

Racquel Bozzelli
21st Century Russia
Foxcroft Academy
04/15/2015

Crimean Annexation: A Glimpse into the future?

The Russian Federation's recent aggressive actions in Eastern Europe are disconcerting as a matter of its reflection of the old Soviet Union under Josef Stalin. Similar to the post war Soviet Union, the expansionist designs of Russia's current leadership reflect geopolitical concerns that extend as far back as Ivan the Terrible. The current civil war in Ukraine, which is being supported by Russia, has awakened the rest of Europe to Russia's commitment to destabilize, divide, and then conquer those neighboring countries that attempt to ally themselves with the West. The annexation of the Crimea in 2013 is of particular concern as its reminiscent of Adolf Hitler's annexation of Austria in 1938. Similar to that annexation of yesteryear, the West has failed to commit military force to prevent the Crimea from being wrested from Ukraine, and therefore one can only wonder if somehow this has emboldened, and thus provided Russia with a model for its future foreign policy decisions.

To understand the current annexation of the Crimea by Russia, the history of both countries must be understood as they are intimately intertwined to the point that distinction of cultures is difficult to discern. The connections go beyond geographic location and contribute to the current political dynamic that has Europe in turmoil with speculation and anxiety concerning future relations with this resurgent regional power that is Russia.

The history of Russia is one of invasion, war, and political intrigue. Early invasions began with the Mongols from 1237-1240. During this time the Tartars created the empire of the Golden Horde in southern Russia. The Tatars are important even today because of their social impact on Russia and the surrounding region. The Golden Horde lasted until 1556 when Grand Prince Ivan the Terrible of Moscow conquered the Tartars to create the Tsardom of Russia. Only after Michael Romanov ascended the throne in 1613 did the political environment in Russia stabilize. For the next 300 years the Romanovs ruled Russia, ending in 1917 with

the Bolshevik Revolution that erupted from the violence of the Great War.¹

In 1917, the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, overthrew the government and elected the Constituent Assembly, creating a dictatorship under the Communist Party with Lenin as its head. Lenin was able to get control of the government quickly because he took advantage of the instability of the government at the time, and gained support of the people by telling them this would be a people's revolution, when in fact it was not. Not all went well for Lenin, because in 1918 a civil war between the Bolshevik Red Army and the anti-communist White Army engulfed the nation. The civil war, that lasted until 1922, was very violent and spilled over into surrounding states such as Poland and Ukraine. In fact, the last battle between the Red and White Army occurred in Crimea where the White Army gained much of its support. This also led to the Russian occupation of the First Ukrainian Republic that emerged in the aftermath of the First World War. ²

When Josef Stalin came to power he acted quickly to re-direct the countries resources from agriculture to industry. To accomplish this he demanded collectivization of farms. This act was resisted by many, especially in the Ukraine and Crimea. In response to the resistance Stalin brought famine to the region by taking all of what was produced, leaving nothing for the local population to eat. This displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians and forced many into labor camps. It is estimated that the famine led to the deaths of millions of Russians of the Ukraine and Crimea regions from starvation.³

¹BBC News, "Russia Timeline-Profile", <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17840446> (last accessed

²Vitaly Portnikov, "Russia in the Shadows: how the war against Ukraine will affect the country's future", *Ukrainian Television and Radio World Service* ://utr.tv/en/our-programs/expert/item/23361-russia-in-the-shadows-how-the-war-against-ukraine-will-affect-the-country-s-future.html (Last accessed April 10, 2015); BBC News, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe17840446>

³Cafer Seydahamet, *Famine in Crimea, International Committee for Crimea* <http://www.iccrimea.org/historical/famine1931.html> (Last Accessed 04/11/2015).

In 1939, Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany that led the way to eastern Poland, parts of Czechoslovakia and Romania, and the Baltic States falling within the Soviet sphere. When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, the Crimea was one of their primary targets. Given its strategic location and excellent port facility at Sevastopol, Crimea would see heavy fighting resulting in a very high cost in lives. It is estimated that as many as half the Crimean population would perish during the war. During the Nazi occupation there were a number of Crimean Tatar Nationalists, believing if the Nazis were victorious they would be provided their independence, who collaborated against the pro-Soviet guerrilla forces that continued to resist the Nazis. These nationalists would pay a very heavy price after the Nazis were pushed out of Crimea in 1944.⁴

After the Cold War began in 1947, the Soviet Union consolidated its power over the nations of Eastern Europe and Crimea. In most cases it was simply a matter of their not removing their armies following the end of WWII. Any resistance to the Soviets held on the region became mute following their successful testing of a nuclear device in 1949. From that point until 1989, the West adopted a policy of “containment”, which meant any attempt by Crimea, or any other satellite nation of the Soviet Union to break away, became an impossibility.⁵

Some hope of the Soviets easing their grip on its “empire” came with the passing of Stalin in 1953. His death led to a power struggle between Georgi Malenkov and Nikita Khrushchev. In March of 1958, Khrushchev emerged from the struggle as Secretary General of the Communist Party, and quickly attempted to ease tension between the Soviet Union and the

⁴Alexander Korolkov, *The Embattled Peninsula: The Struggle for Crimea during WWII*, http://rbth.com/society/2014/05/09/the_embattled_peninsula_the_struggle.html; [http://](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe17840446) (Last accessed 04/11/2015); BBC News, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe17840446.

⁵ Eugene Rumer, *Crimea Crisis: Lessons from the first Cold War*, <http://news.yahoo.com/crimea-crisis--lessons-from-first-cold-war-180035758.html> (Last accessed 04/12/2015)

West. Unfortunately, many more events continued through the Cold War that caused it to become more tense. In 1957, *Sputnik* became the first satellite to orbit the Earth, and in 1961 Yuri Gagarin became the first man to enter space. This launching of the space race led the United States to believe it had been technologically surpassed by the Soviets, which given the secretive nature of the Soviet Union, led to US panic. This, along with the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and Cuban Missile Crisis hardened relations between the two super powers. Furthermore, the space race acted to further increase the Soviet hold on Crimea as its strategic location prompted construction of a sophisticated communication infrastructure that allowed for better satellite coverage and eventually communication with its space station. Something Russia will be very hesitant to let go of now that it is back under their control.⁶

As time progressed it was becoming more evident that the Soviet economy was increasingly under duress. Those situations were not helped when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979. Met with increasing resistance from the US supplied Mujahideen fighters, the cost of the war became untenable and exposed further the inefficiencies of the Soviet economic and political system. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power he implemented plans to reform the economy, make politics more open, and lower the cost of the Cold War. Though well intended, the attempts at reform came too late, and the Soviet Union began to collapse, beginning in 1989 with the reunification of Germany, and ending with the collapse of its economy in 1991. With this collapse satellite nations of the Soviet Union declared their independence, some seeking added protection through alliances with the west. Ukraine, which

⁶Matthew Bodner, *Crimea Annexation Boosts Russia's Deep Space Capabilities*, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/crimea-annexation-boosts-russia-s-deep-space-capabilities/517092.html> (last accessed 04/11/2015); *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe17840446>.

included the Crimea, declared its independence for the second time in August 1991.⁷

After the fall of the Soviet Union there was a larger amount of chaos than before. Russia became independent and this caused the Ukraine and Belarus to form the Commonwealth of Independent States, which would eventually be joined by all the former Soviet Union states, except the Baltic States. Chechnya soon declared independence causing major conflicts with Moscow. At this time there was only an acting Prime Minister, Yegor Gaidar, who launched controversial programs that removed government controls on the economy. This was seen by some as a prevention of total collapse. Others argued that it was poorly managed and a direct effect was hyper-inflation and the rise of the oligarchs.⁸

Vladimir Putin's ascension to power in 1999, following Boris Yeltsin's resignation, marked the beginning of modern government action concerning Russia. In other words, Putin represented a shift in Russian foreign policy that some have determined a return to a Cold War mindset. Understanding Putin's foreign policy provides insight, not only to recent events in Crimea, but also the overwhelming support that Putin has received from the Russian people, a people who have recently been psychologically abashed by the rest of the world, but never the less believe they should play a dominant role in the region, which includes Crimea.⁹

When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, many expected the new president, Boris Yeltsin, to return Crimea to Russia, but Crimea remained part of the newly independent Ukraine. Crimea agreed to remain as part of the Ukraine, but they were able to have their own constitution, legislature, and for a very small amount of time, its own president. After the fall of

⁷ "Ukraine declares its independence", <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/ukraine-declares-its-independence>(last accessed 04/11/2015); "The War in Afghanistan and its Effects on the Soviet Economy", <http://blogs.bu.edu/guidedhistory/russia-and-its-empires/mikhail-eremeev/> (last accessed 04/11/2015)

⁸BBC News, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe17840446

⁹Lee-Anne Goodman, "Putin stuck in Cold War mindset: Harper", *Canadian Press*, <http://www.simcoe.com/news-story/4431016-putin-stuck-in-cold-war-mindset-harper/> (Last accessed 04/14/2015).

the Soviet Union there was a lot of reorganizing and in 1997 the Ukraine and Russia signed the *Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership*, which allowed Russia to keep the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea.¹⁰

Even though Ukraine broke away from the Soviet Union, when Ukraine held a vote on whether or not to be independent, only 54 percent of Ukrainians voted to not be part of Russia. Crimea itself has one of the largest populations of ethnic Russians within the Ukraine. This is a fact that was difficult for the West to question and added legitimacy to Russia's annexation of Crimea, and to some extent their support of the Ukrainian separatists. This was also very telling of Russia's claim to many of its former satellite countries, such as the Baltic states as well as Kazakhstan. In fact, this had been an issue throughout Europe for hundreds, if not thousands of years given the fluid nature of the different European ethnic groups.¹¹

Putin's foreign policy was greatly influenced by his personal history, and his memory of the Soviet Union's strength. He was a member of the Soviet Union's police force, the KGB, from 1975 until his resignation in August of 1991. He also served as the assistant rector for international affairs at the Leningrad University, an advisor to the Chairman of the Leningrad City Council, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the St. Petersburg mayor's office, and he served on the Russian Security Council as Secretary and Prime Minister. His background allowed him to develop the contacts, and ultimately the support required to be elected president. In May of 2000, when sworn into office, he spoke of returning Russia to its

¹⁰ Adam Taylor, *To Understand Crimea, Take a Look Back at its Complicated history*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/02/27/to-understand-crimea-take-a-look-back-at-its-complicated-history> (last accessed 04/13/2015)

¹¹ Adam Taylor, *To Understand Crimea*.

prominent place in Europe and the world.¹²

Putin's global influence would be felt almost immediately. During a June 2000 summit with American President Bill Clinton, he signed an agreement to limit arms, but disagreed about plans for a national missile defense system. The next month, Putin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin signed a statement opposing the U.S. plans to build missile shields over North America and Asia. Putin, in 2001, also acted to re-establish ties with Cuba, one of its staunchest Cold War allies in the Western hemisphere. Putin also made his domestic agenda quickly understood when in April of 2001 the Russian government took over the NTV T.V. station and put legal restrictions on independent media platforms. These actions led some to criticize his moves in silencing independent voices. This would not be the first time Putin would be criticized for controlling media.¹³

In 2001, Putin's relationship with American President Bush became very civil. They had many meetings together and Putin described Bush as "sincere". In 2002, the two leaders signed the Moscow Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions, requiring each country to reduce its nuclear warheads. Putin was re-elected in 2004, and in 2007 was chosen by Time Magazine as its "Man of the Year". Unfortunately, this period of detente would not last and relations between Russia and the United States deteriorated, primarily over human rights violations. In response to the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act, a law aimed at preventing those guilty of his death from entering the United States, Putin banned U.S. citizens from adopting Russian children. This bill also banned U.S. funded civic groups from operating in Russia. In 2013, Putin again verbally attacked the U.S. relations by criticizing President Obama and the American idea of exceptionalism. Then, in 2014, Putin put a ban on food and agricultural imports from any

¹² NPR News, "Vladimir Putin", <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/putin/biotimeline.html> (last accessed 04/13/2015)

¹³ "NPR News", <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/putin/biotimeline.html>

countries that had imposed sanctions against Russia.¹⁴

The same year that Putin imposed bans on US agricultural products Ukraine began to implode. In January 2014, protests erupted after Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich turned toward Russia for a bailout loan instead of signing a deal with the European Union. The protest then morphed into a general plea for more human rights, less corruption, and more democracy. Laws that attempted to restrict protests in the Ukraine were eventually repealed and in an attempt to ease tensions, Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov resigned. Kiev saw the worst violence in more than 70 years. During protests, 88 people were killed in just two days. Eventually, President Yanukovich disappeared leaving protesters to take charge of the presidential buildings.¹⁵

Having forced the pro-Russian leadership from office, the Ukrainian parliament quickly voted to ban Russian as its second language, causing the Russian speaking regions to protest. Though the law was eventually repealed, pro-Russian gunmen responded by seizing key buildings in Crimea, and unidentified gunmen, in combat uniforms, appeared outside of the main airports in Crimea. A secession referendum was quickly brought before the people of Crimea, and they voted by an overwhelming majority (97%) to join Russia. Skepticism of the legitimacy of the vote caused the EU and U.S to impose travel bans and asset freezes. President Putin then signed a bill to annex Crimea into the Russian Federation. This prompted U.S. President Obama to urge Russian officials to remove their troops in hopes of to easing tensions between

¹⁴ “NPR News”, <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/putin/biotimeline.html>; Kathy Lally and Will Englund, “Russia Fumes as U.S. Senate Passes Measure Aimed at Human Rights”, *The Washington Post*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/us-passes-magnitsky-bill-aimed-at-russia/2012/12/06/262a5bba-3fd5-11e2-bca3-aadc9b7e29c5_story.html (last accessed 04/13/2015).

¹⁵ Maria Danilova and Jim Heintz, “Mykola Azarov, Ukrainian Prime Minister, Offers Resignation”, *The World Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/28/mykola-azarov-ukraine-prime-minister-resignation_n_4678332.html (last accessed 04/13/2015); “NPR News”, <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/putin/biotimeline.html>.

the West and Russia.¹⁶

Crimea remains under Russian control, and there are few who believe that will change. The West's response to the annexation was at best tepid and since then Vladimir Putin has continued to support Ukrainian separatists in their attempt to break away from Ukraine. Putin has also set a course for re-building an antiquated military, continuously violated the airspace of most European countries, and tensions are so high in the Baltic states that Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves has recently "called for a permanent NATO force to be stationed in the state(Estonia) to preempt Russian aggression." Germany has promised Estonia that NATO will come to their aid if invaded by Russia, but it remains to be seen whether the Russian leadership will take the threat seriously. In fact, the West's response in Crimea suggest otherwise, which undoubtedly will play in Russia's favor as they attempt to expand their influence and regain what was lost in 1991. But, Crimea may also act as Russia's Achilles since one can believe that the West will draw a line in the sand somewhere, possibly in Estonia. If full scale war comes Russia could lose, but only as a matter of the conflict remaining conventional. Lets hope that Putin, unlike Adolf Hitler, knows when to quit.¹⁷

¹⁶ Matt Smith and Alla Eshchenko,"Ukraine Cries 'robbery' as Russia Annexes Crimea", *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/18/world/europe/ukraine-crisis/index.html> (last accessed 04/13/2015).

¹⁷ Vivian Hughbanks,"The Need for Speed: Germany Assures Estonia of NATO Support Against Russians", *townhall.com*,<http://townhall.com/tipsheet/vivianhughbanks/2015/04/14/germany-assures-estonia-of-nato-support-against-russians-n1985130> (last accessed 04/14/2015).

Bibliography

1. Bodner, Matthew. *Crimea Annexation Boosts Russia's Deep Space Capabilities*. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/crimea-annexation-boosts-russia-s-deep-space-capabilities/517092.html> .
2. Danilova, Maria and Jim Heintz. "Mykola Azarov, Ukrainian Prime Minister, Offers Resignation". *The World Post*. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/28/mykola-azarov-ukraine-prime-minister-resignation_n_4678332.html
3. Goodman, Lee-Anne. "Putin stuck in Cold War mindset: Harper". *Canadian Press*, <http://www.simcoe.com/news-story/4431016-putin-stuck-in-cold-war-mindset-harper/> .
4. Korolkov, Alexander. *The Embattled Peninsula: The Struggle for Crimea during WWII*. http://rbth.com/society/2014/05/09/the_embattled_peninsula_the_struggle.html; <http://> .
5. Lally, Kathy and Will Englund. "Russia Fumes as U.S. Senate Passes Measure Aimed at Human Rights". *The Washington Post*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/us-passes-magnitsky-bill-aimed-at-russia/2012/12/06/262a5bba-3fd5-11e2-bca3-aadc9b7e29c5_story.html
6. Portnikov, Vitaly. *Russia in the Shadows: how the war against Ukraine will affect the country's future*. "Ukrainian Television and Radio World Service" ://utr.tv/en/our-programs/expert/item/23361-russia-in-the-shadows-how-the-war-against-ukraine-will-affect-the-country-s-future.html .
7. Rumer, Eugene. "Crimea Crisis: Lessons from the first Cold War". *Yahoo News*, <http://news.yahoo.com/crimea-crisis--lessons-from-first-cold-war-180035758.html> .
8. Seydahamet, Cafer. *Famine in Crimea, International Committee for Crimea*. <http://www.iccrimea.org/historical/famine1931.html> .
9. Smith, Matt and Alla Eshchenko. "Ukraine cries 'robbery' as Russia annexes Crimea". *CNN*. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/18/world/europe/ukraine-crisis/index.html>
10. Taylor, Adam. *To Understand Crimea, Take a Look Back at its Complicated history*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/02/27/to-understand-crimea-take-a-look-back-at-its-complicated-history> .
11. "Ukraine declares its independence", <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/ukraine-declares-its-independence> .
12. "The War in Afghanistan and its Effects on the Soviet Economy", <http://blogs.bu.edu/guidedhistory/russia-and-its-empires/mikhail-yeremeev/> .
13. BBC News, "Russia Profile-Timeleine", <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17840446> .
14. NPR News. "Vladimir Putin". <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/putin/biotimeline.html> .