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The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

### **Russia, Ukraine and the 30-year quest for a post-Soviet order**



Historian Mary Elise Sarotte tells the inside story of the west's efforts to secure a post-cold-war settlement — and how Putin seized on missteps and Russian grievances to destroy it

Mary Elise Sarotte FEBRUARY 25 2022

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Why has the post-cold-war order broken apart in a violent fight over Ukraine? It is now beyond question that that order has crumbled, and that Europe will once again, as in 1989, bear a line of division between Moscow-centric and Washington-centric blocs.

It is also beyond question that the source of this tragedy is Vladimir Putin's insistence on eliminating Ukraine's independence — because that independence, representing Ukraine's intolerable freedom (in the Russian president's eyes) to choose between Russia and the west, is the ultimate reason why violence has come.

As someone who witnessed the dissolution of the old cold-war dividing line while studying abroad in West Berlin in 1989, it is hard to fathom that a latter-day version of it will now return, only further to the east, and with the Baltic states playing the role of West Berlin. I certainly did not expect to see the return of this division in my lifetime.

Nor did I have any way of knowing that the person who would recreate it was, back in 1989, not that far away from me in my student flat in divided Berlin, namely a younger Putin as a KGB officer in the East German city of Dresden. Decades later, as president of Russia, Putin became unwilling to tolerate Ukraine's sovereignty because of that country's special role in what he views as the greatest catastrophe of the 20th century: the collapse of the Soviet Union.

**Western leaders knew that creating a berth for the newly independent Ukraine was the key to enduring European peace. Yet they could not devise a policy to accomplish that goal.**

Thirty years ago, Kyiv's decision to secede made the break-up of an already crumbling USSR irreversible. This week, Putin's decision to send a massive military into Ukraine sealed the demise of the already crumbling post-cold-war peace. These events bookended an era characterised by a belief — now proved false — that Europe would never again witness a major land war.

## accomplish that goal

What, precisely, is it about Ukraine that has thrust it into this pivotal role? There are many ways to answer this, such as by diving deeply into questions of Russian and Ukrainian identity and nationality, or by looking back a millennium in time. Answers produced by these methods do, of course, matter.

But there is another, lesser-used way to uncover why Ukraine has mattered so much — focusing not on Ukraine itself, but on the way that dispute between the US and Russia over its post-Soviet fate exacerbated tensions between Moscow and Kyiv, leading to today's conflict.

To understand how this fateful conflict evolved, it is necessary to go back to the 1990s. It is apparent from evidence that I, now a history professor, have had declassified (along with other archive materials) that western leaders knew that creating a berth for the newly independent Ukraine was the key to enduring European peace. Yet they could not devise a policy to accomplish that goal.

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**The fight over Ukraine's fate** started even before it had pulled out of the Soviet Union — and, behind closed doors, divided the administration of George HW Bush. As the Soviet Union was crumbling in 1991, US defence secretary Dick Cheney advised his boss that Washington should do everything possible to accelerate that collapse. The US secretary of state, Bush's old friend and tennis doubles partner James Baker, disagreed vehemently.





President George HW Bush flanked by US secretary of state James Baker and defence secretary Dick Cheney in 1989 © Bettmann Archive

Baker argued that it was essential to keep the Soviet Union — America’s greatest foe — in one piece, because otherwise its arsenal of 35,000 nuclear weapons would fragment in dangerously unpredictable ways. As Baker warned Bush: “There is no other foreign issue more deserving of your attention.”

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Torn between Cheney’s and Baker’s views, the Bush administration became badly split. As its senior figures fought over what to do, Ukrainians forced the matter by holding a referendum on December 1 1991 on whether to become an independent state. The result was lopsided: with 84 per cent turnout, the vote was over 90 per cent in favour of independence. Support for breaking away ranged from 54 per cent in Crimea to over 95 per cent in western districts and in Kyiv. Even in Donetsk, Luhansk and neighbouring eastern districts, the vote in favour was more than 80 per cent.

The then US ambassador in Moscow, Robert Strauss, advised Washington that this result was devastating for Russians — “the most revolutionary event of 1991 for Russia may not be the collapse of Communism, but the loss of something Russians of all political stripes think of as part of their own body politic, and near to the heart at that: Ukraine.”





Demonstrators wave Ukrainian and EU flags in the lead-up to Ukraine's 1991 independence referendum... © Sergey Supinski/AFP /Getty





... and a young man stands on the graffitied base of a statue of Lenin, signalling a break with Soviet communism © Peter Turnley/Corbis/VCG/Getty

Meanwhile, the west was shocked to realise, given the amount of Soviet nuclear arsenal on its territory, that the newly independent country had instantly become the world's third-largest nuclear power — bigger than Britain or France. Moscow still had command and control over those weapons, but that did not decrease Baker's sense of panic that physical possession of so many weapons belonged to a state going through a turbulent transformation. Russia was experiencing its own turbulence, but at least it was populated by the devils Washington knew, so in his view Moscow should inherit all of that arsenal.

Brent Scowcroft, the US national security adviser, tried to convince Baker that nukes divided among Ukrainians and others unable to launch them might be less

divided among Ukrainians and others unable to launch them might be less threatening to the US than the original Soviet force under centralised control. Baker would not be persuaded. In late 1991 and 1992, he embarked on repeated, urgent diplomatic missions to the crumbling Soviet Union in a fight to ensure that only one nuclear successor state emerged: Russia.



Talks in the Kremlin in 1990 between Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze (third from left) and US secretary of state James Baker (third from right) © Tass/Getty

Bush's defeat in 1992's US presidential election, after only one term, abruptly ended Baker's efforts. But the sense of urgency survived the presidential transition and took on new complexity as the prospect of extending Nato beyond a reunited Germany – discussed speculatively under Bush – became a reality. These two issues joined in the mind of the man who won the election: Bill Clinton.

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**The new US president wanted** to find a way to make Ukraine feel secure enough to give up the nuclear weapons on its territory. If he acceded to the wishes of the countries between Germany and Ukraine to join Nato, however, that might have the opposite effect on Kyiv.

As Clinton warned his fellow Nato leaders in January 1994, the “nations of the former Soviet Union . . . have been almost ignored through this entire debate” about where to enlarge the alliance. “Why should we now draw a new line through Europe just a little further east?” That would only “foreclose the best possible future for Europe”,

meaning “a democratic Ukraine, a democratic government in every one of the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, all committed . . . to common security”. They should do nothing to “foreclose that possibility”.



US President Bill Clinton speaks at a Nato press conference in Brussels in January 1994, announcing that Ukraine had agreed to remove nuclear weapons from its territory © Marcy Nighswander/AP

In light of all these considerations, Clinton decided that rather than draw a new line between Nato and non-Nato Europe so soon after erasing the cold war line, he would instead try to blur any future divisions. On the advice of his defence secretary and his chairman of joint chiefs of staff William Perry and John Shalikashvili he approved



Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, William J. Perry and Gen. Shaukashvili, he approved the creation of a new entity called the Partnership for Peace (PfP), open to central and eastern European nations and post-Soviet states alike.

Through PfP, potential Nato members could gain experience in carrying out peacekeeping and other joint military ventures with the west and, over time, acquire the full weight of the Article 5 guarantee — the promise that an attack on one member-state would be considered as an attack against all. Such a widely applicable, incremental approach did not require Washington either to draw a new line through post-cold-war Europe or to leave Ukraine and most other post-Soviet republics to their own devices.



The 1997 signing of the Nato expansion agreement with (from left) UK prime minister Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, French president Jacques Chirac and Russian president Boris Yeltsin © Wally McNamee/Corbis/Getty

The Partnership was not nearly as popular as the idea of becoming Nato members. But, through clenched teeth, and because they understood what Clinton was saying about Ukraine, central and eastern Europeans agreed to support and join it. Russia and Ukraine did the same. PfP thus became something that Nato expansion could not: minimally acceptable to all stakeholders. It was a policy that simultaneously avoided drawing a new line across Europe, allowed Nato to enlarge and provided a berth for Ukraine, all while being tolerable to Russia.

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**But having figured out** a workable policy solution, Washington pushed that

solution aside — because of Russian President Boris Yeltsin’s self-harming choices, and the way they combined with Clinton’s own shifting priorities. Yeltsin decided to launch a brutal invasion of the breakaway region of Chechnya in late 1994, horrifying central and eastern Europeans, who worried that this revival of Soviet tactics might threaten them. Rampant inflation and the victory of some anti-reform extremists in elections only intensified the sense that Russia’s transition was going off the rails.

Meanwhile, bloodshed in the Balkans added urgency to all questions of European security and created new frictions between Washington and Moscow over how to handle the conflict. And the victory of the US Republican party in 1994’s midterm congressional elections, based on a “Contract with America” that called for swifter Nato enlargement, signalled to Clinton that the issue was a vote-getter — particularly in the states that he needed to win if he wanted to win a second term as president in 1996.



From left: Czech president Václav Havel, Bill Clinton, Ukraine’s Leonid Kuchma and Nato secretary-general Javier Solana at Nato’s 1999 summit in Washington © Timothy A Clary/AFP/Getty

Last but not least, continual pressure on Ukraine to denuclearise had finally borne fruit. In exchange for assurances of its territorial integrity — codified in the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 — Kyiv agreed either to destroy its nuclear weapons or to relocate them to Russia. It made Kyiv less important to the west.

The upshot of all these developments was that Clinton became increasingly willing to draw a new line across Europe after all. Savvy members of the US National Security

Council and US Department of State recognised the president's shifting mood, and emphasised that central and eastern Europe had suffered too many historical wrongs and already waited too long to join the west. They convinced Clinton to switch the mode of Nato enlargement. Instead of incremental accession by a large number of states through PfP, they had the alliance extend the full weight of the Article 5 guarantee to a small number of states. While their motives had merit, their mode of expansion separated the former Soviet bloc states that had managed to secure Article 5 from those that had not, such as Ukraine.



Preparing to destroy one of Ukraine's ballistic missiles in 1997. Under President Clinton, the US put pressure on former Soviet states to dismantle their arsenals © AP

Whereas PfP had kept open the options for different ways of adding members, now enlargement became all or nothing. One consequence was that US options for managing post-cold-war contingency — namely, by having a variety of relationships with Nato to offer to both central and eastern European and post-Soviet states — became dramatically more limited just as Vladimir Putin was rising within the ranks in Russia.

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**In 1989, Putin had returned from his KGB** outpost in a collapsing East Germany to his hometown in a collapsing Soviet Union. He found employment with Anatoly Sobchak, one of his former professors from Leningrad State University, who

was on his way to becoming mayor of a city that would once again be named St Petersburg.

Putin became his indispensable aide, managing relations between the elected authorities, the remnants of the KGB and the local crime bosses. He distinguished himself through unwavering loyalty to the mayor. Even after Sobchak was voted out of office in 1996 and came into legal peril due to alleged corruption, Putin protected him, reportedly organising a swift exit for the ex-mayor to France in November 1997 by private jet.

Such loyalty impressed Yeltsin's deputy chief of staff, Alexei Kudrin, who had worked for the mayor as well and knew Putin. Through Kudrin and other contacts, Putin got a foothold in the Yeltsin administration and moved to Moscow — and did not disappoint their expectations that he would shift his unquestioning loyalty to the Russian president.

**Only one thing works in such circumstances — to go on the offensive. You must hit first, and hit so hard that your opponent will not rise to his feet'**

Vladimir Putin, in 2000

The extent of his devotion to his new master became clear when Russia's chief prosecutor, Yuri Skuratov, started investigating corrupt activities on the part of the Yeltsin family and its close associates. Behind-the-scenes efforts to deter the prosecutor failed and it seemed in early 1999 as if Skuratov might come into possession of valuable evidence. Suddenly, a tape allegedly of Skuratov naked and in bed with two unclothed women — neither of whom was his wife — appeared nationwide on the government television network. The

video's authenticity was confirmed on air personally by Putin.

Through these and other displays of loyalty, he swiftly climbed the ladder of power, becoming prime minister in August 1999, acting president upon Yeltsin's unexpected, immediate resignation in December 1999, and president following the election of March 2000. Once fully in charge, Putin's personal grievances took on an outsized role. He remembered that when he had called nearby Soviet military forces in 1989 to request armed back-up for defending his KGB outpost, he could not get it. The person who had answered the phone had refused to grant Putin's request without explicit permission from Moscow — and then added, "Moscow is silent."

That phrase haunted Putin and gave rise to a lasting personal conviction. As he said in

the year he became president of Russia, “only one thing works in such circumstances — to go on the offensive. You must hit first, and hit so hard that your opponent will not rise to his feet.” In his view, “we would have avoided a lot of problems if the Soviets had not made such a hasty exit from eastern Europe.”



An organiser grasps a poster of Putin at a political rally in Moscow in support of the president ahead of 2000's election © Jeremy Nicholl/Eyevine

Putin also believed that Soviet republics should not simply have been allowed to declare themselves sovereign, independent states. As he put it in 2014, that separation meant that “millions of people went to bed in one country and awoke in different ones, overnight becoming ethnic minorities”.

In a 2017 estimate, the Pew Research Center put the number of ethnic Russians living outside Russia in other former Soviet republics to be 25mn. In Putin’s eyes, this made Russians “the biggest ethnic group in the world to be divided by borders”. Left out of his account was the role of Joseph Stalin’s forced deportations and resettlements in creating that reality.

**Now war has come and it is clear that back in 1989 and 1990, amid all the celebrating, we missed something**

As the 30th anniversary of Soviet collapse and Ukrainian independence neared last year, in hindsight it is clear that Putin decided, nominally on behalf of those “ethnic” Russians, to end Ukraine’s capacity for moving closer to the west. He correctly

## something

sensed that Kyiv, having failed to gain a berth in the post-cold-war security order, would have few options if Russia were to use force

to assert its dominance.

He also may have sensed an opportune moment of weakness in the west, with the US distracted by domestic discord, Britain consumed by Brexit and the woes of prime minister Boris Johnson, France facing an election, and Germany lacking former chancellor Angela Merkel — who, having grown up in East Germany and speaking fluent Russian, had far too good an understanding of Putin for his own comfort.

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**Now war has come** and it is clear that back in 1989 and 1990, amid all the celebrating, we missed something. For a long time, we rightly trumpeted the ways that dissolution of the line dividing cold war Europe created freer societies and wider life choices for central and eastern European nations and new post-Soviet states. The focus was, justifiably, on those people for whom that line's erasure represented a triumph. Certainly that is my memory of that happy time.

Looking back now, however, it appears that it was all too easy to forget the people who had lost out — above all Putin. It was also easy to forget that Russia, despite all the woes after the Soviet collapse, remained a world-class power, with a sprawling landmass, abundant natural resources, an enormous military and a strategic nuclear arsenal. And it was easy to ignore how seriously Putin was taking the conflict with the west over Ukraine's future, and how much he wanted to recreate Moscow's line of control.





The aftermath of shelling on the outskirts of Kharkiv as Vladimir Putin launched the invasion of Ukraine on Thursday © Sergey Bobok/AFP/Getty

The outbreak of war in Ukraine means, among many other consequences, that we need to view the cold war's end through a new lens. Its most lasting consequence, tragically, may not be the optimism that it inspired in the many, but the damage that it did to the one: Vladimir Putin. To assuage his grievance about the loss of Soviet status and above all Ukraine, he has commenced a major land war in Europe — and written the requiem for the post-Soviet peace.

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*Mary Elise Sarotte is a professor at Johns Hopkins University and the author of the new book 'Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate', from which parts of this essay have been adapted*

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