

Maps: How Ukraine became Ukraine

Ishaan Tharoor: March 9, 2015

For the past year, Ukraine has been plunged into chaos. Mass protests against pro-Moscow President Viktor Yanukovich led to his ouster in February 2014. That sparked a spiraling crisis: a fledgling interim government in Kiev looked on as Russia first seized and then annexed the territory of Crimea, a strategic Black Sea peninsula. A pro-Russian separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine, believed to have direct backing from Moscow, has led to the deaths of thousands since.

To some, Ukraine has become the geopolitical faultline between the liberal democratic West and authoritarian, neo-imperial Russia under President Vladimir Putin. Foreign policy luminaries in Washington openly discuss the current state of affairs as a new Cold War.

Beneath the political divisions of the present lies a country's deep, complex past. The land that's now Ukraine has long been dear to Russian nationalists. But it has also been home to a host of other peoples and empires. Its shifting borders and overlapping histories all have echoes in the current heated moment.

What follows is a sketch of how Ukraine became Ukraine over 1,300 years of history, mapped by The Washington Post's cartographer Gene Thorp. Ukraine's modern borders are outlined in green throughout.



8th century to 13th century

The "Rus" -- the people whose name got tacked on to Russia -- were originally Scandinavian traders and settlers who made their way from the Baltic Sea through the marshes and forests of Eastern Europe down toward the fertile riverlands of what's now Ukraine. Other Viking adventurers journeyed to Constantinople, the great capital of the Byzantine Empire, to find their fortune -- sometimes as hired muscle.

The first major center of the "Rus" was at Kiev, established in the 9th century. In 988, Vladimir, a prince of the Kievan Rus, was baptized by a Byzantine priest in the old Greek colony of Khersonesos on the Crimean coast. His conversion marked the advent of Orthodox Christianity among the Rus and remains a moment of great nationalist symbolism for Russians. Putin invoked this older Vladimir in a speech last December when justifying his annexation of Crimea.

Successive Mongol invasions beginning in the 13th century subdued Kiev's influence, and led eventually to the rise of other Russian centers to the north, including Moscow. The Turkic descendants of the Mongol Golden Horde formed their own Khanate along the northern rim of the Black Sea.



1650 to 1812

Fast forward a few centuries, and you see how the land that's now Ukraine lay on the margins of competing empires. It was a region of permanent contest and shifting borders. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth -- which, at its peak, encompassed a huge swath of Europe -- had dominated much of the land, but Ukraine would also see the incursions of Hungarians, Ottomans, Swedes, bands of Cossacks and the armies of successive Russian czars.

In the 17th century, Russia and Poland split much of the territory of what's now Ukraine along the Dnieper river. Russia's advance continued a century later, during the rule of Catherine the Great, who imagined her domains along the Black Sea constituted "Novorossiia," or "new Russia" -- a term revived by the pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Back then, the Russian court harbored dreams of collapsing the Ottoman empire and extending Moscow's reach to Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) and even Jerusalem.

"Believe me, you will acquire immortal fame such as no other sovereign of Russia ever had," said Grigoriy Potemkin, a prominent adviser to Catherine the Great, when offering the empress counsel in 1780 on plans to wrest Crimea away from Ottoman suzerainty. "This glory will open the way to still further and greater glory."

Meanwhile, the partitions of Poland in the late 18th century led to the city of Lviv -- once a major regional hub and a center of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe -- falling under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian empire. It was there in the mid-19th century where Ukrainian nationalism began to take hold, rooted in the traditions and dialects of the region's peasants and the aspirations of intellectuals who had fled the stifling rule of Russia rule further to the east.



1914 to 1918

World War I and the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 triggered more traumas and upheaval in the areas that now constitute Ukraine. The new Bolshevik government was desperate to end hostilities with Germany and its allies and signed a treaty in the town of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 ceding some of Russia's domains to the Central powers and recognizing the independence of others, including Ukraine.

The terms of the treaty were nullified by Germany's defeat later in the year, but the genie of Ukrainian nationalism was out of the bottle. Independence movements of various stripes sprung up in cities like Lviv, Kiev and Kharkiv, but were eventually all swept away amid the wider struggle for power in Russia.



1919 to 1922

At the end of World War I, a revived Poland reclaimed Lviv and a chunk of what's now western Ukraine. The country was one of the key battlegrounds of the Russian Civil War, pitting Bolshevik forces against an array of armies, led by loyalists to the old czarist regime as well as other political opportunists. After a lot of bloodshed -- and other battles with Poland -- the Bolsheviks emerged triumphant, and officially declared the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic in 1922.

The years that followed would be even more traumatic: in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Ukraine suffered heavily under the rule of Soviet despot Josef Stalin. A vast segment of Ukraine's rural population was displaced and dispossessed by Stalin's aggressive collectivization policies. A man-made famine in 1932-3 led to the deaths of some three million people.

To make up the numbers, Russian speakers from elsewhere immigrated to Ukraine's hollowed out towns and cities, leaving a demographic footprint that defines Ukraine's divisive politics to this day.



1945 to 1954

World War II ravaged Ukraine. Hitler and other Nazi strategists imagined it could become the breadbasket of their larger Germany empire. Instead, it was a hideous, bloody warzone, shaped by epic, grinding battles and various massacres of civilian populations. Some Ukrainian nationalists cooperated for a time with Nazi authorities, seeing the invasion as a means to achieve their own independence. This was particularly the case in western Ukraine, which until the end of World War II, had no experience of Soviet rule.

The "fascism" of these Ukrainian guerrillas is still a source of controversy now. Some militant elements in the anti-Yanukovich protest movement actively embraced the legacy of Nazi-affiliated war heroes. The Kremlin's propaganda organs, meanwhile, used this history to label the new government in Kiev as one riding on a wave of "neo-Nazism."

After the end of World War II, the Soviet Union claimed Lviv and its surrounding lands in Ukraine's west. The Crimean peninsula, whose population was majority Russian (after the mass deportation of Crimea's Tatars), was formally ceded from Russia to the Ukrainian socialist republic in 1954 by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.



After the fall of the U.S.S.R.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine emerged as one many new independent post-Soviet states in 1991. Its politics were riven by regional divides between the country's west and the Russian-leaning east. Russia chose to maintain a naval base in Sevastopol, the main port city in Crimea's southern tip.



Present day

And so here we are. Russian troops, many based in Sevastopol, fanned out across the peninsula last March to aid what was ultimately Russia's annexation of the territory. A pro-Russian insurgency in the east by the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk, Ukraine's industrial heartland, is ongoing, despite numerous attempts at ceasefires.

Kiev is seeking greater Western military assistance in what many consider to be a fight against Moscow. There are fears Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko may institute martial law in a bid to subdue the separatists, threatening the country's already fledgling democracy. Ukraine is at a proverbial crossroads, as it has been for centuries.
