

Crimea as Kosovo and Sudetenland:  
The Peril of Historical Narratives in the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian Crisis

Vladimir Putin's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014 upended a political order in Eastern Europe that, except Yugoslavia's disintegration, had been remarkably coherent for a generation after the 1989-1991 collapse of the Soviet-imposed system. The ensuing international crisis has provoked a bewildering variety of historical references, as observers look to the past to make sense of crisis participants' behavior – and their next moves. Everyone thinks the past is prologue; disagreement abounds as to which past. Two opposing narratives have emerged that, at the risk of simplification, I associate with Russia and 'the West' respectively. To Putin, the March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014 referendum in Crimea, held under armed Russian supervision, was justified by the precedent of Kosovo, a breakaway province of Serbia that declared independence in 2008. The contrasting Western viewpoint reaches back further, to the 1938 Nazi annexation of the Czechoslovak Sudetenland. Though these two stories dominate the rhetorical space of the 2014 Crimean crisis, many more perspectives exist in the interstices. Unfortunately, neither the Russian/Western oppositional binary nor an embrace of the multitude of remembered pasts advanced by others in the region brings us any closer to understanding. Indeed mining the past, to dig up the appropriate lessons for the present, only confines us to narrow tunnels, dim lighting, choking fumes – and the risk of a cave-in.

The pre-eminent reaction of Western policy-makers has been to cast the Russian annexation of Crimea as parallel to the Nazi annexation of the Czechoslovak Sudetenland in 1938. This has been, for instance, the public position of former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary

Clinton. We may judge the Sudetenland narrative's prevalence by the unusual bipartisan support she received from Senator John McCain and Senator Marco Rubio, both Republicans. The Vyšehrad assessment is notably similar. Karel Schwarzenberg, the former Czech foreign minister, observed "What's happening in Ukraine is history repeating itself," because "Putin is acting along the same principle as Adolf Hitler," in justifying territorial annexation on the premise of protecting co-ethnics across borders. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk: "History shows – although I don't want to use too many historical comparisons – that those who appease all the time in order to preserve peace usually only buy a little bit of time." The lesson we derive? Crimea is Sudetenland, Putin is akin to Hitler in his cynical and aggressive expansionism, and therefore the West must demonstrate its strength and stop him. As we think we know, Putin's is an appetite that grows by what it feeds upon.

What complicates the straightforward Western position on Crimea as Sudetenland, however, is the simultaneously proffered concept of Russia and Vladimir Putin as a return to 19<sup>th</sup> century Tsarist Russia. "You just don't in the 21<sup>st</sup> century behave in 19<sup>th</sup> century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped up pre-text," U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry commented. Leaping decades within the same paragraph, Senator John McCain assured audiences of CNN's 'State of the Union' that military confrontation did not "mean re-ignition of the Cold War," though "it does mean treating him [Putin] in the way that we understand an individual who believes in restoring the old Russian empire." The implication here is a long history of Russian aggression, of the need to treat or contain Russia as separate from normal, "21<sup>st</sup> century" European states. Russian atavism is baked in, and there's no helping it. Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, opines in a recent column in *The Guardian* that

“yet again” Moscow is leaning on the militaristic wisdom of Tsar Alexander III, “that Russia has only two friends in the world, its army and its navy.” I am unsure of the wisdom we gain from seeing Putin’s Russia in the guise of Tsarist Russia – beyond the self-congratulatory assurance that we, at least, are behaving like modern, civilized people and that we can reaffirm a stereotype of Russia as essentially backward.

Unhelpfully for the West, Putin has chosen to frame the independence/autonomy referendum and ensuing annexation of Crimea in terms of the recent past – the 2008 independence of Kosovo. Discursively, Russia has positioned itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century while its opponents grasp for meaning in the Soviet and imperial past. According to Putin’s recent address, the West was full of an “amazing, primitive, blunt cynicism” that refused to recognize “the well-known Kosovo precedent” in Crimea. This was the end of his speech; he spent the first half in totalizing generalities. “Russia and Crimea have always meant” things to each other. “Everything in Crimea” is tied to Russian history. The peninsula “has always been an inseparable part of Russia.” Both timely and timeless, then, Russia is justified by the deep and immediate past in its present actions.

The problem here is not that Putin is “on the wrong side of history,” as President Obama said recently, nor even that his facts are wrong or interpretations skewed. Putin’s defense of Crimea as Kosovo is a gross instance of the same error committed by Western policy-makers like Donald Tusk and John McCain. This is the error of delving into the past, selecting what seems useful to the present, fashioning a comparative story about history from “the facts” – and bludgeoning one’s opponent with it. The failure to distinguish object from referent in this

exercise creates discursive tunnels with troubling conclusions. After all, if Crimea is Kosovo, then who can the ethnic-cleansing Serbs be, if not the government in Kyiv? If Crimea is the Sudetenland, who are the Nazis?

We see here a problem, wherein apparently usable pasts, drummed into the present for all the 'lessons' they may hold, tint our perspective subtly, insidiously. Each new circumstance of the present moment no longer comes to us clearly. Our history-mediated vision now apprehends Russian support of Russophone minorities elsewhere as the opening moves in yet further territorial expansion, which we cannot appease. American efforts to support a budding democracy in Kyiv appear to be another step in the historical encirclement of Russia. America moves to reassure and secure its NATO allies; Russia sees more NATO assets nearby and rattles its nuclear saber, as Dmitry Kiselyov did when he reminded his television audience that Russia could turn the U.S. into "radioactive dust". This discursive dance drives tensions much higher than present circumstances should allow, and it does so because all parties now see themselves in historical narratives of victimization, or of defending democracy, as the case may be.

To further complicate efforts at understanding the Crimean crisis, the Kosovo and Sudetenland stories are supplemented by all the particular stories invoked by neighbors – Finns, Poles, Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars and many others. To the Finns, Russian aggression evokes memories of the 1940 Winter War. "They wouldn't dare come here," according to former Finnish Defense Forces Commander, retired General Gustav Hägglund. "They know that they'd get a bloody nose. We stand by our historic achievements." Just a little further south across the Gulf of Finland, the attitude is markedly more cautious. Estonians are full of

foreboding. They remember the Soviet Union's World War II annexation of their country, but also the riots and cyber-warfare occasioned by the 2007 removal of a Soviet memorial from Tallinn. Many Crimean Tatars, having just returned to their homes in the peninsula from Stalinist exile in Central Asia, nervously contemplate their inadvertent return to Russian sovereignty and all its meanings. A Turkish newspaper columnist has somewhat jokingly reminded Russians that an independent Crimea legally returns to Turkey under the terms of a treaty negotiated with Catherine the Great. Sweden's defense budget is seeing an increase, with an explicit reference to the Napoleonic Wars, when in 1808 Russians briefly seized the island of Gotland in the Baltic.

Revealingly, as much forgetting is involved as remembering. Finns emphasize their heroism in the Winter War, but neglect the follow-up: Finland's later cooperation with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union. Among other things, that contributed to the infamous starvation of hundreds of thousands of civilians in the siege of Leningrad. Sweden's memory of losing Gotland in 1808 neatly skips two ensuing centuries of peace. Since Moscow is now the common opponent, both sides of the Polish-Ukrainian border have increasingly pushed aside certain memories. Ukrainian nationalists' 1942-44 ethnic cleansing of 60,000 Poles is in the background now, and so are centuries of Polish feudal oppression. These particular pasts, fading to the background, are replaced with other pasts more relevant to present needs. Ukrainian protesters tear down Lenin statues all around Ukraine. Shevchenko is appealed to instead – a different, better past than the Soviet one. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian government tells the West that Khrushchev's transfer of Crimea to Ukraine was permanent. That is a usable Soviet past, so Ukrainians embrace it. Poles openly fret about how to support their 'younger

brothers' in Ukraine, a country apparently doomed to the patronage and guidance of 'elder brothers' in the Slavic world.

This mercenary spectacle of picking through the past is visible everywhere. "Potential conflicts in the CIS are numerous," *Pravda* stated "and they are all caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union that occurred in violation of international law." That muddies the waters of recent history. Vladimir Putin does the same for the distant past: Crimea is "the location of ancient Kherstones, where Prince Vladimir was baptized. His spiritual feat of adopting Orthodoxy predetermined the overall basis of the culture, civilisation and human values that unite the peoples of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus." But why divorce Crimea from Kyiv, surely closer to what was, after all, Kievan Rus' than Moscow? Especially if all the East Slavic peoples are really so united? To paraphrase the Czech writer Karel Havlíček, this is Russia labeling everything Russian as Slavic, in order to label everything Slavic – including Prince Vladimir – as Russian. The story of Crimea returning home to Russia is implausible. To join the past to the ambition and venality of the present involves the crudest kind of contextual amputation and artificially stitched-together narratives.

More than ever, the historian's profession is critically important. Not, as it might seem, because only historians are wise enough, or learned enough, to master the complexity of the past, interpret it and offer up its teachings and experience to resolve present crises. There are no lessons in the past for historians to retrieve – at least, not in the kind of objective *if a then b* sense that policymakers and pundits crave. To borrow from William F. Buckley, Jr., I might say that a historian is someone who stands athwart the contemporary moment, yelling, "Stop!"

when no one is inclined to do so. Our role should be to stress contingency and the limits of knowledge, the inaccessibility of the past and the inability to dredge it for guidance in the present without casting aside context, and thereby truth. The tendency to shape the malleable facts of history into self-justifying narrative discourses will likely continue. Historians should undercut this tendency by emphasizing that the past is alien, and our living moment ineluctably, opaquely *now*. Is Crimea Kosovo, or Sudetenland? It is only Crimea. The past is not a recipe book. We cannot know all the ingredients, so we cannot reproduce and enjoy its dishes. I have devoted space in this essay to different points of view on Russia, the West and the 2014 Crimean crisis. My intention was not to reproduce or judge Russian actions as a morality play drawn from certain pasts – as victim and bully – but to consider how regional participants explained the complex present with stories and lessons drawn from “the facts of history” and its corresponding dangers of discourse creation and tunneling. The over-determination of this crisis and its future – a kaleidoscope of pasts offered as explanation of Russian aggression and probable action – demonstrates the inutility of history as a guide. We cannot use the flotsam and jetsam of the past to construct a raft today, and we would not know where to steer if we could.

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