A Year of War in Ukraine: The Roots of the Crisis

Here’s a guide to how the biggest war in Europe since World War II came about, and what’s at stake for Russia and the world.

By Eric Nagourney, Dan Bilefsky and Richard Pérez-Peña
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“A walk in the park.”

That was the assurance skeptical members of the Russian military said they were given by superiors as it appeared increasingly clear that President Vladimir V. Putin truly did mean to wage an unprovoked war on neighboring Ukraine.

And it seemed to make sense.

Ukraine was a vastly outgunned nation led by the unlikeliest of presidents, a former comedian elected just a few years before. Russia was a major military power, if not the global force it was in the days of the Soviet Union.

And so when the first planes raced across the border followed by ground troops, it was widely assumed that it would be mere days before the Russian tricolor was hoisted over Kyiv, the capital.

That was a year ago. Now, no one is talking about a walk in the park. They speak of slogans and slaughter: Of a Kremlin “special military operation” that metastasized into the biggest ground war in Europe since World War II. Of Russian casualties of around 200,000 killed or wounded, by some Western estimates.

A surprisingly fierce and resourceful Ukrainian Army rebuffed Moscow’s attempts to seize the capital in the early days of the war, and then made Russian forces pay dearly for ground seized when the Kremlin refocused its attention on eastern Ukraine. In the fall, Ukrainian forces began dealing still more serious blows to the invader, pushing the Russians out of large chunks in the northeast, east and south, though Moscow still holds a large portion of the country and in recent weeks has been gaining some ground again.

It was not the war the Kremlin’s propaganda had promised.

His military flailing, Mr. Putin ordered a call-up of 300,000 soldiers last fall, prompting many young men to flee the country to avoid the draft. He stepped up the bombardment of civilian infrastructure in a bid to break Ukrainians’ will and ability to fight.

And he cracked down on dissent and set the gears of the Kremlin’s propaganda machine at top speed, feeding his people a steady diet of falsehoods about Nazis running Ukraine and Russia waging a war of self-defense. A disastrous conflict that might have toppled some leaders appears to have made Mr. Putin’s position stronger than ever.

A bit surprisingly, for all the fears and tensions raised across Europe after the invasion, which set off an inflationary spiral in vital energy and food supplies, damaging most Western economies, the West has remained largely unified.

Responding to pleas from Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, allies have provided increasingly powerful weaponry. And NATO, the nemesis Mr. Putin often cited as grounds for Russian discontent, may now expand to take in Sweden and Finland, two historically nonaligned countries alarmed by Russia’s naked act of aggression.
In a bitter and bloody war, civilians have borne terrible burdens. The confirmed number of Ukrainian civilians killed is over 7,000 — but United Nations officials say the true toll is far higher. And new names have entered the world's lexicon of atrocity: Bucha, Irpin, Izium, Lyman, where civilians were raped, tortured and murdered, and the dead hidden in mass graves or left to rot in yards and along roadways.

Across the country, missiles have hit homes, cultural gathering spots and industrial plants that provide Ukrainians with the basics of life, including heat, electricity and water. Millions have become refugees.

But for all Moscow’s at the onset of the war certitude, on Feb. 24, 2023, the Russian flag was not flying over Kyiv.

Here is a look at how the world got here.

**What’s behind the crisis?**

After the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, NATO expanded eastward, eventually taking in most of the European nations that had been in the Communist sphere.

The Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, once parts of the Soviet Union, joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, as did Poland, Romania and others. That put NATO forces hundreds of miles closer to Moscow, directly bordering Russia. Then in 2008, NATO leaders said they planned — some day — to enroll Ukraine, though that is still seen as a far-off prospect.
Mr. Putin has described the Soviet disintegration as one of the greatest catastrophes of the 20th century, and one that robbed Russia of its rightful place among the world's great powers. He has spent his two decades in power rebuilding Russia's military and reasserting its geopolitical clout.

The Russian president calls NATO's expansion menacing, and the prospect of Ukraine joining it a major threat. As Russia has grown more assertive and stronger militarily, his complaints about the military alliance have grown more strident. He has repeatedly invoked the specter of American ballistic missiles and combat forces in Ukraine, though U.S., Ukrainian and NATO officials insist there are none.

Mr. Putin has also insisted that Ukraine is fundamentally part of Russia, culturally and historically, ignoring ample evidence to the contrary, including the views of most Ukrainians.

East-West relations worsened drastically in early 2014, when mass protests in Ukraine forced out a president closely allied with Mr. Putin. Russia swiftly invaded and annexed Crimea, a part of Ukraine with enormous strategic importance. Moscow also fomented, armed and reinforced a separatist rebellion that took control of part of the Donbas region of Ukraine in a war that had killed more than 13,000 people before the invasion last year.

What does Putin want?

Mr. Putin appears intent on turning the calendar back more than 30 years, establishing a broad, Russian-dominated security zone like the one Moscow presided over in Soviet days. At age 70, he clearly wants to draw Ukraine, a nation of 44 million people and a former Soviet republic, back into firm Russian control.
In December 2021, months before invading, Russia presented NATO and the United States with a set of written demands that it said were needed to ensure its security but were impossible for the West to meet. Foremost among them were a guarantee that Ukraine never join NATO, and that NATO draw down its forces in the Eastern European countries that had already joined.

More broadly, Mr. Putin now appears intent on securing a place in the pantheon of historic, expansionist Russian leaders. In his public comments, he increasingly styles himself as a modern-day Peter the Great, the famous Russian czar, gathering up lost Russian lands.

**How has the West responded?**

![Ukrainian forces firing an M77 howitzer, supplied by the United States, toward Russian positions in the Donetsk region in June. Tyler Hicks/The New York Times](image)

As Russia threatened to invade, President Biden made clear that his administration was not considering sending troops or planes into the fight. Ukraine is not a member of the NATO alliance and does not come under its commitment to collective defense, and Mr. Biden wants to avoid direct conflict between Russian and American forces, which he has warned could lead to world war.

But the United States and Ukraine’s European allies have sent an array of weaponry to Ukraine, including anti-tank and antiaircraft systems, as well as increasingly powerful artillery and rockets. More recently, several European countries, the United States and Britain agreed to provide Ukraine with high-end battle tanks, though Kyiv’s subsequent demands for fighter planes have yet to be met.

Seeking to punish Moscow for the invasion, Western nations imposed heavy economic sanctions, including on oligarchs close to Mr. Putin. Mr. Biden vowed to turn Mr. Putin into a “pariah.”
U.S. and European financial penalties and restrictions also throttled banks and other businesses in Russia, limiting the Russian government’s ability to use its enormous foreign currency reserves and impeding millions of Russians from using their credit cards, accessing their bank deposits or traveling abroad. Additionally, European countries placed an embargo on Russian oil and sharply cut gas imports, trying to slash Moscow’s cash flow.

The sanctions have damaged the Russian economy but have fallen far short of bringing Moscow to its knees, in part because the Kremlin has strengthened its trade and financial ties with other economic partners, especially China, Turkey and India.

What’s at stake for Europe?

At stake for Europe is the security structure that has helped keep the peace on the continent since World War II.

Europeans have been divided for years over how to respond to various forms of Russian aggression, but outrage over Mr. Putin’s invasion and subsequent barbarity has helped foster a unified front with the U.S.

Europe has important trade ties with Russia, and stands to lose far more than the United States from sanctions. It was long dependent on Russian gas supplies, a weakness that Mr. Putin immediately sought to exploit, but in the past year European countries have shifted to other energy sources with remarkable speed.

For years before the invasion, many of the NATO nations of Western Europe spent too little on their militaries to satisfy American demands, arguing that deepening trade ties with Russia would ensure peace.
The countries that were under the Kremlin's thumb during the Cold War, notably Poland and the Baltic States, took a much warier view of Moscow, warning that their allies failed to understand the Russian threat. The war has moved Europe as a whole closer to that hawkish view of Russia.

Steven Erlanger contributed reporting.

Dan Bilefsky is an international correspondent, based in Montreal. He was previously based in London, Paris, Prague and New York. He was part of the team that won the 2022 George Polk Award for an investigation of the assassination of Haiti's president. He is the author of the true crime thriller "The Last Job." More about Dan Bilefsky

Richard Pérez-Peña, an international news editor in New York, has been with The Times as a reporter and editor since 1992. He has worked on the Metro, National, Business, Media and International desks. More about Richard Pérez-Peña

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