Analysis of Russian-Ukraine Conflict from the Historical Perspective of Russian Nation

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Abstract. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia has seriously impacted the security in Europe and the world in the 21st century. There is a widespread discussion worldwide about the reason for the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in the modern society. This paper focuses on the reason for the conflict from the aspect of Russia's history and national character. First, the long-existing tension between Russia and the West amplified the conflicts between the two major powers. Second, the Russian nation's desire for a secure environment pushed the Russian government to carry out some behavior and led to the outbreak of the military operation. Last but not least, Russian nationalism also contributed because Russia regarded the military operation as a chance to restore its international influence.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian Conflict, Power Struggle, Global Politics

1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict on February 20th, 2014, the tension between Russia and Ukraine has been increasing, and the conflicts have grown larger in scale every year. The turning point took place on February 24th, 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a "special military operation" to demilitarize Ukraine. Minutes after President Putin's order, Russian troops launched air strikes and sent land forces toward Kyiv and Kharkiv. This paper will discuss the reasons for the outbreak of the military operation in 2022 and the overall Russo-Ukrainian conflict from the perspective of Russian history, characteristics of the Russian nation, and Russian nationalism.

2. Historical Perspective: Tension between Russia and the West

The long-lasting tension between Russia and Western countries can be seen as a reason for Russia to go to conflict. The disunity between Russia and the Western countries appeared hundreds of years before the Ukrainian Crisis. Tsarist Russia was under absolute autocracy. The Tsar himself had absolute control of the nation. By contrast, the majority of Western countries had begun to democratize. As the first country to adopt democracy, Britain turned from Absolute Monarchy to Constitutional Monarchy in 1628. Other Western countries like France also adopted democracy due to the stimulation of the enlightenment movement. As a country that had no democracy, Russia was struggling to fit into a democratic Europe.

The Tsar's expansionist ideas also concerned the West. The Russian leaders desired to spread Russian culture and influence to more comprehensive parts of the world to prove that the Russians had superiority over other ethnicities. The earliest Russian expansion could date back to the 16th and 17th centuries when Russia took control of Siberia to secure a region rich in natural resources. The West had long feared the increasing Russian influence as it would threaten their regime.

The relationship between Russia and the West worsened during the Cold War. The Cold War was also seen as a conflict between Communism and Capitalism. The Soviet Union and the United States directly opposed each other. Europe, especially Western Europe, was deeply concerned about overthrowing the existing government and creating a new communist government. The formation of NATO was a typical example of high tension. Western countries, including the United States, Britain, France, and Italy, signed the North Atlantic Treaty. They agreed that if there is an attack on one of the members in Europe and North America, it will be seeing as an attack against all the members

inside the Treaty. Necessary actions can be taken to ensure the safety of the North Atlantic Area, including the use of armed forces [2].

The Soviet Union also responded to the threat of the Western countries. Soviet Union, together with its satellite states, signed the Warsaw Pact. The treaty called on the member states to defend any member attacked by an outside force and set up a unified military command under Marshal Ivan S. Konev of the Soviet Union [3]. This was seen as a direct counter to the setting up of NATO in the West.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the West still distrusted Russia because they would not accept the formation of a new "Soviet Union." Before 2008, Russia was still seeking cooperation with the West. Boris Yeltsin and his successor Vladimir Putin focused on retiring Russia's global influence. Both Russian presidents sought collaboration with the United States and other European countries. One of the major successes was the NATO-Russia council. The NATO-Russia council was set up at the NATO-Russian Summit in Rome on May 28th, 2002. It replaced the old Permanent Joint Council that was set up in 1997. The NRC is a constitution that focused on consensus-building, cooperation, joint decision and action. The Russia and NATO member states work as equal partners to work on achieving common interest [4].

However, the Western countries were still focusing on isolating Russia from the rest of Europe. NATO was widening its influence on the former Soviet bloc countries to restrict Russia's influence in Eastern Europe. The effectiveness of Putin's foreign policies before 2008 was limited mainly because he failed to gain sufficient support and trust from the West to restore Russia's global influence. After 2008, Putin changed Russia's foreign policies and deviated from cooperation with the West. This led to increased distrust between Russia and the West as less information was shared between the two sides. In the run-up to the 2016 US presidential elections, Russian agents engaged in a multi-pronged influence campaign intended to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency [5].

3. The Characteristics of the Russian Nation

The Russian nation's characteristics have also contributed to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian crisis. The Russians were very sensitive to the security problem because of Russian history. Russia had had conflicts with its neighbors as the country with the largest land area. In the 13th century, the Mongol Empire led by Genghis Khan invaded Russia and set up the Golden Horde, occupying part of Russia's territories.

In 1812, France launched an invasion of Russia because Napoleon wanted to secure France's position in Europe and punish Russia for not accepting the Continental system that attempted to isolate Britain from European trade. Estimates vary, but experts believe that at least 450,000 Grande Armée soldiers and perhaps as many as 650,000 crossed the Niemen River to fight approximately 200,000 soldiers on the Russian side.[6] The French army pushed to Moscow in only three months. Despite the French military being eventually defeated by Russia's use of the scorched-earth strategy, this invasion still frightened the Russians as they could not defend their own territory. Russia later faced invasions and conflicts during the First and Second World Wars.

In the First World War, Russia fought at the Eastern fronts with Germany, the Austrian-Hungary empire, and the Ottoman Empire. The Russian army suffered severe casualties during the war as the soldiers needed to be better equipped, and the generals could not lead the forces. The Russians were not enthusiastic about the war as there were high conscriptions. The war's failure directly led to the collapse of the Romanov family and the Tsarist regime. The Russians saw the government's weakness and felt the lack of security under the existing government system.

The sense of lack of security did not change after the first socialist country "Soviet Union" was created in 1917. The invasion of Nazi Germany in 1941 further intensified the Russian people's concerns about the lack of security. Hitler also posed a threat to Russia's security. Nazi Germany's

attack on the USSR came on the night of June 21st, 1941, and it came as a surprise despite frequent warnings from the intelligence services and some foreign politicians.[7] The Führer Adolf Hitler decided to launch a risky plan— Operation Barbarossa to entirely pull the focus of the battle from the Western front to the Eastern front. Operation Barbarossa was considered one of the deadliest military campaigns in world history. The Russian army paid a huge effort to protect their territory. It was estimated that between 2.7 million and 4 million Soviet military personnel and between 4 million and 6 million Soviet civilians were killed during the whole operation. It is estimated that almost 27 million Soviets were sacrificed during the Second World War.

The Russian people's safety concerns were continuously built up as Russia developed. Obviously, evidence showed how the Russians attempted to strengthen their security. After the end of the Second World War, the red army "protecting" the cities and civilians in Eastern Europe did not withdraw, as Stalin promised at the Yalta conference. Instead, Soviet-backed governments were set up that were, to a large extent, under the control of Russia and Stalin. Before the end of the war, Stalin already realized that if the common enemy—Germany was removed, the conflict in ideology between Russia and the West might lead to another war, and he could not accept another invasion of Russia's mainland to happen again, so he saw Eastern Europe as a buffer zone. If there were an invasion from the West, the central government would have time to prepare the Soviet Union to counter the invasions. This proved that Russians had significant concerns about their safety and would try to create safety measures even though it might lead to Western opposition.

Russia's desire for a secure environment can be seen as the reason for the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian military operation. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, members of NATO and other Western countries were all eager to ensure that the new Russian Republic would not turn into a new "Soviet Union." Russian people were deeply concerned about this expansion because they felt isolated and encircled. The Russians were not allowing the siege to happen as it was a huge threat to their national security. The Russians took measures to weaken the influence of Western powers.

The five-day conflict between Russia and Georgia signified Russia's attempt to counter NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe. Georgia was sending troops to South Ossetia to prevent it from declaring independence, and Russia was trying to interfere with the actions of the Georgian army by launching air strikes and sending ground forces. On August 15th, 2008, the ceasefire agreement demanded the Georgian troops withdraw from the regions that declared independence, signaling a major Russian victory. The region that Russia had long been concerned about is Crimea. The Russian intervention received little response internationally. The European leaders were seeking ceasefire, which favored the Russian interests, while the US, under the new Obama administration, was seeking for a restoration of relations with the Kremlin. [8]

Because of Russia's unique geographical position, most ports were frozen in winter, preventing the battleships from leaving. This made the Russian navy extremely vulnerable. Russia needed a port that allowed its fleet to function during winter. Crimea was Russia's first choice. It is the region that is directly connected to the Black Sea. Fleets can enter the Atlantic Ocean through the Black Sea and ensure free deployment to strategic positions. However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Crimea was considered part of Ukraine's territory. The Russians' fear of losing support on the sea made them annex Crimea. On February 27th, 2014, Russian troops entered Crimea, taking down strategic sites. Only two months after the Russian operation, on March 18th, 2014, Russia officially declared that it had incorporated Crimea. Russian troops were sent into Crimea to form a loyal military in that region. The army was seen as a repressive and managerial tool to govern Crimea. [9] Russia focused on removing opposition groups and consolidating Russian power. In 2015, Russian law enforcement took over from the Crimean "self-defense" groups—the Russian-sponsored paramilitary groups constituting the guerrilla forces of the annexation—in pursuing opponents of the occupation. Their tactics include imposing harsh sentences for fabricated incidents to make an example of particular individuals. [9] Russia was able to maintain social stability through strict control over propaganda. However, Ukraine and NATO would not allow Russia to take over Crimea this easily. They once condemned Russia for invading Crimea.

4. The Russian Nationalism

Russian nationalism also contributed to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Nationalism has existed in Russia since the idea of "country" began to develop. The Russians felt confident about their own identity and their culture. The government saw nationalism as an opportunity to consolidate power and further used nationalism to make the Russian people in their favor. Nationalism in pro-modern Russia was incredibly influential. The idea of "Russification" was introduced by Alexander II and carried on during his reign. His successors, Alexander III and Nicolas II, followed the policy of Russification and further introduced more policies to raise Russia's status in Russia. Under Russification, people in other ethnic groups have to follow Russian culture and traditions, speak Russian, and receive Russian education. The Russians were also able to gain more job opportunities and higher positions. The Tsar aimed to gain support from the Russians and stabilize the country, as the unsuccessful campaign in the Crimean War in 1856 led to social unrest. However, Russification was not popular as minor ethnicities like Ukrainians and Germans in Russia felt discriminated against. The opposition from different ethnic groups intensified the problem of social unrest as new political groups were formed to fight against the Tsar.

Nationalism was weakened after the Tsar's regime collapsed and the Bolsheviks came to power. The Soviet Union followed the idea of Soviet internationalism introduced by the founder Vladimir Lenin. Lenin pointed out that a socialist revolution could be successful only if all countries' working classes united. Thus, the Soviet Union encouraged cooperation between different ethnicities and suppressed nationalism for an extended period. But nationalism still survived in the republics in the Soviet Union and led to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Since the Revolutions of 1989, not only Eastern European countries broke away from Russia, but former republics also declared independence, beginning with Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. The newly formed Russian government needed to be more influential internationally. After the failure of cooperation between Russia and the West from 1991 to 2008 and the failure in the political and economic transformation, Russia began to seek a stable and centralized government. The Russians want a powerful government that could bring Russia back into the position of a superpower.

Nationalism became popular in Russia also because of the poor economy since the 1990s. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the West had concerns about Russia's influence. When conflicts occurred between Russia and the West, the West would introduce economic sanctions to restrict Russia's actions. The sanctions limited Russia's access to the Western market and its products. This, to a large extent, weakened Russia's competitiveness. Furthermore, the Russian market itself had problems. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the new Russian government faced serious corruption and bureaucracy. The Russian government also lacked laws that regulate investments. As a result, foreign investors were unwilling to invest their money in Russian industries, and Russia itself did not have sufficiently found to start new industries. Table 1 demonstrated that the Russian economy improved a little from 2018 to 2021. There was even a decline in Russian GDP in 2020.

Table 1. Russian GDP from 2018 to 2021 [10].

Year	GDP	Comparison with previous year
2018	$1,657.33B	5.28% increase
2019	$1,693.11B	2.16% increase
2020	$1,489.36B	12.03% decline
2021	$1,778.78B	19.43% increase

The economic situation inside Russia affected the citizens' livelihood, and the Russian people wanted to improve their living standards. Thus, the Russian people favored nationalism as they believed that Russia should be powerful and they should enjoy a better environment. The military operation with Ukraine was a step taken by the Russian government to regain its "territories" and restore power. This is favored by the Russian people as they might think that by restoring the land

lost after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia would become stronger, and they would be able to live in a better environment with a higher living standard.

5. Conclusion

Overall, there are three main reasons Russia decided to launch an invasion of Ukraine. First of all, the presence of long-term tension between Russia and the West contributed to the increase in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The conflicts between Russia and the West appeared hundreds of years ago and remained unsolved. After 2008, Russia and the West split increased as Putin changed his foreign policies. Eventually, the crisis broke out in 2014 due to the disunity between Russia and the West.

Second, the Russian people's desire for security led to the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian crisis in 2014. Modern Russia experienced multiple military conflicts with other nations, including the Napoleonic invasion in 1812, the battle with Germany, the Austrian-Hungarian empire and Ottoman empire in the First World War, the Nazi-Germany invasion during the Second World War, and the five-day conflict with Georgia. Russians wanted a secure environment, so they needed to ensure they could take hold of the Crimea region to allow their fleet to function during winter. To occupy the Crimea region, an invasion was required.

Last but not least, Russian nationalism also contributed to the outbreak of the crisis between Russia and Ukraine. Nationalism had existed in Russia throughout history, but it grew particularly strong after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian people believed that Russia should be one of the strongest nations. They also believed that Russian culture should dominate other cultures. They saw the invasion of Ukraine as a way to demonstrate Russian power and restore the land that was lost after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict can be viewed as a trigger that reflected modern Russia's long-term problems, and after viewing the factors that pushed Russia towards a current military operation. It might be possible for Russia and the West to learn more about each other's interests and make compromises to prevent more casualties on the Ukrainian battlefields.

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