

SLIDE ONE

Ukraine gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

It is situated between Russia, Poland, and the Black Sea. It is the second largest country by area in Europe. The largest being Russia. Its width is roughly equal to the distance between New York and Chicago.

It has a population of 41 million people, excluding the region of Crimea (crime-EE-uh) which was illegally annexed by Russia in 2014. 78% of the people there identify as Ukrainian. 17% identify as Russian. There are about 800,000 Jews living there. That makes it the fifth-largest Jewish community in Europe and the twelfth-largest Jewish community in the world.

SLIDE TWO

Jewish people have a long history in the Ukraine region going back a thousand years, not often free from antisemitism. During the Nazi occupation of Ukraine, for example, there were nearly a dozen separate major massacres of Jews there.

SLIDE THREE

Ukraine is a representative democracy with a multi-party system. As a former part of the Soviet Union and as a young nation still finding its footing, it has for decades suffered from widespread corruption. Although since 2014 Ukraine has made major strides.

2014 was the year Russia first invaded Ukraine. It was Putin's response to a bloodless Ukrainian revolution which ousted a president friendly to Russia for new leadership friendly to the West. Until that invasion, Ukraine's largest trading partner was Russia. Since then, Ukraine's largest trading partner is the European Union.

SLIDE FOUR

Ukrainian customs are heavily influenced by the Eastern Orthodox Church and traditions from Slavic mythology. Nearly all Ukrainians speak both Ukrainian and Russian languages. Two-thirds of the population use Ukrainian as their primary language. In 2018, Ukrainian was made the official language. This was in response to Russia's continued occupation of Crimea and continued military involvement in eastern Ukraine.

Financially, Ukraine is among the poorest nations of Europe, although only 1% of people there live below their poverty line.

SLIDE FIVE

Vladimir Putin is an authoritarian leader who personally controls all aspects of Russia. A former KGB agent, he is completely and totally anti-democratic. He's been the leader of Russia for about twenty years now. It seems he's trying to reconstruct the old Russian Empire. He does not want Ukraine to join NATO or the European Union, NATO being the defensive alliance of 30 western nations in which an attack on one is considered an

attack on all. This alliance has successfully deterred Russia (and the Soviet Union) from invading any NATO nation ever. This is why Ukraine wants to get into NATO and why Russia doesn't want that to happen. But Ukraine is a democracy. And in a free and fair election, the people voted for a government that wants to connect with the West rather than Russia.

Let me say here that there is a difference when I talk about Putin and the Russian government and when I talk about Russian people. Putin is an authoritarian leader who controls every aspect of Russia. Russian people are individuals who cannot be singularly defined. I hope you all are careful about this. A condemnation of Putin is in no way a condemnation of Russian people.

SLIDE SIX

In the early morning of last Thursday, after weeks of diplomatic efforts by Ukraine, the United States, France, and other European nations, Putin announced what he called a special military operation into eastern Ukraine. He said there were no plans to occupy Ukraine territory. He said his intention was to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine. Mind you, Ukraine is not governed by neo-Nazis. Neo-Nazis make up a minute part of the population there. And the claims Putin makes that the Ukraine government is committing a genocide against Russian speakers there, these claims are erroneous.

SLIDE SEVEN

For a few years now, Putin has laid out his position on Ukraine, that there is no Ukraine. Ukraine is simply part of Russia. Ukrainians and Russians, he argues, are as alike as brothers. He alleges that Ukraine's current Western-friendly government was illegally put in place by the United States and has been practicing a genocide against Russian speakers within their borders. These are both complete fabrication on Putin's part.

Putin wants the current Ukraine government ousted, and a new Russian-friendly, anti-western government installed. He also said that Ukraine must never become part of the NATO alliance. He has implied a willingness, if need be, to use nuclear weapons to prevent that from ever happening.

SLIDE EIGHT

Within minutes of Putin's announcement, Russian cruise missiles and ballistic missiles began hitting Ukraine cities, airfields, and military bases. In less than an hour, Russian military vehicles entered Ukraine. This was an illegal act of war.

It is now a week later. Russia, with 10 times the military and manpower of Ukraine, has struggled to get a solid advantage. Ukraine is not yet under Russian control. This is due to the strong resistance of Ukraine's military and citizenry, and due to (for lack of a better word) Russia's disorganization. And/or possibly Putin's miscalculation about how Ukraine would respond and how NATO would respond. The bottom line for Ukraine president Volodymyr Zelenskyy is this: Zelenskyy will not agree to any peace that surrenders Ukrainian sovereignty, while Putin is not willing to agree to any peace that

doesn't put Ukraine under Russian influence and control. Putin is willing to remove Zelensky and install a leader sympathetic to Russia, if necessary, to get that done.

It is difficult to get exact numbers, but a few thousand soldiers on each side have been killed or wounded. At least 1000 Ukraine civilians have died. And nearly a million Ukrainian refugees have fled (mostly into Poland). The Ukraine refugee totals may equal that of Syria, and that of Venezuela.

These numbers are likely much higher, because yesterday Russian forces seized their first major Ukrainian city, the strategic port of Kherson (KER-sen). Other Russian forces are on the verge of taking Kharkiv (car-KEEV), the country's second-largest city. A 40-mile convoy of Russian military vehicles currently stands north of Ukraine's capital, Kyiv (KEEV). Russian forces, which includes a private militia group called the Wagner Group, are getting more aggressive with their attack, focusing in on Kyiv. Their forces now also include soldiers from Belarus and Chechnya. Chechen soldiers are known for their brutality and human rights abuses, as are Wagner Group soldiers.

SLIDE NINE

Putin has threatened to use nuclear weapons on any nation that joins Ukraine on the battlefield. This threat is real. And because of that, no other nation has dared to send in their soldiers or aircraft to help. This includes the United States. However, this hasn't stopped nations friendly to Ukraine (the entire EU, all of NATO, Australia, Japan, and others) from supplying Ukraine with weapons, money, and military intelligence. It also hasn't stopped them from attacking Russia's economy through sanctions and other financial means. If Russia's economy takes a hard enough hit, maybe it will paralyze Putin's war effort and maybe it will inspire Russians to say no to Putin. Peaceful mass protests could be one factor that helps to end the invasion. However, it is illegal to protest without permission from the government there, and the punishment is up to three years in prison, and in this case may be more. But this isn't stopping thousands of people from protesting in the streets of Russia.

SLIDE TEN

Yesterday at the United Nations, 141 countries voted to condemn Russia, "deploring" Russia's aggression against Ukraine and demanding the immediate and complete withdrawal of all Russian forces from Ukrainian territory. The resolution is non-binding, but is still quite significant.

The only countries that are publicly siding with Russia are: Belarus, North Korea, Eritrea, and Syria. Israel condemned the invasion, but is trying to remain neutral.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine may raise some questions for you. Questions around things that worry you. Questions about things that spark your curiosity.

For example, why is this so important? Why is this getting so much more media than Somalia, Syria, the South Sudan, Yemen, Myanmar, Nigeria? Why are black people

and transgender people having trouble evacuating Ukraine? Why is it so much easier for Ukrainian refugees to be welcomed into EU nations than non-White refugees?

What is the diplomatic off-ramp? How does Ukraine let Putin save face here? Does that option exist? What will happen to the economies and lifestyles of Europeans and Americans because of the sanctions? How are Ukrainian citizens resisting the Russian aggression? What does leadership look like?

How will this affect the relationship between China and Taiwan? Between Russia and China? And does NATO matter?

What is the history of Jews in Ukraine? Do you have friends or family in Russia or Ukraine? How do you deal with that? How can Jewish texts help me navigate this? Where is the hope? How do we deal with this emotionally? Through prayer? Through Poetry?

For the next part of seminar today, take a look at the list we've posted of different topics around the Russian invasion. Go quickly to the room listed. Ask questions. Make comments. Feel comforted.