

The Maidan Revolution in Ukraine

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 1 2020

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

The Maidan uprising dates from the failure of the Vilnius Summit, at which Ukraine was to sign a Union Agreement with the European Union but it did not happen immediately. Protests in the central Maidan of Kyiv, which had started in November 2013 peaked in February 2014, with armed clashes in the square between demonstrators and Berkut police, resulting ultimately in the deaths of around 100 people – most from snipers firing from the rooftops of nearby buildings – and the removal of the president, Viktor Yanukovich.

Russian forces invaded Crimea at the end of March and annexed the peninsula after a rapidly held and far from democratic referendum. Fighting broke out in the eastern regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, while in the western regions, local governments were replaced by nationalist forces. The Russian government claimed that neo-Nazi forces had taken power in Kyiv and it was necessary to respond. It also maintained that the United States government was behind the uprising, a claim bolstered by the presence in the square of officials such as John McCain and Victoria Nuland, and an intercepted phone conversation between the latter and another US official, evidently outlining their preferences for the next Ukrainian government.

The reports from Ukraine made international headlines and the actions in Maidan were visible live on social media. Before long, it was hard to discern truth from fiction as these outlets became a sounding board not only for scholars and analysts of Ukraine, but also, cranks, and trolls of various kinds. Jeff Kochan, a Canadian scholar based in Konstanz, has referred to the emergence of agnotology, or the study of ignorance in recent years. “The goal is not to replace one set of facts with another, but to create a fog of doubt about what the facts are. The resulting spectacle is meant to paralyze public opinion and promote passivity.”[1]

On Facebook and Twitter, reports were so numerous and contradictory that its many readers became confused. It was easy for many Westerners to embrace the narrative that an authoritarian and even imperialist power, Russia, had invaded its democratic Western-leaning neighbor Ukraine with the intention of occupying all its territory. But such an interpretation was very simplistic and one-sided.

In late 2013, I found myself following live video coverage of the clash between protesters and black uniformed police with shields and batons on the Maidan in Kyiv on the night of November 30-December 1. The attack on the protesters only swelled the number of people on the square the following day. I was communicating on Facebook with a number of people in Kyiv, including Bill Risch, an American scholar from Georgia, who was conducting interviews, well aware of their future importance. CIUS held a number of impromptu workshops with participation by myself and others. I also gave the keynote address at a CIUS Conference on “Ukraine within Europe: Opportunities and Obstacles.”

The conference included papers by local and international scholars, as well as former Ambassador to Ukraine Derek Fraser – my erstwhile colleague in Sofia in 1989 – with over 200 in attendance. In my speech I noted the corruption of the Yanukovich regime, but that Ukraine seemed more likely to join the EU under his regime than that of the openly pro-European Yushchenko. In the event, as we recall, Vladimir Putin approached Yanukovich with – what the latter

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perceived as – a better offer. In truth, the Association Agreement as laid out was quite harsh to Ukraine and posed the question of what would happen with Ukraine's outdated steel mills and coal mines and how they could compete with European rivals. We also discussed regional alignment and the role of elites, and the implications of the imprisonment of Yulia Tymoshenko and broached the likelihood of Russia fomenting unrest in Crimea "and other areas." I don't think anyone attending this conference could have been totally surprised by what happened four months later.

In the summer I had been accepted as a Visiting Scholar with the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center at Hokkaido University in Japan. Ironically, given future events, I understood that a previous fellow, Kuzio, had recommended me to the host institution. My time in Hokkaido University at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center (SRC) was not my first visit to Japan. Far from it. I had been about eight times before, to various places in Honshu and to Okinawa. My wife Aya was born in Kobe where her parents and brother still live. So, I can say honestly that, following a series of communications with Osuga-San of the SRC, I had an idea what to expect when we arrived at Chitose airport, via Tokyo, on June 1, after a very long journey from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Sapporo is the capital and by far the largest city in Hokkaido. It is a bustling, busy city, interspersed with spacious parks and a central region, Odori, containing a pleasant green area, which is the site in the summer of a hospitable beer garden, under the shadow of the TV tower. Public transport is efficient, and it is also easy to get around, as thousands do, by bicycle, though cyclists (and I became one) use sidewalks rather than the roads, finding their way around pedestrians.

Aya and I opted to find our own residence, at an apartment overlooking Nakajima Park. It was a beautiful spot and we were on the seventh floor with views to Mount Moiwa in one direction and over the park in the other. The sunsets were extraordinary. Our apartment had two bedrooms, though only the main lounge adjoining the smaller bedroom was air conditioned. The University of Hokkaido is four stops on the subway from Nakajima Park so in the morning I had a pleasant walk by the lake initially and through the university grounds at the end. The SRC is housed in a complex of buildings overlooking some tennis courts. The easiest access for a newcomer is through the library, but eventually I found some short cuts. The staff was friendly and helpful.

My host, Koshino Go, who studies Belarusian and Russian literature, gave me a tour of the library and the SRC. I was provided with a large office on the fifth (the highest) floor, with a computer, sofa, coffee table, and several chairs as well as a main desk. The fifth floor housed both full-time faculty and visiting fellows. I got to know Tabata-Shin and his wife Tomoko – we have mutual friends in the United States – Mochizuki-Tetsuo, and fellow Canadian Thomas Lahusen from the University of Toronto, who was working on a documentary film about the northern Chinese city of Harbin.

The SRC director, Osamu Ieda, was an entertaining host, as was his wife Yuko, who hosted several social occasions that allowed Aya and I to meet the graduate students and junior professors. Most events took place directly in his office on the second floor. There we met a former director, an anthropologist who regaled us with stories about the Ainu on Hokkaido and southern Sakhalin Island (Russia) just to the north. He had made a study of Bronislaw Pilsudski (brother of Josef), who spent his time in exile studying the lifestyles of the Ainu (he lived in an Ainu village and married an Ainu woman), the aboriginal people of Japan, who eventually succumbed to Imperial Japanese expansion and occupation of the large northern island. The stories were similar to those I had heard in Yakutsk 16 years earlier.

If one visits Hokkaido University in the summer, one will note two distinct features. First of all, there are the crows. These are not North American crows, but huge birds with vicious beaks. And they congregate in vast numbers. It is a sight that makes Alfred Hitchcock's old horror film *The Birds* pale by comparison. And they were nesting, which obviously made them hostile to intruders. Never in my life had I imagined that crows would attack humans, but they did, and frequently, dive bombing in pairs. Accessing the Center through the ground floor entrance became quite hazardous until the university authorities removed all the nests. The fearless crow army then reassembled by the tennis courts.

And that leads me to the second feature. Students gathered daily on the courts. They played some game that certainly resembled tennis. But it was more complicated. It involved sometimes six people at a time, along with

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cheerleading factions of both genders, who at times were leaping up and down like demented pogo dancers. The players also had a code of bellowing. It sounded like something between a ram and an angry bull, and the first bellow would be echoed by a chorus of others. These calls began from early morning until the time I left my office at night, often unaffected by torrential downpours of rain. Tabata apparently complained at one point but was informed that the bellowing was a student tradition and that he simply didn't comprehend the custom. Neither did I, frankly, but I learned to live with it.

We soon explored the fascinating city. Sapporo is a winter resort, but the summers are also interesting, with various activities: spectacular firework displays, jazz and folk concerts, shrine festivals, concerts in Nakajima Park, which houses an impressive concert hall, ramen restaurants and night clubs in Susukino, and of course cold beer under the sun, with the famous Japanese beers on offer: Sapporo, Asahi, and Kirin. We got summer passes for Mount Moiwa, and I went there three times in all, using the two cable cars to the summit and enjoying the wonderful views of the city, both at daytime and at night. Ieda and Yuko invited Aya and I to their house in Otaru, a short train ride to the west, on the Sea of Japan. We began at the fish market, with its extraordinary display of maguro, uni, and kani – we later enjoyed trying hakkaku.

While in Otaru, I accompanied Ieda and a group of students on an excursion, which started with Mount Tengu – another cable car ride – where there was a museum on the top. I had met Tengu in Kyoto, but here his legend seemed to be more elaborate and the museum contained a host of Tengus, all with the usual oversized snout, a sort of Japanese version of Pinocchio, though in Tengu's case a source of good fortune, if tales are to be believed. Together with the students I made a wish by stroking the nose of a Tengu sculpture outside the cable car building.

Incidentally the legendary Tengu supposedly comprised characteristics of both a human and a bird of prey, which might help to explain the crow phenomenon described above. The views over the Japan Sea were unforgettable. In the distance a ferry was transporting passengers south to Kyoto, a trip of some 30 hours according to Ieda. To the north and west lay Russia. I was able at last to take stock of my companions. Three were Japanese (including Morishita-San and Kanayama-San) and three were Chinese, along with Ieda and his daughter Ryoko. The Chinese spoke Japanese and a little English.

After the mountain we took buses around, visiting a replica of a herring factory some distance from the main town of Otaru, close to the aquarium and – after our last proposed tour, the building where delegates of Russia and Japan had met after the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905, turned out to be locked – somewhat bizarrely to the only mosque in Hokkaido, where we were greeted by two men originally from Pakistan. They supplied us with coke and 7-Up, which we drank on the carpet of the mosque, facing Mecca, while the daughter of the older man, who had been educated in the United States, explained the workings of the mosque.

In August, Aya and I rented a car and visited Lake Toya, an area of spectacular volcanic mountains and lakes just two hours away from Sapporo, eating some wonderful food at the Windsor Hotel, located on the top of a hill. We went to Neboribetsu with its fascinating onsens (hot springs) and bear park high up in the mountains, a surreal environment where bears stand on their hind legs and demand food, which visitors can purchase from a machine for 300 yen.

Both Aya and I benefited from the expertise of fellow scholars and the resources of the SRC. The university library houses an impressive collection of Slavic materials, and even for Ukraine, the area on which I was working, the resources were equal to those of my home university, meaning better than most libraries of North America. They took some finding at first, but the search proved worthwhile. A highlight for me was the monthly graduate seminar. Frequently, the topic of Ukraine and Maidan was touched upon, as this was my stated field of research during my time in Hokkaido.

In July, the SRC held a major symposium on 30 years of crisis in Eurasia, 1914-1945, with visiting scholars from US, Italy, Turkey, and other parts of Japan, including Mark Von Hagen, whom I had met several times in North America and the American scholar of Japanese ancestry, Toshihazu Hasegawa. It was an invigorating and intense two days, accompanied by field trips to the Ainu Museum and the Historical Village of Hokkaido (Kaitaku no Mura), an open-air

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museum of buildings from various parts of Hokkaido representing the period (1868-1926). Our hosts, interpreting on the bus in entertaining versions of English, were Uyama-San and Chida-San from the SRC. Aya also presented a paper close to her current research interests, on Canada's response to Euromaidan in Ukraine, and the role of the Ukrainian community.

In general, having Aya with me made life incredibly simple. I was able to visit places and understand things that would have been incomprehensible had I come alone. She also fit in well with the SRC and its activities, attending symposia and joining in discussions. But more often she could be found in the plush Daimaru store close to campus. Working at the SRC is a one-time opportunity to get a project done in ideal surroundings and largely without interruption. Indeed, the professors are usually closeted in their offices, working like beavers until sunset.

The relatively short time I had at the SRC – essentially the summer – proved to be incredibly productive. I was able to finish a major article and numerous shorter ones, as well as complete most of the editing for the book on Euromaidan in Ukraine. I began researching the career of Igor Girkin (Strelkov) who had taken on the role of Minister of Defense in the breakaway regions of the Donbas, and was believed to be responsible for the downing of a Malaysia Airlines flight over the conflict area in July 2014. It was evident that he was contracted by Russian intelligence services, but equally clear that he had adopted an independent position, making his own decisions and applying ruthless measures to anyone who committed a transgression, such as theft. I wrote numerous articles for my blog site with the intention of combining them in a book at some point.

Following the events in Maidan from Hokkaido certainly allowed one the advantage of distance. It allowed me to focus on specific topics – the career of Girkin/Strelkov, for example – without being caught up in the emotion of events. The war taking place in Donbas seemed remote and was rarely featured in newspapers such as *The Japan Times*. Moreover, I seemed to be the only academic in the vicinity even remotely interested in Ukraine. Perhaps that is why I made such good progress, though I did follow the writings and reports of a number of friends and colleagues in various parts of Ukraine throughout the period.

I noted several differences between the work ethic in a Japanese university and in Canada. For one thing, the faculty members virtually lived in their offices. Some never seemed to go home. In my signed contract, I had agreed to be in my office between 8:30 am and 5 pm but had never taken that very seriously. Other than the visits to the library, however, we were actually expected to be there. Lahusen, who was making a film about the history of Harbin, simply ignored that rule and left campus whenever he felt the need. The secretarial staff on the floor below all sat around one table, nine women and a boss – naturally a man – typing away on their machines. One told me that her wage was based on the time she logged on to her computer and the time she logged out. And they were watched all day by the male supervisor. She was horrified when I sent her a note to say I was visiting Lake Toya, and said she preferred not to know.

The city had beer gardens all summer, on the other hand, and the faculty invited me several times to the center and would extend their stay until late in the evening. Despite their industriousness, by Western standards, the faculty was not especially productive, but then only about three of them were tenured; the rest were on short contracts of up to five years. In terms of gender, the faculty resembled the secretarial pool. There was only one woman there, and she was the youngest faculty member. All of them could read and speak Russian, and in several cases, at least one of the Central Asian languages.

Once I returned to Alberta in August, I took on a new position, that of Chair of the Department of History and Classics for the next five years. I formally gave up my office at CIUS, which had been allocated because of my directorship of the Stasiuk Program for the Study of Contemporary Ukraine. In 2012, CIUS had been integrated into the Faculty of Arts, with a program review conducted subsequently resulting in a reduction of staff. Zenon Kohut had retired in 2012 and a new director was appointed, Volodymyr Kravchenko from Kharkiv, who had visited Alberta several times as a visiting scholar. Because of the integration, Kravchenko's home department was History and Classics. His arrival heralded a new era.

In September 2014, the most vicious fighting of the Ukrainian conflict took place in the Donbas when Russia sent in

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“volunteers,” regular troops to counter the advance of the Ukrainian Army, operating under the mandate of an anti-terrorist operation (ATO). The increase in tensions manifested itself widely on social media. Many of my friends began to use the Ukrainian flag as their home page photograph on Facebook, and there was much focus on Russian president Putin who was compared to Hitler, with President Barack Obama and some other Western leaders depicted as appeasers, unable to withstand the aggressive stance of the Russian leader. I tried to maintain the distance from events I had acquired in Japan, while writing frequent commentaries, mainly for European-based journals.

In the meantime, several scholars contributed to the book I was preparing along with my PhD student Frederick Mills, entitled *Ukraine's Euromaidan*. In retrospect, it seems to me an optimistic and rather one-sided monograph, though it contains some articles of real value, especially by those who were witnesses to the events in Maidan. Contributors included Risch, Kuzio, Olesya Khromeychuk, Tanya Zaharchenko, Svitlana Krasynska, Marta Dyczok, Olga Onuch, and Aya Fujiwara, as well as young Ukrainian scholars Anna Susak and Natalia Otrishchenko, and my Belarusian friend Podgol, who co-authored a chapter with me on the reaction to Euromaidan in Belarus. When the book appeared in April 2015, the war in Donbas was still continuing, and Russia was suffering from Western sanctions as a result of its refusal to withdraw from Crimea.

In Canada prior to 2014, Prime Minister Stephen Harper closely allied his cause with that of the UCC. When new Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, a well-known oligarch and longtime political operator, took office in June 2014, Harper flew to Kyiv for the ceremony along with UCC President Paul Grod. A photograph in the media showed them together on an airplane with Harper wearing a Ukraine soccer scarf. Harper, a right-wing conservative, announced his intention of building a monument in Ottawa to the victims of Communism. In the 2014 Canadian elections, however, his party was roundly defeated, and Justin Trudeau became Prime Minister as the leader of the Liberal Party. Essentially, Canadian policy did not change much: like most of the Western world, we were solidly behind Ukraine. That position was justifiable but there was much that remained unclear, including the significance of extremists, responsibility for the 100 murders in Maidan, and Ukraine's policies toward the population of the occupied regions.

Note

[1] Jeff Kochan, “Manufactured Ignorance about the Ukrainian-Canadian Left,” *Canadian Dimension*, January 3, 2020, <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/manufactured-ignorance-about-the-ukrainian-canadian-left>

About the author:

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