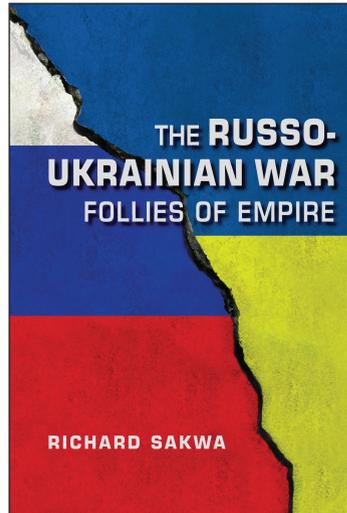


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The Russo-
Ukrainian War:
Follies of Empire

Richard Sakwa

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Preface

It is the responsibility of leadership to work intelligently with what is given and not waste time fantasizing about a world of flawless people and perfect choices.

—Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*

I AM STILL SURPRISED, DISAPPOINTED, ALARMED, AND GRATIFIED BY THE response to my earlier book, *Frontline Ukraine*, first published in 2015.¹ Surprised, because of the vehemence of reactions, both positive and negative. The Ukraine conflict, and all that it signifies, represents the concentrated essence of post–Cold War dilemmas of European, and indeed global, security. The country’s fate involves conflict over civilizational identity, divergent paths of national development, and the postcolonial and postimperial right of smaller nations to express themselves in an idiom appropriate for their history. Given the weight of the issues, the surprise lay not so much in the intensity of reactions, but the tone in which the debate was conducted. This leads to my disappointment. I have long believed in what I took to be the classical principles of scholarly analysis and academic impartiality. Instead, words were taken out of context and sentences willfully misrepresented. For example, in the preface to *Frontline Ukraine* I mentioned that the book was personal, in that before World War II my father, an agronomist by profession, trained as a reservist in the Polish Army and served in what was then Lwów. A reviewer misrepresented this to suggest that I admitted that the book was polemical, when in fact my intent was the opposite. The willful distortion of facts and views is characteristic of the conflict. This gave rise to my alarm. It was clear that the Ukrainian issue was an intellectual minefield, but the extreme reactions and the associated

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trolling took me aback. Even before 2022, the conflict leached in to poison personal and scholarly relations. However, I was grateful for the many messages, from associates but also from many strangers (including an inspirational cohort of peaceniks from across the world), who thanked me for presenting perspectives and balanced analysis that had become taboo to so many.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, understandably, further inflamed passions. My perspective is a simple one: All sides are at fault and must bear responsibility for the tragedy that has unfolded in the country and across Europe, with momentous and ruinous effects globally. The conflict reflects deep-rooted tensions and contradictions in contemporary international politics. It also erodes the legitimacy and efficacy of the United Nations–based Charter International System established in 1945—at the end of a catastrophic world war that in its closing stages witnessed the birth of the nuclear age. This is where Barbara Tuchman’s *March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam*, first published in March 1984, is so helpful. In her characteristically lucid and dispassionate manner, she dissects the distorted perceptions, inadequate policymaking, and, indeed, the follies that have attended conflicts since the dawn of recorded history. She defines “folly or perversity” as “the pursuit of policy contrary to the self-interest of the constituency or state involved.”² She examines the Peloponnesian War, the Renaissance popes, the British loss of the American colonies, and the war in Vietnam. To qualify as folly, the policy in question has to meet three criteria: It must have been “perceived as counter-productive in its own time, not merely by hindsight”; “a feasible alternative course of action must have been available”; and “the policy in question should be that of a group, not an individual ruler, and should persist beyond any one political lifetime.”³ The Russo–Ukraine conflict fully meets these criteria.

In the cases examined by Tuchman, the causes and purpose of the conflict were unclear, but the consequences were uniformly contrary to those initially intended, and typically calamitous. Governments made decisions that destroyed their nations, and in some cases affected civilization itself. The Russo–Ukrainian War is one of these supreme moments of folly. It is one of the most pointless, avoidable, and unnecessary wars in history, although no less consequential and damaging. The strategic folly is compounded by foolish and simplistic analysis, whereby responsibility is ascribed entirely to one side or another. Instead, Russia’s invasion marked the culmination of the long-brewing crisis of the European security order. Its intended effects—for Russia,

the resolution of a perceived security threat; for Ukraine, the restoration of territorial integrity and imposition of national homogeneity; and for the Political West, the humbling of a potential great power rival—could not be resolved through war. The disastrous consequences are only too apparent: catastrophic damage to Ukrainian society and economy, the destruction of what remained of the European security order, the consolidation of the security state in Russia and its isolation from Europe, and the acceleration of epochal global shifts in power and status.

The war reflects the clash of competing logics and is deeply rooted in contesting conceptions of post-Cold War international politics. It was not inevitable, but neither was its inception arbitrary or unprovoked. It is certainly tragic, in the Greek sense of the word, with all the actors caught up in their follies and ambitions.⁴ The war has wreaked vengeance on them all. Throughout there has been a failure of communication. The parties have failed to listen to each other; when they have listened, they have not been heard; if they heard, they have not understood; and when they understood, they have failed to act. There has been a fundamental failure within Ukraine to create a dialogical discourse between the various visions of state and national development, provoking a fundamental crisis of political representation. The United States and its allies, which in this work will be called the Political West, did not listen to Russia's accumulating list of grievances and warnings about the dangers of the encroachment of what was perceived to be a hostile alliance system toward its borders. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia was ready to recognize an independent Ukrainian state within what Moscow considered questionably drawn Communist borders, as long as it remained neutral and respected the rights of the Rusophone and pro-Russian communities in that territory. When that was no longer the case, the Russian leadership narrowed the definition of national security to the point that Ukraine loomed ever larger as a security threat, reducing the options for a political solution. There were alternatives to the course pursued by all parties to the conflict, but each side became increasingly hermetic—sealed off from the ability to enter a genuine dialogue with each other.⁵

Instead, “imperial” views have prevailed, defined as policies shaped by unilinear and historically determined perceptions of societal development and hierarchical relationships, which have excluded alternative interpretations. Contradictions were acknowledged, but their political articulation was inadequately represented. In Ukraine, a simplified model of national development failed to create an inclusive constitutional settlement for the country's various cultures. The coercive regime change of

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February 2014 exposed the divisions. Its defenders call it a Revolution of Dignity, whereas its critics condemn it as a coup d'état. For the one it represented resurrection, for the other no more than an insurrection. If a revolution is defined as the breakdown of a social and political order and its replacement by a new regime based on a radical vision of transforming society, then this was a revolution. The result is clear: Following the Maidan Revolution (named after the central square in Kiev at the epicenter of events), the “other” Ukraine lost effective representation in policymaking. A monolithic postcolonial view of national identity was imposed on society as the only valid form of Ukraine’s post-Soviet and post-Russian national destiny. In place of the earlier multivector foreign policy, an ideologized vision of joining the institutions of the Political West, above all the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union, irrespective of the lack of consensus in society, was asserted. This was the national populist stance, which suppressed the “other” Ukrainian models of political, economic, and foreign policy development.

Russia was also radicalizing, but in the opposite direction. The growing rift with the Political West assumed political and cultural forms. From 2012, Russia presented itself as a “civilization state,” culturally distinct from the West and politically opposed to its model of modernity.⁶ As tensions increased, the conflict was portrayed as an epochal civilizational break with a West characterized as inherently hostile and incompatible with Russian values. The Political West, the US-led Atlantic alliance system created during Cold War I, radicalized after its purported victory over the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and posed as the repository of all the virtues and the promised end of history. Describing itself as the rules-based international order (RBIO) meant usurping the prerogatives and norms represented by the charter system, the closest that humanity has come to creating a genuinely universal set of principles, as codified in the UN Charter, subsequent declarations and protocols, and the whole body of international law adopted on its basis.⁷ Radicalized by the dissolution of the communist bloc in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Political West posed as the only viable form of modernity. Those who resisted this hegemonic West were condemned as not only misguided but fundamentally evil. The scope for dialogue and diplomacy became severely circumscribed.⁸

This is the context in which tensions over Ukraine accumulated. Could the war have been avoided? The question will be examined in detail later, but the short answer is yes. In fact, this is perhaps the

most avoidable war in history. It was not generated by defined territorial grievances, long-standing ideological differences, or substantive structural contradictions about status or power. All these elements contributed, but none was determinative. There had long been tensions between Russia and Ukraine over energy transit, Crimea, the status of the Russian language, and other issues, but all were resolvable with a modicum of goodwill and intelligent statecraft. Instead, Ukraine's domestic fractures were widened and exploited by the broader tensions between Russia and the Political West. The failure to establish an inclusive and comprehensive European security order after 1991 generated tensions that finally exploded in war. The grand hopes for a post-Cold War positive peace order, marked not just by the absence of war but by the creation of a substantive political, economic, and security community covering the whole of Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok, were betrayed. The EU gradually assumed a more delineated geopolitical character, which inevitably brought it into confrontation with Russia.⁹ The accession of some traditionally anti-Russian East European states in 2004 and 2007 exacerbated the growing gulf. Post-communist elites presented themselves as uniquely qualified to understand the dynamics of Russian politics, having endured Moscow's rule. Long-term resentments and hostilities were thereby imported into the EU. The tendency toward a simplified and reductionist view of Russia was enthusiastically echoed by neoconservatives and liberal globalists in the West.

Tensions were initially tempered by the traditional diplomatic statecraft practiced by France, Germany, and Italy, but in the end the Russophobic strain in the former Soviet bloc changed the character of the EU itself. Devised originally as a peace project, to ensure that France and Germany could never again go to war, the EU not only spectacularly failed to do the same for Russia in the post-Cold War era, but itself generated conflict. As for relations with the United States, separated by great oceans and continents, the two countries in the early postcommunist years cooperated on important issues, including arms control. There was no fundamental territorial, economic, or even ideological contradiction between the two countries. Russia was equal to the United States in nuclear arms but in little else, and in the first decades after 1991 accepted US leadership (but not its hegemonic ambitions) and sought to join the Political West. Conflict with Russia was generated by the perpetuation and extension of the archaic structures of Cold War security to the postcommunist lands in entirely new post-Cold War conditions. Cold War practices were revived in the

foothills of what threatened to become a full-scale World War III. All this makes the folly of this war all the greater.

So why, then, did the protagonists stumble into conflict? I provided the larger analysis in *Russia Against the Rest* (2017),¹⁰ complemented by my study of the broader failure to achieve a positive peace after the end of the Cold War in 1989–1991 in *The Lost Peace* (2023).¹¹ My interpretive historical analysis is developed in this book. I outline the four entwined levels of the conflict: struggles over models of state and nation building within Ukraine that generated intense elite contestation; tensions in relations between Russia and Ukraine; the failure to establish an equitable and inclusive post-Cold War pancontinental European security order; and the stresses induced by great power contradictions in Russo–US relations. Overarching them all is the larger question of the character of the international system established in 1945 and the changes wrought in the balance of power by the end of the Cold War. After 1945 a Political West took shape, in which the United States’ preeminent power was embedded in the form of a military-ideological alliance system, which also changed the character of the US polity itself as the military-industrial-ideological complex consolidated its power and influence.

The Political West combines hard military power (the imperial dimension) with the ideational goals of the liberal international order (the commonwealth aspect), based on free markets, liberal democracy, and political freedoms. During the Cold War these aligned in the struggle against the Soviet Union. Manifestations of “communism” abroad were suppressed, provoking regime change and other interventions by the United States.¹² Cold War I ended in 1989, creating an opening for a positive peace order, marked not just by the absence of war but by the potential for the comity—cooperation between powers great and small—embedded in the UN Charter. Instead, imperial thinking prevailed and the potential for a positive peace order was squandered. The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 further fueled the radicalization of the Political West. Its ambitions became literally boundless. Globalization was set to transform the world, accompanied by the universalization of Western-style democracy. This was to be a hegemony without limits—until brought up sharply by the recalcitrance of Russia and China, which increasingly align to curb these ambitions. The front line of that larger conflict runs through Ukraine.

We can also point to an even larger time frame, something that Russian commentators are keen to do, namely, the epochal shift in power from the West to China and other countries comprising the “world

majority,” the Global South—what was once described as the Third World. At the end of World War II the Allies came together, in the spirit of comity and cooperation, to create the United Nations, whose foundational principles are expressed in the UN Charter, signed in San Francisco in June 1945. The Charter International System has generated a vast body of international public law and humanitarian conventions. Although far from a world government, the charter system defines what is legal and legitimate in international politics. This system managed the dismantling of the European overseas empires, although not without conflict and rearguard neocolonial interventions that in various forms continue. Nevertheless, the states born in the era of decolonization have matured. The 193 states in the UN are formally equal, and this is the basis for normative multipolarity. The middle and smaller powers demand that their voice be heard in international politics. US commentators use such terms as “multialignment” in preference to “multipolarity,” but the essence is the same. International politics has entered a period of great fluidity and openness, with non-Western institutions and ideas contributing as never before. A whole architecture of non-Western institutions and associations is taking shape, driven in part by the erosion of the West’s relative financial, economic, and military preeminence, along with a decline in its moral standing.

The fundamental principle of the charter system is sovereign internationalism, which provides the framework for a positive peace order based on equality, cooperation, and development. This is the principle of comity, at the heart of the charter system, based on partnership between the great powers but respecting the rights and privileges of the entire international community as represented in the UN General Assembly. Instead, unresolved problems of European security drew the world back into an era of imperialistic great power conflict and world wars. Instead of comity at the end of the Cold War in 1989–1991, two models of world order clashed, which in the end provoked a second cold war. The United States and its allies advanced the idea of “Europe whole and free,” which prioritized the right of states to join the alliance system of their choice. This was embedded in the larger ideological project of liberal globalism and the enduring geopolitical assertion of the Political West. No longer constrained by the existence of a peer-level great power competitor, liberal globalism and the RBIO challenged the sovereign internationalism asserted by Russia (and later even more by China). Russia insisted on “equal and indivisible” security, which implied constraints on free choice, although advanced within the framework of the fundamental charter principle of sovereign internationalism.

Liberal globalism and its regional manifestation in the form of Europe whole and free thus ran up against the assertion of sovereign internationalism, which took the form of the struggle for an equal and indivisible European security order. Moscow (and Beijing) argue that the latter is in fact more in keeping with the charter principle of comity and condemn the Political West for usurping the rights and privileges that properly belong to the United Nations.

The issue came to a head over plans to expand NATO, the core of the postwar Political West. Successive waves of enlargement brought the alliance to the gates of Moscow, heightening traditional Russian security concerns and intensifying a security dilemma. The ensuing war distracted from the challenges of climate change, pandemics, poverty, underdevelopment, and mass migration. The international politics of earlier eras returned, drawing comparison of our time with the great power and imperial conflicts that led to war in 1914 and 1939. The US-led Political West, created during and shaped by Cold War I, is ranged against the increasingly close alignment of Russia, China, and their allies, with the great mass of countries in the middle hedging: defending their nonaligned status and refusing to choose between the great powers. They also increasingly vociferously assert their sovereign right to participate in global affairs. This is something new, repudiating the logic of neocolonialism, cold war, and bloc politics. The folly of the Russo–Ukrainian War threatens to drag humanity back to the era of world wars, which in the nuclear age imperils the very existence of life on Earth.

Every study is a work of interpretation, but on what basis should the raw material of fact and opinion be selected and ordered, and what sources should be used? Addressing these questions, reviewers of the draft manuscript of this book urged me to add a note on methodology and documentation. Readers with tender sensibilities may skip this paragraph and the next. I have long avoided describing myself as a political scientist and prefer the idea that I am a practitioner of political studies. This stands in the tradition of Plato and Aristotle, in which the purpose is not only to explain political phenomena but also to diagnose the problems of a political community. The aim is to help leaders and societies understand the predicaments facing their polity, and ultimately to provide solutions.¹³ This means avoiding the positivist trap, in which facts and values are artificially separated, a tradition formalized by Max Weber. Positivists argue that a normative approach obscures the empirical ability to explain social phenomena, but the methodology fosters the barrenness of much contemporary political science. Instead, the

Canadian political philosopher Charles Taylor reconstitutes a classical political studies approach through what he calls hermeneutical interpretation, the attempt to make sense of the object of study rather than simply analyzing its properties. Taylor calls on students of politics not only to examine but to interpret human activity.¹⁴

This book is written in this spirit of interpretivism, in which causal analysis is combined with what Alexander Wendt calls “constitutive explanation”: an analysis of processes in the context of the structures that allow them to exist.¹⁵ As for sources, in addition to the plethora of primary documentation, speeches, polling data, resolutions and declarations, and the analysis and information provided by interviews, secondary studies, and mainstream media platforms, I make no apology for drawing on the richness of dissenting alternative sources, the so-called altmedia. Much analysis of the war has fallen victim to the factors that provoked the conflict in the first place, with advocacy replacing analysis. Groupthink and the suppression of dissenting viewpoints define a cold war, and, unfortunately, we are once again trapped in such a conflict. A final methodological point is grammatical. Place names are (mostly) spelled according to the linguistic majority of the region in question. Also, with the war continuing when this book was completed, the choice of past or present tense has been difficult, hence I apologize for slippage between the two.

This is an unfinished story in all respects. The Russo–Ukrainian War will shape the international politics of the twenty-first century and will be the subject of intense debate for generations to come. In this book I analyze how we arrived at this point. This raises the thorny issue of moral equivalence. In my view, the supreme folly in any conflict is to believe that truth and justice lie entirely on one side. To explain the logic of a situation does not mean endorsement of its premises. I long warned about the intensifying European security crisis and dangers of estrangement between Russia and the Political West, and in this way tried to avert a catastrophic outcome. The war was predictable, predicted, and, most tragic of all, avoidable. These are the issues I examine in this book. I chronicle and analyze the course of events and seek to provide a conceptual handle on developments. Building on earlier work, I provide a detailed study of the causes, course, and consequences of the Russo–Ukrainian War and its effect on international politics. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, I continue to believe that the depths of human folly are matched only by the heights of human potential.