

Historical Notes on the War in Ukraine

Scott Newton

Westplaining

The Russo-Ukraine war has become a focus of intense study on the part of mainstream and social media, academics and the twitter commentariat. Much of this has depicted the struggle as a clear case of good (Ukraine) versus bad (Russia). Those who have not accepted this narrative find themselves accused of 'Westplaining'. This is a derogatory term used against those whose explanations of why conflict has erupted dwell on long-running problems in relations between Russia and the West, some predating the dissolution of the USSR at the end of 1991. These, it is alleged, miss the point that there cannot be any justification or legitimacy for an act of war on the part of one nation against another. They are the delusions of former Communists and current Leftists whose admiration for the Soviet Union has now collapsed into pro-Russian apology.¹ These accusations are not absurd. There are apologists for Russia who blame everything on NATO and the West, some of whom certainly are old Stalinist 'tankies' (a few readings of *The Morning Star* letters column over the last few weeks has shown this quite clearly).

On the other hand, anyone who tries to understand what the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is about should know the history – or at least have a basic acquaintance with it. And it has to be said that this history (i) includes ongoing, serious divisions between Russia and the West over the shape of post-Cold War Europe; (ii) a Russian position, going all the way back to Gorbachev, which has been to oppose NATO expansion and call for a continent without blocs with its own, new security organisation and (after 1991/2) for a neutral Ukraine with its borders guaranteed by both Russia and the West. The evidence is all there to show that the West gave guarantees covering these issues to Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, which have simply not been honoured at any stage. Gorbachev at the end of the Cold War expected the USSR to be treated as a partner in the creation of a new European order but instead it was treated as a

¹ See George Monbiot, 'We need to talk about Westplaining', <<https://twitter.com/GeorgeMonbiot/status/1503758826461409287>>.

defeated country. This is not Westplaining, it is history; and in the case of relations between the West and Russia since 1991, this has been characterised by the development of a process which was never likely to end well – unless something intervened to arrest it.

The alternative, to ditch all so-called Westplaining, would leave us with an account of what is going on which makes about as much sense as a history of World War I which omits all the background and starts 'At the end of June 1914 the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire was assassinated in Sarajevo. Five weeks later all Europe was at war'; or of World War 2 which, in similar style, opens up with 'On 3 September 1939 Germany invaded Poland and the Second World War started'. In other words, the wars would appear as if they were like natural catastrophes or asteroid strikes, coming out of nowhere. At worst, most would be left without a clue about why they happened; at best their understanding of what provoked them and what they were about would be crude and over-simplified. That would be the result of throwing out all 'Westplaining'.

This does not mean that there can be any excuse for Russia's invasion. The historical record shows there have indeed been serious problems in relations between the West and Ukraine on the one side and Russia on the other, from before the end of the Cold War. Clearly, Russia's attempt to settle these issues by an act of aggression against a state which presented no threat to its existence cannot be accepted as a legitimate way of resolving international disputes: but that does not mean that we should abandon all attempts at understanding the problems, making sense of what has happened to avoid similar crises in the future. As the well-known comment goes, 'Those who do not understand the past are condemned to repeat it'. And in the case of a war between Russia and Ukraine, which has the potential to turn into a much wider and catastrophic conflict for all humanity, the obligation to understand is very urgent indeed. That it should be necessary to make this observation at all is a testament to the sheer volume of myopic and simple-minded moralising which is passing for analysis in much of the media, especially in more liberal quarters (such as *The Guardian* or *Channel 4 News*).

Greater Europe

The end of the Cold War (or maybe the end of the First Cold War) saw the USSR launch its own initiatives for a new international order, designed to bring lasting world peace and prosperity. In 1989 Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, proposed a 'common European home'. This replaced the 'Two Camps' doctrine,

which held that the world was divided into socialist and capitalist blocs – and attitude which had governed Soviet Cold War strategy since 1948. In place of an endless arms race, global ideological struggle and a Europe divided between East and West, Gorbachev called for an end to the blocs and for co-operation between nations – whatever their political and economic systems – on international disarmament and development, as well as on global ecological problems. In elaborations of this vision over the next two years Gorbachev advocated the creation of a continent united from Lisbon to Vladivostok, characterised by a pan-European security system, free trade, and ‘intra-European relations founded on international law’.² He looked to financial assistance from the West, channelled possibly through the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which would allow East European states (and the Soviet Union) to make a smooth transition – not to free market capitalism – but to a pluralist form of social democracy. The objective was a ‘Greater Europe’³ with major centres at Moscow, Brussels and Ankara within a multi-polar world in which Russia would remain a key player. It was a concept which had echoes of John F. Kennedy’s famous call for a ‘world safe for diversity’ in June 1963.

Over the next generation, Gorbachev’s successors in Moscow all called for a new era of international co-operation based on the principles he had established between 1989 and 1991. During the Yeltsin era a good deal was made of how Russia and Western Europe could help each other. Russia possessed an abundant reservoir of raw materials (especially oil and gas); Western Europe had skills, advanced technology and investment. The creation of institutionalised arrangements providing for an exchange would help to relieve Western Europe’s energy deficit and, at the same time, contribute to the modernization of the Russian economy, bringing together the two halves of the continent in the process.

In June 2008 President Dmitri Medvedev advocated a new regional European Security Pact, based on the United Nations Charter, by which Russia would become part of what he called the ‘Euro-Atlantic community’. Russia, said Medvedev, had ‘come in from the cold’. Since the

² Tom Casier, ‘Gorbachev’s “Common European Home” and its relevance for Russian foreign policy today’, *Debater a Europa*, 18 (2018), p. 17. See <<https://tinyurl.com/y5rat6mk>> or <<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/66331/1/Gorbachev%20Common%20European%20Home%20PUBLISHED.pdf>>.

³ See Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), pp. 26-49. I reviewed Sakwa’s excellent study in *Lobster 77* (2019). See <<https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/free/lobster77/lob77-frontline-ukraine.pdf>>.

end of the Cold War it had looked to employ 'all its natural, financial and intellectual resources and potential', in 'truly equal cooperation' with 'the European Union and North America – three branches of European civilization'; now it was time to discuss 'the whole euro-Atlantic space from Vancouver to Vladivostok', and move on from this to 'conclude a legally binding European Security Treaty'.⁴ A similar initiative came from Vladimir Putin in November 2010, again in Berlin; and as late as January 2014, at a Russia-EU summit in Brussels, the Russian President advocated a free trade area from the Atlantic to the Pacific.⁵

Wider Europe

These proposals for a new international system based on 'Greater Europe' have consistently fallen on deaf ears. They have run counter to the West's own model of post-Cold War co-operation, one called 'Wider Europe' by Richard Sakwa, a leading specialist in the recent history of Russia and Eastern Europe.⁶ Wider Europe is, essentially, a Euro-Atlanticist venture, which seeks to build a new, post Cold War alliance system based on partnership between the EU, the USA and NATO. Rejecting the multi-polar Greater Europe, it involves international co-operation within the framework of a liberal-capitalist world economy with a global security order dominated by the USA in concert with its European allies. Wider Europe is held together by axes connecting Washington with Brussels (where the headquarters of both NATO and the European Commission are located) and the capitals of the leading West European states; but it is a unipolar model and dependent on continuing US hegemony. The project emerged as the Western response to the winding-up of the Warsaw Pact and fading of Soviet influence over Eastern Europe between 1988 and 1991, which was then followed by the dissolution of the USSR. During the 1990s, commitment to the construction of a Wider Europe became the default strategy in Washington and Brussels as well as in the national capitals of European Community (EC: it did not become the European Union [EU] until late 1993).

The evolution of this Wider Europe strategy went through a series of stages. The first of these was more or less concurrent with the end of the

⁴ Oleg Shchedrov, 'Russia comes in from Cold, Medvedev says in Berlin', *Reuters*, World News, 5 June 2008 at <<https://tinyurl.com/5hfe6ebc>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-medvedev-security-idUSBAT00225020080605>>.

⁵ Sakwa (see note 3) pp. 29-30.

⁶ Sakwa (see note 3) pp. 26-7.

Cold War and the last two years of the USSR's existence. This was the time when the agenda for the future shape of Europe had been set by Gorbachev's multi-polar 'common European home'. The Western response to this was, from the start, lukewarm because the USA and its allies in NATO focused on the more immediate problems. Notable amongst those was the question of economic assistance for Central and East European Countries (CEECs). Even more urgent was how to manage the reunification of Germany – which was occurring far more rapidly than any government had anticipated – without alarming the rest of the European continent, east and west.

At first it seemed as if this development would give Greater Europe some momentum, even if it led to Germany joining NATO. Given Soviet memories of the carnage inflicted on the USSR by Nazi Germany fifty years before, this could have been a huge stumbling-block to further progress in improving East-West relations. However, after expressing some scepticism, in the first half of 1990 Moscow came round to accepting German membership of NATO, (i) on the grounds that it was better if the country was tied down within the organisation than capable of independent action outside it and (ii) in return for an explicit guarantee 'that if the United States keeps its presence in Germany within the framework of NATO, *not an inch of NATO's present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction*'.⁷ (emphasis added) Furthermore, there was a recognition that NATO itself would need to change. On 4 May, US Secretary of State James Baker told Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze that the USA recognized

'the need to adapt NATO, politically and militarily . . . the process would not yield winners and losers. Instead, it would produce a new legitimate European structure – one that would be inclusive, not exclusive.'⁸

These commitments were reiterated by President Bush, French President Mitterrand, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and by consecutive British Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Soviet security

⁷ US National Security Archive, Record of conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and James Baker, Moscow, 9 February 1990 at <<https://tinyurl.com/2p8ksdt9>> or <<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16117-document-06-record-conversation-between>>.

⁸ US National Security Archive, 'James F. Baker III, Memorandum for the President: "My Meeting with Shevardnadze"', Bonn, 4 May 1990 at <<https://tinyurl.com/yu4e6bwb>> or <<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16131-document-17-james-baker-iii-memorandum>>.

concerns were well understood and it was agreed that the new Germany would be a non-nuclear state and that NATO would not expand eastwards to absorb the nations which until June 1991 had formed the Warsaw Pact. It soon became clear, however, that the Gorbachev agenda was not going to prevail. After 1990 it was increasingly sidelined by Wider Europe, for two main reasons.

First, there had been some interest in a large-scale investment programme co-ordinated by Brussels and Washington to stimulate reconstruction and growth in the Central and East European Countries (CEECs) – somewhat on the lines of the 1948 Marshall Plan for the recovery of Europe. What emerged, however, was financial aid from the EC (later EU) and the EBRD, linked to programmes of political and economic reform designed to promote multiparty democracy and extensive private enterprise.⁹ Running in parallel with these were a series of 'Association Agreements' between the EU and the CEECs intended to prepare the way for these nations to join the EU during the course of the next decade. There was not much ideological diversity here: the model was not to be that of mixed-economy social democracies but liberal democracies, with economies rooted in the free market following large-scale privatisation of public assets. The Washington Consensus of the late 1980s, which identified good governance and open societies with a large private sector, low taxes and balanced budgets, was the lodestar to be followed by the former 'socialist' economies, including the USSR.¹⁰

Second, it became clear that Poland and the Baltic republics wished to join NATO, seeing in that a guarantee of security both against the USSR and against Germany, especially if the latter was also a member. These aspirations were not regarded favourably by President Bush, or by

⁹ Back in 1989-90, during my time in the History Department at Cardiff University, I was contacted by a friend in the Foreign Office working in (from memory) the Policy Planning Staff. He asked me to provide some information and background on the post-1945 US Marshall Plan for the post-World War 2 reconstruction of Western Europe (the subject had been part of my doctoral research, a decade earlier). This was indicative of thinking at the time about how to handle Eastern European countries' transition to a new normality, away from the Cold War.

In my response I made the point that the Marshall scheme involved a significant publicly funded foreign investment programme on the part of the USA. Some time later he rang me to say that there would, after all, be no Marshall Plan for Eastern Europe – 'there wasn't enough money' – and resources would be found from a mix of providers, involving the IMF, the EC, EBRD and the private sector.

¹⁰ There is a case-study of the Polish experience in Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), pp. 171-84.

the US State Department: there was concern that if the West went along with them it would be creating an anti-Soviet coalition extending to the borders of the USSR, a development which might reverse all the recent trends towards internal liberalisation and international co-operation in the USSR and take the world back to the Cold War.¹¹ There was, however, a different perspective in the US Department of Defense. Here, Secretary Dick Cheney advocated merely letting the would-be applicants know that the current moment was not a good time for their membership to be considered, implying thereby that they could join at some point in the future.¹² However, Bush left office in January 1993 and under his two successors the position was transformed. In 1996 President Clinton openly advocated expanding NATO to include the members of the old Warsaw Pact. By 2005 Poland, the Baltic states, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria had all joined the Western military alliance. As the Russians had feared, NATO now did indeed stretch all the way to their borders. This expansionist momentum continued under George W. Bush and Barack Obama. There was a new European security order but it was not the one Gorbachev had wanted.

What led Washington, with the support of its allies in NATO and the EU, to perform this *volte-face*? To begin with there was pressure from the former Warsaw Pact countries who identified themselves as having more in common, culturally, politically and economically, with Western Europe than with Russia. During the 1990s Moscow had waged wars against separatist forces in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and above all the Chechen Republic. Those conflicts strengthened both the ex-Warsaw Pact countries' orientation towards the West, and their desire to take measures to safeguard such. Secondly, the 1990s had also seen the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Republics which had, along with Russian Federation, made up the USSR. As a result, neither Washington nor Brussels had any serious anxiety that NATO enlargement might

¹¹ U.S. National Security Archive, Department of State, European Bureau: Revised NATO Strategy Paper for Discussion at Sub-Group Meeting, 22 October 1990, at <<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16140-document-26-u-s-department-state-european>> or <<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16140-document-26-u-s-department-state-european>>.

¹² See U.S. National Security Archive, James F. Dobbins, State Department European Bureau, 'Memorandum to National Security Council: NATO Strategy Review for October 29 Discussion', 25 October 1990, at <<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16140-document-26-u-s-department-state-european>> or <<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16141-document-27-james-f-dobbins-state-department>>

reignite the Cold War. Within Russia the decade had been characterised by economic crisis and a catastrophic fall in living standards,¹³ while its armed forces had struggled to contain those nationalist insurgencies within the Federation.

The fragmentation of the USSR and the implosion of the Russian state left no serious strategic challenge to the USA and its allies in NATO. With China's turn towards capitalism under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, it appeared to remove all significant economic and political alternatives to free markets and liberal democracy. In Washington this was seen, as Francis Fukuyama had written in 1989, as 'the end of history . . . the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.'¹⁴ Regarded in 1986-89 as a partner in the ending of the Cold War and the creation of a new international architecture designed to guarantee political and economic diversity and global peace and prosperity, the USSR and its main successor state, Russia, was now seen as weak and beaten. It was widely accepted that it had 'lost' the Cold War.¹⁵ Not only did it have nothing to offer the world (except possibly a warning about state socialist societies), it had become an economic basket case. Gorbachev's 'Greater Europe' crashed along with the Soviet Union. Western liberal-capitalism was the only game in town and both US and EU politicians now sought to promote this throughout the old Soviet bloc by extending the Euro-Atlantic Wider Europe as far east as they could. By 2005 they were looking to a new round of NATO enlargement, which would include Ukraine and Georgia.

Ukraine looks West

The dissolution of the USSR began on 18 August 1991, following an abortive coup against Gorbachev by Communist Party and KGB elements anxious to preserve the Union. Gorbachev sat it out in his holiday dacha on the Crimea and was back in Moscow six days later. Ironically, this led to the unravelling of the Soviet Union, the very eventuality the coup had been launched to prevent. Separatist sentiment became increasingly evident throughout the USSR, being most apparent in the Baltic States and Ukraine. On 8 December the leaders of the republics of Belarus,

¹³ Klein, (see note 10) pp. 218-256 and Sakwa (see note 3) p. 28.

¹⁴ Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), pp. 3-18.

¹⁵ See for example, Leslie Gelb, 'Who won the Cold War?', *The New York Times*, 20 August 1992.

Russia and Ukraine secretly met at a hunting lodge in the Belovezh Forest near the Polish-Belorussian border and signed the Belovezh Accords. These announced the end of the USSR and its replacement by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – a much looser organization designed to foster political, economic and military co-operation between its members. By the start of 1994 all the former republics of the old Soviet Union (apart from the Baltic States) had joined the CIS. The CIS exists to this day, although Georgia withdrew from it in 2008 after the war with Russia and Ukraine effectively ceased to participate in 2014.

The creation of the CIS encouraged Washington and Brussels to work for the detachment of former Soviet republics from Russia and their integration into Wider Europe and the Western economic and security system. This process developed quite rapidly in relations between NATO, the EU and the Baltic Republics, which joined both organizations in 2004. The development was not welcomed in Russia, where it was (with reason) seen as a contravention of the assurances given to Gorbachev at the end of the Cold War, but it was accepted as a *fait accompli*. President Putin admitted in September 2001 that 'we cannot forbid people to make certain choices if they want to increase the security of their nations in a particular way' and declared that Baltic membership of NATO was 'no tragedy' for Russia.¹⁶ This philosophical attitude did not, however, extend to Ukrainian membership of NATO, nor to the prospect of its joining the EU. Ukraine became the focus of three strategic projects, two launched from the West and consistent with the Wider Europe mission, and the other stemming from Moscow and linked both to Russian security concerns and to ongoing efforts to revive the Greater Europe initiative. There was no compatibility between these different Western and Eastern perspectives and the failure to find common ground has become a key factor in transforming Ukraine into a flashpoint and conflict zone.

The West's interest in Ukraine lay partly in its economic potential.¹⁷ It has a rich agricultural sector, notably in grain, plentiful energy reserves (especially oil and gas, notwithstanding its dependence on Russia for this) and mineral resources such as lithium (a key component of electric vehicle batteries) and titanium (critical in aircraft production and an

¹⁶ Andris Banka, 'The Breakaways: a retrospective on the Baltic road to NATO', *War on the Rocks*, 4 October 2019 at <<https://tinyurl.com/2p89kjxy>> or <<https://warontherocks.com/2019/10/the-breakaways-a-retrospective-on-the-baltic-road-to-nato/>>.

¹⁷ Sakwa (see note 3) p. 74.

important part of the Boeing Company's supply chain).¹⁸ The country has been viewed in Brussels and Washington as presenting major economic opportunities for Western capital, especially if it were to be admitted into the EU. As Sakwa has noted, this would lead over time to a 'sweeping liberalisation of trade'¹⁹ between Ukraine and the EU and implied economic discrimination against Russia. Producers of goods and services in the EU would gain access to strategic raw materials an extra forty million consumers, while Ukraine's economy stood to benefit from participation in a large internal market made up from twenty-seven countries.

The construction of a new, Western-aligned Ukraine was not only encouraged by Washington and Brussels; there is plenty of support for it within Ukraine. It has been enthusiastically backed by radical and liberal nationalists who have seen in it a complete break with Ukraine's past as part of the Tsarist Empire and then the Soviet Union, and a sign of the nation's commitment to a pro-market, liberal-democratic future. They have sought to turn Ukraine away from Russian influence and build up connections with the West, all the way to EU and NATO membership (albeit many years down the road). These forces are on the whole concentrated in the western regions of the country and backed the BYuT until its dissolution in 2011. (Bloc Yulia Tymoschenko was a political grouping named after its leader, the radical nationalist Yulia Tymoschenko). Unsurprisingly, the BYuT was encouraged and partly funded by the West, via the 'Orange Revolution', a 'sophisticated and brilliantly conceived exercise in western branding and mass marketing', funded and organised by the US government'.²⁰ In 2005 this helped to propel the BYuT into power with its mission of charting a new, pro-Western course for the country.

Negotiations between Kyiv and Brussels after the Orange Revolution led to an Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine, drafted in 2012 after several years of talks. Although the Agreement included no commitment to eventual Ukrainian membership, it required not only

¹⁸ See 'Are Ukraine's vast natural resources a real reason behind Russia's invasion?', *Business Today*, 25 February 2022 at <<https://tinyurl.com/43aecf2y>> or <<https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/world/story/are-ukraines-vast-natural-resources-a-real-reason-behind-russias-invasion-323894-2022-02-25>>.

¹⁹ Sakwa (see note 3) p. 74.

²⁰ Ian Traynor, 'US Campaign Behind the Turmoil in Kiev', *The Guardian*, 26 November 2004 at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/26/ukraine.usa>>.

acceptance of a good deal of the EU's legal and regulatory regime but a pro-Western external security strategy. The latter was a function of increasing co-operation between the EU and NATO in foreign and security policy after 2000. This was all evidence of a Ukrainian orientation away from Russia in international strategic and economic relations even though Ukraine remained (but for how long?) outside the EU. By 2019 the EU had replaced Russia as Ukraine's largest trading partner. Running in parallel with Ukraine's rapprochement with the EU, Tymoschenko's BYuT campaigned for the country to be admitted to NATO membership, seeing in the achievement of this goal an irreversible freedom from Russian dominance and an identification of their nation's future as a liberal democracy in alignment with the West. In 2008 an Action Plan which set out the steps necessary for joining NATO (without a date attached) was drafted; in the same year the Ukrainian government affirmed that the agreement on the Russian Black Sea Fleet's basing rights in Sevastopol (the Russian Navy's only warm water port), negotiated in 1997, would be terminated in 2017.

The Grand Chessboard

There was a second dimension to Ukraine's inclusion in Wider Europe, with possible EU and NATO membership, which mainstream media outlets in the West did not discuss in much detail. This was the country's place in US global strategy. As early as 1992 a Pentagon defence planning document explicitly stated that the main objective of US security policy should be 'to obstruct the emergence of any potential rival – "either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere"'.²¹ The bipolar world of the Cold War had given way to a unipolar one, dominated by Washington and the aim of US strategy should be to keep it that way. This agenda was developed in a more rigorous theoretical manner a few years later, in Zbigniew Brzezinski's 1997 study, *The Grand Chessboard*.²² Brzezinski had been President Carter's National Security Adviser from 1977-81 and had remained an influential voice in the US foreign policy establishment. Here he set out what he argued were the steps the US had to take, if it was going to retain its post Cold War position as the world's hegemonic power. It needed to shape an external environment consistent

²¹ Andrew Murray, 'Cynical power play lies behind the war in Ukraine', *The Morning Star*, 19-20 March 2022, p. 13 at <<https://tinyurl.com/ym57zrtd>> or <<https://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/article/f/ukraine-conflict-story-cynical-power-play>>.

²² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997)

with its long-term interest in the maintenance of international order and stability, open trade and free markets which would endure well into the twenty-first century.

The setting for this very serious game of global strategy was what Brzezinski called the 'huge, oddly shaped Eurasian chess board – extending from Lisbon to Vladivostok'.²³ This area had to be kept free from dominance by one great power, to prevent a rival from then becoming capable of 'challenging America's global pre-eminence'.²⁴ Success here depended on control of 'the middle space', which needed to be 'drawn increasingly into the expanding orbit of the West (where America preponderates)'. If, on the other hand, the middle space were to turn against the West and become 'an assertive single entity', capable of expanding southwards and at the same time building an alliance with 'the major Eastern actor', American primacy over Eurasia would shrink. There would be a real prospect that the USA would be expelled from 'its perch on the western periphery' by its Western partners in response to pressure from the new continental superpower to the East. This would represent a massive, epochal geostrategic reverse for the USA, the end of its 'participation in the game on the Eurasian chessboard'.²⁵ The resulting anarchic, multi-polar world would have America as one great power amongst two or three more, losing the ability to shape a congenial international environment in the process.

During the Cold War, the 'middle space' was for the most part under Soviet control, with US influence in the European theatre restricted to the West and to the Atlantic arena. The end of the Cold War and the break-up of the USSR transformed this position, allowing Western political and economic influence to expand, through the project for a Wider Europe, into that 'middle space'. Brzezinski's analysis implied that it was in the interest of the USA and its allies to extend this advance and prevent the reconstruction of the Soviet Union, albeit in the looser form as the CIS. This meant not only the expansion of NATO and the EU into Eastern Europe but a definitive, permanent separation of Russia from Ukraine. Brzezinski warned against Russian resumption of control over the country, since this would lead it automatically to regain the 'wherewithal to

²³ Brzezinski (see note 22) p. 34.

²⁴ Sakwa (see note 3) p. 215.

²⁵ Brzezinski, (see note 22) p. 34.

become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia'.²⁶ But '[w]ithout Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire'.²⁷ It would then no longer be capable of challenging US dominance in Eurasia and, by extension, America's position as the world's hegemonic power.

Russian Resistance

Brzezinski's book was widely read in Russian policy-making circles, and became 'part of everyday political discussion'.²⁸ Its argument confirmed Russian suspicions about the implications of Ukrainian membership of both the EU and NATO. Moscow's resistance to this grew during the 2000s. Russian diplomats made it clear that such a development would not be acceptable, warning at the start of March 2008 that:

'further expansion of NATO could produce a serious political-military upheaval that would affect the interests of Russia. . . . Citing the 1997 bilateral agreement laying out the Russian-Ukrainian strategic partnership, the statement stressed that the potential integration of Ukraine into NATO would force Russia to undertake "appropriate measures".'²⁹

Ukrainian membership of NATO would complete the humiliating aftermath of the Cold War, leaving Russia economically weakened and strategically vulnerable. It would lose the ability to station its Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol and face an unfriendly military alliance with nuclear weapons all the way along its borders from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

Moscow countered this prospect of a Western-orientated Ukraine with the diplomatic initiatives based on the Greater Europe model, notably Medvedev's 2008 proposals for a new European Security Treaty, Putin's endorsement of this in 2010 and his 2014 call for a free trade area from the Atlantic to the Pacific. These made little headway in Washington or in European capitals, leading Russia to increasing political and economic interference in Ukrainian affairs, where it had significant influence over

²⁶ Brzezinski, (see note 22) p. 45.

²⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, 'The New Great Game: Why Ukraine Matters To So Many Other Nations', Bloomberg, 27 February 2014 at <<https://tinyurl.com/9untwrfj>> or <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-02-27/the-new-great-game-why-ukraine-matters-to-so-many-other-nations>>.

²⁸ Sakwa, (see note 3) p. 215.

²⁹ See Wikileaks, cable to Washington from US Ambassador to Moscow, William J. Burns, 1 March 2008, 'Russia-Ukraine Relations: Yuschenko and Tymoschenko in Moscow', at <https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MOSCOW587_a.html>.

the energy sector (as main supplier of oil and gas), the security service, members of Parliament and the Party of Regions (PoR), led by Viktor Yanukovich.³⁰

The pro-Russian PoR derived the greater part of its support from the Russophone east and south of the country. In 2005 it signed a collaboration agreement with Russia's governing political party, United Russia, whose party congresses Yanukovich attended in 2008 and 2009.³¹ The PoR campaigned in particular on linguistic and cultural issues of great significance to its grass roots supporters, accusing the BYuT of seeking to discriminate against the Russophone community. By 2010 it was clear that the cultural, linguistic, political and economic fracture between the pro-Western and pro-Russian forces in Ukraine was widening. Yanukovich narrowly won the 2010 Presidential election, with the PoR performing strongly in its electoral heartland. He overturned the BYuT policy regarding the Russian Black Sea Fleet's base at Sevastopol and struck a new agreement extending its presence there until 2042. After much equivocation, he refused to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, striking a financial deal with Moscow instead. This was the spark for the 2014 Maidan Revolution, when thousands came to the Maidan (Kiev's central square) and demonstrated against Yanukovich and his government which had turned out to be incompetent and corrupt and now appeared to be repudiating the country's post-2005 pro-Western trajectory. The protesters were supported by Washington, which backed their determination to turn Ukraine to the West, seeing in their actions an opportunity to re-run the Orange Revolution and, this time, make it permanent.³² Yanukovich was unable to control the situation, which quite rapidly became violent. His government collapsed and he fled to Russia.

Politics now rapidly became polarised. The new administration under Petro Poroshenko pressed on with the radical nationalist agenda. Soviet monuments were destroyed, a bill to make Ukrainian the sole official language was prepared and the government began to discuss the repudiation of Yanukovich's agreement with Moscow concerning the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

³⁰ Sakwa (see note 3) pp. 130-1.

³¹ See 'Party of Regions hopes for strengthening collaboration with "United Russia" party', *Kyiv Post*, 22 November 2009 at <<https://tinyurl.com/56xnzxwv>> or <<http://www.kyivpost.com/content/politics/party-of-regions-hopes-for-strengthening-collabora-53358.html>>.

³² Sakwa (see note 3) pp. 86-7.

Russia's response was to embrace direct intervention and military action. It occupied the Crimea and unilaterally incorporated it into Russia following a referendum, thereby securing the Black Sea Fleet's position at Sevastopol for the foreseeable future. It then backed a separatist insurgency in the Donbas region in the east of Ukraine which established pro-Russian 'People's Republics' (a deliberate echo of the Soviet era) in Donetsk and Lugansk. The Ukrainian government responded with armed force, sending in the military to put down the uprising, and in return Russia provided assistance to the rebels. It was clear that Moscow did not regard the breakaway republics just as a means of safeguarding the civil rights of the Russophone communities in the east of Ukraine. It saw in their existence the excuse for a *de facto* partition which would, in undermining attempts to build up Ukraine as a unified, pro-Western state, preserve Russian political and economic influence over the country. The war which followed stemmed in part from the crisis in the Donbas region, but its main cause was Russia's determination to frustrate Ukraine's turn to the West. For seven years conflict was for the most part limited to the Donbas region, but this year, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it has engulfed the whole country.

Russia and Ukraine

Moscow's opposition to a Western-oriented Ukraine had deep roots. Concern about the implications for Russian security embraced not simply strategic issues but cultural, economic, historical and political questions.

To begin with, the histories of Ukraine and Russia are intertwined and these connections stretch back centuries, to the founding of the Russian State (with Kyiv as one of its centres of civilization) in 882 AD. In practical terms this meant that there were deep and longstanding economic, political, cultural and family ties between the two countries. 8.3 million Ukrainians identified themselves as ethnic Russians in the 2001 census, 29.6 per cent of the population said Russian was their mother tongue and most of the major cities in the centre and south-east of the country were Russophone.³³ Within Russia at the end of the Soviet period there was considerable sympathy for Alexander Solzhenitsyn's vision, set out in his 1990 text *Rebuilding Russia*, not of a new empire but of a "Russian union" with Ukraine at its heart'.³⁴

³³ 2001 Ukrainian Census, General Results/National composition of population. See <<http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/nationality/>> and <<http://2001.ukrcensus.gov.ua/eng/results/general/language/>>.

³⁴ *Sakwa* (see note 3), p. 8.

Secondly, the Russian and Ukrainian economies had been closely integrated in the Soviet era and strong links remained after the dissolution of the USSR. Ukraine was a major export market for Russia, especially in the energy sector. In the early 2000s over a third of all Ukrainian trade was with the Russian Federation. Russia was Ukraine's leading customer for ferrous metals, steel plate, electrical machinery, machine tools, chemicals and food. Close ties continued in the aerospace and military-industrial sectors, with factories in the east of Ukraine supplying Russia with hardware such as helicopter engines (produced in Zaporizhia), ICBMs (designed and made in Dnepropetrovsk), and a missile guidance system (from Kharkiv).³⁵ A Ukrainian pivot to the West would not only deprive Russia of a key market, it would threaten its links with what was still, in essence, a functioning part of its own military-industrial complex.

History and Politics

Thirdly, there was history and politics. Ukraine had existed as a nation-state only in the years following the Bolshevik revolution and subsequent civil war. It had a short, chaotic and violent history before it was overthrown by Soviet troops in 1919, becoming the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Although it was one of the founding nations of the USSR in 1922, nationalist sentiment remained strong during the 1920s and 1930s. This was given political expression by the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), founded in 1929 and quickly taking a radical right-wing path. The OUN saw liberalism, socialism and democracy as responsible for the failure of the Ukrainian State: they had eroded the political will without which no Ukrainian nation could be established. Fascist and militarist ideas became prevalent, along with an extreme ethnic nationalism which excluded Jews, Poles and Russians from membership of a new Ukrainian State.³⁶

By the time of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 a militant fraction of the OUN (led by Stepan Bandera and known as OUN-B), announced the establishment of a Ukrainian State and joined the German onslaught against Russia as well as against Jewish and Polish

³⁵ See Michael Birnbaum, 'Ukrain factories equip Russian military despite support for rebels', *Washington Post*, 15 August 2014 at <<https://tinyurl.com/2vb8y2ep>> or <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraine-factories-equip-russian-military-despite-support-for-rebels/2014/08/15/9c32cde7-a57c-4d7b-856a-e74b8307ef9d_story.html>.

³⁶ Sakwa (see note 3) pp. 15-17.

communities in eastern and central Europe. OUN-B's relations with the Nazis were not always good, and Bandera himself was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp from 1941 until 1944, before being released to rally Ukrainian nationalists against the advancing Red Army. Even while Bandera was imprisoned, however, many of his supporters joined the Nazis – 40,000 of them volunteering to serve with the SS in early 1943. Half of these were accepted, most of them Ukrainians who had served in auxiliary police battalions responsible for massacres of Jews, Poles and even fellow Ukrainians.³⁷ In addition to Ukrainian SS members, there was OUN-B's military wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Ukrayinska Povstanska Armiya or UPA). Founded in October 1942, it fought to for an independent post-war Ukrainian state which included parts of Russia, Belarus and Poland. Allied with the Germans, the UPA committed a series of appalling atrocities. One of its major early actions was the July 1943 massacre of '70,000 Poles, mainly women, children and some unarmed men, in Volyn, and by 1945 it had killed at least 130,000 in Eastern Galicia'. Entire families under suspicion of having informed the Soviets against the UPA were blinded (people's eyes were gouged out) before being hacked to death.³⁸

As Soviet troops continued to drive the Germans before them, the OUN fragmented, some staying behind while many of its members in the UPA, along with a large number who had served in the Ukrainian SS, headed for western Germany. The OUN was reformed and based in Munich; and throughout the period from 1945-48 there was a steady westward migration of veterans from Ukrainian SS detachments and the UPA, turning themselves in to the Anglo-Americans. The German surrender in May 1945 did not bring an end to the OUN and UPA's war against the USSR. Members of both organisations arriving in Germany reported that the fight was continuing, with left-behind UPA forces using equipment either given to them or abandoned by the retreating Germans. As relations between the wartime alliance of the USA, UK and USSR deteriorated, the Cold War gathered momentum. The Western allies began to work hard to loosen the Soviet grip on eastern Europe and to this end British and American intelligence now started to back the OUN-UPA struggle against Moscow. They provided logistical support and more

³⁷ Mark Aarons and John Loftus, *Ratlines: How the Vatican's Nazi Networks Betrayed Western Intelligence to the Soviets* (London: Mandarin, 1991), pp. 180-1.

³⁸ Sakwa, (see note 3) p. 17. These horrific events make the compassion and generosity shown by Polish people to Ukrainian refugees today all the more remarkable and moving.

weapons for partisan operations, designed to undermine Soviet authority in Ukraine and Poland, throughout the late 1940s and into the 1950s. Between 1945-48 these operations were responsible for the deaths of 35,000 members of the Russian secret police.³⁹

It would be very wrong to argue that contemporary Ukrainian nationalism is Nazi. The President is Jewish and the prevailing political discourse is liberal-democratic. Yet the history cannot be denied and the far right continues to have some influence in Ukraine, even if its part in the nation's life is perhaps a good deal less significant than it was a few years ago. When Bandera was assassinated by the KGB in 1958 he became a Ukrainian nationalist hero. There are statues of him in many Ukrainian towns and cities and his birthday on 1 January is the occasion for a national holiday, with marches in his honour.⁴⁰ The OUN still exists today, influencing the radical nationalist agenda with a continued paramilitary legacy. Its presence was evident in the massacre of anti-Maidan demonstrators in Odessa by militant right-wing nationalists in 2014. (The official death toll was 48 dead and 247 injured but Sakwa points to local reports which suggest the number of deaths ran into the hundreds.⁴¹) There is also the existence of the Azov Battalion, made up of recruits from far right groups and neo-Nazi elements, which is fighting with the Ukrainian forces in the war against Russia.⁴² A recent book about the battle of Stalingrad, by the distinguished British historian Anthony Beevor, was banned by the Ukrainian authorities because it contained a passage about the August 1941 massacre of 90 Jewish children by Ukrainian militiamen in the town of Belaya Tserkov.⁴³ All this has left its

³⁹ John Loftus, *The Belarus Secret* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 107; Sakwa, (see note 3) p. 17.

⁴⁰ Radio free Europe/Radio Liberty's Ukrainian News Service, 'Hundreds Of Ukrainians March To Honor Controversial Nationalist Leader', 1 January 2022 at <<https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-march-stepan-bandera/31635671.html>>.

⁴¹ Sakwa (see note 3) pp. 97-8.

⁴² Oleksiy Kuzmenko, 'Far-Right Group Made Its Home in Ukraine's Major Western Military Training Hub', Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES), occasional papers no. 11 (September 2021), at <<https://tinyurl.com/ycknn88k>> or <<https://www.illiberalism.org/far-right-group-made-its-home-in-ukraines-major-western-military-training-hub/>>.

⁴³ Alison Flood, 'Stalingrad author Antony Beevor speaks out over Ukraine book ban', *The Guardian*, 19 January 2018 at <<https://tinyurl.com/y8xw6yu7>> or <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/19/stalingrad-author-anthony-beevor-speaks-out-over-ukraine-book-ban>>.

mark on the Russophone communities, notably those in the Donbas region. This has clearly added to the Kremlin's fears that a Ukrainian state aligned with the West would have significant implications for Russia. The main fear being that Ukraine might become actively hostile and seek to re-open divisive and potentially bloody issues which would otherwise appear to have been buried.

The Cockpit of Europe

None of this justifies Putin's war against Ukraine, an independent liberal-democratic state, notwithstanding its imperfections (notably in the power of oligarchs and the far right influence on its nationalist movement). But the West's decision to expand its political and military presence all the way to the borders of the Russian Federation was always likely to provoke a hostile reaction. The veteran US strategist George F. Kennan, formulator of the doctrine of containment of the Soviet Union back at the start of the Cold War, warned about this in a 1997 *New York Times* article.⁴⁴ Even if enthusiasm regarding Ukraine's enrolment in NATO has now cooled, Russian political, economic and strategic concerns are well founded. There have been significant developments within Ukraine over the last fifteen to twenty years – and the West is still interested in bringing the nation under the umbrella of the EU. These concerns lay behind the seizure of Crimea and the intervention in the Donbas in 2014 and they have driven Russia's determination that Ukraine remain a neutral and non-aligned state.

Russian efforts to stabilise its relations with Ukraine within the context of a new, post Cold War international system have been rebuffed time after time since the era of Gorbachev. Nevertheless, in the last year there has been some evidence that the West has started to take the Russian position concerning Ukraine seriously, possibly as a consequence of Putin's resort to a tough diplomatic line which appeared to combine a willingness to negotiate with the threat of force.⁴⁵ This has made the Russian invasion very hard to understand, in terms of its morality, political sense, objectives and timing. All it seems safe to say at the moment is that this war can be viewed as the result of a political failure on the part

⁴⁴ George F. Kennan, 'A Fateful Error', *The New York Times*, 5 February 1997 at <<https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/05/opinion/a-fateful-error.html>>. Kennan was the subject of a piece in my 'Historical Notes', in *Lobster* 48 (2004).

⁴⁵ Karan Thapar, 'Putin's Invasion Has Converted Imminent Diplomatic Victory Into a Major Political Setback', *The Wire*, 3 March 2022 at <<https://tinyurl.com/3u39s5t5>> or <<https://thewire.in/world/watch-karan-thapar-putin-invasion-ukraine-diplomatic-victory-political-setback>>.

of the principal participants in the Cold War to construct a stable, just and lasting peace settlement. The repudiation of Greater Europe in favour of Wider Europe by the USA, the EU and NATO was accompanied by a hubristic liberal-capitalist triumphalism which poisoned and destabilised the international environment. The recent history of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria provides clear evidence of a dialectical process in which Western intervention has fuelled political instability and led to blowback in the form of Islamic fundamentalism. In the European theatre the same process has encouraged the growth of authoritarian and nationalist reaction in Russia. The result has been a catastrophe for the people of Ukraine, their country becoming the cockpit of twenty-first century Europe, a site of imperialist rivalry between an expansionist West and an increasingly chauvinist and possibly revanchist Russia.

*

Scott Newton is Emeritus Professor of Modern British and International History at Cardiff University.

His most recent book is *The Reinvention of Britain 1960-2016: A Political and Economic History* (Routledge, 2017).