

Putin's Crimean Anschluss

By [Victor Davidoff](#)

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In the 1940s, Soviet poet Nikolai Glazkov wrote that "the more an era is interesting to historians, the more it is heartbreaking for the people living through it." Watching the breaking news as events unfold rapidly in Crimea, it is hard to shake the thought that you are reading a history textbook. Only which one? Is it a book about the annexation of Sudetenland by Hitler in 1938? Or it is about Stalin's annexation of the Baltic states in the 1940s?

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It looks like President Vladimir Putin took the lessons of both events to heart. Like Hitler, who justified his aggression as "concern for the lives of our German compatriots," Putin also justified the occupation of Crimea by concern for the Russian-speaking population on the peninsula. Putin provided asylum to Viktor Yanukovich, who [said](#) he still remains the president of Ukraine and its commander-in-chief and declared the decisions of the Ukrainian parliament illegitimate.

Meanwhile, to provide legislative justification for this Anschluss, the State Duma is already reviewing a legally insane draft law that allows the Kremlin to declare any territory part of Russia if the leaders of the territory request it. There are no stipulations on determining the legitimacy of the leaders. It might be noted that in the last election, the party of the current head of Crimea, Sergei Aksyonov, who was elevated to that position with the help of the Russian military, got only 4 percent of the vote.

Worst of all, in the face of this aggression, Western democracies are in the same position as they were in the 1930s. According to the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, the U.S. and Britain are obliged to protect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Nevertheless, despite strong statements made by U.S. President Barack Obama and the representatives of the European Union, it is hard to imagine what meaningful actions the West might take. Any action — a sea blockade of the peninsula or a no-fly zone — would put NATO troops in direct conflict with the Russian army. It would be a European remake of the Cuban missile crisis — the worst nightmare of even the most militant hawks.

The future of "Russian Crimea" is also a nightmare. Kiev subsidizes the economy by 60 percent, and the peninsula gets most of its electricity and water from the mainland. Tourism, which used to be one its main sources of income for Crimeans, may now only attract the most adventurous travelers.

Most frightening of all is that Crimea is rushing toward civil war. Vitaly Portnikov, an expert on Ukrainian affairs, [wrote](#) in his blog on Grani.ru: "In Crimea there are a great number of people who identify with Ukraine, not with Russia and certainly not with a government made up of local 'thugs.' This includes tens of thousands of Ukrainians and Russians, especially young people who have grown up in the new Crimea in the new Ukraine. This also includes Crimean Tatars, who are well-organized, united and even have their own national parliament, the Mejlis."

Mustafa Dzhemilev — former head of the Mejlis, which represents 250,000 people — rejected any negotiation with the illegitimate authorities in Crimea. He [wrote](#) in Liga.novosti: "The Mejlis will fight. Even if we have to physically fight the usurpers. Units of Crimean Tatars who are battle-ready are being formed now."

Considering all these factors, it is easy to predict that unless Putin pulls back on the aggression — and there is still a little hope for that — Europe will have yet another full-scale war on its territory. And this one might make the dissolution of Yugoslavia look tame in comparison.

Andrei Illarionov, former economic advisor to Putin, [wrote](#) on LiveJournal that Putin's goal is to "do everything to unleash a full-scale civil war in Ukraine." Illarionov believes that this dangerous policy is based on Putin's personal revenge against Ukrainians "who dared

to overthrow a Putin-friendly leader and who gave an strong sense of hope to other nations still under the power of the same type of dictator."

It looks like the only people who haven't taken any lessons from history are Western politicians. For more than 20 years, the West has declined to take any serious measures to stop the Russian occupation of the self-proclaimed Transdnestr republic in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For its invasion of Georgia in 2008, Russia was not punished at all. In fact, Russia was awarded with membership into the World Trade Organization. The failed U.S. reset policy is an exact copy of appeasement pursued by Western powers right up to the beginning of World War II.

Unfortunately, average people are always the ones who pay for the lack of historical knowledge of their politicians and diplomats. Today it is Ukrainians. But tomorrow it might be the citizens of the Baltic states or any other former Soviet republic.

Victor Davidoff is a Moscow-based writer and journalist who follows the Russian blogosphere in his biweekly column.

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