

## Russia and Ukraine: Back To The USSR

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**The images, stories and eventualities coming out of Ukraine are almost too horrific to contemplate. Rocket strikes against non-military targets, indiscriminate bombings across business and residential districts of major cities, and the creation of almost half a million refugees in just one week make the picture clear. This is a nation in the midst of a war that imperils the world like none since 1945, a war inflicted upon her by a neighbour with existentialist motivations: that Ukraine, in its current independent form, simply should not exist. This is not the time to consider how the conflict and its potential futures could affect the Ukrainian and Russian business climates – when the former is struggling to survive the war crimes of the latter, such concerns are secondary at best. But it does provide the impetus to look back on the last one hundred years of history and examine how we got to this point – and if there is any way back.**



If the Russian Revolution of 1917 was the Soviet Union's creation myth, then the Second World War was its national story. The integral role played by the USSR in defeating Nazi Germany was rightly heralded, even as Stalin and his successors took their country on a path of ever-deeper repression and authoritarianism that was more akin to the Third Reich than they would perhaps like to admit. The problem is, that this idea of 'Russia versus the world' has never gone away even as Nazism receded and successive Soviet leaders, spurred by the military and economic dominance of the USA post-war, began to see everything as a threat to the success and survival of the USSR. These worst fears were realised in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the independence of territories along its western edge, and the reality that the 'Russia' which emerged was a smaller and less influential player.

For Vladimir Putin; raised in the heart of the Soviet system and an absolute product of time and place (he served sixteen years across the KGB and FSB), this has been the driving force behind his political path and thus, that of Russia: that Moscow's power, reach and influence had been slowly eroded by outside factors since the breakup and that it was a question of national pride, not to say imperative, that all of these be restored and the 'Soviet Union' live again.

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Central to this is the re-integration of former USSR territories and their peoples; there can be no question that Putin genuinely believes that Ukraine's independence is meaningless in practice and that her citizens should be (and indeed want to be) part of a greater united Russia once more, because historical and cultural reasons compel this. But believing something does not make it so. Ukraine, the Baltic states and the remaining CIS nations all seceded according to international law, and none have shown the inclination to return. Gorbachev's failure to restore order in, and control of, the breakaway republics in the final three years of the Soviet Union's existence has always been felt by Putin as something akin to a personal betrayal. This more than anything is what has shaped his rule of Russia: cognisance of the supposed losses that the 'motherland' incurred and a determination that they not only *can* be restored – but that they *must* be. The invasion of Ukraine is the clearest exemplar yet of this policy: the two weeks of war in Georgia in 2008 and the 2014 annexation of Crimea were but preludes to what could yet lead to all-out war across Europe. Indeed, one can even argue that Russia's cyber activities over the past twenty years, from the devastating hacks on Ukrainian and Estonian systems to what was understatedly described as 'meddling' in the 2016 US election, have been their own form of warfare in service to Russia's greater goals. Much of the West has arguably been at war with Putin for a long time; we just did not truly realise it until now.

If Putin is (as some have suggested) mentally incapacitated, then he is in no fit condition to make decisions and should be removed. If he is not, then he is clearly a war-mongering dictator willing to countenance the wholesale destruction of the very territory and lives he claims to value so dearly albeit as Russian and not Ukrainian. The question of whether Russia has ever been a 'rational' actor since 1945 has been long debated, but if one accepts the equation that at present Russia = Putin, rationality can be completely taken off the table. Even Putin's inner circle have indicated that they do not know what is in his mind, or how far he is prepared to go. The installation of a puppet regime in Kiev, to attempt to put a political resolution on the crisis? Continuation of the invasion into former Soviet states now in NATO and risk all-out war, to reinforce the apparent existential imperative? The detonation of a nuclear weapon, to deter Western powers from taking further punitive action and asserting that there is no line that Russia will not cross to achieve her aims. All of these are possible, and it is a fool's game at present to predict which is most likely. All that can be said with certainty is – to paraphrase Zelensky – that this is no time to be neutral.

Nobody is questioning the deep terror and regret felt by millions of everyday Russians who bear no malice towards Ukraine and are victims by birth of a system that has been designed to suppress dissent and trumpet a rabid form of ultra-nationalism for a hundred years. This is Putin's war. But at the moment, through every meaningful political, military and economic metric, Putin *is* Russia and so penalties must by necessity fall across the whole country in a united front to make plain the fact that the world does not agree with the war crimes being committed, nor the outdated and just plain wrong justification that these atrocities are somehow correcting history rather than writing a disturbing new chapter of it. Already the cultural and sporting boycott has begun and increasing economic sanctions are being applied, but these are not

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enough: there is a very strong case to be made that if 'Russia' on the international stage is to become something more than a byword for 'Putin', the entire system of Putinism needs to be torn down by not only the cessation of any Western economic and corporate engagement in-country, and a refusal to countenance Russia as an equal partner so long as the current regime is in place, but a far more aggressive look inwards to the political and economic relationships and arrangements that the Putin elite have carved out of the American and European markets that are, in their own ways, complicit in reaffirming Putin and the system that has validated him for decades. We can no longer be surprised at the monster's reach when we have spent so long sharpening his claws.

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