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## Featured Piece: Ukraine is Suffering

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### Abstract

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## Featured Pieces

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### *Ukraine is Suffering*

William D. Bowman, Professor of History, Gettysburg College

Ukraine is suffering. In late February 2022, Vladimir Putin ordered a Russian invasion of Ukraine. In an assault reminiscent of fighting during the Second World War, Russian soldiers have campaigned against Ukrainian forces and attacked civilians in much of the country. After several weeks of waging war, Ukraine has not fallen, as many military experts would have predicted. In fact, in recent weeks Russian forces, having failed to take Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, have relocated themselves to the eastern region of the country in an effort to take provinces bordering Russia proper. This is the Donbas area of Ukraine, which is close to the Crimea, which Putin's troops took by force in 2014. The outcome of the war on Ukraine is far from clear and the suffering continues. Millions of Ukrainians have become refugees and fled to neighboring Poland, Moldova, and other countries. Millions

more are displaced persons in their home country. Ukrainian resistance to Russian aggression has been fierce and the conflict has no obvious outcome in site.

Ukraine suffered. During the Second World War, the eastern front, which included Ukraine, was the site of some of the most difficult military campaigning in the whole of Europe. The country was part of what Timothy Snyder, one of the world's leading historians of the region, has called the "bloodlands." After mid-1941 and the launching of "Barbarossa," the German code name for the invasion of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was overrun and occupied by enemy forces. In addition to military casualties, the country sustained numerous civilian casualties as well. Ukraine's Jews and Communist party officials, in particular, were targets of German military forces and the notorious Einsatzgruppen, or special commando units, whose primary purpose was the execution of Germany's political and ethnic "enemies." Shootings in the open, in forests near towns or villages, and over open mass graves, became the norm. Ukraine, alongside Poland, the Baltic littoral (modern-day Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia), Belarus, and western Russia under German occupation, suffered horrifically. Whole, historic communities of Ukrainian Jews, in particular, were particularly hard hit under barbaric conditions.

Ukraine suffered even earlier in the twentieth-century. As a consequence of Josef Stalin's first "Five-Year Plan" and its emphasis upon collectivization of farmland, Ukraine, then part of the Soviet Union, fell victim to a massive famine. Traditionally part of the breadbasket of imperial Russia and then the Soviet Union, Ukraine found that its transformed agricultural landscape could not keep pace with the grain demands of Stalin's economic plan. Shortages of grain in the countryside, however, met with Soviet indifference. For Stalin, any grain produced in Ukraine had to be used for his agricultural transformation of the Soviet Union and not for the local population. As a consequence, three to four million Ukrainians were intentionally allowed to starve to death, in what came to be known as the Holodomor, a term that captures both the hunger that haunted the land and the Soviet policy of extermination that accompanied it.

As Putin ordered the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, he also performed a brazen act of historical erasure. In what can only be called an inversion of the past, he argued that Ukraine had no independent existence outside of the Soviet Union, that it was a product of the Bolshevik Revolution and its consolidation in the period after 1917. This is part of his larger argument, articulated in 2005, that the great "tragedy" of the twentieth century was the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991 and its loss of territories

throughout eastern Europe, the Caucasus region, and in Central Asia. In other words, what most of the world viewed as the end of the Cold War and the liberation of numerous former Soviet Socialist Republics, including Ukraine, was according to Putin and this highly nationalistic version of Russian history a historic tragedy. Moreover, the defunct Soviet Union and the Russian state that emerged in its wake had also lost control and influence over a whole swath of eastern European countries, such as East Germany Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania in 1989. It is this sense of territorial and political loss that fuels Putin's historical grievance and vision. Of course, his historical statements are meant more as political justifications for his aggressive foreign policy moves than as serious arguments about the past. They are usually directed at the Russian public and not Ukraine, Europe, or the west as a whole.

Any serious assessment of Ukraine's past and its relationship to a developing and emerging "Russia" would have to give historical primacy in many respects to the former. After all, Kievan Rus is usually considered the start of much of what one would consider "Russian" history. It was there in the tenth century that Orthodox Christianity was adopted as the state and majority religion. In fact, even the messianic historical vision that Putin has adopted originated in Kiev, which saw itself as the successor and

defender of Orthodox Christianity and European civilization that had arisen and been established in Constantinople, the original heart of Byzantium. Historical claims and counter-claims about political and cultural precedence are indeed very old in Europe and in world history, too. They can be healthy signs of noteworthy and defensible developments. Unfortunately, they are also all too often used as popular justification for current aggressive and unjustified political and military moves, as is the case in 2022.

The question now is how much more will Ukraine suffer in the near future. As the brutal fighting continues, much of Europe (and the United States) is sympathetic to the Ukrainian cause. Indeed, the European Union and its member states have thus far shown much resolve in supporting Ukraine. Non-combatant states, however, also lose that resolve over time. Refugees pouring into Poland or Moldova place financial burdens on those societies and beyond. Russia has recently cut fuel exports to Poland and Bulgaria. As the conflict slogs on into the summer of 2022, civilian casualties rise in Ukraine, and the economic toil of the fighting mounts, pressure will be placed on Ukraine to “settle” the war with Russia, even though the latter invaded the former. As with the current military conflict itself, discussion will likely focus on eastern Ukraine and provinces that Putin desires that border Russia proper, connect lines of

communication in the region, and link up with the Crimea. Even if Ukraine can withstand the Russian military onslaught, it might unfortunately still lose some of its territory in the east as part of a political settlement of the war.

There are, however, two other radically different outcomes to the war in Ukraine. First, despite all of their military difficulties of the first several weeks of the campaigning, Russian forces could gain the upper hand and use a consolidated base in the east to re-launch their attacks on Kiev and the rest of Ukraine. The country could still fall. In which case, Putin would feel emboldened in his historical vision and might look to Moldova or the Baltic littoral as future territories that should, in his grandiose scheme, be “restored” to Russia. In his estimation, what “history” do they have beyond a Russian past?

On the other hand, Ukraine could “win” the war against Russia. That might mean a stalemate in the east that forces Russia to make very minor or no territorial demands. That might mean continuing to show the weakness of the Russian military, its leadership, its technology, and its morale and more or less defeating it in the field. It might even mean that Putin overextends himself and misplays the situation such that his internal, Russian opponents move against him. All of these scenarios are unlikely, to be sure, especially as Putin still holds nuclear weapons options

and has shown his willingness to deal harshly with political opponents. Nevertheless, the situation in Ukraine in late April and early May of 2022 is far from clear and several outcomes to the current fighting are possible. Above all else, one hopes that the suffering in Ukraine stops and that an independent, sovereign, and free country will survive to heal.