



## SIGNS OF WAR



## STUDY GUIDE

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After years of working in the Dutch parliament, photographer Pierre Crom decides that "it might be more interesting to follow the results of their political decisions instead of making propaganda for politicians". In February 2014, he travelled to Crimea in Ukraine on a one-way plane ticket, one day before its annexation by Russia. From then on, he found himself in the middle of a rapidly escalating conflict and decided to stay. The start of the war in Sloviansk, the crash of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH17, the tank battle in Debaltseve - he manages to gain access to the most important historical stages of this war. Although "lucky" as a photographer. Pierre had to confront violent events on a scale that he could never have imagined before.

## About Ukraine

Ukraine is a country located in eastern Europe. It shares a border with Russia to the east, Romania and Moldova to the southwest, and Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland to the west. Its capital city is Kyiv, which is in the north-central part of the country. Ukraine is the second-largest country on the continent, after Russia. It has a population of more than 43 million people. Ukrainians are a majority, however there are also many other ethnic groups in the country including Russian, Belarusian, Moldovan, Crimean Tatar, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Romanian, Polish, and Jewish.<sup>1</sup> The official language of Ukraine is Ukrainian, however, a significant percentage of people who live there also speak Russian. Much of Ukraine has highly fertile soil, and the country is often referred to as the region's breadbasket.

## History of Ukraine and Russia

Ukraine and Russia both share a Slavic heritage, and they both trace their origins back to the same place; a civilization called Kievan Rus, that was based in Kyiv. However, these two nations also have a shared history of tension.

Throughout history, Ukraine has periodically been considered a part of Russia, and other times been an independent nation. In 1793, it became part of the Russian Empire. In 1917, there was a violent revolution in Russia, and the monarchy was replaced with a socialist government. At that time, Ukraine declared its independence. Shortly after that, however, Ukraine was taken over by Soviet forces. In 1922 it was incorporated into the Soviet Union, as the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Of the fifteen soviet republics, Ukraine was the second most populous. It was a significant agricultural producer, and also had many other resources such as coal and iron. As a result, it was an important part of the Soviet Union. However, many Ukrainians suffered under Soviet policies. For instance, these policies resulted in widespread famine in Ukraine in 1932 and 1933, and nearly 4 million people died. This famine, also referred to as Holodomor, is widely considered to be a genocide. Ukrainians also suffered under a campaign of "Russification," which was an attempt to promote the Russian language and culture in Ukraine. In 1991, the Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ukraine/>

Union dissolved, and Ukraine declared its independence and became a democracy. This was supported by 92 percent of Ukrainians, according to a national referendum.

## **Crimea and Donbas**

Crimea is one ongoing source of conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Crimea is a peninsula in Eastern Europe. It is almost completely surrounded by the Black Sea, and is connected by an isthmus to Ukraine. In the east, a bridge links it with Russia. It is a popular vacation spot, and also has a strategic naval base in the port of Sevastopol. Russians comprise a majority in its population. There are also a significant number of Tartars, which are an indigenous group. Like Ukraine, Crimea became a republic within the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union dissolved, it became part of Ukraine.

In 2014, armed soldiers from Russia started occupying strategic areas in Crimea. Soon after that, the Crimean government voted to leave Ukraine and become part of Russia, and a referendum on was held. It was reported that 97 percent of votes were in favor of joining Russia, however, the results were widely condemned as inaccurate. In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea, with Russia's president, Vladimir Putin framing it as the rightful return of land that belonged to Russia. He said, "Crimea has always been an integral part of Russia in the hearts and minds of people."<sup>2</sup> However, this move was widely denounced by many other nations.

Soon after annexing Crimea, Russia also backed a separatist uprising in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas. Secessionists there later declared independence as the Donetsk People's Republic, and the Luhansk People's Republic. Conflict in that area continued, with Russian-backed forces fighting against Ukrainian forces. Thousands of people have died in fighting there and in Crimea.

Debaltseve is a city in Donetsk. In 2015, there was a battle there between Ukrainian armed forces and pro-Russian separatist forces from the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. Ukrainian troops were eventually forced to withdraw.

## **War**

In 2022, conflict in Crimea and Donbas continued, however, it was overshadowed by war between Russian and Ukraine. In early 2021, Russia moved tens of thousands of troops to its border with Ukraine, staying vague about what it was doing. The troop buildup continued into early 2022, and then on February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in a large and devastating military operation. Putin made a speech where he stated that Ukraine had never been a real nation of its own. He said "Ukraine never had a tradition of genuine statehood." Instead, he argued, "Modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia."<sup>3</sup> War between Russian and Ukraine continues today, with Russia occupying parts of Ukraine, and Ukraine continuing to resist.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/world/europe/ukraine.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/extracts-putins-speech-ukraine-2022-02-21/>

The war has caused widespread destruction and loss of life. According to a September 2023 report by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) there have been a total of 27,499 civilian casualties in Ukraine since February 24, 2022, which includes 9,701 killed and 17,748 injured. Additionally, it notes, “OHCHR believes that the actual figures are considerably higher, as the receipt of information from some locations where intense hostilities have been going on has been delayed and many reports are still pending corroboration.”<sup>4</sup> It estimates that as a result of the war, in 2023 millions of people in Ukraine will need humanitarian assistance.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk reports that there have been many human rights violations in the conflict. For instance, he states, “More than 90 per cent of Ukrainian prisoners of war that my Office interviewed said that they were tortured or ill-treated, notably in penitentiary facilities, including through so-called – it is an awful phrase – ‘welcoming beatings’ on their arrival, as well as frequent acts of torture throughout detention.”<sup>5</sup>

The conflict has also caused a refugee crisis. USA UNHCR reports that 3.7 million people have been internally displaced in Ukraine, and 6.5 million more have fled to neighboring countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Moldova. It reports that Poland has accepted the greatest number of Ukrainian refugees.<sup>6</sup>

## **Additional Resources**

### **Books**

- Paul J. D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Civil War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Serhii Plokhyy, *The Frontline: Essays on Ukraine’s Past and Present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press for the Ukrainian Research Institute, 2021.
- Anna Reid, *Borderland: A Journey Through the History of Ukraine*. New York: Basic Books, 2023.
- Karl Schlögel, translated by Gerrit Jackson, *Ukraine: A Nation on the Borderland*. London: Reaktion Books, 2022.
- Serhy Yekelchuk, *Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/09/ukraine-civilian-casualty-update-24-september-2023>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2023/03/ukraine-high-commissioner-turk-details-severe-violations-and-calls-just-peace>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/>

## Online Resources

- Center for Preventative Action, “War in Ukraine,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 14, 2023.  
[www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine](http://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine)
- Council on Foreign Relations, “War in Ukraine,” March 6, 2024.  
<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine>
- Alice Popovici, “How Crimea’s Complex History with Russia Dates Back to the 19th Century,” *History.com*, August 21, 2023.  
<https://www.history.com/news/crimea-russia-ukraine-annexation>
- Ukraine NOW, “Origins and History of Ukraine,” February 22, 2022.  
<https://ukraine.ua/explore/origins-history-of-ukraine/>
- USA UNHCR, “About the Crisis in Ukraine.”  
[www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/](http://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/)
- World Economic Forum, “1 Year On: A Timeline of the War in Ukraine,” February 23, 2023. [www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/02/ukraine-war-timeline-one-year/](http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/02/ukraine-war-timeline-one-year/)

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