

My thoughts on the Ukraine

It is difficult for the historian in me not to use historical analogies but they seem particularly apt when discussing the current situation in the Ukraine. The “bigger picture” is the [projection](#) of Russian power into the Crimea and its desire to bring its neighbour into an Asian economic orbit instead of a European one. Russia’s mineral wealth and rapprochement with China coupled with America’s desire to utilize its relationship with Russia to its own advantage in the region has led to this provocative action on Putin’s behalf. It appears that there are no consequences. Just as many felt that mobilization in the region couldn’t possibly lead to conflict in 1914. (And remember that I did just finish reading McMillan’s latest book on the ending of the long 19th century peace.) This ratcheting up of tension, including war games on the border and the use of its flag in the barricaded government building in Simferopol, suggests that Russian intentions are less than neutral. This isn’t helpful for Ukraine. Neither is the intransigence with which the US portrays the democratically elected Ukrainian leaders. A worrisome trend is emerging whereby revolution leads to democracy leads to the election of those who would find little in common with Thomas Jefferson.

The Ukraine has its own issues. [Demographics](#) are important: young, educated, and urban are western oriented; rural, older Ukrainians are more pro-Russian, perhaps longing for its more structured position in the Soviet orbit. Russian speakers are, naturally, more eastern looking. Ethnic tension between Ukrainians and Russian speakers take on a different dimension when factoring in the Tatar population. This doesn’t even take into account the geographic dimension: the south-east area bordering on the Black Sea are eastern-focused, the north and west are aligned more to Europe. From an [economic](#) perspective Russia provides the energy that fuels the economy, creating a balance of payments issue that cannot be [neglected](#).

And politics too. Rampant corruption and less than transparent power structures has led to a rejection of government itself. Nationalist groups aligned with groups like the Greek Golden Dawn and their racist ilk form part of this opposition. Oh my.

So what is the way forward? I am no expert on this situation but perhaps another history lesson. The peace failed in 1914 because leaders were too obsessed with domestic politics and lacked the courage or intelligence to openly discuss these issues in a transparent fashion. Asserting religious or philosophical superiority in domestic politics is one thing, doing it in an international arena is another. Power dynamics are vastly asymmetric in both areas but on a domestic level there is usually only one side that can marshal military might.

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