

Russia's War on Ukraine

Course description

On February 24, 2022, Russian missiles struck multiple cities across the sovereign nation of Ukraine. As the tanks and artillery vehicles pounded civilian and military targets, buildings crumbled, Ukrainians died. The world watched in horror. A nation once lauded for defeating Nazi Germany, Russia is now an aggressor bringing murder and violence to people with whom it shared centuries of common past. How did it happen? Why does Putin's regime refuse to call his war "war"? Who's Putin fighting—Ukraine? NATO? The West? What do Russian people think of the carnage wrought in their name? And where does this all end for Russia, Ukraine, and the world?

Taught by an acclaimed writer, cultural critic, and social historian, the course combines larger historical and societal trends with personal vignettes for perspective and accessibility. Sessions follow an entertaining multimedia format, where the latest political, economic, and cultural events are illustrated with movie clips, music, art, and literature. Participants will emerge with a better understanding of the Russian-Ukrainian war landscape and cultural space, including the logic behind the actions of the Russian government and Russian society's failure to stop the war; political and cultural roots of Russia's military barbarism; reasons behind Ukraine's resilience; and short and long-term impacts of the war.

Course outline

Session 1. Reasons for war: history and present

The session will start with an overview of Russian-Ukrainian historical, cultural, economic, and demographic entwinement and how it became fodder for Vladimir Putin's imperial restoration. A brief overview of Ukrainian history will help the students ground the war in historical realities and enable them to assess the validity of the Kremlin's claims. We will also look at announced and real goals of the war and their evolution in the official Kremlin discourse. Key developments at the front and outcomes to date will also be reviewed.

Session 2. Society response to war

The fratricidal war changed Ukraine and Russia forever. This session will discuss how it destroyed the myths on both sides of the frontline, and why Ukraine's rebirth is matched by Russia's civilizational and moral collapse. We will talk about the origins of Russian fascism, the population's support for Putin and his war, as well as look at the pockets of resistance within the Russian society. We will also discuss what's behind the heroism of Ukrainian resistance and the barbarism of Russian troops in Ukraine; the potential for revolution in Russia; and the reasons behind the support of the Putin's regime.

Session 3. Russian culture after the Bucha massacre: is anything left?

For about two centuries, Russian art and particularly literature were revered unquestioningly around the world. With its stated emphasis on the spiritual over material, communal over

individual, “heart” over “reason,” Russian was an alternative way of thinking, feeling and living. But Russian highly culture has always had a dark everyday side: cruelty, chauvinism, conformism, oppression. In this session, we will discuss how Russian culture is used as a mask and a way to channel the suffering of the nation it oppresses. We will also look at select works of Russian art and discuss whether they still belong in the world’s cultural cannon.

Session 4 Putin’s endgame

This session will look at the short and long-term impacts of Putin’s war on Ukraine, Russia and the West. We will discuss whether Western sanctions imposed on Russia are working; how the Lendlease program and other western weapons’ delivery change the course of the war; the likelihood of Russia’s use of the nuclear weapons; and possible scenarios for the war’s end, including how each will reshape Ukraine, Russia and the world.