

FARINGDON PEACE GROUP - December 2014 Monthly Speaker Meeting

At the meeting of the Faringdon Peace Group on 3 December Dr Kate Hudson, General Secretary of CND, was our speaker and asked us how we viewed the crisis in Ukraine. Did we see it as having the potential to start World War 3? Did we see it as a continuation of the Cold War or a continuation of the struggle for global supremacy between USA and Russia? How might we view it?

Kate Hudson suggested that we might look more closely at the history and the geography of the country. Ukraine is the largest country entirely in Europe. It has been the 'bread basket' of Europe and Russia exporting great quantities of grain in the Soviet period. It has been in more recent years a rapidly growing industrial force with a high growth rate and a specialist aerospace industry. It maintains the second largest military force in Europe. Yet it suffered huge setbacks in the depression and famine of the 1930's and the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008.

Politically its boundaries have been manipulated by the 'Great Powers' with little regard to the various communities and peoples within its borders, of who 77% are ethnic Ukrainian and 17% Russian. It has been primarily under Russian influence since the 18th century and 85% of the people today prefer Russian to Ukrainian as their language. The western sector of Ukraine was united with Poland after World War 1. During World War 2, most of the inhabitants fought with Russia and the defence of Kiev left over 600,000 killed, captured or missing. Some the groups in the western region sided and fought with the Germans with continuing ambitions to achieve national independence. In 1954 the Crimea, with substantial guarantees for its autonomy, was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. With the break-up of the Soviet Union Ukraine achieved its independence in 1991 but in the midst of massive inflation and economic depression. The impact of the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 was a factor in the decision of Ukraine to abandon all its nuclear weapons in 1994 with guarantees being given by other nations.

After a new constitution was adopted in 1996, the country has been in almost constant political upheaval with a growing division between a pro-western and a pro-Russian policy. The Orange Revolution of 2004 was partly aided by training and finance from the US and the West. Succeeding Presidents have veered from pro-Western to pro-Russian policies against a background of disputed elections and internal power struggles until the pro-western protest got worse early this year and Crimea, where Russian troops were already stationed, moved back to Russian control and two breakaway 'states' set themselves up in Eastern Ukraine. Fighting continues between the government and the breakaway eastern factions to the great suffering of the ordinary inhabitants of the area. There have been 4000 killed and towards a million refugees, most of whom have gone to Russia.

Kate Hudson suggested that the conflict needed to be seen within this historical perspective; that USA, Europe and Russia need to be contributing to the solution of what is long-running regional issue with boundary problems rooted in the past. News this week of ceasefire talks and limited agreements hold out some hope of greater dialogue, which could possibly lead to a settlement based upon greater regional autonomy within the areas of the country. We hope so.