

UKRAINE, RUSSIA, AND THE LONG SHADOW OF NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

A Cold War History and a Too-Hot Future



A view of the Maidan, the year before the invasion.

It is hard to overstate the significance of the square at the heart of Kyiv, Ukraine, now called the Maidan Nezalezhnosti. The stones of the Maidan have silently endured generations of trouble and fights over what Ukraine should be. Every few decades, starting with the collapse of the Soviet Union, students and activists have felt the need to cover it in tents and banners and protest signs, and then their own blood, resisting government oppression and rampant corruption.

This is not primarily because of their own political class, or their own societal strife. It is because of their terrible next door neighbor, Russia.

The Past As Prologue



The Revolution on Granite

In 1990, right before the world's sociopolitical system came apart, Ukrainians were one of many peoples protesting, rejecting the interference they'd faced from the Soviet Union all their lives. Along with their Baltic Neighbors (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) They created a human chain of millions of people across these countries in a line. In Ukraine, it stretched from Kyiv to Lviv, over 300 miles of bodies held together, hand to hand. It was as if everyone was waiting for their bread, but the bread was their goddamn political freedom. It was a unique and striking political protest, but it was also dangerous.

The Russian empire, in the form of the Soviet Union at that moment, had made it clear over generations that they'd kill these people without a thought, but these people were willing to risk it. At the end of the protest, they won, and the Soviet Union fell. From Tallinn to Kyiv, and beyond into the wider Soviet world, so many people protested in so many ways, that the Soviet Union came apart. Moscow lost control, just as the Russian empire had as well, nearly a century earlier. In Ukraine Prime Minister Vitaliy Masol resigned, and shortly thereafter, Ukraine became a true independent nation. In 1990, the Maidan was called October Revolution Square, but after these events it would become Maidan Nezalezhnosti: Independence Square. Ukraine was born a free country, ostensibly to

chart its own course into the 21st century.



The 2004 Orange Revolution

But the Russian attention persisted, ebbing and flowing with administrations and corruption scandals. Years later the square would again fill, first becoming the home of the 2004 Orange Revolution, and then, at the tail end of the Arab Spring revolutions in 2013, the square became the home of the Euromaidan Protest. The Ukrainians looked westward to escape the stifling influence of their corrupt and overbearing neighbor.



Scenes from Maidan Nezalezhnosti, after the government fell.

By 2014 the Ukrainian people, especially the young people, were again having to tell the world they were done with the Russians. They wanted to be free. They chanted and carried banners by day, and slept in the square at night under the Ukrainian sky.



A clock, lined with memorials for fallen protestors in Maidan Nezalezhnosti, summer 2014

They built a tent city. It was terrifying and jubilant. I visited their city within a city on the Maidan, shortly after their Russian puppet president had been forced to flee. I saw the kitchens and sleeping places, the weaponry they'd captured from their government and turned back on the troops attacking them. There were memorials they built to their dead, and flowers, flowers absolutely everywhere. It was spring in Ukraine. But despite the spring, Christmas decorations still hung on the street furniture, left over from the beginning of this tiny war of great consequence.



Yanacovich's fake galleon for parties.

The young people even took over the ersatz king Yanucovych's palace, Mezhyhirya, complete with a room full of sets of medieval knight's armor, a bowling alley, boxing ring, a fake galleon for parties, and a zoo full of too many poorly-kept animals. The zoo included many large animals and

rare birds kept in inhumane conditions, pushing Yanukovych at least one more circle down in Hell when he gets there.

It is to this day the weirdest place I've ever been, and I'm from Los Angeles.

Ukraine turned west after the Euromaidan protest, and Putin couldn't have that. Within months he invaded and took Crimea. He moved like a gangster with no mandate beyond pointing a gun at his neighbor's head. The world let him do it. The objections would a few editorials, some weak sanctions, and not much more. But it should have been much more, because promises are the power of international relations, and promises, old promises, were being broken.

That's a Lot of Nukes

When the kids packed up the tents from the Maidan back in the 1990s, Ukraine was, by the happenstance of the Cold War, gaining independence as the third largest nuclear power in the world. It went Russia, USA, then Ukraine. There were housing thousands of the former Soviet Union's nuclear warheads. This was a problem for everyone, including Ukraine. The next several years were the unwinding of the Cold War, and it was dirty and corrupt and strange, for everyone, not just Ukraine. But also one of the most hopeful moments in modern history. Maybe we weren't all going to die in nuclear fire after all. Young people all over the world had to plan for... a future? That was one of many new and uncomfortable feelings of the early 90s.

The Ukrainian experience exemplified all of the contradictions of the end of the Cold War, struggling to find itself amid corruption and power plays, both internal and international. It was the chance to emerge from Soviet oppression, to be its own nation, to find itself within the community of nations. But the process was delicate, and never simple, given the nuclear weaponry and the century or more of looting and

oppression the Ukrainians had faced.

It is not a good thing for a country to have terrible financial problems, a broken society, and enough nuclear weapons to end civilization several times over.

The Ukrainians knew this as much as anyone did, but some of the leaders and the people wanted to keep at least a few of those weapons to make sure the Russians didn't ever come back. They were not afraid of the Americans, or the Europeans, they were afraid of Russia – of the Russians coming back. That was always clear, and always rational.



The Budapest Memorandum being signed by the four primary parties

Much of the world, but most importantly the United States, didn't want unstable countries to have nukes. Several other former Soviet states also had nukes, but they gave them back to Russia without as much fuss. It took several years to resolve the issue in Ukraine, because Ukrainians spent some time not so sure about giving up their radioactive security blanket.

So four years into this potential crisis, the Americans just paid Ukraine to give all their nuclear bombs to Russia. All three countries, plus the UK, sat down and hashed out a deal. It's called the Budapest Memorandum, and it said if Ukraine gave up all of the bombs, these three other nations would see to Ukraine's security. If anyone came to threaten Ukraine, the US, Russia, and the UK were obligated to defend Ukraine in war, equipment, actual boots on the

ground – whatever it took. Ukraine did not hold out for the word “guarantee” in the security agreement they got for handing back the nukes to Russia. Maybe they should have, but in the end, it’s just words, isn’t it?

With this done, the former Soviet republics, including Ukraine, also signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty, saying they would never seek to have nuclear weapons. The Budapest Memorandum probably made the world a better and safer place at a precarious time. It was one of the highlight moments in the history of keeping humanity from setting ourselves on fire like idiots.

But Russia never stopped meddling in Ukrainian politics, and the Ukrainians never stopped hating it.

Broken Promises

Because of this history, what’s at stake in Ukraine right now is different from every other conflict, however tragic and awful they may be. It’s not just the lives of innocent Ukrainians, or the geopolitics of Eurasia, but the course of humanity’s nuclear future. Because promises made have become promises broken, and broken nuclear promises concern us all.



The hope that filled Maidan Nezalezhnost in 2014, just

like 1990 and 2004, was that what people wanted for themselves could matter. That they could have a fate that wasn’t just determined by what distant rich old men in charge of so-called great powers thought they should have. Later that year, Putin answered their hopes by

breaking Russia's promises and invading and annexing Crimea. He threw away the commitments made in Budapest in exchange for all those nukes, right there on the world stage.

The other signatories of the Budapest Memorandum, including the US, just let him do it. This is what a nuclear agreement was worth: some hand-wringing, some sanctions, a news cycle, a funny segment on Last Week Tonight. It got a few think pieces about the history of Crimea and Where It Really Belongs.

But the spirit of the Maidan has never left the Ukrainians. They fought the Russians on the peninsula, and kept fighting right up to the full scale invasion in 2022. "I need ammunition, not a ride," Zelensky famously told the world that February, or really, he told the Americans (and maybe the UK?), the people who had signed the Budapest Memorandum, the people who had promised to protect them in exchange for giving up their power to end our world.

And with all this, we are back in the hot end of the Cold War, being fought by people who weren't even alive when the Cold War supposedly ended. But wars like this, wars of identity and autonomy, have an annoying tendency to never really end. Perhaps this one won't until the last nuke is torn apart and thrown into the last pit to decay for the rest of the life of the solar system.

Those old nukes make this war a different from all the other wars, genocides, and atrocities crowding in on our attention these days. Despite the gallons of ink spilled on it, it isn't ultimately about Zelensky being a good guy, or European fear of invasion, or even Good against some narratively archetypal Russia Being Evil. All of that is window dressing, like the Ukrainian flags hanging outside all the civic buildings around Europe. In the long run, it isn't even about a moral stand, even if that is the politically convenient way to talk about it. It's a terrible time on Earth in terms of wars and genocides right now, but the conflict in

Ukraine is different. Not worse; it's all too bad to be ranked. But the consequences of our failure to honor the Budapest Memorandum could be more terrible than we have imagined. They could be the end of our era on our little blue planet.

Ukraine gave their nukes back to Russia, and were betrayed. For everything we've said about standing with Ukraine, and their right to exist, or their crops feeding the world, or their millennia-old story as a nation, none of that is what history will remember. What happens to Ukraine will determine the state of the international order, and possibly whether everything that calls itself a nation is going to be clamoring to get their very own fleet of radioactive world-enders.

Because if Ukraine goes down, there's one message: if you don't want to be completely dominated or destroyed by any country larger and more powerful than you, you have to have nuclear weapons. Does anyone imagine Ukraine would be having any trouble with Russia at all if they could be putting radioactive air bursts over St Petersburg and Moscow?

They would not.

Ukraine isn't about Ukraine at the scale of human history. It's about whether we want to continue having lots of people on Earth, or just spend the next thousand years LARPing the Fallout games.

Thusly the first lesson of the 2014 invasion of Crimea was don't trust the Russians. Maybe also don't trust the Americans and the UK, to always and immediately have your back. But as that conflict has progressed to now, another lesson has emerged: if you don't want to be crushed by your powerful neighbors you better be willing and able to reduce their cities to radioactive glass.

When Everyone Needs Their Own Nuke



Right now, there's a little public appetite for smaller powers to get

nukes. The assumption, grown out of the great power politics of 19th and 20th century Europe, was that great powers having them meant no one would need them, because the great powers would shield smaller nations from violence. But that assumption is failing catastrophically. Smaller powers have started to realize they need their own nuclear deterrent.



Kim Jong Un, casually gesturing at maybe a nuclear bomb?

This emerging calculus applies to thousands of "little" conflicts around the world. But no conflict is little when it's your conflict. North Korea is the obvious example of the future we're flirting with. They're a poor hell country in an absolutely terrifying neighborhood that

realized they literally needed nukes more than food. But they have their bombs. Their continued existence can only be threatened by their own incompetence, no one else can touch them.

These cases, where a state's sovereignty is in question, are everywhere. As a random example, (and deliberately not one I think is currently likely) take Ethiopia. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has a couple of priorities: getting a trading port on the Red Sea, (Ethiopia is the largest landlocked country in the world by population), and basic electrification. They've recently destabilized the region by recognizing the break-away state of Somaliland in exchange for a trading port, pissing off Somalia something fierce.

Equally contentious, the administration is working on a massive hydroelectric project with the potential to electrify a lot of Ethiopia, and maybe export power to some neighbors. But Egypt, the military powerhouse in the neighborhood, doesn't want to deal with the reduced flow on the Nile for a some years as the dam is filled. They have threatened to bomb the project out of existence, if they don't get their way on the Nile – lights that might never come on. All while Somalia tries to box in Ethiopia's trade hopes in order to hold itself together.

Would it be irrational for Prime Minister Ahmed to want a nuke or two to hold the neighbors at bay? It's expensive and impractical, so yes, ...but also no. The nuclear club gets yelled at plenty, but as the DRPK has shown, it also gets respect, and ultimately, nuclear nations get left alone, something Ethiopia might appreciate.



The Iranian IR-40 Heavy Water Reactor that is definitely not making Plutonium. At the moment.

There's many others who currently might want to go nuclear; that's how proliferation works. Iran has been vaguely trying for ages, which means their frenemy Saudi Arabia would not want to be left behind. Syria has tried because Syria is insane. And Turkey? They don't like being left out of things.

If ever the US waivers in its international support, South Korea would be existentially foolish to pass up joining the nuclear club. If the Korean peninsula is fully nuclear, Japan might feel compelled to follow, even with its history.

The world quietly becomes more dangerous as the post Cold War great power promises fail, and it's not getting harder to build a nuke.

A post-Budapest proliferation world could be terrifying, especially as it is pushed into political chaos by Russia, the Middle East, and most of all, Climate Change. It is exactly the world everyone has wanted to prevent since the Trinity test. The old cold warriors aren't supplying Ukraine out of the kindness of their hearts, but out of the cold calculus of the deal with the Devil we all made in New Mexico.

The Boomers of international relations know what's at stake here is non-proliferation, which they're already watching fail in Asia. This is a dark future we're toying with, where small states play nuclear brinkmanship over resources made unreliable by climate change. And they have

to, because the modern great powers, pulling back from their allies, haven't given them any choice. As increasingly insecure and isolated western countries hoard resources, close borders, and most importantly, abandon agreements to protect the integrity and dignity of smaller allies, *nuclear armament just makes more sense.*

The NPT (Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty) is still a going concern, if no longer a famous or fashionable one. We don't dream in mushroom clouds anymore, like the kids did in the 1970s and 1980s. The treaty has been medium successful; the number of nuclear weapons has gone down by a lot, and the number of nuclear armed states hasn't gone up by as much as was expected back in the 1970s. But should Ukraine fall, the NPT could simply become a dead letter. Why should anyone trust their existence to an international norm the internationals don't care about? The world is watching Ukraine; the question is what historical lesson it will take away from this war.

Ten years after the Revolution of Dignity



Protestors demanding the return of POWs in Maidan Nezalezhnosti last month

Despite the bombing and the strain of this war on the city, Maidan Nezalezhnosti is not empty these days. It is still the heart of Kyiv, and a moral center of the country itself. It is decorated with pictures of the lost places and

people of Ukraine, and sometimes filled with families and protestors, demanding into the wind the return of their family members, and their homes. It is still a place of hot and angry hope. Kyiv, like the rest of the world, is uncomfortably warm right now in record-breaking August heat. It will be surpassed soon by the next record breaking month on our little blue dot, as the heat destabilizes our physical systems along with our political and social systems.

Right now, Maidan's sound track is too often the air raid siren, signalling people to head into the subway system because of incoming missiles they hope to, and usually do, shoot out of the sky. It is a terrifying testament to an unanswered question: What kind of a world order do we want?

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