

2 Full Years of War in Ukraine: What Now?

Saturday, Feb. 24, marked two years since Russia's illegal large-scale invasion of Ukraine. Though numbers are hard to come by, estimates are that more than a half-million people (both sides combined) have lost their lives in the largest European conflict since the end of World War II nearly 80 years ago. Included in that number are at least 20,000 Ukrainian civilians who have perished as a result of an indiscriminate Russian bombing campaign that has left no corners of Ukraine unscathed—even hundreds of miles from the fighting.

The 800-mile front line in the south and east has barely shifted in the past year, particularly since late 2022 when Ukraine recaptured large swaths of previously held Russian territory in the oblasts of Kharkiv and Kherson. Recently the Russians won a strategic victory in the eastern town of Avdiivka, but at high cost—it's estimated that more than 17,000 Russian soldiers died in the bloody four-month assault to capture a city reduced completely to rubble. It's a victory Putin can point to as he runs virtually uncontested for his fifth term as president in next month's elections.

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With the mysterious death of Russian pro-democracy leader Alexei Navalny in an Arctic prison on Feb. 16, a looming vote in Congress regarding a critically needed military aid package for Ukraine and recent Russian gains on the battlefield, the tide of the war hangs in the balance.

Navalny, Russia's most outspoken and well-known Putin critic,

was poisoned with high-grade plutonium in late 2020, yet made a miraculous recovery in a German hospital. Soon after, he shocked the world by announcing his return to Russia. Upon setting foot on Russian soil, he was immediately thrown into jail on trumped-up charges. It was during this time in 2021 that the former atheist accepted Christ and was convicted by God to continue to fight for democratic freedoms. Ever a thorn in Putin's side, in a subsequent court hearing Navalny said, "I don't want to give up either my country or my beliefs. I cannot betray either the first or the second. If your beliefs are worth something, you must be willing to stand up for them. And if necessary, make some sacrifices."

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Like the witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Christian who stood up to Hitler and paid the ultimate price, Navalny's life and death are a testament to the human spirit and the necessity to practice one's faith in Christ in both deeds and words.

As the Russo-Ukraine War enters its third bloody year, let us continue to pray for peace in Eastern Europe.{eoa}

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