



The War For Ukraine

August 21, 2015 **Herman Pirchner, Jr.** *The Journal of International Security Affairs*

Related Categories: Russia; Ukraine

Ukraine is at war. Since the spring of 2014, Vladimir Putin's Russia has waged a concerted campaign of aggression against its smaller western neighbor. Moscow's "hybrid warfare" in support of separatist enclaves in Ukraine's Donbass region has included the insertion of military forces to augment pro-Russian insurgents, large-scale deliveries of military matériel to these fighters, and the widespread use of propaganda. The Kremlin's efforts have met with political and economic pressure from the West, in the form of multilateral sanctions imposed by the Obama administration and the European Union. However, the strongly negative effects of this pressure on the Russian economy have not caused the Kremlin to change course in any meaningful way.

Why does Russia covet Ukraine? And why has Moscow persisted in its offensive there, despite the mounting political and economic costs? The answers to those questions can be found in the bloody shared history of the two countries. So, too, can a sense of what the next steps in this crisis might be.

A bloody history

Without the proper historical context, it is impossible to understand the current struggle between Russia (and its supporters in Ukraine) and Ukraine itself. Much of the current conflict is rooted in Moscow's long-standing imperialist ideology, which denies the very existence of an independent Ukrainian state. President Putin himself admitted as much when he stated that Russians "always saw the Russians and Ukrainians as single people. I still think this way now."^[1]

History, however, tells us otherwise. The beginnings of the Ukrainian nation can be traced to the arrival of Slavic tribes in the territory of present day central and eastern Ukraine in the 6th century. By the 11th century, the state of Kievan Rus' (which was founded in 862) was geographically the largest state in Europe. The 13th century, however, saw much of it destroyed by Mongol raiders.

Over the following 100 years, in the wake of the Mongol retreat, the Poland-Lithuanian commonwealth annexed most of the territory of Ukraine. By the mid-17th century, an increasingly powerful Russia gained sovereignty over much of the land, with the remainder staying under Polish rule until the second and third partitions of Poland (1793 and 1795) ended Poland's status as an independent country. From that time until its 1991 independence, most of today's Ukraine was ruled by Czarist Russia and subsequently its successor, the USSR.

Russia's dominion came at a high price. During the 124 years of Tsarist rule (1793 to 1917), repeated efforts were made to suppress all vestiges of Ukrainian culture. Publishing in the Ukrainian language, teaching in the Ukrainian language, and survival of independent churches not under control of the Russian Orthodox Church were all severely curtailed.

Between 1917 and 1920, there was a brief period of declared Ukrainian independence from Moscow. By the early 1920s, however, the Soviets gained control and began their consolidation of power. This effort took three major forms.

The first was the horror of the man-made famine known as the "Holodomor." Today, a large museum in Kyiv documents the estimated 2,000,000 Ukrainians that were intentionally starved to death by the communists in the early 1930s. This tragedy unfolded in brutal fashion; Ukrainian-speaking villages were surrounded by Bolshevik forces, which removed the village's food supply and then let no one in or out—simply allowing the residents to die slow deaths from starvation.

That policy was followed by the widespread imprisonment and assassination of Ukrainian opposition forces. Outright murders, show trials, and sentences to hard labor in "Gulag" camps further crushed the resistance of Ukrainian nationalists and anti-communists. An estimated 80 percent of Ukraine's cultural elite were killed or sent to the camps during the decade of the 1930s alone. ^[2]

With resistance thereby minimized, Moscow turned its attention to cultural repression, most significantly the suppression of the Ukrainian language. As late as 1933, 88 percent of all students in Soviet Ukraine were receiving instruction in Ukrainian. ^[3] By 1938, however, the study of Russian had become mandatory in all schools. The effects of this policy were far-reaching; by 1988, Ukrainian remained the language of instruction for only 48 percent of students. Nevertheless widespread opposition remained; shortly before Ukraine's independence in 1989, an estimated 65 percent of Ukraine's citizens still spoke Ukrainian as their first language. ^[4]

Promises not kept

Ukraine's 1991 independence came about as the result of a vote in which every Ukrainian oblast (the equivalent of a U.S. state) opted in favor of a break with Moscow. Yet soon thereafter, a chorus of prominent voices in Moscow—including the famed anti-communist historian Alexandr Solzhenitsyn and Dmitri Rogozin, currently Russia's Deputy Prime Minister—began calling for the reabsorption of Ukraine and other former Soviet territories.

One of the main obstacles to neo-imperialist Russian ambitions was the fact that independent Ukraine was a nuclear state. That status, however, was removed by diplomatic means. In the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, Russia, the United Kingdom, Ukraine and the United States all agreed to “guarantee” the territorial integrity of Ukraine if it agreed to give up its nuclear arsenal. [5] Thereafter, Kyiv did so.

Yet, formal guarantees notwithstanding, Moscow soon began taking steps to make its expansionist aspirations a reality. In 2001, the Russian Duma enacted a law outlining the procedure for the expansion of the territory of the Russian Federation. [6] (That law, whose compatibility with international law was later endorsed by the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission, would become the template for the annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula some thirteen years later, in the spring of 2014). Thereafter, in 2003, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov advanced a strategic doctrine that authorized the use of Russian force to protect Russian citizens living beyond the borders of Russia. [7] Subsequently, in 2004, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov’s government made it easier for Russians living in other countries (including those in Ukraine) to obtain Russian citizenship. [8] The same year, Russia launched a movement to form a single economic space with Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine. [9]

Moscow’s meddling was soon felt in Ukraine. In the country’s 2004 presidential election, Russia strongly promoted the candidacy of pro-Kremlin politician Viktor Yanukovich, who used massive amounts of fraud to “win” the poll. The Ukrainian public’s reaction to the electoral fraud ushered in the popular unrest known as the “Orange Revolution.” The subsequent revote brought pro-Western advocate Viktor Yushchenko to power in January of 2005. But the next half-decade of poor government and graft took their toll, and five years later Yanukovich again won the Ukrainian presidency—this time in elections that were generally regarded as fair.

Disorder followed. In the years since, the well-documented graft and theft of assets perpetrated by Yanukovich and his inner circle practically bankrupted the country. Less well documented during the same period was the Yanukovich regime’s denigration of the Ukrainian military and security services, as well as its promotion of those with questionable loyalty to the Ukrainian state. The Yanukovich years also saw creeping Russian influence in the form of activities launched through Russia’s five Ukrainian-based consular operations in the country—institutions that worked in parallel with the Russian intelligence services. Their ample budget was used to employ and/or organize Russian nationalists, mafia figures, and the marginally ideological unemployed as a collective asset to be used at the proper moment. That moment came in the Fall of 2013.

The Maidan, and after

In the Fall of 2013, Ukraine faced a transformative choice. Preceding months had seen the Yanukovich government, by then in dire need of an economic bailout, begin serious consultations with the European Union over the possibility of an Association Agreement that would decisively hitch Ukraine’s economy to the Euro-Atlantic sphere. For Russia, this represented an alarming development, and Moscow employed tremendous economic leverage and political clout to sway the Yanukovich government back into its orbit.

The ploy worked, but at a high cost. In November of 2013, Yanukovich reversed course, opting for a deeper partnership with Russia in lieu of increased commerce with Europe. But Yanukovich’s retreat from his pledges to build Ukraine’s economic relationship with Europe led to protests in Ukraine’s Maidan Square, an open area in the center of Kyiv. The escalating protests, which grew to encompass other Ukrainian cities as well, led to the toppling of the Yanukovich government in early 2014.

The subsequent turmoil, however, provided a new opening for Moscow. The power vacuum that followed Yanukovich’s ouster in Kyiv gave the Kremlin fresh opportunities to expand its influence, and it seized the moment, stage-managing the infiltration of masked, armed, and unidentified Russian forces into Ukraine. Through bullying tactics, they took control of Crimea and staged a fraudulent March 2014 political referendum that led to that territory’s subsequent annexation by Russia.

This proved to be just the beginning. By the Spring of 2014, Russia’s attention had already turned to other parts of Ukraine. Moves toward independence by pro-Russian forces appeared in the provinces of Odessa and Dnipropetrovsk, but were successfully subdued by the fledgling government of Petro Poroshenko in Kyiv. In the Eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, however, those efforts proved more resilient—and more dangerous.

There, demonstrators, backed by Russian interests, began to appear demanding union with Russia. Soon, there were armed men taking over cities and villages. In April of 2014, separatist forces in the Donetsk region attempted to solidify their political status through the creation of an independent Donetsk People’s Republic. Later the same month, pro-Russian forces in Luhansk did the same. And weeks later, the two upstart enclaves signed an agreement forming a confederation. All of these moves were backed by Moscow, which lionized the separatists on state media and which, later, would dispatch both arms and manpower in the guise of “humanitarian convoys” to reinforce the rebels.

By now, however, the new Ukrainian government was determined to fight. So were several grassroots militias formed from Ukrainian reservists and volunteers. After initially losing territory, these forces began a successful counteroffensive in mid-July 2014 and looked poised to regain full control of Luhansk and Donetsk. That is, until the Russian government decided to raise the stakes in late August 2014, sending Russian soldiers with advanced equipment into the fray. Predictably, the poorly trained and equipped Ukrainian forces took heavy casualties and lost much of the territory they had previously regained.

This tug-of-war eventually led to the first Minsk Agreement, a provisional cease-fire that was signed on September 5, 2014. But this deal did not hold, and Russian-led troops took additional territory, prompting another agreement, colloquially known as Minsk II, to be signed on February 11, 2015. As of this writing, that agreement as well is being routinely violated, with ongoing casualties on both sides and international observers not being permitted promised access to Russian-controlled areas. Further, an estimated 50,000 Russian troops are currently massed on its border with Ukraine, and an additional 50,000 are located in Crimea.¹⁰ Based on a maps and statistics provided by the Ukrainian government, it is possible to estimate that roughly a third of the combined territories of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts are today under Russian control. This, however, only constitutes approximately three percent of the territory of Ukraine – far less than the mainstream media, and Russian propaganda, would have us believe.

Moscow’s risky game

Most of the fighters that make up the pro-Russian forces were born on the territory of present day Ukraine. These fighters, trained, supplied and directed by Moscow, can be divided into three basic categories (although no one knows definitively how many fall into each). The first contingent is made up of those who really wish to be a part of the Russian Federation, and are fighting for that cause. The second is composed of mafia types who have been promised riches when property is confiscated from conquered Ukrainian territory. Finally, there are those who are engaged in the fighting simply because they need the money that is being paid to separatist forces by Russia.

However, as noted above, there are a significant number of Russian troops (recently estimated at 12,000 [11]) and irregulars fighting in Ukraine—all of them under Moscow's direct command. These Russians direct the military campaign and have provided all those fighting against Ukraine with weapons far more advanced than anything possessed by the Ukrainian side. [12] Russian-based fighters can also be divided into three categories, each again of unknown size. The first contingent is made up of Russian nationalists drawn from various branches of the Russian armed forces, including officers directing combat activities. The second encompasses "volunteers" from the Russian army, who are heavily encouraged by Moscow to take part in the hostilities. The final group is composed of Chechens, some of whom were released from Russian jails and are paid to fight. [13]

For Russia, the current state of affairs is far less favorable than it appears at first glance. The Kremlin is being forced to lie to its own people about the presence of Russian soldiers in Ukraine, and their deaths there. Numerous news stories about the surreptitious burials of soldiers killed in the fighting in Ukraine [14] underscore the fact that the deaths of Russian soldiers on the Ukrainian battlefield have become an inconvenient truth, and one Russian authorities are taking great pains to cover up. Nevertheless, the number of Russian casualties has been great enough that there are now the beginnings of a movement of military mothers, who have begun to trade information and demonstrate against government lies. [15]

This state of affairs is not new. A similar movement emerged during the time of the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan. Over time, it had a significant effect on Soviet policy, and contributed to the Kremlin's decision in 1989 to cut its losses and withdraw from that country. This suggests that the continued flow of body bags back to Russia, or any increase in Russian casualties, will create political problems for Russian President Vladimir Putin. In the electronic age, it has become harder to lie to your own people.

Opposition is also showing its face among the elite that form Putin's power base. Former Prime Minister and FSB chief Yevgeny Primakov recently remarked that it was time to cut a deal over Ukraine, because Russia could not afford to become isolated in the world. [16] It is unlikely that Primakov, a savvy long-time operator in the cutthroat power politics of the Kremlin, would have made such a public remark while enjoying significant support within the security services that are the true masters of Russia.

Opposition is also beginning to build from the country's oligarchs and local elites. Massive government projects, such as a dam system to stop the annual floods in the Russian Far East, have been postponed or cancelled as a result of the costs associated with Russia's war effort in Ukraine. The economic fortunes of Russia's wealthy have also declined noticeably. In just one example, well-off Russians are now finding it difficult to unload expensive real estate at even a quarter of its previous value, because everyone else with enough money to buy premium properties is also trying to get their cash and families out of the country. These stakeholders have little faith in Russia's future—especially its short-term future, as the country's economy is not expected to recover anytime soon. Getting Crimea was great, goes the line, but is Eastern Ukraine worth the cost?

Nevertheless, Putin and his inner circle believe they can up the ante and expand their holdings and influence at the expense of Ukraine and other countries. Their confidence rests on the fact that they are masters of propaganda in the West (which they expect to divide by muddying various policy debates with bad information) and within Russia itself. Domestically, they are convinced that the Russian public will believe what it is told, and that therefore Russians will support Putin no matter the cost. Prevalent, too, is the belief that Putin has an iron will—one that will ultimately cause the materialistic, divided West to surrender.

Ukraine's struggle

The picture on the Ukrainian side is equally complex. Years of misrule under Yanukovych left Ukraine's army in horrible condition, with an unreliable officer corps and questionable loyalties among its commanding officers. This state of affairs has changed substantially over the past year, as many of the officers of the Yanukovych era have been progressively dismissed by the new government in Kyiv.

The army is not alone, however. Independently led and financed militias (many guess up to 30 fighting on the Ukrainian side) have played a large role in the fighting to date. Funded by oligarchs, public fundraisers, and by individual soldiers (who have to buy their own equipment when joining a militia), these highly motivated—if ill-trained (volunteers go through a week of training before seeing combat) [17]—soldiers have been effective and should be increasingly so as they are fully integrated into the Ukrainian Army. [18]

Nevertheless, problems abound. For example, some militia units and their civilian supporters have been tied to far right ideologies, fueling Russian propaganda of fascist politics in Ukraine. Yet, as recent polling documents, these extremists represent a smaller percent of the population in Ukraine than in many Western European countries. In the 2014 presidential election, Ukraine's two right-wing parties, the Radical Party and Svoboda, received 8 percent and 1.16 percent of the vote respectively. [19] In France's 2012 presidential election, by contrast, Marine Le Pen secured 17.9 percent for her ultra conservative party. [20]

Though the Russian public has not been told of their soldiers dying in the war, Ukraine's population is acutely aware of the thousands of casualties they have suffered to date—and are prepared to suffer more in order to regain their territory. Russia is viewed as the aggressor in a way that will preclude normal Russian-Ukrainian relations for a long time.

Ukrainians are motivated not only by the natural desire to defend themselves against an invasion, but also by memories of the past and a vision for the future. Many of those running Ukraine today are the relatives of the 2,000,000 starved to death by Moscow in the "Holodomor" of the 1930s, or of the countless others sent to the Gulag. They know their churches were repressed during both the Tsarist and Soviet periods. It is not lost on the Ukrainian leadership that these barbaric acts were carried out by Stalin's KGB or its successor organizations—governmental entities that not only dominate the government of Putin's Russia but are increasingly trying to restore the image of Stalin. Moreover, Ukrainians are presently learning how Crimea and occupied Donetsk and Luhansk are being run, and they don't want the same to happen to them. [21]

Recent economic history also counts. Ukrainians know that a quarter-century ago, Ukrainians and Poles were roughly comparable in terms of economic status and standard of living. Yet today, the per capita income of Poles is three times higher than that of Ukrainians. This and other examples of prosperity among the Western-oriented countries of Eastern Europe have bred a desire for European freedoms and economic advantages among ordinary Ukrainians. These are advantages they know they will not obtain if they become an expanded Russian state.

The leadership in Kyiv understands as well that economic and legal reforms are necessary if Ukraine is to be a prosperous and independent state. It is not yet clear if these efforts will be successful, but great progress has already been made in at least one area: energy diversification. Two years ago, Ukraine received 95 percent of its natural gas from Russia, and was continually subjected to Moscow's economic blackmail. Today, perhaps as little as 40 percent of Ukrainian gas comes from Russia. [22]

Additional gains are being made in the training of Ukrainian troops sent to the front. In the past, militia troops were sent to the front lines with little or no training. Ukraine's defense minister estimated that only about 6,000 out of 130,000 troops were prepared for combat when the war began a year ago. [23] This is no longer the case; a growing number of military troops now engaged in combat against Russian and pro-Russian forces are battle tested, and have received some measure of training from foreign specialists. In April, 300 U.S. troops joined those of other countries who train Ukrainian forces in basic military tactics. [24] Modern military equipment also remains in short supply, though the situation is marginally less dire than it was. At the beginning of the war, 99 percent of equipment being used had been manufactured over a decade ago, and only one in 100 soldiers had a bullet-proof vest. [25]

There are also now the beginnings of a Lithuanian, Polish, Ukrainian military alliance and a modest amount of arms have begun to flow to Ukraine from its new partners. However, as of this writing, the Obama administration has yet to send defensive weapons to Ukraine in spite of the authorization passed, by large bipartisan votes, in both Houses of Congress.

The situation on the ground, meanwhile, continues to deteriorate. Since the signing of the most recent Minsk accords, attacks by the separatists, in violation of the original Minsk agreement, have increased the net area under Russia-backed rebel control by roughly 500 square kilometers. Here, the timing is telling; separatists took Debaltseve three days after Minsk II was signed. [26] Moreover, OSCE peacekeepers have not been given the agreed-upon access to areas controlled by Russia-backed separatists—including 90 percent of the artillery withdrawal zone, informed estimates say. [27]

Western intelligence likewise has reported that heavy artillery and tanks have been moved into Ukraine territory by Russia, including T-72B3 and T-90 tanks, Dozor armored vehicles, Pantsir-S1 air defense systems, and Grad-K rocket systems, and Buk missile systems. [28] According to a study conducted by Dr. Phillip Karber of the Potomac Foundation, roughly 890 Russian heavy weapons were introduced into the Donbas between October and December. [29]

Defense Secretary Ash Carter has summarized the current state of play as follows: "What's clear is that sanctions are working on the Russian economy...what is not apparent is how that effect on his economy is deterring Putin from following the course that was evidenced in Crimea last year." That, according to the U.S. defense chief, represents a teachable moment. "There are other things we need to be doing in recognition of the fact that...Putin does not seem to be reversing course," he told reporters in early June.³⁰ So far, however, American action has not matched this rhetoric.

What comes next?

The conflict still is far from over. Russia possesses the military capability to take still greater swathes of Ukrainian territory. The cities of Kharkiv, Mariupol, and Odessa are among the most-mentioned potential targets of Russian aggression. If the Kremlin chooses to advance militarily, however, it will most certainly face a range of adverse conditions, from greater sanctions and isolation from the international community to an insurgency in the Ukrainian territories occupied by Russia and its proxies to a steady flow of Russian soldiers who have been killed in action. All of the above would threaten Vladimir Putin's rule at home, and dictate an increasingly repressive rule in both the occupied territories he now controls and within Russia itself.

A second potential scenario is the invasion of Latvia, a NATO member nation too small to put up much resistance to Russian troops. In this case, Russian nationalists would have carried the day in Moscow—no doubt arguing that the Atlantic Alliance would never respond to the provocation and, when it in fact didn't, that Western security guarantees could no longer be believed. That would lead to still further Russian expansionism, to which Europe would need to accommodate itself.

Other futures, of course, are possible as well. Russia's current course could well take its political toll, with Putin falling from power. Should that happen, a new Russian leadership might be willing to make a political settlement. However, the opposite result is also possible: a new Russian ruler who governs even more recklessly. Of course, Putin could maintain his current hold on power, drawing out the occupation of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk and using that base to destabilize other parts of Ukraine. In fact, this seems to be the dominant strategy being pursued by Moscow today, in which the economic instability associated with continued unrest in Ukraine leads to one of two outcomes desired by the Kremlin: either a counterrevolution that brings to power a more pliable, Russia-friendly government in Kyiv, or a political settlement by which Ukraine adopts a "federalist" solution granting greater autonomy to the country's east—and thereby codifying Moscow's sway there.

American options

Amid all of this uncertainty, how is the U.S. to respond? In addition to financial assistance, the arming of Ukraine is imperative. We should do so because of the commitments we gave under the Budapest Memorandum. If we do not honor that commitment, it will incentivize transnational movements and other nations who wish to move against American interests. Additionally, if the fight against Russian aggression is not made by Ukrainians in Ukraine, Americans and other NATO members may be the ones having to fight a Russian invasion of Latvia or another NATO member in the not-too-distant future.

But what type of help should we give? Former NATO Commander and Democratic Presidential candidate Gen. Wesley Clark has proffered a list of military equipment that the West should send, ranging from anti-armor weapons to night vision goggles.³¹ This seems like a good start. After all, as Clark himself has pointed out, arming Ukraine may be destabilizing—but not to do so has already proved to be destabilizing, and will likely continue to be so.

His comments hint at a larger truth. Russia, which has long sought to subjugate Ukraine, sees the country's current military weakness—and the lack of attention being paid by the West—as an opportunity. And because it does, more aggression is possible. Whatever the particulars, the United States and its allies need to begin reversing that perception. After more than a year-and-a-half of instability stemming from Moscow's actions, there's no time to lose.

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NOTES:

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