



Demonstrators march with a banner that reads “Ukraine—Peace, Russia—Freedom,” in Moscow on 24 February 2022 after Russia’s attack on Ukraine. Many large antiwar protests were organized in the immediate aftermath of Russia’s invasion, but the Russian government has subsequently stymied large-scale street protests and closed down the opposition’s access to Russian media. (Photo by Dmitry Serebryakov, Associated Press)

Russian Public Opinion and the Ukraine War

Applying the American Experience

John Mueller, PhD

This article is a greatly expanded version of the author’s article originally published online 26 May 2022 on the CATO website at <https://www.cato.org/blog/russian-public-opinion-ukraine-war-perspectives-american-experience>. Reprinted with permission.

Since World War II, the United States has conducted extended wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Whether the Russian effort in Ukraine will be similarly extended has yet to be seen. However, should that come about, evidence about public opinion from America's wars suggests lessons—and nonlessons—for assessing Russian opinion on the war in Ukraine.

The comparison suggests that, after a rally-around-the-flag effect at the outset of the war, a decline of support is to be expected regardless of the effects of media coverage, antiwar demonstrations, censorship and propaganda efforts, or the military course of the war. This decline may not cause an abrupt exit from the war, but it may well result in an increasing willingness

to accept failure or even debacle in the war and in a strong inclination not to attempt other such ventures. However, there is an important difference in the experiences, one that is potentially consequential: while the average American remained substantially untouched personally by the wars, that may not hold for the average Russian.

Abstract

People tend to believe what they want to believe. Initially, publics often overwhelmingly want to believe that the actions of their governments—whatever the actual motivation—were justified, wise, and necessary. However, even if antiwar officials get into office, this may not change the prosecution of the war very much due to the momentum such military adventures tend to acquire by their nature. On the other hand, even successful prosecution of a war is unlikely to convert people who have already decided it was not worth the costs. Therefore, the eventual decline of public support may not cause an abrupt exit, but it may result in a long-term strong inclination within the Russian government not to attempt other such ventures. Consequently, the Ukraine invasion may well prove to be a “one-off” anomaly rather than a harbinger of other such attacks to follow. In fact, the Ukraine war may soon be recognized as an anachronism unlikely to affect the global trend toward a decline of international war as a means of settling international disputes, one of the greatest sociocultural achievements in modern history. For example, a large part of the Russian public seems to have accepted as past history the Soviet debacle in Afghanistan in the late 1980s and might accept as necessary a similarly humiliating withdrawal from Ukraine as an acceptable cost for achieving peace, a return to domestic normalcy, and readmittance to the international community. Consequently, the key issue is whether the senior Russian civilian and military leadership—who often seem fixated on rectifying perceived humiliations of the past—would be willing to accept such an outcome irrespective of what the majority of the Russian populace actually desires.



Russian President Vladimir Putin walks with Gen. Valery Gerasimov, chief of the General Staff of the Russian military (left) and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on 13 September 2021 at the Mulino training ground in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia, during the Zapad 2021 joint military drills held by Russia and Belarus. (Photo by Sergei Savostyanov/Kremlin Pool/Alamy Live News)

Initial Support

Even discounting for the restrictions in civil liberties, initial Russian popular support for the war appears to have been quite high—probably around 70 or 75 percent. The same number roughly holds for the American wars except for the one in Afghanistan, conducted shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, where support at the outset was more like 90 percent.¹

People tend to believe what they want to believe. In all cases, the strong initial support for the wars was likely the result of a rally-around-the-flag effect in which the publics overwhelmingly wanted to believe



Against a background of waving flags, Russian President Vladimir Putin attends a concert on 18 March 2022 at Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow to commemorate the eighth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. The ceremony was intended in part to bolster public support for Putin's February 2022 invasion, the purpose of which was to annex portions of Ukraine to Russia. Although Putin has attempted to promote public support for his "special military operation" against Ukraine through extensive state propaganda, a controlled media, and oppression measures against war opponents, historical experience suggests that a decline of popular support is inevitable regardless of the effects of media coverage, antiwar demonstrations, censorship, and propaganda efforts due to the military course of the war itself. No amount of censorship and biased reporting can suppress the two most important elements in the public's decision calculus: the war is still going on and our people are dying in it. (Photo by Ramil Sitdikov, Agence France-Presse)

that the actions of their governments were justified, wise, and necessary.

The strong initial support for the Ukraine invasion among the Russian public has routinely been attributed to the propaganda efforts of the Russian government and its controlled media. But those same forces have for years sought to convince Russians of the value of the Russian anti-COVID vaccine, Sputnik. Yet resistance to that message has been extensive.² And if extensive and purposeful promotion could guarantee acceptance, we'd

all be driving Edsels and drinking New Coke—legendary marketing failures in 1958 and 1985, respectively, by two of the (otherwise) most successful businesses in history: the Ford Motor Company and Coca-Cola.³

The acceptance of misinformation in such matters is hardly unusual. At the outset of the war in Iraq, most Americans, nudged on by the Republican administration, said they believed that Saddam Hussein was "personally involved" in the 9/11 attacks. And, although the nudging stopped, 30 to 40 percent held to that belief for more than seven years. Moreover, the public substantially bought the ideas that a loss in Afghanistan would lead to more 9/11s, that al-Qaida

presented a threat to the United States that was existential and had infiltrated thousands of trained operatives into the country, that wars in Vietnam and Korea were necessary to prevent World War III, and that Saddam Hussein would come to "dominate" the Middle East with his remarkably inept army and/or hand off weapons of mass destruction to congenial terrorists. Plausible counters to such assertions mostly generated little headway.

The Decline of Support

The U.S. data suggest that Russian support for the war in Ukraine will decline—rather sharply in the first stages as reluctant supporters drop off and then more slowly as the remainder comes increasingly to consist of harder core supporters. And the most important element in this decline is the cumulation of casualties—and particularly of combat deaths—among their forces.

It should not be assumed, however, that poll respondents have much of a grasp on what the actual number of casualties or battle deaths is—and their guesses on the issue do not correlate very well with support or opposition to the war. Rather, people seem to make a rough cost-benefit calculation in which the value of the war as they see it is put up against the cost thus far in American lives.

In all of this, what has chiefly mattered for American public opinion is American losses, not those of the people defended. Although the number of Iraqis who have died because of the U.S. invasion of their country has reached into the hundreds of thousands, the only cumulative body count that truly matters for American public opinion, and the only one that is routinely reported, is the American one.

There is nothing new about this phenomenon: Americans backed the wars in Korea and Vietnam because they saw them as vital to confronting the threat presented by international communism, and defending the South Koreans or the South Vietnamese was decidedly a secondary goal.⁴ And although fully 60 percent of the American public held the Iraqi people to be *innocent* of any blame for their leader's policies in the Gulf War of 1991, this lack of animosity toward the Iraqi people did not translate into a great deal of sympathy among the American public for Iraqi casualties. Extensive pictures and publicity about the civilian casualties resulting from an attack on a Baghdad bomb shelter on 13 February 1991 had no impact on support for bombing. Moreover, images of the “highway of death” and reports that one hundred thousand Iraqi combatants had died in the war scarcely dampened enthusiasm at the various “victory” and “welcome home” parades and celebrations.⁵ Nor was much sympathy or even interest shown for the Iraqi civilian deaths that resulted from the severe sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United States during the 1990s.⁶

Due to the historic closeness of Russians and Ukrainians (“our brothers”), this effect may be different in the current war.

Weighing the Stakes

The public did not weigh the stakes the same for every war. When support for the wars in Vietnam and Korea dropped below 50 percent, some nineteen thousand battle deaths had been suffered by the United States. In the war in Iraq, that level of support, using the same measure, was reached when around 1,500 had been killed. This lower tolerance for casualties is likely largely due to the fact that the American public placed far less value on the stakes in Iraq than it did on those in Korea and Vietnam which were seen to be vital elements in the Cold War. How such a calculation will play out for Russians today has yet to be determined.

The Impact of Events in the War

Specific events in the war seem for the most part to have had little long-term impact on the downward trend. Thus, a drop-in support in 2004 after the disclosure of prisoner abuses in Iraq by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison was mostly reversed in a month or so. And the same thing happened when there was a notable upward shift in support after Saddam Hussein was captured at the end of 2003: support soon fell back to where it had been before and then continued its generally downward course.⁷ Support for the Vietnam War was already in decline at the time of the Tet Offensive in 1968, and it is not at all clear that that dramatic event accelerated the pace of the decline much.⁸

More generally, as the Saddam Hussein capture suggests, if people have decided the war is not worth it, improvements on the battlefield will not increase support for the war. There was such a perceived improvement at the time of the surge in Iraq between 2007 and 2008 when, for example, the percentage of people holding that the United States was making significant progress rose from 36 to 46, while the percentage concluding that it was winning the war rose from 21 to 37. Despite this, however, support for the war itself did not increase—there was no change in questions asking if the respondents favored the war, felt it had been worth the effort or the right decision or a mistake, or favored staying as long as it takes.⁹ Successful prosecution of a war, it appears, is unlikely to convert people who have already decided it was not worth the costs.

The Impact of the Media and Antiwar Demonstrations

If the decline in support is primarily caused by increasing casualties as suffered by the invading forces, media and propaganda efforts and public antiwar demonstrations will be less significant. This effect likely holds for the Ukraine war as well.

No amount of censorship and biased reporting can suppress the two most important elements in

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the public's decision calculus: the war is still going on and our people are dying in it. And that noisy public antiwar demonstrations often fail to convince and may be counterproductive is suggested by a comparison of the Korea and Vietnam Wars—costly anti-communist wars on the fringes of Asia. Although there were few, if any, antiwar demonstrations during the war in Korea, support for that war eroded as it

did during the Vietnam War in which antiwar protest was frequent and highly visible.¹⁰ The antics of Vietnam antiwar protesters were often met with dismay by the public. For example, after the riots in Chicago at the time of the Democratic convention in 1968, polls found that people were overwhelmingly supportive of the police, not the protesters.¹¹

Even if an antiwar movement is successful in getting like-minded officials into office, this may not change the prosecution of the war very much. Refusing to repeat the mistakes of their counterparts in the Vietnam War, opponents of the Iraq War, rather than expressing themselves in often unruly public demonstrations, worked assiduously within the Democratic party. As such, they were instrumental in engineering the party's 2004 nomination for the presidency of the most credible antiwar candidate, John Kerry. Then, in the 2006 and 2008 elections, they fielded successful antiwar candidates for House and Senate, many of them Iraq War veterans, substantially increasing in each case the number of Democratic seats. And above all, they were the cornerstone of the success in 2008 of the only major presidential candidates in the field to have opposed the Iraq War, Barack Obama. But Obama proved to be quite a disappointment: he appointed to notable office no one who had publicly and clearly opposed the Iraq war before it was launched. Obama left that war



Leonid Volkov, chief of staff for jailed Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny (*background photo*), speaks during an interview at the European Parliament 14 December 2021 in Strasbourg, France. "Russian critics of President Vladimir Putin are waging a vigorous campaign of resistance to the war in Ukraine, according to ... Volkov. Navalny's supporters are actively fighting to resist Putin on the information front 'where we fight to change the attitude of the Russian society.'" (Photo by Frederick Florin, Agence France-Press)

more or less on George W. Bush's timetable, and then he handed the war in Afghanistan over to his successor eight years later.

The Consequences of the Decline of Support

Although declining public support for the war may not generally lead to abandonment of the war, it may still have consequences. For example, the decline helped impel changes in military tactics to reduce the rate of American casualties in all four of the wars, although this seems to have had little effect on support for the war despite predictions that decreasing casualty rates would generate an increase of support.¹²

A second effect can be the creation of a politically permissive atmosphere for withdrawal and even for debacle. This can be seen in the public acquiescence in the abrupt and embarrassing collapse in Afghanistan

in 2021. The public generally accepted the disaster and was not interested in sending troops to attempt to rectify it. The collapse itself seems to have had little lasting effect on President Joseph Biden's political standing. The same phenomenon was seen in the acceptance of utter collapse of the U.S. position in Vietnam in 1975 which led to a communist takeover there. In fact, the man who presided over that debacle, President Gerald Ford, tried to use the fiasco to his advantage in his re-election campaign the next year, arguing that "we are at peace. Not a single young American is fighting or dying on any foreign soil tonight."¹³ Although there are no poll data, the Russian public seems to have accepted the Soviet debacle in Afghanistan under Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s, and in all, the experience suggests that in time they would accept even a humiliating withdrawal from Ukraine in much the same way.

Third, the Ukraine war is unlikely to affect the decline of international war, one of the greatest achievements in modern history.¹⁴

Until Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Europe had lived free from substantial international war for the longest period since the word "Europe" was invented some 2,500 years ago. For the most part, the rest of the world has followed suit, and the use of war to settle international differences has almost completely vanished—although measures short of direct warfare continue to be employed including interventions in civil wars, applying economic sanctions, attempting covert regime change, poaching fish, and waging armed border disputes in remote areas.

Some are concerned that the Ukraine war might shatter this remarkable development.¹⁵ But it is far more likely that the aversion to such wars will continue, something strongly suggested by the facts that the war has almost universally been condemned and that other countries are unlikely to be inspired by the costly and messy example no matter how the war comes out.

America's wars mostly generated a strong public reluctance to repeating the experience. There were no repeats of the Korea or Vietnam wars, and the

country seems to have embraced a kind of Iraq/Afghanistan syndrome after its massive overreactions to 9/11.¹⁶ This phenomenon suggests that the Russian venture into Ukraine may well prove to be a one-off rather than a harbinger of other such attacks. As in the United States, the primary response will likely be "let's not do that again."

"Russians may well come to face severe economic pain and perhaps even collapse because of their invasion of Ukraine."

A Potentially Important Difference: Direct Pain to the Public

Beyond those who fought the American wars and those close to them, the public never really had to pay a punishing price or tax for their wars. In contrast, Russians may well come to face severe economic pain and perhaps even collapse because of their invasion of Ukraine.

The chief architect of the war, President Vladimir Putin, argues that Russia will be able to suck up any economic hit. However, things were not looking that good for the Russian economy even before the war. A lengthy period of growth during this century was halted in 2014 and growth has been stagnant ever since. Some of this was caused by the reaction to Putin's annexation of portions of Ukraine in 2014 which set off something like an economic doomsday machine. Because of its antics, Russia suffered a decline in the value of its currency, capital flight, a drop in its stock market, and a decline in foreign investment. And, perhaps most importantly, there was a very substantial drop in confidence by investors, buyers, and sellers throughout the world.¹⁷ This alienated, in particular, the European Union, which had long been Russia's largest trading partner and direct investor.¹⁸ In addition, economic sanctions were visited on Russia by other states, and unrelated to the crisis, there was a severe drop in prices for oil on the international market, a development that was especially harmful to Russia: oil and gas sales fund about 36 percent of its annual

budget. As a result, real disposable income fell by 15 percent between 2014 and 2017.¹⁹ Moreover, aspirational purchases for homes and cars shifted to ones devoted to daily needs.²⁰

Because of this, economists, even before the Ukraine crisis, were suggesting that Russia's prospect for growth over the next decade was "dim."²¹ The current war there is likely to considerably exacerbate this situation, particularly if oil and natural gas prices descend from their current highs.²² European customers have greatly increased their efforts to wean themselves from dependence on Russian oil and natural gas, and there has been a determined effort to apply punishing economic sanctions. Moreover, a great number of foreign, and particularly Western, firms have abruptly withdrawn from the Russian economy, and as a simple matter of business, few are likely to return any

time soon, particularly if Putin remains in office. This could be particularly costly because, as Obama pointed out derisively, if undiplomatically, in his final news conference as president in 2016, "Their economy doesn't produce anything that anybody wants to buy, except oil and gas and arms. They don't innovate."²³

Although nothing like this happened in any of the four American wars, the economic damage for Russia's war is likely to be felt directly by the Russian people as currency becomes insecure, travel is restricted, jobs are lost, incomes fall, opportunities are snuffed out, shortages erupt, the quality of life plunges, corruption becomes ever worse, businesses fail, government coffers become empty, and talent is hemorrhaged. Russia may be able to ride out the shock, but there is a special potential for disaster as well. ■

Notes

1. John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "Trends in Public Opinion on Terrorism," 14 May 2020, 8, 19–21, accessed 10 June 2022, <https://politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/terrorpolls.pdf>.

The poll question used to measure war support is of this form: "Do you think the United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in xxx?" This works less well for the war in Afghanistan than for the others because there were effectively two wars in Afghanistan: the one in 2001 that quickly succeeded, and the one against the Taliban insurgency that began a few years later and ground on for nearly two decades. Some, or even many, respondents may choose to take the question to refer to the first war, not to the second or to a combination of the two.

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3. On this consideration more generally, see John Mueller, *Public Opinion on War and Terror: Manipulated or Manipulating?* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 10 August 2021), accessed 10 June 2022, <https://www.cato.org/white-paper/public-opinion-war-terror>.

4. John Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1973), 48–49. More generally, see John Mueller, "Public Opinion as a Constraint on U.S. Foreign Policy: Assessing the Perceived Value of American and Foreign Lives" (paper presentation, Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Los Angeles, CA, 15 March 2000), accessed 13 June 2022, <https://politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ISA2000.pdf>.

5. John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 122, 134–35, 316, 317. That this estimate of Iraqi battle deaths was much too high, see John Mueller, "The Perfect Enemy: Assessing the Gulf War," *Security Studies* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 77–117, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419508429253>.

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7. John Mueller, ed., "The Iraq War and the Management of American Public Opinion," in *War and Ideas: Selected Essays* (London: Routledge, 2011), 199, 203, 205.

8. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, 57.

9. Mueller and Stewart, "Trends in Public Opinion on Terrorism," 21; Mueller, "The Iraq War," 214. For the argument, in contrast, that the American public is "defeat phobic" rather than "casualty phobic," see Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

10. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, 62, 156; John Mueller, "Reflections on the Vietnam Protest Movement and on the Curious Calm at the War's End," in *Vietnam as History*, ed. Peter Braestrup (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 151–57, accessed 10 June 2022, <https://politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/BRAESTRU.pdf>.

11. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, 164–65. For the argument that the protest movement likely helped Richard Nixon in both the 1968 and the 1972 elections, see Mueller, "Reflections on the Vietnam Protest Movement."

12. Scott Sigmund Gartner, "The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War: An Experimental Approach," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (February 2008): 95–106, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055408080027>.

13. Mueller, "Reflections on the Vietnam Protest Movement."

14. For discussions of the phenomenon, see Yuval Noah Harari, "Yuval Noah Harari Argues That What's at Stake in Ukraine Is the Direction of Human History," *The Economist* (website), 9 February 2022, accessed 10 June 2022, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/02/09/yuval-noah-harari-argues-that-whats-at-stake-in-ukraine-is-the-direction-of-human-history>; John Mueller, *The Stupidity of War: American Foreign Policy and the Case for Complicity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Steven

Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011); John Mueller, "War Is on the Rocks," *War on the Rocks*, 1 July 2021, accessed 10 June 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/war-is-on-the-rocks/>.

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19. Anders Åslund, *Russia's Crony Capitalism: The Path from Market Economy to Kleptocracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 242.

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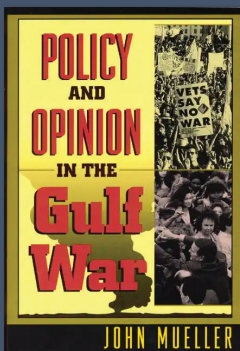
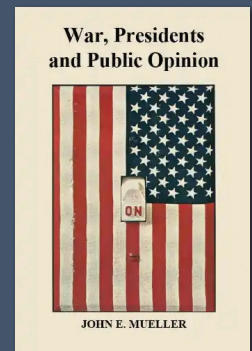
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Military Review

WE RECOMMEND

Originally published in 1973, this volume by Dr. John E. Mueller is considered by many scholars in the field of both communications and political science to be the pivotal study of public opinion as it relates to warfare that established a benchmark against which all other such studies are now judged. The work itself provides a rigorous analysis of public opinion as it evolved with regard to the war in Korea during the 1950s and the war in Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s. A key element of the study deals with how the U.S. presidents who led during those conflicts were affected by public opinion in their decisions. The study also examines how public opinion polling was often misrepresented for political traction in an effort to advance political agendas relative to the wars. Every serious military scholar examining the relationship of journalism, public affairs, psychological operations, propaganda, political warfare and any other dimension of communications related to warfare should be familiar with the key principles identified and analysis the book provides to understand why and how public opinion affects the leadership's conduct of war.



Using largely the same analytical tools developed for his previous work—except in much greater detail—Mueller analyzes the influence of public opinion on the conduct of the 1990–1991 Gulf War. To the advantage of scholars studying the influence of public opinion on that conflict, it may have been the most extensively polled war in U.S. history as President George W. Bush, his opponents, and even Iraqi President Saddam Hussein appealed to, and tried to influence, public opinion. Mueller provides an account of the complex relationship between American policy and public opinion during the Gulf crisis. In doing so, he analyzes key issues including the actual shallowness of public support for war; the effect of public opinion on the media (rather than the other way around); the use and misuse of polls by policy makers; the American popular focus on Hussein's ouster as a central purpose of the war; and the war's short-lived impact on voting.

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