

Editorial

Problems of NATO

'For the American political and media establishment, US-Russian relations always begin yesterday, without the pre-history of the relationship, and thus without its essential political context. Of this we now have a new and increasingly dangerous example.'

So wrote Professor Stephen Cohen in *Spokesman 117*, in 2012. The context then was the burgeoning war in Syria and Russia's long-term support for President Assad. Two years on, this most cruel conflict continues to claim multitudinous victims, but there has also been remarkable co-operation between Russia and the United States which has led to Syria's ongoing disarmament of its considerable arsenal of chemical weapons. Is that progress on chemical weapons now threatened by the crisis in Ukraine?

In 2013, direct US, UK and French military intervention in Syria was narrowly averted when, first, the British House of Commons defeated the Cameron Government when it sought authorisation for any such action, and then President Obama 'paused' the rush to war. (The Turkish Government, it seems, had been behind efforts to push Obama over his chemical weapons 'red line' into war, at Ghouta near Damascus, according to Seymour Hersh, the respected American journalist.) Some space for diplomacy opened up, and Russia and the United States led the way, under UN auspices, in the chemical disarmament of Syria. NATO and Russia were preparing a groundbreaking naval collaboration to guard the US Navy ship detailed to remove and destroy Syria's chemical stockpiles by sea to meet a tight deadline in June 2014, supervised by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. That collaboration has fallen foul of NATO's decision to suspend all co-operation and contact with Russia.

Ukraine's precipitate economic decline in recent decades, since it separated itself from the Soviet Union, is charted in this issue of *The Spokesman* by Roy and Zhores Medvedev. Even before those momentous changes, beginning in late 1991, greater influence in the Soviet periphery had long been an objective of Western strategy. Once Ukraine became independent, the chosen methods to achieve such influence combined sponsored developments of Ukrainian 'civil society', much of it courtesy of the US government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, with long-term economic, political and military interventions by the European Union and NATO. Victoria Nuland, the foul-mouthed representative of the US State Department, reckons the United States has invested \$5billion in

recent years in advancing its Ukrainian policy. (She can be heard saying this on YouTube, in front of a large banner emblazoned with the name of the oil company sponsor, 'CHEVRON'.) It's ten years since the US sponsored 'Orange Revolution' brought Viktor Yushchenko to power in Ukraine, in 2004. The Ukrainian people soon saw through him, as they did through his Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, not to mention his successor as President, Viktor Yanukovich. The crowd in Independence Square was visibly underwhelmed as Mrs Tymoshenko addressed them on the evening of her recent release from prison. Now, the Ukrainian people, minus those in Crimea, are asked to elect a new president amidst increasing conflict. Will the attempts at reshuffling some old, corrupt faces work? Certainly, disillusionment with the old guard, assembled under Arseniy Yatsenyuk, Ukraine's 'interim' Prime Minister (presciently tipped for the PM's job by Ms Nuland), has set in quickly. Ukraine's economic situation is dire, and the removal of energy subsidies and the imposition of other austerity measures, insisted on by the IMF, EU and other international creditors, will make winter 2014-15 tough indeed for the Ukrainian people.

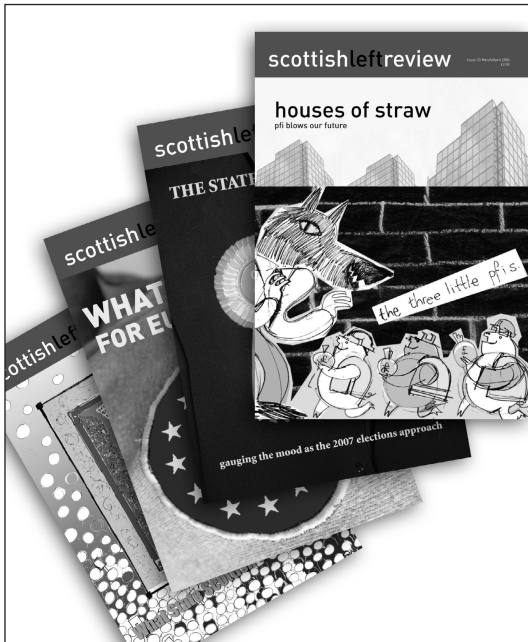
There is much difficult and dangerous terrain to negotiate through the coming months, before winter descends again. Crimea has returned to Russian administration, following some deft military manoeuvres by Russian forces and a swift referendum endorsed by a large majority of the peninsula's predominantly Russian population. The Tatar minority is understandably uneasy about the change, as are many ethnic Ukrainians in Crimea. There seems to be much scope for destabilising the Crimea under its new arrangements, should the West or others choose to do so. But the risk of destabilisation is far greater in Ukraine itself. Restive Russians in cities in eastern Ukraine are occupying official buildings. These communities are not adequately represented in the 'interim' government appointed after the forced removal of President Yanukovich. The head of the CIA travels incognito to Kiev, bringing with him the Agency's unique experience of regime change, followed more publicly by Vice President Biden.

Instability, even conflict in Ukraine will likely continue for some time to come, and no one knows how far it will spread. Ethnic tensions between some Russians, Ukrainians and others are compounded by acute economic hardship. The West has long focused on ethnic differences as it sought to undermine, first, the Soviet Union, and now the Russian Federation and its regional associations. (The cover of *Problems of Communism*, published 40 years ago by the US Information Agency, reflects this approach.) One consequence of the West's push against Russia may be that Russia draws

even closer to China; that would certainly have alarmed the sponsors of *Problems of Communism*. Instability and conflict in Ukraine may not trouble the Americans much, located as it is on Russia's borders, but it should certainly concern Europeans who, among other considerations, will be asked to pick up much of the tab. This should be a central issue in the direct elections to the European Parliament, which take place on 22 to 25 May. But sensible discussion of authentic European issues is not readily accomplished. Nevertheless, we take the opportunity of the European elections to revisit the social emergency gripping much of Greece, carefully examined by John Markakis. Alexis Tsipras, leader of SYRIZA and candidate of the European Left for the Presidency of the European Commission, sets out aspects of his programme.

As we enter a period of acute international tension, it is timely to recall the sudden descent into the First World War, a century ago. Bruce Kent writes movingly of the work of Ernst Friedrich, the German pacifist, whose pictorial commentary on the horrors of those years is republished by Spokesman Books on 1 May 2014, 90 years to the day after it first appeared in Berlin.

Tony Simpson



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