Why is there a Refugee Crisis in Ukraine?

Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events

In February 2022, Russia launched a large-scale military invasion of Ukraine, a country in Eastern Europe of 44 million people. Ukraine is a neighboring country to Russia. There is a lot of speculation about Russian President Vladimir Putin's motives for the attack. The invasion and war have received widespread condemnation from countries around the world, many of which have imposed sanctions on Russia and provided foreign aid to Ukraine, including weapons.

Refugee crisis unfolding
A very serious humanitarian crisis is unfolding as a result of the ongoing war and its violence and danger for the people living in Ukraine. As of this writing (3/3/22), according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), more than one million Ukrainians have fled the country and are seeking safety in neighboring countries. They have become refugees. Refugees are people who flee war, violence, conflict or persecution (being continually treated in a cruel and harmful way) and cross an international border to find safety in another country. The UNHCR has declared Ukraine to be a Level 3 emergency, which is their highest level. The United Nations warned that at the current rate, this could become “the biggest refugee crisis this century.”

Many of the refugees are women and children because most men between the ages of 18 and 60 are volunteering or are required to fight in the war and are unable to leave Ukraine. The refugees include a growing number of unaccompanied children. In addition, thousands of people of color living in Ukraine are also desperately trying to flee. Many have reported additional red tape, racial discrimination and abuse at the border, saying they are being treated this way due to bias. Transgender people’s fear of anti-trans violence and complications with crossing the border is preventing some people who want to leave from doing so.

**Where are the refugees going?**

Approximately half of the Ukrainian refugees have gone to Poland. The rest have traveled to Hungary, Moldova, Slovakia, Romania, Russia and other European countries. The refugees are traveling by train, car and even by foot, walking many miles and waiting in long lines at the borders. They are carrying whatever they can fit in their suitcases and have time to pack as they need to leave quickly. In addition, the United Nations estimates indicate that there are at least 160,000 people in Ukraine who have fled the war and are displaced within their own country. The U.N. is trying to help them but unfortunately the war makes it difficult and unsafe for aid workers.
There are approximately 10,000 Holocaust survivors currently living in Ukraine. Many receive home care, are bed-bound and cannot leave. A spokesman for the Claims Conference (an organization that connects Jewish victims of the Holocaust with compensation and restitution), said: "I spoke to someone who said I hid in the basement in 1941, and here I am, back in the very same basement. They never thought they'd have to re-live this trauma."

**How are other countries helping?**

The European Union (EU), which is a union of twenty-seven member states, anticipates that up to four million people may try to leave Ukraine. An EU Commission proposed temporary residency rights for refugees, which would grant automatic temporary protection for Ukrainian refugees for up to three years, including a resident permit and access to employment and needed social services.

The U.S. Government announced that it will provide $54 million in humanitarian assistance to those impacted by Russia's invasion and the war. There are more than one million people of Ukrainian ancestry currently living in the United States. Although at this point most refugees are fleeing to neighboring countries, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said that the U.S. was prepared to accept refugees from Ukraine.

**Age**

10 and up

**Questions to Start the Conversation**

- What have you been learning and hearing about what’s happening in Ukraine? What did you already know about the refugee situation?
- How would you describe what it means to be a refugee?
- What are your thoughts and feelings about the refugee crisis in Ukraine?
Questions to Dig Deeper

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- What do you think the bordering European countries should do to help the refugees leaving Ukraine? What do you think the U.S. should do to help?
- What can we do to help our friends, peers, and families learn about what’s happening in Ukraine, and particularly the refugee situation?
- What do you know about other refugee situations around the world and how can other countries help?

Ideas for Taking Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?

- Educate yourself and others about what’s happening in Ukraine by sharing information with friends, family and peers — on social media or by helping to organize an educational event in your school or community.
- Donate money or organize a fundraiser to support organizations that are helping refugees in Ukraine such as: HIAS, CARE, UJA Federation/New York, or USA for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).
- Write to President Biden or your members of Congress to encourage them to support humanitarian aid.
- Here are additional ways to help.

Additional Resources
- **We Were Strangers Too: Learning about Refugees through Art** (ADL Lesson Plan)
- **Refugees, Reactions and World Response** (ADL Table Talk)
- **10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism**
- **Ukrainian Crisis** (ADL)
- **Ukraine Emergency** (UNHCR)