UKRAINE & CRIMEA

CURRENT CONTEXT

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The current crisis unfolding in Ukraine and the Crimean peninsula have deep roots that extend well before the Cold War, to a period when this region was in the control of different empires and nations. Beginning in the mid-1400s, Crimea existed as a protectorate of the Ottoman Empire until Catherine the Great annexed it to Russia in 1783. Poland held control over western Ukraine until 1793, when much of modern-day Ukraine was integrated into the Russian Empire. At the end of World War I Ukraine declared its independence, though this was short lived as the Red Army forcibly incorporated Ukraine into the Soviet Union in 1919. Soviet leader Josef Stalin further exacerbated Ukrainian discontent with his collectivization program that killed or punished millions of peasants during the 1930s. Meanwhile, the Crimean peninsula contained a large percentage of ethnic Russians who thought of themselves as sharing a history, in addition to a common set of traditions and religion, with Russia. The exception in Crimea was the Tatars – a Turkic ethnic group that first emerged under the Ottoman Empire. In 1944 the Soviets sent the Tatars to Central Asia because of their collaboration with the Nazis. Roughly half of the 200,000 Tatars who were evicted died along the way; those who remained were not allowed to move back to Crimea until the late 1980s. The Tatars now comprise about 12% of the Crimean population.

But it was an event in 1954 that set the stage for today's political unrest in Crimea and Ukraine. Out of gratitude for Ukraine's efforts during World War II, and in recognition of its suffering during the Nazi occupation, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea to Ukraine in 1954. Given that Ukraine was still under the authority of the Soviet Union, the transfer was more a gesture than anything else. Ukraine won its independence in 1991, but only 54% of the Crimean

voters wished to see separation from Russia. While remaining a part of Ukraine, Crimea managed a good deal of autonomy within the country, creating its own constitution and legislature. During its nearly twenty five years of independence, Ukraine has explored alignments with Russia and with the European Union. In 1997, Ukraine and Russia signed a bi-lateral Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership that gave Russia the right to keep its Black Sea military fleet in the port of Sevastapol in Crimea, as it did during the reign of the Soviet Union. This treaty did not preclude Ukraine's decision to work toward association and a free-trade agreement with the European Union, a deal that President Viktor Yanukovych ultimately broke in favor of a closer relationship with Russia.

Many Ukrainians – especially young adults – had hoped for increased economic opportunities as a result of integration with Europe, and turned out to protest Yanukovych's decision, as well as his corrupt government, in November 2013. Yanukovych's heavy-handed approach to ending the Maidan protests ultimately brought charges of mass-murder, leading him to flee Ukraine. But as a region with long economic and ethnic ties to Russia, eastern Ukraine and Crimea remained apart from the Maidan movement. Indeed, in late February 2014, 20,000 people in Sevastapol – Crimea's largest city – overthrew the Ukrainian-appointed Mayor and replaced him with a Russian citizen. And in March, Crimeans voted to be annexed to Russia, which was formalized on March 18. Violence continues throughout the region, which is compounded by Ukraine's near-bankrupt government, inflation, and poverty that puts Ukraine's national GDP at just a fraction of nearby Russia and Poland. Significantly, eastern Ukraine is the country's most economically vibrant region. For Crimea, Russian annexation means economic alignment with a more prosperous country, while Ukraine faces Russia's military strength along an expanded border in the wake of the annexation. It is unclear whether Russia will push its way into more of Ukraine, where they would find passionate protests from most western Ukrainians, and support from some of those in the eastern and southern part of the country. Ukraine is scheduled to elect a new president on May 25, though current violence throughout the country leaves many skeptical that the outcome will be arrived at in a fair and democratic fashion.

-- Shelley Brooks, Ph.D., CHSSP Statewide Office

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1400s – Crimea becomes a protectorate of the Ottoman Empire, under a Turkic ethnic group, the Tatars, emerge.

1783 – Catherine the Great of Russia conquers Crimea as part of her expansion of the Russian Empire.

1793 – Much of modern-day Ukraine is incorporated into the Russian Empire, after time spent under Polish control.

1917 – Tsarist Russia collapses and the USSR emerges. Ukraine declares its independence.

1919 – The USSR establishes control over Ukraine, making null its call for independence.

1944 – Soviets expel Tatars from Crimea, sending them into Central Asia, where roughly half of the 200,000 Tatars perish.

1954 – Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transfers control of Crimea to Ukraine, in appreciation of war sacrifices.

1989 – Tatars begin to return to Crimea.

1991 – Ukrainian independence from the Soviet Union. Overall, 90% of Ukrainians vote for independence, but in Crimea that number is just 54%.

1997 – Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and Russia, which formally allowed Russia to keep its Black Sea fleet in Sevastapol.

2004 – Orange Revolution in Ukraine – democratic protests against a biased election in favor of Viktor Yanukovych. Protests succeeded in bringing about a fair re-vote that brought victory to Victor Yushchenko.

2010 - Viktor Yanukovych elected president of Ukraine.

November 21, 2013 – President Yanukovych abandons an agreement for closer trade ties with the European Union, in favor of alignment with Russia.

Late November 2013 – 100,000 Ukrainians protest the failed EU agreement, and Yanukovych's corrupt government. Injured protestors raise international awareness of the dissent within Ukraine.

Early December 2013 – 800,000 protestors gather in Ukraine's capital, Kiev.

Mid-January 2014 – President Yanukovych passes repressive anti-protest laws, and three protestors die from injuries.

Late January 2014 – Prime Minister of Ukraine resigns, and Parliament nulls the anti-protest laws.

February 20, 2014 – 88 people die during protests in Kiev.

February 22, 2014 – President Yanukovych effectively ends his rule by disappearing from Ukraine, and his arch-rival is released from jail.

Late February 2014 – 20,000 people in Sevastapol overthrow Ukrainian-appointed Mayor.

March 1, 2014 – Russian Parliament authorizes use of military force to protect Russian interests in Ukraine.

March 18, 2014 – Crimea officially becomes part of Russia.

March 28, 2014 – after pledging to stand behind Ukraine, President Obama calls for Russia to "move back its troops" to reduce tensions.

Early April, 2014 – Pro-Russian groups occupy numerous government buildings in eastern Ukraine.

April 15, 2014 – Ukraine's acting President calls for anti-terrorist programs against pro-Russian activists.

May 1, 2014 – Ukraine reinstates military conscription.

Early May, 2014 – Violence throughout eastern Ukraine between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian forces, including numerous deaths and torched buildings.

May 25, 2014 – Date set for Ukrainian presidential election.

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Map Source: CIA World Factbook, May 2014.
https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/graphics/maps/up-map.gif

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Additional Resources**

Teaching Materials:

- *The Choices Program at Brown University:* http://choices.edu/resources/twtn/twtn-ukraine.php
- *PBS News Hour:* http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/daily_videos/ukrainians-prepare-for-conflict-as-russian-troops-move-into-crimea/
- *Think Global Website:* http://globaldimension.org.uk/news/item/19051

Maps and background:

- *BBC News:* http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26367786, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26387353, and http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18287223
- *The Washington Post*: http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2014/02/27/to-understand-crimea-take-a-look-back-at-its-complicated-history/
- *CIA World Factbook:* https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook

Timeline of events:

- *The Washington Post:* http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/timeline-key-events-in-ukraines-ongoing-crisis/2014/05/07/a15b84e6-d604-11e3-8a78-8fe50322a72c_story.html
- *BBC News:* http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26248275
- *The Wall Street Journal:* http://graphics.wsj.com/ukraine-conflict-map/?mod=wsj_streaming_deadly-clashes-in-ukraine

**The resources listed above are provided for further research and do not imply an endorsement by the California History-Social Science Project or the University of California.