

ESSAY

Why Ukrainians Are Prepared to Fight

Eight years ago, the country rose up against the corruption and brutality of Russian domination, forging a new kind of civic bond and commitment

By Marci Shore

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On Feb. 24, Russia invaded Ukraine. In the early morning hours, before dawn, Russian artillery began bombarding Kyiv, Odessa and Kharkiv.

A few weeks earlier, as Vladimir Putin was ostentatiously amassing troops on the border, I had sent an email to two journalist friends in Kyiv.

“Ia s vami,” I wrote in Russian. I’m with you.

“We’re always mobilized,” one wrote back, “and ready to work, whatever comes.”

These women are still young, yet between them they have covered war and revolution in their own country, Belarus, Egypt and Iraq. Born around the time of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, they come from a country that has been through a lot.

During the World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution and the civil war that followed, Kyiv was occupied by five different armies. In the 1930s, Stalin engineered a famine that killed more than three and a half million Ukrainians. Then came the Great Terror, the World War II, Nazi occupation, the Holocaust, ethnic cleansing, mass deportation to the Gulag, nuclear catastrophe. When the U.S.S.R. dissolved in 1991, Russia became its successor state; Ukraine and 13 other constituent Soviet Republics became newly independent states. In Ukraine, years of corruption, gangsterism and oligarchy followed.

“When you experience being with people who are ready to die for you... it’s a kind of rapture, a wonder at the possibilities given to man.”

— Jurko Prochasko

In 2004, the former Soviet republics in the Baltics—Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania—joined both the European Union and NATO. By then it was clear that a Russia ruled by Mr. Putin would resist any attempt by Ukraine (a country with a population more than seven times that of all three Baltic states combined) to follow their path. In that year’s Ukrainian presidential election, the Kremlin supported Viktor Yanukovich —a criminal with robbery convictions, who used election fraud and dioxin poisoning of his chief opponent to claim victory. In protest, thousands of Ukrainian citizens gathered on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti, Kyiv’s Independence Square, in what became known as the Orange Revolution.

For three weeks they froze, resolutely—and victoriously. New elections the following month brought their preferred, westward-leaning candidate to the presidency. But the Orange Revolution’s victory was ephemeral. The new president proved a disappointment. Mr. Yanukovich reappeared to run again in 2010—this time assisted by a slick Washington PR agent named Paul Manafort, who gave Mr. Yanukovich a makeover—haircut, clothes, body language—and coached him on how to scare Ukrainian Russian-speakers with threats that Ukrainian nationalists would persecute them. (Ukraine is a bilingual country, and Ukrainian and Russian are like Spanish and Italian, related but distinct.) The coaching was effective.



A demonstrator holds an EU flag with a Crimean Tatar symbol in its center, Kyiv, Nov. 29, 2013.

PHOTO: SERGEI CHUZAVKOV/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Under Mr. Yanukovich, Ukraine was bound to the Kremlin, and the country’s resources flowed largely to the president and his inner circle of oligarchs. A younger generation, born after the fall of the Soviet Union, looked to the prospect of EU membership for the horizon of their future. Then, in November 2013, under pressure from Mr. Putin, Mr. Yanukovich abruptly declined to sign a long-anticipated association agreement with the EU.

Thousands went out to the Maidan once again. They were largely students, young people who felt as if their future had been torn from their hands. They weren't interested in ethnic differences or language politics. They were interested in Europe's being open to them. Their slogan was "Ukraine is Europe."

Mr. Yanukovych sent riot police to beat them. It appeared that he was counting on the terrified parents to pull their children off the streets. But he miscalculated: Instead the parents joined their children there. At one point more than a half million people were on the streets of Kyiv, now with the slogan: "We will not let you beat our children." All winter they stayed on the Maidan.



Forces sent by Ukraine's interior ministry clash with protesters in Kyiv, Feb. 18, 2014.

PHOTO: VLAD SODEL/REUTERS

On Feb. 18, 2014, Mr. Yanukovych sent a militia to confront a crowd with stun grenades, tear gas, truncheons and rubber bullets. An iconic photograph appeared on the internet: a 59-year-old father and his 27-year-old son, their hair soaked in blood. In the days that followed on the Maidan, people dug up paving stones and crushed bricks to reinforce barricades. They set fire to clothing and tires and anything else that could burn. The sky turned black from smoke. Snipers fired from the rooftop of the high-rise Hotel Ukraina, and bodies fell.

More than a hundred protesters lost their lives in the revolution. After a cease-fire on Feb. 21, Mr. Yanukovych fled to Russia. Most people went home, but some stayed on the Maidan, where they had lived for weeks and seen people killed. The psychoanalyst Jurko Prochasko described the conversations he had there when he came to offer help: "When you experience being with people who are ready to die for you, to make themselves vulnerable for you, to carry you if you're wounded, a willingness appears—it's a kind of rapture, a wonder at the possibilities given to man."

“I’m a Russian-language writer. And now I can’t even bear to watch Russian films. I’m unable to forgive.”

— Vladimir Rafeenko

Ukraine was a different country than it had been a few months earlier. All winter long the border had blurred between night and day. People had opened themselves, overcome social divisions, crossed to the other side of fear. Ukraine had become a civic nation in a new way.

Philosophers have long struggled with how to think about the present, which cannot be grasped because it has no duration. For Jean-Paul Sartre, the present was the border between facticity—what simply is, what has happened and cannot be changed—and transcendence, an opening to go beyond what and who one has been until this moment. Revolution illuminates this border. It is as if, in Blanche’s words from “A Streetcar Named Desire,” “You suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow.”

This week marks the anniversary of the sniper massacre on the Maidan. In the eight years that have passed, Ukraine has lost the Crimean Peninsula to an illegal Russian annexation. The Kremlin has instigated a war in the east Ukrainian region called the Donbas, where thousands of Ukrainians have been taken captive and tortured, and some 14 thousand killed in a war that serves no purpose—apart from Mr. Putin’s amusement. And now Mr. Putin has launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, not limited to the east.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

To what extent do you think the blossoming civic identity of Ukrainians will be a factor in the conflict with Russia? Join the conversation below.

For eight years, the Donbas has been a laboratory of post-truth. An early Russian television narrative held that the Maidan was a CIA-sponsored fascist coup and Ukrainian Nazis were now heading east to kill all Russian speakers. In response, the story went, local separatists, all on their own initiative, had risen up to protect their people.

In late winter 2015, Elena Kostyuchenko, a journalist for *Novaia Gazeta* in Moscow, was in the Donbas, reporting on the Russian soldiers there, who officially didn’t exist. After one battle, she talked to a 20-year-old Russian tank driver named Dorzhi Batomunkuev at a hospital in Donetsk.

Yes, he said, he had known he was being sent to Ukraine. His unit had disguised themselves; they had painted their tanks, stripped them of identification. He had been

told that Polish mercenaries in the Donbas were killing peaceful civilians. Ms. Kostyuchenko asked if he'd seen them. No, he said, but he did not doubt they were there. "Of course I'm not proud of what I did," he told her, "that I was destroying and killing. Obviously, you can't be proud of that. But on the other hand, I calm myself down with the fact that it's all for the sake of peace, for peaceful citizens."

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The Ukrainian writer Vladimir Rafeenko, whose novel "Descartes' Demon" won the Russian Prize for literature written in Russian by non-Russian citizens in 2013, is from Donetsk. Born in 1969, he lived there all his life, until 2014, when he joined some million and a half internally displaced persons who fled westward into the part of Ukraine not at war. Like many Ukrainians, Mr. Rafeenko is a native Russian speaker, and it was obvious to him that the Russian language had been under no threat in Donetsk until Mr. Putin started a war there. "I'm a Russian-language writer," Mr. Rafeenko told me. "And now I can't even bear to watch Russian films. I'm unable to forgive."

Mr. Rafeenko has written a novel in Russian about the grotesque absurdity of the war and a novel in Ukrainian about being a refugee in one's own country. Last year, via Zoom, he taught a literature course that devoted four weeks to Anton Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya" and "The Cherry Orchard." In passionately opposing imperial Russian aggression, he draws precisely on the rich tradition of Russian literature.

At present, every third Ukrainian is prepared to resist a Russian invasion with armed force. An additional 21% are prepared to organize civil resistance. In any case, Russia has been engaging in a war with Ukraine for the past eight years. My journalist friends, too, are readers of Chekhov and know that it is axiomatic that once a gun appears on the stage, the director must see that it is fired before the end of the last act. Mr. Putin has arranged very many guns on the stage. What choice is there but to be "ready to work, whatever comes"?

—Dr. Shore is an associate professor of history at Yale University and the author of *"The Ukrainian Night: An Intimate History of Revolution,"* published by Yale University Press in 2018.