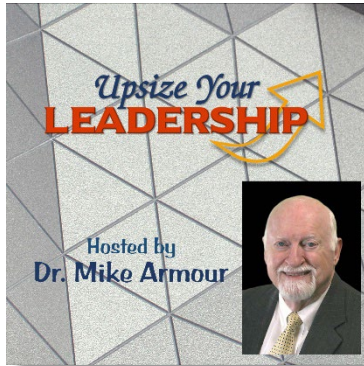


A Ukraine You Never Hear About

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When you're dealing with a complex situation, how important is it for you to know the story behind the story? I find that kind of knowledge extremely helpful. By knowing the backstory, I can make better sense out of what's happening now.

Well, today I am departing from my typical podcast topic to give you some of the backstory to a situation which is dominating the news cycles this week, and one whose nuances I understand quite well. I'm talking about the faceoff between Russia and Ukraine. My purpose is not partisan. It's not my aim to advocate for a particular policy or course of action. I simply want to give you some background that the media are not touching on, largely because so few people in the U.S. know

much about Ukraine at all. And that includes journalists.

On the other hand, I have worked extensively in Ukraine, literally in every corner of it. For several years I was president of an international non-profit which was conducting humanitarian operations nationwide. In fact, our primary operations center was in downtown Donetsk, the primary city into which Russian troops moved earlier this week.

The projects which we were funding put me in close working relationships with everyone from local mayors and magistrates to members of the president's cabinet. And because most of our efforts targeted the poorest and most disenfranchised portion of the population, I became intimately acquainted with the values and mindsets of everyday citizens. It's against that backdrop that I want to share with you the story of a Ukraine which you might otherwise never hear about.

The events playing out in Ukraine currently have a centuries-long, very nuanced backstory. I can't possibly give you that entire backstory in a short single podcast. I can't even give you a thorough summary of that backstory. But I can help you make better sense of what's happening in Ukraine by sharing some salient facts about the Ukraine you never hear about.

First, you should know that Ukraine is not some relatively small nation in Europe. In terms of land-mass, it's the largest nation entirely within Europe. Russia, of course is larger, but the bulk of its territory is in Asia. Ukraine is roughly the size of Texas, with a population also comparable to Texas.

Second, you should know that for hundreds of years, powerful empires have continuously sought control of lands which now comprise Ukraine. In terms of trade routes between the Mediterranean nations and Asia, Ukraine is strategically located on the Black Sea and fed from the north by the mighty Dnieper River. Much of southern and eastern Ukraine fell under the de facto domination of the Ottoman Empire in the late medieval era. Later, as Europe pushed back against the Ottomans, the Austro-Hungarian Empire established a strong hold on western portions of modern-day Ukraine. Then, as the Russian Empire began to exert itself, czarist regimes took over eastern territories along the Sea of Azov.

Along the way, moreover, other nations had their hands on Ukrainian territory. As early as the fourteenth century, much of northwestern Ukraine was considered part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In the sixteenth century the Lithuanians and Poles made league together to form a commonwealth, and Polish influence and power became pronounced in the northwest. In fact, the city of Lviv, Ukraine is the best-preserved example of 17th and 18th century Polish architecture in Europe, having escaped aerial bombardment during the Second World War. And some schools in the area still instruct students in Polish.

All of this is to say that Ukraine has had a very fragmented national identity. In fact, during the First World War, Ukrainians actually fought on both sides of the eastern front, dependent on which nation controlled the territory from which a soldier was conscripted into service.

What has been playing out there in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century is the struggle of Ukraine to develop that national identity which the country has never had. It's very name is derived from the somewhat peripheral role to which it was relegated by other European nations as the modern world unfolded. *Ukraina* is the Slavic word for the borderland or boundary or for what we Americans might have once called the frontier. The Russian Empire saw Ukraine as a vast frontier which served as a buffer between the Islamic world of the Ottoman Empire and the Orthodox world of eastern Europe. The Russians therefore came to refer to that region as the *ukraina*, which then gave us the modern name. Anytime that you hear people using the term "the Ukraine," they are using a phrase which hearkens back to the days when Ukraine was viewed as "the frontier," again to borrow from terminology which we once used in America.

As a result of its history, Ukraine is divided linguistically. In eastern Ukraine the Russian language is dominant. As you move westward, Ukrainian becomes increasingly dominant, until it becomes almost the exclusive language by the time that you reach the Carpathian Mountains in the west. The nation is likewise divided religiously. When the communists came to power in Russia at the end of the First World War, leaders of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine rejected the Leninist movement. They therefore made a formal break with the Russian Orthodox Church and formed the Ukrainian Orthodox Church. The tension between the two churches is still pronounced, as the Russian Orthodox Church has treated the Ukrainian branch of Orthodoxy as illegitimate.

Once Ukraine fell to the communists, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was heavily repressed by the government, which promoted the primacy of the Russian Orthodox hierarchy. But Ukrainian Orthodoxy continued to sustain itself and re-emerged as a powerful influence once the Soviet Union collapsed. As a consequence, in cities like Kiev, impressive Russian Orthodox cathedrals and Ukrainian Orthodox cathedrals stand in relative proximity to one another. In general, however, Russian Orthodoxy is most dominant in eastern Ukraine, with Ukrainian Orthodoxy becoming more prominent as you move east to west.

But once you get west of Kiev, the religious picture becomes even more complicated. In western Ukraine you find many churches which are known as Greek Catholics. These are churches which were once Orthodox, looking to the Greek Orthodox patriarch in Constantinople (today's Istanbul) as their leader. When the rise of the Ottoman Empire made communication with Constantinople all but impossible, they built a relationship with the papacy in Rome. The result is a network of churches in western Ukraine (and also in the Baltics) who have preserved an Orthodox liturgy, but whose clergy derive their priestly authority from Rome.

Moreover, because of its location, western Ukraine was influenced by the Protestant Reformation when it took place just to the north. It's not unusual, therefore, to find churches in western Ukraine which are either clearly identified with Protestantism or show Protestant influence in their practices.

By now, I suppose, some of you are asking why I've taken such a tour through the religious history of Ukraine. It's because this religious diversity compounds the problem of forming a national identity. Religion is extremely important to the people of Ukraine, even to the ones who are not particularly devout. Religious alliances tend to coalesce into political alliances. The Orange Revolution, for example, which was Ukraine's first attempt to establish a post-Soviet democracy, was led primarily by people from western Ukraine, where religious pluralism has been a way of life for centuries. In my travels, I found that the people who were most opposed to the Orange Revolution were either old-line communists or those with a deep loyalty to the Russian Orthodox heritage.

Aggravating these divisions is a deep resentment of Russia that becomes more intense as you move westward. The Ukrainians have not forgotten that Stalin starved millions of their people to death and did so purposefully in the 1930s. The death toll was particularly heavy in the wheat-growing regions of the nation. Ukraine was often referred to as the bread-basket of Europe because it grew and exported so much wheat. When Stalin's collectivism of Russian farms caused a sharp drop in production, he sent soldiers in to confiscate the entire harvests in Ukraine, leaving people with literally no food to survive the winter.

The story of the starvation still lives on vividly in the cultural memory of the areas where it was felt most intently. As Ukraine established its post-Soviet independence, anti-Russian sentiment became open and outspoken. So much so that in western Ukraine, you were often shunned if you tried to carry on a conversation in Russian instead of Ukrainian. I once went into an electronics store near the Carpathian mountains to buy a replacement for a critical piece of equipment which had been irreparably damaged. The item I wanted to purchase would have cost the equivalent of a thousand dollars in U.S. currency at the time. No small sale for any Ukrainian retail store in those days.

Because I had absolutely no knowledge of Ukrainian, I approached a salesman and explained in Russian what I wanted to buy. He stiffened, turned briskly, and walked away simply because I had spoken to him in Russian. I had to go back later with an interpreter who was fluent in Ukrainian in order to consummate the purchase.

Even at that, however, anti-Russian sentiment had not gelled into a Ukrainian sense of nationalistic pride. One of the entities with which we worked closely in those days were the Pioneer Youth Camps, begun in the Soviet era, but continuing today as a primary summer experience for the vast majority of children. The organization which I headed was providing materials and staffing for many of these camps. Fifteen years ago, camp directors would ask us, as part of our interaction with their campers, to help instill a bit of the sense of patriotism and

national pride which they saw as evident in the lives of Americans. They freely confessed that Ukraine was far from having a sufficient unifying sense of national identity.

But that situation changed markedly about seven years ago. When Putin annexed Crimea and unleashed civil war in the Donetsk and Luhansk areas, the independence-minded Ukrainians rallied almost immediately around a level of national pride which was previously unknown. The spirit of patriotism has been steadily rising ever since.

In my judgment, Putin has not realized how much the national spirit in Ukraine has changed in the last decade. He does not recognize, I believe, the depth of unity behind Ukrainian defiance of his demands. What this means for the future of the current hostilities, I cannot predict. Personally, I fear for the worst and worry about what may befall many dear friends all across Ukraine.

My guess is, however, that the world may be surprised at how determinedly the Ukrainians resist any Russian effort to overrun their nation. Given their far superior military might, the Russians would likely prevail in an all-out war. And they could possibly do so very quickly, given the manpower and equipment which they have in place. But the conflict is likely to be bloody and prolonged, with the Russians capturing large swaths of land, but finding themselves unable to pacify this newly conquered territory – especially in the heart of Ukraine around Kiev and even more notably in areas like Lviv to the west. There a resolute resistance force could easily develop, go underground, and provide on-going harassment of occupying forces.

In short, this is a complex situation to understand if you are only a casual, remote observer. It's even difficult to understand if you're quite familiar with the circumstances. What I hope I've communicated to you in this episode is the level of this complexity. News commentators and talking heads sometimes speak as though Ukraine is one homogenous entity. They fail to realize that Ukraine is a country with immense cultural diversity and one struggling to define its national identity. In the annals of history, national identity has often been determined by what happened in times of warfare. The same thing may be happening in Ukraine today.

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