



INSIDE RUSSIA: TRAITORS AND HEROES



STUDY GUIDE

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Inside Russia: Traitors and Heroes

Inside Russia: Traitors and Heroes documents an extraordinary year in the lives of ordinary Russians. Amidst the brutal suppression of anti-war protests across the country, a local politician condemns the war on social media. She must decide whether to face criminal charges or flee the country. A group of young graffiti artists begins a campaign of subversive art to mock the government's pro-war propaganda. Soon one of its members is arrested. It has been dangerous for ordinary Russians to speak up against Vladimir Putin's regime for years. New censorship laws, introduced since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, have made it tougher than ever. Many thousands have fled Russia. Dissenting Russians must decide if they should flee their homeland or voice their dissent.

About Russia

Russia—officially called the Russian Federation—occupies a large area of land in both eastern Europe and northern Asia. It is the largest country in the world, and includes 11 time zones and a wide range of environments, from deserts, to forests, to Arctic tundra. Moscow, located in the western part of the country, is the capital city.

Russia has a population of more than 141 million people. More than 75 percent are Russian, however, there are close to 200 different ethnic groups in total, including Tatar, Ukrainian, Bashkir, Chuvash, and Chechen.¹ The majority of Russia's population is concentrated in the western part of the country. The official language of Russia is Russian and is spoken by most of the people who live there.

About Ukraine

Ukraine is in eastern Europe, and shares a border with Russia in the east. It is the second largest country on the continent, after Russia. Its capital city is Kyiv, which is in the north-central part of the country. Ukraine has a population of more than 43 million people. While the majority are Ukrainian, there are also a number of other ethnic groups living there including Russian, Belarusian, Moldovan, Crimean Tatar, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Romanian, Polish, and Jewish.² The country's official language is Ukrainian, however, a significant percentage of people there also speak Russian. Almost all of Ukraine consists of level plains that average just over 500 feet above sea level. These plains have highly fertile soil, and Ukraine is often referred to as the region's "breadbasket."

History of Ukraine and Russia

Ukraine and Russia have many things in common. They share a Slavic heritage, and they both trace their origins back to the same place; a civilization called Kievan Rus, which was based in Kyiv. However, there is also a history of tension between the two nations.

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

² <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/ukraine/>

In 1793, most of what is now Ukraine became part of the Russian Empire. Then, in 1917, Russia underwent a violent revolution where the monarchy that had ruled for centuries was overthrown and a socialist government was instituted. Russia became the Russian Republic. Ukraine declared independence from Russia at this time. Not long after that, however, it was taken over by Soviet forces. In 1922, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was incorporated into the Soviet Union. In 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved, and Ukraine declared its independence again, becoming a democracy.

In 2014, tensions between Russia and Ukraine flared. After a mass protest against Russia, which took place in Ukraine, Russia occupied and annexed Crimea, a peninsula in Ukraine that is located on the Black Sea. Many of the residents of that area are ethnically Russian. Over the next few years, thousands of people died in that conflict. Russia also backed a separatist uprising in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas. Secessionists later declared independence as the Donetsk People's Republic, and the Luhansk People's Republic. Conflict in that area continues, and more than 10,000 people have died.

Vladimir Putin is a politician and former Russian intelligence officer who has been president of Russia since 2000. He has stated that he believes that Ukraine should be part of Russia. Volodymyr Zelensky is the president of Ukraine. He was elected in 2019, in a landslide victory. In his campaign for presidency, he promised to end the war in the Donbas region.

The Current Conflict

In early 2021, Russia sent tens of thousands of troops to its border with Ukraine, staying vague about its intentions. It continued the troop buildup in early 2022. Then, on February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine in a large and devastating military operation. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, 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."³ War between Russian and Ukraine continues today, with Russia occupying parts of Ukraine, and Ukraine continuing to resist. Numerous countries, including the United States, have imposed sanctions on Russia, and have provided aid to Ukraine.

Freedom of Speech in Russia

Following its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has instituted a number of restrictions on free speech, including media speech. Human Rights Watch explains that the Russian government did this by passing new laws restricting criticism of the war. It says, "Parliament adopted a broad range of new bills introducing war censorship with long prison sentences for 'offences' such as referring to the armed conflict in Ukraine as a 'war,' criticizing the invasion, discussing the conduct of Russian armed forces, and reporting on war crimes by Russian military or Ukrainian civilian casualties."⁴ According to Reporters Without Borders, there has also been strict censorship of the country's

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

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/russian-federation>

media. The organization reports, “Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, almost all independent media have been banned, blocked and/or declared ‘foreign agents’ or ‘undesirable organisations’. All others are subject to military censorship.”⁵

Russians Leaving Russia

While estimates vary. It is believed that hundreds of thousands of people have left Russia since the war with Ukraine started. Freedom House explains, “Russians left the country in large numbers after the war began, with the Federal Security Service (FSB) reporting that 3.9 million people departed in the first quarter of the year. The government launched a ‘partial mobilization’ to bolster its war effort in late September. Some Russian media outlets estimated that as many as 700,000 people, mostly military-aged men, left Russia in the following two weeks to avoid being drafted.”⁶ Overall, people have chosen to leave Russia for a variety of different reasons including opposition to the war, and unwillingness to live under the country’s current restrictions. Their destinations include Georgia, a number of Baltic countries, and European Union countries.



⁵ <https://rsf.org/en/country/russia>

⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-world/2023>

Additional Resources

Books

- Paul J. D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Civil War*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
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- Mark Galeotti, *Putin’s Wars: From Chechnya to Ukraine*. Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2022.
- Elena Kostyuchenko, trans. Bela Shayevich and Ilona Yazhbin Chavasse. *I Love Russia: Reporting from a Lost Country*. New York: Penguin, 2023.
- Serhy Yekelchuk, *Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Online Resources

- Center for Preventative Action, “War in Ukraine,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, updated August 15, 2023.
<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine#Concerns-1>
- French Institute of International Relations, “The Exodus of the Century: A New Wave of Russian Emigration,” July 2023.
<https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/exodus-century-new-wave-russian-emigration>
- Harvard Kennedy School, “Russia-Ukraine War: Insights and Analysis.”
<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/russia-ukraine-war-insights-analysis>
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<https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2022/08/22/what-can-get-you-trouble-anti-war-speech-russia>
- Reporters Without Borders, “Russia.”
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- World Economic Forum, “1 Year On: A Timeline of the War in Ukraine,” February 23, 2023.
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