

The Last Empire

by GWYNNE DYER

This is not another reassessment of Mikhail Gorbachev's failed attempt to democratise the Soviet Union thirty years ago. He wasn't actually trying to do that anyway; he was attempting to save the Soviet Union and Communism by civilising and softening the harsh Bolshevik dictatorship that had prevailed since 1917.

Gorbachev was hated by most older Russians because the Soviet Union, the country they were born into, broke apart on his watch. His current successor, Vladimir Putin, is now waging a war to put it back together, but Gorbachev, Putin and most other Russians have all made the same category error. They thought the Soviet Union was a country.

It wasn't. It was an empire, fundamentally no different from the half-dozen other European empires that carved most of the world up between them in the preceding few centuries ? or indeed, from the hundreds of other empires that had preceded them in the 5,000 years of ?mass? civilisations.

Almost all of these empires had a ruling ethnic or linguistic group at the centre, and a variety of subject peoples around the periphery. Their size was historically limited by very slow long-distance communications, but the advent of ocean-going ships allowed them to go global by the 17th century. And they were all ruled, in the final analysis, by force.

The British, the French and Dutch empires never confused their empires with their own countries, because their colonies were separated from the homelands by thousands of kilometres of ocean. It was trickier with the Russian, Turkish and Austro-Hungarian empires, where all their possessions were connected by land, but the latter two were gone by 1918.

That left the Russian empire, which fell into the hands of Bolshevik revolutionaries and was renamed the Soviet Union. But its borders didn't change except in the far west, where Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland gained their independence.

That's where the popular confusion in Russia comes from. Because the Communists claimed to be ?anti-imperialist?, and even abstained from using Russian nationalist tropes until Stalin's time, it was easy for Russians to think the Soviet Union was all the same ?homeland?. But the subject peoples noticed.

When Gorbachev largely abandoned the threat of force as a means of keeping the empire together, the non-Russian nationalities naturally took that as a signal that they could leave. And their departure really wasn't ?the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century? (as Putin claims); it was the final act in the dismantling of the European empires.

Of course, the subject peoples left. Some of the colonial populations were radically different from the Russians, like the Muslim ?republics? of Central Asia. Some seemed quite similar to outsiders ? the Ukrainians and the Russians, for example ? but their real historical grievances were as deep and irreconcilable as those between the Irish and the English.

Siberia and the Far East stayed in Russia, because the conquered populations there had been indigenous people living in small groups. They were greatly outnumbered by Russian settlers as early as the 18th century, and their future at best is like the First Nations of Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

That's how the last European empire was decolonised thirty years ago, and trying to piece it back together now is as foolish and futile as a British attempt to reconquer Ireland would be. Yes, Russians and Ukrainians have a lot of shared history. Yes, it's hard for people who don't know them well to tell them apart. But no, they will not live happily together.

Is this the ?narcissism of small differences? that Sigmund Freud talked about? Yes, of course it is. But some sort of shared identity is needed if we are to live together peacefully and productively in the large numbers that have become standard since the rise of the

mass civilisations, and constructing such common identities is hard work.

So two languages, Russian and Ukrainian, that are really no further apart than Glaswegian English and Jamaican English, are erected into a sharp dividing line between different 'nations' by Ukrainian nationalists. But they don't talk about religion, because Ukrainians are too divided along that axis.

History, fake or true, helps too. Russians share a story about an alleged genocide of Russian-speakers in Eastern Ukraine in the present; many Ukrainians believe that the famine of the early 1930s (the 'holodomor') was deliberately caused by their Russian rulers.

There only so many people whom you can hope to bring into the same identity, which is why there are 52 countries in Africa, and seven countries where Yugoslavia used to be. It's just part of the decolonisation process, but the Russians have not yet grasped that this is what they are going through.