

Understanding Russia's War Against Ukraine

Understanding why the Russia-Ukraine war started is critical to understanding how it is being fought now, and how it might end. It did not start because of NATO, which only came into existence in 1949 after Moscow reneged on its promise to allow free elections in the countries it had liberated from the Nazis. Moscow has been fighting to gain control of Ukraine since the fifteenth century, because it is the historical link to Byzantium and the acceptance of Christianity in 988.

The warning signs of imperial revanchism went largely unnoticed in the 1990s. As Western companies scrambled for investment opportunities and politicians sought to embrace a “democratic Russia”, Russian generals quietly warned that countries should not open embassies in Ukraine, as they would soon be downgraded to consulates. Western enthusiasm was not curbed by the fact that in 1992 the Russian 14th Army invaded and occupied the newly independent Moldovan state to carve out a fake “Republic of Transnistria”, nor by the brutality of the First Chechen War. It was enough though to evoke a 1997 warning from former US Secretary of State Zbigniew Brzezinski that, if Russia were to turn to fascism in the future it would invade Ukraine unless that country was part of NATO.

After the first half-hour of his interview with Putin, the frustrated pro-Russian US podcaster Tucker Carlson was so confused he asked: “What century are we in?” Putin was convincing Carlson that it was “Russians” who accepted Christianity in Kyiv in 988 and that Ukrainians don't actually exist, since they were “invented” by Austro-Hungarian and Polish elites in the nineteenth century. What Putin and many Russians are feeling is the collapse of empire, which in central and eastern Ukraine left a legacy of descendants of Russian colonisers. It is the same feeling that Poles had with respect to western Ukrainian lands and the ethnic Poles living there in 1918-19 as they themselves emerged

from a century and a half of division between three empires.

Putin's historical mythology explains why the war is genocidal. His aim is to destroy all vestiges of Ukrainian nationality through executions, prison camps and forced Russification. Where Russians have occupied Ukrainian territory, Nazi-style burning of Ukrainian books has taken place, museums have been destroyed or looted, and people found speaking Ukrainian have been arrested and murdered. The International Criminal Court has indicted Putin for the war crime of kidnapping twenty thousand Ukrainian children and allocating them among Russian families. If the current war were about “NATO expansion” none of that would be necessary.

Putin's view of Russian history is delusional. From before the ninth and tenth centuries the ancestors of today's Ukrainians lived in the region surrounding Kyiv that was known from at least the twelfth century as “Ukraine”. During that time Kyiv was the centre of a vast but loosely knit empire, and the people of Ukraine were called “Rus”. Their language differed from that of the residents of Novgorod in the north and the Viatichi tribe in the vicinity of Moscow who only received Christianity from Kyiv in the mid-twelfth century. Centuries after Kyiv had fallen to the Mongol Horde in 1240, in Novgorod and the Grand Duchy of Muscovy people began to adopt the “Rus” name as a way of linking their history to Kyiv and thus to Byzantium.

While the statehood and imperialist attitude of Muscovites was moulded through two and a half centuries of vassalage to the Golden Horde, in the mid-fourteenth century the then powerful and still pagan Grand Duchy of Lithuania defeated the Horde in central Ukraine. The Rus-Ukrainians were thereby cut off from the Horde and influenced the Lithuanian nobility through its adoption of Orthodoxy and Kyiv's legal code.

For the same reason that Putin's forces invaded

Ukraine in 2014 and launched the full-scale invasion in 2022, the Grand Duchy of Muscovy fought five wars spanning fifty years across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries against the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The aim was to capture Kyiv. In 1514 an army composed of Lithuanians, Ukrainians and Poles under the command of the Ukrainian prince Konstantyn Ostrozkyi defeated a Muscovite army at the Battle of Orsha in today's Belarus. The 30th Separate Brigade of the current Ukrainian Armed Forces is named after Prince Ostrozkyi, bears his coat of arms, and continues that battle in eastern Ukraine.

Putin had been planning Russia's current war against Ukraine since at least 2003. While publicly declaring in 2002 that as "a sovereign nation Ukrainian has its own relations with NATO", just as Brzezinski had foreshadowed in 1997, Putin knew that if Ukraine joined NATO it would be beyond Russia's reach. On September 17, 2003, seven months after he signed a border treaty with Ukraine, Putin addressed a meeting of Russia's military, security and political elite in Dagestan. His message was that since in his view Kyiv was the "birthplace of Russian statehood" it was intolerable for it to reside outside the Russian Federation.

Less than two weeks later, on September 29, 2003, the Tuzla Island Incident was sparked when Russia began constructing an earthen dam towards Ukraine's Tuzla Island in the Kerch Strait, effectively laying claim to Ukrainian territory. After President Kuchma dispatched border guards and threatened military force, Putin backed down, but commenced a hybrid war against Ukraine while Russia reformed and rebuilt its armed forces into reputedly the "second army in the world".

Russia's kinetic war was launched in 2014 with the invasion of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and later the Donbas region. The Kremlin's propaganda machine was very successful during that phase of the twelve-year Russia-Ukraine war. Throughout the world numerous media outlets and commentators reproduced copies of a purported "Russian language map" which gave the false impression of distinct Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking regions and associated loyalties. The map's message was completely undermined by the fact that in 1991 every Ukrainian region voted overwhelmingly for

independence. The absurdity of that map's implicit "thesis" is illustrated by the fact that President Zelensky is a Russian speaker, and Ukraine's supreme military commander General Oleksandr Syrskiy is not just a Russian speaker, but an ethnic Russian.

There were no "separatists", no "rebels", and no "civil war" in the Donbas region from 2014 to 2022, and nor were there "breakaway republics" as widely reported in the world's media. These were all fictions invented by the Kremlin, which controlled and paid for the invasion of the Donbas region by Russian volunteers supported by regular Russian forces. Without that invasion nothing would have happened there, just as nothing happened in major "Russian-speaking" cities like Kharkiv and Odessa. Yet the false Kremlin narrative circulating throughout the world helped Moscow's cause, in particular its claim during the full-scale invasion of 2022 that Russia was coming to the aid of its own fake "self-declared republics".

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The pro-Moscow/anti-Ukraine policy being pursued by the Trump-Vance administration in opposition to the views of a majority of ordinary Americans is not new. It follows a tradition that was first observed at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. In his 1946 memoir, "Russia, Ukraine and America", Arnold Margolin, a distinguished Jewish lawyer from Kyiv, described how as Ukraine's deputy foreign minister he met with the American Secretary of State Robert Lansing, who he assessed as "lamentably misin-

formed on the actual situation in Eastern Europe". Placing complete trust in the imperialist White Russian forces of Kolchak and Denikin, Lansing could not understand why Ukrainians would not simply federate with Russians as the US had federated. He also stubbornly refused all efforts to be educated by Margolin and his colleagues, and Ukrainians received no Western aid, which led to a predictable result.

As the Soviet Union crumbled under its own incompetence in 1991, the US again supported Russian imperialism over Ukraine's national aspirations. The tone of President George H.W. Bush's "Chicken Kyiv" speech, which he delivered to stunned Ukrainian lawmakers in their own parliament, was brilliantly captured by the *Australian's* foreign correspondent Nicolas

Rothwell. His August 7 headline read, "Bush sides with old order in fear of the unknown". In total ignorance Bush warned against replacing "a far-off tyranny with local despotism" and "suicidal nationalism based on ethnic hatred". The Ukrainian people gave him their answer three months later with a 90 per cent vote for independence.

In the years immediately following Ukraine's independence, the US President Bill Clinton, together with the UK Prime Minister John Major and Russia's Boris Yeltsin, pressured Ukraine to give up the large nuclear stockpile it inherited from the USSR in exchange for a worthless "security assurance" known as the Budapest Memorandum. One can understand the West's nervousness at the sight of a "new" state suddenly becoming the world's third nuclear power, but why did they also force Ukraine to destroy its fleet of forty-four Tupolev strategic bombers and to deliver over 1,000 long-range Kh-55 cruise missiles to Russia (which since 2022 Russia has fired back into Ukraine)? In 2014 President Obama reneged on the Budapest Memorandum, signalling to Putin that the US would not intervene, and even removing machine-guns from the 100 Humvees he promised to deliver to Ukraine.

The US was ready to abandon Ukraine on the eve of the 2022 invasion. Late in 2021 the US's mole in the upper echelons of the Putin regime provided full knowledge about the impending full-scale invasion. US Under Secretary of State Victoria Nuland advised Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba to "start digging trenches", while Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told him that the US would once again "do nothing". The Americans had swallowed the Russian propaganda narrative that Ukraine would collapse in seventy-two hours. Joe Biden even gave Putin a green light, signalling that the US would not be concerned if there was just a "minor incursion".

But Ukraine did not collapse in accordance with the propaganda script written by the Kremlin. While the Ukrainians' victory over a far superior Russian force at the Battle of Kyiv was narrow, they prevailed because they still had enough Soviet-era and more recent Ukrainian-made weapons, and quickly adopted drones as a cornerstone of intelligent asymmetric warfare. The false Russian propaganda narrative that is still rolled out by pro-Russian voices in the West asserts that Ukrainians had accepted Russia's terms for a ceasefire in Istanbul in late March 2022. They were maximalist demands for the total capitulation of Ukraine, and President Zelensky's response was that it would have been treason to accept them. Russia has never wavered from those demands.

Despite the Biden administration's always late drip-fed assistance and the EU's reticence, Ukraine has already won the war strategically. It won back a substantial swathe of land that had been occupied by Russian forces and is holding the Russians along a 1,200-kilometre contact line in the east. In four years of full-scale war Russia has not established air superiority, has failed to capture and hold even one major regional city, has lost one third of its Black Sea fleet, and lost an enormous amount of military equipment. However, as the war has progressed to a battle of missiles, drones and interceptor drones, much of the lost equipment has been rendered obsolete and the opposing armies now face each other across a vaguely defined forty-to-fifty-kilometre "kill zone" separating and often intertwining them.

While Russia holds a numerical advantage, Putin's insistence on advances for propaganda "wins" results in a Russian:Ukrainian casualty ratio in the order of 2.5:1 since 2022 and considerably higher this year. During 2025 Russia suffered 415,000 casualties to gain 0.8 per cent of Ukraine's territory, and the 35,000 casualties Russia sustained during March exceeded its recruitment efforts.

The Russians see their path to victory through the denial of Western aid to Ukraine, whilst undermining the Ukrainian population's will to resist by targeting civilians with constant drone attacks, the destruction of civilian infrastructure including electricity and heating facilities in winter. Swarms of 700 drones a day are now attacking Ukrainian cities. During 2026 Ukraine and Russia are each expected to produce 7 million drones.

The Ukrainians see their path to victory through a more focused strategy of wearing down the Russian war economy by attacking its oil-exporting facilities that are the life-blood of its military effort. Ukraine was formerly the major missile manufacturing centre of the USSR, and Ukrainian engineers have rapidly developed a range of home-grown missiles, drones and innovative autonomous vehicles. Its "Flamingo" cruise missile carries a payload of 1,150 kilograms for 3,000 kilometres. Ukrainian missiles and drones are now regularly destroying and penetrating Russian air defences, causing serious damage to Russian refineries, military factories and logistics hubs. It is the same logic the Allies applied in blockading Germany during the Great War.

As the US under Donald Trump cut off aid to Ukraine and is pivoting to alignment with Russia, during 2025 Europe has stepped up its support for Ukraine to plug the gap. The US negotiating team led by real estate moguls Steve Witkoff and

Jared Kushner have made seven trips to Moscow and none to Kyiv, which Zelensky describes as “disrespectful”. They are as ignorant of Ukraine and Eastern European affairs as Robert Lansing was in 1919, but with a financial motive to pressure Ukraine to hand over its four fortress cities in the Donbas to Russia in exchange for another worthless security guarantee.

While both Russia and Ukraine have up to now played the US “negotiations circus” to save face, the war will not end with negotiations. Many Ukrainians might be happy to freeze at the current contact line were Ukraine to be accepted into the EU, and significant numbers of US and European troops and military kit were stationed on Ukrainian soil to allow the “South Korea model” to play out, but Putin would never agree to it. He is more Hitler than Hindenburg.

It's worth repeating here that Putin's goal is not to capture 20 per cent of Ukraine's land but to destroy the Ukrainian state and Ukrainian national consciousness. The only times Russia has come to the negotiating table over the past century and a half was when it was defeated militarily, and defeating Russia in this war would require a collapse of its energy-based war economy. The Trump administration's war against Iran and subsequent lifting of sanctions on Russian oil exports has thrown Putin a lifeline, but Ukraine's bombing of exporting refineries has largely neutralised the effect so far. In another blow to Ukraine, up to one thousand \$4 million Patriot missiles that could have been used to stop Russia's hypersonic Kinzhal missiles were fired by the US and its allies to stop Iran's \$50,000 Shahed drones. Last year Zelensky offered the Americans access to Ukraine's low-cost (\$1,000 to \$6,000) interceptor drones, but was ignored.

In the midst of the US-Israel war against Iran, Zelensky has played a poor hand rather well, and has even found some new cards. The Ukrainian president recently concluded ten-year agreements with three key countries in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and

Qatar) and Ukraine is already working on drone technology with Germany, Norway, Sweden and the Netherlands, with the UK, France and Italy to follow. With 200 dynamic defence sector companies Ukraine is emerging as a military equipment powerhouse which could result in an “Israel model”—a militarised society in which foreign investment is underpinned by an implicit EU guarantee. That is, if the war were to conclude the only way it can—through Russia's economic and/or military failure.

While the electoral defeat of Viktor Orban and the provision of a 90-billion-euro loan for Ukraine are encouraging, the Trump administration's re-setting of relations with Belarus is a worrying development. This would potentially allow a backdoor conduit for US equipment and parts to flow to Russia. Simultaneously Russia is progressing its integration and takeover of the Belarus army, raising the spectre of Russia opening a new 1,084-kilometre northern front. This would stretch Ukraine's armed forces and threaten the capital again.

President Trump has threatened that the US might pull out of NATO over its “lack of support” during the US-Iran war, and previously threatened a NATO ally, Denmark, with invasion. With the current unpopularity of the US in Europe and rising uncertainty about NATO, the EU's Commissioner for Defence and Space, Andrius Kubilius, has proposed the concept of a new “European Defence Union”. President Zelensky agrees that there is scope for a new security architecture for Europe that in his view should include Ukraine, the UK, the EU, Norway and Turkiye. If that happened, Eastern Europe would return to a situation where Moscow's aggression towards Europe is checked by Lithuanians, Poles and Ukrainians, as they did for centuries, but this time with the backing of Central and Western Europe—a military power that in Zelensky's assessment would be “formidable”.

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