

# But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

## Why is Russia invading Ukraine?

March 11, 2022

**Jane** 00:19

This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids, from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. If you've been listening to us for a while, you know that we tell you you can send us questions on anything you want to learn more about. And sometimes that includes things you're hearing or seeing on the news, and that the adults in your life might be talking about. A lot of times those conversations and new stories are made for adults. And it can be a little confusing, or sometimes even scary, if you're listening as a kid. So today, we're going to be helping you understand something happening in the world right now, that's being talked about a lot by adults: the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Several of you have sent us questions asking why this war is happening. To be honest, a lot of adults don't really understand why it's happening either. So this might be a good episode to listen to with your adults, so you can talk about it together afterwards.

**Jane** 01:18

Adults, we're mostly going to be talking about the historical context of this conflict and how things got to this point. We want to help give kids a little better understanding of what they may be seeing and hearing, but we won't be diving deeply into specifics of what's happening on the ground. This episode is appropriate for all of our listeners. But if your kids are particularly sensitive, you might want to preview this episode first, or listen with them. And kids, if hearing about war is scary to you, it's okay to skip this episode.

**Jane** 01:51

I also want to acknowledge that we have listeners in both Russia and Ukraine, and plenty of listeners in other places, like Poland and Romania, that are being affected by what's happening. We are wishing safety and peace for all of you. Okay, let's get started. We asked someone who studies the history of both Russia and Ukraine to join us on the show today. Erin Hutchinson is a professor at the University of Colorado Boulder.

**Erin Hutchinson** 02:17

I teach college students about Russia and the Soviet Union, and Ukraine as well. So that's my main area of focus.

**Jane** 02:25

About two weeks ago, on February 24th, the leader of the Russian government made the decision to invade Ukraine. There had been large numbers of troops on the border, supposedly doing military exercises,

**Jane** 02:25

The Soviet Union was the name of a country that existed from 1922 to 1991. It was made up of several different areas, called republics, that included both Russia and Ukraine, as well as Moldova, Lithuania, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and seven other countries. The Soviet Union, sometimes known as the USSR, broke apart into those 15 different countries about 30 years ago now. Erin Hutchinson studies those countries as they exist today and as they existed when they were part of the Soviet Union and even before that. Right now, Russia is attacking Ukraine. And we asked Erin to tell us what's happening as of early March 2022.

**Jane** 03:28

Like training, practicing.

**Erin Hutchinson** 03:30

Training, right. But people started to suspect that this wasn't just some military practice that was going on. And then what happened on February 24th is that these troops were ordered to cross the border and enter into the territory of Ukraine. The goal seems to have been for these troops to quickly capture the capital city of Ukraine, Kiev. However, the Russian troops faced very strong resistance from the Ukrainian army and from the Ukrainian population. And so they did manage to advance into the country, but they have not really achieved their goals, which were to take the capital city of Kiev, and it seems that the goal was to change the Ukrainian government by force into one that would be more pro Russian. Ukrainian population has really united behind their army and our government and they are absolutely not going to accept being forced to change their government.

**Jedi** 04:33

Hi, my name is Jedi. I live in Ravenna, Ohio. I just turned 10. My question is, why is Russia attacking Ukraine?

**Jane** 04:42

Erin, can you help us understand why Russia is attacking another country called Ukraine?

**Erin Hutchinson** 04:49

That is a really great question. And in order to understand that we need to go back in history a little bit. Actually, kind of a lot, maybe. We could even go back 1000 years. I think I'll just go back about 400. So this is before the Soviet Union ever existed, but there was a country we call the Russian Empire. And in the 17th century, it began acquiring territory that forms today's Ukraine, and began bringing new people into the Empire. And this is a process that took place in the 17th and 18th centuries.

**Jane** 05:25

So that's the 1600s and the 1700s.

**Erin Hutchinson** 05:27

Yes, exactly. So as a part of this process of incorporating this new territory, people in the Russian Empire, especially the rulers of the country, begin to emphasize that the reason why they should bring in these new lands is because the people who lived there, whom we today call Ukrainians, were really

part of the Russian people. And so this idea emerged. And by the time we get to the 1800s, or the 19th century, it was that really the official policy of the Russian imperial government that there was no difference between Russia and Ukrainians, really, they were all part of the same nation. But this Ukrainian sort of national identity didn't go away. And in fact, over time, it became stronger.

**Jane 06:17**

But each time Ukraine tried to be independent, it was brought back in to be together with Russia. In the last century, it was one of the republics that made up that country called the Soviet Union.

**Erin Hutchinson 06:28**

It was, at the time that it existed, it was the world's largest country. But in 1991, the government ultimately began to fall apart. And the 15 different republics, as they were called, that formed the Soviet Union, became independent. But there are people in the Russian government today who see the collapse of the Soviet Union as basically wrong, and that Ukraine really should be brought back into-- either incorporated into Russia today, or they would like to see Ukraine, basically kind of stay very close friends with Russia, the Ukrainian government, as opposed to having more ties and connections to Europe and the United States.

**Jane 07:16**

So I mean, it's interesting. It sounds like, for hundreds and hundreds of years, there's been tension; there's been this conflict about identity and whether they should be together or apart. And, that this is not something new; this is something that's been happening in the region for a very, very long time. Does that sound right?

**Erin Hutchinson 07:36**

That does sound right. In general, we can say that, on the part of Ukrainians, there has been a desire to have autonomy or independence. Not all Ukrainians all the time. But in general, we can say this is something that Ukrainian people have sought. But there has been also pressure from the Russian Government to sort of keep them under their control, kind of inside their state or very closely allied or connected to them. So it's a conflict with some pretty deep historical roots.

**Jane 08:07**

I mean, if I were thinking about it, maybe kind of like what might happen on the playground or in a cafeteria, let's say I'm Ukraine, and I have been sitting at the same lunch table with Russia for a long time. And sometimes we're really good friends, and we even share our lunch. And sometimes we're not great friends, but we still kind of been sitting at the same lunch table. But I now want to go over and sit at a lunch table with some other people who have other European country names. Like, I want to be at the same lunch table with more like France and Germany and Poland, and the United Kingdom and the United States, even though they're kind of far away, I kind of want to be closer to the United States. And Russia is saying, "No, you have to still sit at this lunch table with me, you can't leave that lunch table. And if you go over to that table, it leaves me feeling more vulnerable, or like I might not be safe anymore if you're over with those other countries. So I need you here at the lunch table with me."

**Erin Hutchinson 09:06**

That sounds like a pretty good comparison. And, you know, I think part of the reason why Ukraine wants to go and sit at someone else's lunch table is that there's been a long history with Russia. And during the times when Ukraine and Russia were very close friends, a lot of bad things happened to Ukraine. You know, it's not coming out of nowhere, that Ukraine wants to sit at a different lunch table.

**Jane 09:30**

And Russia might not sit by itself either, right? It might say, "hey, China, do you want to come and sit at this lunch table with me?" Like, there are different countries around the world that are getting involved in this and see a benefit or a cost to certain ways that this could play out. And so different countries are getting involved, even if they're not Ukraine and Russia, right?

**Erin Hutchinson 09:51**

Yeah, definitely. There's different alliances, different sort of friendships and groups of friends among countries and that's, one of the reasons why this Russian invasion of Ukraine is so scary to people is that not only is what happening in Ukraine right now really terrible, and a lot of people are being hurt, but there's also worries that other countries could be drawn into this conflict as well, so that it could become something bigger. We hope that won't happen.

**Erin Hutchinson 09:58**

So Russia wants to take over Ukraine, and Ukraine wants to be independent. But Russia isn't just saying it wants things to be different. It's using its military to attack Ukraine. In just a minute, we'll talk more about why things have gotten to the point of war now.

**Jane 10:39**

This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids. I'm Jane Lindholm, and today we're answering your questions about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with Soviet Studies Professor Erin Hutchinson. It's confusing and very scary for a lot of people, even adults. For people in Ukraine, of course, this is more than just scary. Many of them are not safe to stay in their country. And they're trying to get out to countries nearby where the war isn't happening,

**Erin Hutchinson 11:06**

You know, in areas that have seen really heavy fighting places, like, for example, the outskirts of the capital city of Kiev, we've seen civilians trying to escape. Not just there, but really all over the country, we've seen civilians, mostly older people, and women and children, who are running for the borders. They're trying to cross into other countries like Ukraine's neighbors Poland, Romania and Moldova. And so listeners might have seen on the news some scenes of, you know, these train stations where there's just hundreds, if not thousands, of Ukrainians, trying to leave the country and then arriving in other countries. And so it's been extremely difficult for the people who've been made refugees by this conflict. It's just been very, very hard experience for them.

**Jane 11:59**

So here's a question from Henry.

**Henry 12:01**

I'm nine years old, and I live in Bellevue, Washington. My question is, why doesn't Ukraine have a big army? Thank you.

**Jane 12:10**

Erin says there are a few reasons why Russia's army is bigger than Ukraine's, including the fact that Russia is a much bigger country with a lot more people to be soldiers and more money to fund a military. Also, when the Soviet Union broke apart into different countries, Russia kind of got to keep the Soviet military, while Ukraine had to start from scratch in building its army. All that being said, a lot of Ukrainians who weren't in their country's military before this have been joining the fight to push back against the Russian invasion.

**Jane 12:43**

If you live in the United States, or Western Europe, or lots of other parts of the world, you might be hearing adults talk about how bad it is that Russia is doing this, how wrong they are. My own son has been hearing that too, when we listen to the news. And he has this question.

**Dylan 13:00**

My name is Dylan and I live in Monkton Vermont. And I'm 8 and my question is, why does Russia think they're doing the right thing?

**Jane 13:09**

Why does Russia think it's doing the right thing?

**Erin Hutchinson 13:12**

Oh, that's an interesting question. In my response, I always try to...I want to distinguish between the Russian government that made the decision to invade and then the Russian people who really were not consulted on this. Because, although Russia sort of after the collapse of the Soviet Union started out as being a democracy, over time, the freedoms that people had in the country--freedom of speech, the right to vote--have been really limited, to the point where the Russian people have very little control over what their government does at this point. And many Russian people are opposing the war, are very concerned, and looking at what the government is doing in Ukraine and are very horrified. So I want to, you know, say that first and foremost.

**Erin Hutchinson 14:02**

In terms of why the Russian government thinks that this invasion was correct, if we look at, you know, the motivations of Vladimir Putin, I mean, I think some of it comes down to what I was talking about before, like the belief that Russia and Ukraine should basically be in the same country. Another argument that's made is that the potential for Ukraine to become a member of the NATO military alliance is in some way threatening for Russia. So that is the way that they've justified what they've done. Although I think, at least in my opinion, I don't think these actions can be justified.

**Jane 14:42**

It's also true, right, that if you are living in Russia, you may not be getting all of the information about what's happening. Partly because the Russian government is saying journalists, people who report on

the news, can't report about this, can't go to Ukraine and say, "This is what's happening in Ukraine." So people who are living in Russia, just regular people, might not be getting all the same information that we are in the United States or that people in other countries where information is allowed to flow freely are getting.

**Erin Hutchinson** 15:13

That's definitely the case. So the Russian government has said that any journalist or media outlet, like any newspaper or radio station, that uses the word war to describe what's going on is breaking the law. So, you know, journalists aren't even allowed to use the word war, they have to call it a special military operation.

**Jane** 15:36

So the other questions that we've gotten from kids who are trying to figure all this out are what we might call existential questions, questions about human existence, really big questions about why we do the things we do.

**Emmaline** 15:50

My name is Emmaline. I'm four and a half and I want to know, why do some people do bad things?

**Jane** 15:57

Why do people do bad things? And then we're also hearing from a lot of kids, generally, who want to know, why is there war? Why do countries go to war with each other? And when they have fights, why are they violent?

**Erin Hutchinson** 16:11

This is a question that people have asked themselves throughout history, why conflicts need to be resolved through violence. You know, it's my belief that the disagreements between Ukraine and Russia absolutely could be resolved through peaceful means. There were sort of efforts to kind of talk about these things. But ultimately, the president of the Russian Federation decided that he wanted to resolve this through violence. So that was the only way that he saw. I think that that's just a tragedy for all the people involved. You know, a lot of people are hurting now today, because of the decision to solve these differences that do exist between Russia and Ukraine through violent means.

**Jane** 16:59

Lastly, we have a question from Frances.

**Frances** 17:02

I'm 8 years old. I live in River Forest, Illinois. And my question is, how do you get more countries?

**Jane** 17:10

How do you get new countries? And you know, Erin, sometimes countries break apart. Sometimes, as we've been hearing, one country takes over another country and they blend into a single joint country together. There are lots of different ways that countries become more countries or fewer countries. What do you think is likely to happen in this situation?

**Erin Hutchinson** 17:33

Oh, my. My hope is that Ukrainian people will be able to still determine their own fate, that they will stay independent. That seems to be what the vast majority of Ukrainians want. And I think that that's what really matters at the end of the day. When we're talking about whether two countries should be together or whether they should be separate, well, I think that the opinions of the people in the country are what count the most, right, or should count the most. You know, obviously, it also can be more complicated than that. But, you know, it seems possible, there's a lot of possible outcomes, you know, Ukraine could maintain its independence. Ukraine could, you know, become a country that's, you know, more or less forced to sit at Russia's lunch table. Ukraine could even be incorporated into Russia. I don't think that last option is the most likely one. But at this point, I don't know, you know, even those of us who study the this part of the world and pay a lot of attention to it don't know what's going to happen. But we really hope for peace, that the people who are currently suffering will be okay, and that the war will end and quickly and that the people of Ukraine who want to be independent will be able to stay independent.

**Jane** 18:55

This is something that's happening in Ukraine, but it's affecting a lot of the world in various different ways. How is what's happening over there having an effect in the United States, in other parts of Europe and in other parts of the world?

**Erin Hutchinson** 19:12

For me, it's it's very much affecting my life because I spent time in Ukraine. I studied Ukrainian and I have a lot of friends who are either from Ukraine or who live in Ukraine. So, people I know have to leave the country. People I know in Kiev right now wondering whether they're, you know, they're going to be possibly hurt by you know, a bomb falling on their building.

**Jane** 19:37

And a lot of people around the world have family and friends in Ukraine, who they're very, very worried about right now.

**Erin Hutchinson** 19:44

Yeah, absolutely, it's going on, you know, right now. In terms of how it might affect us in the United States or people around the world, you know, I mean, I think it's making a lot of people feel more unsafe. Because military conflicts have happened in Europe throughout its history, but it had been quite some time since we'd seen a full scale invasion of one country by another one in Europe. So I know people living in other Eastern European countries like Poland are very nervous, wondering if this could happen to them. And in the United States, we are also just sort of nervously watching what's going on and wanting the conflict to end soon so that people will be okay.

**Jane** 20:29

Another thing people may be hearing adults talk about is that Russia is a big producer of oil, which it sells to other countries. Oil goes into a lot of things. It's how many people heat their homes; it's in the gas many people put into their cars. And the price of gas and other oil products in many countries around the world has gone up a lot because of this conflict. That can be really hard for people to pay



for. And Erin says Russia and Ukraine are also major growers of wheat. So some countries, particularly in the Middle East, are finding the cost of food going up.

**Jane 21:05**

The worst consequences of this war are, of course, for the people in Ukraine where it's happening. War is violent. And it often harms people who have done nothing wrong, who just happen to live in the country where the violence is happening. In war, many people lose a lot. Sometimes they lose their homes and all the things they have. Sometimes they have to leave and they lose their communities and jobs and ability to live in the place they call home. Sometimes they lose their lives, or the lives of people they love.

**Erin Hutchinson 21:40**

Every time we have a war and we see the real true face of war, I think it reminds us of a lesson we should have learned a long time ago, which is that war is not the solution to our differences. It's a real tragedy, particularly for the people of Ukraine, but also for the world.

**Jane 21:56**

It certainly is. Thanks to Erin Hutchinson for helping us learn more. Erin is a professor at the University of Colorado Boulder. If you want to know more about what is happening in Europe right now, you should ask the adults in your life to help you find accurate and non-scary information. We have links to good news sources for kids in our show notes for this episode and on our website: [butwhykids.org](https://butwhykids.org). Ask your adults to help check them out with you.

**Jane 22:27**

If you have access to social media, things like Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, it's important to know that sometimes the videos and pictures you might see are not real or are not what the people who are posting them say they are. In wars like this, sometimes people use social media to try to spread a message to try to get people on their side. So it's important to find sources you can trust and not share information that might not be correct.

**Jane 22:57**

And another thing: if hearing the news is making you anxious, you can ask the adults around you not to watch or listen to the news when you're around and not to have conversations about it while you're in the room. It's okay to take a break from the news. That goes for adults, too.

**Jane 23:15**

If you're looking for ways to help the people who have left Ukraine, we also have links of just a few organizations you can donate to. And some communities around the world are holding events to show support for the Ukrainian people. You can ask your adults if they know anything like that happening near you.

**Jane 23:31**

No matter what. If you're a kid, none of this is your fault and you are not responsible for fixing it. You all deserve to be safe and secure and loved. If you're feeling worried, and this goes for anything, tell



someone you trust. And thank you to you and your families for trusting us to help guide you through things that are hard and confusing and complex.

**Jane** 23:57

That's our show for today. It's produced by Melody Bodette and me, Jane Lindholm, for Vermont Public Radio, and distributed by PRX. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.