

## SHAPING THE DEEP MEMORIES OF RUSSIANS AND UKRAINIANS

The medieval principality of Kiev was the origin of the Russian state, but from before it existed, the area we today call the Ukraine was as much a passageway as a destination: from the north, Vikings (who called themselves Rus) came down the rivers to trade and hunt for slaves; from the south, Byzantium sent missionaries and traders; and nomadic peoples from inner Asia, Scythians, various Turkish peoples, Tatars and Mongols periodically surged in from the East. Natives and descendants of previous invaders accommodated to these intrusions. They had to. Many, of course, died or were killed, but many more intermarried or converted to the customs, languages and religions of the most recent of the newcomers.

Historians often describe these accommodations in religious terms: in the vast steppe lands near the Sea of Azov, the Khazars, a Turkish people, converted to Judaism while the people living around Kiev, then a trading post on the Dnieper river, became Greek (Orthodox) Christians and most of the nomads converted to Islam. There was no single overarching political, religious or social Ukrainian authority, but the bosses, chief men or warlords of towns, districts and large estates constituted themselves a sort of primitive parliament, the *veche*, to negotiate with one another and with the titular rulers. For a brief period in the Twelfth century, under this arrangement and led by a major figure in early history, Vladimir II, *Monomakh*, "Kiev" dominated most of what today is the Russian Federation including what later became the Tsardom of Moscow, but it did not include all of what today is the Ukraine. This is shown in the map below.



courtesy of Wikimedia

Kiev's sway was shattered within half a century, and in 1169 Kiev itself was sacked and burned by armies from northern Russian city-states. As the great Kievan-Russian historian

Michael Florinsky wrote,<sup>1</sup> "The Kievan chapter of Russia's history was closed." The center of "Russian" power moved north to the city-state of Vladimir in what had been a mainly Finnish area. The district's later major city and capital, Moscow, was then just a small trading post crowding around a wooden stockade that, burned, demolished and rebuilt, came to be known as the Kremlin. Then in the Thirteenth century the Mongols of Chingis Khan arrived.<sup>2</sup>

The Mongols first entered the formerly Kievan area in 1223. They were to rule virtually all of Asia for most of the following two centuries. In 1238 they captured Moscow and in 1240, Kiev. One branch of Chingis Khan's descendants established became known as the Golden Horde (*Zlataia Orda*).<sup>3</sup> That subsidiary empire of the Mongols dominated what became Russia and the Ukraine.

Militarily, the Mongols were the most powerful people on Earth in the Thirteenth century, but they were nomads and did not wish to settle among those they overwhelmed. For the most part, particularly in the north of Russia, they contented themselves with collecting booty -- which they assessed on the basis of a sophisticated census. To levy taxes and keep order they employed local bosses as their agents. They gave the agents considerable latitude, allowed them to accumulate power and ennobled them with the first Russian title of autocracy, Grand Duke (*Veliki Kniaz*). Thus, it was the Mongols who virtually made a "statelet" of Moscow. In the city, the *Veliki Kniaz* was the "boss" and the tax collector, but beyond its walls, he was just a Mongol employee.

He did, however, have one advantage: Moscow became the seat of a metropolitan of the Orthodox Church. So the combination of Mongol appointment, fiscal power and religious authority gave Moscow an edge over other principalities. Added to these, the Moskva river and the *confluence* of several land routes facilitated trade. But, when the Moscovites tried to express their growing wealth and power, the Mongols sacked and burned the city. Between the middle of the Thirteenth and the middle of the Fifteenth century, Moscow and other northern cities suffered nearly 50 punitive raids or major invasions. As I shall argue, it is foreign violence, dating from the Mongol period and repeated time after time in subsequent centuries, that shapes the deep fear that is lodged in the memory of the Russian people.

Many historians believe that Mongol policy formed the Russian tradition of the authoritarian state. If so, the local rulers certainly took to it readily.

Also blamed on the Mongols is the isolation of Russia from the quickening pulsations of the Western emergence from the Dark Ages into late Medieval and Renaissance times. There is some truth in this charge, but probably as important in blocking contacts with the West were the warlike and still primitive peoples -- Teutonic Knights, Lithuanians and Swedes -- who ruled the forests and swamps that lay between the Russian cities and western Europe.

As they grew in wealth and power and as Mongol power waned, the Russians tried to reach out to the West. The first really independent and powerful Moscow grand duke, Ivan III who ruled in the last years of the Fifteenth century, conquered most of the north from Finland to

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Florinsky, *Russia; A History and An Interpretation* (New York, 1953), I, 31. Florinsky edited 12 volumes on Russian affairs for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and came to the United States in 1926 where he became Professor of History at Columbia. He wrote widely on economics and international affairs. *Russia* was his major book. It remains the classic study.

<sup>2</sup> The Mongols were single-mindedly devoted to power and organized themselves for constant warfare. They lay out their "national policy" in the remarkable *Secret History of the Mongols*. Translated by Francis Woodman Cleaves (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). Also see the adaptation by Paul Kahn under the same title and published by North Pointe Press, San Francisco, 1984. Like many words in Arabic, Turkish and Persian, words are variously spelled. Chingis is often spelled Ghengis.

<sup>3</sup> Our word "horde" comes from the Turkish *orda* which means "fighting force" or something like "army division."

the Urals and, as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great were later to do, he sent missions to the Italian cities to entice to Moscow architects -- the Milanese Pietro Antonio Solario was one of the builders of the Kremlin -- painters, jewelers and metal workers. Ivan also married a Byzantine princess and through her laid claim to the heritage of Byzantium and through it to ancient Rome. Russians liked to think of their growing empire as "the Third Rome."

From our perspective, and perhaps from theirs, it was unfortunate for the Russians that they reached through the declining Byzantine empire for their spiritual and intellectual stimulus rather than profiting more directly from the tides then running through the city states of Italy and northern Europe. But, whatever the causes -- the Mongol heritage or the influence of Byzantium -- the Russians developed separately from the West. In religion they adopted Orthodox rather than Catholic Christianity; in language they wrote their version of Slavic in Cyrillic rather than Latin script; and in a number of social practices including the segregation and veiling of women they turned east. Yet they experienced some of the same economic surges as western Europeans. Agriculture spread and iron smelting, copper casting and the development of crafts intensified. Moscow was certainly not Venice or Bruges, but it enjoyed a period of awakening of both popular enterprise and a sense of identity if not yet of nationhood.

In the middle of the Sixteenth century, Ivan IV *Grozny* ("The Dread") set in motion two trends that would shape Russia down to recent times.

First, whatever can be said about the influence of the Mongols on Russian despotism, it was Ivan who institutionalized it. To overwhelm the old "bosses," the *boyars*, he created a new security bureaucracy, the *oprichnina*. Yet, for all the "dread" associated with him, he was (for the time) a surprisingly civilized man. He built Russia's first major library and established the first Russian printing press. He also reached out to the West. Like Ivan III, he sent abroad in quest for a wife. He even thought of marrying Queen Elizabeth of England. His objective was the first major international "security" pact based on an arms deal: English guns for Russian trading privileges.

The second trend Ivan IV furthered was the expansion of "Muscovy" into the Russian empire. Already in the Sixteenth century, Ivan had to react to almost yearly raids by the Tatars. In 1571 a raiding party looted and partly burned Moscow, kidnapping over a hundred thousand captives to be sold as slaves. The scene was viewed by a contemporary English merchant who commented<sup>4</sup> that when

the Emperour fled out of the field, and many of his people were carried away by the  
Crimme Tartar: to wit, all of the young people, the old they did not meddle with,  
but let them alone, and so with exceeding much spoile and infinite prisoners,  
they returned home againe.

Partly in response to the raids, Ivan set off to conquer the western part of Central Asia (the area around the city of Kazan) and the northeastern Ukraine. He stopped short of the Crimea which had become a dependency of the then powerful Ottoman Empire, but he laid the ground for a "mindset" that would continue to the present day: it is perhaps not an exaggeration to think of it in terms of the American experience as "manifest destiny." But manifest or not, expansion was long to be viewed as the only source of security from foreign invasion. Like most states, Russia reached out for more territory.

Outside the walls of Moscow and the satellite towns of "Muscovy," the lives of the peasants were constricted. The world for each person was his village. His life was spent in hunger, cold and privation and usually did not last long. Whenever he raised his head, he was apt to lose it or at least to lose what had enabled him to raise it. He lay under a pyramid of exploitation: Mongol

---

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hakluyt, *Voyages*. (originally published in 1589, London, 1967) volume II, 135-136

to *Veliki Kniaz* to landlord. Each was squeezing the one below him so that the whole weight fell on the peasant. The challenge for the peasant was to survive. He could not have been energized by a sense of "nationhood" or of love for "Russia." But he obviously developed a tenacity that proved to be one of the nation's greatest assets. It brought about the defeats of the vastly superior military forces of the French in the Nineteenth century and the Germans in the Twentieth. We can see it already in the Sixteenth century. Listen to the words of the leader of the first English trading mission, Richard Chancelour,<sup>5</sup>

I believe they be such men for hard living as are not under the sun; for no cold wil hurt them. Yea and though they lie in the field two moneths, as such as it shall freese more then a yeard thicke, the common souldier hath neither tent nor any thing else over his head...I pray you amongst all our boasting warriors how many should we find to endure the field with them but one moneth.

When the Mongol suzerainty ended, the plight of the peasant became worse because the tsars, as the *Velilki Kniaz* had become, needed soldiers to protect against the continuing Mongol raids and to conquer additional territory. To man their armies, they created a new form of land tenure, *pomestie*, comparable to Western European and Ottoman empire feudalism. In the system, landlords (*dvoriane*) paid for land by providing military service. They could not meet government demands unless they exploited their peasants. They did, relentlessly. But, as new areas were conquered, hundreds of thousands of peasants tried to escape to them. To survive themselves, the *dvoriane* had to stop them. Stopping them gave birth to a new social system, serfdom (*krepostne pravo*). In a 1597 decree peasants were bound to the land.

The "average" Russian had become a serf. But some did manage to escape and in doing so they became the Russians of our romantic imagination, the Cossacks. During the Sixteenth century, "the southern steppes, which separated Muscovy from the Crimean Tatars ...were swarming with fugitives from Muscovy, Poland, and Lithuania [who were] loosely organized into semi-military groups under an elected leader [and] made a precarious living chiefly by brigandage and by entering the military service of whoever cared to pay them."<sup>6</sup> Their willingness to fight for pay would become a crucial aspect of the civil war that followed the Revolution of 1917.

During the Seventeenth century, the pace of change in Moscow itself quickened. By midcentury, with its own German-language schools and Protestant churches, the small foreign colony grew large enough to form a sort of extraterritorial city. The *Nemetskaya Sloboda* was a Ghetto in reverse in which men put aside the Byzantine-Tatar *kaftan* for Western clothes and women emerged from *purda*. Outside the foreign enclave's walls, Moscow had become a city of nearly a quarter of a million people.

For the first time, we can begin to identify a "Russian" style of life. For women, it was austere, secluded and authoritarian. Its rules were even set out in an official guide, the *Domostroy*, that instructed heads of households on how to manage their domestic affairs. But, for men, life was more open. Crafts led to employment in numerous guilds. The arms industry led the way with the casting of massive cannon, but nearly equal was the demand for church bells. Moscow became almost as "outdoors" as an Italian city, its streets, thronged with wandering crowds, jugglers, acrobats and street musicians moving among peddlers' stalls.

Vodka had become the national drink so the pace was quickened by drunken revelers. To keep order, the governing authorities adopted, as in England of the same period, brutal punishments. Red Square was the Russian equivalent of London's Tyburn where the public was

---

<sup>5</sup> Hakluyt, *Voyages*, I, 256.

<sup>6</sup> Florinsky, *Russia*, I, 216.

treated to the grisly spectacle of executions. Whipping, branding, hanging, impaling and burning to death were common. Tsar Peter the Great, whom we usually think of as a "modernizer," was known to have personally cut off the heads of at least a hundred condemned men. But, as in England, the common people acquiesced to the rule, brutal though it was, of the aristocracy, and felt themselves to "belong" together and to something we can begin to call Russia.

But "Russia," from the beginning was and still today is, a collectivity rather than a unity. As we have seen, the very word *Rus* was the contribution of invaders, the Vikings. Most of the vast lands of the northern part of what today we think of as the core of the nation were in early medieval times the habitats of Finns, Baltic Germans, Letts, Poles and numerous tribal groups. This diversity remained evident in later centuries in the great *boyar* (land-owning, aristocratic) families: some claimed German descent, others Viking or Varangian ancestry and still others Polish or Lithuanian kinship.<sup>7</sup> The most illustrious were those who asserted their descent from the Mongols: they were known as the "the royals" (*tsarevichi*). Later, they were joined by Circassians (*Çerkes*) and Georgians whom the Russians thought to be "princes." In a study of Russian noble families in the Seventeenth century, 229 were found to be of "West European" origin, 223 of Polish and Lithuanian origin and 156 were of Tatar origin.<sup>8</sup>

Because the wealthier families, the *dvoriane*, were more apt to preserve information on their backgrounds, we know more about them than about the peasants (*krestiane*). Given their poverty, it would have been difficult for the peasants to travel as much as the nobles. Almost certainly they were more homogeneous and overwhelmingly ethnically Slavic. Whether or not that was the case, however, they certainly did not mingle with the nobles. They literally did not speak the same language: they spoke Russian while by at least the Eighteenth century the *dvoriane* spoke to one another in French or German. It is possible that this alienation was one of the causes, along with exploitation and brutality, that promoted the Russian attitude toward foreignness.

In the South along the Black Sea, society was much more diverse. When the Kievans defeated the Jewish state of the Khazars, they opened the way for a succession of mainly Turkish warlike tribal societies to migrate westward from Central Asia. The greatest and longest-lasting were the Mongols who established the empire of the Golden Horde and whose descendants are the Crimean Tatars. Into this bewildering and largely unrecorded field of tribal groups, petty states and ephemeral empires, Ivan IV and his successors plunged.

From Ivan IV onward, as Russia expanded, tsars had to deal with an astonishing variety of societies. They chose much the same "tool" as American colonists with the native Americans, military force. But, whereas Americans were able to exterminate most of the natives and segregate the survivors in reservations, the Russians had to cope with relatively large and established principalities. They could not kill them all. But, like the Americans, they made little attempt to find accommodations with them or even understandings of them. The Russians lumped them all together as aliens (*inozhimnii*) or foreigners (*inostrnets*). With few exceptions, they tried to exclude them from Russian life. They failed. By the time the Tsarist regime collapsed, what became just the single Russian state in the Union of Soviet Republics, contained 176 recognized "nations."

Most of these nations could be kept distant from the Russian heartland. One could not. The Jewish people were widely scattered. In addition to the descendants of the Khazars along the Black Sea, communities of Jews lived in Georgia and others, the so-called "Mountain Jews" or "Juhuro," were spread across Central Asia. Then, in the middle of the Seventeenth century, when

---

<sup>7</sup> George Vernadsky, *The Mongols and Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 367.

<sup>8</sup> Vernadsky, *Mongols*, 370.

Russia annexed parts of what had been Poland, large numbers of Ashkenazi Jews were absorbed into the that part of the Ukraine that came under Russian suzerainty.

When Ukrainian peasants revolted against their Polish landlords, they also carried out widespread attacks on the Ashkenazi Jews whom they considered to be foreign agents. Partly as a result of these early pogroms, Jews scattered widely throughout Russia.

Empress Elisabeth wanted to expel the Jews from Russia but lacked the means to do so. Catherine the Great and her successors hit on a different policy, restricting the Jewish population to the western fifth of the empire. This area was comparable to (and named after) the English regime in Ireland. It was considered to be surrounded by a "pale" or staked frontier beyond which the designated people -- the Irish in Ireland and the Jews in Russia -- should not go. The Pale of Settlement (*Cherta osedlosti*) was huge, a million square miles or a fifth of European Russia, but it in Jews were restricted in various ways, and restrictions grew during the Nineteenth century. Over four in five Jews lived in towns or cities where they engaged in commerce and handcrafts; this put them in competition with Russians laborers, craftsmen and merchants and seems to have been a major factor in the hatred that they evoked. Large numbers of Jews were expelled from both Kiev and Moscow and vicious pogroms drove hundreds of thousand out of Russia in the half century before the Revolution.

The closest the Russians came to respecting, if not liking, the native communities came in their dealings with the "wild East," where Russian armies fought the Caucasians as Tolstoy recounts in his *Hadji Murad*. But it was not until after the 1917 Revolution that Russians were willing to treat their minority communities as participants in their political system. The concentration of politics on ideology under the Bolsheviks rather than ethnicity under the Tsars made it possible for men like Stalin, a Georgian, to "belong."

The path that led to national incorporation was long and movement along it was gradual. Indeed, the sense of Russian nationhood grew slowly in the reigns of Ivan's successors. Peter the Great spent much of his life abroad and when in Russia frequented the "liberated" German colony; Catherine the Great made of her entourage a virtual Prussian court; and even Alexander the Great was more at home in French than in Russian which, like the growing Russian aristocracy, he was said to have spoken badly and reluctantly.

But the sense of nationhood received a major push from Napoleon's invasion and capture of Moscow in 1812. Like the Germans almost a century and a half later, Napoleon had overwhelming military power. But his Russian counterpart, Marshal Mikhail Kutuzov, understood that his real army was Russia itself. It was the vast expanse and the severe weather that wore down the invaders. The Russian peasants and serfs were prepared to suffer -- as they did in their normal lives -- and even to die in vast numbers as they did in fighting for their homeland. This gave Kutuzov as it was much later to give Stalin a seemingly unlimited source of soldiers. It was as soldiers under government command and guerrillas acting on their own that they expressed their "Russianness."

If the north had achieved a quickening sense of national identity, the south achieved far less. Inland from the Black Sea and especially in the Crimea, the Mongols had ruled directly. In the Ukraine, they completely replaced the former Russian princes.<sup>9</sup> They thus divided the southern experience from that of the north. They also adopted a more colonial policy, establishing themselves among the conquered population wherever there was sufficient water to promote agriculture. Consequently, although they lost the *élan* of their ancestors, the Crimean Tatars remained a distinct people.

---

<sup>9</sup> Vernadsky, *Mongols*, 214.

More significant for Russia's future, the Crimean Tatars held the key to Russia's door to the warm world. That door opened onto the Black Sea and thence to the Mediterranean. Acquiring the Crimea became for the Russians, as I have suggested, something like the American notion of "manifest destiny." Already in 1652, they had forced the Ukraine to recognize Russian suzerainty and a century later, in 1783, they took the Crimea from the weakening Ottoman empire.

The European powers, energized and led by Britain, feared the arrival of the Russians on the Black Sea. Britain saw it as a threat to its Indian empire. In 1721 Peter the Great had tried to take "the road to India." But he took the wrong road. He thought that it lay through Iran and Afghanistan. That road was shorter but almost impossible for large armies. Against the Russians, Britain fought the "Great Game" in Afghanistan, but both the British and the Russians realized that the real struggle was in the Crimea and Ukraine. The route along the Dnieper or Don rivers to the Black Sea to the Turkish Straits was longer but far easier.

As the Russians pushed south, the British set what became their strategy for the next two centuries. When they could not stop the conquest of the Crimea, they tried to shore up the "Sick Man of Europe," the Ottoman Empire. They saw the Ottoman empire's control of the Bosphorus as the "stopper in the bottle," to prevent the Russian genie from getting out of the Black Sea into the Mediterranean. In 1841 Britain got the European powers to agree to close the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles to all warships, and in 1853 the British imposed what today we would call a "no fly zone" on the Black Sea. They sent their fleet to interdict all Russian shipping there. This clash of policies resulted in the Crimean war of 1854.

In the Crimean war, an Anglo-French-Ottoman force of some 62,000 men carried out the first invasion of Russia by Western forces since Napoleon captured Moscow in 1812. In the summer of 1855, the allied forces destroyed Sevastapol. The Russian heroic defense was celebrated by Leo Tolstoy, who fought in the campaign, in his *Tales of Sevastapol*. Along with his *War and Peace*, it was a Russian national *saga*. The words of Historian Michael Florinsky sound in today's press,

Nationalistically minded Russian historians have interpreted the war as a conspiracy of the western powers, jealous of Russia's might and greatness, to prevent the fulfillment of her "historic destinies"... [while] British historians have often extolled the wisdom of [their statesmen] in safeguarding the "vital" routes of British commerce and saving Europe and Asia from Russian domination...

Each side weighed the issue in terms of its own interests and saw the aims of the other in the worst light. What diplomacy might have alleviated, the use of arms intensified. That is recurring and modern theme in international relations. Each step taken often leads to the next which then seems to demand a further move. Viewing this process in the Crimean conflict, Florinsky sounds a warning which statesmen today should heed: "the course of events was determined rather by spontaneous decisions, the consequences of which were not fully realized, than by an preconceived plan." Specifically, as the English diplomatic historian Harold Temperley wrote,<sup>10</sup> the two actions that precipitated the war, the sending of the Royal Navy to the Turkish Straits and to the Black Sea, were not "taken from clear motives or on the basis of an agreed policy. Both were influenced by misconceptions of the moment."

Tactics and strategy came together in the Crimean war. Russia was defeated. It was also humiliated. The army that was the pride of Tsar Nicholas, despite such little victories as against the Charge of the Light Brigade, had proved to be no match for the Anglo-French-Turkish force.

---

<sup>10</sup> Florinsky, *History, II, 876-877* and Harold Temperley, *England and the Near East: The Crimea* (London, 1936), 511.

But the Anglo-French-Turkish victory only delayed the Russian march to the south. Russia could not afford to give up its access to the Black Sea. So, as it could, it rebuilt its position in the Crimea and tightened its control of the Ukraine. In effect, if not in proclamations, Russia applied to the south a policy comparable to the Monroe Doctrine the United States was applying to Latin America. It was the beginning of a policy we see today in dealing with what the Russians today call the "near abroad," the neighboring republics, including the Ukraine, that had formed the Soviet Union and which they consider vital to their security.

These trends were again brought into focus by the First World War. As in England and France, the German declaration of war was greeted with a burst of nationalist support for the Tsarist government. The Russians even agreed to close down bars and stop drinking vodka, and the anti-Tsarist labor unions called off demonstrations against the government. But the war quickly turned into a catastrophe for Russia. At the Straits, the Ottoman Turks closed the Dardanelles entry from the Mediterranean and the Bosphorus passage, just after Istanbul (then still called Constantinople), through the Black Sea to Sevastopol. Russia's people and army faced starvation.



Sketch map from Cmd. 371, *Final Report of the Dardanelles Commission*  
HM Stationary Office, London 1917.

Russian armies began to lose hundreds of thousands of long-suffering peasant soldiers of the nearly 10 million men Russia mobilized, over a third were wounded or killed. The incompetence of the Tsarist government was shocking: soldiers, who sometimes lacked boots and overcoats, were occasionally sent into battle without rifles on the assumption that they could pick up those dropped by the men who had been killed while artillery units were often left without ammunition. Having failed to stop the Germans with the army, the Tsarist government opted for a scorched earth policy.

As the historian Michael Florinski, who was a participant in the battles, wrote,<sup>11</sup>

During the retreat of 1915 this policy was extended to the entire civilian population: the advancing enemy was to encounter a desert. Farmers and townsmen were ordered to leave their abodes while their stocks of grain and sometimes their

<sup>11</sup> Florinsky, *History*, II, 1329-1930.



homesteads were set aflame. Some of the evacuees were packed into freight cars and dispatched at a snail's pace to an unknown destination; the majority departed by road. Highways leading east were jammed by a mass of bewildered and desperate humanity, with carts carrying a few belongings, and with domestic animals driven by their owners...The registered refugees numbered ...3.3 million in May 1916, a great many, no doubt, escaped registration... precursors of the displaced persons of the 1940s [a great many] died of hunger, exposure and disease.

Even the Tsarist minister of agriculture warned that the scorched earth-evacuation policy would lead "Russia to the abyss, to revolution, to perdition." It did. It seared Russia yet again in what seemed an unending sequence of foreign invasions. Even the "dark masses" of the peasantry sunk beneath the horror. Massive surrenders and desertions ensued. Then, following the October (the "Second" or Bolshevik) Revolution, the army collapsed. The soldiers of whole divisions simply walked home.

Accepting reality, the incoming Bolshevik government ordered demobilization and began negotiations with the Germans at Brest-Litovsk to make peace. The Bolsheviks saw in peace not only a surcease of suffering but an opportunity effect their revolution. If fighting stopped, they could throw all their resources into winning over the people and establishing their rule. We see their actions and the opposition to them clearly in the Ukraine.

In the Ukraine, a self-appointed "governing Council," the *Rada*, was struggling against the local Bolsheviks. The *Rada* was hedging its bets by also negotiating with the Moscow government for a sort of ceasefire and with the German military authorities for a sort of alliance. The Germans responded first. They effected the authority and popularity of the *Rada* by turning over to it supplies of food to pass to their supporters. When the Bolsheviks temporized, the Germans put aside the Brest-Litovsk negotiations and re-launched their attack along the entire front. Russian resistance disintegrated, and the Bolshevik government signed the treaty.

The treaty obligated the Bolshevik government to recognize the independence of the Ukraine. On the same day, March 3, 1918, German forces entered Kiev and proclaimed the Ukraine to be a separate state. While the borders were not finally drawn, the territory was far larger than it had been before or would become later: it stretched from Brest-Litovsk in the northwest almost to Rostov in the east and down to Odessa and the Crimea along the Black Sea.

Then, almost simultaneously, both Imperial Germany and the Bolshevik Russia virtually collapsed. By October 1918, the Bolsheviks were reduced to a territory not much larger than Muscovy under the Mongols and on November 11 German surrendered. Everyone, both the Bolsheviks and their Russian opponents, the "Whites," expected that the Anglo-American-French victors would march into Russia. They did, but in small numbers and in places remote from the Russian heartland. British forces moved up from India through Iran into the Caucasus and along with Americans occupied small areas on the Pacific and on the Baltic and White Seas. Some French forces also moved into the southern Ukrainian port of Odessa at the end of 1918. Still-intact "White" Russian armies, Czech former prisoners of war, Finns, Letts, Poles, Romanians and groups of foreign-encouraged, -paid and -armed Cossacks -- all more or less separately -- pounced on Bolshevik-held Russia. If the Russians had not previously had a sense of being surrounded, they certainly then developed it.

The map below shows a partial view of the invasion of western Russia in early 1918.



courtesy of Wikipedia

The European components of British and French armies were exhausted and wanted to go home as badly as the Bolshevik-led Russians wanted them to do so. The British who were primarily interested in oil, used mainly colonial (Indian) troops to seize Baku; in their operations in the Ukraine, the French mistakenly did not use colonial (African) troops but Frenchmen who, caught up in the ideological battles of the period, refused to fight the Bolsheviks. Such records as remain of American soldiers suggest that they did not know where they were or whom they were fighting against. For them, the Bolsheviks were just a bunch of "bolos."

Few Americans remember the events but, of course, the Russians do. Deep-seated attitudes linger and often unconsciously define the possible so let me recall them.

Knowing little about Russia or Russian attitudes, American officials, "as Assistant Secretary of State William Phillips later recalled... 'were led to believe that if the American flag and the Allied flags appeared in Russia, the Russian people would rise against the so-called Bolsheviks and throw them out.'" That was also the advice given by the then young but already considered-to-be-expert George Kennan. Known later mainly for his caution on confrontation with Russia,<sup>12</sup> he was then a leader of the interventionists, who may be considered the "grandfathers" of today's neoconservatives. In a letter to Secretary of State Lansing in May 1918, he urged that an Allied expeditionary force be sent to get the Russians to "set up an independent, anti-Bolshevik and anti-German government of their own." Following up on this proposal, he advised Secretary Lansing "that the arrival of Allied troops -- and especially Americans -- in eastern Siberia will be welcomed, rather than resented or resisted by an overwhelming majority of the population, and that with the overthrow of class tyranny in that part of the country, the regeneration of Russia as a true democracy will begin."

His advice was certainly a different reading of the Russian experience as I have described it. It proved to be dead wrong. But it was welcomed by the Wilson administration.

<sup>12</sup> This was the thrust of his "X" article in *Foreign Affairs* (July 1947). It is often forgotten that, during the Cold War, he also helped to plan an aggressive but covert program of subversion against the Soviet Union.

President Wilson was determined to defeat the Bolsheviks.<sup>13</sup> He was particularly keen to prevent the arms that had been furnished to the Tsarist army from being taken over by the Red army; so in August 1918 he sent one contingent of American troops to guard supply dumps at Archangel and another to guard storehouses at the far end of Siberia at Vladivostok. Rather than being welcomed, as Kennan thought they would be, they were opposed by the Bolsheviks and not assisted by anyone else. In one engagement, when the troops moved hundreds of miles into Russia, American soldiers killed about 500 troops of the Red army.

Strategically more important, the US supplied arms, food and money to the two "White" forces then fighting the Bolsheviks. One army was led by Aleksandr Kolchak in Siberia and the other by Anton Denikin first and then by Pyotr Wrangel in the Crimea. These were large forces, numbering roughly 100,000 men each. In the Crimea, Wrangel even had a small navy. Cash injections also enabled them to "hire" Cossack forces to fight with them. Covert American agents additionally employed saboteurs to blow up trains on the railways leading to Moscow. As the fortunes of the Whites declined in 1919, the Wilson administration extended its intervention to include an "undeclared" embargo on trade and subsequently a blockade to deprive the Bolshevik government of equipment and food.

Events showed that the presence of the foreign forces actually contributed to the victory of the Bolsheviks. They were seen in the light of Russian fears of foreign invasion. And they were too few to defeat the new Red army which, under the leadership of Leon Trotsky had grown to nearly half a million soldiers, whatever Kennan advised, at least the British realized that the Bolsheviks could not be defeated or democracy "regenerated" by arms. In January 1920 the Allies lifted the recently-imposed blockade and American forces withdrew. Then, when in May 1920, the new Polish army attacked and occupied Kiev, their attack set off a burst of xenophobia. The Poles were routed and driven back almost to Warsaw by the still fledgling Red Army and Ukrainian guerrillas.

Ironically but understandably it was then that the Bolshevik government was nearly defeated: as long as the enemy was foreign, the peasantry supported the Bolsheviks, but once the foreign threat was diminished they revolted. Driven to desperation by a famine that was estimated to have killed half a million people, they were beyond the control of the Bolshevik regime. Lenin told his Communist colleagues at the Party convention in March 1921 that "We are in a condition of such poverty, ruin and exhaustion of the productive powers of the workers and peasants that everything [viz., the ideology and objectives of the Party] must be set aside to increase production."<sup>14</sup>

Lenin's answer was the New Economic Policy (NEP) which released the peasantry from virtual confiscation of their crops. Peasants who had been leaving their crops to rot in the fields quickly increased production.

The peasants' reaction was vital to the regime, but the really interesting reaction was that of foreign leaders. They read the NEP to mean that Communism had faltered. The Communist leadership saw the signs in a similar way, but for them as a mortal danger to the Communist system, and as soon as they could, in December 1927, they again clamped bureaucratic and police controls on the populace.

---

<sup>13</sup> Information on the American campaign is from David S. Foglesong, *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). The quotes from Phillips and Kennan are from pages 162 and 163. I have also used George Kennan's *Russia Leaves the War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956) and his *The Decision to Intervene* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958). Coordination of these various activities was turned over to my cousin Frank Polk who was at that time Counselor of the State Department. I have drawn on his papers at the Yale University Library.

<sup>14</sup> George Vernadsky, *A History of Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929 etc.), 322-323.

In the fall of 1928, the government initialized the first Five Year Plan to industrialize the country and collectivize its agriculture. More or less in parallel, the government began the savage process of destroying the whole class of financially successful farmers, the *kulaks*.<sup>15</sup>

Soviet government policy fell particularly heavily on the Ukraine. For the first time in about 700 years, the Ukraine seemed to be in a position to be ruled by natives who wanted their resources for themselves. The peasantry particularly wanted the lands that the government was confiscating from the old landlords. But the chief Bolshevik official in Kiev pointed out that "Russia cannot exist without the Ukrainian sugar industry, and the same can be said in regard to coal (Donbass), cereals (the black-earth belt), etc."<sup>16</sup> Self rule was not to last long. Having lost roughly a third of the Ukraine to Poland, the Russian leaders were determined to hold on to the rest. As they met resistance or even imagined that there might be resistance, the regime, by then under Stalin, engaged in one of the greatest campaigns of terror in human history.

From 1934, when one of Stalin's protégées, Sergei Kirov, was assassinated until just before the beginning of the Second World War, millions of people were arrested, imprisoned, sent to labor camps or executed. They included not only one in ten members of the officer corps of the army -- about 33,000 officers -- but also thousands of civilian Party officials including members of the Central Committee. In 1937-1938, almost 700,000 people were sentenced to be shot.<sup>17</sup> Quotas were set by areas of the Soviet Union specifying in advance the number (but not the identify) of the people to be purged. In 1938, Party officials in the Ukraine were ordered to find 6,000 to be executed. In addition to those shot, about 3,500,000 people disappeared into the *gulag*.<sup>18</sup> Not since the Mongol invasion had Russia suffered so grievously.

Stalin saw enemies and foreign agents everywhere. In the quest for security, whether for the state, the Party or himself personally, his emasculation of the Russian army and destruction of the Russian administrative structure was preparing the way for the next great invasion by the Germans. Operation Barbarossa struck Russia in 1941.



<sup>15</sup> The word *kulak* means "fist" and was the popular term for village tight-fisted money lenders.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 68.

<sup>17</sup> J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 420 ff. This is the definitive account, based on Soviet archives, most of which have subsequently been closed.

<sup>18</sup> Document 182, 31 January 1938, "strictly secret" All-Union Communist party (Bolshevik) Central Committee, approving the recommendation of NKVD chief Yezhov. Op. cit., 518 and 589.

map courtesy of Wikipedia

As the map above shows, the scale of the invasion was unprecedented -- 4 million *Wehrmacht* troops were hurled into the Soviet Union. The Germans rapidly conquered virtually all of its European territory from the suburbs of Leningrad through Moscow down to Rostov, destroyed most of the Soviet army and killed hundreds of thousands of civilians.

As in the First World War, the Russians subjected the Ukraine to a scorched earth policy. The 1941 policy was even more catastrophic than the 1914 retreat. About 4 million inhabitants -- including at least 200,000 Crimean Tatars -- were forced to flee to the east while political prisoners were summarily executed. Houses were destroyed, stored grain was burned and even the iron and coal mines of the eastern Ukraine were flooded. To no avail. The *Wehrmacht* took Kiev on September 19, capturing almost 700,000 Soviet troops.

As the photograph below shows, at least some Ukrainians initially welcomed the Germans. So, did Germany miss a great chance to defeat Russia? Some Historians believe it did. Had they worked with, rather than humiliating, suppressing and starving the Ukrainians and sending the leaders of the Ukrainian nationalist movement off to concentration camps, they might have undermined Russian resistance. So the argument goes. But it didn't parse.



courtesy Wikipedia

While Moscow was the prime *political* target, the Ukraine was the prime *economic* target. What Germany needed most was food and the Ukraine had long been considered to be the "bread basket" of Russia. However, in 1941, it had no surplus grain; so to get it, the Germans had to take it almost literally out of the mouths of the Ukrainians. Doing so, of course, alienated the population. Winning over the Ukrainians was never an option for the *Wehrmacht*; nor would it have facilitated the conquest of Russia. Regardless of how the Ukrainians felt about the Communist regime, the Germans were impelled to act in ways that virtually assured that the deep fears of foreigners would reassert themselves.

There was contemporary reason for those deep fears. The Nazis never seriously considered collaboration with the Ukrainians. Military strategists thought they could defeat Russia without any help; Party ideologues considered Ukrainians who after all were Slavs to be *untermenchen*; and Nazi economists planned to get rid of 30 or so million of the "surplus population" of the rich "Black Earth" or Ukrainian area and to reduce the survivors into slave laborers to farm it. Moreover, Ukrainian consumption of food competed with German needs so the Germans adopted the *Hungerplan* to starve the population. Hardest hit were those most

accessible: the prisoners of war. The picture below shows a few of the nearly 3 million Russian POWs who were starved to death by the German Army.<sup>19</sup>



courtesy Wikipedia

As the *Reichskommissariat Ukraine* relentlessly siphoned off food from the Ukraine and shipped some 2.5 million Ukrainians to Germany to work as slave laborers, the Ukrainians began to resist and in trying to suppress them, the Germans effectively pushed them into the Russian national struggle. Partisan warfare began in early 1942 and coalesced into the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. As in Russia so in the Ukraine, warfare was literally "to the knife." Overall, the Russians and Ukrainians lost nearly 9 million troops and perhaps 20 million civilians -- one in each six Soviet citizens was killed or died and roughly a third of the Soviet Union's productive power was destroyed.

In summary, we can say that following as it did the terrible oppression of Stalin's regime, the Second World War illustrated and emphasized the deep fears inherited from the past: fears of foreigners were merged with fears of one another, fears of disunion and fears of the neighboring stranger. Even in victory, this was the mood of Russians as the War ended.

Indeed, insecurity (partially overcome by ideological rigidity) marked the Russian Communist movement from its beginning. When it seized power in Russia, insecurity was manifested in the reality of foreign invasion. The Bolshevik leaders tried to deal with the threat by building their military force and by expansion abroad. Trotsky, who virtually created the Red Army, thought that expansion could be effected by revolution. One of the ostensible reasons for the split between him and Stalin had been the disagreement over timing: Trotsky urged promoting world revolution immediately while Stalin proclaimed the need to build Russian power first. However, long before the Soviet Union was theoretically ready to expand, Stalin himself encouraged the move into Poland in the 1941 Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement.

That agreement was, of course, voided by the war. The Soviet Union and Communism nearly went down to defeat. Then, as the tide turned, a major new opportunity opened in 1944. It came from an unexpected source: Great Britain.

Britain's wartime leader, Winston Churchill, was an unreconstructed imperialist. He always argued that Britain should keep its Indian empire. He grew up on tales of the Great Game and the Charge of the Light Brigade. For him, regardless of whatever regime ruled it, Russia was the enemy. It had to be kept in its proper "sphere." His governmental predecessors (many of whom were kinsmen) had thought that the Ottoman empire could stop the Russian at the "choke point" of the Turkish Straits. When it became clear that the modern Turks could not do so, he

---

<sup>19</sup> However, as in other occupied European countries so in the Ukraine, Germany was able to enlist natives in an SS corps and to do so even when the German military miracle was ending.

transferred that task to Greece. There was a new urgency in blocking Soviet expansion because of Britain's dependency on Iraqi and Iranian oil -- both as a source of energy and even more important in Britain's increasing poverty -- of money. To block the expected Russian thrust to the south was the first principle in his view of strategy. At all costs, Greece had to be kept from Russian control.

But, Churchill had few cards to play in this new version of the Great Game. The Allied military commander General Dwight Eisenhower would not allow him, as he tried to do, to divert the July 1943 Allied attack on German-dominated Europe from Italy to Greece, and Churchill did not have many soldiers at his independent disposition. "His" Greeks, who had formed the pre-war Nazi-like dictatorship, were not popular in Greece which was then under the rule of the Communist-led guerrillas; they controlled most of the country and had won their position by fighting the Nazi invaders. When part of the Greek "army-in-exile," then in Egypt and under British command, tried to join the de facto "Greek government-in-Greece," Churchill denounced its leaders as "treacherous, filthy beasts" and "miserable Greek banditti" and personally ordered that they be hanged. He could do that in Egypt, but, since Greece was still under German control, he could not operate there. So what could he do? His answer was to go over their heads to those he regarded as their masters, the Russians.

In May 1944, he sent Foreign Minister Anthony Eden go Moscow to propose a deal. he would agree to Stalin's takeover of eastern Europe, where Britain had relatively few interests, in return for Stalin's agreement that Greece be under British control. When the Russians seemed receptive, Churchill flew to Moscow in October. Sitting across the table from Stalin, he scribbled a short note (preserved in the British Public Record Office) which he passed over to Stalin legitimating Soviet control over virtually all of eastern Europe in exchange for British control of Greece. It is from this — Churchill's deal — that the Russian hegemony over east Europe may be dated; almost a year before the Yalta Conference for which Roosevelt was excoriated for having been "soft on Communism" and having been outsmarted by Stalin. It was the great cold warrior, Churchill himself, who had planted the corner post of the Iron Curtain.

The 1945 victory enabled the Soviets to implement the deal and to expand it to include European countries then occupied by the Soviet Army. See map below.



map courtesy of Wikipedia

While many points of disagreement existed between the Soviet leaders and the Anglo-Americans as the war ended, the focal point was what to do about Germany. As the above history makes clear, the Russians were convinced that under whatever regime Germany had the long-term goal of conquering Russia. The Russians were determined to prevent that possibility at all costs.

Some Americans shared that objective. In May 1944, Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau advanced a plan to render Germany incapable of aggressive warfare. The Morgenthau Plan, which Roosevelt espoused and more or less forced Churchill to adopt was to demilitarize, partition (with its industrial area "internationalized") and convert Germany into a "a country primarily agricultural and pastoral in its character."

Stalin was a passive recipient of Churchill's plan to divide Europe and was not involved in the formation of Morgenthau's plan, but he must have been delighted by them. Both would have enhanced Russian strategic interests. In the European context, that meant dominating the belt of countries through which Russia had time after time been invaded and eliminating the previous and probably only possible future invader, Germany.

But, what actually began to happen was precisely the opposite. With reason, Churchill, Attlee, Truman and Eisenhower, along with their advisers read enough Communist literature to conclude that the Communists had always intended to dominate the world and from their Russian base proposed to begin to do so in Europe. This assessment set off a program that necessarily violated Soviet strategic interests and raised the Russian deep fears of invasion on the one hand and on the other convinced the Western leaders to organize and deploy their power to effect their interests. The result was the Cold War.

I propose to deal with the Cold War in a later essay, but here I want to mention three aspects of it that bear on the subject of this essay, the Russian sense of insecurity and deep fear.

First among the steps leading to the Cold War was the policy toward Germany. The Western leaders believed that Germany was the lynchpin of Western security. It had to be resurrected because England was bankrupt while both France and Italy were deeply divided with strong pro-Communist and Communist (and judged to be Soviet controlled) movements. Without Germany, the postwar Western leaders concluded, European states, like falling dominoes, would fall under Soviet domination. Thus, the major American thrust of postwar policy focused on rebuilding Europe and particularly on reestablishing German wealth and power.

This transformation was to be brought about by a massive (\$150 billion in today's dollars) American economic aid program, the 1948 Marshall Plan, but also involved the long-term stationing of American troops in Germany, the integration of a restored but "denazified" German army, various financial, currency and fiscal moves that seemed to and were intended to undermine the Russian position in its zone. The newly created CIA, with the help of MI6, was to undertake an aggressive program of Anglo-American psychological warfare, intelligence and subversive activities in Germany and elsewhere.

Parallel to the European program, the 1947 Truman Doctrine was to extend aid to pro-American governments in the Middle East, Western Asia and Africa. Churchill's "stopper in the bottle," Greece, was to be a major beneficiary.

The USSR responded to Western attempts to undermine its currency with its 1948 blockade of Berlin (which in turn evoked the 1948-1949 Air Lift), by establishing in 1949 its own (East or GDR) Germany, continuing its stationing much of its huge army along the East-West frontier, encouraging Communist Party attempts to take over Italy and France and engaging in various intelligence activities. It could not, however, bring into operation anything like the Marshall Plan -- indeed, it took more from its European allies than it could afford to give them -- nor could it generate willing cooperation in areas under its control. These were to prove fatal weaknesses. As its efforts proved ineffective, it began in 1961 to build the Berlin Wall.



Second among the moves that raised again the Russia obsession with encirclement was the American creation of a string of pacts. These were the strategic contribution of US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. They began in 1949 with NATO in Western Europe and moved around a geopolitical frontier of the Soviet-"Free World." In the Middle East, the overlapping pact was the 1955 CENTO and in Southeast Asia also in 1955 in SEATO. The Soviet Union replied to NATO with its own pact, the 1955 Warsaw Pact of eight satellite states.

Third, both the Soviet Union and the United States engaged in an arms race. It was both unprecedented in scale and involved for the first time thermonuclear weapons. These were both a massive drain on resources needed for other aspects of peace and security and directly threatened the possibility of world suicide. Feeble attempts were made to control the level of armaments, but each side regarded its defense "needs" as essentially non-negotiable.

At base was the conviction of each side that the aim of the other was its destruction. Each side furnished the other with ample reasons for this assessment, and neither made serious and sustained efforts to delve into the "mindset," deep fears or legitimate concerns of the other.

As we poise now on what appears to be the danger of a return to the dark days of the Cold War, the judgments of that time are being revived. In this paper, I have assumed that we well understand our own and have aimed to show those of the "other side." I argue that we would be foolish simply to repeat to one another the clichés of the media. Perhaps the most urgent question before us both -- the Western world and the Russian leaders -- is whether or not we have matured and can bring intelligence, understanding and goodwill to guide our actions.

William R. Polk  
December 15, 2014

William R. Polk, MA (Oxford) PhD (Harvard) was teaching at Harvard when President Kennedy invited him to become a Member of the Policy Planning Council, responsible for North Africa, the Middle East and West Asia He served for 4 years under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, during that time he was a member of the three-men Crisis Management Committee during the Cuban Missile Crisis and head of the interdepartmental task force that helped to end the Franco-Algerian war. From 1965 he was Professor of History at the University of Chicago, founding director of the Middle Eastern Studies Center and Founder and President of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs. At the request of Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, he negotiated with President Gamal Abdul Nasser the cease fire that ended Israeli-Egyptian fighting on the Suez Canal in 1970. He is the author of some 17 books on world affairs, including *The United States and the Arab World*; *The Elusive Peace, the Middle East in the Twentieth Century*; *Understanding Iraq*; *Out of Iraq* (with Senator George McGovern); *Understanding Iran*; *Violent Politics: A History of Insurgency and Terrorism*; *Neighbors and Strangers: The Fundamentals of Foreign Affairs* and numerous articles in *Foreign Affairs*, *The Atlantic*, *Harpers*, *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* and *Le Monde Diplomatique*. He has lectured at many universities and at the Council on Foreign Relations, Chatham House, the Paris School of International Affairs Sciences Po, St. Anthony's (Oxon), the Soviet Academy of Sciences and has appeared frequently on NPR, the BBC, CBS, France 24 and other networks. His most recent books, both available on Amazon, are *Humpty Dumpty: The Fate of Regime Change* and *Distant Thunder: Reflections on the Dangers of Our Times*.