

Reflections on World Politics #7

John A. Bernbaum

April 9, 2022

Rearguard Action

The Other Struggle: Television news and social media outlets are working hard to keep us updated on the battle between the Russian invaders and Ukrainian defenders. The trajectory of this conflict has surprised the world; most analysts expected a quick Russian takeover, and not the remarkable resistance of the outnumbered Ukrainian forces. Many of the male students and staff at the schools we support are on the front lines, having left their wives and children, and are now courageously facing the aggressors with little opportunity to connect with their families.

But the rearguard action that is going on is also amazing. While mothers were evacuated with their children as soon as the war began, others at our partner educational institutions made the decision to stay behind and serve the needy. In many cities that are under attack, the elderly search desperately for basements where they can hide during bombing attacks. The students and staff who stayed behind assist the military and civilians with medical care, food, and counseling; they search out the elderly who are frightened and help them find safety. When possible, these students secure transportation for them to get them across the borders into neighboring NATO countries.

The number of refugees, currently approaching 4 million, continues to increase. Mothers and their children often suffer the most. As the war continues, these women and children are crossing borders without money or visas, and they are susceptible to sexual violence and exploitation. With the aid of organizations like Mission Eurasia and World Relief, churches in neighboring countries are opening their doors to these frightened families and protecting them from harm.

One of our partner campuses in Kiev has been shelled by Russian artillery on several occasions, but the president has fearlessly stated that “these scars on our campus will make us much stronger to continue serving the church and transforming society.” Meanwhile, the remaining staff and female students are making and delivering food and medicine, while other students and staff are leading worship services with soldiers on the front line and organizing evacuations for the most vulnerable.

Another partner campus closer to the northern border of Ukraine has converted their school facilities into a full-time refugee center. They have provided housing for nearly 5,000 people, of which 3,500 have been relocated to neighboring countries. Their students have heard the sad stories of separation and loss of family members. They report that while some of the refugees cry while telling their stories, others are completely silent and do not want to talk about their difficult experiences. Others testify how God miraculously saved them, brought them out of

towns under siege, and how these students met them, fed them, and helped them to realize that they have a future. Chefs on campus have prepared more than 8,000 meals at this school, and 25 drivers are constantly transporting people to safety in Poland.

Evangelical student ministries have also been active, and many students have relocated to the western districts in Ukraine and are actively working with those in need. One student reported that her small church was providing temporary shelter for people from the war zones. She said, “God provided us with everything we need: food, showers, washing machines, beds and mattresses.” She said the same number of people who used to worship in this church are now living here – 70 of them. Another student reported that there were 35 people living in her house in western Ukraine and that every day she organizes games and English language classes for the children.

What is becoming so clear is that people of faith are working together, despite differences in beliefs and practices. The strength of religious freedom in Ukraine is priceless, and this is going to play an important role when Ukraine begins the rebuilding process.

Support for Ukraine: We need to support the Ukrainians and not lose interest over time if the war drags on without a settlement, which may become Putin’s Plan B since the Russian takeover of Ukraine will not happen. I have funneled my support through Mission Eurasia and World Relief, which both have “feet on the ground” in Ukraine. You can check out their websites and those of other supporting non-profits. If you have a relationship with any Ukrainian organization, school, or church, you may be able to give directly to them.

I was recently reminded of a comment from Martin Luther King, Jr., who used to say, “There is a special place in hell for the people who choose silence or neutrality in times of moral crisis.” This time in history is of great significance, not only for the Ukrainians, but for all people who value freedom, human rights, and the dignity of all people created in the image of God.

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