

## The Follies of Versailles and the Follies of NATO

Consider what follows as the anniversary of the Ukraine War draws near:

As World War I approached its end, the new-born Weimar Republic accepted an armistice on the understanding that permanent peace would build on Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points. Instead, it got the Treaty of Versailles, with its demands for reparations which an impoverished and defeated but still intact Germany was in no financial shape to honor. The resulting bitterness and sense of betrayal in Germany undermined the Weimar Republic, opened the way to power for a resentful Adolf Hitler, and led to World War II.

Winston Churchill, who was no pacifist, described the situation this way:

The economic clauses of the Treaty were malignant and silly to an extent that made them obviously futile. Germany was condemned to pay reparations on a fabulous scale. The crimes of the vanquished find their background and explanation, though not, of course, their pardon, in the follies of the victors. Without these follies crime would have found neither temptation nor opportunity.

We find ourselves in a similar situation today.

By 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev was fully aware that the Soviet Union had lost the Cold War and was prepared to acquiesce in his defeat, provided that the USSR would continue to be treated as a great power. Having been brought to the understanding that NATO would not move eastward, he agreed to Germany's reunification.

By 1991, Gorbachev was out of power. The Soviet Union had collapsed and lost control of its outlying republics. But Russia itself, though diminished, was still intact. During the 1990s, the new Russian Republic limped along under Boris Yeltsin's erratic leadership, as Russia's newly minted economic oligarchs looted its wealth and invested it overseas. In an effort to stabilize the country, Yeltsin named ex-KGB agent Vladimir Putin as his successor.

Meanwhile, NATO expanded eastward, a process which began under Bill Clinton and has continued under Democratic and Republican administrations alike. Russian expert George Kennan warned that NATO expansion eastward was a huge blunder, but the powers that be in DC chose to ignore his warning.

By 2014, NATO had designated Australia, Finland, Sweden, Georgia, and the Ukraine "enhanced opportunity partners," potentially eligible for NATO membership and welcome to participate in NATO military exercises. One would not know that from our own official story. Putin had always considered the USSR's collapse as one of the worst disasters in human history. Embittered, alarmed, and resentful in the face of NATO encroachment, he was determined to

restore Russia's power and prestige. NATO's eastward expansion offered him every temptation and opportunity to lash out, as he did in Georgia, Crimea, and now in Ukraine.

Though smaller in scale than Hitler's atrocities in Europe, Putin's crimes are equally unpardonable. Had greater wisdom and prudence prevailed, we could have prevented both.

Nor is it certain that slugging it out in Ukraine will improve matters. And so we are obliged to create and insist on every opportunity to negotiate. *Not now* excuses from president Biden and his administration will not do while Ukraine continues in its agony.

And so we come to the old Taoist poem:

The emperor is defeated-the people suffer.  
The emperor is victorious-the people suffer.