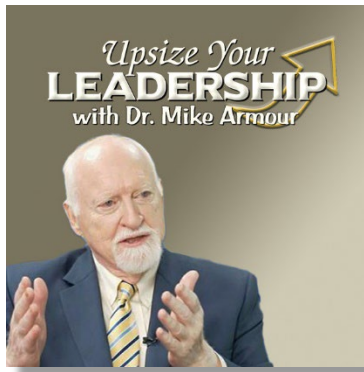


# War in Ukraine Backstories You Don't Hear (Part One)

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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The media has been reminding us lately that the war in Ukraine entered its third year this month. And as you know, further funding for Ukraine is a topic of major political debate in Washington and elsewhere.

I try to pay attention to both sides of the debate, because strong arguments can be made on both sides. As I listen to the back-and-forth, however, I often hear views which are inadequately informed – or even erroneously informed – about critical factors in this war. And these misinformed statements occur on both sides of the discussion.

Therefore, I want to set the record straight today on some issues which have been ignored in reporting on the war. Listeners will gain perspectives today that they are unlikely to hear anywhere else.

And these are not perspectives formed at a distance. They come from years of personal engagement with common, everyday citizens in both Russia and Ukraine. Once you have these perspectives, you will see complexities in this war that you may have never recognized before.

And for those listeners who are leaders, this episode will be a reminder of the power that culture and back-stories exert in shaping individual and group behavior. Greater sensitivity to that dynamic is sure to upsize your leadership.

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In January 2022, a war seemed to be pending in Eastern Europe. Russia had positioned personnel and equipment in staging areas that looked like preparation for an invasion of Ukraine.

At the time, most people in the United States would have struggled to find Ukraine on a map. They knew almost nothing about it apart from the fact that it had formerly been part of the Soviet Union. They had no idea that in terms of size, Ukraine is the largest country contained entirely within the European continent. And one of the best endowed in Europe in terms of agricultural and mineral resources.

Because I knew both countries and their people so well, I decided in late January of 2022 to devote two podcast episodes to characteristic qualities of the Ukrainian people which were likely to surprise us if war actually unfolded. For instance, I forecast that the West would be amazed at how much ingenuity and innovation the Ukrainians would demonstrate.

I recorded the podcasts and set the schedule for them to go live. Little did I know that the first episode would be aired less than 48 hours after the war began. With the Russian invasion everywhere in the news, the podcast drew immediate attention and listenership shot through the roof.

Since then, I've not used this program to focus on the conflict in Ukraine. But in general, the Ukrainian response has played out much as I anticipated in those initial episodes. What I did not know in February 2022 was whether the U.S. and Europe would invest themselves in Ukraine's defense. And even when I speculated that they might, I certainly had no idea of how substantial their investment might be or what form it might take.

But because the U.S. and Western Europe did indeed invest heavily in Ukraine's war effort, and because we are now debating whether to do more, the American public is at least more familiar with Russia and Ukraine, with Zelensky and Putin. But much of what we have heard has come from pundits and politicians who have never even set foot in Ukraine, much less explored the tremendous cultural and historical diversity that you encounter if you travel from Crimea in the south to the Carpathian mountains in the west, or from Donetsk and Kharkiv, hard against the Russian border in the east, to Lviv, tucked up tightly against Poland in the northwest.

Because they lack that perspective, opinion-makers frequently argue for resolutions of the war which are frankly untenable. In the end, their proposed solutions would amount to little more than kicking the can down the road, so to speak. I've therefore decided to revisit the Ukrainian situation in a short series of programs and fill in details which have largely gone unspoken.

What triggered me to do this was a recent conversation between two nationally known talk show personalities who are usually well-informed. They were discussing possible parameters for a peace settlement in Ukraine.

Their conclusion was that a settlement was possible if Ukraine would merely agree to let Russia keep the area where it already holds, specifically, the Donbas region in the east and Crimea in the south. Their rationale was, these parts of Ukraine are Russian in culture, Russian is their primary language, and religiously they are largely Russian Orthodox. The two commentators even implied that the people of these regions actually prefer to be part of Russia.

It would be a gross understatement to say that I was shocked at the untested assumptions behind their conclusion. Because Russian culture and language are so prominent in these regions, the two commentators concluded that the people there are more loyal to Russia than to Ukraine. As someone who has had offices and employees in downtown Donetsk and who has worked with every strata of Ukrainian society in the Donbas region and Crimea, I can tell you that their conclusion is dead wrong.

In the two decades that I have interacted with people in these regions – everyone from cabinet members and top church officials to school teachers to street vendors to coal miners to farmers – never once have I heard one of them express a preference to be part of Russia. To the contrary, they are generally outspoken about NOT wanting to be part of Russia. You see, they may like Russian culture, but they detest Russian rule.

Putin made the same miscalculation as the two talk show hosts did in their commentary. He thought that Donbas and Crimea would welcome the Russians with open arms. They did not. They fled by the millions to western Ukraine and nearby European countries. Close friends of mine have been doing humanitarian work among these refugees for the past two years. Virtually none of them will return to Donbas or Crimea if Russia ends up in permanent control of those regions.

If I had to offer a U.S. cultural equivalent, I would point to the city of San Antonio. From its beginning, San Antonio has had a heavy overlay of Hispanic culture, primarily Mexican in its tone. Spanish continues to be spoken in family and friendship circles, even by people who are third- and fourth-generation Americans. But none of them wants to be part of Mexico. They love their identity and their freedom as Americans, all the while loving their cultural traditions which trace back to Mexican roots.

A similar attitude prevailed across Donbas and Crimea prior to the invasion. And I'm not offering that opinion based on a brief vacation in the area. I was CEO of a humanitarian organization which literally worked with every elementary and secondary school in Eastern Ukraine, as well as several universities. We had offices and a team of employees in downtown Donetsk, on one of the first blocks which the Russians shelled and destroyed when the war began.

We were also heavily involved with dozens of orphanages and numerous children's and women's hospitals. As part of my work, I've addressed weeklong church and family conferences in Crimea and meetings of Ukraine's National Academy of Science in Kiev. I've work shoulder to shoulder with Ukrainians from every walk of life, from coal miners to members of the president's cabinet.

When Ukrainians learned that I hold a PhD in European intellectual and cultural history, they eagerly opened up to me about their own history and culture. My conclusions about what Ukrainians think derives from years of conversations like these in every corner of Ukraine.

To a person, these people view their nation's history with Russia through a lens of events which Americans generally do not take into account – events that have had a profound impact on the Ukrainian psyche.

For instance, Americans don't readily remember the millions of Ukrainians who starved to death in the bitter winters of 1932 and 1933. The total number of deaths was upwards of 3.5 million people, and many studies conclude that the true total was seven to ten million. And it was done intentionally, knowingly, and on purpose.

This came about as a result of the absolute failure of agrarian reforms which Moscow's communist regime imposed on Russian farmlands. Agricultural productivity plummeted so sharply that Stalin could not feed his people. His solution was to send his army into Ukraine during the harvest season and literally confiscate the entire wheat harvest, along with any other food products which the Ukrainians had grown.

Keep in mind that Ukraine had long been known as the "breadbasket of Europe" because of its legendary wheat production. The yellow stripe on the Ukrainian flag represents the color of expansive wheat fields, ripe for harvest, which literally stretch from horizon to horizon in many parts of Ukraine where I've traveled.

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Stalin stripped farm families (about 80% of the population at the time) of their entire food supply. He knew that it would lead to mass starvation in Ukraine. But better the Ukrainians than his own people. This was the first carefully engineered, mass genocide in the history of humanity. The Ukrainians can no more forget this event than the Jews can forget the holocaust. It's still commemorated each year.

Then, more recently, in 1986, the Russian government made another show of profound indifference toward the people of Ukraine by remaining silent for days after the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. For those unfamiliar with the geography of that region, Chernobyl is in the northernmost portion of Ukraine, just south of the border with Belarus.

Radiation damage from the accident was so extensive in the immediate area that miles of territory around Chernobyl will remain uninhabitable for 20,000 years. And we're not talking about a few neighborhoods. The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, as it's known, covers over 1000 square miles.

But it was not just the immediate vicinity of the accident which was affected. The damaged nuclear plant continued to spew radioactive clouds into the atmosphere for ten days before the reactor could be shut down. These emissions formed a poisonous radioactive cloud which settled across Ukraine while Moscow suppressed any news of the incident. Because Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union at the time, Moscow's purposeful silence left local officials in Ukraine in the dark about both the disaster and the resulting cloud. Being unaware, they took no defensive measures to limit the health and environmental hazards which the cloud posed. The general populace knew nothing about the accident until the radioactive cloud had done most of its damage – damage which will have health effects for generations.

The memory of the starvation and of Chernobyl are etched into Ukrainian consciousness just as indelibly as Pearl Harbor and 9-11 are embedded in our own. For the vast majority of Ukrainians, therefore, the thought of living again under Russian domination is a horrifying prospect. That's why they have fought so valiantly, relentlessly, and with such determination in this war.

Moreover, the Russian ground and air offensive has now made Moscow even more odious in the mind of Ukrainians. Only a tiny percentage of urban Ukrainians own a house. The vast majority live in crowded apartment buildings, most of them high-rises. Wherever Russia has attacked in Ukraine, apartment buildings have been among the first targets. This wholesale destruction of civilian homes and slaughter of families who lived there has only solidified and intensified Ukrainian resentment of Russia.

And since most of this destruction has occurred in areas controlled by Russian forces, you can easily see why the idea that eastern Ukraine would prefer to be part of Russia simply fails to take this deep-seated resentment into consideration.

Next week I will explain how this resentment of Russia has been channeled to form a sense of Ukrainian national identity which never existed before. For the first time in Ukraine's storied history, nationalistic pride and patriotism have swept across the country. And I'll show you how this development has translated into unanticipated Ukrainian success on the battlefield.

Will this success ultimately lead to some kind of Ukrainian victory? I'm not sure. With my 35-year naval career and a graduate degree in military history, I try to look at the dynamics of this war somewhat objectively, in spite of having obvious sympathies for Ukraine. No matter what

course Congress chooses for further funding for Ukraine, I'm certain of one thing: the Ukrainians will continue to do everything in their power to resist Russian rule, no matter what final settlement is reached.

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*Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at [www.LeaderPerfect.com](http://www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

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