

Serhiy Kvit

Media, History, and Education

Three Ways to Ukrainian Independence

With a preface by Diane Francis

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Preface

Serhiy Kvit is a well-respected Ukrainian commentator and President of the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. In his former capacity as Minister of Education and Science in Ukraine, Kvit helped bring about educational reforms that, among other innovations, enabled collaboration between Ukrainian scientists and businesses. His academic research focuses on media and educational reforms, the topics of his several books and the many articles he has published around the world.

Media, History, and Education: Three Ways to Ukrainian Independence, his newest book documents and analyzes the three pillars—media, education, civil society—that have supported Ukraine’s liberation from Soviet and Russian influences, a process that extends into our present and has culminated in the current war. A free, unfettered media in Ukraine has proved elusive—due to government control and ownership by oligarchs. However, since Ukraine’s departure from the Soviet Union in 1991, and the USSR’s dissolution, generations of enterprising and investigative journalists across Ukraine have furthered the cause of true independence even as they have continuously battled the country’s systemic Soviet-style corruption.

At the same time, Ukraine’s educational pillar has served to correct historical misconceptions. Ukrainian academics have published many textbooks and historical studies that successfully refute and disprove decades of Russian disinformation and historical revisionism. The most poisonous claim of all is that Ukraine is not, and never has been, a nation or an ethnic group with a distinct identity. Professor Kvit and others have dedicated themselves to setting the record straight and their activity has, in turn, informed and emboldened the development of Ukraine’s already cohesive and collaborative civil society.

The result has been two street revolutions staged by Ukrainians, who gradually advanced their chosen destiny as a Western-oriented, free-market, and democratic polity. These movements gained in popularity and worked to overthrow Ukraine’s rotten

oligarchy, its corrupt governments, and Russia's continuing, corrosive influence.

The book addresses all the modern tools that assisted this liberation—from social media to journalism schools and organizations—and also explains who Ukrainians are, why they have struggled relentlessly for a century despite Russian depredations, and why their cause has won the admiration of human rights champions and the world's democracies.

Ukraine is a nation still struggling to be free. The journey has been long, but Ukrainians have been steadfast, as Dr. Serhiy Kvit so adeptly recounts. His book is a must-read for any who want to understand why the world is now at war with Vladimir Putin and his Kremlin. It also reveals why Ukrainians will never give up and why the spirit of the Ukrainian people will never fade. Glory to Ukraine!

Toronto, December 2022

Diane Francis

Foreword

This book focuses on the humanitarian and ideological components of Ukrainians' struggle for independence from Russia in the twenty-first century. As the title suggests, it is about media, history, and education. In the past, Ukrainians, seeking to preserve their own identity during the long period of statelessness, would mostly turn to history. Only after independence was restored, in 1991, did it become possible to talk about domestic educational and media spheres.

The current ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war cannot be viewed as a distant, localized, or peripheral massacre somewhere in the post-Soviet space, no matter how many Western politicians and intellectuals wish it to be seen that way. This war has a crucial impact on global economic and political life, and it is, without exaggeration, changing our world. In particular, its events push us to reconsider many issues previously raised in global discussions which were either thought to have long ago lost their original meaning or, for various reasons, fell out of context.

After the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the bipolar world, Western democracies viewed the processes taking place in Russia and the post-Soviet space as largely irrelevant to their everyday existence. "The world's largest gas station" and, simultaneously, a "fake news factory", Putin's Russia gradually became a cozy partner for many Western experts, business representatives, and political leaders.

When the Soviet bureaucratic dictatorship collapsed, many international champions of social experiments (i.e. "de facto" Russian communist sympathizers) mutated into fans of Putin's regime because they saw the Russian President as advancing a "special path" of social development, or an "alternative" to Western liberal democracy. Both far-right and far-left activists, supported by Russia around the world in order to spread chaos and destroy international law and the global security system, today act as the natural allies of the Putin regime.

Often detached from real-life agendas, their rhetoric continues to thrive despite news of atrocities in Ukraine because it is supported by established stereotypes: the consensus on the need to counter the “rich and powerful”, to oppose political corruption. These stereotypes gain strength because of outstanding problems in education, primarily related to the lack of critical thinking.

During the last three decades, Western think tanks, which specialize in Russia and Eastern Europe and ignore Ukraine, have not developed an adequate perspective on the post-Soviet world. Often, they even took a pro-Russian position. However difficult these “experts” find it to explain why Russia attacked Ukraine in 2014 and then launched a full-scale invasion in 2022, I knew from my early childhood that it would eventually happen. It was just a matter of time. All I had to know was the history of my family and the history of my people.

Talk about the current war as the “Ukrainian conflict” looks strange. It would be like presenting World War II as the “Polish conflict”. Overlooked in this designation is the chauvinistic sense of the concept of “Russian Orthodox civilization”, the fascism of “sovereign democracy”, the dramatic consequences of the Russian communists’ and the Russian Orthodox Church’s political consent, and the natural imperialism of Russian liberals. Also neglected were the elimination of the few remaining independent Russian media outlets and the self-government of national autonomies within Russia.

On the other hand, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine was actually labeled by the West as a part of Eurasia, that is, it was seen as falling within Russia’s sphere of influence. The penetration of Russian special services, businesses, Russian language and culture into Ukraine was extremely destructive, and included the export of corruption, an oligarchic economy, and tools for suppressing social activity. Remember, for instance, Russia’s “temniks”¹ for the media. So, what was there to prevent Vladimir

1 Informal political instructions to journalists presenting a list of “desirable” and “undesirable” topics for coverage. The word “topic” in the Ukrainian language, and in the national political context, is consonant with “darkness” and the

Putin from returning Ukraine to his rejuvenated Russian Empire and thus reviving the Soviet Union?

To answer this question, it is necessary to know and understand a lot not only about Russia but also about Ukraine, which is an additional challenge for the West. The explanation lies on the surface: Ukrainians and Russians have dramatically different political cultures. Genuine leadership in Ukrainian political life belongs to the country's strong civil society, which maintains such values as the freedom of speech and freedom of choice in focus. It is important that after the Revolution of Dignity (2014–2015), the Ukrainian nation gained all the characteristics of a political nation.

The unity of Ukrainians and their readiness to defend their independence with arms in hand enable us to talk about the democratic and military traditions of the Ukrainian people. I have tried to consider some political phenomena that are still viewed in a mostly speculative way. These include an armed civil society and the character of political leadership: in Ukraine, it is not professional politicians who are the real leaders leading the people, but, on the contrary, it is society that chooses politicians and pushes them forward, encouraging them to become leaders. Therefore, this provides a good example, not of the role of the individual in history, but about the role of the nation in history.

It is important to understand that Russia's war against Ukraine did not start on February 24, 2022, not even in 2014. The long war aimed at the complete destruction of Ukraine has been waged continuously since 1622, when all copies of Kyrylo Tranquilion-Stavrovetskyi's *Teacher's Gospel*, printed in old Ukrainian in Ukraine, were burned deliberately in Russia. Four hundred years later, Russians still continue to burn Ukrainian books, destroying libraries, educational and cultural institutions.

According to the National Information Bureau, as of May 2023, the Russian army had completely destroyed more than 400 educational institutions in Ukraine, damaging more than 2000.

“obscuring” of the freedom of speech. This extremely successful Russian practice of applying pressure on journalists and the media was rejected by Ukrainian society and turned out to be a complete failure.

Russians killed 480, injured 968, and deported about 20,000 Ukrainian children. Taking these facts into account, along with the entire history of the relations between the two countries, we realize that Russia acts as an “existential enemy of Ukraine”.²

The reasons for Russia’s destruction of the global security system and the reasons for the attack on Ukraine in 2022 are closely related. Having proved unable to effectively manage its own country, Putin’s regime chose to pursue the path of appealing to the historical myth of the “greatness” of Russia. For such a path to be possible at all, Ukraine must be taken back under its influence, observing, incidentally, that Ukraine and Kyiv belonged to the genuine lands of historical Rus’. Additionally, there is the desire to get a hold of Ukraine’s human resources – required, in particular, to rebuild the Russian army. A particular problem for it is the absence of brave, proactive and competent Ukrainian soldiers and officers who, during the several hundred years of Moscow occupation, made up the backbone of the Russian armed forces. So, there can be no “great Russia” without Ukraine.

For Ukrainians, their own identity naturally intersects with the European one, both from a historical and a value point of view. Life has shown that Ukrainians are ready to idealistically defend these values more than some representatives of Old Europe, who often remember first of all their interests in the circumstances of “real politics”, where many things look very relative.³ Open letter

2 The expression used by Volodymyr Vasylenko, professor of the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Ukraine to Great Britain.

3 Thus, Switzerland maintains neutrality towards the crimes of the Russian army, blocking the delivery of weapons to Ukraine. At the same time, according to the investigations of the Swiss publications SRF and Die Wochenzeitung, since March 2022, the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Swiss factories have received 75 tonnes of gold from Russia for processing, taking advantage of the fact that it is imported through London and does not violate sanctions. “75 tonnes of Russian gold imported into Switzerland since beginning of war”, *European Pravda*, June 30, 2023, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2023/06/30/7409354/>; Olivier Christe, “Goldhandel: Maschine zum Reinwaschen”, *Die Wochenzeitung*, June 29, 2023, <https://www.woz.ch/2326/goldhandel/maschine-zum-reinwaschen!/EWMS1KXQK499>; Marcel Niedermann, “Drehscheibe Schweiz: Auf der Spur von Putins Gold”, *SRF*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.srf.ch/news/international/drehscheibe-schweiz-auf-der-spur-von-putins-gold>.

of Ukrainian writer Oksana Zabuzhko to Dutch writer Arnon Grunberg also about the flaws in European memory and cultural memorialization:

“I was reminded that the Magdeburg law lasted for almost 600 years in Ukraine: it began being used in the thirteenth century, during the Galicia-Volhynia dynasty, and was liquidated by the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century along with the autonomous Cossack Hetmanate’s other institutions.

If you look at the map of this war, a few especially dramatic, multi-episode, already legendary battles stand out: Hostomel, where on 24 February 2022, the Russian paratroopers failed to take control of the airport and retreated, unaware that the only force opposing them was the local territorial defence; Chernihiv – the city of millennia-old churches on the UNESCO list of global cultural heritage, which the Russians razed to the ground from 24 February to 1st of April, as they would later raze Mariupol and Bakhmut, but never managed to take; Nizhyn that held out under siege, as if back in the Middle Ages, for a month, (when food started to run out, the local farmers snuck milk and flour into the city by roundabout routes and distributed them to the residents) but did not allow the invaders in – I cannot fail to mention that these have for centuries been cities of free citizens: Hostomel since 1614, Chernihiv since 1622, Nizhyn since 1625. It’s a good thing they had defended their right to be free.

The border of Europe now lies – and not metaphorically at all – here, along the old eastern reach of the Magdeburg law: every Eastern-Ukrainian city (town, village) that faces the enemy is a fortress on the frontier. And the future of Europe depends directly on whether they will stand their ground or fall.”⁴

As we can see, the current Russian-Ukrainian war is the result of an irreconcilable confrontation of values. The view that Ukraine must be defended against Russian invaders, that nothing must be forgotten, and ultimately that revenge must be taken against occupiers and criminals pervades Ukrainian society. In this context, any appeals from international experts to the Christian value of forgiveness or to recognize the existence of a separate category of Russians who “suffer” under Putin’s regime are seen as irrelevant. This requires more detailed explanation.

4 Oksana Zabuzhko, “Dear Arnon, remember: war in my dear Ukraine is Europe’s defining moment,” *Voxeurop*, June 1, 2023, <https://voxeurop.eu/en/oksanazabuzhko-dont-forget-ongoing-war-ukraine-defining-moment-europe/>.

The Biblical injunction to turn the other cheek to the criminal correlates with the metaphor of a “fruitful” hermeneutical conversation, that is, when a criminal internally changes through repentance, or when both sides have the desire, ability, and capacity to listen to and understand each other. In other words, mutual understanding is possible only under the condition of rapprochement by both sides. It is precisely this condition that is lacking given the total support for Putin’s regime expressed by Russian society. Polls and surveys show that their society has no shame; instead, it is proud of the crimes committed by the Russian army in Ukraine.

Therefore, entering into the thankless business of political predictions, I must say that Russia has no future within its current borders and the present geopolitical configuration. Its existence will end when feelings of shame, dignity, and the desire to initiate an independent, non-imperial, history awaken in that “prison of nations”. Accordingly, Ukraine will move from the status of a frontier of Western civilization to that of a regular civilized state, where the values embodied in the concepts of freedom and justice will be fully secured: it will be a free and effective country for its free citizens.

Kyiv, July 2023