

TONY WOOD

MATRIX OF WAR

THE RUSSIAN INVASION of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, launched by the Kremlin after months of rising tensions, quickly generated a flood of casualties and several million refugees, as well as bringing the senseless destruction of cities and towns. A negotiated peace may yet bring it to an end. But amid the continued bombardment of Ukrainian cities by Russian artillery and the ramping up of Western military aid to Ukraine, the possibility remains that the war will continue. With that, the odds of a wider conflagration involving several nuclear-armed states would shorten alarmingly. While it is not yet clear how the war will unfold, the world stands at the threshold of a troubled new period. What follows is an attempt to sketch out the historical matrix from which the present conflict developed, and to identify the possible scenarios that lie ahead.

I

The Kremlin bears the responsibility for unleashing this war, and regardless of the outcome will carry a heavy moral burden for the destruction it has already caused. Amid a broad surge of sympathy for Ukraine and condemnation of Putin—briefly expressed in Russia too, by a burst of spontaneous anti-war demonstrations—the drive by the US and its allies to punish and ostracize the current regime has gathered pace. But justifiable outrage and the immediate demands of solidarity with Ukrainians should not be allowed to shut out larger questions of historical responsibility. As the most powerful bloc in a decades-long geopolitical contest over Ukraine, the US and its NATO allies necessarily played a role in shaping the context for the invasion, just as inter-imperial rivalries in the Belle Epoque set the stage for the descent into war in August 1914. Any analysis that confines itself to Russia's actions alone, or that looks

no further than the inside of Putin's head, is at best a one-sided delusion, and at worst wilfully distorts the facts.

A clear understanding requires us to keep in view three interwoven strands of analysis: firstly, Ukraine's own internal development and priorities since 1991; second, the advance of NATO and the EU into the strategic vacuum left in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War; and third, Russia's trajectory from post-Soviet decline to national reassertion. The clashes and confluences of these three dynamics produced the broader context in which Russia then committed its act of aggression.

2

The war of 2022 is at once the expression and the outcome of longer-term dynamics that have placed Ukraine at the centre of rival geopolitical and geo-economic projects: on the one hand a Western-driven tandem of NATO and the EU, seeking to extend the US's strategic dominion and to fold Ukraine into the EU's liberal capitalist architecture; on the other Russian attempts to re-establish a sphere of influence in its 'near abroad'. The balance of power—military, economic, ideological—between these two projects has been lopsided, to say the least. For much of the 1990s and 2000s, one of them was able to advance unopposed while the other remained little more than a compensatory fantasy, amid Russia's post-Soviet disarray. Yet since the mid-2000s, with Russia's economy revived by natural-resource revenues, these two rival projects have been on a collision course, their fundamental incompatibility increasingly plain.

Since gaining sovereignty in 1991, Ukraine has undergone simultaneous, accelerated processes of state-formation and nation-building, all while attempting to advance its own interests, autonomous of both the West and Russia. But having tried to balance between Russia and the West in the 1990s and early 2000s, it was thereafter faced with a zero-sum choice. Since 2014—after the annexation of Crimea and especially the ongoing war in the Donbas—the confrontation of the two projects has only intensified, producing a kind of tectonic shearing that has reshaped the Ukrainian polity, its leaders tilting the country firmly in a westward direction even as its eastern territories remained mired in a Russian-sponsored separatist conflict. Putin's invasion of 2022 was designed to shatter this pre-existing political and strategic pattern, to

then reshape it to Moscow's specifications. Yet it may only confirm the underlying historical trend, in which Russia's post-Soviet neighbours accelerate away from it, producing precisely the fortified ring of pro-Western states Russian policy has spent years trying to forestall.

3

The consolidation of a fervently pro-Western Ukrainian polity, its stance defined in large measure by the need to resist Russian hostility, is all the more stunning a historical outcome given the country's plural inheritance and its considerable degree of closeness with Russia. In its territorial composition, culture and demographic profile, the Ukraine that gained independence with the disintegration of the USSR was quite different from, say, the Baltic States, whose territorial outlines had been established after the First World War, and which remained culturally distinct from the rest of the Union. Ukraine's modern-day boundaries, stretching from the historical heartland of Ukrainian nationalism in the west to that of Soviet industrial modernity in the east—from the Baroque cupolas of Lviv to the Constructivist Palace of Industry in Kharkiv—are the legacy of both imperial and Soviet pasts.¹ It was the Bolsheviks who, in the wake of the Civil War, defined the contours of the Ukrainian SSR in 1922, bringing together Kyiv and the core of medieval Rus' with steppe lands originally conquered by the Romanov Empire in the eighteenth century and the industrializing Donbas. At the beginning and end of the Second World War, further Ukrainian-speaking provinces in the west that had been Hapsburg and then Polish lands were added. In 1954, Crimea—from 1921 an autonomous unit within the Russian component of the USSR, its entire Crimean Tatar population deported en masse in 1944—was transferred to the Ukrainian SSR.

Early Soviet policies, in line with Leninist principles on self-determination, had encouraged the use of the Ukrainian language and 'indigenization' of state structures; the 1920s also brought a literary and cultural flowering, as nationalist networks previously separated by imperial borders received state sanction. But at the end of the decade, Moscow reversed course and adopted a punitive approach; Ukraine's nationalist

¹ For a balanced historical overview of these epochs, see Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History*, 4th edition, Toronto 2009, pp. 201–335 and 348–537.

intelligentsia was decimated.² Thereafter, though the ruling echelons of Communist Ukraine would be Ukrainians, the room for expression of even a sovietized Ukrainian national identity narrowed considerably. Demographically, while Russian protestations that Ukrainians are their ‘brother people’ have always been both patronizing and self-serving, since tsarist times there has been considerable migration and intermarriage between the two, at all levels of society. If the industrialization of the Ukrainian east involved an influx of Russian-speakers, conversely the colonization of Siberia’s agrarian frontier was to a significant extent carried out by Ukrainian peasants. Anatol Lieven has likened Ukrainians’ role in the Russian empire to that of the Scots rather than the Irish—except that, in the legal and economic domains, it was ‘impossible to tell who were the “colonizers” and who were the “colonized”.’³ In this Ukraine differed from the Central Asian and Caucasian Soviet republics, where something closer to a colonial relationship obtained. Across the USSR, Russian had in most cases been the language of high politics, education and social advancement—the medium of Soviet modernization, as Lieven put it⁴—and the bilingualism expected of non-Russians was rarely reciprocated. Here, too, Ukraine differed: by the end of the Soviet era most of Ukraine was genuinely bilingual, with Russian the lingua franca or mother tongue in several of the major cities, and people in Kyiv and the central provinces speaking dialects that merged the two.

What Ukraine shared with most other former Soviet republics was an economic structure that had been fundamentally geared to be part of an all-union system—and hence one that would be dramatically unbalanced when it became a sovereign unit. Alongside a large agricultural sector, Ukraine possessed the mines and heavy industry of the Donbas, as well as a sizeable military sector. Already stagnating by the 1980s, these would be cut adrift by the Soviet collapse, leaving Ukraine scrambling to find new export markets even as it attempted to rebalance its economy, amid a slump still more profound than those besetting other post-Soviet states: GDP contracted by more than 60 per cent between 1990 and 1999, and even in 2020 remained at barely half its late Soviet level (in constant prices).⁵ Ukraine was also the last of the former Soviet

² On both phases see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*, Ithaca NY 2001, esp. Chs 2, 3, 6 and 7. Thanks also to Kyle Shybunko for his insights on this period.

³ Anatol Lieven, *Ukraine and Russia: A Fraternal Rivalry*, Washington DC 1999, p. 27.

⁴ Lieven, *Ukraine and Russia*, p. 50.

⁵ World Bank national accounts data, ‘GDP (constant 2015 US\$)—Ukraine’.

republics to create a permanent currency: the temporary karbovanets coupon, introduced in 1992 and then ravaged by hyperinflation, was replaced by the hryvnia only in 1996.

These specificities—territorial diversity, a *sui generis* relationship with Russia, legacies of Soviet economic interdependence—made Ukraine an intrinsically diverse and potentially more divided country than many of its post-Soviet peers. They would place marked constraints on its development during the 1990s.

4

Nationalist movements—above all the Rukh party—played a prominent role in the Ukrainian drive for sovereignty at the end of the Soviet era, though this was in practice led by a section of the former nomenklatura. The December 1991 referendum on independence produced a 91 per cent ‘Yes’ vote.⁶ Yet this overwhelming mandate had also been premised on the arrival of greater prosperity, and when this failed to materialize, discontent with President Leonid Kravchuk grew. In 1994 it was Leonid Kuchma—a Russian-speaker from Chernihiv, subsequently based in Dnipropetrovsk—who won the presidency by campaigning on a platform of improved ties with Russia and promises of decentralization. However, his margin of victory was narrow—52 per cent to Kravchuk’s 45—and the national totals concealed profound regional imbalances: Kravchuk, a native of Rivne, had scored over 90 per cent in some western provinces, while Kuchma almost reversed those figures in the east and south; the centre was divided.⁷ After the election, decentralization was dropped, and while the institutional momentum of ‘Ukrainianization’ stalled, Kuchma made a point of learning Ukrainian himself.

Kuchma’s decade in office, from 1994 to 2005, brought a strategic balancing that both reflected and enshrined the country’s internal disparities. As Orest Subtelny put it, ‘since the various political forces in the country could not agree on which geopolitical orientation to adopt, all accepted that neutrality, for the time being, was the best option’—codifying

⁶ Figure from Ella Zadorozhniuk and Dmitri Furman, ‘Ukrainskie regiony i ukrainskaia politika,’ in Furman, ed., *Ukraina i Rossiia: obshchestva i gosudarstva*, Moscow 1997, p. 104 Table V.

⁷ Figures from Zadorozhniuk and Furman, ‘Ukrainskie regiony i ukrainskaia politika,’ p. 117 Table VIII.

Ukraine's 'non-bloc status' in legislation and adopting a 'multi-vector foreign policy'.⁸ On the one hand, Kuchma concluded several key treaties with Yeltsin, including a crucial 1997 accord that guaranteed Ukraine's sovereignty and agreed on a division of the Black Sea fleet. In 2000–01 he made deals with Putin on gas pipelines that, among other things, redounded to the benefit of a handful of oligarchic clans, creating a layer of tycoons with a material stake in improved ties with Russia.⁹ On the other hand, Kuchma also made many overtures to the West, seeking closer economic links with the EU as well as pursuing cooperation with NATO.¹⁰ It was also Kuchma who dispatched 1,700 Ukrainian troops to take part in the post-invasion 'stabilization' of Iraq in 2003.¹¹

More than a matter of short-term political expediency, this balancing act was ultimately rooted in the geopolitical and economic dilemmas facing post-Soviet Ukraine: should it seek to integrate with the West, at the risk of semi-permanent demotion to peripheral status, or re-establish links with Russia, at the price of diminished sovereignty or even reincorporation into a refurbished USSR? Ukraine's ambivalent attitude to the Commonwealth of Independent States, jointly created by Yeltsin, Kravchuk and Stanislav Shushkevich of Belarus in 1991, stemmed largely from fears of the second of these scenarios. Concerns about the first, meanwhile, drove Kuchma's interest in reviving Ukraine's high-value manufacturing sectors, in order to integrate into the world economy on better terms as well as creating a strong national capitalist class. While the first component of this project was thwarted by continuing economic disaster, the second was realized in the perverse form of oligarchic clans that were the state-designated recipients of a privatization bonanza in the early 2000s.¹²

Nevertheless, Ukraine's trade patterns did rapidly diversify after 1991. While 53 per cent of Ukraine's exports went to Russia in 1995, by 2009 only 25 per cent did; conversely, Russia went from accounting for 43 per cent of Ukraine's imports to only 20 per cent over the same period.¹³

⁸ Subtelny, *Ukraine*, p. 598.

⁹ Yuliya Yurchenko, *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital*, London 2018, pp. 75–8.

¹⁰ This included a highly provocative joint exercise with US forces off the coast of Crimea in 1997, which prompted anti-NATO protests in the peninsula: Lieven, *Ukraine and Russia*, p. 120.

¹¹ 'Kuchma asks parliament to send troops to Iraq', *Kyiv Post*, 3 June 2003.

¹² Marko Bojcun, *Towards a Political Economy of Ukraine: Selected Essays, 1990–2015*, Stuttgart 2020, p. 211; and Yurchenko, *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital*, pp. 83–6.

¹³ Sergei Kulik et al, *Ekonomicheskie interesy i zadachi Rossii v SNG*, Moscow 2010, p. 97, Prilozhenie 11.

A portion of the slack was taken up by EU countries: in 1996 these accounted for only 11 per cent of Ukrainian exports, but by 2009 their share had risen to 24 per cent.¹⁴ These shifts exemplify a broader centrifugal tendency among former Soviet states, each of which forged new trade ties, in many cases virtually from scratch, and correspondingly loosened their economic interdependence with Russia, without yet severing it completely. But the underlying dynamic of dwindling Russian economic influence was clear.

5

Russia's precipitous collapse as a great power in the 1990s was not only the cause of social and economic disaster on the domestic front. It was also the enabling condition for a wholesale strategic realignment of Eastern Europe. The dismantling of the Warsaw Pact was not matched, as the Soviet leadership had naively hoped, by a symmetrical winding down of NATO.¹⁵ On the contrary, the withdrawal of Soviet military power provided an opportunity that Washington was determined not to pass up. When the US threatened to torpedo the process of German reunification unless it took place within NATO, the Soviets did not insist on neutrality.¹⁶ With Soviet retreat leaving the sole superpower in command of the field, Eastern European leaders were quick to press their cases for NATO membership, the Visegrád Group—the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland—jointly declaring it their goal in 1992. By 1994 Clinton was announcing on a visit to Poland that the admission of new members to the alliance was 'no longer a question of whether, but when and how.'¹⁷ The few voices of opposition to NATO expansion in Washington—including George Kennan, architect of containment—were ignored, their concerns over provoking Russia and the hesitation of the US's NATO allies dismissed. Military considerations were set aside on the grounds that 'the possibility that Poland or the Czech Republic would actually need defending seemed remote.'¹⁸ Indeed the main reason NATO

¹⁴ Figures from Harvard Atlas of Economic Complexity.

¹⁵ 'Let's disband both NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Let's release your allies and ours', Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze suggested to US Secretary of State James Baker in September 1989: quoted in M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate*, New Haven 2021, p. 29.

¹⁶ Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, Chs 2 and 3.

¹⁷ Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, p. 191; see also James Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The US Decision to Enlarge NATO*, Washington DC 1999.

¹⁸ Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When*, p. 142.

expansion could gather such momentum was precisely because Russia was not a threat. That momentum was sustained into the 2000s: after the Visegrád Group joined in 1999, seven more countries—the Baltic States plus Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia—did so in 2004, followed by Albania and Croatia in 2009.

Yet while the expansion was fundamentally premised on Russia's weakness, it also initially required a shield of ambiguity to soften the blow for Moscow, and in particular to avoid harming Yeltsin's 1996 re-election bid. The US pursued a two-track policy in which Russian collaboration with NATO was encouraged but aspirations to actual membership deflected. For Russian strategists, however, the question of NATO's ultimate purpose lingered: if the Alliance was not directed against Russia, why shouldn't Russia join it? The aspiration itself stemmed from the prevalence in the foreign-policy thinking of the time of a 'Westernizing' line, seeking closer integration with the West and the creation of a common security architecture, 'from Vancouver to Vladivostok' in the phrase used in 1991 by the US and German foreign ministers, and echoed by their Russian peer Andrei Kozyrev.¹⁹ This line continued to predominate well into Putin's reign. In 2000 he even proposed Russian membership in NATO and reaffirmed Russia's place as 'part of European culture.'²⁰ Western approval for his war on Chechnya in 1999 was matched by Russian support for Bush's 'War on Terror' after 9/11. But Russian hopes for a deeper partnership, let alone a redrawing of the global security architecture, were confounded. In the second half of the 2000s, indeed, evidence mounted that Russian and Western interests were fundamentally incompatible—and events in Ukraine would play a central role both in revealing and in deepening that incompatibility.

6

The 'Orange Revolution' of 2004–05, in which popular protests brought to power the pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko in place of the Russian-backed Viktor Yanukovich, set the country on a political path that now diverged decisively from that of most of its post-Soviet peers. Dmitri Furman identified a family resemblance between the regimes that came

¹⁹ Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, p. 128.

²⁰ 'Putin Says "Why Not?" to Russia Joining NATO', *Washington Post*, 6 March 2000.

to power in the early 1990s, labelling them ‘imitation democracies.’²¹ The term referred to a gap between democratic form and anti-democratic substance, a façade of elections covering the continued hold of a single ‘party of power’. Yet while Ukraine conformed to this pattern in the 1990s—Kuchma too, like Yeltsin and Kazakhstan’s Nazarbaev, faced down his parliament and managed to impose a new constitution—its very internal heterogeneity made the maintenance of an undivided ruling clique impossible. Political life was more varied and contestatory than in most other parts of the former USSR; Ukraine also experienced a more polycentric version of the oligarchic enrichment that had taken place in Russia, producing inter-clan strife with regional overtones that was readily transferred to the political sphere.²² The three-way rivalry between Yushchenko, Yanukovych and Yulia Tymoshenko—from Sumy, Donetsk province and Dnipropetrovsk respectively—that unfolded in the second half of the 2000s swiftly dulled the initial euphoria of the Orange Revolution. But oligarchic intrigues aside, genuine political competition became the norm of civic life in a way that simply did not apply in Russia. This created spaces in which mass mobilizations could potentially tilt the balance at moments of crisis—without, however, fundamentally altering the broader parameters of Ukraine’s post-Soviet political economy.

Yushchenko’s victory also brought an intensification in the struggle between Western and Russian interests over Ukraine, matched by a heightening of Ukraine’s internal political differences. Veering away from Kuchma’s strategy of navigating between Russia and the West, Yushchenko enacted a westward lurch, both economically and geopolitically. In 2008, the Ukrainian government began discussions with the EU over what would eventually become an Association Agreement, and joined the EU’s Eastern Partnership in 2009. Betting firmly on economic ties with the West, Yushchenko liberalized Ukraine’s financial markets and presided over an influx of foreign investment, the total climbing from a net \$1.7 billion inflow in 2004 to one of \$10.2 billion in 2007 (though this was still modest by regional standards: the equivalent 2007 figure for Poland was \$25 billion). But rather than reinvigorating Ukraine’s industrial plant, much of the investment flowed into finance and real estate. The share of foreign capital in Ukrainian

²¹ Dmitri Furman, *Dvizhenie po spirali: politicheskaia sistema Rossii v riadu drugih sistem*, Moscow 2010; English translation forthcoming from Verso as *Imitation Democracy: The Development of Russia’s Post-Soviet Political System*.

²² Bojczun, *Towards a Political Economy of Ukraine*, pp. 137–8.

banking rose from 13 per cent in 2004 to over 50 per cent in 2009; three-fifths of that share was held by interests from six EU countries, with Russian finance accounting for another fifth.²³

While GDP growth averaged more than 6 per cent between 2004 and 2008, the fruits were unevenly distributed in social and geographical terms. The western provinces, historically impoverished when part of Austria-Hungary and Poland, continued to lag furthest behind: the weight of agriculture in their economies and unemployment levels left them worse off than the centre and east, the latter buoyed by demand for coal, coke and steel.²⁴ Their prolonged misery was among the preconditions for the nationalist mobilizations of 2014; pro-EU sentiment was in many cases underpinned by a frustrated desire for the better opportunities offered by even the lower rungs of EU labour markets. But while the pro-Western orientation of the government was certainly shared by a large portion of the populace, the eastern provinces remained economically linked as well as culturally close to Russia. They remained a sufficiently strong base for Yanukovich to challenge successfully for power in 2010—a reminder both that Ukraine's choice between the rival blocs to east and west had not been definitively decided, and that the choice itself was a dividing factor in Ukrainian domestic politics.

7

Alongside moves to integrate more closely with the EU, Yushchenko stepped up Ukraine's push for full NATO membership. At the time, there was no popular mandate for such a course, and the Ukrainian constitution barred foreign military bases.²⁵ But the Ukrainian government's aspiration was approved at NATO's Bucharest summit in April 2008, together with that of Georgia. The official communique stated flatly that 'these countries will become members of NATO.'²⁶ But the process was shorn of an explicit timeline in the face of objections to Ukrainian or

²³ Figures from World Bank national accounts data, 'Foreign direct investment, net inflows (BoP, current US\$)'; and Bojcun, *Towards a Political Economy of Ukraine*, pp. 200–1.

²⁴ Bojcun, *Towards a Political Economy of Ukraine*, p. 201; Volodymyr Ishchenko, 'Ukraine's Fractures', NLR 87, May–June 2014.

²⁵ Rajan Menon and Eugene Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order*, Cambridge MA 2015, p. 39.

²⁶ 'Bucharest Summit Declaration', 3 April 2008.

Georgian membership from Putin. This was a key turning point, and one where the historically culpable role of the US in driving NATO expansion needs to be emphasized. Sufficiently aware of Russian concerns to hold back from offering Ukraine and Georgia an immediate path to membership, the Bush administration overrode French and German misgivings to insist that the process would advance all the same. This left the two aspirant states in a waiting room, with none of the supposed benefits of membership, while continuing to amplify Russian concerns. Imposed by Washington from the safe distance of 5,000 miles, this policy course knowingly placed the populations of Georgia and Ukraine in danger, a shameful strategic calculation for which only non-NATO members have so far been made to pay the price.

NATO's assumption may well have been that Russia would simply have to swallow the next round of expansion as it had previous ones. But Russia's temporary powerlessness to oppose the alliance's growth in the 1990s was not the same as permanent acquiescence, and NATO planners surely foresaw that a reaction of some kind would sooner or later take place. It came barely four months after the Bucharest gathering, in the form of the Russo-Georgian War. Though it lasted a matter of days, the August 2008 war set a pattern that would be followed in Ukraine in 2014. Justified by the Kremlin in terms of a humanitarian 'responsibility to protect'—turning previous Western rhetoric against it—Russia's intervention effectively solidified internal divisions into 'frozen' separatist conflicts that were clearly intended to serve as a block on full NATO membership. At the same time, the Russo-Georgian war highlighted the Kremlin's lack of means of persuasion other than force, which thereafter increasingly became one tool of foreign policy among others—a dangerous lowering of the threshold for the use of military power. Yet while Russia's stance had visibly altered, the broader parameters of US policy remained the same, rendering further clashes all but inevitable.

8

The Maidan protests of 2013–14 and their aftermath crystallized a powerful set of polarizations within Ukrainian politics, in which external economic and geopolitical forces appeared as stark binary choices of an existential kind: the West or Russia, NATO or Putin, the EU versus the Russian-led Eurasian Union, even civilization or barbarism. These

oppositions were overlaid onto the country's uneven political, social and demographic map, amid economic stagnation. After contracting drastically with the onset of the global economic crisis—GDP shrank by 15 per cent in 2009—and then briefly rallying, by 2013 growth was flatlining. Economic frustrations were aggravated by the corruption and authoritarian tenor of Yanukovych's rule. The former governor of Donetsk and his associated clan were clearly inclined to favour Russian material interests—and of course to profit from them personally—but negotiations with the EU on an Association Agreement accelerated under Yanukovych, maintaining the country's westward momentum. Yet it was also apparent that many of Ukraine's domestic industries would be greatly damaged by the terms of the Association Agreement, and even some of its oligarchs had reservations, in particular about the incompatibility of closer enmeshment with the EU and continued trade with Russia.²⁷

It was Yanukovych's U-turn on signing the Agreement in December 2013, followed by harsh repression of the initial Euromaidan protests, that sparked the wider revolt that led to his ouster the following February. The Maidan laid bare many of the dysfunctions of the previous system, and at the same time demonstrated how brittle the support for pro-Russian politicians was. With Yanukovych and his ilk in profound discredit, the political stage was soon dominated by pro-Western figures who manoeuvred to gain the approval of the Maidan. Yet the apparent consensus on display in the streets of Kyiv was far from a nationwide phenomenon, and political developments in the capital opened up a rift with the Russian-speaking east, which the Kremlin then assiduously widened by annexing Crimea and arming separatist forces in the Donbas. These actions did much to confirm Ukrainian nationalists' longstanding claims that Russia posed a threat to their country's territorial integrity. The war in the Donbas and the Crimean annexation also ultimately helped to produce the very outcome they were supposed to avert: the consolidation of a firmly pro-Western Ukraine with growing ties to the EU and NATO.

9

The Ukraine crisis of 2013–14 also marked a watershed for Russia, both in terms of its domestic politics and its international orientation. Externally, its upshot was undoubtedly a geopolitical defeat for the

²⁷ Yurchenko, *Ukraine and the Empire of Capital*, pp. 155–6.

Kremlin, cementing Ukraine's pro-Western orientation and sharpening hostilities with the US and Europe. Internally, however, the annexation of Crimea was trumpeted by the Kremlin as a triumph, returning to the national fold territory it considered 'an inseparable part of Russia', as Putin termed it in his March 2014 speech announcing Crimea's incorporation into the Russian Federation.²⁸ Widely popular at the time, the annexation generated a 'Crimean consensus' that enabled Putin easily to weather the ensuing confrontation with the West, the sanctions regime depicted as simply another facet of a broader Western assault on Russia. But the successful establishment of this consensus itself pointed to another crucial development: the new prominence within official ideology and practice of Russian great-power nationalism.

For much of the 1990s, Russian nationalism was the dog that did not bark, confounding predictions that a revanchist politics would emerge from the humiliations of the USSR's collapse. Part of the reason for this was disarray at the level of the state and profound anomie in society, which made full-blown nationalist mobilizations as unlikely to succeed as any other form of mass politics. But another reason for the initial weakness of Russian nationalism lay in Russia's own status as a multinational federation, in which Russians formed the vast majority—80 per cent according to the first post-Soviet census of 2002—alongside scores of other ethnic groups, many of them the 'titular nationalities' of autonomous republics or regions. In such a structure, an overtly ethnified Russian nationalism would be destabilizing. Hence the recourse to distinct terms to refer to ethnic Russians—*russkie*—and citizens of the Russian Federation—*rossiane*—with official statements generally careful to deploy the latter. Putin's colonial war in Chechnya was fought not in the name of ethnic Russian dominance, but of 'anti-terrorism', a catch-all that soon came to connote a broader counter-insurgency across the Muslim North Caucasus, but which was never translated into explicitly national terms.

From 2012 onwards, however, and with Putin's return to the presidency, elements of nationalist thinking came increasingly to the fore in Kremlin pronouncements, couched in 'civilizational' terms that granted Russia a leading role in the defence of 'traditional values' against a liberal onslaught.²⁹ The crackdown on dissent after the 2011–12 protests often

²⁸ 'Address by President of the Russian Federation', 18 March 2014.

²⁹ See Ilya Budraitskis, 'Putin Lives in the World that Huntington Built', in *Dissidents among Dissidents*, London and New York 2022, pp. 7–11.

took the form of an internal culture war against anti-national elements. It was also a wounded Russian nationalism that was mobilized in the Ukraine crisis of 2013–14, deployed to justify Russian intervention on the side of Russian-speakers in the Donbas. The conflation of language and civic belonging this involved was indicative either of a deliberate instrumentalization or a profound misunderstanding: many of Ukraine’s Russian-speakers considered themselves Ukrainians who happened to speak Russian, rather than essentialized but somehow misplaced Russians. The Donbas war also opened up a more alarming set of possibilities: if Russia was willing to place Ukraine’s borders in question in the name of defending ‘Russians’, which other frontiers might be subject to revision, and on what basis?

The new prominence of nationalist motivations in the Kremlin’s outlook in itself betokened a broader shift, which the Ukraine crisis of 2013–14 both rendered apparent and exacerbated: a decoupling of the economic and territorial logics of Russian power.³⁰ During the natural-resource boom years of the 2000s Russia’s geopolitical priorities and the interests of its capitalists had been broadly aligned, the projection of power in its ‘near abroad’ compatible with an overseas investment drive by Russian corporations; symptomatic of this close overlap was a 2003 manifesto by Anatoly Chubais, orchestrator of Yeltsin’s privatization, calling for Russia to forge a ‘liberal empire’, as ‘the only, unique and natural’ power in the former Soviet lands. In Ukraine, these two logics were intertwined to an unusual extent, notably due to the role of its pipelines in conveying Russian gas to European markets. After 2014, however, the two logics were sundered: the Donbas war brought the physical destruction of many Russian-owned industrial assets, while the Crimean annexation led to Western sanctions that hobbled both inward and outward investment. That the Kremlin deemed these penalties worth enduring indicates the underlying shift in the nature of Russian power.

IO

The Maidan protests had been a symptom of a long-running crisis of political representation in Ukraine—a crisis common to all post-Soviet states, but given a particularly polarizing twist in the case of Ukraine by

³⁰ My analysis here draws on Ilya Matveev, ‘Between Political and Economic Imperialism: Russia’s Shifting Global Strategy’, *Journal of Labour and Society*, 2021.

the internal repercussions of the country's status as geopolitical object of external contention.³¹ Far from resolving this crisis, however, the course of Ukrainian politics after the Maidan only deepened it, and the country's internal rifts widened still further even as its governments stepped up the country's parallel geopolitical and geo-economic integrations with Washington and Brussels.

Petro Poroshenko, elected in 2014, signed a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement with the EU which entered into force in 2016, while the US unlocked massive inflows of aid, some \$4 billion between 2014 and 2021, of which around \$2.5 billion was military aid.³² US diplomats were closely involved in negotiations over the first post-Maidan transitional governments, and thereafter worked tightly with the Ukrainian military and intelligence apparatus. With GDP shrinking rapidly and the country's debt mounting, Poroshenko also began a drastic neoliberal restructuring through IMF-recommended austerity measures—'It would be sad to waste this crisis', in the words of his Lithuanian-born minister of economy and trade, Aivaras Abromavičius.³³

But if in these respects the post-Maidan order brought an intensification of pre-existing dynamics, in other areas it represented a clear break with what went before. One of the distinguishing features of post-Maidan political life was the abrupt empowerment of right-wing nationalist movements. Having been the most prominent organized force in the Maidan itself, in its wake they retained a far greater mobilizing capacity than any other tendency. Pro-Western liberals, though solidly anchored in policy circles and NGOs, had no such numerical weight. The latter's weakness was compounded by the lack, as Volodymyr Ishchenko puts it, of an institutionalized political and ideological boundary between the liberal wing of civil society and the far right.³⁴ This enabled the right to gain a degree of ideological influence and institutional sway out of proportion

³¹ Here I draw on Volodymyr Ishchenko and Oleg Zhuravlev's analysis of the Maidan and its aftermath as a 'deficient revolution': 'How Maidan Revolutions Reproduce and Intensify the Post-Soviet Crisis of Political Representation', *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 714, October 2021.

³² Congressional Research Service, 'Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and US Policy', 5 October 2021, p. 33; and 2014–21 data from [ForeignAssistance.gov](https://www.foreignassistance.gov/).

³³ 'The American Woman Who Stands between Putin and Ukraine', *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 5 March 2015.

³⁴ See the interview with Volodymyr Ishchenko, 'Towards the Abyss', in this number of *New Left Review*.

to their actual numbers and, crucially, to their electoral performance: while parties such as Svoboda slumped at the ballot box, far-right slogans became normalized in public discourse and hard-right paramilitary formations were integrated into the state security apparatus by Interior Minister Arsen Avakov during his seven-year tenure (2014–21). It is this contrast between limited electoral reach and extensive state support, as well as its access to actual weaponry, that has marked the Ukrainian right out from rising neo-fascist tendencies elsewhere.

In the context of the ongoing Donbas war, moreover, the nationalist right's depiction of Ukraine as under permanent assault by its antagonistic neighbour had an obvious resonance. The conflict in the Donbas created a surge of fatalities and mass displacement in its first six months—some 4,000 dead on both sides by October 2014, with as many as half a million registered as IDPs in Ukraine and tens of thousands more having fled to Russia—and continued to generate a steady stream of casualties thereafter.³⁵ By May 2018, civilian casualties totalled some 3,000 dead and at least 7,000 injured, though reliable figures were hard to come by; according to one estimate, some two-thirds of the casualties were in the more densely populated separatist-held territories.³⁶

The ceasefire agreed at Minsk in February 2015 was notional at best, and was deeply resented by a newly empowered nationalism that saw any accord with Russia as an intolerable imposition at best, treason at worst. At key moments, a significant bloc of public opinion, ranging from liberals to the far right, would mobilize to block moves seen as signalling concessions to Russia. This dynamic in part explains why the constitutional changes stipulated under the Second Minsk Protocol of 2015—decentralizing power and according Donetsk and Luhansk provinces special status—were not enacted either under Poroshenko or his successor, Volodymyr Zelensky, both of whom were elected with sizeable mandates for peace.

Zelensky's victory in 2019 exemplified the crisis of representation noted above. His thumping margin in the April run-off—73 per cent to Poroshenko's 24—was matched by an avalanche in the legislature in

³⁵ International Crisis Group, 'Peace in Ukraine: The Costs of War in Donbas', Report No. 261, 3 September 2020.

³⁶ International Crisis Group, 'Nobody Wants Us: The Alienated Civilians of Eastern Ukraine', Report No. 252, 1 October 2018.

July, where his ‘Servant of the People’ party, named after his hit TV show and only a few months old, won 43 per cent of the vote and 254 out of a total 450 seats. Anti-establishment sentiment was a core element of Zelensky’s appeal, born of frustration with continuing economic stagnation and oligarchic corruption. But his vows to forge peace in the Donbas and his more conciliatory line towards Russian-speakers—Poroshenko had cut off pensions and imposed a ban on trade with the separatist-held areas, as well as restricting the use of Russian in the public sphere—were also central, especially in eastern provinces where he outpolled Poroshenko by even higher margins.

The demise of this platform after Zelensky took office testifies to the powerful combined weight of nationalist and pro-Western impulses within the Ukrainian political system. The lack of boundaries between liberals and far-right made accusations of ‘selling out’ to Russia an especially effective weapon in internal political battles; though often deployed opportunistically by rival oligarchic clans, it had a nationalist ratchet effect, heightening polarization while shrinking the government’s room for manoeuvre. In October 2019, for example, Zelensky announced his government’s acceptance of the ‘Steinmeier Formula’, the technical means previously agreed at Minsk for implementing special status for the separatist entities. Yet this was immediately greeted with protests under the slogan ‘No to Capitulation’ and far-right roadblocks to prevent disengagement at the frontline.³⁷

If the tenor of politics in Ukraine imposed clear constraints on moves to implement the Minsk accords, conversely it only increased the momentum of the country’s westward strategic re-orientation. In February 2019, Ukraine’s Constitution was amended to overturn its ‘non-bloc’ status and assert the ‘irreversibility of the European and Euro-Atlantic course of Ukraine’ and to enshrine a commitment to future NATO membership. At the time, surveys suggested that only around 45 per cent of the Ukrainian population supported joining NATO.³⁸

³⁷ Katharine Quinn-Judge, ‘Peace in Ukraine: A Promise Yet to Be Kept’, *ISPI Online*, 17 April 2020.

³⁸ The figure is based on polls taken either side of the Constitutional amendment: 44 per cent in December 2018 and 49 per cent in May 2019. The numbers are especially striking given that the poll was conducted under the auspices of USAID: ‘Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Ukraine,’ Center for Insights in Survey Research, 6–15 November 2021.

The rolling state of militarized crisis after 2014 was a powerful accelerator for the consolidation of a Ukrainian national sense of self that was increasingly defined by the antagonism with its larger neighbour. As in so many previous historical conjunctures, from 2014 onwards the processes of Ukrainian nation-building and state-formation were overtaken by external forces and distorted by war.

II

Putin's televised speech of 21 February 2022, intended to legitimate the coming invasion, displayed a characteristic blend of attitudes towards Ukraine. Each played a role in the Kremlin's decision to attack its neighbour; none of them is confined to Putin alone. Conflated in policy and practice but analytically distinct, these attitudes are rooted in different layers of thinking within Russia's elite, and their sudden superposition in part explains the mix of rational calculation and imperial overreach behind the invasion.

One layer of thinking is strictly geopolitical, seeing Ukraine as a vital strategic emplacement which no Russian government should willingly cede to NATO. A second layer, drawing on both Soviet-era assumptions and the wellsprings of Russian nationalism, retains the conviction that Ukraine is 'not a real country', as Putin supposedly told George W. Bush in 2008. This basic perception of modern-day Ukraine as at best a contingent historical construct is widely shared in Russia, articulated by figures ranging from Gorbachev to Solzhenitsyn, themselves drawing on long imperial precedent.³⁹ A third set of preconceptions about Ukraine is of more recent vintage, and concerns its status as precisely a related but distinct country that is moving along a different political trajectory from Russia. Where Russia has maintained the system of 'imitation democracy', Ukraine has repeatedly overturned it through popular uprisings—the Maidan conjuring the spectre of a political disorder that poses a direct threat to the Kremlin's rule. Fourthly, there is

³⁹ In October 1991, Gorbachev told George Bush that 'Ukraine in its current borders would be an unstable construct if it broke away', and that 'it had come into existence only because local Bolsheviks had at one point gerrymandered it that way to ensure their own power': Sarotte, *Not One Inch*, p. 127. Solzhenitsyn, for his part, assailed Ukrainian nationalists for 'eagerly accepting the false Leninist borders of Ukraine': Lieven, *Ukraine and Russia*, p. 150.

the geo-economic status of Ukraine: not only the site of the pipelines ferrying Russian gas to its key European markets, but also the largest potential market for any Russian-led regional economic project.

All of these motivations were collapsed together in the decision to invade. Putin's 21 February speech offered a familiar recapitulation of charges against NATO expansion and Western double standards, as well as a critique of post-Maidan Ukraine's 'aggressive nationalism and neo-Nazism', amplifying a pet theme of Russian government-run media. But the bulk was devoted to a lengthy history lesson intended to prove the artificial nature of Ukraine's current frontiers. Putin directed particular fury at Lenin and at the Bolsheviks' policies on the national question: 'why was it necessary to make such generous gifts, beyond the wildest dreams of the most zealous nationalists?' Turning to the present, Putin asserted that if what Ukrainian nationalists really wanted was 'decommunization'—referring mainly to 2015 Rada legislation that banned 'communist' organizations and symbols and called for the wholesale renaming of streets—'that suits us fine'; the implication being that the Ukrainians should be prepared to lose territories the Communists had 'given' to Ukraine. Recognizing the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics was a first move towards this. The historical fantasy in play here was not a restoration of the Soviet Union and hence reincorporation of a subordinate, semi-sovereign Ukraine; it was rather the unravelling of the Soviet inheritance and a reversion to imperial boundaries, raising the spectre of Ukraine's dismemberment.

Has this, in fact, been the goal of Russian policy all along—a revanchist neo-imperialism bent on subjugating its periphery, concealed for a time behind objections to NATO expansion but now finally revealed in the destruction unleashed on Ukraine? For many liberal commentators, the Russian invasion proved that NATO expansion was not in fact the issue, but rather the alibi for Russia's inability to accept a sovereign Ukraine, or else its opposition to the EU.⁴⁰ While the US and European establishment's interest in removing NATO expansion from the picture is obvious, some on the left have also taken up a version of this argument, criticizing both themselves and their peers for buying into the

⁴⁰ For Sam Greene, 'despite all the rhetoric about NATO, Moscow's beef is fundamentally with the European Union': 'Here's looking at EU', 10 February 2022, tldrussia.substack.com.

narrative of NATO's role.⁴¹ Others have reflected that insufficient attention was paid to the autonomous weight of nationalism within Kremlin calculations, and its dangerous capacity to outstrip any rational consideration of economic or political interests, as well as to Russia's active role in exerting neo-imperial pressure on its environs, rather than merely reacting to Western moves.⁴²

Yet the apparent dichotomy now developing between two explanatory schemas—one emphasizing NATO expansion, the other the long-hidden force of Russian nationalism; one supposedly exculpating Russia, the other muting the role of NATO—is ultimately false. There is no real world in which NATO expansion did not occur, and the emergence of an increasingly assertive and militarized Russian nationalism is inextricable from that process, because it was in large part propelled and reinforced by it. With regard to Ukraine, Russian nationalist fantasies have persistently been enmeshed with geostrategic calculations, the advancement of oligarchic interests with the self-preservation of the 'imitation democratic' system. What weight we assign to these factors can be debated; but that they simultaneously exist should not. Recognition of their existence, moreover, in no way diminishes Russia's responsibility for invading Ukraine. Rather, it helps to clarify it, by enabling us to identify the different links in the causal chain that have brought us to this moment, and to distinguish each actor's degree of culpability. A consequential anti-imperialist politics requires not only condemnation of criminal wars as they unfold, but also an understanding of the field of great-power contention that repeatedly produces them.

I 2

Russia's decision to invade Ukraine took by surprise even those who had spent months announcing its imminence. Some of the more lucid observers had expected Russian recognition of the Donbas statelets to be followed by a limited military operation to expand their terrain. The initial shock at the much larger-scale invasion that instead ensued was compounded by the apparently delusional nature of the Kremlin's declared war aims: demilitarization and 'denazification' of Ukraine,

⁴¹ Greg Afinogenov, 'The Seeds of War', *Dissent*, 2 March 2022.

⁴² Volodymyr Artiukh, 'US-plaining is not enough. To the Western left, on your and our mistakes', *Commons.ua*, 1 March 2022.

implying not only moves to permanently cripple the Ukrainian military but also to install a new political regime. Did this point to a deeper irrationality on the Kremlin's part—a decoupling of decision-making from basic strategic reasoning? The idea that Russia could, in 2022, impose a puppet government on a country where it could not even help rig an election in 2004 defied plausibility. Yet the initial military strategy, involving rapid attempts to seize Kyiv and decapitate the government, reflected this ambition. Within days this approach had visibly failed, prompting a recalibration, and a turn to the artillery bombardment and siege methods seen in Chechnya. Reports of atrocities by Russian forces in occupied areas provided further echoes of that grim precedent.

The appalling paradox of Russian military strategy is that the greatest destruction has so far been visited on the east and south of Ukraine—that is, on the more 'Russian' areas that the Kremlin claimed to be 'liberating'. Although Putin's 21 February speech might have presaged a 'gathering of the Russian lands', the war's first result has been the devastation of Ukraine's Russian-speaking areas, the likely consequence of which will be repulsion of a population the Kremlin long considered a blocking minority within Ukraine. The disregard for their well-being suggests either an improbable intelligence failure—did anyone at the summits of power really believe Russian soldiers would be welcomed as liberators?—or a more fundamental understanding, on some level, that this is a distinct population from that of Russia itself. The very fact that Russian strategists even considered waging this war ultimately attests to their awareness that Ukraine is indeed a separate, sovereign entity on an accelerating course away from Russia's orbit. By physically destroying the shared Soviet inheritance that once bound Russia and Ukraine, the war only confirms the underlying political reality.

13

Five weeks in, it remains to be seen what the future course of the war will be. The worst possible scenario, involving full-scale war between the NATO powers and Russia, has not yet materialized. But the longer the war continues, the higher the possibility of an escalation with potentially catastrophic consequences. Biden's belligerent assertion on a visit to Poland in late March that Putin 'cannot remain in power' increased the prospects of such an outcome. Already plainly implied by the West's

coordinated economic warfare, unprecedented in its scale, regime change has now been explicitly, if unofficially, posited as the goal of US policy.

A second scenario would be a military defeat for Russia, with a combination of sanctions and US and European weapons shipments helping not just to stem the Russian advance but to force a retreat without any peace agreement. This seems unlikely in itself—the sheer size of the Russian military means they can continue to fight for some time given the political will—and in the absence of a peace settlement would amount to no more than a temporary respite for Ukraine.

A third possibility, and the most disastrous for Ukraine, is the indefinite prolongation of the conflict, with the vastly larger Russian army facing off against Ukrainian forces being constantly rearmed by the US and European powers. The result would be to make Ukraine the site of a relentless proxy war, aid from the US and its allies helping to obstruct without neutralizing the destructive power of Russian arms. This is where the concerted policy of Western governments currently points, and the implications make a mockery of their apparent concerns for Ukrainians' welfare. On 28 February, Hillary Clinton on MSNBC described Afghanistan in the 1980s as 'the model that people are now looking toward,' though 'the similarities are not ones you should bank on'. The example of Syria seems no less chillingly relevant.

A fourth, less pessimistic scenario involves the swift agreement of a peace. By mid-March a new set of Russian demands had surfaced in talks between Ukrainian and Russian envoys: Ukrainian neutrality, recognition of Russian sovereignty in Crimea and of the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk provinces. In late March Ukrainian negotiators put forward a ten-point plan proposing the country adopt non-aligned and non-nuclear status, subject to a referendum, and that its security be guaranteed by a consortium of other states. Discussion of Crimea would be hived off into a separate bilateral process, and the Donbas was not mentioned. Whatever the contours of an eventual peace settlement, and for all the posturing by Washington and its allies, there seems to be broad agreement that NATO membership for Ukraine should be foreclosed. Given how little protection the possibility of NATO membership has given Ukraine, and how much NATO itself did to make the conflict more likely in the first place, the Ukrainian populace may find that an acceptable condition for peace. But with Russian forces seemingly

stalled in their advance, and US and European weapons continuing to flood in, the Ukrainian government may have diminishing incentives to accept a settlement at gunpoint, especially if they are being encouraged by their allies to believe those guns will eventually be forced to retreat. If further atrocities after those uncovered at Bucha in early April come to light, the moral case for negotiating a peace with Russia will also become even harder to make.

A fifth possibility, somewhere between the two preceding scenarios, is that a military stalemate leads not to a peace settlement but to an armed truce. On one side, Russian occupying troops may end up in control of enough territory to enforce a de facto partition, while on the other Ukrainian forces, with NATO backing, would stand emplaced behind front lines stretching over hundreds of miles. Russian moves, as of late March, to refocus military efforts on the Donbas distinctly signalled such a possibility. This would be a much larger-scale version of the fortified armistice line between North and South Korea, and would involve a permanent militarization not just of the polities on either side, but across much of Europe.

I4

The war has already taken an unacceptable toll on Ukraine, and in any scenario its future looks difficult, if not bleak. Repairing the physical damage and returning refugees to their homes after an eventual peace will be no small task; reinstating its sovereignty will be an undertaking of another order, dependent on the designs and pressures of external forces. A Russian withdrawal, to be hoped for as soon as possible, would allow the work of reconstruction at least to begin. But the invasion has sown an enmity that will linger.

In Russia itself, the war has already led to a more nakedly authoritarian turn. The eruption of protests against the invasion prompted a domestic crackdown, with thousands of arrests in dozens of cities. While popular appetite for the war remains low, the overall increase in Western pressure on the regime and the broader European militarization that will ensue from the conflict may well encourage a rallying around the flag, rather than mass desertions or rebellion. Short of such a political earthquake, the regime would also be little inclined to establish positive relations

with Ukraine. In the longer run, if the sanctions-based punishment of Russia becomes institutionalized, it will face a choice between armoured autarchy and closer economic integration with China. Either way its dependence on natural resource exports, and the vast inequalities of the current economic model, will likely deepen even as military spending consumes a mounting share of Russia's diminishing national income.

Europe, too, is likely to militarize further, Germany's announcement in late February that it would boost military spending to over 2 per cent of GDP a dark token of things to come. If the reigning political-economic order remains in place, it is difficult to see this ramping up of military expenditures not coming at the cost of what little remains of social safety nets. Neoliberal security states will trade growth for still more missiles and razor wire. It is hard not to see parallels here with the twilight of the Belle Epoque. Then as now, inter-imperial tensions fed a headlong arms race. Then as now, too, public opinion readily rallied behind national governments. In 1914 the parliamentary parties of the left followed suit, voting for war credits in their national legislatures and thus enabling the bloodbath they had pledged to avert two years earlier. This is, of course, another century, and the left is in a far weaker position, with far less influence on the course of events. By the same token, it is much more vulnerable to being swept along or swept aside by a militarized great-power confrontation it played no role in creating. Some of the old tools—internationalism, class solidarity, a fierce and uncompromising analytical clarity—will be needed to rearm the left against this new round of inter-imperial contention: against the powerful, against both their wars and their peace.

6 April 2022