GREAT DECISIONS
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HIGH SCHOOL
NOVEMBER 2022

TEACHERS: CHECK OUT THE BACK PAGE

THE WAR IN UKRAINE

A GLOBAL RESPONSE

WHY IT HAPPENED

UKRAINE FIGHTS BACK

FLEEING TO SAFETY

BY ALLISON GUSTAVSON

A NATION INVADED

Stringer/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

A convoy of Russian military vehicles moves toward the Ukrainian border on February 23, 2022, in preparation for the invasion.

You have probably been hearing a lot about the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24, 2022. From blue-and-yellow flags and photographs of war-ravaged cities to rising gas prices and fears about nuclear escalation, this war has captured the world's attention.

Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has been the largest military operation in Europe since World War II (1939–1945). As the war rages on, Western leaders must decide how far they should go to support and protect Ukraine's young democracy and innocent citizens. How can they effectively punish Russia, and what are the consequences of those choices?

If you've ever tried to solve a Rubik's Cube, you know that every move affects the whole. These are complex decisions, and just like individuals, countries in conflict always have a backstory to consider. To understand what is happening in Ukraine today, we must learn about the two nations and their shared history.

THE BACKSTORY

The relationship between Russia and Ukraine goes back centuries, but the modern conflict can be boiled down to a key dispute: Russian president Vladimir Putin believes that Ukraine is a part of Russia, while Ukrainians do not. They are are fighting to defend their country's independence.

Putin's conviction that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" is a core component of his overall mission to restore the Russian power and prestige

that crumbled with the fall of the Soviet Union. An independent Ukraine—especially with its resources, strategic geographic location, and increasing ties to Western countries and their alliances like **NATO**—is a direct threat to that vision. When asked in 2018 if he'd use nuclear weapons if Russia was attacked, Putin affirmed by saying, "Why do we need such a world if there is no Russia there?"

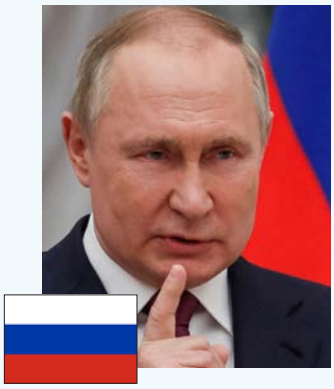
The 2022 invasion is actually a dramatic escalation of a war that began in 2014 and resulted in Russia **annexing** Crimea, a region of Ukraine largely populated by ethnic Russians that has been the source of ongoing disagreement. Putin justified the assault by claiming that there had been a "**fascist coup**" in Ukraine, though it was actually a popular uprising against Ukraine's corrupt, pro-Russian president. Large protests resulted in that president's removal from office and laid the groundwork for Volodymyr Zelenskyy's landslide election as a transformational pro-democracy leader.

WHAT PUTIN WANTS

A skillful manipulator and **propagandist**, Putin controls every aspect of his image and is careful with his public statements, which are usually designed to keep the world guessing about his actual intentions.

There was much global debate in response to reports that Putin was amassing troops at the Ukrainian border in early February. "Will he or won't he?" was the question on everyone's mind. On February 15, U.S. president Joe Biden warned that intelligence indicated the likelihood of an invasion, saying, "We are ready with diplomacy . . . and we are ready to respond decisively to a Russian attack on Ukraine." Many observers, however, continued to assume Putin was simply posturing.

THE FACES OF THEIR NATIONS



Yuri Kochetkov/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

President Vladimir Putin

An inscrutable icon

As a **KGB** agent, Putin rose to power with a gift for languages, years of undercover work, and a passion for communism. Since then, he has emerged as a ruthless strongman and propagandist working every angle to rebuild "Mother Russia" and consolidate his power.

Ukrainian Presidency / Handout/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy

A wartime statesman for the social media age

Before his landslide victory in 2019, Zelenskyy starred in the hit TV show *Servant of the People*, playing a history-teacher-turned-Ukrainian-president who is elected after an anti-corruption video goes viral. Zelenskyy's leadership and skillful command of messaging and communication have earned worldwide admiration.

THE DEBATE

IS IT WORTH PUNISHING RUSSIA WHEN IT MEANS HIGHER GAS PRICES?

YES

- ✓ The U.S. must do whatever it takes to punish Putin and Russia.
- ✓ Sanctions signal to Ukrainians that the U.S. stands with them.
- ✓ By hitting Putin where it hurts, **sanctions** could turn his own people against him.

NO

- ✗ Putin could retaliate for the sanctions.
- ✗ The people hurt most by sanctions are not those with the power to end the war.
- ✗ U.S. citizens should not have to pay for foreign conflicts.

Sisacom/Shutterstock

On February 24, he revealed that he wasn't bluffing.

Putin's initial announcement named a "special military operation" to "demilitarize and **denazify**" Ukraine. This declaration was largely deemed absurd, particularly since Zelenskyy is, himself, Jewish. In June, Putin seemed to shift his focus to the "liberation" of the Donbas (a region where pro-Russian **separatists** hold power) from Ukrainian rule for the "security of Russia itself." Stanford professor Kathryn Stoner, however, interpreted his motives plainly: "For Putin, the example of a free, independent Ukraine on Russia's border is too inspiring a model for his own people who might eventually demand something similar at home, and that would mean his ouster."

RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

It was widely assumed that, as a superior military power, Russia's victory over Ukraine would be swift and decisive. But under Zelenskyy's leadership, Ukraine has demonstrated a resilience that has inspired the world. When the U.S. offered to evacuate Zelenskyy after the initial attack on Kyiv, he declared, "The fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride." He has rallied his nation and mounted a successful resistance.

Russia has resorted to increasingly cold-blooded actions. In the first six months of war, Ukraine lost tens of thousands of citizens and suffered through unfathomable atrocities and **war crimes**—sexual violence, barbaric killings, torture, and indiscriminate murder of civilians—evidence of which continues to pour in.

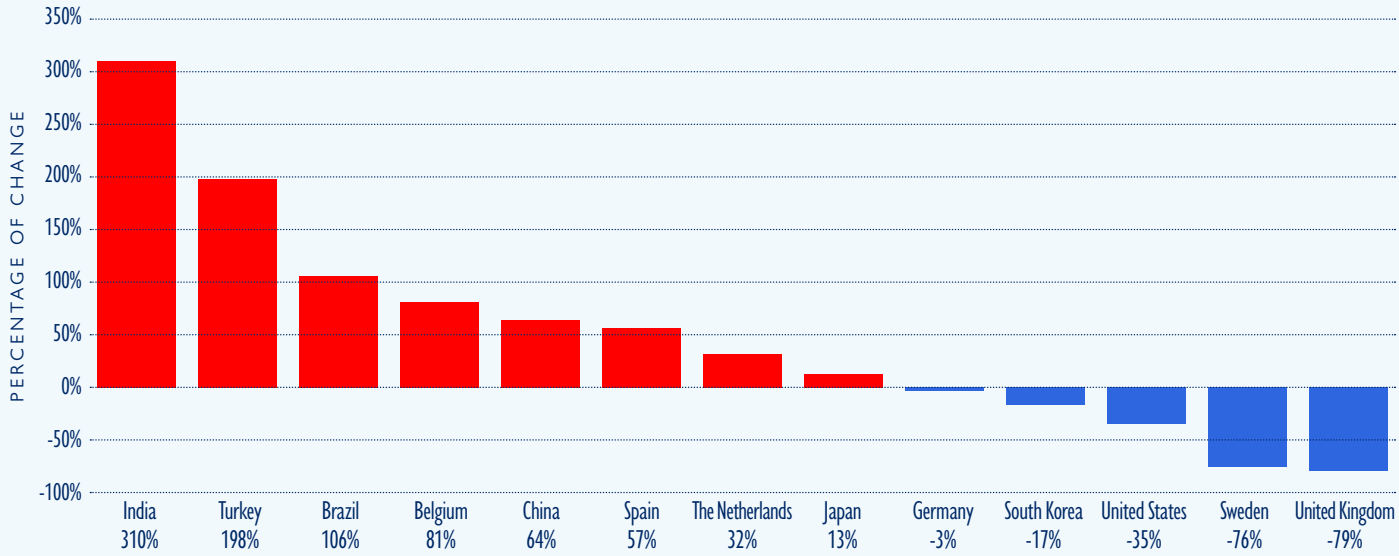
In April, for example, Zelenskyy declared the city of Mariupol "completely destroyed." Russian bombs spared nothing and nobody, including schools, a maternity hospital, and the theater-turned-bomb shelter that harbored hundreds of people and was the target of the deadliest airstrike on Ukrainian civilians—including many children—to date.

Despite this, Ukraine continued to thwart Russian advances, prompting "defeated and demoralized" Russian soldiers to instead lash out against civilians in the nearby city of Bucha. "What is happening in Bucha is . . . a war crime," President Biden said in response.

Refugees from the war-torn city of Mariupol arrive at a train station in Lviv, where many continued on out of Ukraine entirely.

Ty O'Neil/SOPA Images/LightRocket/Getty Images

TRADE VOLUME WITH RUSSIA AFTER INVASION



A REFUGEE CRISIS

Millions of refugees—more than half of them children—have fled Ukraine since the start of the war. Families have been separated, with many parents choosing to stay and fight, and possibly die, to protect Ukraine. Such enormous numbers mask the very real stories behind each person and family: terrorized children separated from their parents, teenagers who woke up, as one high schooler reported, to "a dozen notifications" that "Ukrainian cities were bombed . . . Our school lessons were suspended, and I sat at home flipping through the news with fear."

Escaping from a country under siege is treacherous and terrifying. Early in the war, thousands of people endured nearly impossible conditions—on foot, in traffic backed up for days in the freezing cold, on trains—to get out. And getting out is just the beginning. Once safely outside of Ukraine's borders, people must find a way to eat, sleep, and care for basic needs in a new country with its own limited resources and an overwhelming influx of people in crisis.

For displaced teens—many of whom had to leave alone, without a parent—whose country, schools, and very lives have been destroyed, each day can be as uncertain as the future itself. Though the vast majority of refugees hope to return home one day, the scope of destruction makes the timeline impossible to predict.

THE WORLD DRAWN IN

Imagine: one day you're listening to Spotify, grabbing a coffee at Starbucks, and buying a new sweatshirt at H&M or Uniqlo; the next, those companies (and over a thousand others) shutter their doors or pull out of the country entirely.

That's exactly what happened in Russia after the invasion. Pressured by investors and consumers, corporate withdrawals

THE DEBATE

SHOULD PEOPLE CRITICAL OF U.S. INTERVENTION IN UKRAINE BE GIVEN AN EQUAL PLATFORM?

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YES

- ✓ In a free society, all viewpoints should be heard.
- ✓ Unpopular perspectives can challenge our assumptions.
- ✓ If a view is unpopular, it won't succeed anyway, so there's no need to suppress it.

NO

- ✗ Supporting Ukraine is the right thing to do.
- ✗ Promoting pro-Russia views is anti-democratic.
- ✗ War skepticism is just an easy way of avoiding tough choices.

A teenager rests while sheltering from Russian attacks in a train station in Kharkiv, Ukraine.

Emre Caylak/AFP/Getty Images

sent a sharp message to Putin: this is an illegal war on an independent democracy.

Many nations are walking a tightrope, though. Western leaders want to support Ukraine, and democracy broadly, without entering directly into a global military conflict with a nuclear superpower, while non-Western countries have calibrated their responses according to their own political and economic interests.

So far, the U.S. and its Western allies have supported Ukraine and punished Russia in two primary ways: by providing billions of dollars in humanitarian and military aid, equipment, and intelligence to Ukraine, and by imposing severe sanctions designed to cripple Russia's economy and its ability to afford the war. The effects of such sanctions are complex, but even you might be feeling the sting: by restricting availability, sanctions on Russian oil and gas are reflected in prices at the gas pump. Food prices, too, have risen, as both Russia and Ukraine are major agricultural producers, particularly of grain.

While the majority of the American public and a **bipartisan** coalition in Congress are generally supportive of the aid sent to Ukraine under Biden's leadership, many in the U.S. remain critical of the ballooning military investment.

THE DEBATE

Harun Ozmen/Shutterstock

SHOULD THE U.S. CONTINUE TO SEND MONEY AND WEAPONS TO UKRAINE?

YES

- ✓ It will help save Ukrainian lives.
- ✓ Ukraine cannot continue to defend itself without additional resources.
- ✓ It's important to prevent Russia from increasing in size and power.

NO

- ✗ The U.S. should stay out of wars it is not directly involved in.
- ✗ The U.S. should use resources to protect its own citizens first.
- ✗ Putin could respond to continued U.S. aid of Ukraine with nuclear warfare.

THE WAR CONTINUES

In late August, Russia shut off Nord Stream 1, a pipeline that brings gas supplies from Russia to Europe, prompting Europe's biggest energy crisis in decades.

Citing leaks that could not be repaired unless sanctions were lifted, Russia seems to be using its energy supplies to pressure Europe as winter approaches. Then, in September, Russia announced a "partial mobilization" of troops, prompting hundreds of thousands to flee Russia to avoid the draft. By many accounts, the mobilization has been badly executed, leaving troops untrained and under-resourced. Meanwhile, the threat of nuclear escalation looms, and the war's outcome remains uncertain. Even in the best-case scenario for Ukraine, rebuilding could cost more than $350 billion.

WHAT *YOU* CAN DO

While the war might be far away, there are important actions that concerned global citizens can take.

- **Tutor** Ukrainian refugees, helping them adapt to their new environment and supporting them through this difficult transition. Find out more at Tutorpeers.
- **Contact** your representatives in the U.S. government and tell them what you think about continuing U.S. support for Ukraine.
- **Fight** disinformation by correcting people who post false stories about the war on social media and by spreading quality news stories.
- **Support** Ukrainian artists by sharing their stories and standing for their right to create freely, without fear of persecution.
- **Volunteer** with an organization that works to protect cultural heritage.

TEEN TRAILBLAZERS

Avi Schiffman and Marco Burstein

Courtesy of Avi Schiffman and Marco Burstein

Viktoria Kravetz

UNICEF

Avi Schiffman and Marco Burstein

Days after the Russian invasion, seventeen-year-old Avi Schiffman couldn't sleep and tweeted a thought: "a cool idea would be to set up a website to match Ukrainian refugees to hosts in neighboring countries." He collaborated with his friend, coder Marco Burstein, to launch Ukraine Take Shelter just days later, pairing people offering shelter with those who needed it.

Viktoria Kravetz

When classes were suspended, eleventh-grader Viktoria Kravetz became something she never imagined: one of thousands of youth volunteers in Ukraine registering refugees fleeing their hometowns in search of safety. "It has been a little nerve-wracking and stressful. And also very unpredictable," said Vika, who works with the Tvory Volunteering Centre and is committed to remaining in Ukraine despite grave risks. Though frightened and exhausted, Vika remains optimistic: "I think we will rebuild the country. Ukraine will become more progressive and cohesive than it was before."

Michael Kotcher

With a creative take on traditional fundraising, fifteen-year-old Michael Kotcher and his fellow teenagers created a Guinness World Record–breaking mosaic, turning more than five thousand boxes of donated cereal—yellow Corn Pops and blue Rice Krispies—into a stunning, larger-than-life Ukrainian flag that served as a vehicle for raising awareness about the war and funds in support of Ukraine.

Michael Kotcher with a friend

Pat Nabong/Sun-Times

THE BACK PAGE

Mike Luckovich/Cartoonstock

SHOWING SYMPATHY

1. What is this cartoon trying to say? Why do or don't you agree with its message?
2. Why do you think some Americans are more worried about gas prices than the destruction in Ukraine?
3. How much attention should people be expected to give to global issues if they are struggling to get by at home?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. What do you think the U.S. could be doing differently to address the situation in Ukraine?
2. How do you think the conflict will end? What makes you think this?
3. **YOUR STORY:** How have you or people you know been impacted by the war?

KEY WORDS & TERMS		
annexing	KGB	separatists
bipartisan	NATO	war crimes
denazify	propagandist	
fascist coup	sanctions	

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