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**With(out) Reason: Why Russia Invaded Ukraine**

*ABSTRACT:* This paper examines the root causes of Russia's military intervention in Ukraine, which has been widely condemned as an illegal act of aggression. While many attribute the invasion to Vladimir Putin's authoritarianism, this paper argues that the situation is far more complex. The paper identifies historical grievances, NATO expansion, and domestic political instability in Russia as key factors that led to the conflict. These factors create a complex web of tensions and motivations that complicate efforts to assign blame or find a resolution. Overall, this paper seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the conflict and its underlying causes.

On February 24, 2022, Russia ended a decades-long European peace with the invasion of Ukraine. Immediately, the Western world condemned Putin and his nation, claiming the invasion was a product of his tyranny. Over the past 14 months, Western opinion on the war hasn’t shifted, getting even more intense. President Joe Biden said in February, that the United States is “in the great battle for freedom: a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force” (“Remarks by President Biden…"). Around the same time, Putin shifted the war’s blame onto the west, saying “I want to repeat: it is they who are culpable for the war, and we are using force to stop it” (Armstrong). So, who is right? Who is truly to blame for the war? In reality, there is no clear answer, but a mixture of blame to go around.

The history of the region between Russia and Ukraine can be traced back to the Soviet era, when the two nations were part of the Soviet Union. After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Ukraine gained independence and became a sovereign nation, but tensions with Russia persisted, particularly over the status of Crimea, which has a significant Russian-speaking population. Although Crimea was made part of Ukraine during the Soviet era, Russia annexed the territory after a Ukrainian coup that installed a Western-backed leader. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was viewed as a violation of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and sparked ongoing conflict in the region. The strategic importance of Crimea, which houses Russia's main naval base and provides access to the Black Sea, has made the conflict particularly contentious. The tensions escalated over the past decade, leading to a sort of civil war between pro-Russian separatist groups and Ukrainian loyalists, culminating in the recent full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In Putin’s ”On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians“, he breaks down the ethnic and historical similarities between the Russian and Ukrainian people, linking them to the same lineage. He argues that the two nations are one people, noting that the two countries were historically part of the same state with many shared traditions and values. He implies that Western nations like the United States seek to use Ukraine as a geopolitical pawn while also expressing concern for the treatment of ethnic Russians in Ukrainian territories (Putin). While this concern has been scoffed at by the West, recent comments by Ukrainian Senior Advisor Mykhailo Podolyak support Putin’s analysis, saying “We have to eradicate everything Russian. There should be only Ukrainian cultural space or global cultural space. We should not have a dialogue about whether a person has the right to use the Russian language or not” (Lieven). These comments by Podolyak are indicative of the views of far-right nationalists that hold high roles in the Ukrainian government. Many fear that these hard-liners, who hold significant influence and power, could prove to be a formidable obstacle to bringing an end to the war.

Russia portrays the ongoing war as being fueled in part by historical grievances, while the United States attributes its cause to the tyrannical nature of Vladimir Putin. According to the Western narrative, Putin's grip on power was being threatened by a faltering economy and diminishing global influence. In response, he launched an invasion of Ukraine in the hopes of securing a swift victory and rallying support at home while expanding Russia's territory. Many have drawn parallels between his aims and the expansionist policies of the former Soviet Union. As President Biden has stated, this is a battle between autocracy and democracy, reminiscent of the ideological justifications for proxy wars during the Cold War, such as Vietnam and Korea.

A key difference between the current situation and the Cold War era is that the rest of the world is not necessarily on board with the Western perspective. In countries such as China, India, and Turkey, between 69-79% of people view Russia as a strategic ally, and a significant portion believe that ending the war should be the highest priority, even if it means significant concessions on the part of Ukraine (Lyshen). By contrast, the US has taken a hard-line stance on the conflict. When viewed in such stark terms, there is little room for nuance or compromise. The Biden administration sees the conflict as a battle between good and evil, with no room for negotiation or compromise with the perceived forces of evil.

The final and possibly most important cause of the war is the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or NATO. Since its creation in the 40s, NATO has been America’s most important alliance, but many have warned against its expansion. In 1998, former US director of policy planning George Kennan said about NATO’s expansion, “'I think it is the beginning of a new cold war…I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else. This expansion would make the Founding Fathers of this country turn over in their graves.” (Friedman). Kennan’s criticisms were echoed by CIA Director William Burns in a leaked embassy cable saying, “NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine…could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even, some claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene.” (“Submit Documents…”).

As NATO has expanded over the years, Russia has grown increasingly wary of American interference in its sphere of influence. The US-led invasions of Serbia, Iraq, and Libya, all conducted under the backing of NATO, set off alarm bells in the Kremlin. Moreover, the US's withdrawal from the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty and the Iran Nuclear Deal have only fueled Russian distrust of the United States. From the Russian perspective, America is an expansionist power that cannot be negotiated with or trusted. They see the US as being incapable of honoring agreements, with no checks or balances or ability to be policed by the world.

The expansion of NATO to the east began to terrify Russia, especially after Ukraine's 2014 coup, which increased tensions in the region. A pro-NATO, anti-Russia nation on Russia's eastern border, controlling Russia's sole access point to the Black Sea, was a major concern for the Kremlin. Even after the annexation of Crimea, the US-Ukraine relationship continued to develop, with a focus on arming Ukraine and exacerbating differences between Ukraine and Russia. Although Ukraine was not yet a member of NATO, the groundwork was being laid for its eventual membership. For Russia, rather than waiting for Ukraine to join NATO and risk World War III, the decision was made to invade before it was too late. Putin had an, “apocalyptic vision of a future, nuclear-armed Ukraine, embedded in NATO and intent on provoking a Russian-Western war. Arguably, it was that long-term nuclear danger that finally prompted Putin to go to war.” (Roberts).

The question then remains, why did the US insist on the expansion of NATO? The United States argues that the growth was necessary to counter Russia's expansionary methods and to ensure a hard line against aggression. They claim that with the entrance of countries like Poland and Sweden, even if Russia were to take over Ukraine, NATO's shield would ensure that the hostility stops there. However, Russia's perspective is quite different. They argue that they wouldn't feel the need to invade if NATO weren't getting rid of their buffer zone. They believe that they are being surrounded by enemies, and NATO's expansion is aimed at inciting a Russian invasion.

While NATO clearly didn’t want a Russian invasion, the argument could be made that they are currently fighting a proxy war with the goal of diminishing Russian power. Before the war, the economic threat Russia posed to the US was key. With the increase of hydrofracking in the 2010s, the US took their place as a world gas/oil king. But still, Europe’s largest economy, Germany, had an energy pipeline with Russia running through Ukraine for decades and had plans to build another one. The US considered sanctioning Russian gas but didn't have a solid basis to do so. However, after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US imposed sanctions on all gas through the pipeline. A few months later, the pipelines were sabotaged and destroyed, but the responsible party remains unknown. As a result, Germany is now reliant on US gas, which has increased America's power in the world.

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused immense suffering and loss of life, and it is a clear violation of international law. While Russia's actions must be condemned in the strongest terms, it is important to acknowledge that the situation is more complex than just one of unprovoked aggression. Russia's sense of historical grievances, combined with the power struggle of its leader Vladimir Putin and the expansion of NATO, have all contributed to the current conflict. However, this does not excuse Russia's actions or diminish the responsibility it bears for the suffering it has caused. Additionally, the West's hypocritical condemnation of Russia, given its own history of military interventionism, must also be recognized. Ultimately, there is no justification for the invasion of Ukraine, and both Russia and NATO must be held accountable for their actions and work towards a peaceful resolution.

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