Identity Crisis: How the Outcome of the Cold War affects our Understanding of the Crisis in Ukraine

Sara Catherine Lichon
Ramapo College of New Jersey

Follow this and additional works at: https://idun.augsburg.edu/honors_review

Part of the Eastern European Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://idun.augsburg.edu/honors_review/vol10/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate at Idun. It has been accepted for inclusion in Augsburg Honors Review by an authorized editor of Idun. For more information, please contact bloomber@augsburg.edu.
Identity Crisis: How the Outcome of the Cold War affects our Understanding of the Crisis in Ukraine

Sara Catherine Lichon
Ramapo College of New Jersey

Abstract

This paper discusses how history affects the present, arguing that the outcome of the Cold War aids our understanding of the current Ukraine Crisis by shedding light on the identity crises which Ukraine, Russia, and the United States faced after the Soviet Union collapsed. These new identities conflicted with each other, ultimately leading to the conflict we are facing today. The paper starts by discussing what the Ukraine Crisis is: current fighting between pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine and Ukrainian troops, due to conflict that began after Ukrainian pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych was overthrown in 2014. The situation in Ukraine did not spontaneously appear, but is the culmination of many years of tension and conflicting identities. Because of Ukraine’s long, intertwined history with Russia, many Ukrainians in the eastern reaches of the country believe they are more Russian than Ukrainian, and many of them are ethnically Russian. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Russians were displaced and found themselves living in newly independent Ukraine, which they did not consider their homeland. Meanwhile, those in western Ukraine were closer to the democratic west, and ideas of free democracy were more prevalent.

Also discussed is how Russia, after losing its identity as an empire, did not know what its relationship was with the post-Soviet states, causing it to revert back to an imperial state of mind, explaining its desire to get involved in the Ukraine Crisis. Meanwhile, the U.S. wishes to become involved in order to protect the New World Order and its identity as victor of the Cold War. However, the U.S. is also hesitant to interfere too much, as it could lead to a new Cold War and threaten its status as the victor. These conflicting identities all contribute to the Ukraine Crisis, and this paper aims to describe how this information can be used to better understand the crisis.
Introduction

Currently, the country of Ukraine is in the midst of a crisis: separatists are wishing to break away from the region, the government is attempting to keep their sovereignty and integrity, the Russian government is overstepping its bounds, and the West is attempting to make sense of the situation. As the conflict continues to escalate, it becomes harder and harder to understand what exactly is going on. Those in Western Europe and the United States view Russia as becoming aggressive and imperialistic, attempting to recreate the Soviet Union by taking away Ukraine’s sovereignty. Those in Russia see themselves protecting Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine from a cruel government. Ukraine itself is split; those in western Ukraine see Russia infringing on their freedom, while those in eastern Ukraine (specifically Crimea and the Luhansk and Donetsk regions) see Russia as a safe-haven and the country to which they belong. These many different views have their roots in the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union fell, the many independent states created by it were at a loss, unsure of their new identities. Russia itself was unsure of its relationship to the post-Soviet nations, while the West, particularly the U.S., was sure of its new identity as the victor of the Cold War and leader of the new world order, or the world created by a dominant U.S.. Ultimately, the outcome of the Cold War created conflicting identities between east and west Ukraine, Russia, and the United States, and these identities have all boiled over into the current Ukraine Crisis the world faces today.

What is the Ukraine Crisis?

Before delving into the question of how the outcome of the Cold War led to the Ukraine Crisis, it is important to understand what exactly the Ukraine Crisis is and what perceptions surround it. In November 2013, several hundred students in the Ukrainian capital of Kiev protested in Independence Square, demanding that then-Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. This already-drafted agreement would have aligned Ukraine’s economy with Europe’s by adding Ukraine to the free-market alliance between multiple European countries¹, meaning that Ukraine would be able to trade with these other European countries without tariffs or restrictions. The Association Agreement between Ukraine and the EU included a set of conditions that Yanukovych was not willing to accept, however: electoral reforms to Ukraine’s government to make

¹ Diuk, “Euromaiden: Ukraine’s Self-Organizing Revolution.”
it more democratic, and an end to “selective justice,” or the imprisonment of many opposition government leaders on political charges. Yanukovych also claimed that Ukraine faced financial difficulties that could only be solved by working with Russia, so, in December 2013, he signed a gas deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin, making it clear that he wanted Ukraine’s economy to be connected to Russia’s rather than to Europe’s. Ukrainian college students in Kiev, who had started to feel excitement at the prospect of being closer to Europe, were angered by Yanukovych’s decision, and they began organizing protests in the center of the city.

These protests were unique in that, while they were started by a small group of people, they grew into a large and violent revolution that created a lasting impact. Hundreds of students gathered in the city square – called Independence Square in English but Maiden in Ukrainian – in order to peacefully demand that Yanukovych sign the Association Agreement. On November 30, however, the Berkut, Ukraine’s special forces, were sent to the square to clear the protesters. Their methods were violent and extreme, beating students with batons until they were covered in blood. The Ukrainian people were outraged by the government’s brutal response to peaceful protests, and the protests rapidly grew into the Euromaidan Revolution, named such for its pro-European direction in Maiden Square. Seven hundred thousand people protested in the city on December 1, facing the wrath of Berkut forces. Months passed, thousands of more people joined, and Kiev functioned as a war zone until February 2014, when Yanukovych fled to Russia and abandoned his post as president.

Many had thought that the situation would end there. But soon after in Crimea, a peninsula in eastern Ukraine, armed, unidentified men seized airports and government buildings in Simferopol. It was unclear whether these men were Ukrainian or Russian, but the majority of people living in Crimea were not supportive of the revolution in Kyiv, fearing that the new pro-Western government would not represent Crimean identity and interests. Those in Crimea, who are mostly ethnically Russian, had their own protests against the revolution and asked the Russian government for protection, fearing that their rights would be taken away. This eventually led to a referendum where ninety seven percent of Crimeans voted to join Russia. Soon after that, eastern

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 “Ukraine Crisis: Timeline of Major Events.”
6 Ibid.
7 “95.7% of Crimeans in referendum voted to join Russia - preliminary results.”
Ukrainian separatists declared the areas of Luhansk and Donetsk “People’s Republics,” officially sparking the crisis. It is up for debate between the East and the West on whether or not Russia is sending soldiers to Ukraine to help the separatists fight the current war.

Each side has a different perspective on the situation. Those in Luhansk and Donetsk believe they are fighting a war against a fascist Ukrainian government and its aggressive ally, the United States; they are hoping to free the Ukrainians from Western tyranny and bring them back to Russia’s fold. A soldier fighting on the side of the separatists justified his fighting by saying, “we came to help our orthodox brothers in their righteous fight against fascists, NATO, Americans, and imperialism.” A Spanish volunteer also fighting for the separatists explained his view: “It’s not a Russian-Ukrainian war, it is a Ukraine civil war. The government in Kiev sent militaries to kill, ready to kill, to make a civil war.” Those who are eastern Ukrainian feel the strongest about this. In the eastern, rebel-controlled town of Pervomaysk, which was on the frontlines of the conflict, mayor Olga Ischenko, “wanted to know if its [the nearby town of Popasnyaya] people were yearning to be liberated by the rebels.” Another woman in Pervomaysk, Natalya Sokolik, explained how “according to the opinion of the people here, they would not like to be part of Ukraine again after everything they have experienced.”

Meanwhile, those in Russia have their own opinions on the crisis in Ukraine. Many in the West believe that the Kremlin (a term used for the Russian government, similar to how the U.S. government is often referred to as the White House) wishes to use the crisis as a way to claim parts of Ukraine as Russia’s own, or at least to draw eastern Ukraine into Russia’s sphere of influence; in fact, this has already happened in Crimea. The reasoning behind this is that Russia sees Ukraine and Russia as one nation, due to their shared history and cultural similarities. Alexander Orlov, the Russian Ambassador to France, once said that “Russians and Ukrainians are one nation...You can’t separate them.” The reason Russia feels the need to intervene in Ukraine is also because of the belief that Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine are being violated; shortly after a new government replaced Yanukovych, Ukrainian Parliament abolished a 2012 law that allowed Russian to be used

8 “Ukraine Crisis: Timeline of Major Events.”
9 “Russian Roulette Dispatch 102.”
10 Ibid.
11 Judah, “Ukraine: Divided and Bitter.”
12 Ibid.
13 Snyder, “Ukraine: Putin’s Denial.”
as an official language alongside Ukrainian.\textsuperscript{14} This, in Russia’s eyes, justified military intervention.\textsuperscript{15}

Those in the West, however, have a drastically different view of the situation. They believe that Russia has invaded Ukraine illegally, and thus refuse to recognize any of the new developments, such as the annexation of Crimea. Timothy Snyder, an American historian who blogged frequently about the Ukraine Crisis and its impact on international politics from a Western perspective, stated in one of his posts, “Russia has illegally invaded, occupied, and annexed the Crimean peninsula, the southernmost province of Ukraine... The Russian intervention in Ukraine has been justified by absurd lies.”\textsuperscript{16} Even the United States government blames the crisis on Russian intervention; at a hearing of the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on Ukraine, Ambassador John E. Herbst stated that “the Kremlin began its hybrid war in Ukraine’s east” in order to “undermine the post-Cold War order.”\textsuperscript{17} Victoria Nuland, the Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs at the time, claimed that “Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine are suffering a reign of terror,” and that the crisis was a “manufactured conflict – controlled by the Kremlin” and “its separatist puppets.”\textsuperscript{18}

The West, especially the United States, also views Russia as bitter about losing the Cold War, and feeling threatened by a growing Western international presence. Former Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs John Kornblum’s testimony at the hearing on Ukraine stated that “current Russian leaders appear to view the growing encroachment of the Western way of life as an existential challenge.”\textsuperscript{19} Ukraine comes into play here for its pro-Western revolution; if Ukraine succeeds in becoming westernized, the Western world would be physically closer to Russia. Former Principal Deputy under Secretary of Defense Brian P. McKeon ended his testimony by saying that “Russia’s aggressive actions in Ukraine are a threat to a bipartisan objective of American policy since the end of the Cold War of seeking a Europe whole, free, and at peace.”\textsuperscript{20} The western and eastern views of the crisis oppose each other, making it nearly impossible to fully understand what is truly happening in Ukraine. The question is, why do these certain perceptions exist? The answer lies in the outcome of the Cold War, and the identity crisis that followed it.

\textsuperscript{14} “Canceled language law in Ukraine sparks concern among Russian and EU diplomats.”
\textsuperscript{15} Snyder, “Ukraine: The Edge of Democracy.”
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Herbst, “U.S. Policy in Ukraine.”
\textsuperscript{18} Nuland, “U.S. Policy in Ukraine.”
\textsuperscript{19} Kornblum, “U.S. Policy in Ukraine.”
\textsuperscript{20} McKeon, “U.S. Policy in Ukraine.”
Identity Crisis in Post-Cold War Ukraine

There are many different angles for one to view the crisis from, but perhaps the most important thing to look at is the perception of the Ukrainians. The situation in Ukraine did not spontaneously appear, but rather is the culmination of many years of tension and conflicting ideals. After the Cold War ended, those in Ukraine entered an identity crisis, with some of the population feeling they were Russian while the rest feeling that they were purely Ukrainian. Ukraine’s history is turbulent and murky, having been intertwined with Russian history for many years. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a “new Russian diaspora” was created, as ethnically Russian and Russian-speaking minorities suddenly found themselves no longer in Russia, but in the independent country of Ukraine. The final Soviet population census in 1989 stated that seventeen percent of the Soviet Russian population was in the new post-Soviet states – specifically 25.3 million people – and the number of people of Russian-based nationalities who were now outside of Russia was 28.2 million, ninety percent of which were ethnically Russian. Such a large number of Russians living outside of Russia was bound to create a problem at some point, as these people felt no loyalty or personal connection to their new homes, including Ukraine.

This issue of ethnically Russian people living in a country that they do not consider their home is especially clear in Crimea. Crimea had been a part of Russia since 1783, when the Tsarist Empire defeated the Ottoman Empire in the Battle of Kozludzha. In 1954, Soviet Union leader Nikita Khrushchev gave the Crimean peninsula to Ukraine as a gift, though its population was made up of mainly ethnically Russian people. About seventy-five percent of Crimeans in the 1950s were Russian, due to a combination of immigration and “ethnic cleansing” done by Stalin when he forced Armenians, Bulgarians and Greeks out of the peninsula. Khrushchev’s gift of Crimea to Ukraine was meant to symbolize Soviet control over Ukraine, emphasizing the unity of the two countries, while also introducing a significant Russian population to Ukraine. At the time of the transfer, this was not seen as an issue, as Ukrainians were considered very culturally close to Russians. On February 19, 1954, at the meeting of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet (the government body made up of the parliaments from each Soviet state) that discussed the transfer

21 Przel, “Case of Ukraine,” 114.
23 Ibid., 59.
24 Kramer, “Why Did Russia Give Away Crimea Sixty Years Ago?”
25 Ibid.
of Crimea to Ukraine, M. P. Tarasov, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of Russia, stated that Ukraine and Russia had a friendship and were culturally united:

The Ukrainian people have tied their fate with the Russian people since olden times. For many centuries they fought against common enemies...The century-long friendship of the Ukrainian and Russian peoples and the economic and cultural link between Crimea and Ukraine were consolidated still further with the victory of the Great October Socialist Revolution...The transfer of the Crimean Oblast’ to the Ukrainian Republic meets the interests of strengthening the friendship of the peoples of the great Soviet Union, and will promote the further strengthening of the fraternal link between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples...26

Those in the Soviet Union at the time considered Ukraine and Russia to be one nation due to their shared history and culture, making the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine logical and understandable.

This transfer would later cause an issue when the Soviet Union fell apart, however. Crimea’s population was still mostly Russian decades later—fifty-eight percent or 1.2 million people in 2001—and many wanted to have closer ties with Russia rather than with Ukraine, feeling as though they were minorities in the overall population of Ukraine.27 This created lasting tensions which have bubbled to the surface multiple times, even prior to the Ukraine Crisis. For example, in March 2006, pro-Russian Crimean politicians organized protests against NATO exercises that were to happen in June, which soon spread to other areas of eastern Ukraine where the majority of the population spoke Russian.28 Because some in Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine see themselves as Russian rather than Ukrainian, they consider the Ukrainian government and the West their enemy, because the West is attempting to keep them from breaking away from Ukraine and joining Russia. This has reached a climax in the current crisis.

Those in the western parts of Ukraine, however, have a different perspective on the crisis. Unlike the Crimean and separatist Ukrainians, they do not feel a bond with Russia – in fact, they wish to break away from Russia as much as possible and form their own independent identity. Most of Ukraine’s history has consisted of being caught in a game of tug-of-war

26 “Meeting of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.”
27 Wilson, 104.
28 Lucas, The New Cold War, 147.
between Russia and European powers. Long before the Cold War, in the seventeenth century, Ukraine was split between Poland and Russia; Poland owning the territory to the west of the Dnieper River and Russia owning the territory to the east. As the decades passed, Russia acquired more and more of this western portion, controlling most of modern-day Ukraine by 1772. The small portion of Ukraine that was not ruled by Russia in 1772 became known as Lviv, and was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In the nineteenth century, Ukrainian nationalism began to form in the area ruled by Austria-Hungary as people fled eastern Russian rule due to a lack of economic progress and poor living conditions. This nationalism grew during World War I, when the Bolsheviks in Russia signed a treaty with Germany in order to avoid conflict in 1918. This treaty ceded parts of Russian territory to the Central Powers and granted independence to other areas, such as Ukraine. But Ukraine’s taste of independence did not last long; the treaty was nullified later with Germany’s defeat, and Ukraine returned to Russia’s control.29

The game of tug-of-war did not end there, and Ukraine was once again split between east and west. Poland claimed Lviv and other parts of western Ukraine at the end of World War I, while the rest of Ukraine became part of the Soviet Union in 1922, after many battles between the Soviets and Poland. But life in Soviet Ukraine was not easy; under the rule of Josef Stalin, agriculture was collectivized, and food grown in rural parts of Ukraine was collected to feed the entire Soviet population. This led to a massive famine in 1932 and 1933, known as Holodomor, where around three million people starved to death. This further fueled Ukrainian wishes for independence, and during World War II, some Ukrainians joined forces with Nazi authorities, hoping that aiding in a German victory and a Soviet defeat would lead to Germany granting Ukraine independence (hence why pro-Russian separatists believe they are fighting fascists). After World War II, however, the Soviet Union expanded, and the areas of Ukraine under Polish control were seized.30 After the constant shifts in power within Ukraine, Ukrainians had a desire to form their own identity separate from those who ruled them while imposing harsh conditions.

The opportunity to gain independence arrived in 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union. When Soviet Union leader Mikhail Gorbachev enacted his perestroika and glasnost reforms, the economy entered a state of chaos. Perestroika consisted of decentralizing the Soviet economy while glasnost consisted of the democratization of the Soviet Union, but these reforms

29 Tharoor, “Maps: How Ukraine became Ukraine.”
30 Ibid.
backfired, as the economy disintegrated instead of improved, and increased freedom of the press made it easier to point out Gorbachev’s failures. According to Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis, there was much appeal in leaving the Soviet Union, “[f]or as politics opened up while prosperity lagged behind, it became hard to see what benefits a state...got from being part of the Soviet Union.” Soon the Soviet states began to break away from the failing center one by one, and on August 24, 1991, Ukraine declared its independence.

Today, western Ukrainians are wary of Russian imperialism returning. After centuries of being victims of Russian rule and tyranny, it is no surprise that Ukraine would want to protect its independence and remain outside of Russia’s shadow. Ukrainians feel that their country has been ignored as a nation for most of its history, constantly being part of other nations; now, Ukraine wishes to have an identity of its own as a sovereign European country. According to political scientist Ilya Prizel, during the twentieth century “outsiders have confused Ukraine with Russia and rejected Ukraine as a legitimate player within the international system,” and thus it makes sense that Ukraine would want “to establish a separate identity from Russia.” But the fear that Russia will again gain control over Ukraine remains in the air. Stephan Khmara, a member of the Ukrainian Conservative Republican Party, once said that “as long as the Russian empire exists, its neighbors will live under direct threat to their security and independence.” This “reflect[s] the feelings of many Ukrainians,” according to Prizel.

The way western Ukrainians attempt to form their own identity is through integration into the European system – the further they can break away from Russia, the more likely that Europe and the world will view Ukraine as a sovereign nation. After gaining independence from the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian government, along with the governments of other newly independent states, turned towards “Euroatlanticism,” according to journalist Edward Lucas. Euroatlanticism was the integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union, which would mean “a commitment to cleaning up and modernizing all the debris of totalitarian

---

31 Raeff, “The Gorbachev Era: Perestroika and Glasnost.”
33 Ibid.
34 Prizel, 124.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 124.
38 Ibid.
Identity Crisis

rule. By joining the European Union, as discussed in the previous section when Ukraine wished to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, Ukraine would reform their government in order to make it more democratic, and also become involved in the free trade alliance between various European countries. By joining NATO, Ukraine would be part of an international military alliance that also promotes democratic ideals. By committing to democratic reform, Ukraine would greatly distance itself from its communist Soviet past, forming an identity separate from Russia.

Additionally, Euromaiden was not Ukraine’s only pro-Western revolution; in 2004, western Ukrainians protested the election of Viktor Yanukovych as president, claiming the election was rigged. These protests became known as the Orange Revolution, and were another instance of east versus west, where Russians and pro-Russian eastern Ukrainians supported Yanukovych while Europeans and western Ukrainians supported his opponent, Viktor Yushchenko. Eastern and western Ukraine’s conflicting identities caused conflict as the western side tried to forge a new path for themselves, while the eastern side did not wish to follow that path. The conflicts have only heightened now during the Ukraine Crisis. The split between the eastern corner of Ukraine and the rest of Ukraine is rooted in the complex history between Ukraine and Russia that lasted until the end of the Cold War. While Crimea and the Luhansk and Donetsk regions of Ukraine identify with their shared history with Russia, western Ukraine is resentful of the many years it suffered under Russia’s rule. These different perspectives of Ukrainian-Russian history have led to the current perspectives in the Ukraine Crisis, and are the source of the tension between the two sides.

The Fallen Empire—What is Russia?

One must not forget the other major powers that are present in the Ukraine Crisis. One country that went through a major identity crisis after the Cold War was Russia. Russia, being at the center of the Soviet Union and the head of the empire, experienced a loss of identity when the Soviet Union collapsed. Due to their control over the many Soviet states, the notion of a Russian empire was a major part of Russian national identity, so the fall of the Soviet Union created a sense of confusion. Russia questioned what its relationship was with the other post-Soviet states; does Russia still lead these

39 Lucas, 130.
40 Schneider, “Ukraine’s ‘Orange Revolution.’”
41 Prizel, 117-8.
42 Ibid.
states? Does it still have the responsibility to maintain control over them? In general, what is Russia? As “the state that claims to be the heir and legal successor of the USSR,” in the words of historian Roman Szporluk, Russia faced difficulty in accepting the sovereignty of the “near abroad,” or other post-Soviet states.

The Russian government was unable to fully abandon their imperial state of mind, explaining its desire to get involved in the conflicts of Ukraine. Vladimir Putin is perhaps the clearest example of this. Putin has become an extremely powerful man, both within his country and in the world. Part of the reason he has gained a tremendous amount of power and support within Russia is because of his promise to rebuild Russia to what it once was during the Cold War and create a new political union between the post-Soviet states. Putin praises the golden days of the Soviet era, and he has argued that the collapse of the Soviet Union has made “the Russian nation...one of the biggest, if not the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders.” He has also stated that “the aspiration of the Russians, of historical Russia, [is] to restore unity.” Putin has made it clear that his goal is to reunite the Russian people, and, seeing as many Russians are in the post-Soviet states, it seems this is the major reasoning behind why Russia is involved in the affairs of these states. Russia’s involvement in Ukraine is part of a larger plan Putin has to restore unity.

The loss of Ukraine specifically has left Russia in a confused and hurt state, because the history of the two nations is so connected. Starting as early as the eighth century, these two countries were intertwined. The first major center of the Rus people, whose name the word Russia is derived from, was in Kiev, which is currently the capital of Ukraine. In the 1600s, Ukraine was divided up amongst numerous people, such as the Hungarians, Ottomans, Swedes, and Cossacks, but most notably was split between Poland and Russia, as mentioned in the previous section. Under Catherine the Great’s rule in the seventeenth century, the area along the Black Sea was referred to as Novorossiya, or New Russia (which is currently a term used by separatists). When the Soviet Union was formed, Ukraine was incorporated into it in 1922, and was used as a breadbasket; the massive famine in the 1930s prompted Russian speakers to immigrate to Ukraine to “make up the numbers” of the Soviet population who died.

---

44 Ibid.
45 Wilson, 32.
46 Ibid., 34.
47 Tharoor.
Indeed, the shared history between these two nations makes it seem that Ukraine’s secession is the cause of the “disintegration of the Russian federation,” to use Prizel’s phrasing. When the Soviet Union fell apart, Russia did not consider the new, independent states as foreign countries, especially not Ukraine. Russia and Ukraine are extremely intertwined to the point where many Ukrainians are seen as Russian, and this made the separation of Ukraine from Russia “emotionally” damaging. Russian historiography emphasizes the connectedness of the two nations, and “usually tried to deny the Ukrainian state and people had a separate existence at all,” according to journalist Andrew Wilson, who has done much research on Russia and Ukraine. Combining the shared history with the transfer of Crimea makes it so that Ukraine and Russia are so connected that severing that connection is seen as almost a blasphemous deed. As Gorbachev once said to U.S. President George Bush at Malta, “The Soviet peoples would not understand [separation]. We lived together for fifty years, we are integrated... In the Ukraine, 50 million are non-Ukrainian.” Such a belief in the integration of the Russian and post-Soviet people, Ukrainians specifically, shows that Ukraine’s independence is severely damaging to Russia’s image and identity. Furthermore, the issue of Russian minorities in these new post-Soviet states remains a major problem. As discussed earlier, there were millions of Russians who were part of the Soviet Union and “[s]uddenly...found themselves uncomfortable and unwelcome, but with no place to go.” Because of this, many Russian politicians believe that the interests of Russian minorities in other countries lie in Russia’s hands. This dedication which Russia developed towards minorities has caused Russia to become increasingly interested in the affairs of the post-Soviet countries, including Ukraine, and explains why Russia insists that the rights of minorities in eastern Ukraine are being threatened.

This desire to protect minorities, combined with the need to maintain a portion of control over the post-Soviet states, has contributed to the current tension between the West and Russia. As the Cold War was nearing a conclusion, Bush and Gorbachev had many conversations in order to formally bring an end to the conflict. During one of these conversations at the Malta Summit in 1989,

48 Prizel, 118.
50 Ibid.
51 Wilson, “Ukrainian Nationalism.”
52 Guroff, 94.
53 Bush and Gorbachev, US Memorandums of Conversation.
54 Prizel, 118.
55 Guroff, 92.
56 Ibid., 91.
the question of the sovereignty of new nations came up; Gorbachev did not want the United States to interfere with the newly emerging states. Gorbachev explained how the "right of each country to make its own choices and also the right of nations to change that initial choice" was "an internal matter," and that the United States should concern itself more with an issue of separatism in Quebec because it is closer to the United States: "I wonder why the U.S. Congress is so concerned about the Soviet federation instead of trying to help Canada which is much closer and more important to you."57 This opinion of Gorbachev's was also present in a conversation he had with the Prime Minister of Canada Brian Mulroney in 1989, where he said:

We are faced with attempts to interfere in the affairs of our federation on the part of the USA...It is not easy for the Americans to comprehend the essence of the new world, of the new values. The habits of the global policemen are still very strong, also strong is the desire to impose their opinion, the efforts to dictate others. I will have to tell the President in Malta: if you want to help somebody, try to help Quebec. It is closer to you, and we will sort out our problems on our own...the Americans have an itch: to give everybody advice on how to live...I have to say that as far as Eastern Europe is concerned, it is hard for the United States to give up the habit of teaching others.58

Russia, in its own state of confusion after the loss of the Soviet Union empire, took on the identity of a nation responsible for taking care of and providing for the new nations that were once part of its empire, and which, in Russian eyes, would never truly be separate from Russia. This identity is still present in Russian government policy today, and contributes to the tensions and animosity felt in the Ukraine Crisis.

**Told by the Victor—The Dominant United States**

After the Cold War, as Russia found itself at a loss for a new identity, the West, especially the United States, developed a lasting identity – the victor of the Cold War. The disintegration of the Soviet Union signified the collapse of communism, and the United States began to lead the world in a "new world order."59 This new world order was a term that was first used in this context by United States president George Bush after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

57 Bush and Gorbachev, US Memorandums of Conversation.
58 Record of Conversation between Gorbachev and Mulroney.
IDENTITY CRISIS

During the Cold War, the United States was dedicated to preventing the spread of communism and encouraging the spread of democracy, and the new world order that was to come after the Cold War was a world led by the United States. The collapse of the Soviet Union signified the end of an era, and the power balance changed; where there was once two global powers in constant competition, there was now only one major power, creating a new world order. Bush announced in his State of the Union address in 1992 that the world was experiencing "changes of almost Biblical proportions" because "communism died this year." 60 Bush emphasized the victory that the United States had achieved, stating that "the biggest thing that has happened in the world in my life, in our lives, is this: by the grace of God, America won the cold war...For the cold war didn't end, it was won." 61 This emphasis on winning the Cold War created for the United States an identity of a victor with a commitment to lead the world as its sole superpower.

The United States was so preoccupied with the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, that it failed to notice the internal divisions within the post-Soviet states, focusing instead solely on its desire to defeat the Soviet Union. According to scholars Gregory and Alexander Guroff, the West has "paid little attention" to the problem of ethnicity in the post-Soviet world and did not look into the substance behind the desires to break away from the Soviet Union, "as the primary goal was destruction of the [Soviet] empire." 62 Those in the West would ignore the opinion of those who wished to remain a part of the Soviet Union and instead looked only to those who wished to break away; for example, the United States was strongly supportive of Ukrainian far-right independence advocate Viacheslav Chornovil, along with many other independence leaders in Lithuania, Georgia, and Uzbekistan. 63 If the United States ever knew there were people in these countries who did not want to leave the Soviet Union, it was never mentioned or documented. The United States would not have needed to look beyond the liberation movements at the deeper picture – the liberation of Ukraine and other post-Soviet states was what the United States wanted, and these independence movements were seen as a major victory for the West. Political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski claimed in 1996, a few years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that "[t]he political landscape of Europe is fundamentally transformed, for Ukraine's existence transforms Russian power by reducing it significantly and thus making it more

60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Guroff, 78-9.
63 Ibid., 93.
manageable.” The smaller Russia’s power was, the more “manageable” it would be, and the easier it would be for the United States to lead its new world order. Those who wished to remain aligned with Russia would not have served the United States’ purpose, and thus went unnoticed.

In the United States’ policy in the Ukraine Crisis today, the United States still does not notice those who wish to remain close to Russia, and still views itself as a victor with a commitment to the new world order. Nuland’s 2015 testimony on the Ukraine Crisis stated that Ukraine played an important role in the “quest for a ‘Europe whole, free and at peace,’” and that the U.S. was dedicated to liberating Ukraine “from its corrupt, oligarchic past,” and “chart[ing] a more democratic, European future.” Rather than acknowledge that some in eastern Ukraine do not want a European future, the U.S. government sees those fighting in eastern Ukraine on the separatist side as purely Kremlin puppets and Russians in disguise. Nuland refers to the fighting as “Russian-fueled violence,” and Kornblum’s testimony also blames Russia and Putin for the conflict that is undoing the United States’ work in creating a democratic presence in Eastern Europe. Kornblum argues that:

In those years [the 1990s], we cooperated to establish conditions for a peaceful, democratic transition for nations of the former Warsaw Pact [a treaty between the Soviet Union and the countries within its bloc]...Today, we can be proud of the secure and prosperous democratic community of nearly one billion inhabitants which stretches from the East of Europe to the tip of Alaska...Current Russia leaders appear to view the growing encroachment of the Western way of life as an existential challenge...[this] has helped Putin justify his unbroken flow of troops and material into Ukraine.

In order to preserve the new world order that it has created, the United States believes it needs to curb Russia’s appetite for the post-Soviet states and maintain the sense of democracy that these new states have adopted. And though it is true that Russia has an appetite, it is not solely to blame for the crisis, as there are some native eastern Ukrainians who support the separatists and wish to join Russia. However, because of the United States’ identity as winner of the Cold War, United States policymakers are reluctant to admit that, perhaps, not all of Ukraine views itself as a victim needing to escape its Russian abuser.

---

65 Nuland.
66 Ibid.
67 Kornblum
Despite the desire to maintain the new world order, the West, especially the United States, has actually hesitated when it comes to getting too involved in the Ukraine Crisis. The West has repeatedly imposed sanctions on Russia and negotiated ceasefires, but to no avail, as the crisis continues. The West is hesitant to send its own troops to Ukraine, lest it further escalate tensions between East and West – this can be seen by the fact that, regardless of how often U.S. policymakers discuss the need to stabilize Ukraine, they do not send troops in. This is another trend that has continued since the end of the Cold War. In the case of Ukraine specifically, shortly after it gained independence, it was only discussed in the West in relation to its Soviet nuclear arsenal or any conflicts with Russia. When it came to aiding Ukraine in its mission for democracy, the U.S. steered clear. In fact, “the West viewed Ukraine and other Soviet republics as ‘irrational children’ whose ‘national interests’ were somehow always menacing,” according to Olga Alexandrova, a contributor to Harvard Ukrainian Studies. This can be seen in the initial reactions the West had towards Ukraine when it was striving for independence; in a speech that Bush gave in Kiev in 1991, he stated that “freedom is not the same as independence. Americans will not support those who seek in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism. They will not aid those who promote a suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred.” This speech, now known as Bush’s “Chicken Kiev” speech, reflects an initial hesitance to completely helping the post-Soviet states fully separate themselves from the Soviet Union. This is still happening today, as the West does not want to provoke further conflict that will spread beyond Ukraine to the rest of the world. Perhaps this is because of the image the United States has developed in being the victor of the Cold War – unwilling to restart the conflict, the United States would prefer to preserve the “new world order” without getting itself too involved in a conflict it considers dead and buried; a battle that the United States has won.

Conclusion

The murky Ukraine Crisis is slightly easier to understand if one looks at the outcome of the Cold War, as after the Soviet Union collapsed, various nations were forced to take on new, conflicting identities, which led to rising tensions that have finally come to a boiling point. Ukrainians in Crimea, Luhansk, and Donetsk who felt they were still connected to Russia are now currently trying to break away from Ukraine. Western Ukrainians who felt that

68 Alexandrova, “Ukraine and Western Europe,” 145.
69 Ibid., 146.
70 Bush, speech in Kiev, Ukraine, August 1, 1991.
Russia stifled Ukraine's growth are still attempting to break away from the former empire. Russia is seeking to retake the country it feels it still rightfully owns, while the United States is struggling to enforce the new world order while not provoking a new Cold War after emerging victorious from the first one. The conflicting identities of victor, fallen empire, free Ukrainians and displaced Russians has led to the current Ukraine Crisis, and there is no telling when it will end. Perhaps strides can be made in the right direction to end it if we look at how the Ukraine Crisis is really an identity crisis, for the sooner this is understood, the easier it will be to turn the crisis from a current event into history.

References

Primary Sources

Gorbachev, Mikhail Sergeevich and Brian Mulroney. Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Prime Minister of Canada Brian Mulroney, November 21, 1989. Wilson Center Digital Archives.


Secondary Sources


