Backdrop

- Map It: “How Ukraine became Ukraine, in 7 maps”
- Student Activity: 7 Maps, 7 Eras in Ukraine’s Shifting Borders
- Post Reprint: “How joining NATO and the E.U. became Ukraine’s unattainable dream”
- Post Reprint: “Why are Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine’s Donbas region a flash point for Putin?”
- Post Reprint: “Putin says he will ‘denazify’ Ukraine. Here’s the history behind that claim.”
- Post Reprint: “The Ukrainian language is having a big moment”
- Student Activity: Identity in One’s Language
The Present Relates the Past

Ukrainians remember their country’s past and still seem to be repeating it: A fertile land made a battleground by opposing forces. A buffer between Europe and Russia/U.S.S.R./Soviet Union/Russia. A people looking to the West and a people finding affinity with Russia. A people pulled and pressured against its will. This guide collects Post articles and activities that are resources to better understand this backstory.

In 7 maps, students see the control of Ukrainian land shifting as hordes, empires and countries from the 9th century on seek property and power. Group students to read the maps, answer the questions found in 7 Maps, 7 Eras in Ukraine’s Shifting Borders, and do the research of the eras. Students will make connections of the past with the present.

To understand the separatists read “Why are Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine’s Donbas region a flash point for Putin?” To grasp the Kremlin’s false claims of “neo-Nazis” in the capital and Western Ukraine read “Putin says he will ‘denazify’ Ukraine. Here’s the history behind that claim.” And to grasp something of both sides of the pleas for membership read “How joining NATO and the E.U. became Ukraine’s unattainable dream.”

The power of language to be a subtle and effective weapon is brought to light in David Stern’s “The Ukrainian language is having a big moment.” A 23-year-old actor and Ukrainian-language educator is using social media with a “breezy style and comic riffs on Ukrainian life” to uplift the language and culture of Ukraine. “Shymanovskiy describes his work as a counterweight to centuries of Russian domination in Ukraine, during which the Ukrainian language was suppressed or pushed to the margins,” states Stern.

“I think that at this time, the only weapon I have is the language itself,”” Shymanovskiy said. “‘I help to preserve at least our identity, the identity of our people.””
How Ukraine became Ukraine, in 7 maps

BY ISHAAN THAROOR AND GENE THORP

• Originally Published March 9, 2015

For the past year, Ukraine has been plunged into chaos. Mass protests against pro-Moscow President Viktor Yanukovych led to his ouster in February 2014. That sparked a spiraling crisis: a fledgling interim government in Kiev looked on as Russia first seized and then annexed the territory of Crimea, a strategic Black Sea peninsula. A pro-Russian separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine, believed to have direct backing from Moscow, has led to the deaths of thousands since.

To some, Ukraine has become the geopolitical faultline between the liberal democratic West and authoritarian, neo-imperial Russia under President Vladimir Putin. Foreign policy luminaries in Washington openly discuss the current state of affairs as a new Cold War.

Beneath the political divisions of the present lies a country’s deep, complex past. The land that’s now Ukraine has long been dear to Russian nationalists. But it has also been home to a host of other peoples and empires. Its shifting borders and overlapping histories all have echoes in the current heated moment.

What follows is a sketch of how Ukraine became Ukraine over 1,300 years of history, mapped by The Washington Post’s cartographer Gene Thorp. Ukraine’s modern borders are outlined in green throughout.

8th century to 13th century

The “Rus” — the people whose name got tacked on to Russia — were originally Scandinavian traders and settlers who made their way from the Baltic Sea through the marshes and forests of Eastern Europe down toward the fertile riverlands of what’s now Ukraine. Other Viking adventurers journeyed to Constantinople, the great capital of the Byzantine Empire, to find their fortune — sometimes as hired muscle.

The first major center of the “Rus” was at Kiev, established in the 9th century. In 988, Vladimir, a prince of the Kievan Rus, was baptized by a Byzantine priest in the old Greek colony of Khersonesos on the Crimean coast. His conversion marked the advent of Orthodox Christianity among the Rus and remains a moment of great nationalist symbolism for Russians. Putin invoked this older Vladimir in a speech last December when justifying his annexation of Crimea.

Successive Mongol invasions beginning in the 13th century subdued Kiev’s influence, and led eventually to the rise of other Rus settlements to the north, including Moscow. The Turkic descendants of the Mongol Golden Horde formed their own Khanate along the northern rim of the Black Sea.
Fast forward a few centuries, and you see how the land that’s now Ukraine lay on the margins of competing empires. It was a region of permanent contest and shifting borders. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth -- which, at its peak, encompassed a huge swath of Europe -- had dominated much of the land, but Ukraine would also see the incursions of Hungarians, Ottomans, Swedes, bands of Cossacks and the armies of successive Russian czars.

In the 17th century, Russia and Poland split much of the territory of what’s now Ukraine along the Dnieper river. Russia’s advance continued a century later, during the rule of Catherine the Great, who imagined her domains along the Black Sea constituted “Novorossiya,” or “new Russia” -- a term revived by the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Back then, the Russian court harbored dreams of collapsing the Ottoman empire and extending Moscow’s reach to Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) and even Jerusalem.

“Believe me, you will acquire immortal fame such as no other sovereign of Russia ever had,” said Grigoriy Potemkin, a prominent adviser to Catherine the Great, when offering the empress counsel in 1780 on plans to wrest Crimea away from Ottoman suzerainty. “This glory will open the way to still further and greater glory.”

Meanwhile, the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century led to the city of Lviv -- once a major regional hub and a center of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe -- falling under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian empire. It was there in the mid-19th century where Ukrainian nationalism began to take hold, rooted in the traditions and dialects of the region’s peasants and the aspirations of intellectuals who had fled the stifling rule of Russia rule further to the east.
World War I and the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 triggered more traumas and upheaval in the areas that now constitute Ukraine. The new Bolshevik government was desperate to end hostilities with Germany and its allies and signed a treaty in the town of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 ceding some of Russia’s domains to the Central powers and recognizing the independence of others, including Ukraine.

The terms of the treaty were nullified by Germany’s defeat later in the year, but the genie of Ukrainian nationalism was out of the bottle. Independence movements of various stripes sprung up in cities like Lviv, Kiev and Kharkiv, but were eventually all swept away amid the wider struggle for power in Russia.

At the end of World War I, a revived Poland reclaimed Lviv and a chunk of what’s now western Ukraine. The country was one of the key battlegrounds of the Russian Civil War, pitting Bolshevik forces against an array of armies, led by loyalists to the old czarist regime as well as other political opportunists. After a lot of bloodshed -- and other battles with Poland -- the Bolsheviks emerged triumphant, and officially declared the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic in 1922.

The years that followed would be even more traumatic: in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Ukraine suffered heavily under the rule of Soviet despot Josef Stalin. A vast segment of Ukraine’s rural population was displaced and dispossessed by Stalin’s aggressive collectivization policies. A man-made famine in 1932-3 led to the deaths of some three million people.

To make up the numbers, Russian speakers from elsewhere immigrated to Ukraine’s hollowed out towns and cities, leaving a demographic footprint that defines Ukraine’s divisive politics to this day.
World War II ravaged Ukraine. Hitler and other Nazi strategists imagined it could become the breadbasket of their larger Germany empire. Instead, it was a hideous, bloody warzone, shaped by epic, grinding battles and various massacres of civilian populations. Some Ukrainian nationalists cooperated for a time with Nazi authorities, seeing the invasion as a means to achieve their own independence. This was particularly the case in western Ukraine, which until the end of World War II, had no experience of Soviet rule.

The “fascism” of these Ukrainian guerrillas is still a source of controversy now. Some militant elements in the anti-Yanukovych protest movement actively embraced the legacy of Nazi-affiliated war heroes. The Kremlin’s propaganda organs, meanwhile, used this history to label the new government in Kiev as one riding on a wave of “neo-Nazism.”

After the end of World War II, the Soviet Union claimed Lviv and its surrounding lands in Ukraine’s west. The Crimean peninsula, whose population was majority Russian (after the mass deportation of Crimea’s Tatars), was formally ceded from Russia to the Ukrainian socialist republic in 1954 by Soviet leader Nikita Khruschev.
After the fall of the U.S.S.R.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine emerged as one of many new independent post-Soviet states in 1991. Its politics were driven by regional divides between the country’s west and the Russian-leaning east. Russia chose to maintain a naval base in Sevastopol, the main port city in Crimea’s southern tip.

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And so here we are. Russian troops, many based in Sevastopol, fanned out across the peninsula last March to aid what was ultimately Russia’s annexation of the territory. A pro-Russian insurgency in the east by the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, Ukraine’s industrial heartland, is ongoing, despite numerous attempts at ceasefires.

Kiev is seeking greater Western military assistance in what many consider to be a fight against Moscow. There are fears Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko may institute martial law in a bid to subdue the separatists, threatening the country’s already fledgling democracy. Ukraine is at a proverbial crossroads, as it has been for centuries.
7 Maps, 7 Eras in Ukraine’s Shifting Borders

First read the maps found in “How Ukraine became Ukraine, in 7 maps.” Note that today’s borders of Ukraine remain in green so you can more clearly observe how changing political leaders and military forces impact control of the land. You will be able to answer some of the questions, below, with the information provided in the text. Other questions will require research.

8th Century to 13th Century
1. How did the Byzantine Empire begin and end? How far did it reach? What was its contribution to society?
2. When did the Greeks colonize today’s Crimea?
3. What important role did Prince Vladimir play in this early era?
4. Who were the Mongols? What drew them to this area?
5. Which was established first — Kiev or Moscow?

1650 to 1812
1. Who were the Ottoman? What influence did the Ottoman Empire have in what would become Ukraine?
2. Little known today, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth once controlled much of Europe. Review and summarize its history, including the Truce of Andrusovo in 1667. What was its impact on Ukraine?
3. What dreams did Catherine the Great have for Russia?
4. How and to whom did the Ottoman Empire lose Crimea?
5. What significant roles did Lviv play in late-18th century to mid-19th century culture?

1914 to 1918
1. Who were the Bolsheviks? What were their goals?
2. Which countries did Germany fight against in WWI?
3. What were the terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed in March 1918? When the treaty was signed, into what three entities was Ukrainian land partitioned?
4. When WWI ended, what happened to Ukrainian land?
5. With which country has land east of the Donetsk River been controlled most often?

1919 to 1930s
1. What led to the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.)?
   a. What other Soviet Socialist Republics were created when WWII ended?
   b. In addition to the Baltic republics, which one was formed of southwest Ukraine?
   c. When was the U.S.S.R. formed? Who was its first leader?
2. Once again, Ukraine’s borders shifted. Before 1922 which countries claim it?
3. Who battled in the Russian Civil War? What impact did the victors have on Ukraine?
4. Always a land of fertile soil, what happened to Ukrainians under Stalin’s policies?
5. What further impact did Stalin’s collectivization policies have on towns and cities?
1945 to 1954

1. Why did Hitler want to gain Ukraine for his new empire?
2. Hoping to regain its independence, some Ukrainians in the western areas cooperated with Nazis. How are these western Ukrainians used by Vladimir Putin today?
3. Why had the western area of Ukraine no experience with Russian rule before WWII?
4. Why did Soviet leader Nikita Khruschev cede the Crimean peninsula to Ukraine Social Soviet Republic in 1954?
5. The Warsaw Pact, a mutual defense organization, was formed in 1955.
   a. Which countries were its members?
   b. What were its provisions? Why was the term “Cold War” applied at this time?

After the fall of the U.S.S.R.

1. At the end of WWII Europe was divided into two regions? What were they? Why was Russia given leadership and control over one region?
3. What factors led to the break-up of the U.S.S.R.?
4. After 1991 what is Ukraine’s political status?
5. Review previous maps, focusing on the geographic area that became Moldova S.S.R.
   a. What entities controlled that area through the years?
   b. Today its citizens speak Romanian and Russian. How can this be explained?

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1. The Crimean War took place from October 1853 to February 1856.
   a. With which countries did Russia fight against and for what reasons?
   b. “The Charge of the Light Brigade” commemorates which battle? Why is it an important battle?
   c. What contribution did Florence Nightingale make during the war?
   d. What were the terms of the Treaty of Paris?
   e. What action has brought Crimea back to the world’s attention during this period?
2. What is the significance of Russia maintaining a naval base in Sevastopol? Locate it on a map.
3. Find Donetsk River on the map. Why is the area darkened? What is happening in this area in 2022?
4. Who have been presidents of Ukraine since Petro Poroshenko?
   a. What has been their view of relations with Russia?
   b. What has been their view of relations with Europe and the United States?
5. Does Ukraine remain at “a proverbial crossroads”? What have the words and actions of Ukrainians in 2022 expressed about the government and alliances that they want?
How joining NATO and the E.U. became Ukraine’s unattainable dream

ANTHONY FAIOLA

Even before the threat of a full Russian invasion, Ukraine’s dalliance with the West had cost it dearly.

Nearly a decade ago, a civil uprising in Ukraine over President Viktor Yanukovych’s shift toward Moscow and rejection of a sweeping deal with the European Union forced him into exile — but not before the massacre of protesters in Kyiv’s Maidan Square. To punish free-willed Ukrainians, a jilted Russian President Vladimir Putin responded by partitioning their nation, annexing Crimea and staging a de facto occupation of the eastern Donbas region.

But still, Ukrainians clung to hope. In 2019, Ukraine even enshrined its will to join the West in its constitution. “Ukraine will join the E.U., Ukraine will join NATO!” declared a jubilant Andriy Parubiy, Ukraine’s speaker of the house, after the measure passed.

Western powers — even if never in agreement, or fully committed, to letting Ukraine in — dangled the hope of access to those rarefied clubs for years. Now even the distant chance that existed before of Ukraine joining NATO or the E.U. is quickly evaporating.

U.S. and European leaders stopped short of giving Putin what he has publicly demanded — a firm promise that Ukraine will never join NATO. But they have acknowledged no immediate plans to let Ukraine in, largely citing lingering problems with corruption and a weak rule of law that haven’t helped its case to join the West’s premier clubs. Washington and major European powers have also said they will not send ground forces to defend Ukraine against the Russians — something they would have had to do if Ukraine was part of NATO. The E.U., under the bloc’s rules of collective defense, would have also been bound to respond had Ukraine joined its 27-member union.

Boxed into an impossible position with neither membership card, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky this week edged closer to acknowledging reality. Ukraine’s years-long goal of joining NATO, he conceded Monday, could be little more than “a dream.” On Wednesday, the New York Times reported that the Ukrainian leader was even weighing a possible referendum that could keep his country from joining NATO, acquiescing to a key Putin demand.

“How much should Ukraine go on that path?” Zelensky had said of NATO membership Monday. “Who will support us? His ruminating underscored the frustration of a nation that has sought to escape the orbit of Russia and grasp for the kind of prosperity witnessed in former Eastern Bloc countries like Poland that joined both the E.U. and NATO. Membership in NATO and the E.U. are two different things; but they were fundamentally similar in purpose: To incorporate Ukrainian into the West.

NATO and the European Union have been flirting with Kyiv for years. At the 2008 Bucharest, Romania, summit, NATO members promised Ukraine and Georgia membership one day. Former President George W. Bush had championed a more immediate path to entry but was rebuffed by France and Germany. Since then, Russia, by attacking both nations, has sent unambiguous warnings of the cost if they do.
The failure of either the alliance or the bloc to integrate Ukraine speaks to competing realities.

On one hand, NATO and, to a lesser extent the E.U., aims to check Russian power and uphold the principle of national self-determination — that if Ukrainians want a democracy free of Moscow’s interference, they should be allowed to have one. But those lofty goals have been brought down to earth by recognition that the geopolitical realities and the need for a security balance in Europe effectively makes Ukrainian membership impossible as long as Putin sits in the Kremlin.

American leaders have been very public in opposition of the idea that autocratic Russia should maintain a sphere of influence in the old Soviet bloc. But some European leaders have seemed to tactically acknowledge Moscow’s case. That was true in 2008. “We are opposed to the entry of Georgia and Ukraine [in NATO] because we think it is not the right response to the balance of power in Europe and between Europe and Russia,” former French Prime Minister François Fillon said then. And it’s still true now. “There is no security for Europeans if there is no security for Russia,” former French President Emmanuel Macron said last week after meeting with Putin.

The E.U. is known for opening the door to new entrants, only to shut it later: Think Turkey, a country that descended deeper into autocracy and state-sponsored bullying as Brussels dragged its feet on accession talks. NATO — which let in seven Eastern European nations in 2004 — has expanded in recent years to include Montenegro and North Macedonia. But letting in the Ukrainians — who Putin insists are “one people” with Russia — is far more complex.

Ukraine’s still-messy shift to democracy remains a big issue. But the Russian leader’s morphing over the past two decades from mere autocrat to aggressive revanchist is the game changer. In 2004, when the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia — all former Soviet republics — joined NATO, there were whines and recriminations in Moscow, but no massive troop movements to their borders.

“Whass changed is the thinking of the Russian leadership,” Barry Pavel, senior vice president at the Atlantic Council, told me. “It’s become much more hostile. The thing Putin is most scared of is having a thriving democratic country with a lot of kinship with Russia right on his border. It would cause enormous problems for him. For his own narrative, for his own security and power base.”

Some argue that the West’s half-embrace of Ukraine have given it false hope, filling it with just enough bravado to keep fighting pro-Russian forces in Donbas, and clamor for the return of Crimea, rather than simply acknowledging the Russian advantage.

The United States and Europe have “sort of said, ‘we’ll help you, but we’re not going to defend you,’” Benjamin H. Friedman, Defense Priorities’s policy director, told me. “I’m not sure the exact message that sends to Kyiv, but they have been able to look to the West as a savior. That has prolonged the civil war [in the east] and made them avoid settling on Russian terms, which is sadly what their geopolitical solution requires.”

But there’s another school of thought that the West has done most of what it can for Ukraine in the geopolitical context, and its decision to refuse Russian demands for a pledge that would definitively end its NATO or E.U. dreams should be hailed. At present, the risk of nuclear war makes military confrontation with Russia on the fields of Eastern Europe a non-starter. But the West has kept a light lit on a distant porch for Ukraine, projecting what could be a far-off possibility of a new future with enough internal change — and in a Putin-free world.

With an estimated 150,000 of Putin’s troops on Ukraine’s frontier, that future may be getting more and more distant. But until there’s a Russian flag flying over Maidan Square, it may not be dead.

“You know where I remember hearing that argument, that argument of giving false hope, it was in 1989, when people said we shouldn’t give the Poles false hope,” Daniel Fried, former U.S. ambassador to Poland, told me. “Poland will never be free, they said. They were wrong then, and I think they’re wrong about Ukraine now. My argument is that it’s worth resisting; it’s worth not giving in to Putin.” ■

You’re reading an excerpt from the Today’s WorldView newsletter.
Why are Donetsk and Luhansk in Ukraine’s Donbas region a flash point for Putin?

BY SAMMY WESTFALL

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The Donbas region in eastern Ukraine has been a flash point in the escalating crisis between Russia and Ukraine, which hinges on land borders and strategic influence.

The region became even more critical Monday as Russian President Vladimir Putin recognized the independence of two Moscow-backed breakaway enclaves there that call themselves the Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic. The Russian leader also signed decrees ordering military forces into the region for “peacekeeping” purposes. The formal recognition marks a considerable escalation that signals an end to the seven-year peace deal known as the Minsk agreement.

The formal recognition prompted a chorus of condemnation from Western leaders, with some announcing sanctions, holding emergency meetings and roundly accusing Moscow for breaching international law. The White House on Tuesday called Russia’s deployment of troops into two pro-Russian separatist regions of Ukraine “the beginning of an invasion.”
What is happening in Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas region?

The Donbas region in eastern Ukraine before the war was known as an industrial powerhouse, with heavy mining and steel-producing capacity, as well as large coal reserves.

Since the fallout of Russia’s 2014 invasion and its annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula, the region has been divided into separate territories under different control: the Kyiv-controlled parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the Russian-backed separatist Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics,” known as the DPR and LPR.

Separatists claim all of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as their territory, but they control about one-third of the region — about 6,500 square miles, per some estimates — along the border with Russia. Moscow has recognized the separatists’ territorial claims, which extend to three times the size of the area they occupy. This includes areas under Ukrainian government control, such as the crucial Mariupol port on the Sea of Azov.

The Donetsks and Luhansks have been largely cut off from Ukraine after the outbreak of fighting in 2014 and on Monday were recognized by Putin as independent republics. Their precise population is hard to determine, but some estimate they are home to around 2.3 million and 1.5 million people, respectively — many of whom are among the region’s large Russian and Russian-speaking populations.

Fighting in eastern Ukraine between the separatists and the Ukrainian government has continued since 2014, claiming 14,000 lives. Violence, division and economic downturn have damaged the region. More than 2 million people have since fled.

Recently, widespread shelling in eastern Ukraine has heightened fears in the West and in Kyiv of an attack, as Russia continues building up its forces, now an estimated 150,000 strong, near Ukraine.

What is the region’s history, and what is the Minsk agreement?

Historical links between Russia and Ukraine date back as far as the 9th century — and Putin has repeatedly and strategically invoked this legacy.

In early 2014, after mass protests in Ukraine toppled a pro-Moscow president, Russia invaded and annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula — a move Europe and the United States see as illegal. Moscow-backed separatists also took over the eastern industrial regions of Donetsk and Luhansk on Russia’s border. There, the rebels seized government buildings and proclaimed new “people’s republics.”

The crisis escalated, and pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk held a referendum to declare independence from Ukraine. Kyiv and the West have accused Russia of supporting the rebels with troops and weapons, but Russia says the fighters are volunteers. Clashes between the separatists and Kyiv-backed forces have continued.

In 2015, Russia and Ukraine agreed on the Minsk peace deal, a plan brokered by France and Germany to end the conflict between Kyiv and the Russian-backed separatists in the contested Donbas region. Under the agreement, Ukraine would give the two regions a special status and significant autonomy in return for regaining
control of its border with Russia.
But the deal has stalled.

Putin has said Ukraine has no intention of implementing the agreement’s terms. Ukraine has sought amendments to the deal — which was brokered after a string of military losses — and said that an agreement on Russian terms would give Moscow power to influence Ukraine’s foreign policy and undermine its sovereignty. Kyiv officials have said the current terms, if implemented, would lead to riots and chaos.

The United States and other allies have expressed support for the deal while calling on all parties to fulfill their parts of the bargain.

Meanwhile, Moscow has issued 800,000 Russian passports in the separatist regions. Ukrainian and Western officials say Russia has armed and supported the separatists, but Russia denies this.

What does Putin want with Donbas? What do the people of Donbas want?

Putin has described Russians and Ukrainians as one people, writing in an essay shared on the Kremlin’s website in July that “true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia.” “Ukraine has never had its own authentic statehood,” Putin said during a seething speech Monday that delved into Soviet history to undermine the idea of Ukraine as an independent nation.

The most recent official census, in 2001, found that more than half of the population in Crimea and Donetsk identified Russian as their native language. But pinning eastern Ukraine as all largely Russian speaking, and the West dominated by Ukrainian, can be seen as an oversimplification. Many in the eastern countryside speak Ukrainian or a Russian-Ukrainian mix called Surzhyk.

Still, Putin has repeatedly invoked the idea of Donbas’s distinctive regional identity as a basis to “defend” its Russian-speaking people from a supposedly intolerant Ukraine. Separatists have also capitalized on this identity to fuel support and rebellion against Kyiv.

In Kyiv-controlled Donbas, a majority wants the separatist regions to return to Ukraine. In the separatist-controlled area, over half want to join Russia, either with or without some autonomous status, per a survey published in 2021. On Monday, the leaders of the two separatist regions asked Putin for recognition and for military assistance, raising the prospect that they could invite Russian forces in, allowing Moscow the pretense of a “legal” military intervention.

Last week, Russia’s State Duma passed an appeal to Putin to recognize the Russian-backed enclaves of Donetsk and Luhansk. The European Union warned Moscow against following through. On Monday, Putin went ahead with the recognition and authorized the Russian Defense Ministry to send forces into the self-declared republics. The agreement with the two breakaway territories also says Russia can have military bases there.

Moscow also sees Ukraine as a buffer zone to NATO, which was founded in 1949 to protect against Soviet aggression. Putin has long said NATO’s eastward expansion was a red line for him. In remarks Tuesday, Putin called on Ukraine to forget joining NATO and to accept that Crimea belongs to Russia.
Putin says he will ‘denazify’ Ukraine. Here’s the history behind that claim.

BY MIRIAM BERGER

Russian President Vladimir Putin invoked the Nazis on Thursday when he announced his decision to launch a large-scale military operation in Ukraine.

The Russian leader said that one of the goals of the offensive was to “denazify” the country, part of a long-running effort by Putin to delegitimize Ukrainian nationalism and sell the incursion to his constituency at home.

The rhetoric around fighting fascism resonates deeply in Russia, which made tremendous sacrifices battling Nazi Germany in World War II. Critics say that Putin is exploiting the trauma of the war and twisting history for his own interests.

In his narrative, the West overlooked the role the Soviet Union, Russia’s predecessor state, played in the fight. In the war’s aftermath, the United States and other Western nations formed the NATO military alliance as a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

Now, Putin sees NATO as an existential threat — and Ukraine’s bid for membership as a red line for Russia’s security.
“When Putin was growing up, the Second World War was at the center of Soviet identity and the enemies were the fascists,” said Timothy Snyder, a professor of history at Yale University.

The irony now, Snyder said, is that Putin appears to be “fighting a war the way that actual Nazis did,” invading neighbors on the pretext that their borders are irrelevant.

But Putin’s attempt to recast Ukraine’s government as fascist drew widespread condemnation [Feb. 24], including from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is both Jewish and had family members die in the Holocaust.

Three of Zelensky’s great uncles were executed as part of the German-led genocide of European Jews during the war, the president said on a trip to Jerusalem in 2020. His grandfather, who was the brother of those killed, survived.

“Forty years later, his grandson became president,” Zelenksy said in an address.

The Ukrainian leader also fired back at Putin’s Nazi claim Thursday, saying on Twitter that Russia had attacked Ukraine just “as Nazi Germany did.”

One of World War II’s worst massacres took place near the Ukrainian capital in 1941, when German-led forces killed tens of thousands of Jews in the ravine of Babi Yar.

“As of today, our countries are on different sides of world history,” Zelensky said on Twitter, addressing Putin. “Russia has embarked on a path of evil.”

According to Michael McFaul, a former U.S. Ambassador to Russia, “there is a history of some Ukrainians fighting on the Nazi side … but a very small group.”

McFaul made the remarks in an appearance on MSNBC [Feb. 24].

Putin, he said, “is pulling on that thread from history to say that what you had was a neo-Nazi usurpation of power [in Ukraine] in 2014,” when Ukrainian protesters ousted the Russian-backed leader and the new government pushed to join NATO.

In response to those protests, Russia invaded and annexed the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine and began backing a separatist insurgency in the country’s east. The conflict there has simmered for years.

Operating in Ukraine are several nationalist paramilitary groups, such as the Azov movement and Right Sector, that espouse neo-Nazi ideology. While high-profile, they appear to have little public support. Only one far-right party, Svoboda, is represented in Ukraine’s parliament, and only holds one seat.

Now Putin is trying to paint Zelensky’s government as “Nazis supported by NATO,” McFaul said.

According to Putin, he must fight to save the Russian-speaking community in eastern Ukraine.

In his speech announcing the start of the operation, he said that the “goal is to protect the people who are subjected to abuse, genocide from the Kyiv regime.”

“To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine and put to justice those that committed numerous bloody crimes against peaceful people, including Russian nationals,” Putin said, according to Russia’s state news agency.

His language is also a red flag that he intends to overthrow the government in Kyiv, said Sergey Radchenko, a professor of international relations at Johns Hopkins University.

The Kremlin has long tried to “present the whole idea of Ukrainian nationalism as a neo-Nazi movement,” he said, adding that the narrative is historically false.

Following Putin’s logic, Radchenko said, Russia’s end goal in Ukraine could be to rid its government of “Ukrainian nationalists … who in their eyes are Nazis.”

At the same time, Snyder said, Putin’s moves to label Ukraine’s government as fascist are “completely emptied of any specificity.”

During the Cold War, the term came to apply to anyone in the West or those who opposed Russia, he said.

“Anyone can be a fascist” in Russian propaganda, Snyder said, adding that it “carries a vague emotion … for anyone anti-Russian.”

Ukraine’s state-run Twitter account on Thursday posted an image of what appeared to be a tall Adolf Hitler caressing the face of a smaller Putin.

NOTE: This article includes updates made of Friday, February 25, 2022.
KYIV, Ukraine — War or no war, Andrii Shymanovskiy believes he wields one of the most powerful weapons against Moscow: the Ukrainian language.

Just over a year ago, the 23-year-old Lviv-based actor and Ukrainian-language instructor began to post TikTok videos explaining the nuances of his mother tongue, once largely secondary to Russian in Ukrainian life but increasingly a centerpiece of efforts to emphasize a distinct Ukrainian identity and culture.

The videos attract millions of views with their breezy style and comic riffs on Ukrainian life. They also, however, touch one of the core complexities in the struggles with Russia and within Ukraine itself.

Language is at the nexus of Ukraine’s cultural and political crosscurrents. For some, the Ukrainian language is a source of the country’s character and should dominate public life. Others give greater weight to Ukraine’s multilingual mix of Ukrainian, Russian and other languages as part of the nation’s essence.

Moscow, however, has used the language issue to paint the Kyiv government as ethnocentric “fascists” bent on tyrannizing Ukraine’s Russian-speaking population. That view is widely rejected in Ukraine, including among many in Russian-speaking areas. Still, a Ukrainian law aimed to increase the use of Ukrainian has given the Kremlin further fodder for its propaganda campaign.
Meanwhile, the amount of Ukrainian heard on the streets of Russian-speaking bastions such as the capital, Kyiv, and Kharkiv in the east appears to be steadily rising.

“I think that at this time, the only weapon I have is the language itself,” Shymonovskiy said. “I help to preserve at least our identity, the identity of our people.”

Shymonovskiy describes his work as a counterweight to centuries of Russian domination in Ukraine, during which the Ukrainian language was suppressed or pushed to the margins.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin says the reverse is true, claiming it’s the Russian language being suppressed and Russian speakers becoming marginalized in Ukraine. Russian is hard under threat, though. Russian speakers still make up a large portion of the population, and the Russian language continues to heavily influence popular culture.

Yet the allegations of a linguistic siege played a central role in Moscow’s justification of its 2014 annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula, where the majority of the population is Russian-speaking.

It was also a cornerstone of the Kremlin’s narrative at the start of the conflict between Russian-backed militants and Ukrainian forces in eastern Ukraine, which has lasted nearly eight years and killed close to 14,000 people.

In recent months, Russian officials have returned to lambasting the Ukrainians’ language policies. “They are simply pushing out Russians and the Russian-speaking population from their historical territories,” Putin said at his annual news conference in Moscow in December.

At the heart of Russia’s criticisms are a claim that all Russian speakers belong to a “Russian world” of shared language, culture and history, and should be defended by Moscow. Putin also wrote in an extensive essay last year that Russians and Ukrainians are “one nation.”

But in Ukraine, demographics do not appear to be on Russia’s side. Many young people in the country — with no memory of the Soviet Union but steeped in Ukraine’s 2014 pro-Western revolution — are switching to speaking primarily in Ukrainian.

Some of the most popular clubs and trendier sections of traditionally Russian-speaking Kyiv, where tattooed patrons sip craft beers, are now zones for Ukrainian speakers. Attempts to converse in Russian can occasionally earn a withering look or sharp criticism not to “use the language of the occupier.”

Shymonovskiy was among the first of a growing movement among Ukraine’s 20-somethings to create Ukrainian-language content on social media and support the Ukrainian language in general. His TikTok channel, in contrast to the rising anxiety in the country over a possible invasion, avoids the subject of war.

Instead, he is seen donning a pink wig, singing, rapping and giving flowers to people who speak Ukrainian. “There’s more negative than positive news in Ukraine right now,” he said. “I don’t want to deepen this.”

Moscow’s claims that Russian speakers in Ukraine are being discriminated against as a group belie a multilayered linguistic reality. Various surveys indicate that about half the population speaks mostly Ukrainian at home and about 30 percent speak mostly Russian in their households, with the rest speaking both or other languages such as Hungarian, Romanian and Crimean Tatar. But firm data is hard to come by.

Most Ukrainians are bilingual in everyday life. Language also doesn’t necessarily determine one’s political loyalties: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who is standing against Putin, is a native Russian speaker.

At a recent training in Kyiv for one of the volunteer battalions preparing to defend Ukrainian cities in case of a Russian invasion, the chatter among the reservists was a hodgepodge of Ukrainian and Russian, with some speakers switching between languages in the middle of sentences.

Geography also doesn’t help settle matters. Descriptions of eastern Ukraine as largely Russian-speaking, and its west as dominated by Ukrainian, are an oversimplification. Large parts of the countryside speak Ukrainian or a mix of Ukrainian and Russian known as Surzhyk.

The Russian and Ukrainian languages are closely related and share many common words but are nevertheless distinct. Russian speakers can have difficulty understanding Ukrainian and vice versa.

However, Russian still dominates many areas of Ukrainian media and culture, despite Ukrainian being designated as the sole “state language” of the country.

A language law, passed under Zelensky’s predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, aims to establish Ukrainian as the country’s dominant mode of communication in businesses, schools and the media.

Service industry workers, for example, must speak to clients in Ukrainian, unless they’re specifically asked to speak in Russian. Television stations must broadcast all films and series in Ukrainian. The law went into effect in 2019 and is to be introduced in stages, but authorities have been selective in which elements they enforce.

The law has been a target for Russian officials, who point to it as evidence of Kyiv’s persecution of its Russian-speaking minority. The Council of Europe’s Venice Commission and watchdog organizations such as Human Rights Watch have also criticized portions of it.

“An open war has been declared against the Russian language, Russian-speaking education,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in September.

Shymonovskiy supports the law, saying that the Kremlin would always “find a reason for propaganda” regardless of what the Ukrainians did. He believes the law helps unite the country.

The conflict being fought in eastern Ukraine — a region with a high concentration of Russian speakers — proves his point, he said. “Where there was the greatest absence of the Ukrainian language, war came there,” he said.

Maria Ilyushina and Isabelle Khurshudyan contributed to this report.
Identity in One’s Language

The power of language to be a subtle and effective weapon is brought to light in David Stern’s “The Ukrainian language is having a big moment.” A 23-year-old actor and Ukrainian-language educator is using social media with a “breezy style and comic riffs on Ukrainian life” to uplift the language and culture of Ukraine. Read Stern’s introduction to Andrii Shymanovskiy and ideas about language and identity.

CLOSE READING

1. What use is Andrii Shymanovskiy making of videos and social media?
   What is his style?

2. What goal(s) does Shymanovskiy have for those who view his videos?

3. “Language is at the nexus of Ukraine’s cultural and political crosscurrents,” writes David L. Stern.
   a. What does this mean?
   b. What are three points of view about the use of the Ukrainian language?

4. “Most Ukrainians are bilingual in everyday life. Language also doesn’t necessarily determine one’s political loyalties.”
   What examples does Stern provide to support this perspective?

5. “Shymanovskiy describes his work as a counterweight to centuries of Russian domination in Ukraine, during which the Ukrainian language was suppressed or pushed to the margins,” states Stern.
   a. Why would a country that wants to dominate another want to discourage use of the native language?
   b. What benefits are there to knowing and using both languages?
   c. Does Stern provide evidence of bilingual citizens?
   d. What is code switching? What example of recent code switching is given?

6. “I think that at this time, the only weapon I have is the language itself,” Shymanovskiy said. “I help to preserve at least our identity, the identity of our people.”
   a. What examples does Stern give of young Ukrainians’ preference for Ukrainian?
   b. How is identity achieved through a common language?

7. Give examples of culture being kept alive through language.

8. Since 2019 a law has been in effect establishing Ukrainian as “the country’s dominant mode of communication in business, schools and the media.”
   a. Explain the reaction of Russian-language speakers to this law.
   b. Explain why Ukrainian-language speakers would support this law.
   c. How has Putin used this law to justify his actions against Ukraine?
TEXTUAL REFERENCE

“Moscow, however, has used the language issue to paint the Kyiv government as ethnocentric “fascists” bent on tyrannizing Ukraine’s Russian-speaking population.”

9. Define “ethnocentric,” “Fascism” and “tyranny.”

10. In Fascist Italy (1922 to 1943) Mussolini was its primary leader. He took a great interest in children whom he saw as the Fascists of the future. Girls were taught that their role was to be good mothers. Boys were taught that they were to be fierce soldiers. Latin was taught in school as the language of the Fascist empire, the language of powerful men and the new Roman Empire.

In northeast Italy, cities such as Trieste had experienced being changed from one country’s control to another’s through centuries. Croatian and Slovenian languages were used among the population. Papers exist that document that Italians forbid the use of Slavic languages in public. In the Slavic communities, family stories were handed down of children being harshly punished in school for speaking their native language.

Engelbert Besednjak, a Slovene Christian Democrat politician, lawyer and journalist, was elected as a representative in the Italian Parliament in 1924. An admired public speaker he used his parliamentary speeches to defend minority rights and human rights. His speeches on school reform were widely known, including by Mussolini. In his last speech he stated that after the abolition of Slovene and Croatian language schools, “every South Slavic family in Italy would transform itself into a school.”

a. What do you think about a country establishing an official language?
b. When should bilingual education be part of a school system’s program?
c. Should parents encourage Saturday Schools or other programs to teach their home country’s language and culture (dance, music, foods)?