Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose brutal Wagner group of mercenaries has militarily been more effective than the regular Russian army. That would truly be disastrous, but the alternatives too provide little cause for hope.

Russia’s disastrous performance in World War I triggered the revolutions of 1917. It could do with a repeat. But the lethal arming of Ukraine — and broader Western hyperbole, such as The Guardian’s headline ‘Terror on New Year’s Eve: huge Russian missile attack kills one in Ukraine’ — doesn’t really help.

[mahir.dawn@gmail.com](http://mailto:mahir.dawn@gmail.com)

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