

FT Books Essay **Non-Fiction**

Ukraine through the lens of history

Former ambassador Rodric Braithwaite looks at two new books on the post-cold war period and argues that the present conflict was inevitable



Orders are given to Royal Marines during defensive drills on the border of Poland and Lithuania in 2017 © Ant Upton/eyevine

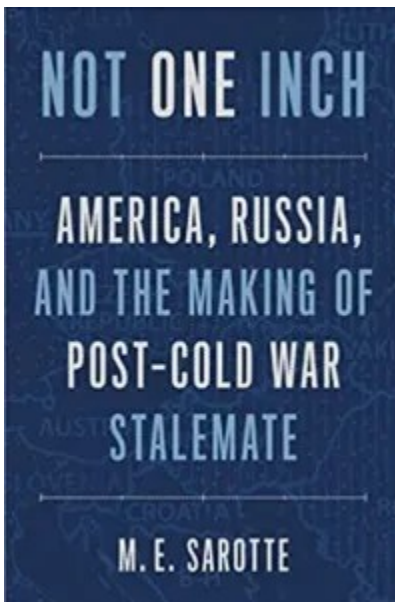
Rodric Braithwaite YESTERDAY

Mary Sarotte was studying in Berlin when the wall came down and shared our exhilaration as one east European country after another broke free of Moscow's control, the Soviet Union collapsed and the cold war came to an end.

Now a professor at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, her latest book, *Not One Inch*, is the third of a trilogy which covers the story from that day to this. She writes with the advantage of 30 years of hindsight and access to many new documents. So does Vladislav Zubok, whose recently published *Collapse* is a deeply informed account of how the Soviet Union fell apart. Both can help us understand how we have once again come to the brink of a major armed stand-off between Russia and the west.

Not One Inch is a riveting account of Nato enlargement and its contribution to the present confrontation. Sarotte tells the story with great narrative and analytical flair, admirable objectivity, and an attention to detail that many of us who thought we knew the history have forgotten or never knew: the essential contribution of the Hungarians towards the fall of the wall in November 1989, for example; or Russian President Boris Yeltsin's advance warning to President Bill Clinton that he intended to make Vladimir Putin his successor. She ends with a bleak assessment of the damage inflicted on politics today. (Sarotte draws on my reports now in British archives; Zubok on my unpublished diary.)

[Baker](#), US secretary of state, suggested a hypothetical bargain to the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev. Nato would “not shift one inch eastward from its present position” once it had safely taken in a reunited Germany. Those words were never recorded in a mutually agreed formula. Gorbachev’s negotiating position was far too weak for him to insist on legal language. The Americans would never have agreed so to bind their hands anyway.



But the Russians, not at all surprisingly, heard what they wanted to hear. They convinced themselves that Baker’s assurance, and others like it, amounted to a moral and political commitment. But under relentless US pressure, Nato’s borders nevertheless advanced until by 2004 they were within spitting distance of Russia and Ukraine. Very many Russians firmly believed that they had been grossly double-crossed.

The origins for this grievance lie a lot further back. In 1985, painfully aware that their country was failing in the competition with the US, the Soviet leaders chose Gorbachev to put it back on track. He co-operated with President Ronald Reagan to end the cold war, opened up the country and gave it a limited form of democracy. But he was unable to manage the problems of empire and the collapsing economy.

Russia’s weakness was America’s opportunity. Helped by the locals, the US reunited Germany inside Nato, freed the east Europeans, and encouraged the break-up of the Soviet Union. At the end of 1991 Gorbachev handed power to Yeltsin as president of a revived Russia. It was a moment of triumph for the west. For the Russians it brought national humiliation, domestic chaos and in places actual famine.

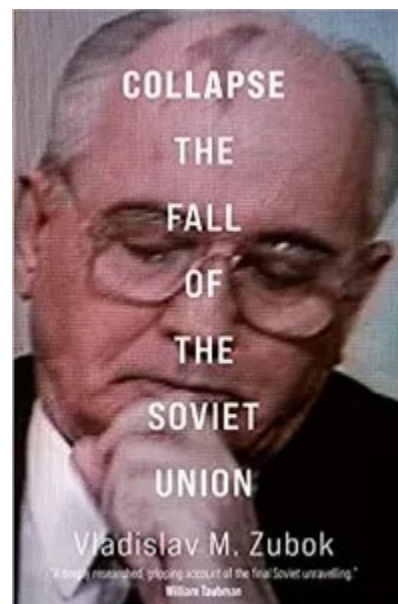
Imagine young democracy when it was most in need of friends

Mary Sarotte

become a full member. They set up the “Partnership for Peace” to associate Russia with Nato’s work: but they made it clear that Moscow would not have an equal voice in them.

American bureaucrats who believed that Nato should expand to include the whole of eastern Europe drove their ideas with ruthless effectiveness. American soldiers rightly worried that the realities were being ignored: how could Nato offer a convincing military guarantee to so many new members on Europe’s periphery? Critics warned that enlargement could destroy Russia’s attempts at reform.

Clinton made genuine efforts to square the circle by offering the Russians a combination of argument, charm and bribery, but his efforts were undermined by his own domestic weakness. Sarotte says that “it is hard to avoid the reality that alliance expansion added to the burdens on Russia’s fragile young democracy when it was most in need of friends”.



Eastern Europeans, bullied for centuries by their large neighbour, did not believe that Russia would long remain flat on its back. For them it was painfully obvious that only

down provide evidence.

Nato's claims that it existed only to defend its members struck Russians as incredible, after America and its allies attacked first Serbia, then Afghanistan and Iraq. Many feared that Russia might be next, including my liberal Russian friends who had suffered under the Soviet regime and were glad to see it go. Western commentators still argue that most Russians had other things to worry about, such as surviving from day to day as their country fell apart. They oversimplify. The emotions were real. When Putin arrived on the scene he had little need to stoke them, though he has certainly exploited them for his own purposes.



A Russian fighter jet (left) escorts French fighter jets (and their refuelling aircraft) over the neutral waters of the Black Sea in December © Russian Defence Ministry/Tass

own characters, and by the combination of hard facts, high emotions, conflicting interests and the unyielding pressures of domestic politics. In the end the contradictions were fundamental. There was never a real hope of an alternative outcome.

Now we have to deal with Putin's Ukrainian gamble. In 1962 Nikita Khrushchev made a reckless attempt in Cuba to force the Americans to concede nuclear parity. He brought the world close to catastrophe and was compelled by US power into a humiliating retreat. Putin is now demanding a written guarantee that Nato will pull back, even though he must know that it would never pass the US Senate. Sensible commentators in Moscow point out that a military adventure in Ukraine would seriously damage Russia's own interests. In the west many believe that we should not risk war over a country for which we have no responsibility. They dismiss the argument that abandoning yet another east European country could undermine our own security arrangements more widely.

There is perhaps a chink. As he wriggled out of his Cuban escapade, Khrushchev managed to secure a verbal guarantee that America would respect Cuba's sovereignty. America is still by far the most powerful country in the world, even though this time geography is against it. It is not beyond imagination that a determined America could secure through diplomacy rather than violence a guarantee for Ukraine at least as strong as the one Khrushchev got for Cuba.

Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of the Post-Cold War

