Emmanuel Macron's shameful kowtowing to Russia is hardly a bolt from the blue

The president's persistent approaches to Moscow have been widely criticised, but the close Franco-Russian relationship goes back a long way

Robert Tombs

To many critics, it was incongruous, humiliating, even unethical, that the leader of a great Western democracy should make persistent efforts to woo Europe's most aggressive autocratic state. I might be referring to President Emmanuel Macron. Or to President Charles de Gaulle. Or indeed to President Sadi Carnot (1887-94).

All political acts have a mixture of motives, and Macron's approaches to Putin have been ascribed to vanity – insistence that the EU must play a leading role – domestic politics and fear of nuclear escalation. No doubt all these are present. But politicians also follow a script, often written long before. They make what one historian called "unspoken assumptions" – ideas about the world that are taken for granted in their political culture.

While every Western politician must share Macron's worries about escalation and economic damage, his unique persistence in trying to get through to Putin follows a characteristically French script, whose first drafts were written in the late 19th century. This script has deeply affected European history. It might do so again. It is worth trying to understand it.

President Macron at the Élysée Palace on Friday

It starts with France's traumatic defeat by Prussia in 1870-71, which created the Second German Reich. France had lost wars before, but always to a coalition of Great Powers, never before to a single one. Its armies had been routed, its capital besieged and starved into surrender.

The effect on France was profound. Defeat inspired a huge effort of national revival, which included the adoption of republican democracy, a cult of militarism (including military drills for children), aggressive imperialism, the introduction of English-style games in schools to inculcate "a taste for struggle", attacks on "effeminate" Catholicism, encouragement to have more children (unsuccessful, but which still shapes France's welfare policies), and an angry nationalism, which some have seen as the origin of fascism.

But none of this could change the fact that the new Germany was outpacing France in industrial strength and birth rates. This is where Russia came in. What had Europe's greatest democracy and its most powerful autocracy in common? Only one thing, but the most important: fear of Germany.

They signed a military alliance, which formed the basis of their joint security. In 1896, Tsar Nicholas II visited France and was met by cheering crowds, including many who had hitherto regarded Russia as an enemy and a threat. France, a wealthy country, invested a vast proportion of its savings in developing Russia, especially railways to carry Russia's armies rapidly west. This helped to create in Germany a fear of "encirclement".

Its response was the Schlieffen Plan, to win a quick victory by invading France through Belgium while Russia was unprepared. The Franco-Russian alliance responded by speeding up their military mobilisation plans to forestall Germany. Then in July 1914, the catastrophe happened – the Schlieffen Plan sparked a global conflict.

France's troops, thrown against the German frontier to help Russia, suffered their heaviest casualties of the whole war. The "Russian steamroller" moved ponderously west, but was soon stopped. Four years of attrition brought mass slaughter, starvation, revolutions, civil wars, and a century of horrors.

But a Franco-Russian relationship revived. Still fearing Germany, and unable to rely on Britain or America, France recognised the USSR in 1924, and French republicans and Bolshevik revolutionaries signed a nonaggression pact as early as 1931. Moscow was at first not unhappy when Hitler came to power in 1933, as Marxist theory laid down that he would be swiftly ousted by a proletarian revolution.

When this did not happen, Moscow and Paris again sought mutual assistance. A pact was signed in 1935, and both countries gave aid to the Popular Front government in Spain.

The French tried to enlist the Soviet Union against Hitler. Chamberlain and Halifax dragged their feet, unwilling to trust Stalin. But the French were perhaps right that Soviet self-interest could have led to a common stand that would have stopped Hitler and probably led to his overthrow. The Second World War, at least in the form it took, might have been prevented or delayed. Instead, rebuffed, the Soviets changed sides, signed a pact with Hitler, and war came.

The Second World War still, inevitably, marks the whole of the West and its collective memory, but in different ways. Although Britain supported French resistance throughout, and France was liberated principally by America and Britain, subsequent memory was shaped by Charles de Gaulle, France's master national scriptwriter.

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De Gaulle resented his treatment by *les Anglo-Saxons* – a concept he introduced into the modern political vocabulary – and in 1942 considered moving his headquarters to Moscow. In 1944, he signed an alliance with the USSR. After he left power, the strongly Atlanticist Fourth Republic was a co-founder of Nato.

But when de Gaulle returned in 1958 and created the presidential Fifth Republic, his resentment of the Anglo-Saxons had not abated. He again cultivated the Russians, culminating in 1966 with a state visit to Moscow, France's withdrawal from Nato's military command structure, and the departure of over 60,000 American troops from French soil.

Lurking in the background was still Germany, divided and occupied, but reviving and potentially powerful. De Gaulle's response – imitated by all his successors – was to make extravagant gestures of reconciliation and friendship. This became France's new "special relationship" and the core of its unflagging ambition to create an independent European Great Power.

But the relationship with Germany, despite efforts on both sides, has never been really warm. France's constant attempt to wrap Germany in a close embrace through EU integration is not devoid of suspicion and worry. So maintaining relations with Soviet Russia and then the Russian Federation were always part of the picture. During the breakup of Yugoslavia, the French, including the army, tended to sympathise with the Serbs, Russia's protégés.

So how does this influence Macron's present-day approaches to Putin? At least since de Gaulle – and indeed since Carnot – France's rulers have taken a realistic view of geopolitics. For de Gaulle, nations were historic entities, whatever their political regimes or the foibles of their temporary rulers. In his eyes, and those of his successors, Russia is always Russia, indispensable to the security of Europe, and hence of France. The Americans cannot be trusted and are in any case likely to abandon Europe. The British, as de Gaulle recorded, will always choose "the open sea" over the Continent – a view confirmed by Brexit.

Germany is big and unmanageable. Russia, Macron has said, must be made part of a European security structure: it cannot be allowed to become once again a permanent enemy and an ally of China. Moreover, France, like the US and Britain, wants to turn more of its attention to the rising Asia-Pacific. Thanks to its hard-headed retention of scattered fragments of empire (tactfully renamed "overseas departments" or "overseas territories" and thus in some cases inside the EU), France is the legal proprietor of 11 million square kilometres of ocean, rich in resources – twice as much as Britain owns. Macron has declared that while 20th-century power struggles were fought on the Continent, the key to the 21st century will be the sea.

So there is far more than grandstanding in Macron's long and so far fruitless conversations with Putin, which the French public approve of. Marine Le Pen on the Right and Jean-Luc Mélenchon on the Left are even more pro-Russian.

The "unspoken assumptions" are that Russia must somehow be kept within the European balance of power, with France, as in the past, its interlocutor and ideally its guide. So Macron must find out the minimum that would satisfy Putin, and try to deliver an acceptable compromise to end a devastating war. Otherwise, the "Anglo-Saxons" – and the despised Boris Johnson – will be ready to fight to the last Ukrainian, while the Germans will roll over for the sake of gas and oil.

Where would that leave France's EU ambitions, you might ask? But if Russia can be induced to accept a settlement – this was the aim of the Minsk accords – Macron can continue his unflagging labours to make "sovereign Europe" into a world power, with France as its leading member and global representative.

French diplomacy plays a long game, with national interest foremost. That, in broad terms, is why France – unlike Britain or America – does not want Russia humiliated.