

Reflections on World Politics #9

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Ukraine's Orphans

As the war in Ukraine enters another dangerous phase, news reports are highlighting military tactics, economic sanctions, and political strategies for responding to Russia's vicious attacks. But there is another dimension to this conflict that demands our attention – the plight of its innocent victims.

Nicholas Wolterstorff, an important mentor in my life, wrote about the “quartet of the vulnerable” – the widows, the orphans, the aliens, and the impoverished, and how God has declared that he loves justice and wants his followers to do justice and fix injustice. These are people in the Bible who were powerless and had no legal standing in the world in which they lived. A study of Jesus' life makes it clear that he also made the vulnerable his primary focus. War, of course, brings this issue to mind, especially war in which military forces target civilians and implement policies of genocide.

Ukraine's Unique Orphan Strategy: In the early 1990s, Ukrainian Christians began an unprecedented interfaith consortium of Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant church leaders called Ukraine Without Orphans (UWO). Its goal was to find loving homes for the country's 30,000 adoptable orphans. Through the hard work of its staff and volunteers, UWO grew to involve 400 churches of all confessions in Ukraine as well as 110 public and charitable organizations that included a presidentially appointed Commission for Children's Rights. According to Richard Scheuerman, who has been substantially involved in this movement, “no nation on earth has accomplished more to address orphanhood in the last decade than Ukraine.” By 2021, the number of children eligible for adoption had fallen to 4,920 -- a dramatic 83% reduction of adoptable orphans. The goal of UWO leaders was not to rest until all of these children were placed in loving homes. What began in Ukraine soon spread into a global movement called World Without Orphans, which has active programs in 38 countries with an additional 47 nations as emerging partners.

The Terrible Irony of This War: The Russian attacks on Ukraine have targeted civilians, as well as Ukrainian military forces, and they have destroyed or damaged many orphanages and schools for children with special needs. Ukraine, which began a global movement to adopt orphans, is now faced with its own major crisis, as its orphans had to be evacuated from war zones and relocated in neighboring countries. It is hard to imagine what it must be like for these orphans, who experienced getting caught in a city under attack, then were moved across the country to a new part of Ukraine, and then transported into another country. What a frightening world for these children who have already been abandoned, and now face another unknown future. They are a part of the “quartet of the vulnerable,” and along with other members of this group – the widows, the poor and the foreigners living in Ukraine – they need special care.

There Is Good News: While the pain and suffering is evident in the lives of many Ukrainians, people of faith from a wide variety of organizations have been actively engaged in helping these orphans and people with special needs. Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and Jewish volunteers are focusing on the needs of these children, and this international response has been a remarkable example of how faith is more than just words -- faith is tied to deeds. Faith is action.

In the schools and ministries that we support and partner with, the staff, faculty and female students are helping these orphans, and many others; they see this as their calling. While the male students are engaged in the military defense of their country, these young women are doing remarkable work for which they were not specifically trained.

In addition to assisting in evacuations from war zones, as well as providing shelter and warm clothing to people who fled without time to pack their belongings, these student volunteers are also preparing and distributing food packets that include water, canned meat, vegetables, oats, oil, flour, and macaroni – packets designed to feed a person for two weeks. One brave pastor from Mariupol, which has been under relentless Russian artillery and missile attacks, has evacuated 500 vulnerable children and families and has 300 others sheltered in the basement of his church.

There are a number of organizations meeting the needs of “the quartet of the vulnerable” in Ukraine, all of them worthy of your prayers and support. Here are two organizations that I can personally recommend, based on my experience with them:

- A Family for Every Orphan, P.O. Box 34628 #37939, Seattle, WA 98124-1628 – “Ukraine Relief” (info@afamilyforeveryorphan.org).
- Ukraine Without Orphans, 702 Knoll Drive, Mount Joy, PA 17551 - “Ukraine Relief” (<https://worldwithoutorphans.org/ukraine-relief>).

Final Words by Art Smith

Woke up warm and safe in my bed.
While someone else heard bombs over their head.
I jumped into a nice hot shower,
While someone else has lost all power.
I hugged my family, we were all together,
While others said goodbye, possibly forever.
While I fear the money that I will spend,
Others worry of losing the country they defend.
In the time it took for me to write this post,
Many have lost the things they love most.
So, when I start to bitch and want to complain,
I will stop myself and pray for Ukraine.

These “Reflections” are circulated approximately once a week. If you want to have your name added to our mailing list, let me know (johnbernbaum@gmail.com); you can unsubscribe at any time. All of these “Reflections” can be found on Dr. Bernbaum’s website (www.johnbernbaum.org), along with many other resources.