Kyiv Revisited

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 14 2017

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I first visited the Maidan over 25 years ago. At that time, members of the Green World ecological association were handing out leaflets about unfeasible industrial projects in Ukraine, several linked to the Chernobyl disaster a few years earlier. Nearby red-hatted coal miners were sitting on cobblestones, publicising the reasons for their crippling strike, which paralysed the Soviet (and especially Ukrainian) coal and steel industries. In the background was the massive monument of Lenin – the stolid Hotel Moskva on the hill in the background – like a silent and critical watchdog overlooking events. The quarter of a century that followed was not always so eventful (I returned regularly), but the mass protests of 1990, 2004, and 2013-14 overlap the period of Soviet rule and independence, as well as defining contemporary Ukraine and the extraordinary and captivating city of Kyiv. Lenin is gone and the hotel was renamed *Ukraina* after independence. But nearby Oleksandr Skoblikov's Arch of Friendship of Peoples, marking the 60th anniversary of the USSR, and Ukrainian House, built in 1982 and featuring a Lenin museum, look strangely out of place. The city is a melange of old and new, dazzling churches and monumental excess like the 200-feet Independence Monument, which always seemed out of place.

Today the Maidan is like the aftermath of a battlefield, the casualties present in spirit and their sacrifices pervading the gloom of what is now a morgue of sorts. One can barely take a step without encountering some memory of the mass protests: the commemorations of those who died in the square, hapless victims of marksmen for the most part; the photographs at what appears like an open-air museum. Everywhere there were people asking for money for the Ukrainian army, with ATO boxes swinging around their necks. Two were soldiers who were standing at the juncture on Instytutska Street where the memorials are displayed. Others were clearly not part of the regular army and stalked all visitors relentlessly. Some young soldiers walked between parents, home on leave from the front though as one source informed, there are not many recruits from Kyiv on the government side, most are from the areas close to the border or Western Ukraine.

In 1989, there were no mass billboards with the slogan 'Glory to Ukraine! Glory to our heroes!' There were no tridents, which now appear everywhere, most often on the t-shirts of passers-by. Residents of the capital are suddenly more assertive, determined to emphasise their national identity. It seems a defensive gesture and it probably is. Billboards talk about health and the rights of young people. But whatever the tragedies of the past eighteen months, Ukraine as a nation has been indisputably strengthened.

On my last night in town I talked with Ollie Carroll, whom I've known for several years. He gave me an account of life in the war zone, where he has been 'embedded' for the past weeks, on both sides of the border. Somehow, he has managed to keep a balance (and alive!), without commitment to either side, which is of course the essence of good journalism but found so rarely in these parts.

These battles have superseded Euromaidan, which occupied world attention for so long, and the violence is

remorseless. Yet the conflict zone currently is quite well defined; thus far it has not expanded much since the Minsk-2 agreement though virtually all analysts maintain that the treaty has failed or is about to fail. As one separatist fighter put it on Vice News – and I am paraphrasing – we don't care about the agreements, we just follow orders.

Ironies abound. The only other plane at Boryspil when I arrived was a Russian Aeroflot, and despite the conflict and Moscow's ban on certain Ukrainian products, Russia remains Ukraine's largest individual trading partner. (The EU as a block is Ukraine's main trading partner.) Plainly, however, relations between the two Slavic neighbours are grim and even the conciliatory Petro Poroshenko is beginning to sound militant.

Following the de-Communisation laws introduced into Parliament in April 2015 (which have caused such a raging debate), I anticipated a rapid removal of the various signs of the Soviet past, but reflected that it has to take place in stages because the costs are prohibitive. Still, new monuments are emerging alongside old ones, some reflecting current events, and at others there are clear signs of present events.

At the entrance to the Museum of the Great Patriotic War, for example, there are Russian tanks and katyushas seized during the Donbas conflict but inside the museum itself, little has changed. The interpretation remains more or less as it was during Soviet times other than the addition of a gallery on the years 1939-41, now considered officially as part of the war years. The Jewish Holocaust is still marginalised. For that matter, there is nothing therein about OUN and UPA and anti-Soviet resistance either. One simply steps back in time.

The Holodomor Memorial National Museum nearby dates from 2008 and is quite effective, in the shape of a candle, nestling between the World War II obelisk and the Pecherska Lavra. Books of Memory for each oblast can be found inside, along with various posters citing the origins of the famine and the alleged perpetrators. The sculpture of the child at the entrance is particularly impressive; less so the inflated statement of the number of victims.

Switch to the northwest and Babiy Yar (Babyn Yar) and here also there are new memorials close to the actual site of the massacre of over 30,000 Jews in September 1941 (and over 100,000 altogether). One is a wooden cross to the nationalist underground victims created in 1991; the second a Menorah-shaped monument to Jewish victims erected on the fiftieth anniversary, the third a small monument to Jewish victims, the fourth a small monument to child victims established in 2001, and a much larger edifice planned for some time now appears to be under construction. Wild dogs have gathered at Babiy Yar – some resemble wolves, but they are passive. The Soviet edifice on the other side of the metro station dates from the 1970s in the typical style of such monuments, though it is particularly striking.

Perhaps the most lasting sentiment I took with me upon leaving was the collective failure to recognise in 1991 that the peaceful fall of the Soviet Union was only the beginning of a process that is culminating in the violence of today. We are still living in the 20th century in Kyiv; the past remains alive and only the future is unknown. Many were unhappy with the former Yanukovych regime and its excesses, but the euphoria over the Poroshenko-Yatseniuk administration has clearly ended. The popularity of the Prime Minister in particular has collapsed in a manner reminiscent of that of Viktor Yushchenko, president in 2005-10.

Ultimately, we may need to re-evaluate Belavezha, the deceptive calm of the transformation of a Communist-led government to an independent one in 1991, as well as the various treaties with Russia that took place between 1990 and 2004. More evident is the enduring failure of all Ukraine's independent governments to deal with issues specific to Donbas but partially concealed by the oligarchic control of past years. And clearly the malevolence of the post-2000 Russian leadership is always in the background reducing the space for manoeuvre.

Euromaidan has unleashed forces dormant for decades and there is no indication of an end game. The relative calmness of this beautiful city in this sense is illusory.

About the author:

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