

Ukraine in Our Future

Timothy Garton Ash

Ukraine faces extraordinary challenges, but it also presents a challenge for Europe—and a great opportunity.

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Moises Saman/Magnum Photos

A volunteer welding antitank traps in anticipation of a Russian attack, Odesa, Ukraine, March 2022

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Books Drawn on for This Essay:

Unmaking Imperial Russia: Mykhailo Hrushevsky and the Writing of Ukrainian History

by Serhii Plokhy

University of Toronto Press, 614 pp., \$58.00 (paper)

Der Krieg gegen die Ukraine: Hintergründe, Ereignisse, Folgen [The War Against Ukraine: Background, Events, Consequences]

by Gwendolyn Sasse

Munich: C.H. Beck, 125 pp., €12.00 (paper)

The Zelensky Effect

by Olga Onuch and Henry E. Hale

Oxford University Press, 404 pp., \$24.95

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Tetiana, a young activist I met in Lviv last December, works part-time as a tattooist. People often ask for tattoos of the Ukrainian flag or the country's trident symbol, she told me, but one of the most popular since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine a year ago is the word *volya*, which means both "will," as in willpower, and "freedom." It captures the essence of what I saw in Ukraine—and of what Ukraine is reminding the world.

"The secret of happiness is liberty," Thucydides has Pericles say in a funeral oration in ancient Athens, the birthplace of democracy, "and the secret of liberty is courage." The courage to live and die for freedom is most obviously apparent in the men and women of the Ukrainian armed forces.

Take Yevhen, for example. Tall, lean, clean-shaven, he was an academic working in cultural studies before the war. Over an evening drink, he told me that he felt impelled to sign up after Russia's invasion on February 24, 2022. Trained as a grenade-launcher specialist, he fought for months in the grinding campaign to liberate the southern Ukrainian city of Kherson, living much of the time in foxholes he dug himself. On the map application on his cell phone he showed me the line of the army's advance, across fields, ditches, and rivers, each kilometer hard fought—particularly here, he said, pausing to mention some strangely shaped acacia trees. In just one action, two thirds of his company were wounded: "Also the fields and trees are wounded."

Yevhen was injured himself yet insisted on returning to combat when he had recovered. Wounded again, this time in the back and both legs, he was, when I met him, convalescing in a military sanatorium—and determined to return to the front once more. His comrades need experienced soldiers like him, he explained. Yevhen spoke in an unnerving, quiet monotone, as if all the emotion had been burned out of him by months of shellfire. But with a rare flicker of visible feeling, he added, "I really want to see if I will be lucky...to see what this country will be like after the war."

It's not just those bearing arms who exhibit such willpower. An entire society is mobilized in this battle. The Ukrainian state has had a checkered record over the three decades since the country gained independence in 1991, but Ukrainian civil society has grown from strength to strength, through three major episodes of popular mobilization: the Orange Revolution of 2004–2005; the Euromaidan, or Revolution of Dignity, in 2013–2014; and the response to the Russian invasion in 2022.

A family from Kramatorsk, near the front line in eastern Ukraine, proudly showed me photos of the Ukrainian soldiers now based in their house, and of the ammunition and land mines stored in what used to be their chicken shed. They also demonstrated how locals reported the position of Russian units to the Ukrainian army, using annotated maps on their phones.

Everyone seems to be doing something: sending food, clothes, or equipment, helping internally displaced people, or—like Max, a young volunteer I met—traveling repeatedly to the east to bring back the old and sick from villages in the line of fire. In a July 2022 survey, 61 percent of Ukrainians said they had participated in the resistance by donating funds, 37 percent by volunteering in the community, and 7 percent by volunteering in the Territorial Defense Force units established to complement the regular armed forces. “The Ukrainian army is 42 million people,” Andriy Sadovy, the mayor of Lviv, told me—the entire country. If ever there was a people’s war, this is it.

The same ingenuity and spirit is apparent in the ways Ukrainians are standing up to Vladimir Putin’s criminal targeting of the country’s energy infrastructure, roughly half of which has been damaged. The characteristic sound of downtown Lviv is now the loud chug-chugging of small generators outside shops and houses. Over the Christmas holidays, travelers at Kyiv’s central station were invited to power the lights on a large Christmas tree by pedaling an exercise bike connected to a dynamo. “Ten seconds of light! Ten seconds of jolly mood!” cried a man dressed as Santa Claus.

Amazingly, in polling conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) last September, 68 percent of Ukrainians answered yes to the question “Do you consider yourself a happy person?,” compared with just 53 percent in 2017. When I asked the sociologist Nataliya Zaitseva-Chipak to help me understand this phenomenon—how on earth could people be happier during a war of terror directed against the civilian population?—she replied, “Yes, *I’m* happier!” It wasn’t just the overwhelming sense of common purpose, she explained. It was also appreciating everything you still have when your compatriots are suffering so much worse in the trenches or the pulverized city of Mariupol. One journalist even told me her friends say that “it’s okay if the missiles are falling on us because it means they’re not killing our soldiers on the front line.”

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Of course there’s another side to this inspiring story: a vast catalog of death, bereavement, displacement, destruction, separation, sickness, and hatred, the consequences of which will be felt for generations to come. When I was in Lviv there were military funerals every day in the garrison church of St. Peter and St. Paul, near where I was staying. I attended one. Three coffins. An honor guard of young soldiers, standing erect with pale, strained faces. The bereaved mother, the bewildered child. In the city’s military cemetery, called the Field of Mars, I walked through row upon row of fresh graves, including that of Artemiy Dymyd, the son of the first rector of the Ukrainian Catholic University, where I had come to lecture. At the top of a gentle incline there were already fresh graves dug in the frozen earth, waiting for the latest coffins from the front.

A refugee from Mariupol, another Tetiana, told me through repeated bursts of tears how her best friend, Luda, had been killed together with her soldier son when a Russian missile destroyed their ninth-floor apartment: “Their screams were heard for hours, but no one could help.” Tetiana had spent days shivering in a cellar, without light, heat, or running water, then experienced a terrifying odyssey of escape. Her mother was from Russia, as were her parents-in-law, and she spoke Russian much better than Ukrainian. Putin would consider her to be a Russian. I asked her if she had a message for him. Yes, she said, she would like to kill him. “We saw the Russians as our brothers—and then they came to murder our children.”

From every Ukrainian you now hear this utter rejection and even hatred, not just of the Russian president, not just of the Russian Federation, but of everything Russian, including the culture and language of what Putin likes to call the “Russian world.” “I was a Russian speaker until February 24,” said Adeline, a refugee from the town of Nova Kakhovka, just across the River Dnipro from Kherson. Several students I spoke to echoed the argument of the Ukrainian writer Oksana Zabuzhko that the horrors of Bucha and Irpin are somehow prefigured in Russian literature—not just in Dostoevsky but even, they say, in Tolstoy and Chekhov.

In Ukrainian literature they find “the spirit of freedom”; in Russian, only that of oppression and mental servitude. According to KIIS, in May 2013 some 80 percent of Ukrainians still had a positive attitude toward Russia; by May 2022 that figure was down to 2 percent.

Hail to Putin, destroyer of the Russian world.

The suffering is immense. In an August 2022 survey, 48 percent of respondents reported a deterioration in their physical health and 42 percent separation from family. At the beginning of this year some 14 million people, roughly one third of the country’s population, had been driven out of their homes and were either internally displaced or refugees abroad. There will be more refugees as Putin tries to freeze Ukrainians into submission through a hard winter.

As we approach the first anniversary of Russia’s full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, and the ninth anniversary of the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war with Putin’s seizure of Crimea in February–March 2014, there is every indication that the largest war in Europe since 1945 will grind on for many more months and probably years. The future of Ukraine will obviously depend on the course and outcome of the war—and not least on whether the West has the will to give this embattled European democracy sufficient military and economic support for it to regain most, if not all, of its sovereign territory and then to negotiate peace from a position of strength. But just as the Western allies in World War II started planning for postwar Europe already in 1942, so it’s not too soon to start thinking about the future that the academic-turned-soldier Yevhen hopes to see.

Lessons for the West

On a sixteenth-century map of Europe by the great Brabantian cartographer Abraham Ortelius, a small island just off the north coast of the Black Sea is marked “Achillis ins[ula].” This is what is

now called Snake Island, whose tiny Ukrainian garrison issued an immortal message of defiance at the beginning of the war: “Russian warship, go fuck yourself!”

It is marked as Achilles Island on Ortelius’s map because legend had it that this is where the spirit of the greatest of ancient Greek warriors came after his death. While Achilles might not quite have said to his Trojan adversary, “Hector, go fuck yourself!,” there’s no doubt that the spirit of Achilles is there with the defenders of Ukraine. As the British World War I poet Patrick Shaw-Stewart wrote:

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Stand in the trench, Achilles,
Flame-capped, and shout for me.

Ukrainians routinely refer to their soldiers as “warriors.” The almost ritual response to the patriotic incantation “Glory to Ukraine!” is “To the Heroes, Glory!”

The contrast with much of today’s Western Europe could not be more acute, and perhaps especially the contrast with Germany. The number of that country’s *Kriegsdienstverweigerer* (those refusing to do military service carrying weapons) almost quintupled in 2022 and, astonishingly, included some who were already members of the German armed forces on active service. (What, you want us actually to fight?) According to *Der Spiegel*, many applicants said “they had not reckoned with an armed conflict.”

So the first lesson from Ukraine for the West is as simple as it is old: sometimes you have to fight for freedom. This may seem obvious, but in what I call the post-Wall period—between the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022—many Western Europeans came to believe that we could have a Europe with no more wars, and certainly not big ones between states; that security could be attained by nonmilitary means; and that economic interdependence (for example, increasing reliance on Russia for energy supplies) would underpin a Kantian perpetual peace. The strategy that Germany and France, in particular, pursued toward Russia over Ukraine after 2014 has been accurately described by Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky as “appeasement.”

A second, related lesson is that freedom is a struggle, not a process. Freedom doesn’t follow necessarily from any particular economic, historical, or other constellation, nor do any objective conditions ensure its survival. It requires constant human effort, attention, and willpower. Freedom’s battle is never finally won.

Third, empires usually don’t give up without a struggle. It was a dangerous illusion to believe that one of the largest land empires in Europe, the centuries-old Russian (subsequently Soviet)

empire, had peacefully dissolved in three miraculous years, 1989–1991, and that this was the end of the story.

I met Vladimir Putin when he was an unknown deputy mayor of St. Petersburg in 1994 and he was already talking about the territories that he said had “always” been Russian, including Crimea, and the people (such as Tetiana from Mariupol) whom he considered to be Russians living outside Russia.

Ukrainians know this well. They have long understood their own modern history as one of decolonization. The Harvard historian Serhii Plokhy’s study of the work of the country’s leading late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century historian, Mykhailo Hrushevsky, is called *Unmaking Imperial Russia*. And when Ukrainians got visa-free travel to the EU in 2017, Zelensky’s predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, described this as “a final exit of our country from the Russian Empire.” Putin is waging a neocolonial war to try to reverse that exit, and the Ukrainians are engaged in an anticolonial war of national liberation just as Indians once were against Britain and Algerians against France.

As the German political scientist Gwendolyn Sasse argues in *Der Krieg gegen die Ukraine* (The War Against Ukraine), many in the West, by contrast, have still not decolonized their own view of Ukraine, and more broadly of the countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. In an article written in the autumn of 2014, after Putin had seized Crimea and started the war in eastern Ukraine, former West German chancellor Helmut Schmidt wrote, “As late as 1990, nobody in the West doubted that Ukraine had for centuries belonged to Russia. Since then, Ukraine has become an independent state, but it is not a nation-state.”

Tetiana, the part-time tattooist, told me that when she traveled to the West, people just “pretended” to know where Ukraine is, but really they thought “Ukraine is, like, part of Russia.” “Finally,” she said, “the world finds out what Ukraine is.”

Ukraine is an independent, sovereign European state with its own history, identity, and sources of unity as well as diversity; a nation forged on an anvil of hard struggle; and a society embracing shared hopes for a better future. It is now led by men and women like Zelensky in their thirties and forties, whom Olga Onuch and Henry E. Hale describe in *The Zelensky Effect* as the Independence Generation—those for whom the achievement of Ukrainian independence was a formative political experience. To those even younger, such as Tetiana, the independent existence and distinct character of Ukraine seem self-evident—just “what Ukraine is.”

“Ukraine has become a major state in Central Europe for the first time in modern history,” writes Henry Kissinger.

Leaving aside the question of what exactly makes a state “major” (one suspects the definition may be “a state taken seriously by Henry Kissinger”), what is this sudden appearance of the term “Central Europe”? After all, Ukraine has been an independent state for more than thirty years

and it hasn't changed its geographical location. The riddle is solved when one recalls an influential essay by Milan Kundera published in these pages nearly forty years ago.

The political meaning Kundera gave to Central Europe may be summarized as “those parts of Europe that find themselves caught in the geopolitical East but want to be part of the geopolitical West.” That westward thrust has not always been the settled purpose of all Ukrainians. But through the political, social, and cultural efforts of many individuals and a series of catalytic developments (2004, 2014, 2022), it has now come to command a clear majority across the country.

I have never forgotten looking out at a forest of European flags on the Maidan in central Kyiv during the Orange Revolution in 2004.

The 2014 Euromaidan (the clue is in the name) was sparked by then president Viktor Yanukovich reneging on a promise to sign an association agreement with the EU, and was in a deeper sense about coming closer to Europe as a community of shared values, destiny, and security.

In his 2019 inaugural address, President Zelensky said, “We have chosen a path to Europe, but Europe is not somewhere out there. Europe is here”—he pointed to his head—“and after it appears here, it will be everywhere, all over Ukraine.” Yet still there were reservations, especially in the eastern and southern parts of the country, about joining the EU—and even more about joining NATO. Putin's brutal invasion, and the civic national unity in repelling it, have finally dispelled them. By July 2022, 81 percent of respondents said that in a referendum they would vote to join the EU and 71 percent would vote for NATO membership. (For the EU, the figure was 88 percent in western Ukraine and a healthy 71 percent in the east of the country; for NATO, 81 percent in the west and 56 percent even in the east). In short, the West now has another European state knocking at its door, staking a strong moral, historical, and geopolitical claim to be admitted.

Questions for Ukraine

Ukraine is asking questions of the West, but there are also questions for Ukraine. Many Ukrainians are privately asking themselves these questions, as are many in the West. But when I suggested to a Ukrainian political analyst who was articulating a sharply skeptical view of President Zelensky that I should write about these concerns, his reaction was, “Oh no, Russian propaganda will pick that up!” Here's an age-old trilemma for a political writer: how to stand with the oppressed, yet continue to speak the truth, yet not give comfort to the enemy. In the long term, no one is well served by propagating a myth of the immaculate victim. Our lodestar should be the George Orwell of *Homage to Catalonia*: fight for the right side but remain honestly critical of its shortcomings.

In 2021, Freedom House, the American NGO well known for its freedom index, classified Ukraine as only “partly free,” highlighting corruption and problems with the judiciary. On Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, Ukraine was the worst-scoring European country—unless you count Russia, which scored even lower. The country's oligarchs

still had far too much power. Ukraine is certainly fighting for democracy against tyranny today, but it would be wrong to pretend that yesterday it was a model liberal democracy. It had a heap of problems then and has a heap more now. If the high hopes of brave Ukrainians are not to be disappointed, these need to be identified and addressed.

Here are just a few. According to the head of the European Investment Bank, the overall costs of reconstruction after the war are likely to exceed \$1 trillion. The longer the war goes on, the higher that figure will be. Even if such sums are forthcoming from the rest of the world, it will be difficult to ensure that this money is spent well to create a modern, transparent, fair economy. The opportunities for clientelism and corruption will be large. Pavlo Sheremeta, a former economy minister, suggested to me that the problem might be not so much the pre-war oligarchs, who have lost a great deal of their influence, but potential new oligarchs connected with those wielding political power today.

One way to limit this danger is to impose strong conditions on reconstruction aid, linking it to both domestic reform and preparations for EU membership. Another is to ensure that as much of the money as possible goes directly to regional, local, and nongovernmental recipients, rather than flowing through the central government. Decentralization is one of the success stories of Ukraine's pre-war reforms, but at the moment—understandably, since there's a war on—the country is essentially being run by the presidential administration. A member of parliament from Zelensky's own Servant of the People party told me that she and her colleagues are hardly consulted.

What is more, all the main TV channels run just one version of the news, 24/7. The United News telethon is watched by some nine out of ten of the estimated 36 percent of Ukrainians for whom television is their main source of news. Independent online publications and social media diversify the information flow for those who regularly access them, but such a television-news monopoly will be a major democratic deficit if it continues into the next presidential election, due in March 2024.

There is widespread admiration for Zelensky's performance as a wartime communicator-in-chief, but a so-called list experiment—a political science technique that gets at people's real rather than publicly professed views—carried out in July 2022 by Onuch and Hale found that while 88 percent of those asked expressed approval of his actions as president, the true figure is probably closer to 60 percent. The temptation for Zelensky to keep the television monopoly and use central state resources in a reelection campaign would be great.

This connects to one of the thorniest questions: that of territory. The official negotiating position of the government, but also the overwhelming conviction of most Ukrainians, reflected in opinion polls and every conversation I've had inside or outside the country, is that Ukraine must regain every inch of its sovereign territory, including Crimea. "Too many have died," Yevhen admonished me, for that not to be the case. Morally and legally, this is absolutely right, and such an outcome would be highly desirable for the future of international order. (Think Taiwan.) But

the hard fact is that even if Western leaders are ready to supply the main battle tanks and other modern armaments that Ukraine needs to win back most of its territory—which they definitely should—most of them would privately urge a halt at the border with Crimea (and possibly also, although this is less clear, at something like the pre-February 24 line of Russian occupation in the far east of Ukraine). But if Zelensky explicitly called for any such territorial concessions, he would be furiously criticized at home and face accusations of betrayal in a revived, angry Ukrainian politics.

In a fine series of lectures on the making of modern Ukraine, the Yale historian Timothy Snyder emphasizes, as other historians of Ukraine have before him, the country's extraordinary multicultural history.

Greeks, Jews, Ottomans, Poles, Austrians, Hungarians, and Germans, as well as Russians, have all contributed to shaping this nation. The multicultural heritage is something that many Ukrainians wish to preserve and highlight as part of their national identity. But how much of it will survive the war? Much of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, for example, has left. How many Hungarian Ukrainians will come back? Given the rejection and even hatred of all things Russian, will the previously self-evident cultural fluidity between the Russian and Ukrainian languages endure? More broadly, will Ukraine manage to maintain a civic, inclusive, tolerant patriotism or, under the extreme pressure of war, fall into a more exclusive, strident nationalism?

Emigration may prove to be, so to speak, the Achilles heel of postwar Ukraine, as it has been for many Eastern European democracies whose citizens have the possibility of settling elsewhere. As the saying goes, it's easier to change countries than to change your own country. Of an estimated eight million Ukrainians who have at some point taken refuge from the war outside Ukraine, how many will discover new possibilities, make connections, and put down roots elsewhere? The young, energetic, and well-educated will be overrepresented among them. Viktoriia, a student of political science, told me that 80 percent of her friends were now abroad. This is very good for a country like Poland, helping it to compensate for a yawning labor shortage, but it won't be good for Ukraine.

And then there is the problem of great expectations. Buoyed by a sense of both shared national purpose and international solidarity, Ukrainians say they believe not just in victory but in a rosy postwar future. In a KIIS poll conducted last October, respondents were offered two versions of the country's prospects. Eighty-nine percent agreed with the prediction that "in 10 years, Ukraine will be a prosperous country within the European Union," and just 5 percent with the pessimistic alternative, "a country with a destroyed economy and a large outflow of people." If the European Union proves as foot-dragging with Ukraine as it has been with the countries of the Western Balkans since the end of Europe's last major genocidal war, in former Yugoslavia, then major disappointment is in store. So if there are extraordinary challenges for Ukraine, Ukraine also presents a big challenge for Europe—and a great opportunity.

Shortly after witnessing that forest of European flags in Kyiv during the Orange Revolution in 2004, I urged the president of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, to say publicly that the European Union wished Ukraine one day to become a member. “If I did that,” he replied, “I would immediately be slapped down by two major member states.” He meant France and Germany. As Serhii Plokhly notes in *The Frontline*, a spokeswoman for the EU external-relations commissioner revealingly declared, “There will first have to be a discussion of whether a country is European.” This deep-seated reluctance lasted a long time. Just a few days before the invasion of Ukraine last year, a senior adviser to German chancellor Olaf Scholz told me that Scholz’s position was crystal clear: the EU should enlarge to include the Western Balkans, but no further. French president Emmanuel Macron wasn’t so keen even on including the Western Balkans.

Four months later, Scholz was standing in Kyiv with Macron, Italian prime minister Mario Draghi, and Romanian president Klaus Iohannis, telling Zelensky and the world that they wanted the EU to welcome Ukraine as a candidate for membership. Soon thereafter, the EU did just that; extended the same recognition to Moldova, a small state sandwiched between Ukraine and Romania; and sent an unprecedentedly encouraging signal to Georgia. What a difference a war makes.

No such firm promise has been made by NATO. But given the level of Western involvement in the defense of Ukraine against Russian aggression, it’s clear that any peace settlement must involve some sort of de facto security commitment by the West. Another effect of the war has been to bring the EU and NATO closer together, with previously neutral EU members Sweden and Finland now in the process of joining NATO. The only logical solution in the long term, and the only solid guarantee of Ukraine’s freedom from future Russian revanchism, will be for it to join NATO as well.

Many in Western and Southern Europe are not happy about all this. France doesn’t like the idea of Europe’s political center of gravity moving further eastward. (The center should obviously be France.) Countries like Spain and Italy worry that it’s diverting attention from the equally large challenges to Europe’s South. Ukrainoskeptics are waiting for negative developments in postwar Ukraine so they can exclaim “We told you so!” For decades to come, Ukraine might yet be stuck in a kind of limbo, not Central Europe but *Zwischeneuropa* (in-between-Europe) or even, to recall a term applied to Ukraine east of the River Dnipro by the early-twentieth-century imperial German geographer Albrecht Penck, *Hintereuropa* (roughly “back-end-of-Europe”).

Yet a better future for Ukraine and Europe is possible. It’s worth emphasizing the scale of this historic opportunity. Anchoring Ukraine (together with Moldova and Georgia) firmly in the geopolitical West would mean the effective end of the Russian empire. As a result, for the first time in European history, we would have a fully postimperial Europe—that is, a Europe with neither overseas nor land empires. It would mean another great advance, comparable in scale to that after 1989, toward the goal memorably formulated at that time as “Europe whole and free.”

Europe does not end at any clear line, but if this double enlargement were achieved, most of what is clearly geographical, historical, and cultural Europe would be brought together in one interlinked set of political, economic, and security communities. European power would be enhanced not just demographically and economically but also militarily, since Ukraine after this war is likely to have the largest, most combat-hardened army in Europe, with the second largest probably being Poland's and, if Scholz keeps his wartime promise of a *Zeitenwende* (a historic turning point) in German defense spending, the best equipped being Germany's. As a result, the US could concentrate more on the Indo-Pacific, including the threat from China to Taiwan. What a prize, not just for Europe but for the whole geopolitical West.

Here is our next generational task. The keyword for Europe, as for Ukraine, encapsulating both the means and the end, is *volya*. If we have the will, Europe can achieve this freedom.

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