



## Nuclear Weapons and Ukraine

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has raised questions on issues surrounding nuclear weapons. Ukraine was formerly a nuclear power, and some think the conflict could still escalate into a worldwide nuclear war. Even without the use of such weapons, concern has been caused by the invasion of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor Exclusion Zone, along with other nuclear plants still operating in a war zone.

We aim to answer questions asked by young people, providing references to assist teachers, and stimulate discussion on the issues.

### Q: **Could the UK and Scotland be sucked into a nuclear war?**

A:

Since the 1960s the USA and Russia, formerly the 'Soviet Union' have had enough nuclear weapons to destroy the whole world many times over. For 60 years the truthful answer to the above question is 'maybe'. What has kept us safe for the last 60 years is a **contested question**. Some say **that countries continuously communicating through the United Nations** has been the key to avoiding a nuclear war.

Others say **the threat of mutual destruction** by countries in a nuclear war is enough to stop a country using them.

The UK's 'Trident' nuclear weapons are carried on submarines based at Faslane, 25 miles from Glasgow. In the past it has been revealed that their primary target was Moscow, and Faslane was a probable target for nuclear attack by Soviet Russia.

### References:

- [1] 'Russia's Lavrov: Do not underestimate threat of nuclear war', Reuters (2022) <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-says-western-weapons-ukraine-legitimate-targets-russian-military-2022-04-25/>
- [2] 'CIA director: US can't 'take lightly' possibility of Russia using nuclear weapons', TheHill.com (2022) <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/3267819-cia-director-us-cant-take-lightly-possibility-of-russia-using-nuclear-weapons/>
- [3] 'The nuclear mistakes that nearly caused World War Three', BBC (2020) <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200807-the-nuclear-mistakes-that-could-have-ended-civilisation>
- [4] 'Why Are We Still Building Nuclear Weapons? Follow the Money', Forbes (2021) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamhartung/2021/08/10/why-are-we-still-building-nuclear-weapons---follow-the-money/>
- [5] UK Ministry of Defence 'Nuclear Deterrence Factsheet', the UK government position <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-nuclear-deterrence-factsheet>
- [6] 'The British Bomb and NATO', SIPRI (2015) [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/misc/NATO-Trident-Report-15\\_11.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/misc/NATO-Trident-Report-15_11.pdf)

### Q: **Would Russia have invaded if Ukraine still had nuclear weapons?**

A:

That question only makes sense if Ukraine could have held on to the nuclear weapons the former Soviet Union had based there in the first place.

The State of Ukraine was set up in 1991 when it and others were allowed to break away from the Soviet Union. Had the new Ukrainian state tried to keep nuclear weapons based there, the Russian Federation (successor state to the Soviet Union), would have invaded Ukraine in 1991 to remove them.

A Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 1991 would have been very different from the invasion of 2022. Bear in mind that most of the troops in the nuclear bases were Russian troops loyal to the new Russian Federation (as were large numbers of the sailors in the ships of the new Ukrainian Navy). All of the countries of the United Nations (notably the other four permanent members of the Security Council) had agreed to the removal and disposal of the Soviet nuclear weapons. The new Ukraine in 1991 would have had no allies to try and hold on to the Soviet nuclear weapons based in their territory.

### References:

*There are plenty of analysts with well-considered opinions. The following link makes clear several practical difficulties, as well as the security threat owning these weapons creates:*

[1] 'Despite the Threat it Faces, Ukraine Was Right to Give Up its Nuclear Weapons' GMFUS.org (2022) <https://www.gmfus.org/news/despite-threat-it-faces-ukraine-was-right-give-its-nuclear-weapons>

*The next link examines the decision to give up nuclear weapons in Ukraine. At present there are no reliable sources that state Ukraine should have kept nuclear weapons:*

[2] 'Ukraine's nuclear lesson: Don't trust Russia's security 'guarantees'' Politico (2022) <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraines-nuclear-lesson-with-russia-written-guarantees-can-be-worth-little/>

*Below is a link with a full timeline of the events leading up to the Russian invasion, from the 1990 Ukrainian declaration of sovereignty, which states it would not "accept, produce, or acquire nuclear weapons".*

[3] 'Ukraine, Nuclear Weapons, and Security Assurances at a Glance' Arms Control Association (2022) <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Ukraine-Nuclear-Weapons>

### Q: **What is likely to happen next?**

A:

The current war in Ukraine is likely to continue with more death and destruction until both sides negotiate a settlement that neither will be completely happy with - in other words a compromise.

### References:

• Harvard Law school is one of the world's most respected education institutions. They have a program on negotiation and resources on conflict resolution:

<https://www.pon.harvard.edu/category/daily/conflict-resolution/>

- Edinburgh's Peace and Justice Centre has produced material for Primary Schools addressing conflict resolution <https://peaceandjustice.org.uk/new-peacebuilders-video-resource-for-primary-schools/>

### **Q: Could we survive a nuclear war?**

A:

This question is addressed in 'Nuclear Explosions' a resource we have made available at [peaceeducationscotland.org](https://peaceeducationscotland.org); in addition a very good animated video is available from: 'Kurzgesagt – In a Nutshell' here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iPH-br\\_eJQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iPH-br_eJQ)

### **Q: What is the difference between tactical and strategic nuclear weapons? Can 'low-yield' nuclear weapons actually be used in the battlefield?**

A:

These questions are addressed in an article by US Military magazine 'Task & Purpose' on the dangers of nuclear escalation:

'Why there's no such thing as 'tactical' nuclear weapons' Task & Purpose (2020)  
<https://taskandpurpose.com/analysis/no-tactical-nuclear-weapons/>

### **Q: Is it moral to use a nuclear weapon to 'end' a war?**

A:

This question is addressed in Peace Education Scotland's resource on 'Morality', available here: <https://www.peaceeducationscotland.org/docs/morality.pdf>

## **Other resources from Peace Education Scotland**

The following are links to relevant PDFs, Powerpoints and short videos we have produced:

All resources <https://www.peaceeducationscotland.org/resources/>

'Environmental Costs of Nuclear Weapons'

<https://www.peaceeducationscotland.org/docs/nuclear-environment-booklet.pdf>

'Nuclear Winter' (mentions consequences of a 'small scale' nuclear war)

<https://www.peaceeducationscotland.org/docs/environment-nuclear-winter.pdf>

'Survivor's Stories' [PDF](#) and Powerpoint [peaceeducationscotland.org/docs/survivors-stories-presentation.pptx](https://www.peaceeducationscotland.org/docs/survivors-stories-presentation.pptx)

## **Resources from the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists**

The Bulletin covers scientific research, foreign policy, and public engagement through their journal and the 'Doomsday Clock'.

Ukraine coverage (2022) <https://thebulletin.org/tag/ukraine/>

'Ukraine building a nuclear bomb? Dangerous nonsense' [thebulletin.org/2022/03/ukraine-building-a-nuclear-bomb-dangerous-nonsense/](https://thebulletin.org/2022/03/ukraine-building-a-nuclear-bomb-dangerous-nonsense/)

'Four unanswered questions about the intersection of war and nuclear power'

<https://thebulletin.org/2022/04/four-unanswered-questions-about-the-intersection-of-war-and-nuclear-power/>