

A Hundred Years Later

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THERE IS AN OLD CHINESE curse that says: “*May you live in historic times!*” (If there isn’t, there should be.)

This week was a historic time. The Crimea seceded from Ukraine. Russia annexed it.

A dangerous situation. No one knows how it will develop.

AFTER MY last article about the Ukrainian crisis, I was flooded with passionate e-mail messages.

Some were outraged by one or two sentences that could be construed as justifying Russian actions. How could I excuse the former KGB apparatchik, the new Hitler, the leader who was building a new Soviet empire by destroying and subjugating neighboring countries?

Others were outraged, with the same passion, by my supposed support for the fascist gangs which have come to power in Kiev, the anti-Semites in Nazi uniforms, and the American imperialists who use them for their own sinister purposes.

I am a bit bewildered by the strength of feeling on both sides. The Cold War, it seems, is not over. It just took a nap. Yesterday’s warriors are again rallying to their flags, ready to do battle.

Sorry, I can’t get passionate about this side or that. Both, it seems to me, have some justice on their side. Many of the battle cries are bogus.

THOSE WHO rage against the annexation of the Crimea by the Russian Federation and compare it to Hitler’s “Anschluss” of Austria may be right in some sense.

I remember the newsreels of ecstatic Austrians welcoming the soldiers of the Führer, who was, after all, an Austrian himself. There can be no doubt that most Austrians welcomed the “return to the fatherland”.

That seems to be the case now in the Crimea. For a long time the peninsula had been a part of Russia. Then, in 1954, the leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, a Ukrainian himself, presented the Crimea as a gift to Ukraine. It was mostly a symbolic gesture, since both Russia and Ukraine belonged to the same Soviet state and were subject to the same oppression.

But the main point is that the people of the Crimea were not consulted. There was no referendum. The majority of the population is Russian, and undoubtedly wishes

now to return to Russia. It expressed this wish in a referendum that, on the whole, seems to be quite authentic. So the annexation may be justified.

Vladimir Putin himself brought up the precedent of Kosovo, which seceded from Serbia not so long ago. This may be a bit cynical, since Russia strenuously objected to this secession at the time. All the Russian arguments then are now contradicted by Putin himself.

If we leave out cynicism, hypocrisy and great power politics for a moment, and stick to simple moral principles, then what is good for the goose is good for the gander. A sizable national minority, living in its homeland, has a right to secede from a state it does not like.

For this reason I supported the independence of Kosovo and believe that the same principle applies now to Catalonia and Scotland, Tibet and Chechnya.

There is always a way to prevent secession without using brute force: to create conditions that make the minority want to stay in the majority state. Generous economic, political and cultural policies can achieve this. But for that you need the wisdom of farsighted leaders, and that is a rare commodity everywhere.

BY THE same token, Ukrainians can be understood when they kick out a president who wants to bring them into the Russian orbit against their will. His golden bathroom appliances are beside the point.

Another question is what role the fascists play in the process. There are contradictory reports, but Israeli reporters on the scene testify to their conspicuous presence in the center of Kiev.

The problem has confronted us since the Tunisian Spring: in many of the “spring” countries the uprisings bring to the fore elements that are worse than the tyrants they want to displace. The revolutions are started by idealists who are unable to unite and set up an effective regime, and then are taken over by intolerant fanatics, who are better fighters and better organizers.

That is the secret of the survival of the abominable Bashar al-Assad. Few people want Syria to fall into the hands of a Taliban-like Islamic tyranny. That is also the fate of Egypt: the liberal democrats started the revolution but lost the democratic elections to a religious party, which was in a haste to impose its creed on the people. They

were overthrown by a military dictatorship that is worse than the regime which the original revolution overthrew.

The emergence of the neo-Nazis in Kiev is worrying, even if Putin uses their presence for his own purposes. If they are supported by the West, overtly or covertly, that is disturbing.

EQUALLY WORRYING is the uncertainty about Putin's intentions.

In many of the countries surrounding Russia there live large numbers of Russians, who went to live there in Soviet times. Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia, Moldova, Kazakhstan and other countries have large Russian minorities, and even majorities, who yearn to be annexed to the motherland.

No one really knows Putin. How far will he go? Can he control his ambitions? Will he be carried away by his successes and the lack of wise policies in Western capitals?

Addressing his parliament about the annexation of the Crimea, he seemed restrained, but there was no mistaking the imperial trimmings of the event. He would not be the first leader in history who overestimated his successes and underrated the power of his opponents.

And on the other side—is there enough wisdom in Washington and the other Western capitals to produce the right mixture of firmness and restraint to prevent an uncontrollable slide into war?

IN THREE months the world will “celebrate” the hundredth anniversary of the shot in Sarajevo—the shot that ignited a worldwide conflagration.

It may be helpful to recount again the chain of events that caused one of the most destructive wars in human history, a war that consumed millions upon millions of human lives and destroyed an entire way of life.

The shot that started it all was quite accidental. The assassin, a Serb nationalist, failed in his first attempt to kill a quite insignificant Austrian archduke. But after he had already given up, he came across his intended victim again, by chance, and shot him dead.

The incompetent Austrian politicians and their senile emperor saw an easy opportunity to demonstrate the prowess of their country and presented little Serbia with an ultimatum. What could they lose?

Except that Serbia was the protégé of Russia. In order to deter the Austrians, the Czar and his equally incompe-

tent ministers and generals ordered a general mobilization of their vast army. They were quite unaware of the fact that this made war unavoidable, because. . .

The German Reich, which had come into being only 43 years earlier, lived in deadly fear of a “war on two fronts”. Located in the middle of Europe, squeezed between two great military powers, France and Russia, it drew up a plan to forestall this eventuality. The plan changed every year in the wake of military exercises, but in essence it was based on the premise that one enemy had to be crushed before the other enemy had time to join the battle.

The plan in place in 1914 was to crush France before the cumbersome Russian mobilization could be completed. So when the Czar announced his mobilization, the German army invaded Belgium and reached the outskirts of Paris in a few weeks. They almost succeeded in defeating France before the Russians were ready.¹

In 1914, Great Britain, shocked by the invasion of Belgium, hastened to the aid of its French ally. Italy, Japan, and others joined the fray. So did the Ottoman Empire, which ruled Palestine. World War I was underway.

Who wanted this terrible war? Nobody. Who took a cool-headed decision to start it? Nobody. Of course, many national and international interests were involved, but none so important as to justify such a catastrophe.

No, it was a war nobody wanted or even envisioned. The flower of European youth was destroyed by the sheer stupidity of the contemporary politicians, followed by the colossal stupidity of the generals.

And in the end, a peace treaty was concocted that made another world war practically inevitable. Only after another awful world war did the politicians come to their senses and make another fratricidal war in Western Europe unthinkable.

A hundred years after it all started, it is well to remember.

CAN ANYTHING like this happen again? Can an unintended chain of foolish acts lead to another catastrophe? Can one thing lead to another in a way that incompetent leaders are unable to stop?

I hope not. After all, during these hundred years, some lessons have been learned and absorbed.

Or not?

¹25 years later, Hitler solved the same problem in a different way. He signed a sham treaty with Stalin, finished France off and then attacked Russia.