

Reflections on World Politics: Russia - #21

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July 30, 2022

Ukrainian Voices

Very few of us have ever lived in an active war zone. We have no idea what it is like to huddle in a basement with family members and listen to the explosion of artillery shells and missiles targeted at residential facilities. We have never felt the buildings we are in shake from enemy attacks, nor have we crept out of basement hideouts after an attack not knowing what we will see when we emerge.

It is important for us to understand the reality that Ukrainians are facing every day. Our news reports rarely deal with the stories of individuals and their families trying to cope when their lives are threatened by the barbaric attacks of the Russian forces. The following quotes from Ukrainians will help us to understand their struggle, as well as their remarkable sense of hope for the future. These quotes are from Christian educators working in institutions our private foundation supports.

Ivan, a seminary president: “All around me there are dead and missing persons. I want to say this as clearly as possible: This is a full-scale, unprovoked war by the Russian Federation against the Ukrainian people. The enemy is destroying homes, hospitals, schools, theaters, even seminaries and churches. Obviously, his goal is the complete destruction of Ukraine. . . Along with great suffering, I see great unity, strength of spirit, cooperation, and love in Ukrainians. I will never forget . . . the facial expressions of people coming out of bomb shelters and trying to understand who we are [as we greet them]. That fear on their faces in the first seconds and then the joy when it becomes clear that we are bringing them food, water, and medicine. . . The war really brought all Ukrainians close, like brothers and sisters. . . If the church really follows Christ, she follows him to the greatest need and remains there, embodying faith, hope, and love.”

Maryna, a vice president and psychologist: “Today every Ukrainian woman is under acute stress. Emotions can trigger a wide variety of physical symptoms. We may ask, ‘Where am I going?’ Or, more deeply, ‘Who am I inside?’ Life makes no sense; the future is gone. It is impossible to continue working on projects begun before the war. . . Physical sensations of falling apart. Insomnia or, inversely, persistent sleepiness. Continuous nightmares. One’s mind is unable to shake off horrible images. . . Every one of us is kneeling prayerfully. As Abraham Lincoln said, ‘For us to get this country on its feet, we must first get on our knees.’ . . I want to encourage Ukrainian women to search for God’s face. He is searching for them.”

Valentin, a seminary president: “The age-old conflict between good and evil becomes intense during war. War makes the presence of goodness and the showing of mercy incredibly important. Now the people of Ukraine are united as never before; people support each other as best they can. And under these circumstances, leadership becomes important – not political leadership but leadership in small groups. . . [Here is an example] of how the church is showing leadership in this war: . . . we donated potatoes to a city in southern Ukraine. When I spoke to the pastor of the church, he burst into tears because there had been no food in their city for many days.”

Tanya, a seminary staff member: “I speak from the perspective of an ordinary woman. I am the mother of two daughters. . . When the war began, I felt as though the infrastructure of my life had been

ruined: You are uprooted; you start to live in a place where you don't belong. No matter how many good and kind people you meet on your way or how comfortable your conditions are at the moment, a feeling of detachment seems to prevail. It gets its hold on you and never leaves you. Another feeling that I and many other Ukrainian women possess now is uncertainty about the future. It is next to impossible to make long-term or even middle-term plans. . . Separated families are another negative reality that confronts millions of people because husbands and adult sons have to stay in the country while their wives and children are in safer places. And nobody knows how long these families will be separated. . . Many people around the world are praying for Ukraine, but a substantial part of my prayer now is about Russia. I pray for Russia to change. I don't ask God to make them miserable, poor, hungry, or sick, but I pray God would open their eyes, that something would change in their minds and hearts."

Oleksandr, a seminary president: "Churches, educators, and Christians of different traditions join the efforts to help those who have needs and to support the Ukrainian army that is protecting us. Wherever it is possible, local churches hold prayer meetings daily. Many Christians volunteer to drive people from war zones to safer places or to distribute food and water among those who have need. They also dig trenches and guard their neighborhoods as members of territorial defense units. Churches open their basements for those who do not have places to hide or shelter people for a night or two on their way to the west of the country or abroad. The local church where my family and I are staying is hosting over 60 people from different corners of our country. Their stories tear the heart apart."

Valeria, a professor of sociology: "Our church now looks more like a combination of hostel and warehouse (as, I believe, many other churches also look). This is my everyday routine now: We receive trucks with humanitarian aid in the church building, make individual food parcels, and have them distributed to the people hiding in the basements in Kharkiv. On the second floor of our church, refugees from war zones are staying. Often, those refugees come to our church having literally nothing but their very lives. They have lost everything. They have no spare clothes or shoes, no bags, no phones; their houses are totally demolished. So we give them food, water, a bed to sleep in. We buy them clothes and shoes and phones so that they can contact their family members. . . I need to be with the refugees. Some refugees have lost their friends or family members. They've seen death. When they come to us, they are often unable to speak. They are devastated, shocked, grieved. When you see them, you understand that you need to sit with them in silence, cry with them, hug them. . . I want to be the good Samaritan who just helped someone in need."

These "Ukrainian voices" were taken from the *Insights Journal* of ScholarLeaders International (Volume 7, Number 2). I have chosen not to add their full names or institutional affiliation. You can read their full statements, and others as well, in the *Journal* (www.insightsjournal.org). Please share these "voices" with others, so they can learn about the challenges and the courage of the Ukrainian people.

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.