

Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 20 2020

This is an excerpt from *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* by David R. Marples. Download your free copy on E-International Relations.

I arrived in Munich, (West) Germany, in autumn 1985 at the American radio station Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty – it was based there between 1949 and 1995. I started a job linked to the Ukrainian program under the nebulous title Research Analyst, in a section titled simply Program Support. There were two such positions in the Ukrainian section occupied by Roman, a New Yorker with a quick wit that belied a very dedicated scholar with a PhD from the University of Michigan who was not always in tune with the wishes of his superiors, and myself. Roman had been there for some eight years and his desk and Ukrainian newspapers occupied most of our very large office. He was also at that time a heavy smoker of Camel cigarettes so one of my first acquisitions was a large fan.

Having received a German work permit under EU auspices as a British citizen, I received a pass to enter the building and Lan and I were assigned an apartment in Balanstrasse, on the tenth floor of a new building opposite a supermarket. We knew little German but were soon enrolled in an intensive language program. Getting to work involved a simple tram or bus ride. We also managed to get some part-time help with a local babysitter who had two small children of her own. As in Edmonton, I felt very much an outsider, especially since I was once again obliged to rely on my British passport in order to get a work permit. I also had no idea what to expect from this multinational operation and its Cold War *raison d'être*.

RFE/RL was by any standards an unusual place. The center of activities was the canteen in the basement where would gather, at any time of day, people of all the nationalities of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, together with some German staff and British and American researchers and administrators. Alcohol was permitted at all times and beer could be purchased from a vending machine. There were certain unwritten rules: the Poles would not sit with the Russians, the Armenians and Azerbaijanis kept well apart, as did the Hungarians and Romanians. The heads at that time were George Bailey (RL) and George Urban (RFE), and the Board for International Broadcasting in Washington, DC was the main authority.

The radios were a Cold War project that started in 1950-1951 under the auspices of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In 1971, the CIA relinquished control though without doubt there were some agents still present. There were also KGB infiltrators, including, as I learned later, the head of the Russian Service, who redefected back to Moscow some years after I left. In Moscow, Konstantin Chernenko was the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a decrepit figure but a clear reversion to the former days of Leonid Brezhnev. RL had a team working on the Kremlin whose articles appeared in the weekly research bulletin, supervised by a suave and very tall British economist called Keith Bush.

My focus at Program Support was contemporary Ukraine. Roman's area was the church and the national question, we both delved into Soviet politics, and that left me with the economy and energy issues. Every morning began with the daily "Budget," a collection of news items from around the world, with German and American predominating, and about two inches thick in multi-colored paper, copied from the original or typed out. I never did discover who put

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together these lists but everyone traipsed to their mailboxes and carried the bundle to their desks, after which – usually with a coffee – they began to sift through the Budget, putting aside items that seemed particularly valuable. It was impossible to read everything and one could have spent an entire day just reading these news items. But we were also permitted to order Soviet newspapers and magazines, which arrived quite promptly, with perhaps 2-3 days delay. Roman had ordered most of the Ukrainian ones already so I merely had to add a few that were more in the area on which I was working.

Program Support included research analysts working in non-Russian regions of the former Soviet Union – Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Transcaucasia, and Central Asia. The group contained some outstanding talents, including the future Estonian president, Toomas Ilves. Our boss was a quiet and kindly American, John Eriksen, who had been a professor at Bowling Green University in Ohio. Roman used to laugh at his struggle with new technology. When we had new computers installed, John would comment that we only needed to press a button and our papers would appear in the print room, like magic. It seemed to me at the outset that John did not like or approve of Keith Bush, because he (Bush) was the true arbiter of what RFE/RL readers would see in the weekly Bulletin, which was widely read in Washington, as well as by scholars at universities.

Studies of the Soviet leadership were written most regularly by Elizabeth Teague, a very pleasant English woman, her compatriot, Ann Sheehy, who criticized everyone and everything and had an acid tongue (but whom Roman considered brilliant), and an outspoken Russian woman, a heavily made up native of Leningrad, who had reportedly been deported from the USSR for assaulting a policeman and was madly in love with Keith Bush. In the area of Foreign Policy was another person of Ukrainian heritage, Bohdan Nahaylo, who had moved to RFE/RL from Amnesty International and who also was a prominent writer for the London *Spectator*. Nahaylo and his Canadian wife Marusia had a son, Max, who was the same age as Carlton, while Roman and his New Zealand wife Alison's son Daniel was also born around the same time. Beyond work, therefore, our families naturally gravitated together. Bohdan later became head of the Ukrainian Broadcasting Service.

Was RFE/RL mainly a propaganda organ? There is no doubt that it exuded a Cold War mentality. Employees were advised not to cross the border of the Iron Curtain because their safety could not be guaranteed. Among the employees, especially the broadcasters, were many people who had fled from their homes in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and elsewhere. Broadcast briefs provided critical insights for Soviet and East European residents who were not expected to read or hear such news at home. The emphasis was on 'critical'. There was much interest in literary figures too and a debate had ensued while I was there about Solzhenitsyn and whether he was an anti-Semite.

One day there was a bomb scare. The whole building had to be rapidly evacuated and there were talks about KGB infiltration. It was not necessarily far-fetched since the Cold War reached new heights in the brief period between the demise of Brezhnev and what is often called the interregnum (Andropov, Chernenko leaderships) before Gorbachev took over. After several hours we were allowed back to our offices with the sheepish explanation that a bomb had indeed been found, but it was an unexploded British bomb from the Second World War, which had landed in the tennis court across the road. The incident reflects the atmosphere within RFE/RL in the mid-1980s.

During the early months I was there, one of the visitors to the radios was Edward Teller, the creator or co-creator of the Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars) program that threatened to end the Cold War equilibrium by placing a huge anti-missile shield over the United States. The program, enthusiastically embraced by the administration of Ronald Reagan, incensed the Soviet Union, but also Western Europe, which feared that it would be abandoned to a conventional attack by Warsaw Pact Forces while the United States moved into isolation. Teller was a bombastic and outspoken man but lectured very effectively – though in truth few of us listening could follow everything he said. After his talk someone asked whether the scheme would actually work. Teller immediately asked the speaker what his nationality was.

"I am Romanian," was the response.

"Why should I speak to a Romanian?" Teller snapped. Many in the audience gasped with surprise. But there was no apology and Teller moved on to the next question.

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The alcohol license did not survive my period at RFE/RL. The Ukrainian desk included a prominent but erratic Ukrainian poet called Moisei Fishbein, a big balding man in his late 30s, who would intervene suddenly amid the day's activities. I sensed his presence behind me one morning in the office.

"What are you reading?" He asked.

"*Izvestiya*."

"Why do you read such shit?" He pronounced it as "sheet."

"Well it's part of my job to read the central press," I responded.

"Shit!" He repeated. "It's all shit!"

Fishbein was drinking in the canteen late one day and decided to stub out his cigarette on someone's head while leaving. I never did learn the identity of his victim, but he did not respond quietly and the canteen was wrecked as others joined in the affray. Hard liquor was subsequently banned, though no such restrictions were ever put on beer and wine. One of the journalists from the Czechoslovak desk used to keep her glass of wine and bottle on the windowsill in the canteen, returning to it after each broadcast. She was visibly withering away because she never consumed any food, though reportedly she had a wonderful broadcasting voice.

I produced a number of research papers and eventually began a study of Ukraine's energy options, which generally signified what Moscow believed were in the best interests of Ukraine and how they were to be introduced. It soon became evident that nuclear power was – as I wrote in one of my first papers for RL – the "wave of the future." It was a simple matter to put together files on each topic, including Chernobyl, the first nuclear power station in the republic and the only one with reactors moderated by graphite. I was also interested in the Donbas coal industry and sent several papers to the British publication, *Soviet Analyst*, which always welcomed them. Sometimes it was easier to publish in the *Analyst* than in the radios' research bulletin, which tended to focus on central politics.

In late 1984, my final changes to the PhD were approved and I attended the degree ceremony in Sheffield the following May, along with my parents. At that juncture, however, I had become more of an analyst than an academic. At RFE/RL we were obligated to write short pieces on relevant topics and sometimes at the demand of the broadcasting desk. The desk could then rework the piece for broadcast. Only very occasionally did I request to see transcripts of the broadcasts and sometimes did not recognize my original text. Still, Munich was a fascinating place to live, with its spacious parks, beer gardens, palaces, and museums. The Alps were a short car drive away and Salzburg two hours to the east. Weekends were often spent by a lake or in the mountains.

In January 1985, RFE/RL selected me as a candidate for the two-week long Salzburg Seminar, run by the Harvard School of International Studies and held at the Schloss Leopoldskron in a picturesque setting, perhaps best known for some of the scenes in the 1965 musical *The Sound of Music*. Our topic of discussion was European-American Relations with the Soviet Union. Along with myself, our delegates were Bill Murphy from RFE's Foreign Policy desk – a former CIA man – and Vladimir Socor who was a research analyst for the Romanian desk. Among those offering the lectures were Dimitri Simes, a young Mark Beissinger, Samuel Huntington, Arnold Horelick, and Alec Nove. The discussions were earnest and relevant and those selected to attend included mainly young diplomats from the US and Europe.

One evening in the magisterial and ornate dining room, I happened to sit at the same table as Huntington and Horelick, who began a furious argument on détente that lasted for about an hour. The former's tone was scholarly and detached, while the latter was bullish, aggressive and concerned with NATO responses to an attack through Europe by conventional Soviet forces. From what I recall, Horelick, the founding director of the RAND/UCLA Center for Soviet Studies, was criticizing Huntington's theory that NATO's response should be a diversionary attack into Eastern Europe from a different direction as a means to evade the overwhelming Soviet forces. The discussion preceded the publication of Huntington's most famous article, *The Clash of Civilizations*, published in *Foreign*

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Affairs in 1993.

I also spent some time with Nove, and selected his discussion group. I knew he was a long-time friend of Everett and had been born in Petrograd in 1918. He was utterly charming, with large white sideburns, a balding pate, and an outrageously English accent, eloquent but almost comical in the correctness of his pronunciation. The American attendees included John Fox, a graduate of Princeton, and John Evans, who had opinions on virtually everything and was the closest thing to an American aristocrat I had ever encountered. Among his subsequent roles was that of US Ambassador to Armenia, a position from which he was suddenly dismissed in May 2006 after less than two years, ostensibly because of his expressed recognition of the 1915 Armenian Genocide. In general, in the Salzburg discussions, the Europeans were apprehensive of American approaches to the Cold War, since they were concerned about the Star Wars program.

In the spring there was much excitement at RL about the emergence of a new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who seemed to represent a different style of leadership to the geriatric cronies who preceded him. RL carefully monitored his speeches in different cities and candid responses to questions. The attitude was one of acute suspicion, which appeared justified when some analysts began to freeze frames of Gorbachev in regions as different as Dnipropetrovsk in Ukraine and western Siberia, and discovered that the faces in the audience were the same in each case. The spontaneity was thus exposed as a fabrication. Glasnost and Perestroika were the two new watchwords, neither of which were completely new, but the self-criticism at least promised a thaw from the previous three leaderships of Chernenko, Andropov, and Brezhnev.

Visitors started to arrive at RFE/RL, mainly friends of Solchanyk. They included Roman Szporluk, his former PhD supervisor at the University of Michigan, Frank Sysyn, then based at Harvard's Ukrainian Research Institute, and Taras Kuzio, editor of *Soviet Nationalities Survey* and soon to be best known as the director of the CIA-financed Ukrainian Press Agency. Kuzio, who is of small stature, appeared with two sinister looking fellows either side of him, who had every appearance of being his bodyguards. Bohdan Krawchenko also arrived en route to Eastern Europe and stayed at our apartment for a couple of nights. One morning I found him taking books off my bookshelf and shoving them into a large bag. "It's okay," he reassured me, "they are all CIUS publications and I can replace them. But they are needed in Ukraine." In their different ways, both Kuzio and Krawchenko were committed to bringing change in Ukraine, which at that time seemed a remote possibility.

In the summer of 1985, RFE/RL sponsored a trip to the University of Illinois for both Solchanyk and myself to attend the Ukrainian Conference in Urbana-Champaign. Mace was there and by now had established himself as something of a celebrity in Ukrainian community circles for his work on the Ukrainian famine. Clearly, he was the guest of honor and had been appointed the Director of the US Commission on the Ukraine famine, which involved dozens of interviews with famine survivors now in the United States. The conference was organized by Stephan Horak, an historian, and Dmytro Shtohryn, a professor of Slavic languages, and supported by Bohdan Rubchak, a literary scholar.

Many of the papers were interesting though in terms of organization the conference left something to be desired. In 1985, it should be recalled, there was no possibility of attendance by scholars from Ukraine. We at RFE/FRL were probably the best informed about contemporary Ukraine. That is perhaps why it caused a ruckus when Rubchak asked Solchanyk and I to move tables at the banquet to make room for Mace, evidently the priority guest. Solchanyk informed Rubchak that likely he would not be showing up for his panel in the morning, and the two exchanged some heated words.

Mace, whom I had last met in Edmonton two years earlier, was an affable and very sociable man of 33 years, smoking constantly and usually with a glass of hard liquor close at hand. He was a storyteller and a gossip, and could be extremely funny. I was never certain how seriously he regarded his task of researching the famine. On one occasion he told me he had selected the tragedy as the best way of gaining prestige in the scholarly world, but he was also very interested in Ukrainian community politics and on first name terms with everyone of any significance. He would intersperse his conversation – usually a monologue – with phrases of Oklahoman Ukrainian in the thickest accent imaginable. Evidently his Ukrainian would get better.

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Probably in 1985 he was at the peak of his powers, with his thesis published as a book, and heading an important United States Commission on the Ukraine famine that had already been bitterly denounced by the Soviet authorities, who still maintained that no famine had occurred. Later, Mace would complain that he was ostracized for his views by the American scholarly establishment and forced to move to Ukraine to continue his career.

By the end of the year 1985 in Munich, I had compiled several files of information about Soviet nuclear stations in Ukraine. I had also decided to leave the radios and return to Canada. It was a difficult decision to make when the salary and benefits were unmatched virtually anywhere. At the same time, I always felt I was on the periphery of a war, in which I was more of an onlooker than a participant. My wife was also uncomfortable in Bavaria, where she felt, with some justice, that Asians were not regarded favorably. Moreover, we were expecting a second child and thought it might be preferable for him/her to be born in Canada. Krawchenko had succeeded Lupul as Director of CIUS and had offered me a position as a Research Associate. RFE/RL, also, was a difficult place to work with the various animosities and intensive security.

About the author:

David R. Marples is a Research Analyst in the Contemporary Ukraine Program, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and Distinguished Professor of Russian and East European History at the University of Alberta. His books include *Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir* (2020), *Ukraine in Conflict* (2017), *'Our Glorious Past': Lukashenka's Belarus and the Great Patriotic War* (2014), *Russia in the 20th Century: The Quest for Stability* (2011), and *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (2007).