

Reflections on World Politics: Ukraine - #11

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A New Phase of War

As the action in phase two of the Russian-Ukrainian war shifts to the eastern and southern sections of Ukraine, it is of critical importance that the United States and its allies continue to support Ukraine in this struggle. A number of leading analysts think that the Ukrainians may be able to defeat the demoralized Russians and thereby secure their country's borders, if military supplies continue from the West. The battlefronts have changed and this introduces several important geographical factors related to our understanding of this conflict. While reviewing a map of Ukraine, it is helpful to know that the country is slightly smaller than the state of Texas – it is the second largest country in Europe, after its northern neighbor Russia. The far eastern borders of Ukraine encompass an area known as the Donbas, which is named after the Donets River Basin.

What Is the Donbas? This region became an industrial center in Russia in the mid-to-late 19th century, when vast iron ore and coal resources were discovered there. Many Russians, Serbs, and Greeks migrated to this area, with Russians making up most of the industrial workforce and urban population, and Ukrainians dominating the rural areas. Donbas was devastated by the famines of 1921-22 and 1932-33, in which more than 8 million people died. These tragedies were further compounded by the battles between the invading Nazi forces and the Red Army, which resulted in the loss of another 7-8 million lives. This painful story is recounted in Timothy Snyder's book, Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin.

After the Second World War, the Soviets began the reconstruction of the Donbas region. Large numbers of Russians repopulated its industrial cities and turned the area into a massive industrial complex; steel became Ukraine's primary industrial export. By 1989, 45% of the population of Donbas identified their ethnicity as Russian, in sharp contrast to the rest of Ukraine.

After Independence: Scholars believe that the principal catalyst for the collapse of the Soviet Union took place in 1991, when the presidents of Russia (Boris Yeltsin) and Ukraine (Leonid Kravchuk) decided they each wanted independence for their republics. Other Soviet republics had declared independence from Moscow beginning in March 1990 and the growing nationalist movements, which started in the Baltic states (Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia), quickly converted the USSR into the UFR (Union of Fewer and Fewer Republics). Without Russia and Ukraine as a united core, there was little support for any Moscow-led commonwealth.

In Ukraine, six candidates competed in the presidential election of September 1991; all six of them advocated independence from Russia. Three months later, Ukrainians shared their convictions in a poll on December 1, 1991, with a voter turnout of 84% and the astounding support of 90% of those voters for independence from Russia. Even the two largest minorities – Russians (11 million) and Jews (500,000) – supported the Ukrainian cause.

Unfortunately, the struggles of Ukraine to develop its independence between 1991 and 2013 was impeded by the legacy of Soviet rule and the corruption that pervaded every aspect of its national life. Like many of the other post-Soviet countries, Ukraine went through a major crisis caused by a

dramatic economic decline and hostile relations between the presidency and the parliament. The “Orange Revolution” in 2004 resulted in overturning the false presidential election results that supported the pro-Russian candidate, but little was done by the new president to deal with massive corruption in which oligarchs secured the sale of government assets at a fraction of their real cost.

When Putin returned to the presidency of Russia in 2012, his desire to re-establish Russian control of the territory previously under Soviet rule was his foreign policy priority. His obsession was to prevent Ukraine from becoming a viable democracy on Russia’s southern border and stopping its “Orange Revolution” from spreading ideas about a possible coup against him.

As its coal-mining industry was dying, the Donbas became Ukraine’s “rust belt.” Angry pro-Russians living in Donbas turned to Moscow for support and made their attachment to Soviet symbols and ideology clear; they also believed that their Russian language was under threat from the government in Kiev, and advocated for a Soviet-era state-run economy, rather than a market economy. Unlike the vast majority of Ukrainians, who were oriented toward becoming a part of Europe, the pro-Russian leaders in Donbas wanted to join the “Russian World,” with its defense of Orthodox values and rejection of the “corrupt values” of the West.

Russia’s Invasion in 2022: The “Revolution of Dignity” in 2013 -- during which hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians gathered in downtown Kiev to demand reform, closer relations with the European Union, and an end to government corruption -- brought a unity to the country that mobilized people of all political convictions. This revolution was exactly what Putin feared, and he began using his security forces to infiltrate the Donbas and Crimea to support efforts to block their dependence on Kiev. Pro-Russian forces, with direct ties to the Kremlin, created two separatist republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. This began a war in 2014 that has lasted for eight years at the cost of 14,000 lives – so for Ukrainians, the current conflict with Russia is seen as an extension of Putin’s continuing aggression.

Donbas is important to Putin and his cronies, who want to partition Ukraine by turning the Donbas and sections of southern Ukraine into “New Russia.” Because of its substantial Russian population, as well as its pro-Russian sympathizers, Donbas is the weak link that Russia hopes to exploit in its effort to undermine Ukraine and its impressive democratic leadership.

Military support from the United States, Canada and other allies, as well as training in how to handle Western weapons systems, has strengthened the Ukrainian armed forces. The Russians were clearly unprepared for the remarkable resistance from Ukrainian soldiers and civilians, but this second phase of the war may be even more challenging. The hard reality that faces Ukraine, even if their forces stop the Russian attacks through Donbas, will be to build reconciliation with those from Donbas who supported this attack on their country.

For further study of Ukraine’s fascinating history, see Serhii Plokhy (Professor of Ukrainian History at Harvard University), *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (revised edition, 2021).

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