

Reflections on World Politics: Ukraine & Russia - #27

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It's Complicated. Let's Talk.

The two most frequent questions readers and seminar participants ask me are: "How will this war end?" and "What will happen to Ukraine (Zelensky) and Russia (Putin) when the fighting stops?" I have no ready answers to these questions. I have failed numerous times when making predictions about developments in this part of the world – an outcome I should have seen coming, because when I began working in the Soviet Union in 1990, I was warned: "In Russia, nothing is as it seems."

As a result, I thought it would be a good time to pause my reflections on developments related to the Russian-Ukrainian war and share some personal thoughts on how I wrestle with these complex issues and particularly how my faith factors into my analysis.

During my graduate school days studying European and Russian history, with a focus on the two World Wars and the Cold War, and then my four years at the Department of State tracking U.S.-Soviet relations, the complexity of issues I studied were fascinating and rich with many cross-cultural dynamics. I enjoyed digging into these topics, trying to understand the reigning ideologies of the two Superpowers and how these perspectives shaped international diplomacy. What made this research attractive to me was all the complications resulting from different national histories, the variety of cultural contexts, the range of traditional beliefs, and the intensity of core values relating to family and community. There were no simple answers in the face of so many differences. I enjoyed studying the variety of peoples who populated the US-Soviet world and tried hard not to generalize about how Russians and Americans viewed each other and what assumptions they made about "the other."

As a Christian scholar, I studied Biblical history and looked for norms or standards that would help me gain insights into the world in which I lived. Working in the American Studies Programs with my colleagues Jerry Herbert, Richard Gathro and Susan Baldauf, we challenged each other to integrate our faith with the world of public policy. Over time, we developed a framework built on Biblical *shalom* (creating and restoring human flourishing) and Biblical justice (right relationships between people as God intended). As we studied different issues, both domestic and international, our goal as teachers was to see how these values would give shape to how we analyzed the crises in our society and what solutions we could imagine for resolving the conflicts.

When we explored different facets of our society and saw great injustices and growing inequality between the rich and the poor, we would encourage our students to say, "It doesn't have to be like this." Unlike most people in the nation's capital, where the primary default position on any significant issue was cynicism, we worked hard to challenge our students to

bring a fresh perspective that focused on human dignity and respect for all people made in the image of God.

To go back to the most popular questions I get asked, the reason I have little to say on how the war will end is that there is no succession strategy in place in Putin's Russia and, more so than any other autocracy, Putin has created a regime in which he has no accountability. He will pay the price for this. Autocrats like Putin rarely die of natural causes and when he dies, chaos and instability may be the result. There is less risk with Zelensky and his leadership team, as he has created a strong cadre committed to the Ukraine's future as a democracy.

Some scholars are convinced that if Russia loses the war, the country may be broken up into numerous pieces – no longer an empire, but a series of smaller ethnic units. Others think Russia will survive as one piece, but advocates of this position are becoming a much smaller group since the war has shifted in Ukraine's favor. Russia as a subservient ally to China is another option. Again, no one can speak definitively on this topic, which is why I leave that subject alone.

For an example of how I think Western advisers misdiagnosed the changes in Russia in 1989 – 1991 because they failed to understand the ethical and moral dimensions of the revolutionary movement that Gorbachev seized upon, you can read Chapter 7 ("Reading Russia Right") in my book, *Opening the Red Door* (InterVarsity Academic Press). Secular-minded analysts focused on changes in Russia's economic and political infrastructure but were deaf to the cries of the Russian people about the corrosive deterioration in the moral and ethical values of Soviet society. Gorbachev explained "we need spiritual values, we need a revolution of the mind. This is the only way toward a new culture and new politics that can meet the challenge of our time ... we also say that moral values that religion generated and embodied for centuries can help us in the work of renewal in our country." Why were these views dismissed? How did Western foreign policy elites fail to see how cultural institutions, including churches, could have played such an important role in the rebuilding process in Russia?

Here's where a faith perspective would have helped shape policies about rebuilding Russian society in light of the pleas of its people. Ukraine is much more open to understanding the value of moral and spiritual insights it needs in the rebuilding process after this war. That's why our foundation is supporting Christian educational institutions in Ukraine. The doors in Russia are closed, but they are wide open in Ukraine.

Yes, I know it's complicated – but let's keep talking and learning from each other.

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