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## Russia and Ukraine: What to Know from a Historian

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## Russia and Ukraine: What to Know from a Historian

### Abstract

"In trying to understand how the past influences events today, one must understand the history of the region."

Posting about current tensions between Russian and Ukraine from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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### Disciplines

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### Comments

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# Russia and Ukraine: What to Know from a Historian

Mark McCarthy

**February 4, 2022**

What are we to make of the rising tension and the possibility of large-scale fighting breaking out between Russia and Ukraine? There are so many different forces operating at so many different levels it can be hard to know where to even begin to try to understand this dispute. Is this simply Russian President Vladimir Putin being a bully, is there any justification for the Russian position, and what role have the Ukrainians played in all of this? In trying to make sense of this standoff, I think there are several factors we must keep in mind. One issue is that the historical roots of this conflict go back almost 800 years. Another factor is that often different countries and people can have a very different understanding of the past and what that can mean for the present.

## **Historical Context**

In trying to understand how the past influences events today, one must understand the history of the region. We know the historical record for Kievan Rus goes back to the seventh century AD. Kievan Rus was a mixture of Eastern Slavs and Viking nobility. The Grand Prince was eventually located in the city of Kiev. By the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, however, Medieval Rus was in a state of decline, and the power and influence of the Grand Prince had weakened dramatically. By 1240, Medieval Rus was conquered by the invading Mongols. For the next 200 years, this part of Europe would be oriented toward the East.

When the Mongol empire itself began to recede in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, things had changed quite dramatically from before the invasion. The Eastern Slavic people were now divided into three distinct groups: Belarusians, Russians and Ukrainians. In addition, the new center of economic, political, religious, and military power had shifted from Kiev to the North and East. The new dominant power was the territory of Muscovy and the Tsar located in Moscow. But it was more than just the location of authority that had changed. In the Tsars' rise to power, they had established a much more authoritarian form of government with strict centralized control.<sup>1</sup> The Russian historian Richard Pipes has described this new form of government as Patrimonialism, where the Russian Tsars began to see their kingdoms as their own personal property and ruled the country like it was their own private estate. Many Ukrainians began to believe that Muscovy, and later Russia, was nothing more than despotic land governed by a cruel and violent tsar who had been heavily influenced by Eastern despotism.

## **Borderland**

During this rise of Muscovy, what had been the heartland of Kievan Rus was now the borderland between a growing Muscovy and the rest of Europe. Maybe it is very appropriate, and even a bit ironic, that the name Ukraine implies a borderland, or being on the edge. The eastern Ukrainians found themselves under the control of a rising Muscovy, and later Imperial Russia, while western Ukrainians found themselves under the control at various times of Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Austria, and the Ottoman Empire. What developed in the western Ukrainian lands became very different from that which developed in the East under the control of Russia, and which 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 Ukraine as a whole had much more contact with Western and Central Europe than Russia had.

It was during Russia's age of Imperialism, starting in 1721, that she started to push her borders further to the west, taking more and more western Ukrainian territory. After the formation of the Soviet Union in 1922, we see the creation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), which is at the heart of many of today's issues. The borders of the Ukrainian republic did not correspond to the historical and ethnic borders of the Ukrainian people. Much of the southern and eastern parts of the Ukrainian republic were actually part of historic Russia. For example, the city of Odessa was founded by Catherine the Great in 1794 after she conquered the territory from the Ottoman Empire. 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 Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev made the Crimean Peninsula part of the Ukrainian republic primarily for bureaucratic reasons.<sup>2</sup> Given that the Ukrainian republic was part of the larger Soviet Union, this moving of lines on a map did not seem to be that important. All of the Soviet Union was primarily governed from Moscow and not the various republics. That changed, however, in 1991 with the breakup of the Soviet Union. For nearly the first time since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Ukraine was back on the map as an independent country, but with significant parts of historic Russia within its borders.<sup>3</sup>

## **Internal Tensions**

Another factor in the tension between Russia and Ukraine is the animosity that has built up between the two groups. Imperial Russia tried a forced policy of Russification for much of their Ukrainian territory. The Ukrainian language was not to be used publicly and many Russian scholars insisted there was no separate Ukrainian language, just poorly educated peasants with a peculiar accent. Even during the Soviet times, the language of everyday life was Russian.<sup>4</sup>

During the late 1920s and early 30s, there was massive resistance to forced agricultural collectivization in Ukraine. Unlike the traditional Russian lands where there was very limited experience with private property, Ukraine farmers had owned their land for generations. They had no intention of surrendering their land and working for the newly created collective farms. The collectives were finally established by force of arms after the Ukrainians had killed much of their livestock.<sup>5</sup> Starting in 1932, Stalin tried to break Ukrainian resistance to Soviet rule with a man-made famine. Accurate records still have not been released from the archives, but the historian Robert Conquest estimates somewhere between 3 and 7 million Ukrainians died in Stalin's attempt at breaking Ukrainian nationalism by forcibly confiscating Ukrainian grain and selling it abroad. During World War II, there were actually three groups fighting each other within Ukraine: Germans, Soviets, and Ukrainian nationalists who fought both the Germans and the Soviets. The Ukrainian partisans were not fully defeated until 1955.

On the other hand, Ukrainian nationalism has a dark side as well with some factions participating in the persecution of ethnic minorities. If you look deep into the history of the Nazi camps during World War II, some of the worst guards were actually ethnic Ukrainians. More recently, Ukrainian nationalists have been responsible for a series of laws that have been designed to push the Russian language out of use even though about 30 percent of the population speaks Russian as their first language.

### **Current Conflict**

If we return to our earlier question, what is driving the conflict between Russia and Ukraine? In many ways, I think this is Putin trying to take advantage of what he perceives as a time of weakness and indecision among the Western powers. For example, even though the United States was a signatory to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum which assured Ukrainian of its territorial integrity, we did not take any significant action other than sanctions after Russia took Crimea in 2014. Putin is even on record as stating that the breakup of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his mind, Ukraine should never have become independent from Russia, and it only happened due to the fact that Russia was at its weakest point in centuries in 1991 after the breakup of the old USSR.<sup>6</sup> Russia also has historic ties to eastern Ukraine, and significant portions of Ukraine were part of historic Russia until reasons of bureaucratic efficiency redrew the map during Soviet times. If we look further back, Russia does trace its history back to the same Kievan Rus that Ukraine does. There is another factor at play as well, and that is the paternalistic impulse that many Russians have towards the other Slavic people in Europe. For many Russians, it is just natural that other Slavic people would want to live under the benevolent guidance of Russia.<sup>7</sup> For many ethnic Russians, these arguments carry a lot of weight. In addition, Russia has fought and died for this territory, from the wars against the Ottoman Empire, to the Crimean War against Britain and France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to Germany twice in World War I and II.

On the other hand, ever since the rise of Muscovy in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Russia has had a poor track record for how it has treated ethnic Ukrainians, especially those interested in preserving

their separate culture or in establishing their own independent state. The losses the Ukrainians have endured at the hand of Russia and other neighboring states are reflected in the opening lines of the Ukrainian national anthem, "Ukraine is not yet dead." Ukrainians have continued their work for independence, as exemplified by the Ecumenical Patriarch's recognition of the independence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church from the Russian Orthodox church in 2019. What is important to remember in looking at this conflict, though, is that it is not some recent development. It has very deep historical roots, going all the way back to the 1200s, and it involves various countries who all have different understandings of the past. What is perhaps most tragic, however, is that since 2014, this conflict has already claimed 14,000 lives.

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1. For example, before the Mongol invasion, we only have a handful of recorded legal cases where the death penalty had been used. After the rise of Muscovy, the use of the death penalty became much more widespread. In fact, Ivan IV (Terrible) was known to personally take part in the torture session of prisoners.
2. Why Khrushchev did this has become a point of contention in recent years. Given the fact that the Crimean Peninsula is physically cut off from Russia by Ukraine does give some credence to the argument that this was done in part for bureaucratic simplicity.
3. From 1240 until 1991, there were two times when Ukraine could be found on a map as an independent territory. The first time was from 1648 – 1654. The second time was from 1918 – 1920.
4. During the summer of 2017, I was in Ukraine with a group of Dordt students and we had the opportunity to visit the region around Chernobyl. Whole towns and villages were simply abandoned within days after the explosion at reactor 4. One of the things that caught my attention was all the public displays of text, from signs to building schematics, and even the schoolbooks left in the abandoned classrooms were all in Russian. I did not see anything written in Ukrainian from the pre-disaster time.
5. Soviet authorities denied any resistance to collectivization. If one travels to Moscow today and looks at the artwork in the Kievskaya metro station, one can see mosaics of Ukrainian farmers joyfully working on the collective farms.

6. In fact, Putin published a 5,000 word essay this past July in which he questioned the right of Ukraine to exist as an independent country and argued that in reality, Ukranians and Russians were one people.
7. One time while I was doing dissertation research in St. Petersburg, my host family tried to convince me that all Slavic people wanted to live under Russian protection because they were all brothers with the same cultural and historical roots.