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Frontline Ukraine: 'How Europe failed to slay the demons of war'

In an extract from his new book, historian Richard Sakwa argues that the current conflict has its roots in the exclusion of Russia from genuine partnerships since the end of the cold war

by Richard Sakwa
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In 2014, history returned to Europe with a vengeance. The crisis over Ukraine brought back not only the spectre but the reality of war, on the 100th anniversary of a conflict that had been spoken of as the war to end all war. The great powers lined up, amid a barrage of propaganda and informational warfare, while many of the smaller powers made their contribution to the festival of irresponsibility.

This was also the 75th anniversary of the beginning of the second world war, which wreaked so much harm on central and eastern Europe. The fall of the Berlin Wall 25 years earlier and the subsequent end of the cold war had been attended by expectations of a Europe “whole and free”.

These hopes were crushed in 2014, and Europe is now set for a new era of division and confrontation. The Ukrainian crisis was the immediate cause, but this only reflected deeper contradictions in the pattern of post-communist development since 1989. In other words, the European and Ukrainian crises came together to devastating effect.

The “Ukrainian crisis” refers to profound tensions in the the country’s nation and state-building processes since it achieved independence in late 1991, which now threaten the unity of the state itself.

These are no longer described in classical ideological terms, but, in the Roman manner, through the use of colours. The Orange tendency thinks in terms of a Ukraine that can finally fulfil its destiny as a nation state, officially monolingual, culturally autonomous from other Slavic nations and aligned with “Europe” and the Atlantic security community. This is a type of “monism”, because of its emphasis on the singularity of the Ukrainian experience.

By contrast, Blue has come to symbolise a rather more plural understanding of the challenges facing Ukraine, recognising that the country’s various regions have different historical and cultural experiences, and that the modern state needs to acknowledge this diversity in a more capacious constitutional settlement. For the Blues, Ukraine is more of a “state nation”, an assemblage of different traditions, but above all one where Russian is recognised as a second state language and economic, social and even security links with Russia are maintained. Of course, the Blue I am talking about is an abstraction, not the blue of former president Viktor Yanukovich’s Party of Regions.

The Blues, no less than the Orangists, have been committed to the idea of a free and united Ukraine, but favour a more comprehensive vision of what it means to be Ukrainian. We also have to include the Gold tendency, the powerful oligarchs who have dominated the country since the 1990s, accompanied by widespread corruption and the decay of public institutions.

Since independence, there has been no visionary leader to meld these colours to forge a Ukrainian version of the rainbow nation.

The “Ukraine crisis” also refers to the way that internal tensions have become internationalised to provoke the worst crisis in Europe since the end of the cold war. Some have even compared its gravity with the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. The world at various points stood close to a new conflagration, provoked by desperately overheated rhetoric on all sides.

The asymmetrical end of the cold war effectively shut Russia out from the European alliance system. The failure to establish a genuinely inclusive and equal security system on the continent imbued European international politics with powerful stress points, which in 2014 produced the international earthquake that we now call the Ukraine crisis.

There had been plenty of warning signs, with Boris Yeltsin, the Russian Federation’s first leader, in December 1994 already talking in terms of a “cold peace”. When he came to power in 2000, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin devoted himself to overcoming the asymmetries.

The major non-state institution at the heart of the architecture of post-communist Europe, the European Union (EU), exacerbated the tensions rather than resolving them. The EU represents the core of what could be called “Wider Europe” – a Brussels-centric vision that extends into the heartlands of what had once been an alternative great-power system centred on Moscow. The increasing merger of Wider Europe with the Atlantic security system only made things worse.

Russia and some European leaders proposed not so much an alternative but a complementary vision to the monism of Wider Europe, known as “Greater Europe”: a way of bringing together all corners of the continent to create what Mikhail Gorbachev in the final period of the Soviet Union had called the “Common European Home”. This is a multipolar and pluralistic concept of Europe, allied with but not the same as the Atlantic community.

In Greater Europe there would be no need to choose between Brussels, Washington or Moscow. In the absence of the tensions generated by the post-cold war “unsettlement”, the peace promised at the end of the cold war would finally arrive. Instead, the double “Ukrainian” and “Ukraine” crises combined with catastrophic consequences.

For me, this is both personal and political. The cold war division of Europe is the reason I was born and grew up in Britain and not in Poland, but, even before that, war and preparations for war had scarred my family. In the inter-war years my father, an agronomist by profession but like so many of his generation also a reservist in the Polish army, marched up and down between Grodno and Lwów (as it was then called).

He told of the 25kg he had to carry in his backpack, with all sorts of equipment and survival tools. The area at the time was part of the Second Polish Republic, and for generations had been settled by Poles. These were the kresy, the borderlands of Europe grinding up against the ever-rising power of the Russian empire. With the partition of Poland in the 18th century, Grodno and what is now the western part of Belarus was ceded to Russia, while Lemberg (the German name for Lwów) and the surrounding province of Galicia became part of the Austro-Hungarian empire.

On gaining independence in 1918, and with Russia and the nascent Ukrainian state in the throes of revolution and civil war, the various armies repeatedly marched back and forth across the region. In the end the Polish state occupied an enormous territory to the east of the Curzon Line.

These were the lands occupied by Joseph Stalin, following the division of the area according to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August 1939. Poland was invaded on 1 September and against the overwhelming might of Adolf Hitler's armies the Polish forces fell back, only for the Soviet Union to invade on 17 September.

My father's unit soon came up against the Soviet forces, and when greeted initially by the Poles as coming to support them against the Germans, they were asked to disarm. My father escaped to Hungary, but many of his reservist comrades were captured, and eventually murdered in Katyn and other killing sites.

My father subsequently joined the Polish second corps under General Anders, and with the British eighth army fought at El Alamein, Benghazi, Tobruk and then all the way up Italy, spending six months at Monte Cassino. At the end of the war Poland was liberated, but it was not free. Unable to return to their homeland, the family was granted refuge in Britain. In the meantime, the Soviet borders were extended to the west, and Lwów became Lvov.

These were territories that had never been part of the Russian empire, and when Ukraine gained independence in 1991 they became the source of the distinctive Orange vision of Ukrainian statehood. Today Lvov has become Lviv, while its representation of what it means to be Ukrainian is contested by other regions and communities, notably the Blues, each of which has endured an equally arduous path to become part of the modern Ukrainian state.

As for the political, being a product of an ideologically and geographically divided Europe, I shared the anticipation at the end of the cold war in 1989–91 that a new and united Europe could finally be built. For a generation the EU helped transcend the logic of conflict in the western part of the continent by binding the traditional antagonists, France and Germany, into a new political community, one that expanded from the founding six that signed the Treaty of Rome in March 1957 to the 28 member states of today.

The Council of Europe, established in 1949, broadened its activities into the post-communist region, and now encompasses 47 nations and 820 million citizens, as its website proudly proclaims. The European Convention of Human Rights and its additional protocols established a powerful normative framework for the continent, policed by the European Court of Human Rights, based in Strasbourg. Russia in the

1990s actively engaged with the EU, signing a Partnership and Cooperation agreement in 1994, although it only took effect on 30 October 1997 following the first Chechen war, and the next year Russia joined the Council of Europe.

However, another dynamic was at work, namely the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato). Also established in 1949 to bring together the victorious western allies, now ranged against the Soviet Union in what had become the cold war.

Nato was not disbanded when the Soviet Union disintegrated and the cold war came to an end. This was the source of the unbalanced end to the cold war, with the eastern part dissolving its alliance system while Nato in the 1990s began a march to the east.

This raised increasing alarm in Russia, and, while notionally granting additional security to its new members, it meant that security in the continent had become divisible. Worse, there was an increasing perception that EU enlargement was almost the automatic precursor to Nato expansion.

There was a compelling geopolitical logic embedded in EU enlargement. For example, although many member states had reservations about the readiness of Bulgaria and Romania to join, there was a fear that they could drift off and become western versions of Ukraine. The project of European economic integration, and its associated peace project, effectively merged with the Euro-Atlantic security partnership, a fateful elision that undermined the rationale of both and which in the end provoked the Ukraine crisis.

The failure to create a genuinely inclusive and symmetrical post-communist political and security order generated what some took to calling a “new cold war”, or, more precisely, a “cold peace”, which stimulated new resentments and the potential for new conflicts.

It became increasingly clear that the demons of war in Europe had not been slain. Instead, the Ukraine crisis demonstrates just how fragile international order has become, and how much Europe has to do to achieve the vision that was so loudly proclaimed, when the Berlin Wall came down in November 1989, of a continent united from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

The Ukraine crisis forces us to rethink European international relations. If Europe is not once again to be divided, there need to be new ideas about what an inclusive and equitable political and security order encompassing the whole continent would look like. In other words, the idea of Greater Europe needs to be endowed with substance and institutional form.

Unfortunately, it appears that the opposite will happen: old ideas will be revived, the practices of the cold war will, zombie-like, come back to life, and once again there will be a fatal dividing line across Europe that will mar the lives of the generation to come. This is far from inevitable, but to avoid it will require a shift in the mode of political intercourse from exprobration to diplomacy, and from denunciation to dialogue.

Thus the personal and the political combine, and this book is much an exploration of failed opportunities as it is an account of how we created yet another crisis in European international politics on the anniversaries of the start of two world wars and a moment of hope in 1989. My father's generation suffered war, destruction and displacement, and yet the European civil war that dominated the 20th century still inflames the political imagination of the 21st.

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