

Understanding Ukraine and Belarus: A Memoir

Written by David R. Marples

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DAVID R. MARPLES, JUN 30 2020

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

In any memoir, it is always difficult to decide what to include and what to leave out. I decided to write this one as a result of prompting from some of my students who have often encouraged me to put some of the stories of my travels on paper. But no writer really knows whether their experiences are unique or common, whether their insights are in any way original. Still, I convinced myself that there were some unusual things about my own.

First of all, my period of development as a scholar coincided with the later years of the Cold War, the collapse of Communism in eastern Europe, and the fall of the Soviet Union. Moreover, I had spent this period both as an analyst and a graduate student, and began my academic career precisely during the time the Soviet system collapsed, and just a month before the failed putsch in Moscow that heralded the end of Gorbachev's leadership, although not in the manner the putschists had intended.

Second, I do think my engagement with Chernobyl and the disaster of 1986 to be something worth relating. This book contains original comments I made in my diary during the time of my visit there, largely unedited, though some of my 1980s prose seems alien and opinionated to me today. The disaster continues to draw public interest, thanks to new books and the documentary series of 2019 on HBO/Sky Television that evoked much anger in the Kremlin, but was generally lauded elsewhere.

Third, my studies pertain to areas of much dispute, and even warfare, over historical memory, which has affected and influenced many scholars of Ukraine in particular. The time period coincided with the rapid development of social media, which has meant that propaganda on both sides – but particularly in Russia – has been rife, and those expressing opinions on sites such as Facebook and Twitter are not necessarily, and perhaps not usually from the academic domain. It is no longer possible to express views that do not coincide with one or another prevailing narrative and not receive a torrent of abuse, often from people we do not know and have no wish to know.

Though Russia is a part of this monograph, the nations I know best, Ukraine and Belarus, feature most. They are starting to redefine their identities, often based on historical memory, and most often, in one way or another, the Second World War. Official and unofficial narratives often pay little heed to history. In Ukraine, memory is the source of serious polemics, arguments, violence, and commemoration and these escalated in the period 2013-2019 to levels never hitherto witnessed. With an oligarch and chocolate magnate at the helm, Ukraine's position became more narrowly defined. Russia was the enemy and Ukraine's path was with Europe. At the same time there were contradictions because during the height of this hybrid and real warfare, Russian exports to Ukraine were actually increasing. But few noticed that or, if they did, expected it would not last long.

Western politicians, writers, and scholars came to Ukraine in this period and most embraced the uprising and perceived it as a quest for democracy and freedom, away from authoritarianism and the remnants of the Soviet past. But as new president Volodymyr Zelensky perceived, what most Ukrainians really needed were better living standards and security and less ideology or street renaming. In many ways these desires were similar to those of Russians in the late 1990s, with the hapless, absent, and increasingly uninterested Boris Yeltsin at the helm.

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For my own part, these disputes have had an impact on my career and continue to do so. In one sense, these memoirs in part are a narrative of my relations with two communities: with Ukrainians both at home and in Ukraine, from one who worked closely with the community for many years and then found himself outside it, even ostracized in some circles; and in Belarus, where I have not had the same experience because the country is more authoritarian and the opposition has not had an opportunity to break out of this pattern and influence national development. And in my home of Edmonton, there is no Belarusian community conducting organized activities. Moreover, it has rarely been unified in North America as a whole since the declaration of independence in 1991.

Simply put, it is very difficult in 2020 to be an objective and humanitarian scholar, working and researching at a distance from the events of the recent past and even those in earlier periods. The overriding symbol of the current interpretations outside academia is nationalism, of many varieties, but with ethnic nationalism in the ascendancy. Fortunately, in my view, it does not represent all of Ukraine, or even the majority. And invasion of and warfare in one's country only tends to catalyze and heighten such sentiments. That would be the case anywhere, though perhaps not of such extreme varieties.

I have basically adhered to chronology in this memoir, from earliest times – in my case the 1950s – to the present, interspersing some personal events, both happy and tragic, as well as some stories that might entertain, which in their own way are as revealing about the nature of the societies described than any scholarly publication. Occasionally I have resorted to a narrative of political changes, but only to provide some explanation and context for those less familiar with the events described. If there is a theme it is of the value of open-mindedness, humanitarianism, and academic freedom in the 21st century, a period of incomplete news and “fake” news, when information is overloaded on our laptops and phones, but it is hard to discern what is of real value. Those that have researched more deeply are often derided for their conclusions because they do not coincide with the preferred narrative of the army of scribes on Twitter or Facebook.

Universities, which have been my main career focal point, are now in financial plight in my province of Alberta, and the Arts and Humanities, in particular, the subject of severe budget cuts. In some cases, disciplines that were once taken for granted have to justify their existence, often from student enrolments or students' future careers, while administrations of universities are bureaucratized and bloated, appealing to business and engineering students rather than those who wish to pursue studies purely from academic interest. The problem is Canada-wide. In Vancouver in the summer of 2019, I was interested to hear a university Chair of History opine that he advised students not to pursue PhDs because they had no future ahead of them should they do so. There were simply no jobs available for those completing dissertations.

I was fortunate that my introduction to academic life preceded such sentiments, and was allowed to research the former Soviet Union and publish what I wanted. My scholarly career also took certain directions that coincided with public interest, such as the Chernobyl disaster (Chornobyl in Ukrainian), memory politics at the time of Euromaidan in Ukraine, and debates on the Second World War that continue today. In Belarus, the legacy of Stalin remains strong, and my current project has set itself the goal of uncovering some of the events of the late 1930s and early 1940s, and publicizing them for the benefit of the Belarusian public, and yet recognizing that they may prefer not to know.

It is time surely to be rid of myths or illusions about Stalinism. He has left his mark on these societies along with those that followed him along his cruel and ideological path, devoid of any human feeling. That is as close to an academic “mission” as I have ever acknowledged. Historians, after all, are supposed to remain dispassionate and detached. A few of us think we still are.

About the author:

David R. Marples is a professor of East European History at the University of Alberta, Canada. He is the author of 15 books, including *Ukraine in Conflict* (2017), *‘Our Glorious Past’: Lukashenka’s Belarus and the Great Patriotic*

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War (2014), *Russia in the 20th Century: The Quest for Stability* (2011), and *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (2007).