

Shades of Gray in the Russia-Ukraine War

If you're looking for morality tales — clashes between the clearly good and the clearly bad — I suggest you look elsewhere than to the geopolitical theater. There we find only conflicts between shades of darker gray.

This seems to have been the case throughout history. Empires and would-be empires vied with rival empires and would-be empires for territory, resources, taxpayers, and soldiers. No surprise: governments will be governments, and that's not good. This is not to say the shades of gray did not differ at all, perhaps even significantly on occasion, but the objective was always, first and foremost, booty and control of people. The interests of commoners were rarely if ever the cause.

We see this in Russia's war on Ukraine. Let's be clear: Vladimir Putin and his Russian government freely chose to send military forces across the border into Ukraine. Their military personnel complied. They ultimately are responsible for their choices and therefore the death, injury, and mayhem that is taking place. (I make an exception for proven false-flag operations on the Ukrainian side, should any come to light.)

Now that the issue of primary culpability is out of the way, we can go on to talk about contributory culpability. I hope I've left little room for anyone to argue assigning contributory culpability to others is intended to let the Russian government personnel off the hook.

What sort of culpability do I have in mind? It's on the order of setting a trap and loading it with bait in order to lure a target. Russia had to choose to step into it, but those who set the trap did not have to do what they did. Hence, they contributed to a terrible situation.

Many experts analysts have long pointed out that the U.S. government at least since the late 1990s has knowingly been provoking Russia by expanding NATO up to the country's western border, incorporating most of the allies and some of the republics of the late Soviet Union. For years the U.S. government and other NATO officials have talked publicly about inviting the former republics Ukraine and Georgia to join. Everyone knew that Ukraine was an especially sensitive matter because it had long been a buffer between Russia and states to the west, Poland in particular. The Soviet Union had been invaded three times in the 20th century, twice by Germany and once by Poland, both NATO members since the demise of the USSR.

The warnings against NATO's march eastward were too many to count and came from people as diverse as Henry Kissinger and Noam Chomsky, Soviet-rollback guru Paul Nitze and Soviet-containment architect George Kennan. The current director of the CIA, William J.

Burns, warned in 2008, when he was George W. Bush's ambassador to Russia, that no Russian leader — conservative or liberal — would ever stand for the admission of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO. Burns's leaked memo was written shortly after publicly NATO declared that it welcomed applications for membership from those states.

That was 14 years ago and six years before the U.S. State Department helped foment a Nazi-backed coup that drove a Russia-friendly but *democratically elected* president from power — even though he had been making concessions to the opposition in the streets, including a call for early elections. What motivated the U.S. government was that president's intention to reject an exclusive economic and political relationship with the European Union in order to accept a loan with liberal terms from Russia.

Aside from the overt NATO talk, there's the matter of the U.S. government's putting missile launchers in Poland and Romania. As outfitted, they are for defensive anti-missile missiles, but that could be changed. Moreover, defensive missiles obviously can be useful in an offensive campaign. Remember that Donald Trump, the reputed Russian agent, had earlier denounced the Reagan-era treaty that banned intermediate-range nuclear weapons from Europe and elsewhere. No one could have been surprised when all this was worrisome to the Russians. (Recall what happened in 1962 when the Soviet Union tried to put missiles in Cuba. John F. Kennedy imposed a naval blockade on the island and was ready to launch a nuclear war if the missiles were not removed.)

Since the Russian invasion, Joe Biden and his foreign policy people have denounced Russia sanctimoniously for its violations of international law and brutality, including the inexcusable deaths of noncombatants. It is not inappropriate to ask when an American president has ever respected international law when it was inconvenient for U.S. objectives. In the 21st century alone, American presidents have launched illegal aggressive wars in the Middle East and other places to effect regime change and other geopolitical objectives even partially on behalf of other states, such as Israel. In the process Americans have killed untold noncombatants. They have tortured prisoners. They have wreaked sickening destruction, creating hordes of refugees — and so on. Yet day after day, lying American officials — but I repeat myself — admonish Putin for his bad behavior. There's nothing like setting a good example.

The Ukrainian leaders must also share in the blame. Those leaders who have been West-leaning have not been shy about aspiring to join NATO, knowing full well how the Russians would interpret those words. Since the 2014 coup — in response to which Russia annexed a long-standing security area, the Crimea with its Russian naval base, to keep it out of NATO hands — Ukrainian presidents could have made overtures to Russia, assuring that they would not seek NATO membership and offering to make Ukraine neutral in the manner of Austria since 1955. They did not do that, even though the current president, Volodymyr Zelensky, a former comedian and actor, was elected on a peace-with-Russia platform.

Superficially, Zelensky is an appealing figure. He's young and charismatic, and he wears t-shirts. His country has been invaded, which of course puts him in a sympathetic light when he appears on television. But is that the whole story of the man? It also seems that despite the terms of the Minsk agreements, he has been unwilling to talk to leaders in the heavily Russian-ethnic Donbas region, in the far east of Ukraine, about home-rule. Two provinces there, Luhansk and Donetsk, have since declared their independence, which Russia has recognized. The Ukrainian military has been shelling the area since the 2014 coup, and Donbas forces have fought back. The casualties on both sides have been high.

Moreover, as Jacques Baud, an intelligence expert who has worked for NATO, the UN, and Swiss strategic intelligence writes:

On [March 24, 2021], Volodymyr Zelensky issued a decree for the recapture of the Crimea, and began to deploy his forces to the south of the country. At the same time, several NATO exercises were conducted between the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea, accompanied by a significant increase in reconnaissance flights along the Russian border. Russia then conducted several exercises to test the operational readiness of its troops and to show that it was following the evolution of the situation. [Aaron Mate's video interview with Baud is [here](#).]

Baud also writes, "In violation of the Minsk Agreements, the Ukraine was conducting air operations in Donbass using drones, including at least one strike against a fuel depot in Donetsk in October 2021. The American press noted this, but not the Europeans; and no one condemned these violations."

It begins to look as though Zelensky has cavalierly used the Ukrainian people for his own ends: instead of seeking peace, he sought or was willing to risk war with Russia, assuming the U.S. government and other NATO states would back him up with perhaps more than arms shipments. He still demands a NATO no-fly zone, which would all but assure a new world war and perhaps an all-out nuclear war. So he also shares in the responsibility.

As usual, there's blame aplenty to go around.