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Driving Force of the Ukraine Crisis

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Driving Force of the Ukraine Crisis

Abstract

"For many people in North America, trying to understand what is taking place in Eastern Europe between Russia and Ukraine can be a bit confusing. Even Winston Churchill once described this part of Europe as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. "

Posting about the crisis in Ukraine from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/the-driving-force-of-the-ukraine-crisis/>

Keywords

In All Things, Russia, Ukraine, Vladimir Putin

Disciplines

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Comments

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The Driving Force of the Ukraine Crisis

 [inallthings.org/the-driving-force-of-the-ukraine-crisis/](https://allinallthings.org/the-driving-force-of-the-ukraine-crisis/)

Mark McCarthy

For many people in North America, trying to understand what is taking place in Eastern Europe between Russia and Ukraine can be a bit confusing. Even Winston Churchill once described this part of Europe as a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. One thing to keep in mind though when trying to understand this part of the world is that this conflict is not some recent development that emerged with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991. In fact, some of the seeds of this conflict were planted almost 800 years ago in the 13th century with the Mongol invasion of Eastern Europe.

If one looks back to historical sources such as the ancient chronicles, they tell a history of Eastern Slavic tribes who in the mid-9th century could not govern themselves. In order to create some form of government and stability they invited a Scandinavian noble family to come and rule over them. Thus was born medieval Rus, governed by the Rurik family. In due course, Kiev became the home of the Grand Prince and lesser family members were given control of surrounding territories. In theory, though, these minor princelings were subject to the rule and authority of the Grand Prince in Kiev. Eventually about eleven principalities made up territory of Kievan Rus and there was significant contact and trade with western Europe. In fact the daughter of the Grand Prince in 1050 married Henry I, King of France. In terms of forming a strong centralized state, though, the power of the Grand Prince was quite limited, and by the 12th century Rus was in a state of decline. When the Mongols arrived in the 13th century, they were able to defeat the various Rus territories one by one and incorporate them into the greater Mongol Empire.¹ This was the start of the Eastern Slavic turn to the Asia. For about the next 200 years this part of Europe would be oriented toward the East instead of the West.

When the Mongol grip began to loosen in the 15th century, the new political territories that emerged in Eastern Europe were significantly different from before the invasion. The Eastern Slavic people had been divided up into three distinct groups, White or Belo Russians, Great Russians and Ukrainians. We also see the economic, religious, political and military power of the region had shifted to the North and West. Instead of the Grand Prince in Kiev, we see the rise of Muscovy and the Tsar in Moscow. In addition, instead of a loose confederation of territories nominally under the authority of the Grand Prince, the Tsar was promoting a much more authoritarian form of government with strict centralized control. Many Ukrainians began to believe that Muscovy was nothing more than despotic land ruled over by a cruel and violent Tsar who had been heavily influenced by Eastern despotism.

During this rise of Muscovy, what had been the heartland of medieval Kievan Rus now became a borderland between a growing Muscovy and the rest of Europe. The eastern Ukrainians found themselves under the control of a rising Muscovy while western Ukrainians found themselves under the control at various times of Lithuania, Poland, Sweden and Austria. What developed in the western Ukrainian lands became very different from what developed in the East which was under the control of Muscovy and underwent various forms of Russification. Western Ukraine had much more contact with the rest of Europe and many of the historical forces at work in western Europe found their way to western Ukraine. In terms of religion, even though Ukraine was majority Eastern Orthodox, there was a significant presence of Roman Catholicism, and in far western Ukraine we even find small pockets of Calvinism. Right in the middle of this borderland was the former capital of Kiev, and at various times it was ruled by either East or West. Thus, western Ukraine, and at times Kiev, has had a very different historical path from the East, and the Ukraine

as a whole had much more contact with Western and Central Europe than Russia had. After World War One, the Soviet Union began to push its borders further to the west, taking more and more western Ukraine territory from countries like Poland and Austria. During the 1930s Stalin tried to stop Ukrainian resistance to Soviet rule with a man-made famine. Accurate records still have not been released from the archives, but historian Robert Conquest estimate somewhere between 3 and 7 million died in Stalin's attempt at breaking Ukrainian nationalism. During World War II there were actually three groups fighting each other within the Ukraine, Germans, Soviets and Ukrainian nationalists who fought both the Germans and the Soviets.

It was after World War II that the Soviet Union pushed its borders much further to the west, incorporating all of western Ukraine into the Soviet Union. After Stalin's death in 1953 the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, who was an ethnic Ukrainian but pro-Soviet, signed a decree making the Crimean Peninsula part of the Ukraine for at least bureaucratic reasons. Given that the Ukraine was part of the larger Soviet Union this moving of lines on a map did not seem to be that important. All of that changed, however, in 1991 with the breakup of the Soviet Union. Almost for the first time since the 13th century Ukraine was an independent county.

If we return to our earlier question, what is driving the conflict between Russia and Ukraine? In many ways I think this is Russian President Putin trying to take advantage of a time of Western indecision and inaction. In his mind the Ukraine should never have become independent from Russia. Russia has historic ties to eastern Ukraine, and the Crimean Peninsula was a part of Russia outright until the bureaucratic change made by Khrushchev in 1953. For ethnic Russians these arguments are quite powerful. In addition, Russia has fought and died for this territory, from the Crimean War against Britain and France in



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the 19th century, to Germany twice in World War One and Two. On the other hand, ever since the rise of Moscow in the 15th Century, Russia has had a poor track record for how it has treated ethnic Ukrainians, especially those interested in establishing their own independent state. What everyone should remember in looking at this conflict is that it is not some recent development. It has very deep historical roots, going

all the way back to the 13th Century.

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Footnotes

1. Most historians agree that even if the Rus had been politically united they still would not have been able to stand up to the Mongols. The Mongols defeated everyone who stood before them, including Hungarian, Polish and German armies. It was only the untimely death of the great Khan that stopped the Mongol armies from moving further into Europe. [↩](#)

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