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Are Ukrainians and Russians Different Peoples?

A brief overview of evolution of two independent nations and their role in the current conflict

The Great Migration in the 6–7th centuries CE brought the Slavic tribes to the eastern European plains. Later on, they became divided into Ukrainians, Belorussians and Russians. How they became ethnically divided is debated and speculated on. For sociologists this is a question of self-identification rather than genetic distinction. For example, the DNA test of the author of this report sees no difference in all three:



ETHNIC COMPOSITION

93% your ancestors — Belarussians, russians, ukrainians

(source: My DNA test)

Throughout history, Russia and Ukraine have been allies and foes. No doubt they had indissociable bonds. In this article we will see how the two nations evolved, what sort of relations shaped between them, and what the ethnic issue has to do with the war of 2022.

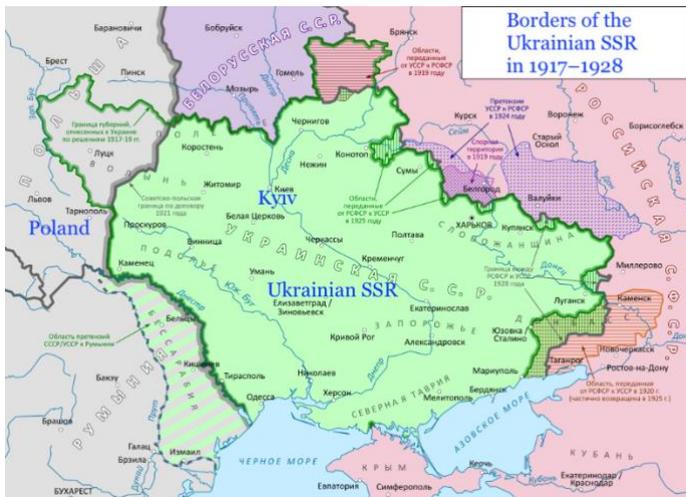
Historical Overview: from the 9th century to 1933



(source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Kyivan-Rus>)

The history of centralised government in the lands now shared by Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus begins in the late 9th century CE. Tribes living in the North West (the area of today's Novgorod, Pskov and, roughly speaking, Saint Petersburg) invited varyags (the name given by Greeks and East Slavs to Vikings) to rule over them. Soon Kyiv became the capital of the new governmental entity – Kievan Rus', which had tight relations with the Byzantine Empire and adopted Orthodox Christianity at the end of the 10th century. With the emergence of the Mongol Empire 300 years later, the Slavic lands were integrated in the Golden Horde and severely oppressed. By that time Kievan Rus' was no longer a centralised state but was divided in a number of independent domains. In the following centuries, the southern and western domains, including the contemporary Ukraine's territory, fell under the rule of Catholic Lithuania and later Poland, while the eastern lands were collected around Orthodox Moscow

in the 16th century. As a result of the partition of Poland by Russia, Austria, and Prussia in the late 18th century, most of Ukraine, including Kyiv, became part of the Russian Empire.



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1917-1928 Soviet Ukraine borders formation.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1917-1928_Soviet_Ukraine_borders_formation.svg) (translation by the author)

With the dissolution of the empire in 1917, Ukraine was proclaimed a sovereign People’s Republic, yet this territory was being torn apart by Bolsheviks, the white movement, Ukrainians, the Polish, anarchist, and other military forces: in 1918 and 1919 new governments would come to power and get overthrown. Finally, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic created by Bolsheviks was integrated into the USSR with its emergence in 1922. By this time, despite the proclaimed independence within the Union, its armed forces, communications, economical infrastructure, and other elements of a sovereign state had merged with those of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic, turning Ukraine into a sort of colony. Whether it’s a correct term or not (the author of the report will stay neutral due to the lack of reliable sources), it will never be admitted by Russian authorities.

Meanwhile, Western Ukraine was absorbed into Poland and actively polonised. In both parts of the divided Ukraine violent nationalistic sentiment arose naturally.



Painting "Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks" by Repin [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Запорожцы_\(картина\)#/media/Файл:Плја_Jefimowitsch_Repin_-_Reply_of_the_Zaporozhian_Cossacks_-_Yorck.jpg](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Запорожцы_(картина)#/media/Файл:Плја_Jefimowitsch_Repin_-_Reply_of_the_Zaporozhian_Cossacks_-_Yorck.jpg)

Throughout this period Ukraine obtained its own symbols and figures which shape its historical memory: including the Cossack people (democratic, self-governing, semi-military

communities originating in the steppes of Eastern Europe) and Bogdan Hmelnsky's struggle against Poland – these are some of those specifically Ukrainian identity elements.

Years 1932–1933 are infamously known as *Holodomor* or terror-famine. In Ukraine and 20 other countries this terror-famine is recognised by law as a genocide deployed by the USSR government of Joseph Stalin against the Ukraine in order to suppress the separatist movement. Millions of people (the exact number scholars do not agree on) fell victim to *Holodomor*. Under the disguise of a centralised wheat collection, food supplements were confiscated, and people were prohibited from moving around the country in search of food. According to Ukrainian sources, this divisive episode complements the persistent process of suppression of the Ukrainian struggle for independence and its violent russification. It is a matter of fact that Russian authorities have always failed to see Ukraine as a sovereign and independent state rather than a part of Russia, and any kind of national liberation movement has been considered separatist, and in today's discourse it is called nationalist or even fascist. However, these years of famine encompassed the entire Soviet Union, not only Ukraine. In Russia, the crisis of 1932–1933 is not recognised genocide against Ukraine.

Russia's Attitude Towards Cultural Identification

In July, 2021 president Vladimir Putin [published](#) a large article stating that Russians and Ukrainians are one people. Interestingly, it was published in both languages, Russian and Ukrainian. According to Putin, the common language derives from the old East Slavic. The linguistic kinship and the Orthodox belief are supposed to prove the cultural homogeneity. This close cultural kinship exists, however the politician neglects the autonomous cultural development of Ukrainians since the 9th century. He persistently brings up certain enemies (identified as "some people") who spoil the long-awaited reunion and "speculate on the ethnical issue". Therefore, official Russian policy promotes for at least the past 100 years this frightening idea of elimination of Ukraine's cultural identity in favour of the mythical "oneness." Putin's article is [criticised](#) by historians such as Georgiy Kasyanov, professor of the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Mikhail Krom, professor of the European University of Saint Petersburg, and Alexey Miller, PhD in history and author of the book "The Ukrainian Issue in the Russian Empire".

Ukraine in the 20th Century

In 1939, under the non-aggression pact of Nazi-Germany and the USSR, Western Ukraine, became part of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. During the World War II, Western Ukraine was completely occupied by the Nazis. These are the years of [Stepan Bandera](#), a fierce nationalist who collaborated with the Nazis against the USSR. In the current affairs between Russia and Ukraine this name is often brought up as the Kremlin fights the shadows of the Ukrainian nationalism. This is not ungrounded: former president of Ukraine Viktor Yushchenko honoured Bandera by posthumously bestowing on him the state honour "Hero of Ukraine." He is widely seen as a national hero and has followers up to date. It is a given fact that in the contemporary Ukraine the neo-Nazi element is present and strong. Right-wing extremist organisation "[Azov](#)" is just one example. Meanwhile, Italian and French departments of Amazon sell [merchandise with Azov's logo](#), and a Ukrainian journalist [called](#) for murder of Russian children on air on the central television.

From the end of war in 1945 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, both Ukraine and Belarus were represented in the General Assembly of the UN. In 1954 Soviet leader

Khrushchev handed the Crimean Peninsula over to the Ukrainian SSR. In 1990–1991 Ukraine gained its independence for good.

After this brief overview of the mutual history of Ukraine and Russia, we can make two important notions: throughout history, due to its geopolitical position, Western Ukraine has been under direct influence of Catholic Europe, Nazi Germany and later NATO and the EU, while Eastern Ukraine enjoys cultural conformity with Russia. This has led to a dramatic division within society that has a direct effect on the current affairs. We will consider this issue in the following part. The second notion is that the two peoples have had strong cultural and religious bonds that render the conflict so hurtful to most Russians and Ukrainians as neither can fully accept its neighbour as “the other”, as a Russian [song](#) goes “There’s Poltava and there’s Moscow, These are two halves of mine” (Poltava is a city in Central Ukraine).

Ethnicity and the War of 2022

The tables have turned in the past decade. Russia accepts that Ukraine is no longer a part of its vast empire or union, however it does not abandon the idea of cultural unity. While Russia aspires to dissolve Ukrainians in the cultural oneness (“We are one people”), it criticises Ukraine for aspiring to dissolve ethnic Russians by making them more Ukrainian (for instance, prohibiting the use of the Russian language in the official domain).

On February 24, 2022 Putin [announced what he calls a peace-making operation in Ukraine](#). The official goal of the operation is the “defence of people [of Donbass] who for the past 8 years have been exposed to harassment and genocide by the Ukrainian regime”, and Russia will “struggle for demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine...”, hence fight against “some people” that we have already met in Putin’s historical opus. In the declaration on February 24 he called the Kyiv’s ruling elite an “anti-people junta.” Let’s try to understand who is being harassed and how we ended up here. We must address the events on the eve of the invasion.

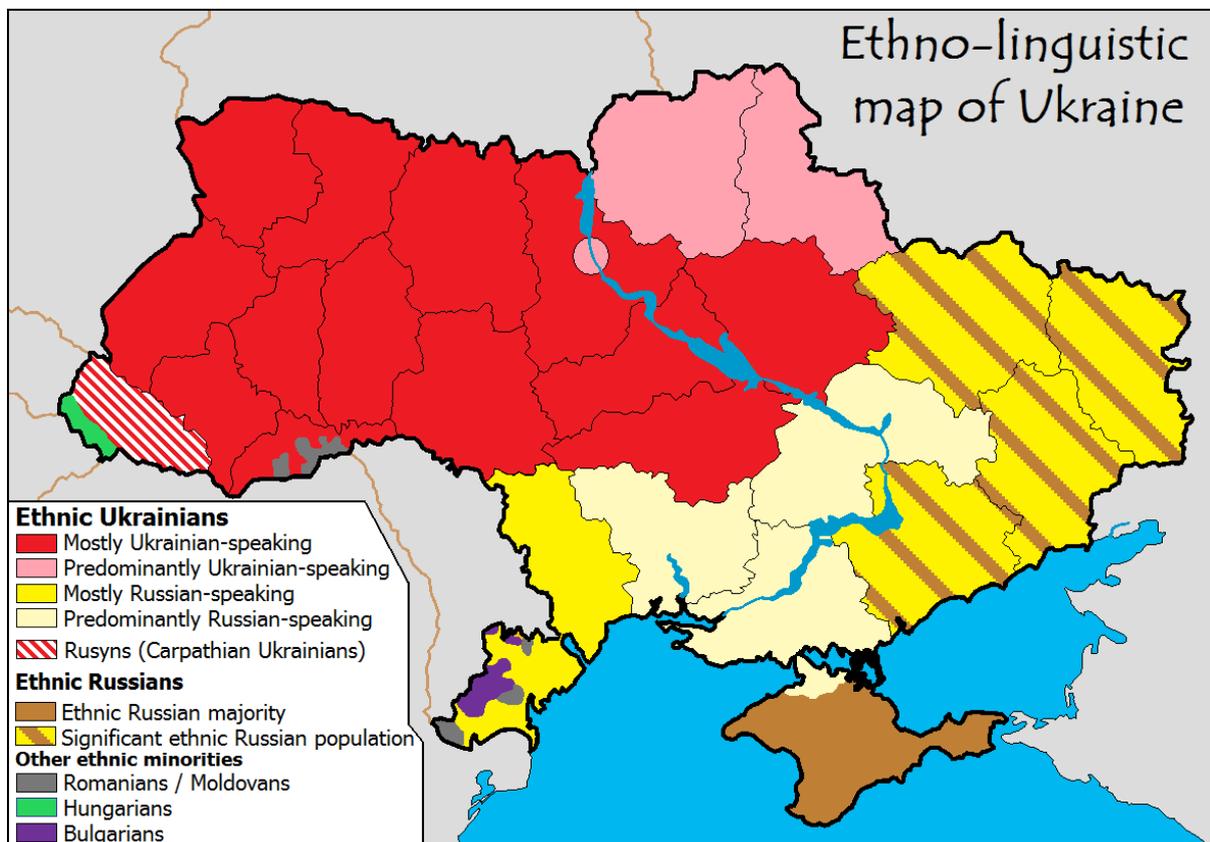
On February 22, the Federation Council, the upper chamber of the parliament, [allowed](#) the president to use the armed forces outside Russia “on the basis of the generally recognized principles and norms of international law.” This followed Putin’s [official recognition](#) of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, former Ukrainian territories bordering Russia. This provoked an immediate reaction of the Russian people: it was then when we could fore-see the outcome for Russia’s political position and economical crisis, but the war was not expected.

Every year on February 23 Russia celebrates Defender of the Fatherland’s day. It is usually seen as the men’s day (just like International Women’s Day on March 8). The celebration is symbolically associated with the glory of the Red army. Posters and postcards depict military equipment, the red star, and the ribbon of Saint George with black and orange stripes. Military symbolism is indeed a significant part of the identity of contemporary Russia. This is why it appears to me rather ironic that in these days the highly militarised Russia declares the demilitarisation of another country.

The core of the issue seems to be purely ethnical: these Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics are inhabited by Russians and Russian is the main spoken language. There the war has been going on since 2014: between the Ukrainian military and local guerrillas, against whom Ukraine officially [launched a so-called anti-terrorism operation](#).

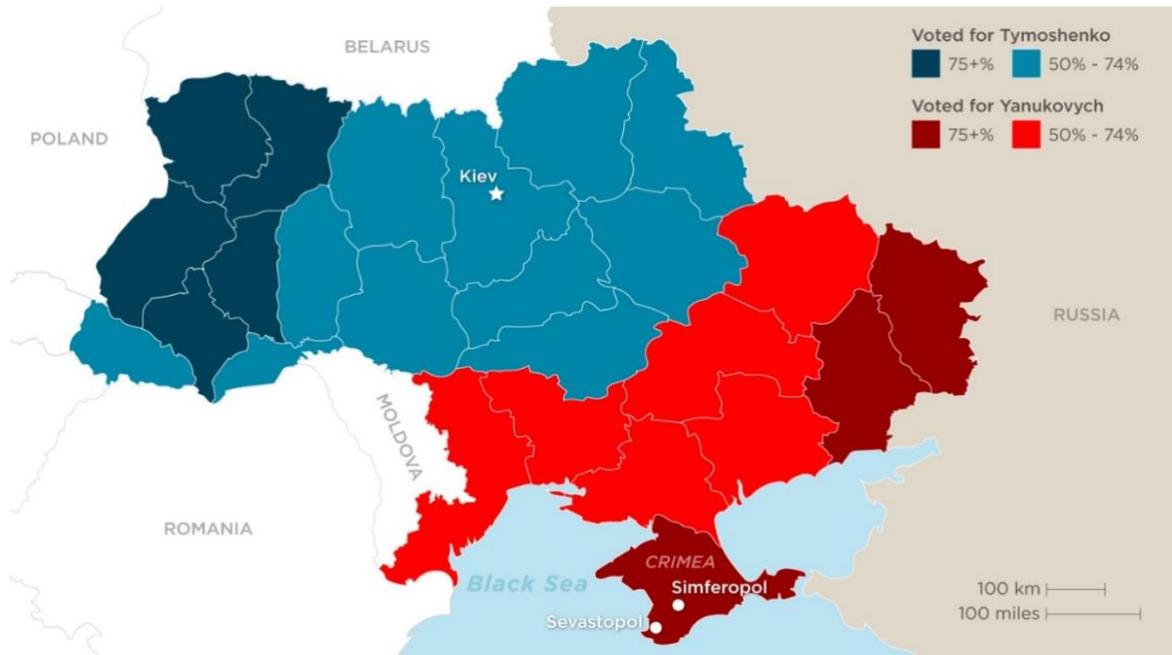
Let's recall what happened in 2013–2014: mass protests in the Maidan (square) of Independence in Kyiv were the people's reaction to the indecisiveness of the government concerning Ukraine requesting entrance into the EU. Prior to that, former president Viktor Yanukovich suddenly stopped negotiations that were supposed to lead to Ukraine's association with the EU. Initially peaceful students' demonstrations demonstrating in favour of integration in the EU ended up with a bloody coup d'état.

This is when Donetsk and Luhansk stepped in: these Russian-speaking provinces of Ukraine disagreed with the overthrow of the legitimately elected president. Their sympathy is understandable: in 2012 Yanukovich had [signed a law promoting the official status of Russian and other minority languages](#). In April, 2014 the two cities proclaimed themselves as sovereign republics with an extremely strong pro-Russian sentiment. Simultaneously, in March, 2014, with military presence, Putin [carried out a self-determination referendum in Crimea](#) (the brilliant pro-Russian results have been doubted, criticised and considered false, and the UN [never recognised](#) the referendum and the breach of territorial integrity of Ukraine as legitimate). He accompanied this act with a metaphor of the ship of Crimea and Sevastopol that had returned to the homeland harbour. Support for Putin inside Russia was immense.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ethnolinguistic_map_of_ukraine.png

The first map shows the ethnic breakdown of Ukraine with mostly Ukrainian speakers in the West and mostly Russian speakers in the East (bordering Russia). The second map depicts the presidential elections results in 2010. Eventually Yanukovich was elected, and we can see how the voting pattern is related to the ethnic picture. In the last picture we can see what Ukrainians would choose between entering the EU and the Customs Union of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus. Expectedly, the population of the south-east chose the latter. A corresponding chart demonstrates people's opinion on joining NATO.

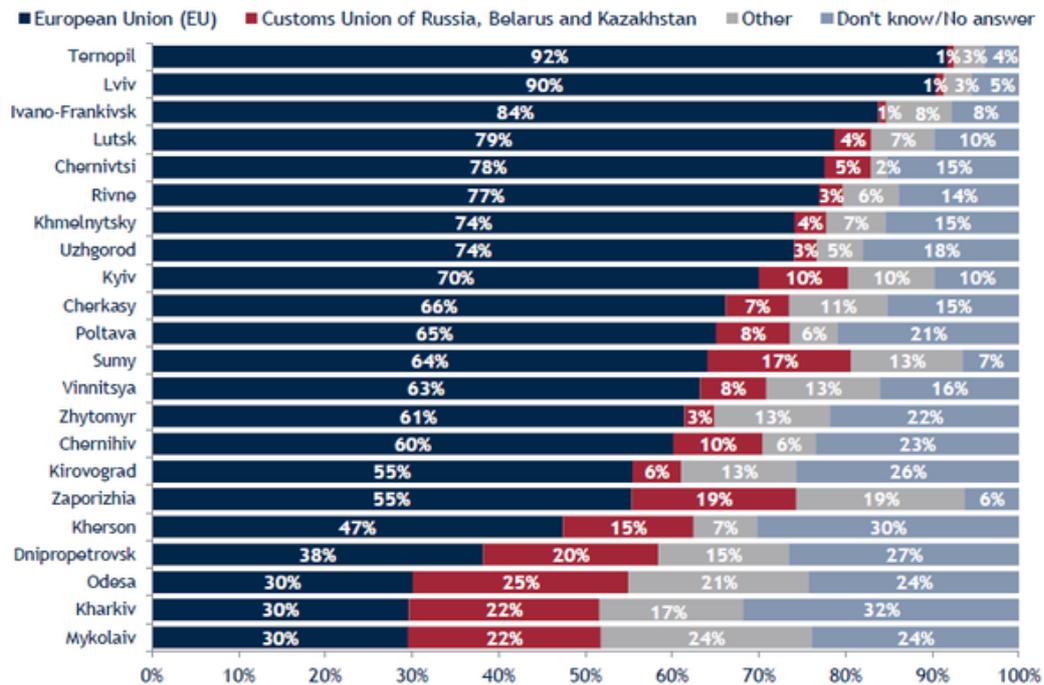


Source: Ukraine Central Election Commission <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2014/02/world/ukraine-divided/>

The second round of the 2010 presidential elections resulted in Viktor Yanukovich obtaining 48.95% of the vote and Yulia Tymoshenko obtaining 45.47%.

American political scientist John Mearsheimer [commented](#) in 2015 that Ukraine is indeed “a badly separated country.” I have explained why. Dr Mearsheimer argues that the conflict is the West’s fault, yet he seems to underestimate the inner conflict between the two nations and believes that the West’s poking at other nations every now and then does any good.

If Ukraine could only enter one international economic union, which of the following should it be?



Source: screenshot from Mearsheimer's lecture <https://youtu.be/JrMiSQAGOS4>

Conclusion

In this article I attempted to bring up the issue of ethnicity back to the spotlight, as the role of NATO in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict seems to seize all attention. If we once again try to answer the question whether Russians and Ukrainians are two distinct nations following their own paths, counter to the official propaganda in Russia, the answer is yes. The tendency of great powers to decide people's fates has proven to be destructive (the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, etc. are there to illustrate that).

However, we must not neglect the interrelated nature of history of the two nations. Russia's geopolitical interest in the war of 2022 is strongly backed up and justified by the heartbreaking narrative of the brotherhood between Russians and Ukrainians which somehow co-exists despite the destruction of the latter in the war of 2022. The issue of ethnicity has further divided Ukraine itself as we can see in the on-going events in Donetsk and Luhansk. Their resistance provided Putin the reason for armed intervention into a sovereign country.

We could say that we are witnessing another round of Ukraine's pattern of joining or leaving Russia, or rather: Russia's pattern of taking Ukraine and letting it go. Although we can attempt to predict the outcome based on historical dynamics of the issue (just like in the 14–15th centuries with Lithuania and Poland, like in the 20th century with Germany, today's crisis involves a third, extremely influential party), we must keep in mind that Europe is at risk of a war that will leave no winners.

Furthermore, Putin's intervention has split Russian society into two camps: the opposition to the deadly method of the Kremlin is extreme. Everyday people go out to protest against the war. To date, over 6,5 thousand people have been detained for speaking up since the beginning of the war, free media have been closed, and the word "war" has been banned. If one has ever dreamt of living in a book, they can now experience George Orwell's 1984.