

Ukraine Reborn (1 of 2)
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A psychological exercise is to look out at an audience from a balcony and ask: How many red hats do you see? Until you pay specific attention, you don't know. Once asked, all the red hats pop out at you. Thinking about Ukraine is the same sort of thing. Most Americans couldn't tell you where it is, but that is changing now. We have Ukraine on the brain.

I should say that I have it on the brain. It has been there all along without my being aware of it. I used to think of it as THE Ukraine, which was not a country exactly, but a part of the Russian Empire and later Soviet Union. It has only been Ukraine, a country, since the fall of the USSR. In reality, however, it has been a country much longer than that.

Ukraine was an ancient duchy, an independent country, until the Russian Czarina, Katherine the Great, with the stroke of a pen, eliminated the duke and absorbed Ukraine into the Russian Empire. Despite the Ukrainians' desire for independence, Russia needed its grain to feed their empire. It was Russia's bread basket. It also became its energy storehouse, from coal to oil and ultimately nuclear plants.

Back to what I knew about Ukraine? My mother was born in a town not far from Chernobyl, almost a century before the horrific Chernobyl disaster. She told me that she was born in Russia, never mentioning Ukraine. Millions of American immigrants shared her experience, calling themselves Russian, not Ukrainian.

During World War II, the Nazis invaded and posed a dilemma: at first, the invasion looked like a liberation from the hated Soviet union, but soon the population learned what being part of the new Nazi German empire meant. The Jewish population, which had an ugly history under Ukrainian rule, had a new horror under the Nazis: extermination.

Before the industrialized death camps opened, Nazi death squads traveled around the newly conquered Ukraine, rounding up Jews, and shooting them to death. They had the Jews dig trenches, line up at the edge, and machine gun them. Baba Yar was one of these trenches. They soon realized they were running out of bullets. There had to be a more cost-effective method of mass murder. Gas chambers.

Back to history: the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin created a deliberate famine to punish the Ukrainian farmers resisting the Communist collectivization movement. He forced the farmers to harvest huge crops of wheat and then send it all to Russia, starving them and the rest of Ukraine. Ukraine was a carpet of corpses, a horror kept from the world by keeping reporters out and diplomats muzzled. They did this twice over just a few years.

During World War I, Ukraine was a killing ground where Turks and British met in unequal combat, resulting in mega British deaths. This was the Crimean portion of the war, identified as Russian, not Ukrainian. Winston Churchill made his greatest blunder there, leaning war leadership the hard way.

Some of Russia's greatest artists, writers, musicians, were really Ukrainian, but never so identified. Russia's gift to Ukraine, however, was massive corruption, which they learned too well.

What we knew about Ukraine before calling it Ukrainian was a history of persecution, persecution by Russia and persecution of Ukraine's own minorities (Jews and Tatars) by Ukraine itself.

I recently rewatched one of my favorite movies, Fiddler on the Roof. I thought of it as the story of a Russian village at the turn of the 20th century, a story that told of the expulsion of that part of Russia's Jewish population, who emigrated to the United States. These new Americans gave us our garment industry, musicians (once Fiddlers on the Roof), comedians, actors, scientists, professors, all of them Ukrainian Jews, not Russian Jews. One would think that living in a place for a thousand years might entitle them to such an identity.

Next week, we will visit the reborn Ukraine, which is playing a huge role in the world today, reclaiming its identity as a vital and talented new European power.

683 words

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