

Understanding Ukraine and Belarus in 2020

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUL 15 2020

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

Should we be so immersed in the past? In the Western world, especially North America, other than diasporas, the past might seem irrelevant. But in the former Soviet countries, including those I study – Ukraine, Belarus, Russia – it is often the defining element of contemporary politics. And though I think it is simplistic to keep making comparisons of tyranny, such as Stalin vs Hitler, or the systems they created, or the number of their victims, and while I am personally supportive of the view that the Holocaust is the defining event of modern Europe, one can go further. Stalinism is still full of secrets yet to be discovered. It lasted for a quarter of a century, but elements of it persisted much longer than that. The Gulag camps lasted until the Gorbachev era. Dissidents wasted away in frigid labor camps into the 1980s. And in my own area, mass graves of Stalin's victims are still being revealed by members of the general public, much to the chagrin of local authorities who tolerate or mandate vandalism of the new memorial sites.

We cannot remain dispassionate about such events, such assaults on humanity and family lives. We can permit people to adhere to myths, because that is natural and allows them to continue their existence. But the facts as we know them, and as we discover them, deserve to be known. At the same time, the historians can discuss their findings in public, at conferences, in classes at university or college, but ultimately the quest is an individual one. We need to start with premises, and human values are at the heart of them. Mass killings can never be justified, nor can racism, and in my own view, ethnic nationalism is equally a scourge because it dehumanizes a society, and divides so-called races from each other. I would not denigrate patriotism, which is something quite different. When I began my career, I was interested in finding out about past events, but today I perceive also a humanitarian quest to preserve those elements of society that I consider essential: human rights, openness, tolerance, and academic freedom.

It was in my attempts at discovering and interpreting Ukraine's past that I became an outsider in the group with which I spent the most time – Ukrainians in the diaspora – having earlier been accepted warmly into their midst. The reality was that they no longer liked what I was writing, based on my research findings. There were no other factors involved. And because my works seemed in their view to undermine their preconceived and long-held notions about their historical past, then they became unacceptable, even chided as Kremlin propaganda, or pro-Russian. They exempted me from directing CIUS, the institution at which I began my career, and they were not supported within my university by my administrative superiors, ostensibly because of a fear of withdrawal of community-based funds – or perhaps because of an apprehension that chaos might result should my appointment go ahead. That should not have happened, but it did. It should not have happened because nothing I wrote had any impact or influence on my affection for Ukraine, which could hardly be changed. The country is much bigger than narrow-minded nationalism or for that matter the violent pro-Russian separatists still fighting in the east. Ukraine has at last removed the vestiges of Stalinism, but it must be careful not to implant something equally corrosive in its place.

In Belarus, I never expected my presence in the country to be affected by continued travel bans. It had never entered my head that the government would prohibit entry to scholars, especially given the limited attention to the country from the outside world. Paradoxically, the bans gave my work sudden importance and recognition, and Belarusians

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wrote to me that I should regard them as “a badge of honor.” But it was terribly frustrating. In some ways it was similar to being ostracized by my former friends in the Ukrainian community. When it ended – with the visa-free regime introduced in 2017 – I was absurdly grateful. All the same, I am still an insider as far as the Belarusian diaspora is concerned and Belarusians are fairly free of the more radical types of nationalism one can find in Ukraine. Many of my friends there – especially in the younger generation under 40 – speak Belarusian exclusively, and try to acquire for Kurapaty the sort of symbolic importance attached to the Holodomor in Ukraine. I think they may succeed and I intend to continue helping them in that task.

I feel very privileged to have lived and worked as a scholar at an academic institution like the University of Alberta. I doubt very much whether many 21st century historians will be given the same sort of opportunities at universities, particularly if we continue the unfortunate path that equates success with high-paying jobs, and universities as no more than a path to a lucrative career. It is known as the New Budget Model and destined for failure. But until its demise it can do much damage to the integrity of universities and the concept of scholarly inquiry and independent thought. It means that students can no longer opt to study the questions that intrigue them, unless they are linked to some future, lucrative career option. In the Arts and Humanities, the prospects are very limited since they are not structured in such a fashion, nor could they be.

In an era of fake news, trolls, and hybrid warfare in several parts of the world, the historian is needed today more than at any time in the past. Vladimir Putin’s 2020 statement that Poland is responsible for starting the Second World War is a case in point. Donald J. Trump’s less serious, but equally telling comment about success in the American Civil War being dependent on control of the airports is another. There is no equation between talent or brilliance and the acquisition of political leadership on a world level (Angela Merkel excepted), though one would accept that a certain innate cunning and ruthlessness are needed, as well as financial backing in the US case.

In short, we cannot leave interpretations of the past to governments and we must maintain our honesty and humanity, no matter where it leads us. Otherwise, we are without integrity and life becomes meaningless.

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).