Why Is Russia Invading Ukraine?

Dominating the news recently is the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Amid the stories of missile strikes, civilian deaths, and refugees surging out of the country, many are wondering why Russia is even attacking Ukraine. Why would Russia carry out an unprovoked invasion knowing the military expense that would be incurred and the massive economic reprisals from the rest of the world? How does the invasion of Ukraine protect Russia's interests? In this article I will attempt to answer this question by looking at the history of Russia-Ukraine relations and the national security and economic factors that are at play. There's a lot of geography involved, so you might want to pull out a map before you start in.

But first, a disclaimer. Some of the things I say in this article may sound like I am defending Russia in its invasion of Ukraine. This is not the case. War is awful and should never be justified under any circumstances. However, I believe Western governments and media have rarely acknowledged what NATO and Ukraine have done to provoke the conflict. There has been little to no attempt to understand the situation from Russia's point of view. Hopefully this article can restore some balance to the discussion.

A Short History of Ukraine

Ukraine and the surrounding regions have a long and complicated history, far more than would be practical to include in this article, so I will give a summary. If you would like to learn more (and have internet access) Encyclopedia Britannica has an excellent article on Ukrainian history[1]. The territory of what is now Ukraine has changed hands many times and been divided in numerous ways. Here are the highlights of the past 1,200 years.

> ***Mid 800s-1240*** *– Kievan Rus' forms and expands. Its territory stretches from the Ukrainian steppe in the south to Lake Ladoga (near the Russian-Finnish border) in the north. Governed from Kyiv, the empire reaches its peak in the late 900s. King Volodymyr the Great accepts Christianity and is baptized in 988, bringing the region under the influence of Byzantine Christianity. The empire declines through the 12th century, culminating in the destruction of Kyiv in 1240 by the Mongol-Tatars. The modern countries of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus all view Kievan Rus' as their cultural ancestors (Plohky, 2006).*

> ***1240-1340*** *– The northern and western parts of what was Kievan Rus' are now part of the Grand Duchy of Moscow, which is a vassal state of the Golden Horde. The western portion of present-day Ukrainian territory is now the state of Galicia-Volhynia.*

> ***Mid 1350s-1783*** *– Ukrainian territory is controlled by three external powers: the Golden Horde to the east, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the north, and the Kingdom of Poland to the west. However, in the mid-1400s, the Golden Horde disintegrates, and Crimea and southern Ukraine are now ruled by the Ottoman Empire. Russia emerges as a fully independent state. The Cossacks form as a society on the southern steppes of Ukraine and ally themselves with the Poles in wars against the Mongols and Turks, but they cause trouble for the Polish Kingdom during peacetime. The Cossacks mount an independence effort in 1648-1649 and have some success in fighting the Poles. The Cossack society divides after only a few years, and Poland and Russia each draw a portion into their spheres of influence.*

> ***1783-1917*** *– Ukrainian territory under Russian control is formally reorganized as provinces of Russia, and it loses any trace of national distinctiveness. Crimea is annexed by Russia, ending Turkish control over the peninsula.*

> ***1917-1922*** *– The Bolshevik Revolution shakes Russia. Ukrainian nationalists take the opportunity to seize power and declare independence. They negotiate peace with the Central Powers (whom Russia is currently fighting in WWI), but Kyiv is promptly attacked by Bolshevik forces. The Bolsheviks prevail, and the government of the independent Ukrainian*

Soviet Socialist Republic is formed in December 1917. As Bolshevik power is solidified across the former Russian Empire, Ukraine cedes more and more of its rights to Moscow. Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and the Transcaucasian Socialist Republic unite to form the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) in December, 1922.

1922-1991 *– While the constituent states of the U.S.S.R. (or Soviet Union) technically retain rights of secession, the Communist Party based in Moscow maintains strict control at all levels of government. The Great Famine kills an estimated 4 million Ukrainians in 1932-1933. The Soviet Union and Germany divide Poland in 1939, and Ukraine is enlarged by the addition of former Polish territory in the west. Ukraine is almost entirely occupied by the Nazi army before the Soviets drive them out in 1944. Ukraine gains additional land from Romania in 1940, from Hungary in 1945 and from Romania again in 1948. Russia cedes the Crimean Peninsula to Ukraine in 1954, completing the modern territory of Ukraine. The Communist Party's grip of the Soviet Union weakens in the late 1980s, and its rule ends in August, 1991. The Ukrainian Parliament declares full independence on August 24, 1991. Crimea becomes an autonomous republic but remains under Ukrainian influence.*

1991-2009 *– Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia agree to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in December, 1991. Ukrainian leaders view the CIS as a loose association of countries, while Russia wants to establish it as a governing body to succeed the Soviet Union. As a result of these differing views, Ukraine does not ratify the CIS charter and never becomes a full member, but it still participates as an associate state until 2014. Crimea holds a referendum on full independence in 1994, but the separatist-leaning president bungles the independence attempt. Russia claims Crimea's territory belongs to them. Ukraine and Russia squabble over the ownership of former-Soviet military assets. Ukraine inherits physical (but not operational) control over many of the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons, giving it the third-largest nuclear arsenal in the world. In 1993, Ukraine signs agreements giving these weapons to Russia. Ukraine maintains close ties with*

Russia, and both countries join NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme, as well as the Council of Europe. Political corruption and turmoil are commonplace in Ukraine. The country begins serious consideration of joining NATO in 2004.

2010-2022 *– In 2010, Ukraine temporarily abandons its pursuit of joining NATO and strengthens its ties with Russia. A planned association agreement with the European Union is canceled in 2013 under intense pressure from Russia. Protests break out in response, and the government responds harshly. Early elections are called in 2014. Armed men occupy Crimean government buildings and raise the Russian flag. The Crimean Parliament votes to join the Russian Federation, and Russia moves troops into the region. Ukraine rejects the Crimean parliamentary vote and the pro-Russian results of an ensuing public referendum. Pro-Russian militias declare the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk to be independent states. A pro-European candidate wins the election, signs the association agreement with the EU, and attempts to put down the uprising in the east. A civilian airliner is shot down over Donetsk, killing 298 people. Russia is accused of sending weapons and troops to support the separatists in Luhansk and Donetsk, but it denies the charges. In March 2019, television personality Volodymyr Zelenskyy wins the presidency of Ukraine and promises that his first goal as president is peace in eastern Ukraine, but Ukrainian forces continue to fight separatist militias. In October or November 2021, Russia increases their armed forces at its border with Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin recognizes the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk on February 21, 2022, and orders Russian troops into these regions. A few days later, Russia launches a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.*

Congratulations if you made it all the way through that *brief* history! In case you skipped down to this point, here's the three-sentence summary. Russia and Ukraine have lots of shared history. Ukraine did not exist as a functionally independent state until the breakup of the U.S.S.R. in 1991. Ukraine has recently been pulling away

from Russia's influence and looking to the West (North America and Western Europe).

Russia's Security Concerns

Russia has been quite vocal in its opposition to Ukraine joining NATO. Why does Russia care about Ukraine's alliances? To fully understand this, we must start over seventy years ago at the end of World War II.

Europe emerged from the war in shambles. It's infrastructure and economy were destroyed, and millions of people had been killed. The militaries of Western Europe were exhausted. However, the Soviet regime was in relatively good shape. The U.S.S.R. had greatly expanded the territory under its influence by occupying and installing pro-Soviet governments in the eastern and central European lands that had previously been occupied by Nazi Germany. The United States did not trust the Soviets and feared their further encroachment into Western Europe, so the U.S. government started talking with Canada and Great Britain about forming a military alliance as a balance of power. NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) was the result, formed in April 1949. The purpose of the alliance was to "enhance Western security and promote democratic values" (Encyclopedia Britannica). The original members were Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Greece and Turkey joined the alliance in 1952, West Germany (later Germany) in 1955, and Spain in 1982.

Faced with a powerful military alliance calculated to limit its expansion and promote a radically different form of government, the Soviet Union and its allies (Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania) signed the Warsaw Pact in 1955. This military defense organization was the counterbalance to NATO. For 36 years, the two sides fought a pitched battle; not so much with men and guns, but rather with competing ideologies. The United States and its NATO allies promoted their interests and democratic form of government, while the Soviet Union and its allies promoted their interests and authoritarian form of government. Each alliance backed different sides in the ideological and military conflicts, pitting democratic capitalism against oligarchic socialism in Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Argentina and various other countries.

The Warsaw Pact ended in 1991, shortly followed by the breakup of the Soviet Union. With its main enemy non-existent, NATO redirected its focus to developing cooperation with former members of the Warsaw Pact and "managing" conflicts in and around Europe. In 1990, during negotiations for Germany's reunification, officials from several NATO nations assured Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO had no intention to expand further east. This commitment was soon to be broken; perhaps because NATO didn't care or perhaps because they saw the promise as null and void because it was made to a government that collapsed soon after.

The Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland joined NATO in 1999; Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined in 2004; Albania and Croatia joined in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020. NATO reports that Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine are all currently seeking membership. Almost all of these countries were previously a part of either the Soviet Union and/or the Warsaw Pact military alliance.

Russia has viewed this NATO expansion to its very borders with much trepidation. The Russian government feels NATO broke the promise made to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 and cannot be trusted. Additionally, NATO still promotes democracy as the only acceptable form of government (the criteria to join NATO "include a functioning democratic political system based on a market economy" (NATO, 2016), and the Russian government prefers to rule with an authoritarian state-controlled economy. Who knows when the U.S.-led NATO might decide to invade Russia to install a democratic government, just as it has in numerous other countries. When Ukraine began expressing interest in joining NATO, Russia was strongly opposed. This would mean another long, hard-to-defend stretch of the Russian border being shared with a hostile military alliance. Additionally, many of the Russian people view the Ukrainians as ethnic brothers. Their languages are quite similar, and (between Kievan Rus, the Golden Horde, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union) Russia and large swaths of Ukraine have been united for the majority of the last 1,200 years. Some Ukrainians share this view of Ukrainian-Russian brotherhood while others do not. The majority of the population in eastern Ukraine is pro-Russia (and anti-NATO) while western Ukraine is largely anti-Russia (and supports membership in NATO).

Russia's Economic Concerns

A westward-looking Ukraine not only threatens Russia's security but its economy as well. Russia is one of the world's largest producers of fossil fuels, extracting one-fifth of the global total of oil and one-fourth of the global total of natural gas. Given Russia's comparatively small population, much of this fuel is exported to the European Union. With a value of over $200 billion, energy sales make up over 60% of Russia's annual exports and give the country a hefty trade surplus. Without these energy sales, Russia's GDP would plummet. These energy exports also give the Russian government the money it needs to maintain its powerful armed forces.

So how does Ukraine figure into this? When Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, it served as the gateway to Europe for Russia's energy exports. Pipelines across Ukraine carried up to 80% of the fuel flowing out of Russia. When the Soviet Union split, Ukraine was suddenly a sovereign nation demanding billions of dollars annually in tariffs for the gas to keep flowing across its territory. Not only that, but a Ukraine-turned-hostile could easily shut off those pipelines, stopping the flow of fuel out of Russia and the flow of money into Russia. To minimize this risk and the tariffs it must pay to Ukraine, Russia has been building new oil and gas pipelines across loyal Belarus and beneath the Black and Baltic Seas.

Ukraine itself possesses significant oil and gas reserves. However, much of this energy potential remains undeveloped, and Ukraine currently imports around half of the fossil fuels it consumes. This could change quickly though, as Ukraine buddying up to the West has already brought Western investment and Western energy companies flooding into the country. In short order, Ukraine's energy production would make Europe less reliant on Russia's deposits and reduce Russia's cash flow. This threat to Russia's economy became only more real in 2012 when significant natural gas deposits were discovered inside Ukraine's exclusive economic zone in the Black Sea. Also, recent advances in gas extraction technology has opened up possibilities in Ukraine's shale rock reserves. The facilities for storing the gas and the pipelines for transporting it to customers are already in place in Ukraine, ready to go. This is all great news for Ukraine and gas customers in Europe and bad news for Russia.

Russia "solved" part of this problem by taking over the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Large portions of the Black Sea (and its energy extraction potential) that had previously been in Ukraine's exclusive economic zone were now under Russian control. The Russians also seized billions of dollars worth of gas drilling and extraction infrastructure, setting back Ukraine's progress as an energy powerhouse. Now Russia had much more gas and Ukraine much less. Then another problem arose for Russia. The Crimean Peninsula is connected to Ukraine by only a narrow strip of land and is separated from Russia in the east by the narrow Kerch Strait. The peninsula is dry, with not nearly enough fresh water to support its agriculture or its population of 2.4 million people. The Soviets solved this issue in the 1960s by building a 400 km (250 mile) canal that carried fresh water from mainland Ukraine in the north to the Crimean Peninsula in the south. When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Ukraine responded by building a concrete dam across the canal, cutting off 85% of Crimea's fresh water supply. Russia opened a bridge across the Kerch Strait in 2018 and has been trucking water into Crimea, but this has not been enough to ease the peninsula's water crisis, which has only been compounded by below-average rainfall the last few years. If Crimea was going to develop into the industrious gas region the Russian's envisioned, the canal from Ukraine needed to be opened.

Russia's Solution

Russia is accustomed to being a world power. For centuries it has been a dominant force in Eastern Europe and Asia; first as the Russian Empire, later as the core of the Soviet Union, and most recently as an energy and military powerhouse. It has seen its power and influence diminish and the power and influence of U.S.-led NATO grow. Now its national and economic security are threatened by many of its former allies joining NATO. If Russia is to maintain any significant role in the world stage and keep its economy healthy for the long term, Ukraine must remain its ally (the preferred option) or remain neutral (the okay option). Ukraine's recent refusal of both alliance and neutrality have left Russia only one option, in their minds — invade Ukraine.

To help us see this situation from the Russian perspective, let's imagine the United States and Texas in place of Russia and Ukraine. Texas was a sovereign republic for about 10 years before joining the United States. Today, after 175 years of statehood, polls suggest that 25% of Texans would support the state becoming independent again. Imagine that Texas would

secede from the United States. This would be by mutual agreement, but with the understanding that the U.S. and Texas would remain allies because of their geographic proximity and shared ethnicity. Then, after 20 years of independence, Texas begins improving relations with China, which has already been forming alliances with other South and Central American countries. Eventually, Texas and China agree to a military alliance that would bring Chinese armed forces to the United States southern border, and China agrees to defend Texan territory as it would its own. How would the United States respond to these developments? This, of course, is an extremely unlikely scenario, but I believe it's a fair comparison to how Russia may view the Ukrainian situation.

Conclusion

I have discussed Russia's views on several issues. I should clarify that these are the views of the Russian government. It is not well known how the Russian populace feels about these issues. Russian media claims that Putin's approval rating has climbed several percentage points since the invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, thousands of Russians have been arrested for protesting the war. Some Russian soldiers captured by Ukrainian forces have reportedly testified that they were duped into participating in the invasion; told that they were liberating Ukraine from the Nazis and that the Ukrainian populace would receive them enthusiastically. It is impossible to say what percentage of Russia supports their leaders in invading Ukraine and how many are against what is happening.

In presenting the information in this article, I do not mean to imply that Russia has a right to possess or control Ukraine. I have only attempted to show how Russia's worldly interests and ambitions are being protected and promoted by the Ukrainian invasion. God exalts and debases leaders and sometimes allows them to conquer other nations, but this does not mean the conquerors are entitled to their power and victory. The leaders of Russia will have to answer to God for their actions along with all the rest of us.

How should we view the Ukrainian conflict as Christians? We should feel about it as we would any other war. As I stated in the introduction, war is awful and should never be justified under any circumstances. It makes no difference what group is the aggressor or what group is being attacked. War is awful, and we Christians should not hesitate to acknowledge it for the horror that it is. While governments of this world wage war at will, we, as peacemakers, must never take sides physically or ideologically.

Although we are nonresistant, this does not mean we sit on the sidelines and watch while the conflict rages. This war is creating even more opportunities to serve our hurting world in Jesus' name. Over two million refugees have left Ukraine already, and millions more are expected to flee the country in the coming weeks. Inside Ukraine, countless people are hurting, hungry, and confused. How can we be the hands and feet of Jesus to these people? Plain News has shared a few channels through which to help the people of Ukraine. Some of the refugees that are leaving will eventually make their way to the United States. Let's take every opportunity we can to demonstrate that loving one's neighbor is the best way to resolve relationship problems.

~ Leonard Hege

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