

Ukraine Assembly – March 2022

Here in the Western World, we have been lucky to have grown up in the most peaceful and prosperous period in human history. Furthermore, the number of conflicts around the world has declined dramatically over the past 20 years. So the invasion of Ukraine by Vladimir Putin has come as a shock to the international community, and I cannot imagine how shocking it must be for the people of Ukraine. I know that some of you in our community have family members in Ukraine. They are in our thoughts. Just in our own little community, I have heard this weekend of relatives in Ukraine making terrifying journeys across the country, and of others determined to stay put in their rightful homes. I have heard of friends and family of SHHS people desperately trying to make it to the border to flee to safety. The United Nations is predicting as many as 7 million displaced Ukrainians as a result of this conflict. It is heart-breaking.

I wish you and your family strength over the coming days. I also know that we have many Russian families at SHHS, and they are also in my thoughts as Putin did not invade Ukraine in their name. Many Russian passport holders will have ties to Ukraine. I know of families in our midst who have Ukrainian ancestors who fled to Russia in WWII. The histories of the two nations are intertwined. Many Russians will be very sad at the turn of events.

There are so many prisms through which we could try to understand the invasion of Ukraine and it would be impossible to do them justice in one assembly. This is a vast and troubling subject and it is perhaps the most significant geopolitical event to take place in the Western World since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The international community is watching the plight of the Ukrainians left defending their country and is wondering what Mr Putin's next moves will be.

We could look at the invasion from a geographical point of view and try to understand the geographical factors driving President Putin's invasion. If you want to know more about that, read the opening chapter of Tim Marshall's excellent book *Prisoners of Geography*. Tim Marshall's book argues that geography – natural features such as land masses, mountains, rivers and sea routes – play a key role in a country's history. That seems to make some sense, although geography cannot excuse the invasion of a sovereign country.

Tim Marshall explains that Russia is a huge country but with a small population for its size. It is the 9th most populous country in the world with 142 million people but it only has 9 inhabitants per square mile. On its Western borders in countries like Ukraine, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, lie much more dense centres of population with no geographical barriers to stop them launching an invasion on Russia. A huge swathe of Northern Europe from the Netherlands to the Ural Mountains in Russia is a flat landmass known as the Northern European Plain. It is easy for invading armies to enter Russia and indeed men like Napoleon and Hitler have tried this in the past, though ultimately unsuccessfully because Russia's huge size as well as its climate means that it is actually very difficult to keep supplying an army with food and equipment on its progression through the country. Russia's response, argues Tim Marshall, to this threat of invasion, and indeed he predicts the invasion of Ukraine in *Prisoners of Geography* is to move forward until she reaches natural land barriers, such as the Carpathian Mountains on the Western border of Ukraine.

Ukraine also provides access to the strategically important Black Sea and in 2014 Russia annexed part of Ukraine known as Crimea. Controlling Crimea means access to the Black Sea and access to the Black Sea means access to the Mediterranean Sea via the narrow strip of water known as the Bosphorus. Russia needs access to Crimea because the Black Sea is a warm sea that is not iced over like the Arctic Sea on Russia's northern borders. So much for Geography. It is a factor but it surely cannot excuse the illegal invasion of another sovereign country as happened last Thursday.

We could look at the invasion from an historical point of view and try to understand things such as the legacy of the Cold War, the expansion of NATO and Russia's feeling that she is only taking back what she

believes to be hers. There are populations of ethnic Russians in the East of Ukraine in areas now held by Russian separatists – by separatists I mean people who want to splinter off and become Russian rather than Ukrainian. Vladimir Putin has presented himself as the brave liberator of Ukrainian Russians. Vladimir Putin chillingly said the other day that modern Ukraine was a country entirely created by Russia, thus providing him with his *casus belli* or justification for war. He said that Ukraine was part of Russia's history, culture and spiritual space.

If you want to understand more about the historical context, you should listen to Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook's latest double episode on Ukraine in their podcast *The Rest is History*. In the podcast, Tom Holland and Dominic Sandbrook explain how Russia and Ukraine have a long and complicated history. For long sweeps of time, Ukraine has not existed as a country. It exists in a huge land mass which also includes Poland and Belarus where borders have changed so much over history. Even the name of Ukraine's capital city has changed, no longer Kiev but Kyiv. But Ukraine has a distinct national and cultural identity which the events of the 20th century attempted to blot out, turning Ukraine and other neighbouring countries into a blood-soaked battleground. The borders are constantly changing in this area and Holland and Sandbrook agree with the argument that one of the reasons for this is the relative lack of geographical features in this part of the world.

Ukraine along with many other countries on Russia's borders used to be part of a huge political entity known as the USSR or Soviet Union. Russia dominated this conglomeration of countries and you can see from this map which countries belonged to it. The world at the time was divided between the East dominated by communist countries like the USSR and China and the West dominated by democratic market economies like the United States and Western European countries. The USSR collapsed in 1991 dramatically and the former Soviet satellite countries gained new-found freedom and, in many cases, democratic systems of government, like in Ukraine. Russia has continued, however, to regard countries like Ukraine as part of its 'sphere of influence' and Vladimir Putin is determined that Ukraine should not join an important military organisation called NATO or North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, or the European Union as some other former Soviet countries have done like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania. NATO and the European Union are Western organisations and Putin does not want to see them in what he regards as his backyard.

We could look at this conflict from a political point of view or indeed from a biographical point of view by attempting to understand the character and motivations of a man who has controlled Russia for 22 years. If you want to know more about Vladimir Putin and what drives this man, you could read a 2016 book called *The New Tsar*. We can of course look at the international response which so far has been to send weapons and equipment to Ukraine and to offer words of support and solidarity but to stop short of any land-based invasion or air strikes by any Western forces.

However, the West has announced a series of economic sanctions against Russia in the hope of forcing Vladimir Putin to backdown. Russia is being expelled from the SWIFT banking system which allows for rapid transfer of money between banks. The UK Government has announced its decision to seize the houses of Russian oligarchs in London to house refugees from Ukraine. And Germany has suspended the importation of gas from Russia through the Nord Stream pipeline. About one third of our gas in Northern Europe comes from Russia.

And of course, we could look at the latest news events through perhaps the most important prism of all, that of the people affected by warfare. The Ukrainians desperately trying to escape the city of Kyiv before the Russians encircled it. The Ukrainians taking shelter in the metro systems with their children. The Ukrainians taking up arms to defend their country, with men aged 18 to 60 banned from leaving the country. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy calling on Western countries to do more, and thanking protesters in Russia for taking up his cause. VIDEO

This conflict is taking place on the European continent. It is a reminder that although we want to believe in human progress, history shows us so many examples of human beings repeating the mistakes of the past. Our era will not escape conflict and one legacy of the pandemic could be a more uncertain and turbulent world. In such a world, knowing our own values and what we believe in, is more important than ever. One of the most important values in any school should be kindness and it is with kindness that I wish to end.

To return to our own community, please remember the Ukrainian and Russian pupils within our community and show sensitivity and kindness towards them. Ask them how they are in a quiet conversation, not in a group setting. Be mindful of the impact on them of overhearing conversations about the conflict. Of course, some of you will want to talk about it and school is a safe place for that. But just be mindful of the Ukrainian and Russian pupils in our midst for whom your conversations may be quite difficult. Ask them whether they would like to join the conversation to say what they think, or perhaps take it elsewhere if they would rather not hear it.

I would like to end with a moment of reflection, not in silence as words should be a comfort to us in troubled times. I want to play you some music you will all recognise. It is the Carol of the Bells, a Ukrainian folk song traditionally played at the start of the New Year to herald the coming of Spring. It is a very popular song outside Ukraine and perhaps that is fitting as we, the international community, watch this crisis unfolding and fear for the people caught up in it. I thought you would like to reflect quietly as you listen to this beautiful song and when it is over you will be dismissed. PLAY CLIP.