

GREAT DECISIONS

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HIGH SCHOOL

APRIL 2026

TEACHERS:
CHECK OUT
THE BACK PAGE

UKRAINE

**HISTORIC
DESTRUCTION**

**WHY IT
HAPPENED**

**HOW IT'S
GOING**

**LASTING
IMPACT**



BY ROBERT FAMILIAR



HOPE FOR PEACE

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy issued a warning to the rest of the world during his speech at the 2026 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. “When you refuse to help people fighting for freedom, the consequences return—and they’re always negative,” he said

In his characteristic all-black uniform, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy took the stage once again at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, an annual gathering of world political leaders and business executives, to demand an end to the Russian invasion and occupation of his country. His speech expressed frustration over what he sees as America and Europe’s inability

to stop the Russian war machine. It also served as a warning about what he believes could happen to others if Russia is allowed to continue its aggression.

The Russo-Ukrainian War is now the costliest and most destructive war in Europe since World War II. As it enters its fifth year, calls for peace are louder than ever. However, with everything that has been lost, neither side will achieve

victory when it concludes.

HIGH STAKES

Russia, the aggressor, has suffered a staggering 1.2 million soldiers killed, wounded, or missing. A January 2026 analysis from the Center for Strategic and International Studies projects that this number could rise to two million by mid-year. The Ukrainian armed forces have

suffered about half that number of losses, on top of thousands of civilian casualties from Russian drone attacks, missile strikes, and other military actions.

The scale of this war was once thought unimaginable in the modern era. At the outset, Russia's **dictator** president, Vladimir Putin, said he would take Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, in mere days. In the years since, Russian forces have been ground to a virtual standstill in brutal trench warfare and block-by-block urban fighting, holding a relatively unchanging 20 percent of Ukrainian territory. Russia's military capabilities have been seriously diminished, its economy is strained because of heightened wartime spending and international **sanctions**, and its diplomatic standing is the lowest it's been in decades.

For Ukraine, the hope of holding all its land and reclaiming the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia seized in 2014, is gone. So is its aim to join the **North Atlantic Treaty Organization** (NATO) any time soon. NATO is a military alliance that includes the United States, Canada and much of Europe. An attack on one member is treated as an attack on all. The first time this alliance was put to use was after the September 11, 2001, attacks against the United States. Russia views Ukraine's potential membership as an existential threat on its border.

The US, alongside many European allies like the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, has provided significant financial aid and indirect military support (such as weapons and ammunition, satellite intelligence, jets, tanks,

and more) since the conflict began. Yet the political will to maintain that support, especially under an **isolationist**, America-first Trump administration, is waning. Without this support, Ukraine would have difficulty defending itself.

Peace talks have begun, but progress is slow. Many believe that Russia wants to draw the talks out as long as possible, betting that American negotiators will lose patience and concede more as time goes on. The rest of the world is asking whether peace can be reached at all, how it will be maintained, and what the future of Ukraine will look like.

HOW IT STARTED

Russia and Ukraine have had a close but difficult relationship for centuries. They share cultural traditions, ethnic groups, religion, and languages, as well as competing territorial and political ambitions. In the early twentieth century, they were united as parts

of the **Union of Soviet Socialist Republics** (USSR) after a communist revolution successfully overthrew the Russian Empire, which had included Russia and most of Ukraine.

For nearly seventy years, Ukraine was a core part of the USSR, only gaining independence in 1991 when the communist superpower collapsed. In the following three decades leading up to the current war, Ukraine has dealt with numerous internal power struggles made worse by persistent Russian attempts to bring back the Soviet-era power bloc.

Beyond the historical bonds that spur Russia's desire to control its neighbor, Ukraine has significant strategic importance. It is an agricultural powerhouse, considered the breadbasket of Europe, with an amount of suitable farmland roughly equal in size to the entire state of California. Pre-war, Ukraine was one of the world's top grain and seed producers,

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE US CONTINUE SUPPORTING UKRAINE?

YES

- ✓ Ukraine is the victim of a hostile invasion and could not defend itself without US support.
- ✓ Ukraine is a much freer, more democratic country than Russia, and the US should promote these values globally.
- ✓ Ukraine's defense has significantly weakened a top US adversary without risking American lives.

NO

- ✗ US support prolongs a costly and deadly war.
- ✗ Russia is a nuclear power, and US involvement risks escalation.
- ✗ The US is spending resources that could be used domestically.





Olemdesign/Dreamstime.com

Russia currently occupies a large portion of land along Ukraine's eastern border in addition to the Crimean peninsula, which separates the Sea of Asov from the Black Sea.

exporting about 10 percent of the global wheat supply, nearly half the world's sunflower oil, and major shares of other staples like corn and barley.

Ukraine also holds large reserves of rare earth minerals like lithium, uranium, and titanium, which are essential for modern technologies like phone batteries, nuclear reactors, and jet engines, as well as fossil fuels like oil, natural gas, and coal. Resources like these are essential to grow economies in the twenty-first century and would allow Russia to exert more pressure on other countries by controlling and restraining access—a technique it has used in the past with oil and natural gas exports to Europe as countries like Germany became highly

dependent on Russian-sourced energy.

But perhaps most important to Russia are the Ukrainian port cities along the country's southern Black Sea coast, which are key trade centers connecting Eastern Europe to markets in Asia, Africa, and Western Europe. This was the primary motivation behind Russia's illegal 2014 [annexation of Crimea](#), a large peninsula which projects control over the Black Sea and now serves as the home base for Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

THE WAR SO FAR

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, eight years after it took Crimea. Aiming for a quick, decisive victory with the goal of taking

all of Ukraine, Russian forces advanced not only from the southern and eastern borders, but also from the north through Belarus, a Russian **puppet** state that is geographically close to Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital. Within weeks, the Russian military reached as close as 24 miles from Kyiv, but after a stretch of intense urban combat, the outnumbered Ukrainian army was able to repel the immediate threat.

Those first moments of the Russo-Ukrainian War were the most mobile. Since then, very little territory has exchanged hands. The present situation is a bloody **stalemate** along hundreds of miles of sprawling trenches, barbed wire, minefields, and other fortifications. Even so, Russia has been able to take and hold large parts of eastern Ukraine and the southern Ukrainian regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson along the Black Sea.

Ukraine has made attempts to turn the tide. In August 2024, it launched a surprise counteroffensive campaign into Russian territory. While that effort required pulling forces from defensive positions, the purpose was to bring the realities of war to Russian soil and show countries backing Ukraine that it still had the strength and initiative to continue fighting.

None of this has been enough to seriously change the course of the war—Ukraine was forced to pull out of Russian territory just months after its troops had ventured in—but it has raised the threat level for the Russian government and boosted international support for the Ukrainian cause.

It's important to note that

Ukraine is more limited than Russia in military scope. For example, the US and Europe have not allowed it to use long-range missiles that could hit deep inside Russia, worried about escalating the conflict further and potentially even prompting Russia to use nuclear weapons.

THE ROAD TO PEACE

President Zelenskyy's political strategy has had to shift since US president Donald Trump returned to office last year. Compared to his predecessor, President Joe Biden, Trump has been more critical of Ukrainian leadership and America's role in funding Ukraine's military.

Zelenskyy's first visit to the Trump White House in February 2025 went poorly. President Trump delivered a clear warning, saying, "You're either going to make a deal or we're out. And if we're out, you'll fight it out and I don't think it's going to be pretty."

Zelenskyy was visibly irritated but took to social media afterward to make his gratitude known. He understands Ukraine cannot afford to lose US support. The second sit-down in August was seemingly much more constructive. The two presidents discussed potential peace terms, how to bring Putin to the negotiation table, and how America could help Ukraine rebuild in the postwar phase.

The US's main interests in Ukraine when the war ends are to maintain the country as a buffer between Russia and NATO allies and to access and develop the same rare earth and fossil fuel resources that Russia has eyed. The

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE US OFFER UKRAINE SECURITY GUARANTEES AFTER THE WAR ENDS?

YES

- ✓ Guarantees will discourage Russia from reinvading Ukraine.
- ✓ It will promote long-term stability in Europe, protecting NATO allies.
- ✓ International laws need to be enforced against acts of aggression.



NO

- ✗ The US risks being dragged into direct conflict with Russia.
- ✗ The US would have fewer options to handle diplomatic situations if guarantees are invoked.
- ✗ Guarantees could raise, not lower, tensions with Russia as the country feels more boxed in by NATO.

difference is that the US employs the soft power of diplomacy and investment, whereas Russia has opted for military might.

Ukraine's top priority in peace talks is security guarantees,

especially from the US. That would mean in the event of future conflict, the US and possibly other countries would be pledged to take a more active role in Ukraine's defense. Ukraine is also seeking



A Ukrainian soldier helps a baby reach safety after Russian attacks on the city of Irpin in 2022.



White House/YouTube

When President Zelenskyy visited the White House in February 2025, US vice president JD Vance chastised the foreign leader for not immediately thanking Trump and the US for supporting Ukraine.

membership in the European Union, a group of 27 European countries that cooperate economically and politically but do not provide security guarantees.

Russia’s requirements to end the war are as expected. Putin wants international recognition of Russia’s claims to seized Ukrainian territory. He wants economic sanctions lifted and

assurance that Ukraine will not be allowed to join NATO. And he wants Ukraine’s armed forces to be limited so they cannot pose a threat in the future.

WHAT’S NEXT

The US has given Russia and Ukraine until June to reach a peace agreement, but it is unclear how such an agreement

would be enforced. Throughout peace negotiations, Russia has rejected or ignored ceasefires and continued to launch devastating drone and missile attacks on Ukrainian cities and infrastructure. Life in Ukraine continues to be marked by fear and uncertainty.

However, the war ends, its scars will persist for generations—the trenches blotting the countryside that will overgrow but reshape the land for long after; the millions of Ukrainian refugees who fled the country, many of whom will never return; and the hundreds of thousands of people who lost their lives and will not get the chance to help their country recover.

Peace is never won easily, especially when facing a foe like Russia. As Zelenskyy said during his address in Davos: “The most fundamental line of conflict between Russia and Ukraine and all of Europe is this: Russia fights to devalue people, to make sure that when dictators want to destroy someone, they can. But they must lose power, not gain it.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Educate yourself** on current human rights issues. Follow the news using reliable sources such as [The New York Times](#), [The Wall Street Journal](#), and [National Public Radio](#) to understand and track human rights concerns around the world.
- **Communicate** with [your legislators](#) about TPS or USAID. Build and sustain relationships with the people who represent you on each level of government and communicate to them why human rights are important.

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE US BE A REFUGE FOR PEOPLE IN DANGER BY PROVIDING TPS?

YES

- ✓ It could bring an end to the war and military and civilian casualties.
- ✓ It would allow Ukraine to begin the process of rebuilding.
- ✓ It is unlikely Ukraine could reclaim its lost land even if fighting continues.

NO

- ✗ It rewards Russia for invading Ukraine.
- ✗ It sets a dangerous global precedent for territorial conflicts in other regions.
- ✗ It encourages Russia to make future attacks in an effort to take Ukraine piece by piece.

Local and state governments can play an important role in human rights protection as well.

- **Connect** with organizations supporting those affected by human rights issues and fundraise for them through your school or student groups affiliated with organizations such as [Human Rights Watch](#) and the [Global Youth Action Network](#).
- **Vote**, when you are old enough! With few exceptions, you can't vote until you're 18, but you can help register others to vote. In many states [you can register](#) yourself at 16 or 17, and you'll be ready to vote when you are old enough!



TEEN TRAILBLAZER



Anton Shtuka

Ivan Sarancha

Ivan Sarancha is a Ukrainian teenager who grew up in Crimea under Russian occupation. On the eve of his eighteenth birthday, draft age for the Russian military, Ivan began his dangerous journey to escape—but first he would have

to go further in. He [traveled 600 miles](#) by bus to the Russian capital, Moscow, and from there to Belarus, where he was able to enter a Ukrainian embassy and get help to cross the border into Ukraine and freedom. Ivan continues to speak out about the authoritarian conditions in Russian-controlled Ukraine.

Oleksandr

A seventeen-year-old named Oleksandr was forced to leave his hometown of Odesa in Ukraine when the war began in 2022. He left behind his home, family, and friends to find safety in Bucharest, Romania. There, he became involved with UNICEF's [U-Report](#) program and began working to spread

awareness about environmental issues—a topic he had long been passionate about. “Amidst the chaos of war, it’s important to remember the resilience and humanity of those who endure,” he says.



UNICEF/Adrian Holerga



A HELPING HAND

1. What do you think this cartoon is trying to say? Why do or don't you agree?
2. Have you ever seen the famous photo this cartoon is referencing? What does that photo mean to you, and how does it relate to the cartoon's message?
3. How do you think Ukraine would be faring in this conflict without foreign assistance? How much credit should Ukraine's troops get for fending off Russian opposition?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. What, if anything, should the US be doing differently to deal with the war in Ukraine?
2. How do you think this war will end?
3. **YOUR STORY:** Do you know anyone who has been personally affected by the war in Ukraine? How has it impacted their life?

KEY WORDS & TERMS

dictator	sanctions
isolationist	stalemate
North Atlantic Treaty Organization	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
puppet state	



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