

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

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This is the second episode in a multipart series that's exploring topics related to the war in Ukraine that gain little media attention. As I explained last week, I've chosen this theme because of the political debate now raging in the U.S. over whether to offer further military aid to Ukraine.

Listening to both sides of the debate, I routinely hear statements which are frankly completely uninformed. And they come from both sides of the discussion. Having spent years running humanitarian projects throughout Ukraine and across much of Russia, I know firsthand that realities on the ground don't conform with what we often hear from both the conservative and liberal media.

That's because media commentary typically draws on what can best be described as a superficial understanding of cultural and historical factors which make solutions to the conflict in Ukraine extremely complex. My purpose in this episode and others in this series is to give you a more informed perspective from which to evaluate positions on the war which you hear from politicians, pundits, and news sources.

While my sympathies are clearly with Ukraine, I'm not advocating for a particular solution to this conflict. I simply want my listeners to grasp just how challenging it will be to find any lasting resolution to the issues involved.

You see, I believe that for generations to come, the war in Ukraine will serve as a case study of how superficial analysis of conflict is short-sighted and largely unhelpful. And for leaders, that's a critical lesson to internalize. As a leader, you probably deal with parties in conflict more often than you like. Being sensitive to the multi-layered nature of conflict is therefore sure to upsize your leadership.

Since many of you may be tuning into this program without the benefit of the one last week, let me briefly recap what I talked about in that episode. I explained how history has shaped Ukrainian attitudes toward Russian rule. Even in regions of Ukraine where Russian is the most common language in daily discourse, people may love Russian culture, but detest Russian rule.

They remember that in 1932, Stalin organized the first human-engineered genocide in history against the Ukrainians, when he purposefully starved at least 3.5 million of them to death. They also remember that toward the end of the Soviet Union, Moscow said nothing for days after the

horrendous nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. As a result, the radioactive cloud from the explosion wafted across Ukraine, poisoning the land, people, crops, and farm animals. The Great Starvation and Chernobyl are etched as unforgettably in the Ukrainian psyche as Pearl Harbor and 9-11 are embedded in our own.

I took the position last week that Putin probably misjudged how deeply the average Ukrainian resents what their country has suffered under Russian rule. He therefore underestimated how staunchly the Ukrainians would resist the Russian invasion.

This determined resistance is why, underequipped as they are, the Ukrainians have struck amazing blows on Russian strategic assets in the war zone. And they have done it all along the battlefield. How have they done it? In large measure because of the effectiveness of the Ukrainian resistance movement in Russian-occupied territory. This underground movement has carried out several assassinations of top Russian officials or sympathizers. But more importantly, they keep a constant eye on Russian forces and alert the Ukrainian defense forces of impending movements by Russian military elements.

Within the past two weeks, for instance, the Ukrainians used drones to destroy millions of dollars of advanced Russian military equipment secretly brought in-country to augment Russia's planned spring offensive. The underground in Crimea found the large buildings in which the equipment was hidden and passed the coordinates to Ukrainian forces, apparently along with information that the huge doors to the storage buildings were standing wide open. Ukraine then literally flew drones inside the building, scoped out the highest value targets, and took them out.

This kind of determined underground resistance is another manifestation of how Ukrainians want no part of Russian hegemony. If settlement of the current war leaves Donbas and Crimea in Russian hands, the conflict will not end. It will merely transform itself into a new kind of standoff.

The Ukrainian underground resistance which already operates successfully behind Russian lines will gain even greater support from the populace, in my judgment. They will mount on-going guerilla attacks against their Russian overlords. Russia will retaliate with a heavy hand, tempting Ukraine to fund and arm the guerillas surreptitiously, no matter the terms of the peace settlement, so that the tension between Russia and Ukraine continues unabated.

It's highly unlikely that either side in this conflict will be willing to agree to a demilitarized zone spatially separating Russian and Ukrainian forces, not even a DMZ patrolled by an international peace-keeping mission. Thus, the two militaries will continue to glare at each other across whatever the final line of demarcation turns out to be. And it will only be a matter of time before some incident sparks renewed armed clashes.

Because Putin miscalculated the depth of Ukrainian resentment of Russia, his invasion inadvertently produced a nationalistic fervor in Ukraine that had never existed before. Prior to the war Ukrainians had a sense of country, but not a true spirit of nationalism. What this war has done is to galvanize Ukrainian resentment of Russia into a fierce sense of nationalist identity.

Russia's war planners failed to foresee this nationalistic development and what it would do to Ukrainian determination and willingness to undergo deprivation to retain their independence. I've not been back to Ukraine since the war began, but many of my associates have been there repeatedly. They all talk about how the war has gelled this newborn sense of patriotism.

Why has this sense of nationalism only now developed? Because for centuries, Ukraine has been controlled or partitioned by neighboring empires in both Europe and Asia. Ukraine as a whole never had extended independence until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Ukraine was not an expansionist country itself. It never made moves to extend its borders to include neighboring territory.

However, because it borders so many different nations, various portions of Ukraine have frequently been under foreign control. As a result, Ukraine ended up with an ethnically and linguistically mixed population. Enclaves of cultural uniqueness abound everywhere.

The Tatars, a remnant of the Ottoman era, have long been a prominent community in Crimea, preserving their own language and culture, despite wholesale efforts by Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia to exterminate them. By contrast, around Lviv, long a part of Poland and still very Polish in its architecture and art, many public classrooms still use Polish as the language of instruction.

When nations are highly diverse in terms of language and culture, developing a unified sense of national identity does not come easily, or even very often. Look at the historic difficulty of integrating the Basque-speaking regions of Spain into the rest of the nation. Or China's challenge at getting Tibetans and the Uyghurs to see themselves as citizens of China.

The United States was able to develop a nationalist identity in large part because from its earliest formation, English was the universal language of law, governance, and education. Individual neighborhoods were able to preserve their Irish or German or Scandinavian or Italian heritage, or what have you, which fostered the preservation of ethnic diversity. But they all adopted the English language and honored a common set of national symbols and customs which defined American identity.

One reason Ukrainians are attracted to us as Americans is because of the diversity which our nation has been able to embrace culturally. One of the most frequent questions which Ukrainians put to me when I worked there regularly was, "How can we keep our diversity, but blend it into the kind of pride in our nation which you Americans have?"

I became a close friend to Ukraine's Minister of Religion. On one of his trips to the U.S., I took him and his wife on a tour of Washington D.C. I will never forget him standing at the Jefferson Memorial and weeping. In something akin to awe-struck wonder, he marveled at Jefferson's vision of a united nation which not only rose above diversity, but actually celebrated it.

As the minister of religion, he dealt with tensions over diversity almost every day. In Crimea, Muslim communities were abundant and sometimes militant. In Donbas, Russian Orthodoxy was dominant and did everything possible to minimize the influence of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, formed after the Bolshevik Revolution and to this day not considered legitimate by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Further west, in central Ukraine, there was a role reversal. While there are notable Russian Orthodox cathedrals to be found there, particularly in Kiev, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church carried more influence and saw the Russian Orthodox Church as a longtime puppet of Moscow.

Moving toward the Carpathian mountains in the west, the religious landscape changes again. In western Ukraine is a strand of Christianity which most Americans have never heard of. It's called Greek Catholicism.

These are churches whose origins were Orthodox, but who were cut off from communication with the Orthodox patriarch in Constantinople during the Ottoman Empire. They therefore formed an alliance with the papacy in Rome, an affiliation which they still maintain. Their liturgy is Orthodox, but they derive their ordination and hierarchy from the pope, yet with a twist. The Greek Christians follow the Orthodox calendar for feast days, including the Orthodox Christmas season. Their priests are not required to be celibate, as in Catholicism, but are allowed to marry, as is the case in Orthodoxy.

With these types of cultural distinctions and centuries of domination by one empire or another – the Ottomans, the Poles and Lithuanians, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then the Russian Empire in the 19th century, the Soviet Union in the 20th – Ukraine never developed a unifying identity that gave its people a truly nationalistic spirit. The raw materials for nationalism were present, but the sense of nationalism itself had never materialized.

That is, until the Russian invasion. It became the vehicle by which the latent drive for national identity finally found its legs and pulled the Ukrainians together as one. The question is whether, when this war is over, Ukraine will be able to capitalize on this sense of nationhood.

An article in the *Kyiv Post* last December outlined the challenge. Prior to the war, Ukraine's population had been in decline for over 30 years, from a peak of 51.6 million in 1991 to about 45 million when the war began. This was largely due to a decline in the birthrate in the later years of the Soviet Union and the mass exodus of younger people to more promising economies once the Cold War ended.

Since the Russian invasion, ten million people have fled Ukraine. Another 13 million are behind Russian lines. Once military and civilian deaths in the conflict are factored in, the portion of Ukraine still free from Russia is probably in the neighborhood of 20 million and certainly no more than 25 million. With the passage of time, those who have gone abroad are less and less likely ever to return, given that so much of their homeland is in shambles and that Ukraine's war-ravaged economy will lack the economic clout to rebuild on a massive scale.

Compounding the challenge is the amount of land taken out of circulation because of land mines that will remain once the war concludes. Today the exclusion area due to mines covers about 170,000 square miles, about 30% of the territory which constituted Ukraine at the time of the invasion and an area roughly the size of Florida. In a nation which is largely rural and dependent on agriculture for its livelihood, why should displaced people return once the war is over?

And one final consideration is also paramount. Will there be enough young adults left in the country at the end of the war to rebuild a sustainable economy? Even before the Russians invaded, Ukraine's demographic distribution was lopsidedly older. Almost a third of the population was over 50. Had we divided the adult population below 75 into age brackets, by far the smallest ten-year bracket was 20-30 years of age. Thus, Ukraine began this war with only a miniscule military-age population.

As a result, the average age in the Ukraine military at present is about 45 – this despite the fact that men of military age have been forbidden to leave the country. Once the war is over, policy-makers in Kiev fully expect these same young men to leave in mass to pursue careers elsewhere in the world. National policy planners anticipate that at least five million more people will move abroad once restrictions are lifted on those in their twenties and thirties.

It's fairly clear that powerful voices in Washington are beginning to lean toward a settlement which would permanently freeze the boundary between Russia and Ukraine along lines which approximate the current battlefield. What would such a settlement mean for Ukraine's long-term prospects?

The article which I quoted from the *Kyiv Post* addressed that question. It presumes that few who have fled abroad will return, because they either have no homes or villages in Ukraine to return to or because they would be unable to fend economically should they return to their homeland.

With the anticipated postwar exodus of military-age men, the article estimates that Ukraine is likely to be left with a population of only 15 million people – with so few young families that the nation's population is no longer sustainable. Nor would there be enough working age men and women to support the massive population of pensioners who will be more dependent than ever on government support.

This data and these trendlines may be new revelations for us as Americans, but the Ukrainians talk openly about the challenge. They are bright and extremely well-read. They are not oblivious to the uphill road that is ahead of them. And that awareness, coupled with their newfound spirit of nationalism, is behind their determination to recapture Crimea and to push Russia out of Donbas.

If Western aid in general and American aid in particular does not continue, I'm rather certain that the Ukrainians will fight on. When they refuse a peace settlement, some in the West will chalk it up to stupidity or stubbornness. I think that the Ukrainians will see it as the only path open to them. If the conflict ends by redrawing national boundaries along the current lines of conflict, Ukraine may not have a future. Retaking the extensive coal mines in Donbas and the ports of Crimea at least give them an economic foothold on the future.

I can therefore see them concluding that if circumstances force them to choose between a peace settlement which seals their ultimate demise or fighting on with even a remote hope of snatching victory from defeat, they will opt to fight on.

Dr. Mike Armour is the president of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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