

## UKRAINE AND THREE FORGOTTEN REALITIES: WHAT WOULD ROBERT STRAUZ-HUPÉ SAY?

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine is an unwelcome reminder of time-tested realities that we have been tempted to forget over the past two decades. These realities, namely that history is written by men, that force must be met with force, and that wars are rarely local affairs, appear throughout history and are undoubtedly unpleasant because they do not lead to sunny optimism. It is not surprising therefore that we prefer to ignore them. But we ignore them also because of an arresting naïveté about the world and a perennial wish to see an irresistible march toward freedom in history. The now notorious statement by Secretary of State John Kerry that Russia is behaving "in a 19<sup>th</sup> century fashion" – suggesting that Moscow has failed to adapt to modern, or post-modern, times – is indicative of this worldview.

Unfortunately, the violent reminder of Ukraine seems not to have altered this worldview. Current administration officials as well as many opinion writers continue to dwell in their pleasant and surreal beliefs in a novel "21<sup>st</sup> century world" that must be fundamentally different from the previous thousands of years of human history. The result is a strategic approach that aims to sweep away the problem at hand: Crimea is seen as a small, local speed bump in an otherwise uninterrupted historical drive toward peace, prosperity, and "interconnectedness." The "global network" of trade, financial flows, labor mobility, and exchanges of ideas will in the end prevail, defeating Putin's antiquated strategies. The 21<sup>st</sup> century strategy to deal with his 19<sup>th</sup> century behavior is to wait and avoid any move that may escalate the situation further. To put it in different words, Western leaders seem to be seeking a diplomatic success without a military success, believing that the supposed new powers of a globalized world (e.g., limited sanctions, diplomatic "time-outs" in the form of suspensions from G-8, long-term energy policies) can arrest armored columns and reverse Russian territorial gains.

Such a strategy may work in the long run, measured in decades or centuries. But for the rest of us, living here and now, it is an exceedingly dangerous strategy. Ukraine is a quasi-failed state, with part of its territory already annexed, part under imminent threat of invasion, and part being destabilized by subversion and propaganda. The fall of Ukraine actively destabilizes the eastern frontier of Europe, and thus, reignites a region that the U.S. deemed secure and not in need of further expenditure of resources and attention. The march of freedom and security will require more than just waiting for history to take its course.

It is important therefore to start from the basic realities that the war in Ukraine is bringing back to our attention and that we are tempted to ignore. With the help of FPRI's founder, Robert Strausz-Hupé, here they are.

The *first* reality that we tend to forget is that history is made by men, not by impersonal forces. What this means is that there is no clear and irresistible progressive direction in it. Men can change history's course for the better, but often for the worse. A powerful leader, with imperial aspirations or simply a Napoleonic ego, can decide to invade a country, even if most of the *bien-pensant* world élites think Davos receptions reflect the new harmonious global relations. As Robert Strausz-Hupé observed, "World history is not a succession of happy endings." We do have strong and willful enemies who will use every opportunity to undermine and weaken us and our friends, and who want to defeat us and our world view. These enemies, Strausz-Hupé continued, "can surely not be defeated by the incantation of optimistic formulas such as the inevitable victory of democracy over totalitarianism, of high-standard-of-living peoples over low-standard-of-living peoples, of a high-class technology over a somewhat lower-class technology, and of good over evil men."<sup>1</sup> Russian troops in Crimea, and the armored columns along Ukraine's eastern border, are a reminder that there is nothing – not democracy, not wealth, not globalization – inevitable in history.

The *second* forgotten reality is related to the first one. We tend to believe that we can win simply because of passing time, as history moves inexorably toward the desired objective. There is therefore little need to oppose an enemy with force: rumbling tanks will be defeated by the allure of democracy and the spread of globalization. Moreover, once a victory has been achieved, our belief is that the outcome is settled, firmly written in history. This belief is most visible in Europe, where over the past two decades we have witnessed the alleged visible sign of such a victory of history: Europe is free, secure, and wealthy, and above all, no serious threat is capable of altering that.

This, of course, is not true. It never was, but the war in Ukraine made it abundantly clear. Europe from London to Kiev is not secure. Again, to quote Robert Strausz-Hupé from the early 1950s: "Europe is debated ground. Upon it is renewed the struggle that Europe waged unceasingly from antiquity to the threshold of her greatest age: the struggle against Asia. As in the past, the menace of Asia presses now upon a Europe that is plunged into a general malaise compounded of lassitude of power and the alienation of society."<sup>2</sup> The fragility of the European peace, threatened by the westward push of Putin's Russia, is again made evident.

Finally, *third*, we have been lulled into believing that a local war is simply that, local. The post-modern faith in the gradual disappearance of violent conflict leads us to see wars as little localized bursts among peoples and nations who have been lagging in the march of history. Russia's war in Ukraine is, in this view, a small local vestige of ancient thinking, destined to remain limited to that area. It's a small island of 19<sup>th</sup> century behavior amidst a sea of 21<sup>st</sup> century thinking – or so we are led to believe.

In reality, all wars are local, and all local wars have global connotations. World wars did not start globally, but in very precise places, often with the widespread belief that they would be limited to that locale. Think Corcyra for the Peloponnesian War or Sarajevo in 1914, or Central Europe (Sudetenland) in 1938-39. Sure, these are historical analogies and as such imperfect and perhaps dangerous. (Strausz-Hupé put it thus: "Historical analogies are like the wings of butterflies: firmly grasped they crumble into particles which may be of interest to a biochemist but no longer evoke the marvelous whole of functional and aesthetical perfection."<sup>3</sup>) Nonetheless, they do convey the idea that a local skirmish often is part of a much wider contest and may lead to geographically more expansive violence.

Furthermore, even when a local war does not erupt into a larger conflagration, it is part of a wider geopolitical game. Putin did not invade Crimea simply because he wanted direct control over that peninsula, or even because he wants to exercise influence over Ukraine writ large. He acts locally but thinks globally. He wants to alter the post-1991 order by proving that the Western order is predicated on an empty promise of security. Hence, while President Obama defines Russian as a mere "regional" power whose reach is limited to small, globally insignificant places, Russian leaders define the region as "Eurasia," a big piece of world's real estate. Ukraine is thus a local war fought with a much larger geopolitical game in mind.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Strausz-Hupé, *The Zone of Indifference* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1952), 273.

<sup>2</sup> Strausz-Hupé, 207.

<sup>3</sup> Strausz-Hupé, 27.

As Strausz-Hupé put it in a forgotten essay on Russia, Moscow pursues a foreign policy that “is characterized by matchless simplicity of conception and persistence of effort.” He continued with an observation that maintains its relevance:

The principal theatre of operations is now, as it has been for nearly three centuries, eastern and southeastern Europe, and Russian policy in the Middle and Far East has been largely derivative. Only when Russia was blocked in Europe, on the Baltic and Moldavian Plains, only then did she turn to Asia. Russia exercised pressure on the Asiatic rim-lands, especially on Britain's positions in southwestern Asia, in order to obtain concessions in Europe. Russian expansionism, although it harvested rich territorial gains in central and eastern Asia, did not let itself be deflected from its primary goals, to wit, Russia's strategic frontiers in the West.<sup>4</sup>

In the end, as Strausz-Hupé did over the decades of his intellectual and policy activity, there is a constant need to remind ourselves of the unpleasant reality of international politics: history is not a string of successes, force needs to be met with force, and the larger geopolitical context is present even in small local wars.

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Strausz-Hupé, “The Western Frontiers of Russia,” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (July 1947), 322.