

Editorial

# Annexations - Ukraine, Crimea, and the West's historical record

Tuesday 6 May 2014, by [New Left Review](#), [WATKINS Susan](#) (Date first published: 8 April 2014).

Few Western leaders failed to pronounce on the importance of sovereignty, territorial integrity and the rule of law as Russia moved to annex the Crimea on March 18<sup>th</sup>. Issues of sovereignty had to be addressed through constitutional means and international law, Obama told his nato allies in Brussels, so that big states could not simply bully the small. Cameron was adamant that countries could not flout international rules without incurring consequences, and vowed to stand up to aggression. Merkel deplored the fact that the principle of “might makes right” was taking precedence over the strength of law. The G7 leaders recalled, in chorus, that international law prohibits the acquisition of another state's territory through the use of force. When Schröder mused that, as Chancellor, he had joined the rest of NATO in bombing a sovereign country, Yugoslavia, without any un Security Council backing, he was scolded – “shameful” – by his successor; the European Parliament's Greens tried to pass a resolution banning him from speaking on the matter. [1]

So much for the proclamations. What is the historical record?

## I

*Western Sahara*: an area of 100,000 square miles, home to the Sahrawi people, annexed by Morocco in 1975. The Sahrawis' struggle for independence had already won the promise of a referendum on self-rule from Madrid during the final stages of the Franco dictatorship. In October 1975 the International Court of Justice knocked down the claim of Morocco's ruler, King Hassan, to the territory, ruling that the Sahrawis had a right to self-determination. Hassan's response was a propagandistic “Green March” into the Spanish Sahara, backed by a military assault on the Sahrawis' guerrilla organization, the Polisario Front. Ignoring the ICJ's judgement, the Ford Administration and the un helped to broker an agreement between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania, excluding Sahrawi representatives; Juan Carlos, Spain's acting head of state, ceded the territory to these two powers in November 1975. [2] Hassan's occupation forces bombed population centres, strafed refugee columns and seized the phosphate mines, imposing a police dictatorship that is still in place today. Far from facing diplomatic or economic isolation, Rabat was visited by Israeli leaders in 1977 and hosted meetings for the Carter Administration to set the scene for Sadat's trip to Jerusalem in 1979. That year, Hassan was rewarded with large-scale military aid from the us, France and Saudi Arabia which turned the tide against the Polisario guerrillas, who had been regaining ground. Hassan seeded the desert with landmines and built a militarized wall of sand, a thousand miles long, to keep the Sahrawis off their land. When he had finished, the un offered to negotiate a ceasefire, winning the Polisarios' agreement in 1991 by once again promising a referendum, which Rabat has stymied ever since by querying voter lists. Hassan, meanwhile, was showered with honours at Buckingham Palace and the Élysée, and given a lavish reception by the Clintons at the White House.

*East Timor*: seized by Indonesia in 1975. This former Portuguese colony, half an island in the far

south of the archipelago, saw a brief moment of independence after the fall of the Lisbon dictatorship, offering a model of self-determination that was in stark contrast to the reign of terror Suharto had imposed across Indonesia since 1965. The us, his major international backer, knew of the invasion plan and did nothing to stop it. On the contrary: Ford and Kissinger were in Jakarta on a state visit the day before the invasion of East Timor; according to a declassified State Department telegram, they advised Suharto, "It's important that whatever you do succeeds quickly". The use of us-supplied weaponry could be a problem, but Washington would hope to "construe" the attack as self-defence. The 35,000-strong Indonesian invasion force embarked on a series of killing sprees and mass executions, on the model of the massacre of communists ten years before. [3] Tens of thousands of Timorese were herded into resettlement camps; Amnesty would estimate that around 200,000 people, a third of the population, died from disease, starvation, or as a result of military action in the years that followed. Indonesia benefited from some \$250m in us military aid between 1974 and 79. When Fretilin guerrillas were still holding out against Jakarta's rule, two years after annexation, Carter sent a dozen counter-insurgency aircraft to help finish them off. Suharto was fêted on every visit to Washington, by presidents from Reagan to Clinton. In both East Timor and Western Sahara, as Ford's Ambassador to the un famously noted, "the us wished things to turn out as they did, and worked to bring this about"; the State Department wanted the un to be "utterly ineffective" in these cases, and he made sure it was. [4]

*Palestine*: 2,324 square miles seized; East Jerusalem and an additional 27 square miles around it annexed. [5] On the contrary: as Russian tanks entered an obliterated city, Clinton congratulated them on the "liberation of Grozny".

To qualify is not to condone. The retrograde logic of Moscow's interventions has been to strengthen Ukraine's far right and to help shore up the transitional government in Kiev, even as it implements savage imf cuts. Putin has become NATO's best recruiting sergeant. The fact remains that Russia is reacting, clumsily and defensively, to a continuous eastward thrust by nato, loosely but systematically correlated with the EU's social-engineering projects. The Atlantic Alliance penetrated ex-Soviet borders in 2004, with the accession of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (along with Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Romania). By 2008, Washington had put Ukraine and Georgia's memberships on the table.

### III

The return of the Crimea to Russia was a by-blow of the crisis in Ukraine, but the two are analytically distinct. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Ukraine has come to constitute a latent version of a classic power vacuum, a result of the cultural and economic disaggregation of the country into two roughly equal halves. Under the Soviet system the Ukrainian SSR never functioned as a homogeneous state, in part because its key cities were so important to the Soviet Union as a whole: Donetsk for coal and engineering, Dnepropetrovsk for missiles, Kharkov for satellites and tanks?all had closer links with Moscow than with Kiev, itself a vital centre for the ussr's high-tech industry. Today, most of the migrant flow to the eu comes from the less populated western regions - Lviv is only thirty miles from the Polish border -where much of the agricultural land has been leased to multinationals and the factories closed down. The fragmentation of the country has made possible a political system more open and pluralist than Russia's, as different power blocs re-combine against each other. But it has also prevented the Ukrainian state from achieving much coherence or stability. [6] It is not only weaker than its counterpart in Russia but still more corrupt, captured by competing billionaires, whose oscillation in power has become the hallmark of its recent history. Thus Poroshenko, the confectionery magnate, and Pinchuk, Kuchma's son-in-law, can aim to take control of the government apparatus in Kiev in a way that Moscow tycoons like Prokhorov or Khodorkovsky can now only dream of.

The congenital weakness of the Ukrainian state, rooted in these conditions, has drawn the West and Russia into rival bids to fill the strategic vacuum. Both sides' room for manoeuvre is limited by their mutual involvement elsewhere: the US needs Moscow's assistance on Afghanistan and Iran, a greater prize than Ukraine; Russia confronts Washington's hold over the international banking system. In Ukraine, the priorities for Moscow are two-fold: to hold off any further penetration of NATO or the EU inside the ex-USSR, and to prevent political contagion from the less regimented Ukrainian political arena into Russia itself. On the Western side, the EU is constitutively enmeshed in the logic and rhetoric of enlargement: if Turkey is to be invited in, on what grounds should Ukraine be excluded? Costs – per capita GDP in Ukraine is now a third of Turkey's – and caution about provoking Russia, its major gas supplier, have long inhibited the EU from too forward a policy. Germany in particular has held back, halting the Ukraine and Georgia at the entrance ramp to NATO in 2008. But other EU states – notably Poland and Sweden, the powers that invaded Russia in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries – have become much more aggressive in pressing for an eastward thrust. For Washington, meanwhile, there is simply the imperial automatism of the global hegemon: if there is a power vacuum in a medium-sized country, the State Department's reflex response is to move in and take charge. In Ukraine, the US has much less to lose than the EU, though also much less to gain than Russia. But once the crisis broke in Kiev, Washington could not resist the opportunity to construct a regime to its liking (as the graphic exchange between its functionaries printed overleaf makes clear). A subsequent issue of the Review will examine the scene inside the country and assess the consequences of these external pressures, overdetermining the fate of the people of Ukraine, whose needs are foreign to them all.

**Susan Watkins**, 8 April 2014

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### **Nuland-Pyatt Transcript**

*The recording of this discussion between State Department operative Victoria Nuland and Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt was released on 7 February 2014 and is available on the BBC website. It offers a vivid glimpse into the process of imperial interference overseas – “personality management” – as these functionaries plan the composition of the new Ukrainian government. Germany had been grooming the former boxer, Vitali Klitschko, with Merkel's chief of staff, Ronald Pofalla, advising on his marital problems. [7] Nuland is determined to exclude him in favour of Arseniy Yatseniuk, former banker and head of the US-backed Open Ukraine foundation, who has “the economic experience”. Meanwhile UN officials are summoned to “help glue this thing” – Jeff Feltman, an American UN under-secretary-general, producing UN envoy and former Netherlands ambassador to Ukraine, Robert Serry. Events since the tape was released have corresponded closely to the scenario Nuland and Pyatt designed: on February 23, Yatseniuk was appointed Prime Minister of the provisional Ukrainian government; on March 29, Klitschko renounced his candidacy for the May presidential elections.*

#### **Nuland: What do you think?**

Pyatt: I think we're in play. The Klitschko piece is obviously the complicated electron here. Especially the announcement of him as deputy prime minister, and you've seen some of my notes on the troubles in the marriage right now, so we're trying to get a read really fast on where he is on this stuff. But I think your argument to him, which you'll need to make, I think that's the next phone

call you want to set up, is exactly the one you made to Yats [Yatseniuk]. And I'm glad you sort of put him on the spot on where he fits in this scenario. And I'm very glad that he said what he said in response.

**Nuland: Good. I don't think Klitsch should go into the government. I don't think it's necessary, I don't think it's a good idea.**

Pyatt: Yeah. I guess . . . in terms of him not going into the government, just let him stay out and do his political homework and stuff. I'm just thinking in terms of the process moving ahead, we want to keep the moderate democrats together. The problem is going to be Tyahnybok and his guys, and I'm sure that's part of what Yanukovych is calculating on all this.

**Nuland: I think Yats is the guy who's got the economic experience, the governing experience. He's the . . . what he needs is Klitsch and Tyahnybok on the outside. He needs to be talking to them four times a week, you know. I just think Klitsch going in . . . he's going to be at that level working for Yatseniuk, it's just not going to work.**

Pyatt: Yeah, no, I think that's right. OK. Good. Do you want us to set up a call with him as the next step?

**Nuland: My understanding from that call - but you tell me - was that the big three were going into their own meeting and that Yats was going to offer in that context a . . . three-plus-one conversation or three-plus-two with you. Is that not how you understood it?**

Pyatt: No. I think . . . I mean that's what he proposed but I think, just knowing the dynamic that's been with them where Klitschko has been the top dog, he's going to take a while to show up for whatever meeting they've got, and he's probably talking to his guys at this point, so I think you reaching out directly to him helps with the personality management among the three, and it gives you also a chance to move fast on all this stuff and put us behind it before they all sit down and he explains why he doesn't like it.

**Nuland: ok, good. I'm happy. Why don't you reach out to him and see if he wants to talk before or after.**

Pyatt: ok, will do. Thanks.

**Nuland: ok. One more wrinkle for you Geoff. I can't remember if I told you this, or if I only told Washington this, that when I talked to Jeff Feltman this morning, he had a new name for the un, that guy Robert Serry. Did I write you that this morning?**

Pyatt: Yeah I saw that.

**Nuland: ok. He's now gotten both Serry and Ban Ki-moon to agree that Serry could come in Monday or Tuesday. So that would be great, I think, to help glue this thing and to have the un help glue it and, you know, fuck the EU.**

Pyatt: No, exactly. And I think we've got to do something to make it stick together because you can be pretty sure that if it does start to gain altitude, that the Russians will be working behind the scenes to try to torpedo it. And again the fact that this is out there right now, I'm still trying to figure out in my mind why Yanukovych [garbled] that. In the meantime there's a Party of Regions faction meeting going on right now and I'm sure there's a lively argument going on in that group at this point. But anyway we could land jelly side up on this one if we move fast. So let me work on Klitschko and if you can just keep . . . we want to try to get somebody with an international

personality to come out here and help to midwife this thing. The other issue is some kind of outreach to Yanukovych, but we probably regroup on that tomorrow as we see how things start to fall into place.

**Nuland: So on that piece Geoff, when I wrote the note Sullivan's come back to me vfr saying you need Biden, and I said probably tomorrow for an atta-boy and to get the deets [details] to stick. So Biden's willing.**

Pyatt: ok. Great. Thanks.

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## P.S.

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## Footnotes

[1] Obama: Speech at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, 26 March 2014; Cameron: Statement to Parliament, 10 March 2014; Merkel: Statement, 13 March 2014; G7 (uk, us, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, accompanied by the eu's two presidents): Declaration at The Hague, 24 March 2014; Schröder, "zeit-Matinee mit Gerhard Schröder vom 09.03.2014", YouTube; Greens: Gregor Peter Schmitz, "Pipe it, Gerhard", Spiegel Online, 13 March 2014. Nikolaus Blome, "Round Two: eu Grooming Klitschko to Lead Ukraine?", Spiegel Online, 10 December 2013.

[2] Jacob Mundy, "How the us and Morocco Seized the Spanish Sahara?", Le Monde diplomatique, January 2006.

[3] Benedict Anderson, "Exit Suharto: Obituary for a Mediocre Tyrant?", nlr 50, March-April 2008.

[4] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, A Dangerous Place, New York 1980, p. 279.

[5] Yoni Mendel, "New Jerusalem", NLR 81, May-June 2013.] Israel's 1948-49 land grab had already expanded its territory from 1,554 square miles under the Yishuv in 1937 to over 8,000 square miles in 1949-30 per cent more than the un Partition Plan's allocation of 5,500 square miles, already tilted in the settlers' favour; some 700,000 Palestinians saw their lands expropriated and were blocked from return. The response was not sanctions, but international recognition and admission to the un, followed by Western help in obtaining nuclear weapons. When Israel annexed East Jerusalem and its environs in 1967 and seized control of the West Bank and Gaza, including the central mountain aquifer, Washington once again made sure the un would do nothing: at the last count, the us has wielded its Security Council veto 42 times to shield Israeli actions from opprobrium, while blocking Palestinian efforts even to join any international agencies. Micro-annexations, by means of West Bank settlements now housing 350,000 citizens-subject not to Palestinian Authority but to Israeli law-and the Separation Wall, have proceeded unabated under cover of us-sponsored peace talks. Israel remains the world's largest recipient of us military aid and eu research funds.

Cyprus: 1,295 square miles annexed by Turkey in 1974. The Turkish invasion - tanks, jets, warships, artillery - left 4,000 dead, expelled 180,000 Greek Cypriots from their homes, and set

up a puppet state, still garrisoned by 35,000 troops. Britain, controlling a large military base on the island, with assorted treaty obligations, did nothing to halt it. A short-lived Congressional arms embargo on Ankara was lifted by Carter. Turkey has since been granted lavish US military aid, special favours from the IMF and sustained support from Washington and Brussels for its EU membership bid. When Cyprus itself was due to enter the EU, the US and UK sought to legitimate the Turkish land-grab by wringing consent to it with a UN-sponsored plan, which would have ratified Ankara's ethnic cleansing and kept the Turkish troops in place. In a referendum, the "Annan Plan" was rejected by a solid majority of Cypriots. Military occupation by a foreign power persists to this day, inside the EU itself, without a word from Brussels.

## II

Few tenets have been more cherished by the international community since the end of the Cold War than the notion that rights should trump state sovereignty; typically omitted from the list is the right of national self-determination. It was this principle that was trampled on by the invading power in Western Sahara, East Timor, Palestine and Cyprus – met, in each instance, by sustained popular resistance: armed, in the Sahara and Timor; both unarmed and armed, in Palestine; and plebiscitary in Cyprus, with the rejection of the Annan diktat at the ballot box. In each case, aggression with much loss of life was rewarded with lavish aid and the warmest friendship by the West.

This is what distinguishes the case of the Crimea, where scarcely anyone contests the fact that a majority have been in favour of joining Russia, seen as enjoying higher living standards; and where the annexation was forced through with scarcely a shot being fired – one soldier killed, compared with thousands of civilian deaths in the cases above. It is well known that Khrushchev re-allocated administration of the peninsula from the Russian SFSR to the Ukrainian SSR in 1954 in a typically high-handed manner, naturally without any popular consultation. There was sustained agitation for Crimean secession during the break-up of the Soviet Union. In a January 1991 referendum, seven months before Ukraine's declaration of independence, the Crimea voted in favour of becoming an autonomous republic. In 1992 the Crimean parliament scheduled a referendum on independence, annulled by Kiev, which instead offered autonomous-republic status. In 1994 the first president of the Crimean AR, who had been elected on a platform of union with Russia, called again for a referendum, whereupon Leonid Kuchma – the assassin ruler of Ukraine at the time – abolished his post and put the Crimea under direct presidential rule.

It was the build-up of Russian forces stationed by agreement in Crimea that allowed a referendum to be held along the lines of that thwarted twenty years before. Troop numbers increased from the scheduled 12,500 to 20,000. The Crimean parliament and other key buildings were secured by unmarked forces on February 27<sup>th</sup>. A new parliamentary leadership was sworn in during an emergency session and scheduled the referendum first for May, then, a week later, for March 16<sup>th</sup>. The official returns – 95 per cent in favour of union with Russia on an 83 per cent turn-out – cannot correspond to the real distribution of opinion in the Crimea, where 24 per cent of the population describes itself as Ukrainian and 10 per cent as Tatar. But though NATO leaders have singled out the referendum for attack – "held under the barrel of a gun", as if the elections they themselves organized in Afghanistan or Iraq were not overseen by tens of thousands of troops, armed to the teeth – none have suggested that the majority of the population in Crimea wants to remain in Ukraine. That force was needed to stage the referendum at all is plain. But this was not Chechnya, where Yeltsin and Putin rivalled Hassan and Suharto in the brutality with which they drowned a movement for national independence in blood. To that the West had no objection. [[Tariq Ali, "How Vladimir Putin became evil", Guardian, 28 March 2014.

[6] For a comparison of post-Soviet trajectories, see Dmitri Furman, "Imitation Democracies", NLR 54, Nov-Dec 2008.

[7] Nikolaus Blome, "Round Two: EU Grooming Klitschko to Lead Ukraine", Spiegel Online, 10 December 2013