War in Ukraine: free to read

The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

Russia, Ukraine and Europe's 200-year quest for peace

Generations of leaders have wrestled over a lasting settlement in Europe. What can today's negotiators learn from centuries of statecraft?

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The many decades of peace that Europe enjoyed after 1945 were a historically unprecedented achievement in which defence spending declined and armies shrank dramatically. "Where have all the soldiers gone?" asked one analyst of this transformation. Up until a month or two ago, polls showed that large numbers of the continent's inhabitants regarded war as an anachronism, an outlook unchanged by the fighting that accompanied Yugoslavia's break-up in the 1990s.

No longer, however. As Russia's invasion of Ukraine enters its second month, we find ourselves back in a world many Europeans thought they had left forever — one where terms such as annexation and partition, security guarantees and neutrality are bandied about across the conference table while bombs fall, trenches are dug and cities are left in ruins. In short, in the midst of Vladimir Putin's war, Europe is once again confronted with the necessity for peacemaking.

"This war is unwinnable," UN secretary-general António Guterres said this week. "Sooner or later it will have to move from the battlefields to the peace table." Bilateral meetings between the belligerents started nearly a month ago and have so far failed to produce any agreement. Predicting further suffering all round if the fighting drags on, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky has in the past few days been calling with increasing urgency for "meaningful talks" between the two sides. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, on the other hand, has discouraged ceasefire hopes and said that talks were going "much more slowly and less substantively than we would like".

Perhaps the idea that war had been banished for good was always a peculiarly European illusion; after all, in much of Asia, the Middle East and Africa, the memory of colonialism is fresh and there have been dozens of armed conflicts, many escalating into outright war since 1945. From such a perspective, the west's outrage at the Russian aggression against Ukraine can seem like hypocrisy, its recourse to the UN a matter of expedience not principle.

"Are we your slaves?" exploded Pakistan's prime minister Imran Khan, when he came under pressure to support the General Assembly resolution condemning the invasion. Echoing the sentiment, nearly half the countries in Africa either abstained on March 2

or simply did not vote at all. Nonetheless, to appreciate what is at stake in this conflict, it is important to understand Europe's own intimate relationship with the prize of peace and its long struggle to secure it.

Peace talks in Belarus on February 28, with Moscow's lead negotiator Vladimir Medinsky, second left © Sergei Kholodilin/AP

It is a quest that, as the historian Stella Ghervas has reminded us, goes back more than two centuries. In this time, the continent's international architecture, norms and institutions have been shaped not only by its conflicts but also by the diplomatic settlements that followed them, settlements that were intended to manage the often precipitous decline of empires and the ambitions of the new nation-states that sprang up in their place. One generation of peacemakers after another has faced the problem of how to reconcile the defeated to their losses and how to temper the expectations of the victors.

International co-operation to banish war began in 1814-15 when the coalition of powers ranged against France declared its aim "to end the miseries of Europe". It was in this foundational moment that Europe itself started to emerge as a political ideal and it is worth recording today that Russia was central to the peacemaking that followed. Tsar Alexander felt a personal commitment to establishing an enduring settlement across the continent and he and his fellow-rulers came very close to achieving this. Through their discussions, they established a pioneering system of summits that not only concluded hostilities with the French but also inaugurated the

modern history of international governance. The European powers had fought nearly 50 wars among themselves between 1648 and 1789; in the decades that followed the Congress of Vienna only five conflicts involved more than one of them.

One of the keys to the success of the Vienna system was that the victors chose to define their enemy as Napoleon himself, not his country. Confirmed monarchists, they believed restoring a Bourbon king to the French throne was essential for international amity. As "the disturber of the tranquillity of the world", Napoleon was packed off first to Elba and then to St Helena, while his former foreign minister, the chameleon-like Talleyrand, now representing the new Louis XVIII, was admitted to top-level negotiations. In this way, French self-esteem was unharmed even as France gave up its continental ambitions. "Restored to its ancient frontiers", Talleyrand reassured Austrian foreign minister Prince Metternich, "France dreams no longer of expansion."

The Congress of Vienna, c1815 © Getty Images

Dealing with an overstretched France, worn out by 20 years of constant fighting, was one thing; reining in the dynamo of 19th-century Europe — Germany — was quite another. In contrast to Vienna, the Versailles settlement after the first world war turned out to be a study in failure. Excluded from the peacemaking, the most powerful economy on the continent only reluctantly accepted the conquerors' terms.

With Hitler's ascent came the reckoning: not just the collapse of the settlement that had been reached in 1919 but more fundamentally, a direct challenge to the vision of international order it incarnated. To the sovereign state equality espoused by the League of Nations, the Third Reich proposed a dictator's alternative — a world in which a few great powers would hold sway over large regions and rule these by force if necessary. This was the ideological basis of the Nazi New Order in Europe, Berlin's share in an anti-democratic global compact with Fascist Italy and authoritarian Japan.

The shock this Nazi vision represented to liberal assumptions was so great, the victory over it so hard-won, that neither Hitler's death nor anything else sufficed to restore Germany's legitimacy in the victors' eyes. Occupied in 1945, it ceased to exist as a unitary state. Perhaps the definitive gesture regarding Allied attitudes towards the Germans was the joint decree they issued in 1947 formally abolishing Prussia, a country that had existed for several hundred years. No diplomatic settlement marked the onset of peace at all. Instead, the cold war eroded wartime co-operation among the Allies, and both Germany and the continent were divided.

Allied officers stand on chairs to get a glimpse into the Hall of Mirrors where the Treaty of Versailles was being signed in 1919 © Henry Guttmann Collection/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Yet it was from these unpromising beginnings that what amounted to a radically

original approach to international peacemaking sprouted over the coming decades in western Europe. It was an approach designed not for the age of empires that was passing but for the world of nation-states. Under an American security umbrella, new regional institutions intensified economic co-operation and fostered a normative alignment around democracy that brought an end to the Franco-German antagonism that had helped cause three wars in under a century. The cold war won the time the Germans needed for their generational reckoning with the legacy of Nazism, for reconciliation with their eastern neighbours and for the emergence of an existential commitment to European institutions.

The foreign policy prescriptions that flow from this kind of view of the past bear more than a passing similarity to the revisionism of the 1930s

In this way, what diplomatic historians once knew as "the German question" — at the heart of the continent's conflict since the mid-19th century — vanished as decisively as the threat from France had done previously. Some commentators after 1989 expected to see a return of a neo-Bismarckian Reich; they were disappointed. Berlin has preferred to exercise its hegemony through a strengthening of existing European institutions than to go it alone. Chancellor Olaf Scholz's decision, announced on February 27, to significantly increase defence spending marks not a return to an older 19th-century role for his country but rather a major step forward for the European Union.

By 1990 it looked as if Europe's long search for peace was finally over. At the end of the cold war, the diplomatic negotiations between the west and the USSR opened in a spirit of optimism and produced the successful so-called Two Plus Four Treaty, which recognised the peaceful reunification of Germany and thus brought the second world war to a belated formal close. Moscow was the scene of this diplomatic triumph. Mikhail Gorbachev's vision of a "common European home" accommodated freedom for the states of eastern Europe and envisaged a new partnership between the west and a reshaped Soviet bloc.

But success bred complacency. The relations between the old enemies had initially been cordial and even optimistic, as the west strove to work with the Kremlin as a co-guarantor of order. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created entirely unforeseen challenges and when Margaret Thatcher, Gorbachev, George HW Bush, François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl all retired, the last generation of politicians

François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl all retired, the last generation of politicians with personal memories of the second world war departed the scene.

Commonwealth of Independent States leaders pose with Putin in Moscow in 2005 © AFP via Getty Images

Neither monarchy, memories nor mutual fear bound Russia and the rest of Europe together any longer. The 1992 treaty forming the European Union was signed by 12 countries, joined by three cold war neutrals a little later, and another 12 by 2010, most of them once behind the iron curtain. Over the same period Nato expanded further east than had ever been contemplated.

Post-Soviet Russia, its economy in freefall, simply could not compete as a pole of attraction. The Baltics never joined Boris Yeltsin’s Commonwealth of Independent States; Georgia and later Ukraine withdrew in order to seek closer ties with the west. By 2020, EU GDP was more than eight times that of the CIS, and its per capita income stood at five times that of the latter. Yet Russia’s million-strong army was far and away the largest on the continent.

The idea that a great power should enjoy its own sphere of influence is an old one and it had long been an accepted part of the age of empires. But it is an idea intrinsically at odds with spreading expectations of free elections, national self-determination and independence.

The Big Three had declared at Yalta in 1945 that the peoples of Europe would be

permitted "to create democratic institutions of their own choice". But in reality the Red Army occupied half the continent and Churchill secretly agreed with Stalin to let eastern Europe be carved up into spheres of influence. Thirty years later, while the region still lay behind the iron curtain, the Helsinki Final Act stated with Panglossian breeziness that both self-determination and consideration for "everyone's security interests" were necessary; the Two Plus Four Treaty of 1990 did the same. But by then, Stalin was long dead, Russia was falling apart, and the US was promoting the global spread of democracy. Within a few years, Moscow's influence in Europe had shrunk to Minsk and the odd Balkan outpost.

For Russia this has been a staggeringly rapid reversal, on a scale generally unacknowledged in the west. Though not a defeated power like France in 1815 or Germany after the two world wars, in just a few years and virtually without a shot being fired, it finds itself back territorially more or less to where it was in the 18th century. It is, very roughly, as if the US had suddenly been returned to the territory it occupied before the Louisiana Purchase.

Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill (with his back to the camera) at Yalta peace negotiations in 1945 © Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images

The contraction is not by any means without precedent — rump imperial states such as Austria and Turkey after the first world war were also shorn of lands they had governed for many decades and their losses were proportionally even greater. Nonetheless, it is scarcely surprising that many of those who grew up in the USSR discerned deliberate humiliation. This tale of injustice in turn became the legitimising

discerned deliberate humiliation. This tale of injustice in turn became the legitimising ideology of a ruling elite that has had less and less to offer its population beyond economic stabilisation and redressing the supposed wrongs of history.

While Nato's eastward expansion is Putin's first grievance, it is his increasingly obsessive fascination with the distant past that best explains his sense of national mission. His recent article on "the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians" leads the reader back more than a millennium to the tribes of ancient Rus ("the largest state in Europe"), before proceeding via St Vladimir of Kiev, hetmans, boyars and the centuries of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to argue that the contemporary conception of a Ukrainian nation is nothing more than the product of an unholy fusion of Bolshevik political engineering and western hatred of Russia. Tellingly, this sort of nationalist mythmaking is also the bread and butter of Moscow's lead negotiator in the current talks with the Ukrainians, Vladimir Medinsky, a polemicist with a dissertation in history that Russia's highest academic body has itself deemed unscholarly, superficial and one-sided.

'The Republic at the Zenith of Its Power. Golden Liberty. The Royal Election of 1573' by Jan Matejko, which portrays a unique Polish-Lithuanian political system © Universal Images Group via Getty

The foreign policy prescriptions that flow from this kind of view of the past bear more than a passing similarity to the revisionism of the 1930s. The racism of the Nazis is missing; but the sense of existential threat justifying the use of force, the use of history as a trump card to dismiss the claims of newer, smaller nations and the disdain for an international order of sovereign states are all familiar.

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The larger ambitions for Russia's global role were spelt out in a Kremlin-approved commentary that appeared briefly on the Novosti website before being hastily removed. Written in a spirit of premature euphoria on the first day of the invasion, the article hails Putin as the restorer of the unity of the Russian people and the "historical fullness" of Russia itself. But he is doing more than this, it says: he has put paid to the postwar Anglo-American hegemony of international affairs and is thus standing up for the rest against the west.

Europe's astonishingly robust response makes clear that its peoples are not ready to see spheres of influence and rule by conquest return to the continent. It is striking that the EU, derided in recent years as a kind of federalist behemoth interested only in depriving states of their autonomy, should have now emerged so forcefully as defender of the rights of small states. But it is not so surprising really: it was theorists of small-state nationalism such as the Italian Giuseppe Mazzini who were the first advocates of European co-operation against the empires of the mid-19th century.

Europe is now therefore, against its wishes, in a kind of war to protect its own remarkable experiment in peace. The limits to Putin's historical revisionism are unclear. And who can believe him anyway after the lies he told before the invasion? His threats to use nuclear weapons cross a threshold. Whatever happens in the Ukraine in the coming weeks, it is hard to see that there can be any return to real peace on the continent so long as he is in power.

It is hard too not to think that it will take generations before Russia is in a position to come to terms with the collapse of the Soviet empire and to forge a new relationship with its neighbours. Yet if the country needs to reach a new understanding of its geopolitical situation, Europe and the US will eventually need to treat it differently too. In 1990, Russia was for a moment regarded as an equal partner in Europe's future and then marginalised. Even if Putin's war with Ukraine hastens his demise, the grievances that fuelled his rise will remain. History suggests heeding them is better than ignoring them entirely. Beyond the fight, the Ottoman sultans used to say, lies the greater fight — the struggle to build an enduring peace.

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