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Free Ukraine

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The Russian assault is another chapter in Ukraine's long history of suffering. Orest Subtelny describes the brutal period after WW I:

> … Indeed, in the modern history of Europe no country experienced such complete anarchy, bitter civil strife, and total collapse of authority…. Six different armies-– those of the Ukrainians, the Bolsheviks, the Whites, the Entente [French], the Poles and the anarchists – operated on its territory. Kyiv changed hands five times in less than a year. Cities and regions were cut off from each other by numerous fronts. … The starving cities emptied as people moved into the countryside in their search for food. (Subtelny 2000, p. 359)

The Bolsheviks took control of Ukraine in 1922. During WWII the Nazis killed a million and a half Ukrainian Jews. An estimated three million non-Jewish Ukrainians in western Ukraine were murdered by Ukrainian forces to prevent Poland's territorial control. Two and a half million Ukrainians were deported to Germany as slave laborers. Finally, with the collapse of the USSR in 1991 90% of Ukrainians voted for independence. A new era dawned, but there were soon the scourges of oligarchy, corruption, and police violence. An American visiting Ukraine in 1993 and 1994 observed:

> … we became aware of how victimized most Ukrainian peasants feel. They were always oppressed and exploited by one invader or another. It seemed

> that many of the peasants we saw at the marketplace lived with little hope for a better future. Independence had not brought them much progress. They were still very poor, hardly able to survive. … We keep wondering whether the future will be any different. With so many voices in Russia wanting to reclaim Ukraine as part of their territory, there is the constant fear that independence might be a very fragile thing. (Nouwen 2023)

A Ceasefire

Putin is demanding the territory Russian forces now hold in eastern Ukraine, the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. Kyiv will not accept any loss of Ukrainian territory. What hope is there for a ceasefire and negotiations? A recent contribution by George Beebe and Zachary Paikin looks back at the Helsinki agreement of 1975 in which the Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe accepted Moscow's de facto control of all its satellite republics. (Beebe, George and Zachary Paikin September 4, 2025) That accord fifty years ago achieved mutual acceptance of the de facto reality that allowed for stability and the dialing back of the nuclear arms race. What that might look like at the present stage of the Ukraine-Russia war is de facto recognition of Moscow's control of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and the withdrawal of Ukrainian military forces from them. They note that in 2023 Putin demanded more, namely, Kherson and Zaporizhia as well, but may settle for Donetsk and Luhansk. Paikin and Beebe recommend that the de jure status of those parts of the Donbas be deferred for later. For now, the West would recognize that part of Donbas as occupied territory.

Ukraine needs a ceasefire now that prevents more death and destruction and the danger of losing more territory. Kyiv has the potential for gaining Western security guarantees. Kyiv's terms must include maintaining its military forces. In addition, it must demand safe return of Ukrainians who fled the country or are internally displaced, and the return of the twenty thousand children kidnapped and sent to Russia. A political win for Putin would be an agreement that Ukraine does not seek NATO membership and that no foreign troops be present on Ukrainian soil. What he has to gain is halting the enormous casualties of Russian troops, the cost of the war, and the lifting of Western sanctions against exports of Russian oil and gas. The matter of war reparations and the investigation and prosecution of war crimes must be addressed in the future by the international community.

Ukraine can recover its vitality now, by addressing internal reforms. It can also influence the future Russia-annexed oblasts in which Putin has exploited differences and fueled ethnic hostility. Is it possible for former neighbors to achieve a degree of mutual understanding, agreeing to live together once again?

Political Reform

Ukraine's current one-party control has prevented legislative reforms. Since the war began, the country is under martial law and elections have been indefinitely postponed, Mustafa Navyem has headed Ukraine's Office of Reconstruction. He says that its task is to "rebuild roads, bridges, and dwellings as fast as Russian missiles are destroying them. …Our only real goal is survival. … We are all in a rush to give people hope." (Gessen 2024, p.35) Navyem worries that "if the war goes on long enough, Ukraine will be more like Russia, autocratic, corrupt, nihilistic." When a settlement is reached Ukraine can begin to rebuild its physical infrastructure, with much international assistance. That can only happen after the Russian assaults stop.

Since Zelenskyy's election in 2019 his party, Servant of the People, has gained complete control of the Ukraine's parliament, with 254 seats. 226 votes are needed to pass legislation. The second largest block of seats was held by "For Life" with forty-four seats, until it was recently banned.. Eleven pro-Russia parties have been banned. Olga Rudenko, a Ukrainian investigative journalist and editor of the *Kyiv Independent* writes that Zelenskyy ignored corruption during the three years of his presidency before the war:

> Scandals and tolerance for corruption have chipped away at Mr. Zelenskyy's popularity. …if an election were held today, he'd garner about 25 percent of the vote — down from the 30 percent he easily won in the first round of the 2019 election. (Rudenko, 2022)

Zelenskyy's cancelation of the 2024 elections has been hotly debated. It is time for elections. Ian Proud, a diplomat in the British Embassy in Moscow from 2014-2019 writes:

> Zelenskyy's regular prognostications about putting his country in a stronger position to negotiate look increasingly self-serving. Ukraine will never be in a stronger position than today, militarily, economically, or demographically. This performative illusion and delusion merely put off the inevitable and much-needed elections in Ukraine that would follow on from a ceasefire. (Ian Proud 2024)

Frédérick Lavoie, a Canadian journalist covered Ukraine's popular protests from 2004-2014. Missing from the heady Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv in 2014, he noted, was the participation of Russian-Speaking Ukrainians. (Lavoie 2018) They were left to worry about their fate, and without balance, there was no unity. The central government needs to be concerned for plural governance.

The Economy

Ukraine exports huge amounts of grain to Europe and Africa and has much mineral wealth but remains the second poorest country among the former Soviet satellites, after Moldova. In 2008 the IMF lent Ukraine $16.4b, stipulating several economic reforms. However, as Anders Åslund, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and author of several books on Ukraine writes, "From 2011 onward [President Viktor] Yanukovych no longer made any pretense of pursuing economic reforms to raise credits from IMF but pursued predatory economic policies." (Åslund 2015, pp. 84-85) Recent privatization policies have primarily benefit Zelenskyy's inner circle.

In 2015 an international panel of economists met in Kyiv and identified four chronic problems: Russian aggression in the Donbas, insufficient inflow of international capital, the continuing need for judicial reform, and lack of legislators' commitment to economic reform. (Åslund 2015, pp. 25-38)

In late 2025, Ukraine's Anti-Corruption Bureau revealed large kickbacks from contractors working for the state-owned nuclear energy sector to Ukraine's Minister of Justice, Minister of Energy, and Deputy Prime Minister. All have been dismissed. Zelenskyy's Chief of Staff and closest advisor was also forced to resign. An estimated one hundred million dollars have been embezzled. All while Ukraine is fighting for its life. Ukraine wants EU membership but given the level of corruption this unlikely to happen. Ukraine has always resisted membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, Putin's alternative to the EU.

Trade Unions

During the Donbas miners' strike in 1991 the Federation of Trade Unions in Ukraine was established. It is an umbrella union comprised of forty-four specialized unions, numbering 4.8 million workers. The Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine was established in 1993, comprised of six unions. However, worker rights have been eroded over the past decade. Laws passed by the Parliament have weakened free unions, especially since the start of the war. Volodya Vagner writes:

> In Ukraine, organized labor has rallied behind the resistance against Russia's invasion. But rather than reward its contribution, the government is using the war to push through anti-labor measures, posing a long-term threat to workers' right to organize. (Vagner 2024)

Leaders of Ukraine's independent union have been investigated, arrested, and silenced. Some have disappeared. Martial law has prohibited worker strikes and protests.

Solidarity

Civil societies of educators, health care workers, lawyers, civil rights activists, chambers of commerce, trades people, cultural and historical associations, and many other groups coalescing around common purposes contribute to greater citizen participation. They help to distribute power across Ukrainian society. Civil societies connect Ukrainians to their counterparts in the West. During the war civil societies floundered as many of their members fled the country or were conscripted into the army. How to rebuild them is an important question.

Ukrainian soldiers want to go home—if they still have homes. It is important to integrate them into the nation they have fought to save. There is also the question of the thousands of soldiers who deserted or dodged the draft. Volodymyr Ishchenko observes that returning soldiers bring their guns home and may behave like soldiers rather than civilians. Vlad Beliavsky is a Ukrainian psychotherapist who enlisted in the army in 2022, serving on the front lines for a year. He now works in intelligence, and he helps soldiers suffering from depression. A demoralized soldier told him he was afraid there would be no future for their country. Beliavsky asked him to consider "one good or constructive thing that has come out of this war." (Hattenstone 2023) The man answered that Ukraine has a powerful army, and people to be proud of. Beliavsky posed a question to help the soldier reframe what was happening: "Do you think that if we get through this nightmare period, this hell, these people will help you and our country to rebuild faster and create a brighter future?" The man answered "Yes." Beliavsky maintains an app offering soldiers help. The need is great: There are also the many soldiers who have deserted, a worrisome trend in the war. Beliavsky is optimistic: "You've got forty million united Ukrainians. …Will [Putin] massacre forty million people? That's the only way he can win this war. The *only* way.*"*

Veterans can be active citizens working for social change and peace. Olexiy Haran, professor of comparative politics at Kyiv Mohyla University writes that "new political forces could potentially take the shape of an organized party led by prominent wartime volunteers, or soldiers returning from the front." (Haran and Yakovlyev, eds 2024)

Ukrainian Churches: Unity and Action

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church-Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) is the largest Ukrainian Church, followed by the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church is the country's third largest Church. (It was

repressed by the Communist government from 1946-1990. Its bishops were deported to Siberia; the Church went underground and clergy were secretly ordained. Most UGCC churches are in western Ukraine. However, its churches in the Donbas have been under attack since the Russian invasion; only thirty-seven of the 80 UGCC churches in the east are still functioning.)

The OCU became autonomous from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in 2018, and the UOC broke with the ROC after Russia invaded in 2022. The UOC, however, is distrusted by the government because some of its clergy have remained in communion with Moscow. The government investigated the UOC, and legislation was drafted by Parliament to shut the UOC down. But UOC members were outraged, including among Ukrainian soldiers who are members of that Church. The legislation did not pass (Luchenko 2023).

Throughout the war the Churches have advocated for the return of prisoners of war, the repatriation of Ukrainian children taken to Russia, humanitarian assistance, and urged that Ukrainian refugees abroad have access to their liturgies. They have also resisted the propaganda emanating from the ideology of *russkiy mir*, by which some ROC officials, most notably Moscow Patriarch Kirill, justify Russian empire and dismisses the claim of Ukrainian sovereignty and insists that the ROC is the sole legitimate faith of the Russian empire.

Since 2018 the World Council of Churches has facilitated discussions among the Ukrainian Churches to foster harmony. But since the Russian invasion, relations have cooled. Whatever form a cease fire takes, the Churches will be called upon to play key roles "to strengthen the role of the Ukrainian churches, create conditions for peace and dialogue, and amplify their role as potential mediators within communities" (Kovalenko 2023 p. 186).Mutual respect and ecumenical action can help the Ukrainian Churches facilitate community reconciliation. They can also advocate for nonviolent civil defense against further aggression.

Four instances of church commitment to nonviolent activism around the world are worth briefly mentioning here: the roles of the Catholic Church in the Philippines and in Poland, the Lutheran Church in East Germany, and the World Council of Churches and the South African Council of Churches in South Africa. As the corruption of the Marcos regime deepened in the 1960s, the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines, led by Cardinal Jaime Sin of Manila condemned its practices. In the Presidential election of 1968 the Cardinal established a vote counting office to prevent fraud. When Marcos lost the election but declared victory, Cardinal Sin directed priests of Manila to urge the faithful to join a massive nonviolent protest in Manila to block the movement of tanks Marcos had dispatched

to arrest his opposition. The next day, Marcos fled the country. In Poland the Catholic Church had opposed the Communist government throughout the 1950s and 1960s. It paid a high price: Cardinal Glemp, primate of the Polish Catholic hierarchy, was imprisoned along with nine hundred priests. Another outspoken priest was assassinated. The Church supported the labor strikes in Gdansk, from which "Solidarity" was born. It called for nonviolent protests and assisted workers' families. In East Germany, the Lutheran bishop of Halle encouraged opposition to the Communist government, encouraging nonviolent demonstrations. Eventually, the government collapsed and appealed to the church to use its building to negotiate a peaceful transfer of power. In the 1980s the WCC and the South African Council of Churches condemned apartheid and its violation of the rights of black South Africans. Across South Africa clergy led nonviolent protests and committed civil disobedience, contributing to the internal and external opposition to apartheid. Only the Dutch Reformed Church continued to legitimize apartheid, and was expelled from the SACC, which now labeled apartheid a heresy. Finally the DRC acknowledged that apartheid ideology was sinful and begged forgiveness for its many years of defending it.

There is precedent for the Ukrainian Churches support of nonviolent protest. In 2013 and 2014 large protests broke out in Kyiv when President Victor Yanukovych reneged on his agreement to sign an agreement with the EU. The movement became known as the "Revolution of Dignity." Pavlo Smytsnyuk described the role of the churches:

> On one of the most critical days of the protest, religious leaders met with the opposition and asked them to continue to negotiate. When the opposition politicians argued that they lacked a "mandate" from the crowd for resuming dialogue, religious leaders told them: you go and negotiate, and we will go to Maidan…. Church leaders pressured the government to continue the dialogue. They had protected the lives of the protestors, who chanted ''thank you." This anecdote shows how churches, when endowed with trust, can successfully promote ideas and actions, which are otherwise unpopular in the eyes of public opinion. (Smytsnyuk, 2023, p.56)

Oleksandra Kovalenko acknowledges "the ideals of pacifism and nonviolent resistance that are often at the core of a Christian worldview" and references Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "theological dialogue crucial…to explaining the significance of active resistance." (Kovalenko 2023, p. 181)

Nonviolent activism in Russian-occupied territories and in Ukraine

The war has divided Donbas communities, those opposing russification suffering harsh reprisals in Russian-controlled areas. Putin tried to legitimate Russian control of Donetsk and Luhansk by sham elections. All Ukrainian speakers have the right to return. Those who wish to remain should have their rights protected. International accompaniment and international monitoring of elections should be negotiated. Those who do not choose to return should receive restitution for their property that was destroyed or stolen. Cross-ethnic dialogue, active civil societies, worker rights, and political associations will be the nonviolent challenges.

How can Ukraine defend its smaller territory in the event of further Russian aggression, through nonviolent means? In the past century nonviolent strategies have defeated brutal occupations and dictatorships, minimizing the loss of lives. Their successes required broad citizen education, consistent nonviolent methods, and patience. Such commitments have worked elsewhere and can vitalize Ukrainian democracy, creating a free Ukraine.

Seamus Heany, excerpt from *The Cure at Troy*

Beings suffer.
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

…

History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells

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