



## Understanding the War in Ukraine - With Katrina vanden Heuvel

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**Zain Raza (ZR):** Thank you for tuning in today and welcome back to another episode of The Source. I'm your host, Zain Raza. This is a two part discussion with Katrina vanden Heuvel on the war in Ukraine. In this part, we will be focusing on the background and context. And in the next part we will be focusing on the recent developments. Katrina vanden Heuvel is the editorial director and publisher of The Nation. She's also a board member of the American Committee for US-Russian Accords and a columnist for The Washington Post. She's also the author of numerous books. Some of them include *Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev's Reformers* and *Is Capitalism Broken?* Katrina, thank you so much for your time today.

**Katrina vanden Heuvel (KVH):** Thank you for having me.

**ZR:** Let us begin with the war in Ukraine, most notably the background that the Russians provided before invading Ukraine. One of the main arguments made by Moscow to justify its war was that NATO had expanded towards Russia's borders despite receiving reassurances from the West that it would not do so. And Ukraine was essentially the last straw forcing Russia's hand. And secondly, ethnic Russians living in Eastern Ukraine were being discriminated against and even killed under the current Ukrainian government, and that impelled Russia to act. Do you think these arguments have any legitimacy?

**KVH:** You know, I think, Zain, that the important thing is that history must matter and history informs. The crisis today does not justify, but it does inform deeply in ways that people have rejected because Putin has raised some of these issues. And if he did, it must be wrong, which is insane. I've been going to Moscow since 1978. The most important years were the years of Mikhail Gorbachev, who had a different conception at the end of the Soviet Union or prior to the end of what security meant. And that meant not NATO, which is a military institution, but a common European home from Vladivostok to Lisbon and built on nonmilitary institutions. NATO, at the end of the Soviet Union, was already a volatile, controversial institution. And by the way, I want people to know that in this country there was

a concerted opposition, multilayered to the expansion of NATO after the end of the Soviet Union. Senators like Bill Bradley, Gary Hart. There was a movement. It did not succeed. But I do think the ongoing expansion of NATO and the failure to uphold the agreement made in Berlin that NATO would not move one inch eastward at the end of the Soviet Union - a promise that was documented. There is no controversy about whether that was a serious promise. Gorbachev, inside Russia, has been attacked for not getting an agreement, a written agreement. I'm not sure that would have made much difference in the context. But it's the expansion of NATO's eastward that I think does play a huge role. And Ukraine is special. The issue of expansion to Ukraine and Georgia, to a secondary extent. But Ukraine is a country which is now becoming more united as a result of the Russian invasion. But, you know, it has had deep roots with Russia. And when Putin talked about the red line, you know, it was a real point. I do think it was an accumulation of grievances after many years. Do you mind if I just say a few words about Putin? I mean, he was the first leader to call George W Bush after 9/11. He helped the US forces. He was pro-Western, inside a country that was divided between Westernizers, Slavophiles turning eastward. And, you know, he kept to that position for quite a few years, even after the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty was repealed by the United States, the foundational structure of the arms control agreements. I think it was 2007, as you probably know, in Munich, where he spoke out against a unipolar world in the wake of the US invasion and violation of the sovereignty of Iraq. And it was at that moment, I think, where the United States, which had believed Russia would be on its knees as it was under Yeltsin, was no longer on its knees. And that freaked everyone out. And in the front row you had Senator John McCain, you had Angela Merkel. But I think at that point, things began to move in a different direction to where we see today a war. But I think NATO was fundamental and I think in dismissing it, people have fixed on Putin's discussions of Russia's ties with Ukraine, the philosophy behind it, the hit, you know, his kind of belief in a special destiny with Ukraine. But NATO, I think played a big role, especially the expansion and now to Eastern Europe. So I do think history is very, very important.

**ZR:** You spent a considerable part of your career studying Russia and writing books on its domestic and foreign policy. What do you think were the primary reasons why Russia failed to integrate politically and economically with the West? We saw many former foes of the US, for example, Japan and Vietnam, Germany, integrate economically or politically. And to some extent, even China, though that relation seems to be falling apart at the moment. In your assessment, why did integration with Russia fail with the West?

**KVH:** Oh, I'm not sure it did fail. I think for years - first of all, Yeltsin. I think how you think of the 90s in Russia defines to a certain extent how you approach Russia today. Many Americans, to the extent they pay attention, think Yeltsin's years were years of freedom. Well, you know, first of all, he sold off the country to the oligarchs who are deeply enmeshed in the West. They could not have done what they did without Yeltsin's go ahead, but without the Western banks. That's a measure of integration. But the impoverishment of a country, 70% poverty, the anger toward a government that left people on their own terms. I think that's a

very important marker. But then Putin comes in and he is more Westernized, coming out of the experience in Germany. He was in the FSB, the KGB. His main role in the early years was to work with a leading Westernizer, the mayor of St Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak. So he was discovered by the Yeltsin administration. In Russian, there were memoirs documenting that the Yeltsin administration was looking for someone who could protect them. And they looked at two or three others who didn't quite do the trick, but they brought Putin in. His first act in power was to give Yeltsin and his family immunity. I mean, you know, but I do think what the West means is an interesting point. But the oligarchs certainly defined a relationship with the West. I do think now, if I might jump ahead, that what's fascinating and tragic - it's not tragic - but what's fascinating about the Ukraine war and its impact is that you have a kind of global emergence of a possible non-aligned movement where Brazil, for example, India, are not in support of the war, but they're not, you know, giving weapons. They're seeking alternatives. And I think that there are some interesting collateral, not necessarily damage, but outcomes to a war that we're beginning to see emerge that will change Russia's role with the West.

**ZR:** I would like to make some arguments that are usually voiced in the majority of the mainstream media here in Germany. Please bear with me. The well-known promise - the well-known promise made by the US and the West that NATO will not move one inch to the east is usually fact checked in the mainstream media here in Germany by stating that this promise was only verbal and not legally binding to international law. Hence, Russia cannot use it to justify that NATO expansion was or is a threat. How do you view this line of argument?

**KVH:** Well, there's a lot of documentation in the archives that there was more than a verbal promise. I mean, a verbal promise is, like I say to you, I'm happy to do your show at 10:30, not 11:30. And I adhere to that promise. But you had major world figures, Shultz, Baker on the US side agreeing. And you have to understand, you do understand that this was at a moment when US relations, Russian relations were at a height of amity and comity. And so I think that has to - so, I mean, I can recall there were several books - and there was a group in Washington called the National Security Archives, which has done a lot of work on those. But put that aside. So let's say there was no broken promise. NATO expansion - again, it's not a coffee klatsch, you know, it's not a tea party, which doesn't ring right anymore. But it is an institution which fosters weapons manufacturers. I mean, the amount of money now that is going into building weapons is also part of NATO's role. So it mitigates against cooperative relations. And let me just put you in the context of America. It's as if Texas seceded. Or Mexico - like, the Warsaw Pact suddenly appeared on our doorsteps in Mexico or Texas seceded, and the Warsaw Pact expanded. The simplest way of thinking about this is NATO was founded, as some said, right, to keep America in Germany down and Russia out. But it was founded as a counterpart to the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union's military institution. When that collapsed, why did NATO grow? You know, we can debate this endlessly. And it is debated. In seminars and books. But the consequences of NATO expansion, in my mind, have

been very negative. And I do think there's another myth, if I might say very quickly, which is that the Eastern European, Central European, Baltic countries - Finland, for example - need to be part of NATO's to protect from an expansionist imperialist Russia. I don't believe Russia is imperialist. I think they have enough problems paying their pensions to their own citizens. Certainly you have to respect those in the countries I mentioned because they've lived through Soviet occupation. But I don't think, to be honest, it's healthy that central Eastern Europe, Poland, which has been criticized for its legal machinery, suddenly become the arbiters of what Western policy towards Europe is. If you remember, Rumsfeld: old Europe, new Europe. I mean, I think you will see divisions. And we're seeing divisions in Europe. You certainly see it where you are. And I think that is interesting, because I think Europe should be more independent of the United States. But it's dangerous right now or potentially dangerous.

**ZR:** Another argument that is usually made is that Ukraine is an independent state and has a right to make military deals with anybody it pleases. And so becoming part of NATO, if it wishes as a sovereign state, is within its own right. How would you respond to this sort of argument?

**KVH:** Ukraine has its agency and its right. The irony, the terrible irony is that so much of this war did begin because of NATO and expansion. At the moment, Ukraine would not meet NATO's preconditions for joining. And it's not clear what NATO would do to help Ukraine now. So I think it's - and you know, it's just the conditions. In addition, joining the EU, which was part of all of this, may become more difficult. Or may change the EU, which has always kind of worked against hyper nationalism. So I think that's at play. But I also think it's worth remembering that this war really started. You could take it back to 2004 to some extent, the color revolutions. But, you know, 2013-14, because there was war in the eastern part of Ukraine. So people have been living with that but there are a lot of arguments for why we have gone in. But here's something interesting. I'm sure in Germany, people have been following the leaks. And just yesterday, an intelligence airman was apprehended in an isolated part of Massachusetts. It's very complicated, interesting. But those show how deeply enmeshed US NATO trainers are. Not high numbers, but they are in Ukraine but also showed the dangers of a Ukraine that is eager for more weapons but is weaker, it seems, than we understood.

**ZR:** In Germany usually the war is understood by the general public, and it's also portrayed by the mainstream media here as starting last year. However, there's a lot of context, and you mentioned this already briefly. Can you talk about more of the context, what actually the events were, where the West also played its role that led to this war?

**KVH:** Yes. So, you really need to go back to 2013-14 Maidan, which is complicated, but there's been a lot of research that, yes, there were people seeking freedom, democracy. Freedom from a corrupt government, but there were also snipers and extremists and

neo-Nazis. And there was also an agreement made by President Obama, I believe, the French leader. I don't know about Germany, but that there would be early elections so that there would be a transfer of power from Yanukovich - deeply corrupt - but elected. He was ran out of town. He's residing in, like, oligarch's road in Moscow. And the myth that Putin and Yanukovich were close is a total myth. And the myth, by the way, that Yanukovich was led by American advisors to join, to not join the EU is wrong. I mean, Yanukovich saw the EU and saw that they would want to lift subsidies and other things and saw his future foretold. But it was an ugly scene. And then you had someone who's become quite notorious in America, Victoria Nuland, who's in the Biden administration appearing on the scene. But more important than handing out cookies to the protesters, which is her right, she is, you know, taped on a phone call with the US ambassador saying F U C K the EU, we'll make the decisions. So the role of the United States was quite deeply enmeshed in the transition, so to speak. Some call it a coup - U.S. led - some call it overthrow, but it precipitated, you know, ongoing violence and conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine, which is a Russian speaking zone, which is where the industrial base. And Poroshenko, who was the transition between Yanukovich and Zelensky, went to war. I mean, he was at war with his own people in Donbass. So it was very complicated. And you have other issues which you would respect, I don't know, in this country. But language issues, where Russian was proscribed, prohibited. And now you have - what you see now, and we have a very good writer named Anatol Lieven, who is with the Quincy Institute. I recommend your viewers check it out. It's about restraint, not intervention. But he's just returned from Ukraine and the rise of nationalism is to be understood. But the war has kind of unified many Ukrainians. But the Donbas is still as we know, those are the sections which are in contestation. Donbas put aside Crimea. So, you know, there is a real background. The war did not start a year ago. Of course, the invasion was a day many will remember. It was shocking to many, including, as you mentioned, I work with the American Committee for US-Russia Accord. Ambassador Jack Matlock, who was Reagan's ambassador to the USSR and then Russia was shocked, as were many others who followed Russian history and politics for decades. I do think what this invasion has done is expose Russia's weakness, not its strength, which is to be calculated as we move forward.

**ZR:** Also, I want to talk about the role of NATO. Some countries perceive NATO as a threat due to the wars it has conducted under US leadership. Others in Europe, generally speaking, NATO's viewed as providing security as well as economic assistance and military assistance. And therefore, countries like Finland have joined NATO, saying that they would be protected from a possible Russian invasion. Sweden is also expected to join NATO at some point. How do you think people watching this segment should view NATO and understand its role?

**KVH:** I begin again, NATO is a military institution. It is about, Zain, if I might - it's about the militarization of our thinking about security more generally. The idea that you need a military institution to protect you - to me, seems wrongheaded because we've come out of a COVID pandemic, global. And security should be about more health care, fighting nuclear proliferation, fighting the climate crisis, an existential threat. Fighting global inequality. And

instead we're having a buildup of weapons systems which are good, for one thing, killing people. Now, one can argue, and I respect those who have lived under Soviet occupation. For example, the Baltics or Central Europe. But it's not clear to me that, as I said, I don't see Russia as an expansionist power. I think Georgia in 2008, there is an alternative history to Georgia. It took two to tango. It was the leader of Georgia at that time, Saakashvili, and turmoil around frozen conflicts. But both countries, Georgia and Russia, played a role. The OSCE has done a report that that was not a pure out Russian invasion. But there is a fear. It goes deeply rooted in World War Two, etc. but I just think NATO - what it does is build up weapons systems. It enriches weapons manufacturers. The war profiteering that is going on right now is staggering. And we shouldn't forget. And this is where I feel for Ukraine, the rebuilding of Ukraine. You know, it may cost \$4 billion dollars, no, 4 trillion. And the reconstruction of countries - look at Afghanistan. We're not good at that. And the world isn't very good at that. So I just don't see NATO as an instrument for the 21st century. In fact, what I see is when you look at what's going on in Ukraine and the brutal war of attrition, the meat grinder kind of patch by patch, it reminds of the First World War with 21st century weapons. And the loss. So it's the loss of lives and treasure. But some on the left have said, well, it's not that expensive. It's one missile carrier. But I measure expense and cost also in the rise of a war mentality, militarized mentality, as a way to approach the crises we face.

**ZR:** To the last question for this part of our interview, how is the state of the left and politics generally in the US? Is there an anti-war sentiment growing? Are people asking questions? Why is there so much money going abroad and not being spent domestically on social issues such as infrastructure? Could you provide our viewers with an update of how the political system is configured within the context of Ukraine?

**KVH:** Do I need to? Yeah, I will. So this is - in my mind - it's a tragedy in a way. We have an editorial in The Nation next week trying to talk to a Left and explain the cost of this, not just the financial, but the moral, the political. I think President Biden has been a very good domestic president working with the Congress and a Senate that he has. He's passed some important legislation. So almost Rooseveltian in the context of our times. But the Democratic Party, to some extent, has become a war party. And this is dangerous for the costs, as you said, of how do we build an infrastructure of care, of humanity if so much is going to the military? Now, what's different, it seems unlike Vietnam, we're bred, you know, that the war really sapped the ability to build a domestic program for Johnson, President Johnson. At the moment, it seems like everything is possible, but I do think the cost will come home and again in the mindset. So it's not just Ukraine, but the idea that as Biden has laid out, that we're in a crusading foreign policy. It's us versus them. It's democracies versus dictatorships. Listen, I'm all for democracy. I'm a believer, though, as is The Nation, that it is very tough if you have endless wars to have a true democracy at home. It tests the democratic institutions of a country. So I foresee, possibly, that the Republican Party may have more of a debate as we head into a presidential year about the war than the Democratic Party. Now, there may be some openings. There are few. But it is a curious nature of this particular war that it has

become a crusade and isn't as open to sober thinking. But we may see something evolve. Never forget, you're too young. 1982, a million people in Central Park protesting against the International Nuclear Force agreement. So how you rebuild a kind of anti-war-peace movement is one of the central challenges. And it may be, I've always felt the anti-nuke movement, if it could meld with the climate movement, because there is nuclear winter. So that is a challenge.

**ZR:** Katrina vanden Heuvel, editorial director and publisher of The Nation, thank you so much for your time. And thank you for tuning in to part one of our discussion. Make sure to subscribe to our YouTube channel if you don't want to miss part two. And also, don't forget to join us on our alternative channels on Rumble and Telegram. YouTube, which is owned by Google, can shadow ban or censor us at any time. So as a precaution, we are asking all our viewers to join us on our alternative channels on Rumble and Telegram. And if you're watching this video, make sure to take into consideration that there's an entire team working behind the scenes from video, light, audio. In the case of our German videos, translation, voice over video editing. So if you want us to continue providing you with daily news and analysis, make sure to donate a small amount. I'm your host, Zain Raza. See you guys next time.

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