**The History of Ukraine and Russia**

**Kathryn David, Mellon Assistant Professor of Russian and East European Studies, Vanderbilt University**

Ukraine and Russia are two countries that border each other in Eastern Europe. On Feb. 24, 2022, Russia sent its army into Ukraine and began trying to take over the country by force.

This invasion surprised many people, as it was the first major war in Europe for decades. But Russia and Ukraine have had a difficult relationship for centuries. To understand what’s happening now you have to dig into 1,300 years of history.

Both countries trace their beginnings to the same medieval kingdom, called Kyivan Rus. It was founded in the 800s by a group of Vikings, the Varangians, who came from Northern Europe to rule over the local people. Kyivan Rus spanned what is now Russia and Ukraine, and its people, the Slavs, are the ancestors of today’s Russians and Ukrainians. Its capital was the city of Kyiv – the same Kyiv that is now the capital of Ukraine. Moscow, capital of today’s Russia, was also part of Kyivan Rus.

Kyivan Rus was conquered by Mongol armies from Asia in 1240 and split up. Kyiv became part of a new commonwealth that spanned today’s Poland and Ukraine. Moscow became a local capital of the Mongol Empire. Both Moscow and Kyiv were at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, but with different cultures based on their geography.

**Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union**

In the 1500s, descendants of the Kyivan Rus’ princes in Moscow formed an empire of their own, imperial Russia. By 1654, it included Kyiv and its Ukrainian peoples along with other lands and people from Europe and Asia.

In imperial Russia, some saw Ukrainians as brothers to the Russians because they shared a culture dating back to medieval times. But Ukrainians said that while both groups practiced the same religion and shared some history, Ukrainian culture – such as its food, language, art and music – was different. It was shaped by contact with different peoples and a history different from Russia’s.

A revolution in February 1917 forced Russia’s leader, Czar Nicholas II, from the throne. Another revolution that same year created a new empire called the Soviet Union.

Some Ukrainians didn’t want to join the new Soviet empire. They tried to form their own country. But the Soviets defeated their movement and created the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic instead – one of a number of republics that made up the union. At first, it allowed Ukrainians to keep their culture and run their local government. But when the Soviets began to fear that Ukrainians wanted independence, they took their power away.

**A free Ukraine**

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. Ukraine and Russia, which both had been part of the Soviet Union, became independent countries.

Fast forward to 2013. Ukraine’s president, Viktor Yanukovych, wanted Ukraine to be loyal to Russia. So he decided not to sign a trade agreement to bring Ukraine closer to Europe. Ukrainians protested, kicked Yanukovych out of office, and elected a government that favored Europe rather than Russia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that despite these protests, most Ukrainians wanted ties with Russia. He also worried that Ukraine would join a military alliance with the U.S. and Europe that would be a threat to Russia.

In 2014, Russia took over an area in southern Ukraine called Crimea. It also sent soldiers and weapons to eastern Ukraine, claiming to be helping people who wanted to be part of Russia. In the eight years since then, about 14,000 people have died, and 1 million people have fled to escape the fighting.

**The current war**

In February 2022, Putin again claimed that Ukrainians and Russians are one people. He sees Ukrainians and Russians as brother nations and says that because Russia is the older brother, it should get to be in charge.

Most Ukrainians disagree. They have been inspired by the words of their president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. He told Putin that Ukrainians want peace, but that if they need to, they will defend their country’s independence.

Putin invaded, and this time his plan is to take over the entire country. Ukrainians are now fighting the Russian army, trying to defeat what they say is an occupation.

In Russia, the people had no say about whether to invade. Many are protesting against it. Many families have both Russian and Ukrainians members. Because of this, a lot of people on both sides of the border do not want to fight a war against each other.

The United States and much of Europe are on the side of Ukrainians. They believe Ukraine should be able to decide its own future.