

Russia's Humanitarian 'Invasion'

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Official Washington's war-hysteria machine is running at full speed again after Russia unilaterally dispatched a convoy of trucks carrying humanitarian supplies to the blockaded Ukrainian city of Luhansk, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

Before dawn broke in Washington on Saturday, "Ukrainian pro-Russian separatists" – more accurately described as federalists of southeast Ukraine who oppose last February's coup in Kiev – unloaded desperately needed provisions from some 280 Russian trucks in Lugansk, Ukraine. The West accused those trucks of "invading" Ukraine on Friday, but it was a record short invasion; after delivering their loads of humanitarian supplies, many of the trucks promptly returned to Russia.

I happen to know what a Russian invasion looks like, and this isn't it. Forty-six years ago, I was ten miles from the border of Czechoslovakia when Russian tanks stormed in to crush the "Prague Spring" experiment in democracy. The attack was brutal.



President Barack Obama meets with his national security advisors in the Situation Room of the White House, Aug. 7, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

Once back in Munich, West Germany, where my duties included substantive liaison with Radio Free Europe, I experienced some of the saddest moments of my life listening to radio station after radio station on the Czech side of the border playing Smetana's patriotic "Ma vlast" (My Homeland) before going silent for more than two decades.

I was not near the frontier between Russia and southeastern Ukraine on Friday as the convoy of some 280 Russian supply trucks started rolling across the border heading toward the federalist-held city of Luhansk, but that "invasion" struck me as more like an attempt to break a siege, a brutal method of warfare that indiscriminately targets all, including civilians, violating the principle of non-combatant immunity.

Michael Walzer, in his *War Against Civilians*, notes that “more people died in the 900-day siege of Leningrad during WWII than in the infernos of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki taken together.” So the Russians have some strong feelings about sieges.

There’s also a personal side for Russian President Vladimir Putin, who was born in Leningrad, now Saint Petersburg, eight years after the long siege by the German army ended. It is no doubt a potent part of his consciousness. One elder brother, Viktor, died of diphtheria during the siege of Leningrad.

The Siege of Luhansk

Despite the fury expressed by U.S. and NATO officials about Russia’s unilateral delivery of the supplies after weeks of frustrating negotiations with Ukrainian authorities, there was clearly a humanitarian need. An International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) team that visited Luhansk on Aug. 21 to make arrangements for the delivery of aid [found](#) water and electricity supplies cut off because of damage to essential infrastructure.

The Ukrainian army has been directing artillery fire into the city in an effort to dislodge the ethnic Russian federalists, many of whom had supported elected President Viktor Yanukovich who was ousted in the Feb. 22 coup.

The Red Cross team reported that people in Luhansk do not leave their homes for fear of being caught in the middle of ongoing fighting, with intermittent shelling into residential areas placing civilians at risk. Laurent Corbaz, ICRC head of operations for Europe and Central Asia, reported “an urgent need for essentials like food and medical supplies.”

The ICRC stated that it had “taken all necessary administrative and preparatory steps for the passage of the Russian convoy,” and that, “pending customs checks,” the organization was “therefore ready to deliver the aid to Luhansk ... provided assurances of safe passage are respected.”

The “safe passage” requirement, however, was the Catch-22. The Kiev regime and its Western supporters have resisted a ceasefire or a political settlement until the federalists – deemed “terrorists” by Kiev – lay down their arms and surrender.

Accusing the West of repeatedly blocking a “humanitarian armistice,” a Russian Foreign Ministry statement cited both Kiev’s obstructionist diplomacy and “much more intensive bombardment of Luhansk” on Aug. 21, the day after some progress had been made on the ground regarding customs clearance and border control procedures: “In other words, the Ukrainian authorities are bombing the destination [Luhansk] and are using this as a pretext to stop the delivery of humanitarian relief aid.”

‘Decision to Act’

Referring to these “intolerable” delays and “endless artificial demands and pretexts,” the Foreign Ministry said, “The Russian side has decided to act.” And there the statement’s abused, plaintive tone ended sharply – with this implied military threat:

“We are warning against any attempts to thwart this purely humanitarian mission. ... Those who are ready to continue sacrificing human lives to their own ambitions and geopolitical designs and are rudely trampling on the norms and principles of international humanitarian

law will assume complete responsibility for the possible consequences of provocations against the humanitarian relief convoy.”

Despite all the agreements and understandings that Moscow claims were reached earlier with Ukrainian authorities, Kiev insists it did not give permission for the Russian convoy to cross its border and that the Russians simply violated Ukrainian sovereignty – no matter the exigent circumstances they adduce.

More alarming still, Russia’s “warning” could be construed as the Kremlin claiming the right to use military force within Ukraine itself, in order to protect such humanitarian supply efforts – and perhaps down the road, to protect the anti-coup federalists, as well.

The risk of escalation, accordingly, will grow in direct proportion to the aggressiveness of not only the Ukrainian armed forces but also their militias of neo-fascists who have been dispatched by Kiev as frontline shock troops in eastern Ukraine.

Though many Russian citizens have crossed the border in support of their brethren in eastern Ukraine, Moscow has denied dispatching or controlling these individuals. But now there are Russians openly acknowledged to have been sent by Moscow into Ukraine – even if only “pilots” of “Russian military vehicles painted to look like civilian trucks,” as the White House depicted the humanitarian mission.

Moscow’s move is a difficult one to parry, except for those – and there are many, both in Kiev and in Washington – who would like to see the situation escalate to a wider East-West armed confrontation. One can only hope that, by this stage, President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry and the European Union realize they have a tiger by the tail.

The coup regime in Kiev knows which side its bread is buttered on, so to speak, and can be expected to heed the advice from the U.S. and the EU if it is expressed forcefully and clearly. Not so the fanatics of the extreme right party Svoboda and the armed “militia” comprised of the Right Sector. Moreover, there are influential neo-fascist officials in key Kiev ministries who dream of cleansing eastern Ukraine of as many ethnic Russians as possible.

Thus, the potential for serious mischief and escalation has grown considerably. Even if Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko wants to restrain his hardliners, he may be hard-pressed to do so. Thus, the U.S. government could be put in the unenviable position of being blamed for provocations – even military attacks on unarmed Russian truck drivers – over which it has little or no control.

Giving Hypocrisy a Bad Name

The White House second-string P.R. team came off the bench on Friday, with the starters on vacation, and it was not a pretty scene. Even if one overlooks the grammatical mistakes, the statement they cobbled together left a lot to be desired.

It began: “Today, in violation of its previous commitments and international law, Russian military vehicles painted to look like civilian trucks forced their way into Ukraine. ...

“The Ukrainian government and the international community have repeatedly made clear that this convoy would constitute a humanitarian mission only if expressly agreed to by the Ukrainian government and only if the aid was inspected, escorted and distributed by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). We can confirm that the ICRC is not

escorting the vehicles and has no role in managing the mission. ...

“Russian military vehicles piloted by Russian drivers have unilaterally entered the territory controlled by the separatist forces.”

The White House protested that Kiev had not “expressly agreed” to allow the convoy in without being escorted by the ICRC. Again, the Catch 22 is obvious. Washington has been calling the shots, abetting Kiev’s dawdling as the supply trucks sat at the border for a week while Kiev prevented the kind of ceasefire that the ICRC insists upon before it will escort such a shipment.

The other issue emphasized in the White House statement was inspection of the trucks: “While a small number of these vehicles were inspected by Ukrainian customs officials, most of the vehicles have not been inspected by anyone but Russia.” During a press conference at the UN on Friday, Russia’s UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin took strong exception to that charge, claiming not only that 59 Ukrainian inspectors had been looking through the trucks on the Russian side of the border, but that media representatives had been able to choose for themselves which trucks to examine.

Regardless of this latest geopolitical back-and-forth, it’s clear that Moscow’s decision to send the trucks across the border marked a new stage of the civil war in Ukraine. As Putin prepares to meet with Ukrainian President Poroshenko next week in Minsk – and as NATO leaders prepare for their summit on Sept. 4 to 5 in Wales – the Kremlin has put down a marker: there are limits to the amount of suffering that Russia will let Kiev inflict on the anti-coup federalists and ethnic Russian civilians right across the border.

The Russians’ attitude seems to be that if the relief convoys can be described as an invasion of sovereign territory, so be it. Nor are they alone in the court of public opinion.

On Friday at the UN, Russian Ambassador Churkin strongly objected to comments that, by its behavior, Russia found itself isolated. Churkin claimed that some of the Security Council members were “sensitive to the Russian position – among them China and the countries of Latin America.” (Argentina and Chile are currently serving as non-permanent members of the Security Council.)

The Polemic and Faux Fogh

Charter members of the Fawning Corporate Media are already busily at work, including the current FCM dean, the New York Times’ [Michael R. Gordon](#), who was at it again with a story titled “[Russia Moves Artillery Units Into Ukraine, NATO Says](#).” Gordon’s “scoop” was all over the radio and TV news; it was picked up by NPR and other usual suspects who disseminate these indiscriminate alarums.

Gordon, who never did find those Weapons of Mass Destruction that he assured us were in Iraq, now writes: “The Russian military has moved artillery units manned by Russian personnel inside Ukrainian territory in recent days and was using them to fire at Ukrainian forces, NATO officials said on Friday.”

His main source seems to be NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen, who famously declared in 2003, “Iraq has WMDs. It is not something we think; it is something we know.” Cables released by WikiLeaks have further shown the former Danish prime minister to be a tool of Washington.

However, Gordon provided no warning to Times' readers about Rasmussen's sorry track record for accuracy. Nor did the Times remind its readers about Gordon's sorry history of getting sensitive national security stories wrong.

Surely, the propaganda war will be stoked by what happened on Friday. Caveat emptor.

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