foreignpolicy.com /2025/01/08/users-guide-to-who-lost-ukraine/

A User's Guide to 'Who Lost Ukraine?'

Stephen M. Walt ⋮ 11-14 minutes ⋮ 1/8/2025

No one knows exactly how or when Russia's war in Ukraine will end, but the terms are likely to be disappointing to Kyiv and its Western supporters. If that happens, the next phase will feature a nasty debate over who was responsible. Some of the participants will be motivated by a genuine desire to learn from a tragic episode, but others will be trying to evade responsibility, shift the blame onto others, or score political points. It's a familiar phenomenon; as John F. Kennedy famously quipped: "Victory has 100 fathers, and defeat is an orphan."

There's no need to wait for this war of ideas to erupt because some of the competing positions are already out there and others are easy to anticipate. I'm not going to offer a detailed evaluation of them here; this column is merely a handy check list of the competing explanations for why the war happened and why it didn't go as most of us hoped.

Argument #1: It was a mistake for Ukraine to give up its nuclear weapons. According to some observers, the first big error was compelling Ukraine to give up the nuclear weapons it had inherited from the former Soviet Union in exchange for some toothless security guarantees. Had Kyiv kept its own nuclear arsenal, so the argument runs, it would have been free to pursue whatever economic arrangements and geopolitical alignment it preferred without having to worry about Russian military intervention. This argument—recently invoked by former U.S. President Bill Clinton—maintains that Russia would not have dared seize Crimea in 2014 or invade the rest of a nuclear-armed Ukraine in 2022 because doing so would have been too risky. There are technical objections to this argument (i.e., it is not clear that Ukraine would have been able to use the weapons even if they had remained in its possession), but it's still a counterfactual worth pondering.

Argument #2: Inviting Ukraine to join NATO was a huge strategic blunder. In the 1990s, a who's who of sophisticated strategic thinkers warned that NATO enlargement would eventually lead to serious trouble with Russia, but their advice was ignored. As one of these experts, Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis, put it in 1998: "The State Department assures us … that we can expect relations with Moscow to proceed normally while we sort out just who the new members of NATO will be. Perhaps it will next try to tell us that pigs can fly." Warnings from inside the U.S. government grew louder when the Bush administration proposed Georgia and Ukraine for future NATO membership at the Bucharest summit in 2008, but they, too, failed to arrest momentum for membership. Russian protests and security concerns were blithely dismissed, and steadily growing security ties between Kyiv and the West eventually drove Russian President Vladimir Putin to launch an illegal war in 2022.

In this view, in short, Ukraine was invaded because advocates of enlargement did not understand the depth of Russian concerns and failed to anticipate how Moscow would react. This argument is anathema to Ukraine's most fervent supporters, who insist that war occurred because Putin is an unappeasable aggressor who would have attacked sooner or later no matter what NATO did. But this account of why the war happened is logically coherent, and there's substantial evidence to support it. To say this does not justify Russia's actions in the slightest, but it does suggest that Western leaders should have considered the possibility that Moscow would do something nasty when they began expanding NATO eastward. They will probably never admit that their own actions made the war more likely, but it wouldn't be the first time that well-intentioned Western efforts to help another country backfired.

Argument #3: NATO didn't expand fast enough. This argument is the flip side of #2. It argues that the real error was not the decision to expand NATO or later to invite Ukraine to prepare an action plan for membership; it was the failure to let Kyiv in sooner and provide it with the means to defend itself. It assumes that Moscow would not have taken military action if Kyiv had enjoyed Article 5 protection and the prospect of direct Western military support. At a minimum, NATO should have helped Ukraine expand its armed forces more rapidly after Russia seized Crimea in 2014 so that it was in a better position to deter or defeat a future Russian incursion. In this view, NATO's vacillation (and the Obama administration's reluctance to provide Ukraine with substantial military support) left Kyiv in the worst possible position: Moscow saw its drift toward the West as an existential threat, but Ukraine lacked adequate protection against a Russian preventive war.

Argument #4: The West failed to negotiate seriously in 2021. The crisis came to a head in 2021, as Ukraine continued to move steadily toward the West. Russia mobilized military forces on the border with Ukraine in March and April. The United States and Ukraine signed a new agreement for security cooperation in September,

Russia intensified its military preparations, and in December, Moscow released two draft treaties demanding fundamental changes to the European security order. The draft treaties were widely seen not as serious proposals but as a pretext for war, and the United States and NATO responded by rejecting the Russian demands and offering only some modest arms control proposals in response. The result was that the two sides never engaged in a serious negotiation over Ukraine's geopolitical alignment. Russia's full set of demands may have been unacceptable, but this view argues that the United States and NATO should have seen them as an opening bid and not as a take-it-or-leave-it ultimatum. Might the war have been avoided—and Ukraine spared much suffering—had Washington (and Brussels) been more willing to compromise on some (but not all) of Moscow's demands?

Argument #5: Ukraine and Russia both lost because they didn't end the war quickly. With the benefit of hindsight, both Ukraine and Russia would have been better off if they had ended the war shortly after it began. According to one version of this argument, the two sides came close to an agreement in Istanbul in April 2022, but Western opposition to the proposed terms eventually led Ukraine to walk away from the deal. A second version—sometimes associated with retired Gen. Mark Milley, who was the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff until 2023—argues that Ukraine and its backers should have pushed for a cease-fire in the fall of 2022, after successful Ukrainian offensives in Kharkiv and Kherson had put Russia at a temporary disadvantage. We'll never know if efforts to end the war early would have succeeded, but these arguments will get renewed attention once the fighting ends and especially if the terms are unfavorable to Kyiv. Given the substantial price that Moscow has paid for its aggression, a negotiated deal back in early 2022 might have been far better for it as well.

Argument #6: Ukraine was stabbed in the back. Not surprisingly, Ukrainians and their most fervent supporters in the West have long complained that Kyiv wasn't getting enough help, wasn't getting it fast enough, and faced too many restrictions on the help it did receive. If only Kyiv had received more Abrams tanks, more F-16s, more Patriots, more ATACMS and Storm Shadows, more artillery shells, etc., along with Russia's frozen assets, and had been allowed to use these weapons however it wanted, then Russia would have been decisively defeated by now, and Ukraine would have regained all its lost territory. This view nicely absolves Western hard-liners of responsibility for the debacle, as it suggests that the problem was not that their advice was wrong but that it wasn't followed with sufficient enthusiasm. As a result, you can expect to hear it from many quarters, a sort of *dolchstoss* redux.

Argument #7: It was Kyiv's fault. Given the suffering that Ukrainians have endured at Russia's hands, blaming the outcome on their own strategic errors seems insensitive, even cruel. Nonetheless, postwar efforts to assess what went wrong will undoubtedly include questioning the ill-fated Ukrainian offensive in the summer of 2023 (which a surprising number of Western commentators inexplicably believed was likely to succeed) and the tactically successful but strategically questionable incursion toward Kursk in the summer of 2024. Ukraine's armed forces have fought heroically and showed impressive tactical inventiveness, but postwar critics are likely to focus on the draining effects of internal corruption, the failure to devote sufficient effort to building defenses, and Kyiv's unwillingness or inability to mobilize younger cohorts for battle.

Argument #8: It's realpolitik, baby. Russians from Putin on down see the war as part of a relentless U.S.-led effort to keep Russia weak, but I suspect there are some in the West who believe Ukraine was simply a pawn that was sacrificed to ensnare Russia in a long and costly war. It's a truly Machiavellian view, which implies that Western elites (and especially Americans) understood that expanding NATO and eventually incorporating Ukraine would drive Moscow crazy and eventually provoke a military response. If the war didn't escalate beyond Ukraine and Western troops didn't get involved, the far richer West could keep the Ukrainians in the fight for a long time and slowly bleed Russia white. A similarly strategy had worked against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and Russia's recent setbacks in Syria and Moldova suggest it is working. I have serious doubts about this explanation myself, but I am curious about what the archives will reveal in the fullness of time.

Read More

A Ukrainian tank crew member of the 68th Jaeger Brigade stands on a Leopard 1A5 tank near Pokrovsk, the eastern Donetsk region, on Dec. 13.

How We Got Here in the Russia-Ukraine War

Our must-read articles on the state of the conflict, its impact on the global order, and the chance for peace.

Argument #9: When all else fails, blame Trump. U.S. President Joe Biden got lucky in one way: Unlike the endgame in Afghanistan, the denouement in Ukraine will happen on someone else's watch. If the outcome is unfavorable to Ukraine, then critics are likely to pin some of the blame on incoming President Donald Trump. His fear of being seen as weak and being blamed for the result may lead Trump to give Ukraine more support than he has signaled he would, but he's unlikely to give it the same level of rhetorical and material support that Biden did. If Ukraine loses those four Russian-occupied oblasts and Crimea permanently or is trapped in another frozen conflict, Trump's political opponents will be all too happy to hold him responsible.

A healthy and fair-minded debate on what went right and wrong in Ukraine would help us learn the right lessons and do better in the future, but learning the right lessons from past failures is never guaranteed. Regular readers of this column already know which of these various arguments I find most convincing, but my goal here is not to pin the blame on anyone. For now, just clip this column, and get ready to keep score as fingers are pointed and the dust-kicking begins.