

Crimea: A New 9/11 for the United States

Paul A. Goble

Professor at The Institute of World Politics
Special Advisor for Soviet Nationality Problems and Baltic Affairs,
Department of State, 1990-1991
Special Assistant for Soviet Nationalities,
Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, 1986-1989

In 1991, with the end of the Cold War, the disappearance of the Soviet bloc, and the disintegration of the USSR, many Americans—policymakers among them—believed that we had reached the end of history. They believed that we had entered a new period in which cooperation among countries on the basis of shared commitment to democratic values and free market economics would not only be possible but would become the central feature of the international system.

Ten years later, the Islamist terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11th dispelled much of that optimism but did not dislodge one of the key assumptions of 1991. The 9/11 attacks were the work of sub-state actors not only against the United States but against the international community. Americans and American policymakers continued to assume that the governments of the countries of the world, whatever their differences on a wide variety of issues, had a common interest in working together to defeat such challenges and that the counter-terrorist coalition provided a reliable basis for expanding ties.

Now, 13 years after 9/11, the United States and the international community have been confronted with a challenge that calls that optimistic assumption into question. By occupying and annexing Ukraine's Crimea by force under the fig leaf of a referendum and by signaling that it views Crimea as a precedent for further action, the Russian Federation, with which Washington had so hoped to establish and develop cooperative ties, has shown itself to be a revisionist, even revanchist power, that is committed not only to overturning the 1991 settlement but that of 1945 as well.

It is tempting to believe that the current crisis is “just about Crimea, which was Russian anyway”—and that isn't true either, given that Stalin deported the Crimean Tatars from there in 1944, prevented their return, and supported the introduction of ethnic Russians in their place—as all too many in the West are doing. It is critically important to understand just what is at stake and why Russia's actions in Crimea represent the gravest threat to the rules of the game that the United States has taken the lead in establishing and maintaining since the end of World War II.

There are three reasons for what will seem to many a far too sweeping judgment, reasons that lie in the history of the area and of international decisions and that are to be found as well in the statements of Vladimir Putin and other Russian leaders during the lead up to what can only be described as the Anschluss of Crimea.

First, Putin has violated the basic foundation of the international system by redrawing borders and transferring the territory of one country into another. He and his supporters claim that they are doing no more than the United States did in Yugoslavia, but that is simply false. The United States did not organize the transfer of Kosovo to Albania. Instead, what we are seeing is naked aggression, covered by a trumped up “referendum” and a massive propaganda effort in Russia and the West.

There is one aspect of Putin’s argument, however, that does deserve attention although it is not compelling under the circumstances. As few in the West have been prepared to acknowledge, the borders of the republics in the USSR were drawn by Stalin not to solve ethnic problems but to exacerbate them. In every case, including most famously Karabakh in Azerbaijan but also Crimea and much of eastern Ukraine, Stalin drew the borders so there would always be a local minority nationality whose members would do Moscow’s bidding against the local majority. That had two benefits for the center. On the one hand, it meant that inter-ethnic tensions in the Soviet Union were primarily among non-Russian groups rather than between Russians and non-Russians, a far more explosive mix. And on the other hand, it justified the kind of repressive system that Stalin imposed. Indeed, it meant that the USSR could continue to exist only with such repression. As I wrote in 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev was likely going to discover that a liberal Russia might be possible, but a liberal Soviet Union was a contradiction in terms. When the last Soviet leader liberalized in the hopes of getting that country’s economy to expand, the USSR fell into pieces.

Those borders could have been changed by negotiation. Indeed, as few recognize, republic borders within the USSR had been changed more than 200 times, with land and people being transferred from one republic to another. However, in 1991 and 1992, the United States decided that these lines must not be changed by negotiation or violence. The rest of the world went along with the idea. The reason for that was the fear that the dismemberment of the Russian Federation, a country that is more than a fifth non-Russian, would exacerbate the problem of control of nuclear weapons and could lead to, in Secretary James Baker’s memorable phrase, “a nuclear Yugoslavia.”

For more than 20 years, this view has guided American and Western policy. The most prominent example of this was the insistence that Armenia end its occupation of Azerbaijani lands and return them to Baku’s sovereignty. So far that has not happened. But it is also the case that our decision to accept Stalin’s borders as eternal did not remove the tensions that he introduced as a kind of poison pill should his empire ever come apart. Putin’s move into Ukraine’s Crimea is an indication of just how strong those tensions remain.

Second, and related to this, Vladimir Putin has done something that overturns not just the 1991 but the 1945 settlement as well. He has argued that ethnicity is more important than citizenship, a reversal of the hierarchy that the United Nations is predicated on and a position that has the potential to undermine many members of the international community. While some may see this as nothing more than a commitment to the right of nations to national self-determination, the Kremlin leader’s approach suffers from a fatal flaw, a defect that unless denounced and countered could lead the heads of other states to

take similar and equally dangerous steps. At the very least, Putin's ideas will lead to massive instability in a large part of Eurasia.

Put in simplest terms, Putin has insisted that ethnic Russians living beyond the borders of the Russian Federation, in this case in Ukraine, have the right to self-determination. Putin has made his career by denying that right to nations within the borders of the Russian Federation, most famously the Chechens against whom he launched and has conducted a brutal campaign that has cost tens of thousands of lives. Consequently, what Putin has done is to say that in Eurasia, ethnic Russians have rights that other peoples do not, a hyper-nationalist, even racist view that will bleed back into Russian society and also spark greater nationalism among the non-Russians both in the non-Russian post-Soviet states and in the Russian Federation as well.

By his actions, Putin has already guaranteed that no Ukrainian state and no Ukrainians will be sympathetic to Russia ever again. Instead, they will view Moscow as a threat. As many people have pointed out since the occupation of Crimea, Putin has done something no Ukrainian leader has ever achieved: he has united Ukrainians and united them around an anti-Russian agenda. Indeed, Ukraine now joins Poland and the Baltic countries as victims of Soviet and Russian actions and will do everything it can, as those countries have done, to escape from the Russian orbit. Some Ukrainians may be suborned or intimidated into saying otherwise, all the more so because some Western countries, including our own, will insist on that. But the underlying geo-psychology has shifted in the region against Russia because of Russian action.

And third, Putin's annexation of Crimea has been accompanied by the most sweeping crackdown against civil society in the Russian Federation since the end of the Cold War. News outlets have been harassed and suppressed, and opposition figures have been threatened. Putin himself has talked about the existence of "national traitors" and "a fifth column" within Russia, terms that to many Russian ears are not very far removed from the Stalin-era term "enemies of the people." Indeed, some of Putin's more rabid supporters are already drawing that conclusion: xenophobia in Russia is at an all-time high, attacks on ethnic and religious minorities are increasing, and many Russian democrats—and we should not forget that they are numerous and our allies—are invoking the words of Pastor Niemöller, fearful that what Putin is doing now will spread to ever more groups, including ominously Jews in that country.

Many in the West have self-confidently assured themselves that this is not a return to the ugly past and that the Internet will block Putin's efforts. But that may be whistling in the dark. Only one in five Russian homes have a computer, and far fewer have links to the World Wide Web. If Russians can sign on only at work, the ability of the authorities to shut Russians off from the rest of the world is still far greater than one would like. And that allows messages to be sent to the Russian people by the state-controlled media that are truly disturbing, including the recent suggestion that Russian forces could incinerate the United States in a nuclear exchange if Washington does not back off.

One needs to be clear: Crimea is not or at least does not need to be the trigger for a new Cold War. The ideological competition of the Cold War was very different. But those who say we must avoid standing up to the Russians lest we provoke one have fallen into a trap set by Moscow. On the one hand, the bogeyman of “a new Cold War” is intended to block such criticism by the West even where and when it is merited. And on the other, what Putin is doing in some ways is even more vicious than what most Soviet leaders after Stalin did.

Soviet ideology was at its base fundamentally internationalist, a fact that limited but of course did not prevent outrages against ethnic and religious groups by the Communist Party and the USSR authorities. But as one wise Baltic leader has put it, if the Russians come back this time, and with Putin’s program of the ethnic supremacy of Russians, Moscow will not be constrained by communism and the results will be truly tragic.

Some argue that because we cannot force Putin to back down on Crimea, we should not speak and act against what he has done. We have a moral obligation and a geopolitical interest in doing so. As we think about Crimea, a small place far away about which few in Washington had heard of until very recently, we need to remember the words of the great Russian memoirist Nadezhda Mandelstam who wrote that “happy is the country in which the despicable will at least be despised,” even if at any one point there may not be anything more than one can do.

Putin’s occupation of Ukraine is a second 9/11, a warning that the optimism of 1991 was misplaced and that the kind of cooperative future we hoped for has been put on hold for some time. That future is still possible. There are many Russians and others who want it. Unfortunately, Vladimir Putin has demonstrated that he is not among their number unless we are prepared to concede to everything he wants.