

Russian, Ukrainian students adapt to life amid war

Clara Martinez /
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Gabrielle Yurin ('23), who is half Russian and half American, said this conflict was the last thing she expected would occur while visiting family in Moscow over February break.

"The threat is one thing, but actual action is another thing," she said. "Once it had happened, everyone was in horror and in shock."

Russian President Vladimir Putin sent troops on assignment to invade Ukraine Feb 24., beginning a conflict that has amassed over 977 civilian casualties, per the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

According to the BBC, Putin's goal for what he referred to as a "special military operation" was to regain power over Ukraine and quell the nation's attempt to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Alexis Gerwe ('23), who is also half Russian and half American, lived in Moscow until she was five years old. Gerwe said she did not anticipate that Russia would take action, even

thinking about that was heart-breaking, because there are so many modern Russian people and young and creative people who are trying to get out there and have lives outside of Russia, and that's all completely gone now."

Ari Dacy ('25) is half Ukrainian, and has family members who currently live in Lviv, Ukraine. According to the New York Times, because Lviv has been spared from direct attacks, thousands of refugees have entered the city since the beginning of the invasion.

Dacy said while constantly checking in with his relatives to ensure their safety, he is under a lot of stress.

"All we can do is just, you know, keep in touch and send them whatever they need," he said. "But, it's not like I can go there and do anything about it, so it's kind of like I'm isolated away from them."

The invasion, however, also altered life for citizens in Russia, which Gerwe said came as a surprise. Her friends in Russia informed her of changes being made to their lives immediately after the invasion took place.

"I didn't process that anything was happening to the people I know and to the life



Photo illustration by Clara Martinez

“It’s like the iron curtain has been pulled closed again, and it’s closed from all other countries.”

- Gabrielle Yurin ('23)



though she was aware of the rising tensions between both nations.

"We knew it was not unprompted just by the nature of NATO and Moscow's history and Russia's history, but we thought that it would never happen because it just always seemed so outlandish," she said.

Yurin said in order to return to the U.K. from Russia, she missed the first day of school after February break to fly through Dubai. She said many countries closed their borders to Russia within hours of the conflict's offset. But, she said missing school had little significance compared to the global impact of Putin's actions against Ukraine.

"It's like the iron curtain has been pulled closed again, and it's closed from all other countries," she said. "Just

I know back in Moscow," she said.

Because Ukraine has been attempting to join NATO since 2008 to avoid conflict with Russia per the Washington Post, Dacy said "it was still shocking to see it happen and actually come true."

Similarly, Yurin said the sudden invasion has served as a reminder for individuals in Russia of the urgency to dismantle the authoritarian government of the Russian Federation.

"A lot of Russians have been living in a state of just being complacent and just not doing much about what's going on in their country," she said. "This is a wake up call for so many young people too, that this cannot go on for much longer."

In addition, Dacy said a main contributing factor to his concerns surrounding the violence that has already occurred is the

uncertainty moving forward.

"That's my family in Ukraine, and I feel like it's going to get worse," he said. "I don't know when the world is going to step in."

Although Dacy said he does not speak on the topic much because of the small Ukrainian population at the school, he said it is easier to cope with the issue and discuss with friends since people all seem to be on the same side.

"They understand, I mean, they're anti-war as well," he said. "Nobody really wants this to happen."

Other young individuals have always opposed Russia's government system, which Gerwe said is the case for her family despite celebrating other aspects of her identity.

"I was always proud of my Russian cultural heritage, but there was always a distinction that I don't agree with what's

age do not go hand-in-hand, particularly concerning Putin's regime.

"Completely rejecting the culture isn't fair, I grew up around it, it's part of me," she said. "Supporting a government doing something that the Russian government is doing right now is completely separate from the culture of Russia."

After returning to London, Yurin said she was consumed with trying to keep up with the war, and struggled to return to the same daily routines.

"It was really weird to figure out how to balance my life with everything that's going on because all of a sudden, like, I'm doing homework and I'm realizing what's the purpose of all of this, like a couple countries over people are getting killed," she said. "All of a sudden your ordinary life just begins to lose any value when something like

was difficult.

"It was really hard coming back because it was the only thing I could think about and still the only thing I really think about," she said. "When this all happened, I had it in me to keep up with all of the news and keep up with everything that's going on, and I mean, that's impossible."

“I didn’t process that anything was happening to the people I know.”

- Alexis Gerwe ('23)



Similarly, Dacy said he struggled to balance keeping up to date with the news without letting it completely take over his life.

"I tried to occupy myself, I would read about the news, but I would just spend a lot of time reading it," he said. "For myself, that wasn't healthy."

Dacy said creating separation between his life at school and his family life helps him to focus on his other priorities.

"When it first came out in the news, at least when I saw it, it kind of consumed me a little bit," he said. "I need to make sure that that doesn't happen when I'm, you know, trying to focus on my schoolwork or just maintain a social life."

Despite being connected to countries on opposite sides of the war, Yurin and Dacy both said they feel closer to their identity as Russian and Ukrainian, respectively. Dacy said feeling so passionately about the ongoing war has strengthened his relationship to the country as he has focused more on how he can help other Ukrainians.

"It brought me a little closer to Ukraine and like my identity as Ukrainian just because it's a part of me that I feel like I didn't really think about too much before this happened," he said.

For Yurin, she said she feels closer to the people of Russia that are fighting against the dictatorship and have been brought together by the common outrage toward the war.

"I'm really proud of my culture, but I love the people and the people that are fighting for justice," she said. "People need to come together no matter where they are from and just realize that it doesn't matter if you're Ukrainian, Russian. We are people and we're fighting for the rights of people."

“It’s a part of me that I feel like I didn’t really think about too much before this happened.”

- Ari Dacy ('25)



going on, like in the political sphere of the country," she said.

Moreover, Gerwe said political views and cultural herit-

this is going on."

Yurin said keeping up with the war as it unfolds has added a large amount of stress to her life and just returning to school