

Opinion – Rethinking History in Light of Ukraine's Resistance

Written by Dmytro Roman Kulchitsky

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DMYTRO ROMAN KULCHITSKY, MAR 3 2022

Before Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, those who pay attention to the news heard American politicians, policymakers, talk show hosts, and academics debate the validity of Russian President Vladimir Putin's representation of Ukraine's past. These debates centered around Putin's claims that there is no Ukrainian nation and that the government in Ukraine derives its power not from the people residing in Ukraine but from Western powers that threaten the security of the Russian nation-state. Therefore, according to Putin, Ukraine is a state without a nation, and the Ukrainian government does not represent its people. Some in the media rejected this interpretation of Ukraine's past and its people, arguing Ukraine is like any other normal nation-state that has evolved to develop a national identity. Others fawned over Putin's use of Russian history to justify his view of a greater Russian nation that the West has alienated since the end of the Soviet Union.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, a puzzle has emerged for those who embrace Putin's version of Ukraine's history. If Putin's view is valid, why are so many Ukrainian men and women of all ages ready to meet their death and fight for their country? Wouldn't one expect the Ukrainian citizens to welcome the Russian soldiers as their liberators with open arms? Wouldn't Ukrainian President Zelensky have fled Kyiv by now because he did not want to face the same fate of leaders such as Nicolae Ceausescu? Wouldn't the Ukrainian soldiers have laid down their arms by now and surrendered without firing a shot? Would not the Ukrainian Diaspora stay silent or root for Russian soldiers to liberate Ukraine?

But, none of this has happened. Instead, the citizens of Ukraine are fighting alongside their soldiers. Professional athletes and artists are sacrificing their careers and lives to aid their fellow Ukrainian citizens in battle. The Ukrainian soldiers are standing firm and not laying down their arms. President Zelensky is not fleeing Ukraine's capital, Kyiv as recommended by the West. Ukrainians in the Diaspora are holding rallies and raising money worldwide to show solidarity with their Ukrainian brothers and sisters fighting in their ancestral homeland. If there is no Ukrainian nation and the current Ukrainian government does not represent the interests of people in Ukraine, then what or who is inspiring and motivating the brave men and women in Ukraine?

The following two quotes offer a way to begin understanding what is happening. The first is by John Locke, who stated, "I have always thought the actions of men [and women are] the best interpreters of their thoughts." The logic behind this quote is that thoughts and ideas precede actions. At the same time, thoughts and ideas are not words with the same meaning. Thought is a mental process that occurs while someone is thinking. On the other hand, ideas are plans that put thoughts into action. Logically, therefore, ideas cannot exist without thoughts.

Whereas Locke's quote provides us a way of understanding the relationship between thoughts, ideas, and action, it offers no means to understand how thoughts and ideas on an individual level become thoughts and ideas on a societal level. This brings me to the second quote from the 2005 movie 'V for Vendetta' from the character Evey: 'We are told to remember the idea, not the man because the man can fail. He can be caught, he can be killed and forgotten, but 400 years later, and idea can still change the world.' In other words, ideas through thoughts can be socialized in people's minds across time.

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Social scientists who study national identity maintain that a national identity emerges when people share one consciousness. The key to developing a social consciousness is a historic territory, myths and historical memories, a common mass public culture, legal rights for its members, and a shared economy with territorial mobility. This was the underlying argument that Putin made when he described the Russian nation. But, Putin's claims on Ukraine's history are shaped by the Russian imperialistic interpretation of a societal consciousness, where Ukrainians are considered 'Little Russians'. This paradigm influenced the world's perception of Ukraine's history for most of the 20th century. A debate about this has been taking place at universities and colleges worldwide since Ukraine's Independence in 1991.

Since Ukraine's Independence in 1991, historians, who, in the spirit of March Bloch, the French historian, have been critically evaluating historical sources and narratives to minimize historical distortions about Ukraine in the present. Their efforts have included critiquing the works of those who attempted to formulate a national interpretation of Ukraine's history but who were either killed or forced to flee Ukraine for fear of execution or exile to Siberia.

Equally important, historians who have challenged the Russian imperialistic view of Ukraine have been able to do this without staring down the barrel of a gun as those who gave up their lives to write history for the sake of history in Ukraine before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Historians have also evaluated the works of those who have conducted research in the Diaspora but whose research existed on the margins because there was no independent Ukraine to provide the reliability or validity needed to challenge the Russian imperialistic paradigm. As a result, their research has drawn a distinction between Ukrainian and Russian identities that are ignored in the Russian Imperialist paradigm. At the same time, historians who critically evaluate historical research have become the enemies of the past, while the people who serve testimony to their work have become the enemies of political leaders who need their version of the past to justify their political, economic, and social objectives in the present.

Tragically, the debate over when Russian history ended and when Ukrainian history began is no longer taking place at conferences or in publications among social scientists. Instead, we are witnessing the power of ideas and how those ideas are fueling the hope, courage, and bravery of men and women fighting for their right to have their own Ukrainian nation and state. The significance of what those in the free world are witnessing today is what Putin either does not understand or is afraid of unleashing in his own country. It's an idea that Catherine the Great could not kill when she destroyed Zaporizhian Cossacks in the 18th century, the Bolsheviks could not end during the brief period of Ukrainian Independence between 1917-18, and Stalin could not exterminate with the Ukrainian Famine in the 1930s. Likewise, as all who preceded him, Putin will not be able to destroy the Ukrainian identity because, in the words of Medgar Evers, an American civil rights activist assassinated in 1963, "you can kill a man, but you cannot kill an idea."

David Lloyd, who is best known for his illustrations of the story 'V for Vendetta' on which the movie was based, writes in his forward to the graphic novel written by Alan Moore that the book was written and illustrated for people 'who do not switch off the news.' Whereas the challenges of paying attention to the world are different since David Lloyd's published those words in 1990, what has not changed is the power of the indomitable spirit to enable people to understand, appreciate, and rally around those who exhibit hope, strength, and courage. Today, Ukrainians are showing the world through their actions that the Ukrainian nation has always existed, and that Ukrainians are prepared to pay the ultimate price to live in a free and democratic society.

About the author:

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