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A hundred years on from the start of the First World War, Europe is once again in turmoil as armies gather on the borders of Ukraine. It is unlikely that Russia’s actions under the leadership of Vladimir Putin will lead to a major war, but the matter illustrates clearly that rivalry between great powers and threats of invasion are not yet a thing of the past in the twenty-first century. At the end of the Cold War Francis Fukuyama wrote that the ‘end of history’ was at hand but clearly he was wrong. Putin has strengthened his grip on power in Russia gradually and it seems that he resents the loss of power and prestige and the shame suffered by his country when the USSR collapsed; he wishes to resurrect the Soviet Union, or else to go further back to the era of the tsars. He has seen the nations of the West violating international law with impunity in the past ten years with wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya (and an attempt to do the same in Syria), without the consent of the UN Security Council; so no doubt the Russians were laughing with scorn at the hypocrisy of US Secretary of State John Kerry when he said, ‘You just don’t invade another country on phony pretext in order to assert your interests.’

Most international disputes are not black and white and America and her allies should not pretend otherwise. Putin is right (at least in part) that the Far Right is on
the rise in Ukraine and that they had a part in the uprising which deposed the
democratically elected government, something which should worry us all; and it is
very likely that the majority of the population in Crimea support being part of Russia
(though the percentage would not as high as last month’s referendum, which was
boycotted by ethnic Ukrainians and Tatars, would suggest). History teaches us that it
is not right to ‘appease’ powers with break the rules of the international community;
but neither is it much good chiding the Russian leader as if he were an errant child,
without seeking to understand his way of thinking.