

Ukraine's Nuclear Weapon Surrender: A Futile Attempt at Preventing War

Nadine Laity, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Ilya Vinkovetsky History 420 course Themes in Russian Imperial History. The assignment asked students to choose a topic relating to the recent war between Russia and Ukraine and then write either an analytical essay or research paper on that topic. The paper uses Chicago citation style.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukraine possessed many Soviet nuclear weapons. For various reasons, Ukraine removed these weapons from their possession and became a non-nucl Contest—2024 ear state. Considering the current war between Russia and Ukraine, there is a rising narrative that Ukraine should be equipped with nuclear weapons to defend itself against Russo-aggression, however, this paper explains why Ukraine gave up their nuclear weapons and why keeping the weapons was not a viable option. The Ukrainian surrender of nuclear weapons was a necessary step for Ukraine to remain sovereign in its early years of independence.

Contemporary society faces an ever-rising level of threat and concern about nuclear weapons and the potential of a nuclear war. The subject of nuclear weapons is at the forefront of many discussions concerning the war between Ukraine and Russia; Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy continuously pleads for protection for Ukraine, giving two options at a European Council summit in the fall of 2024: that Ukraine regain nuclear weapons or join an alliance such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).¹ When Ukraine became an independent country, it maintained ownership of all the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons that were left within its territory.² Ukraine committed itself to becoming a non-nuclear state and made an agreement with several other countries to surrender their nuclear weapons, believing that this agreement would be the most beneficial to their newly independent country. Current events allow us to presuppose that Ukraine should have kept their nuclear weapons, but that was not a viable option. The decision to surrender nuclear weapons was necessary for Ukraine to escape their economic hardships and gain political favour with both the West and Russia, as an attempt to guarantee Ukrainian sovereignty.

The exact history of national Ukrainian identity is unclear. It is notable during the Ukrainian People's Republic which started in 1918, but this Republic was short-lived and soon became the Ukrainian SSR when it was overtaken by the Soviet Union in 1922.³ In the early days of being under Lenin's rule and part of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian national identity flourished through the "promotion of the Ukrainian language and culture."⁴ This flourishing was soon put to a halt under Stalin's rule and the impact of Holodomor, the man-made famine that killed at least 3 million people.⁵ Recognition of the suffering Ukrainians endured throughout Holodomor has continued to be a notable point in Ukraine's political discourse. Ukrainian history within the Soviet Union was marked by "experiences of collective suffering, repression, and Russification."⁶ These negative repercussions of Soviet Imperialism pushed Ukraine to strive for autonomy when the Soviet Union began to collapse in the late twentieth century.

¹ Seb Starcevic, "Zelensky: We need NATO or nukes ... and we want NATO.," *POLITICO*, October 17, 2024, www.politico.eu.

² Michael Dobbs, "Ukraine Claims all Nuclear Weapons on its Territory," *The Washington Post*, July 2, 1993, www.washingtonpost.com.

³ Gwendolyn Sasse, *Russia's War Against Ukraine* (Polity Press, 2023), 19-20.

⁴ Gwendolyn Sasse, *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, 20.

⁵ Gwendolyn Sasse, *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, 21.

⁶ Gwendolyn Sasse, *Russia's War Against Ukraine*, 21.

In July of 1990, while part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine adopted the Declaration of Sovereignty, allowing them greater rights and freedoms.⁷ As the Soviet Union continued to collapse, 92% of Ukrainians sought for independence which they officially gained in December 1991; of the fifteen Soviet republics, Ukraine had the second largest population and economy.⁸ The collapse of the Soviet Union also collapsed the Soviet economy, which had a detrimental impact on the economies of the independent states that came out of the Soviet Union.⁹ By 1992 these impoverished states were suffering as “inflation [was] out of control; peoples savings [were] wiped out; banditry flourishe[d].”¹⁰ By 1993, production in Ukraine declined rapidly and inflation grew to over 10,000%, causing Ukraine’s government to fall into devastating economic deficits.¹¹ This financial catastrophe made life in Ukraine grim for its citizens and pushed the Ukrainian government to make changes as an attempt to secure a more prosperous future.

In addition to inheriting a crumbling economy, Ukraine inherited many nuclear weapons, the third largest nuclear arsenal in the world.¹² It is estimated that the Soviet Union left “1,900 strategic warheads, 176 intercontinental ballistic missiles, and 44 strategic bombers”¹³ within Ukraine’s newly independent territory. In July 1993, the Ukrainian parliament announced Ukraine’s formal ownership of these weapons; this ownership was integral for Ukraine to trade their nuclear weapons for various political agreements.¹⁴ Ever since Ukraine became independent from the Soviet Union, it was committed to becoming a non-nuclear state. Ukrainians favoured this because they believed that keeping nuclear weapons would impede their progress of becoming an independent nation and were aware of the devastating effects of nuclear disasters since the 1986

⁷ Liliane Bivings, “Why Ukraine doesn’t have Nuclear Weapons,” *The Kyiv Independent*. June 2, 2023, kyivindependent.com.

⁸ Council on Foreign Relations, “A historical timeline of post-independence Ukraine.”

⁹ Mikhail Zygar, *War and Punishment: Putin, Zelensky, and the Path to Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine* (New York: Scribner, 2023), 169.

¹⁰ Mikhail Zygar, *War and Punishment*, 169.

¹¹ Liliane Bivings, “Why Ukraine doesn’t have Nuclear Weapons.”

¹² Liliane Bivings, “Why Ukraine doesn’t have Nuclear Weapons.”

¹³ “Ukraine, Nuclear Weapons, and Security Assurances at a Glance,” Arms Control Association, reviewed December 2020, www.armscontrol.org.

¹⁴ Michael Dobbs, “Ukraine Claims all Nuclear Weapons on its Territory.”

Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion.¹⁵ The United States wanted Ukraine to be non-nuclear to ensure there would not be a civil war between nuclear-armed post-Soviet states, and Russia wanted these nuclear weapons returned to itself in order to strengthen its dominance among the post-Soviet states.¹⁶ This led to an international pressure for Ukraine to surrender its nuclear weapons, reinforcing its commitment to becoming a non-nuclear state.

One of the biggest challenges that Ukraine faced was Russia's territorial ambitions, and the Russian government had begun to challenge Ukraine's borders even before it gained legal independence.¹⁷ This fear of Russian aggression led many Ukrainians to believe that becoming a non-nuclear state would leave them vulnerable to a potential Russian attack and, therefore, unable to ensure the future sovereignty of their nation. In the summer of 1993, John Mearsheimer, a political scientist and international relations expert, published an article urging for the support of a nuclear Ukraine.¹⁸ Mearsheimer believed that Ukrainian possession of nuclear weapons was "imperative to maintain peace between Russia and Ukraine."¹⁹ However, the usefulness of these nuclear weapons is uncertain. Ukraine "never possessed operational control"²⁰ of these weapons, and the nuclear codes to use the weapons were in Moscow.²¹ Since the nuclear weapons were not operational for Ukraine and would require significant resources to become operational, it was in Ukraine's best interest to see what other ways they could use these weapons. It became clear that these nuclear weapons could be used as political bargaining chips to gain international recognition of Ukrainian independence and negotiate treaties to guarantee the future of this independence.

As an attempt to stabilize itself, Ukraine made numerous agreements over the first decade of its independence, affirming its commitment to becoming a non-nuclear state. These agreements led the United States to give Ukraine vital financial support, and by 1994, Ukraine was the "third largest recipient of U.S.

¹⁵ Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc, 2023) 64.

¹⁶ Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 63.

¹⁷ Serhii Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 65.

¹⁸ John Mearsheimer, "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent," *Foreign Affairs*, 1993, www.mearsheimer.com.

¹⁹ John Mearsheimer, "The Case for a Ukrainian Nuclear Deterrent," 50.

²⁰ "Ukraine." NTI. Last reviewed July 10, 2024. www.nti.org.

²¹ Michael Dobbs, "Ukraine Claims all Nuclear Weapons on its Territory."

foreign aid.”²² Although this financial support was critical for Ukraine’s prosperity, the agreements made between Ukraine and other nations were focused on its most important goal: guaranteed sovereignty as an independent state. The Lisbon Protocol, signed in May 1992, committed Ukraine to being a non-nuclear state and joining the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The Lisbon Protocol included Ukraine with several nuclear-armed post-Soviet states in START-1, the Soviet-American treaty for the reduction of nuclear weapons.²³ In January 1994, the US-Russia-Ukraine treaty was signed, committing that Ukraine would relinquish their nuclear weapons. In return for the Ukrainian surrender of these weapons, the U.S. would give Ukraine financial aid and Russia would respect Ukraine’s borders.²⁴ By February 1994, Ukraine reaffirmed its commitments in the Lisbon Protocol and later voted to continue advancing as a non-nuclear state for the NPT.

On February 8, 1994, Ukraine became the fifth country to join NATO’s Partnership for Peace, which was a cooperative agreement open to non-NATO countries.²⁵ The Partnership for Peace was a way for NATO to support countries while appeasing Russia’s opposition towards NATO’s Eastward expansions. Geographically, Ukraine is in a vulnerable position between NATO-oriented countries and Russia. Because of this vulnerable position, Ukraine was desperate to attain a stronger relationship with NATO, and the Partnership for Peace served as a guarantee that Ukraine would not be left unsupported in its close proximity to Russia and potential Russian aggression. However, the Partnership for Peace was transient and was soon replaced by two separate agreements, one between NATO and Ukraine and one between NATO and Russia.²⁶ This change did not have a significant effect on the political sphere as these agreements held the same assurances that the Partnership for Peace did.

Following this, Ukraine signed the Budapest Memorandum with the Russian Federation, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on December 5, 1994, in order to gain

²² Liliane Bivings, “Why Ukraine doesn’t have Nuclear Weapons.”

²³ Serhii Plokhly, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 71.

²⁴ Serhii Plokhly, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 72.

²⁵ Council on Foreign Relations, “A historical timeline of post-independence Ukraine.”

²⁶ Serhii Plokhly, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 78.

security assurances.²⁷ This memorandum assured that all countries included would respect “the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine”²⁸ as long as Ukraine accedes to the NPT as a non-²⁹ Later on³⁰ Although agreements for the territorial integrity of Ukraine were the focus of this memorandum, there were no commitments made to Ukraine if these agreements were broken. This continued to leave Ukraine’s sovereignty vulnerable, with no assurance of support for Ukraine if they were threatened.

Ukraine continued signing treaties with various countries attempting to secure its future sovereignty. Ukraine had little power in negotiating with Russia, not only because of its vulnerable geographical position, but also because it was dependent on Russian oil and gas. However, in the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, signed in May 1997, Russia gave recognition for Ukraine’s borders and territorial integrity. The treaty stated that Russia and Ukraine:

shall base their relations with each other on the principles of mutual respect, sovereign equality, territorial integrity, the inviolability of borders, the peaceful settlement of disputes, the non-use of force or threat of force, including economic and other means of pressure, the right of peoples to control their own destiny, non-interference in internal affairs, observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, cooperation among States, and conscientious fulfilment of international obligations and other universally recognized norms of international law.³¹

²⁷ “Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons,” United Nations Treaty Collection, May 12, 1994, treaties.un.org.

²⁸ “Memorandum on Security Assurances in Connection with Ukraine’s Accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.”

²⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, “A historical timeline of post-independence Ukraine.”

³⁰ Serhii Plokyh, *The Russo-Ukrainian War*, 72.

³¹ “Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Ukraine and the Russian Federation,” United Nations Treaty Collection, April 1, 1999, treaties.un.org.

Unfortunately, the treaties signed by Ukraine in its first decade of independence did not persuade the Ukrainian government that they had guaranteed Ukraine's sovereignty. During this time, Ukraine had gained favour with both the West and Russia, but there were no concrete agreements bringing certainty to Ukraine's future. By June 1, 1996, Ukraine had transferred its last nuclear warhead to Russia, counting that the agreements previously made would protect Ukrainian sovereignty.³²

With their nuclear weapons gone, Ukraine no longer had them as a bargaining chip for international relations and continued to look for a means to guarantee their sovereignty. Becoming a member of NATO would guarantee Ukrainians the sovereignty they desire, but this membership has proved to be difficult to attain. Throughout the growing tensions between Russia and Ukraine in the early twenty-first century, Ukraine's decision to surrender its nuclear weapons has been subject to debate. As growing tensions erupted into the war between Russia and Ukraine, Ukrainian sovereignty has become at the forefront of many conversations concerning this war. In April 2023, Former U.S. President Bill Clinton gave an interview regretting his involvement in persuading Ukraine to give up its nuclear weapons.³³ Since he was the U.S. President at the time of these agreements, he feels personally involved, believing that Russia would not have invaded Ukraine if Ukraine was still armed with nuclear weapons.³⁴ Ukrainian President Zelenskyy does not seem to disagree with the past decision to give up nuclear weapons, reaffirming that Ukrainians "choose NATO. Not nuclear weapons."³⁵ However, Ukraine's sovereignty is undoubtedly in a precarious position amidst the current war, and NATO membership is the only foreseeable answer to guarantee this sovereignty.

Understanding Ukraine's history immediately following the dissolution of the Soviet Union paints a grim picture of what Ukrainian life looked like in the first years of its independence. Although the Ukrainian surrender of its nuclear weapons left Ukraine without a strong defence to maintain the country's

³² "Ukraine, Nuclear Weapons, and Security Assurances at a Glance."

³³ Miriam O'Callaghan, "Clinton regrets persuading Ukraine to give up nuclear weapons," RTE, Ireland's National Public Service Media, updated April 4, 2023, www.rte.ie.

³⁴ O'Callaghan, "Clinton regrets persuading Ukraine to give up nuclear weapons."

³⁵ Starcevic, "Zelensky: We need NATO or nukes ... and we want NATO."

independence, the surrender was necessary for the development of Ukraine. The memorandum that Ukraine signed between the Russian Federation, the United States of America, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland guaranteed the sovereignty of Ukraine's borders.³⁶ Ukraine gained necessary financial support from America by fulfilling its promise of becoming a non-nuclear state.³⁷ Although Russia has broken its previous agreements with Ukraine in regard to respecting its borders, Ukraine keeping their nuclear weapons was not a viable option. The decision to surrender nuclear weapons was made by Ukraine as an attempt to escape its economic hardships and ensure the safety of its borders, all while gaining political favour with both the West and Russia. The newly independent Ukraine held political negotiations for years in an attempt to guarantee its sovereignty though, ultimately, these attempts have ended in vain.

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