This month, there is only one history-related episode to discuss—Russia’s war in Ukraine. Pundits, pols and smart phone owners have bombarded us with words and images addressing the “whats” of this story—Russian troop movements, heroic Ukrainian defenders, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy live-streaming resistance all over Kyiv. But coverage of the “whys” or “hows” of this war is lacking—how did Russia and Ukraine come to blows in 2022? Like East European history generally, it is complicated, but the fundamentals are worth trying to unpack.

Russians and Ukrainians are closely related geographically, ethnically and culturally. They both trace their origins to Kyiv “Rus’,” as it was known then, the cradle of Russian/Ukrainian civilization. Prince Volodymyr (Vladimir, for Russians) accepted Eastern Orthodox Christianity in 988, the monks of the Kyivo- Pechersk’a monastery compiled the first work of Russian/Ukrainian literature there, and the Kyivan state was a model of good governance for its time*.* But episodes of internecine warfare, followed by the Mongol invasion, shattered Kyiv’s unity and fatefully scattered its successors.

The founders of what became Russia—“Rus-sians”-- went northeast from Kyiv and eventually located their capital in Moscow, circa 1325, and later Petersburg, by edict of Peter the Great, in 1703. The Russian state expanded south, with the defeat of the Mongols, and east, into Siberia, becoming in effect an Eurasian nation. By contrast, other former Kyiv residents, who would become known as Ukrainians, passed under the control of the Polish-Lithuanian state and later, the Habsburg Monarchy. Those governments were more diverse and subject to westernizing influences than Russia. Over time, moreover, the language spoken in 10th century Kyiv evolved. Those who had gone north spoke a language we know today as Russian. Ukrainians in Poland and later the Habsburg Monarchy began to speak a language heavily influenced by the Poles and Slovaks living among them. Today, Russian and Ukrainian both use the Cyrillic alphabet but differ significantly in vocabulary and pronunciation. Think Spanish and Italian.

Several centuries after their common beginning in Kyiv, Russians and Ukrainians were different people, speaking different languages.

Fast forward to the 18th century: Ukrainians living close to the Russia became subjects of the Tsar. The Russian empire had had hard going through the centuries—far-flung territories, dynastic conflict and foreign invasions, notably the epic war with Napoleon in 1812. These struggles inclined it to prioritize unity—one leader, one truth, one religion, one language--over diversity. Its rulers believed that acknowledging difference risked disunity and danger. By the 19th century, they ordered that Ukrainians and other non-Russian peoples leave their past behind and become Russians. But Ukrainians resisted, believing their culture and language to be distinct. 19th century Ukrainians in Russia found inspiration across the border, in the Habsburg monarchy, where Ukrainians spoke and wrote in their mother tongue. Ukraine’s Shakespeare, Taras Shevchenko, followed suit in Russia, writing poetry and plays in Ukrainian. Like-minded individuals published newspapers anonymously in Ukrainian. In response, the Russian authorities criminalized the very use of the word “Ukraine.” This policy could prove fatal, as in 1895, when Kyiv experienced an outbreak of typhus. Russian authorities decreed that all warning signs be written in Russian, but many Ukrainians could not read Russian. Thousands died.

1917 brought revolution to Russia. In the wars and chaos that followed, Ukrainians campaigned for an independent state, but Communist forces fought to control of all the former Russian territories. Ukraine thus became a republic of the Soviet Union in 1922. A few years later, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin—believing that Ukrainians’ desire for independence constituted treachery--plotted revenge when he launched his drive to bring all agriculture in the country under the control of the state. He instituted a policy of food and grain confiscation, in effect guaranteeing a famine, in the Ukrainian countryside. About three million Ukrainian peasants died of starvation. This outrage, the *Holodomor* in Ukrainian, is considered a crime against humanity, on a par with the Holocaust. Crucially, Stalin then moved Russians into the vacated Ukrainian countryside, to make it difficult for Ukrainians to break away in the future. And he continued to deny Ukrainians their culture and language.

There was worse to come for Ukraine. When Nazi forces invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, they targeted Ukraine’s large Jewish population, killing nearly a million Jews well before the Polish death camps became operational. After the war, Soviet authorities continued to repress Ukrainian culture and language all over Ukraine, despite official denials. I will never forget a young Ukrainian man in Kyiv engaging me and some American colleagues on a bus in 1987, detailing how he could never use Ukrainian language in school and how his teachers taught only Russian literature. “Don’t believe what they tell you about our culture being respected,” he insisted. “Ukrainian language is outlawed here.” We tried to quiet him, but he became more and more agitated. It wasn’t long before the bus driver reached for his radio. Soviet police intercepted and stopped the bus, dragged the young man off and broke his spine with a billy club. We were too shocked to speak.

When the Soviet Union of Mikhail Gorbachev was headed for a breakup in 1991, Ukrainians understandably jumped at the chance to vote for independence. In the first decade after the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin’s independent Russia showed no interest in dominating Ukraine and the former Soviet states. Independent Ukraine accordingly looked to cultivate closer ties to western Europe than Russia. Fatefully, Yeltsin proved unable to cope with the challenges of a transitioning Russia and stepped aside in l999 in favor of Vladimir Putin, a former KGB major, now a player in Russian politics. As the world would learn, Putin’s views on Russia’s destiny differed drastically from Yeltsin’s. This automatically put Ukraine’s aspirations to join Europe in jeopardy. The road to Russia’s war with Ukraine will be the subject of next month’s column.