



How Worried Should We Be About Russia?

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From Berlin, Russia is a 7-hour drive. The Ukraine is only a little farther by car. And sometimes I feel, when staring out my windows to the East, over the Spree, that I can feel Putin breathing. You don't need to be a historian for that to make you nervous.

Writing in the Washington Post on Friday, Anne Applebaum provided the most alarmist version of European security I've come across recently. Her piece ['War in](#)



[Europe is not a Hysterical Idea](#) makes extreme historical comparisons, evoking the atmosphere of Poland in the summer of 1939 and the chaos and destruction of WW2. She asks whether Central Europeans need to be worried about events in the Ukraine as if it were Hitler's invasion of Poland. She favors quotes from extreme right-wing Russian nationalists like Alexander Dugin and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (who earlier this month talked about the 'total annihilation' of Eastern European states). She evokes Hitler and Stalin in her analysis of Putin, and asks whether it is 'naïve' not 'to prepare for total war'.



War in the Ukraine is not a hysterical idea. But it is, so far, hysterical to say that Putin will bring about WW3 on continental Europe. For one thing, Ukraine does not have the guarantees that Poland had from Western powers at the beginning of WW2. It is not a member of NATO.

Just how nervous we need to be - with Russian troops' incursion into the Ukraine, their repeated violation of Finnish airspace, Kiev talking about a 'point of no return', the EU putting a one-week deadline on Russia before it will face consequences (can the EU possibly unite in these efforts?), the Lithuanian leader saying Russia is basically at war with Europe, and Putin reminding everyone in a press conference about the strength of Russia's nuclear arsenal, all in advance of a major NATO meeting next week - depends on a few determining factors which



are not yet entirely clear.

Will a conflict between Russia and the Ukraine remain within the borders of the Ukraine? And within the area of Russian domination in the Ukraine? If the conflict were to involve a NATO state like one of the Baltics, we are in trouble. This depends on just how crazy Vladimir Putin might be ('living in another world' was Merkel's appraisal). Is he bent on making himself into a historic figure who wages war with the West, exposes the hollowness of NATO, and reunites Russians under a reinvigorated empire to overturn the Western victory at the end of the Cold War? Certainly, Stalin and Hitler had millennial perspectives on their historical roles, and scant concern for the immediate loss of human life. And Putin is boosted by his already booming public approval in Russia (supposedly over 80%).

Or is Putin rather more pragmatic? Do we see a limited, regional, operation, in which Russia has a few clearly delineated goals: to prevent the inclusion of the Ukraine in NATO, to extend its annexation from Crimea to Eastern Ukraine. Putin knows that if his goals are limited, Europe and America are likely to react only with strong words and economic sanctions.





One would do well to keep one's eye on such factors rather than falling into axiomatic historical comparisons. Putin compared Ukrainian military movements in Eastern Ukraine to the Nazis last week; he is reminded of 'the events of the Second World War, when the Nazi occupiers, the troops, surrounded our cities — for example, Leningrad — and point-blank shot at these settlements and their inhabitants'. The irony, of course, is that Putin's aggressive testing of Europe's balance of power in the East is rather more reminiscent of Hitler, and his violation of sovereign states starting in 1938. Putin's chauvinism - his nationalistic, heteronormative agenda - can broadly be compared to the Nazis' as well. The World War Two analogies, which are entering into the press discussion in force, might have some limited use after all.

The West must, in light of these aggressions, contend too with the legacy of appeasement. Neville Chamberlain was made foolish by the history books for not standing up to Hitler. And yet, perhaps, we have a little more understanding for him now when faced with our own tough choices, and our own memories of a catastrophic European war. Chamberlain lived under the shadow of WW1. Our inheritance is even less enviable: the greater brutality of WW2 and the re-emergence of old patterns in European history in the nuclear age. Will we find ourselves following Chamberlain in placating our enemy for fear of horrific consequences? For what is the alternative? Angela Merkel has already said there is no military solution to the Ukrainian conflict - a position unsurprising for the European country that has done the most reflection on WW2. Or do we have methods unavailable to our diplomatic predecessors: the arm of financial consequences in a much more interconnected world economy?



No one in the West is going to take big risks for Ukraine. I wish I were so sure about Putin. He did say: 'Thank God, I think no one is thinking of unleashing a large-scale conflict with Russia'. But he followed these words with the warning: 'I want to remind you that Russia is one of the leading nuclear powers'.



We see the re-emergence of military tensions on the European continent between the superpowers - fought over a territory, Ukraine, that finds itself at the intersection of their spheres of influence - and the real question is whether Russia, the EU and America have clear ideas of where a balance of power might be established. Will there be any room for compromise, or will this smack too much of appeasement, or might it embolden Putin and lead us down the road to real conflict? Or is this pattern expected precisely because we have overly axiomatic ideas about how European conflict occurs, from our historical examples? Right now, we are all waiting to find out how much the powers on both sides are willing to lose to defend their spheres of influence, and I expect Europe and America will eventually make larger concessions to Russia, than vice versa, because they care more about a broader peace on the Continent. They will likely turn to a policy of containment, backed by economic sanctions, like that which isolated the Yugoslav conflict from European life for four bloody years.

Meanwhile, within Ukraine, a tragedy looms that might make Yugoslavia look like child's play.



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