

By Rich Lowry

## Putin's heartless siege of Mariupol is the latest reminder that all progress is fragile

*Бездушна облога Маріуполя путіним є останнім нагадуванням про те, що  
весь прогрес крихкий*

*Російська облога Маріуполя шокує не тому, що вона безпрецедентна, а тому, що вона настільки традиційна – форма жорстокою війни, яка є надто типовою для європейської історії, вважає автор публікації. Під час першого вторгнення путіна в Україну в 2014 році тодішній держсекретар Джон Керрі заявив, що він поводився «як у 19-му столітті». Правда полягає в тому, що путін поводиться у стилі 19-го, 20-го та 21-го століть. Він є підтвердженням того факту, що прогрес не є немінучим, а мир і порядок крихкі. Людська природа означає, що безжалісні й жадібні до влади люди завжди будуть з нами, незалежно від того, наскільки просунутими ми вважаємо себе. Президент України Володимир Зеленський заявив, що облога Маріуполя – це «терор, який запам'ятається на століття». Це, безумовно, так, хоча навряд чи це нове явище. Жорстокість путіна щодо України є нагадуванням про те, наскільки важливо підтримувати західний порядок — альтернатива набагато гірша.*

<https://nypost.com/2022/03/22/putins-siege-of-mariupol-the-latest-reminder-that-all-progress-is-fragile/>



*Russia's siege of Mariupol shows a continuation with the history of European warfare, not a deviation. AP*

An invading army surrounds a European city, cuts off its supplies, bombards it and demands surrender.

Is it 1346? 1631? 1870? 1941? Or 2022?

The answer is any of the above and all of the above. [The Russian siege of Mariupol](#) is shocking not because it is unprecedented but because it is so traditional — a form of war that is grinding, brutish and all too typical in European history.

If you refer, say, to the siege of Vienna, the next question is: Which one? The siege of 1485 (during the Austro-Hungarian war), 1529 (during the first Ottoman attempt to take the city), 1683 (during the second) or 1945 (when the Soviets drove westward at the end of World War II)?

The Hundred Years' War featured countless sieges. Henry V, the English king of Shakespeare fame, conducted more than two dozen from 1417 to 1419. Joan of Arc became a legend at the siege of Orléans.

In his compelling new history of military technology, ["Firepower,"](#) Paul Lockhart notes that sieges have been the most common form of battle throughout human history, much more so than pitched battles (which, understandably, garner much more historical interest).

Historian Paul Lockhart points out that sieges are the most common warfare tactic in human history in his book "Firepower." Basic Books



*An apartment building explodes after a Russian army tank fires in Mariupol, Ukraine, on March 11, 2022. AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka*

During Russian President Vladimir Putin's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, then-Secretary of State John Kerry said that he was behaving "in a 19th-century fashion." The truth is that Putin is behaving in a 19th-century, 20th-century and 21st-century fashion. He is confirmation of the facts that progress is not inevitable and peace and order are fragile. Human nature means that remorseless and power-hungry men will always be with us, no matter how advanced we believe we are.

[Russia's operation in Mariupol](#), the strategically located port city on the Sea of Azov, has been blatantly bloody-minded. It hasn't even made a pretense of honoring basic decency, let alone the modern rules and norms around warfare. The Russians have cut off food, electricity and medical supplies and have been reducing the freezing city to rubble.

By some estimates, 80% of the residential buildings in the city have been damaged. The Russians, notoriously, [shelled a maternity ward](#), along with a theater and a school where people were sheltering. Authorities have been forced to bury the accumulating dead bodies, wrapped in carpets or bags, in a mass grave.



*A Ukrainian serviceman guards his position in Mariupol on March 12, 2022. AP Photo/Mstyslav Chernov*



*Former Secretary of State John Kerry said that Russian President Vladimir Putin was acting in a “19th-century fashion” during his first Ukraine invasion in 2014. AP*



*80% of residential buildings in Mariupol have been damaged. AP*



*Russia has cut off electricity, food, and medicine to Mariupol. AP*

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has said that the siege of the city is a “terror that will be remembered for centuries.” It certainly deserves to live in infamy, although it’s hardly a new phenomenon.

The Prussians — cynical empire-builders like Putin but considerably more competent — besieged Paris in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. Starving Parisians ate cats and dogs, and when the siege dragged on, the Prussians shelled the Left Bank of the city, forcing people to flee, killing civilians and hitting hospitals. The Prussians eventually prevailed and proclaimed William I the German emperor in the Palace of Versailles, in a stark humiliation for the French.

Although much of Europe has left behind this kind of *machtspolitik*, neither Russia nor China has. Putin’s brutalizing of Ukraine is a reminder of how essential it is to support the Western order — the alternative is so much worse. It is a reminder of how human affairs can easily slide backward — the history of civilization is of folly, catastrophe and decline as well as of enlightenment, achievement and progress.



*Russian army tanks move down a street on the outskirts of Mariupol, Ukraine, earlier this month. AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka*



*Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called the siege of Mariupol a “terror that will be remembered for centuries.” AP*



*Authorities in Mariupol have been forced to resort to burying the dead in mass graves. AP*



*Russian President Vladimir Putin has even targeted a maternity hospital and other buildings sheltering civilians. AP*

And it is a reminder that when a nation is determined to rule by blood and iron, hard power is the *only* deterrent and recourse — if anything saves Ukraine, it will be missiles, drones and artillery, not norms or treaties.

Vladimir Putin is not a figure from the European past. He is a man of its present and, if not met with clear-thinking and resolve, of its future as well.