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The Russo-Ukrainian War

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Roots of Discord: Ukraine and Russia Before 2014
- **Chapter 2** Euromaidan: Revolution and Upheaval
- **Chapter 3** The Crimean Crisis and Annexation
- **Chapter 4** War in the Donbas: Separatism and Intervention
- **Chapter 5** The Downing of MH17 and International Outrage
- **Chapter 6** Minsk Agreements: Diplomacy and Deadlock
- **Chapter 7** Life Along the Frontlines: Civilian Stories (2014–2021)
- **Chapter 8** The Frozen Conflict: Stalemate in Donbas
- **Chapter 9** Ukraine’s Turn West: NATO and European Aspirations
- **Chapter 10** Russia’s Military Buildup (2021): Ominous Signals
- **Chapter 11** February 2022: The Invasion Begins
- **Chapter 12** Kyiv Under Siege: The Battle for the Capital
- **Chapter 13** Mariupol: Resistance and Tragedy
- **Chapter 14** Out of the North: Russia’s Retreat from Kyiv and Chernihiv
- **Chapter 15** Southern Campaigns: Kherson and Zaporizhzhia
- **Chapter 16** The Kharkiv Counteroffensive: Ukraine Strikes Back
- **Chapter 17** Annexations and the Remaking of Borders
- **Chapter 18** Siege and Attrition: Bakhmut and the Grinding East
- **Chapter 19** The Drone War and Evolving Military Technologies
- **Chapter 20** The International Response: Sanctions, Aid, and Alliances
- **Chapter 21** Economic Fallout: Ukraine, Russia, and the World
- **Chapter 22** Humanitarian Catastrophe: Refugees and War Crimes
- **Chapter 23** Global Uncertainty: Energy, Food, and Geopolitics
- **Chapter 24** The Search for Peace: Negotiating the Unthinkable
- **Chapter 25** The War’s Legacy: Europe and the World Remade

Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian War is a conflict that has transformed the European landscape and reverberated across the globe, shaping the dawn of the twenty-first century with violence, resistance, and far-reaching consequences. What began in 2014 as a regional crisis—sparked by clashing national identities, political upheavals, and Russia’s seizure of Crimea—has metastasized into the largest and deadliest war on the continent since World War II. At its heart lies a battle over sovereignty, the rules of international order, national survival, and the very identity of Ukraine.

For Ukraine, the war is existential. It is a struggle to defend its borders, its democratic aspirations, and its right to determine its own future. From the earliest days of the Euromaidan protests in late 2013, through the steadfast defense of Kyiv and beyond, Ukrainians have mobilized in unprecedented ways—on the battlefield and in civic life—determined to resist Russian aggression. The war has demanded profound sacrifices from the population, triggering a humanitarian catastrophe and reshaping every aspect of Ukrainian society.

For Russia, the war has been both a project of imperial reassertion and an attempt to prevent Ukraine’s westward drift. Driven by a blend of historical grievance, geopolitical ambition, and domestic calculation, the Kremlin has pursued an increasingly aggressive stance—deploying conventional forces, annexing territory, and leveraging disinformation and diplomatic confrontation. The invasion in February 2022 marked a shocking new phase, demolishing post-Cold War taboos against deliberate cross-border conquest in Europe.

Beyond the immediate combatants, the war has forced the world to confront profound questions. The international response—ranging from diplomatic condemnation and economic sanctions to massive flows of military and humanitarian aid—has exposed both the strengths and limitations of the twenty-first century’s global order. It has created new alliances, accelerated historic decisions such as Sweden and Finland’s NATO accession bids, and redrawn the strategic map of Europe and Eurasia.

Yet, the war’s toll cannot be measured only in ammunition, destroyed cities, or geopolitical drama. It is a catastrophe for millions of civilians. The refugee crisis is among the most severe in modern history, and allegations of war crimes abound. Economic shocks have rippled through food and energy markets, fostering instability and hardship far beyond the war’s immediate theater. Both Ukraine and Russia, as well as the global community, have been forced to reckon with the destructive power of armed conflict in an interdependent world.

This book, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: A History*, aims to provide a comprehensive narrative of the conflict's origins, major turning points, key actors, and wide-ranging consequences. Drawing on the perspectives of those on the ground, international observers, and the evolving political landscape, it charts the path from the Euromaidan uprising to the current stalemate, while addressing the broader themes of sovereignty, identity, and the fate of the post-Cold War order. As the war grinds on with no definitive end in sight, understanding its history is indispensable to contemplating Europe's future—and the prospects for peace.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Roots of Discord: Ukraine and Russia Before 2014

To understand the full-scale conflict that erupted in 2022, and indeed the broader Russo-Ukrainian War that began in 2014, one must delve into the intricate and often fraught history that shaped the relationship between these two nations. Their shared past, stretching back centuries, is a complex tapestry woven with threads of kinship, cultural exchange, periods of cooperation, and, crucially, recurring patterns of dominance and resistance. This shared heritage, often invoked by both sides for vastly different purposes, forms the bedrock upon which contemporary grievances and aspirations are built.

The narrative of Eastern Slavs begins in the medieval state of Kyivan Rus', a loose federation of East Slavic and Finno-Ugric peoples from the 9th to the 13th centuries. Kyiv, the modern capital of Ukraine, was its undeniable center, a vibrant hub of trade and culture that adopted Orthodox Christianity from Byzantium in 988 CE. This shared baptismal moment is frequently cited by Moscow as evidence of a singular historical brotherhood. However, over time, the political landscape fragmented. The Mongol invasions of the 13th century severely weakened Kyivan Rus', leading to a divergence in the historical paths of the lands that would eventually become Ukraine and Russia.

While the northern parts of Kyivan Rus' gradually coalesced into the Grand Duchy of Moscow, which would become the heart of the future Russian Empire, the lands of Ukraine found themselves under various foreign powers. For centuries, Ukrainian territories were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and later the Ottoman Empire. This prolonged exposure to Western and Central European influences, particularly Polish, fostered a distinct cultural and political identity in Ukraine, marked by a tradition of Cossack self-governance and a connection to European legal and social norms that differed significantly from the more autocratic traditions developing in Moscow.

The turning point that cemented Russia's influence over a significant portion of Ukraine came in the mid-17th century. The Treaty of Pereiaslav in 1654 saw the Cossack Hetmanate, a Ukrainian proto-state, enter into an agreement with the Tsardom of Russia. While interpretations of this treaty vary wildly—Ukrainians often view it as a military alliance that was subsequently violated, Russians as an act of reunification—it marked the beginning of centuries of Russian imperial expansion into Ukrainian lands. Over time, the Russian Empire absorbed more and more of Ukraine, gradually eliminating Cossack autonomy and imposing its language, administration, and cultural norms.

By the 19th and early 20th centuries, most of Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire, with smaller western portions under Austro-Hungarian rule. During this period, Ukrainian national identity, though suppressed, began to assert itself more forcefully through cultural movements, literature, and nascent political activism. The Russian Empire's policies of Russification, aimed at integrating non-Russian populations, often backfired, fueling a stronger desire for distinct Ukrainian expression and, eventually, independence.

The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, following the Bolshevik Revolution, provided a brief window for Ukrainian statehood. The Ukrainian People's Republic was declared, but its existence was short-lived and turbulent, caught between various warring factions, including Bolsheviks, White Russians, and foreign powers. Ultimately, the Bolsheviks prevailed, and by 1922, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic became one of the founding republics of the Soviet Union. This marked a new chapter of Russian dominance, albeit under a different ideological guise.

Within the Soviet Union, Ukraine experienced both periods of cultural flourishing, particularly in the 1920s, and immense suffering. The Holodomor, the man-made famine of 1932-1933, orchestrated by the Soviet regime, devastated Ukraine, killing millions and leaving an indelible scar on the national psyche. It is widely viewed in Ukraine as an act of genocide, a deliberate attempt to break the back of Ukrainian national resistance and independent peasantry. Subsequent Soviet policies, including purges and forced collectivization, further reinforced a sense of historical grievance and victimhood for many Ukrainians.

Despite these hardships, Ukraine remained a vital part of the Soviet Union, serving as its agricultural heartland and a significant industrial base. Ukrainian culture and language, though often suppressed and Russified, persisted. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 finally brought Ukraine its long-sought independence, a moment of profound historical significance achieved largely peacefully. The Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine, passed on August 24, 1991, marked the formal end of centuries of foreign domination and the beginning of a new, independent trajectory.

However, independence did not erase the complex historical baggage. Russia, as the successor state to the Soviet Union, continued to view Ukraine through a lens shaped by centuries of shared history and imperial tradition. For many in Moscow, Ukraine was not merely a neighboring state but an integral part of a broader "Russian world" or sphere of influence. This perspective often minimized Ukraine's distinct identity and aspirations, framing its independent choices as potentially hostile or illegitimate.

The early years of independent Ukraine were characterized by the difficult transition from communism to a market economy and democracy. Ukraine navigated its path with varying degrees of success, grappling with corruption, economic hardship, and

the challenge of building robust democratic institutions. Relations with Russia were, for the most part, pragmatic, if sometimes tense, particularly concerning the Black Sea Fleet and the status of Crimea, home to Russia's vital naval base in Sevastopol. A 1997 treaty formally divided the fleet and allowed Russia to continue basing its forces in Crimea.

Crucially, Ukraine, unlike some other former Soviet republics, increasingly looked westward, seeking closer integration with European structures and, eventually, expressing aspirations for membership in NATO. This westward orientation was driven by a desire for economic prosperity, democratic development, and, critically, security guarantees against potential Russian aggression. For Moscow, however, the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO represented an unacceptable strategic threat, a direct encroachment on what it considered its historical sphere of influence. This diverging geopolitical orientation laid the groundwork for future confrontation.

Internally, Ukraine remained a nation with regional differences, particularly between its more Ukrainian-speaking, westward-leaning western and central regions, and its more Russian-speaking, eastward-leaning southern and eastern regions. These regional nuances were often exploited by political actors, both domestic and foreign, to create divisions and foster narratives that served particular agendas. However, these internal differences, while real, did not necessarily translate into a desire for separation from Ukraine for the vast majority of its citizens.

The period leading up to 2014 also saw Ukraine experiencing its first major post-independence political upheavals. The 2004 Orange Revolution, sparked by widespread allegations of fraud in the presidential election, saw mass protests that ultimately led to a rerun of the election and the victory of Viktor Yushchenko, a pro-Western candidate. This event was a significant demonstration of Ukrainian civic power and a rejection of what many perceived as Russian interference in Ukrainian democratic processes. It further solidified Ukraine's desire for a European path, even as it intensified Moscow's concerns about the direction of its neighbor. The stage was set for a dramatic confrontation when Ukraine's pivot to Europe became a direct challenge to Russia's geopolitical ambitions.

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