The Historian as Public Analyst: The Case of Ukraine

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DAVID R. MARPLES, APR 3 2016

This is an excerpt from the preface of *Ukraine's Euromaidan: Broadcasting through Information Wars with Hromadske Radio* by Marta Dyczok

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The current crisis in Ukraine has lasted over two years. Prior to that there were other outbreaks of mass protest against the ruling government, most notably in 1990, during the late Soviet period, and in late 2004 with the so-called Orange Revolution. In such circumstances it becomes difficult for scholars to determine their role, particularly if they are area experts. In the case of the Euromaidan, their situation is especially difficult because of the polarization of media opinion and the inflammatory nature of the events.

I have known Marta Dyczok for many years. In 2010, when I was a Visiting Scholar at the University of Toronto, we would have regular discussions at the Duke of York pub. From these emerged a major symposium we held, together with Rory Finnin, at the University of Cambridge on the 20th anniversary of Ukrainian independence.

Marta's career has combined media work with academic scholarship. More than any other person I can think of, she combines the two fields with relative ease. Her first book, published with Macmillan in 2000, looked at Ukrainian refugees during the Second World War. Almost simultaneously she published a concise study of contemporary Ukraine. But she has always continued to publish media articles and focus her work on the Ukrainian media. Moreover, she has the capacity and background to move within activist circles in the so-called Ukrainian Diaspora in Canada.

The events of the Euromaidan galvanized Ukrainians like no other event. Notable from the outset was a link between the Diaspora and the protesters in Kyiv and other cities, and perhaps especially in Western Ukraine, where the pro-European movement had advanced much further than in other regions. After Ukrainian independence, there was a veritable merging of many in the Diaspora with Ukrainian relatives and friends. In virtually every Canadian city there were people starting businesses in Ukraine, moving there permanently or for long periods, as well as academic conferences and sponsored reform programs.

The importance of this development can hardly be exaggerated. For years the Diaspora prided itself on keeping the Ukrainian language and culture alive during the Soviet period. It also preserved its version of the memory of many historical events headed by the famine of 1932-33. Suddenly the "old enemy" no longer existed. Yet, in some ways the change was a mirage and the lengthy years of the presidency of Leonid Kuchma brought disillusionment appearing to move the country further away from Western-style democracy by its second term. What had really changed?

The Orange Revolution also brought disappointment in that the government of Viktor Yushchenko never really governed. It became mired in cabinet disputes and the president failed to address pressing problems. Ultimately he appointed as Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych – the very figure against whom the uprising had been launched after fabrication of election results. Perhaps that is why the Euromaidan seemed so critical to the Diaspora. To some it

represented a final break with the Soviet traditions after past failures and a move away from a newly revisionist Russia – which earlier had recognized independent Ukraine and the inviolability of its borders. Certainly in November 2013 that seemed to be the choice: the EU or Russia.

Let me add a caveat here. Because of her Ukrainian background, Marta has gone beyond the usual limits of the scholar. Most of us are far more reserved and distant. But, as noted above, there is a lengthy tradition of those of Ukrainian background living abroad expressing their commitment to the future of their ancestral homeland. I would acknowledge also that we disagree (sometimes strongly) on a number of issues, but that is fine. Good friends can live with such differences. I do accept though that she is sincere in her views.

The reports contained in this volume provide a highly readable and fascinating perspective of the phenomenon known as the Euromaidan – something that continues to evolve with no end point in sight. It has become much more than a local event, if indeed it ever could be described as such, because of its international involvement. Russia, the European Union, the United States and Canada play important roles. The Ukrainian conflict is an international issue. Ukraine can no longer be regarded as a post-Soviet state or one identified with Russkiy Mir. Since 1991 it has always remained on the periphery, or divorced completely, from the Russian-led structures that have emerged such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. But, it may no longer be the same state as in 1991 and its final borders remain in dispute.

Scholars debate the nature of Euromaidan: is it a civil war or a war with Russia? Is it the start of a new Cold War? Should Ukraine join NATO to secure its borders? Will it bring Ukraine into Europe or end as a failed experiment with a weakened or permanently damaged state structure? Does it mark the failure of the post-Soviet order? As scholars we probably have to accept that we will not be able to analyze and comment with any certainty for another decade or two. That is why we are reliant on media analyses and reports? But who makes up the media?

Russian media have been active regarding the conflict, but the vast majority touts the line of the government which regards the Euromaidan as a coup carried out by extreme right-wing elements funded by the United States and others. Western media in Ukraine operate from a more objective stance but face a number of problems: access to leaders and activists, lack of language skills, lack of knowledge of the history of the state, and inability to fathom the plethora of parties and factions, as well as army groups, both official and volunteers.

Marta has no such dilemmas. She spends every summer in Ukraine, has lived in Kyiv for the past seven months, knows many of the main players on the Ukrainian side personally, and has appeared frequently on Ukrainian television and radio, as well as her media appearances in USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, Italy, Japan, and Hong Kong. Thus, she provides insights that are unique – not so much as an observer but as a participant. She can combine her academic expertise as an historian and political scientist, as well as her background in journalism and her lengthy association with Ukraine. And, that is why her voice should be heard.

About the author:

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