Ukraine on the Brink

It is quite normal to refuse to believe that you are about to be engulfed by a cataclysm

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Editors' Note: *On February 24, six hours after this article was filed, Russia began an all-out attack on Ukraine.*

In the spring of 2014, when Russian-backed separatists were seizing parts of eastern Ukraine, I wrote a piece from there for these pages titled "Ukraine: The Phony War?" Well, here we are again: for the past couple of months Russian forces have been gradually massing along Ukraine's borders. One day in mid-February, as darkness fell over Kharkiv, the country's second-largest city, I noticed about twenty people kneeling at the edge of a park on Sumska Street, the central boulevard.

They were silent and were holding their hands as if in prayer. Were they local peace activists, I wondered? In 2014 I had seen a group of people close to the front line in Mariupol who were imploring the Lord to save their city. But this time, as I got closer, I noticed a little placard that said: "endccp.com." They were Chinese, maybe students from among the thousands of foreigners studying here, demanding, their website explained, an end "to the evil Chinese Communist Party."

The next day the news was alarming. A Russian attack was imminent, said a US intelligence official. The center of Kharkiv is only a fifty-minute drive from the Russian border, or a bit longer if you're in a tank. So I went to the supermarket to buy some cans of tuna in case war broke out. It was packed, but the shelves were full. As a dutiful journalist I stood by the checkout with my notebook watching to see if there were any signs of panic buying. But there were none. That night no attack came.

Millions of words have been spewed in the last few weeks about what Russian president Vladimir Putin wants. He wants to destroy Ukraine, say some. No, he craves respect, say others. He wants this…or maybe that. No one knows, and in Ukraine very few people I've met think he is about to launch a full-scale invasion.

At the Hoptivka border crossing twenty-five miles north of Kharkiv, a steady stream of people were dragging suitcases toward the Russian side or coming the other way. I asked some if they were worried; everyone in Kharkiv had seen the videos on social media of Russian military convoys allegedly near Belgorod, an hour or so further north. One woman arriving from Russia said with a serious face, "Yes, and that is why I am coming home to fight!" Before I could ask her name, she hurried off, laughing loudly, to catch a mini-bus to Kharkiv.

I asked for permission to visit the border. By a hamlet called Zv'yazok there were three guards in snowsuits and a black Labrador called Lucky on patrol. There was nothing to be seen on the other side of the ditch the Ukrainians had dug in 2014. On both sides the snow lay thick on the fields, and I wondered what the Labrador was supposed to be sniffing for. Tanks? In Washington and in European capitals, leaders kept saying that an attack was imminent. But at least where I was allowed to visit, no preparations were being made for it, and there was no military activity on the main road from Kharkiv, as might have been expected.

People in Kharkiv may not believe much in a Russian attack, but by the time you read this it may have begun. When I started writing it in the Half an Hour café in Kharkiv, there was news that the puppet regime in separatist-controlled Donetsk was evacuating the population, which sounded like a prelude to war. By the time I finished it, Russian troops were reported to be arriving there. Meanwhile they were playing Michael Jackson's "Heal the World" in the café, which was full of earnest young people poring over their laptops or relaxing.

In my experience it is quite normal to refuse to believe that you are about to be engulfed by a cataclysm that will change your life forever—or kill you.

In 2014 I was invited to a Passover Seder by the Donetsk Jewish community. During the dinner the rabbi said unexpectedly, "We have a foreign guest, he can make a speech!" I said that "Next Year

in Jerusalem" was all well and good but there were separatists constructing checkpoints on the highway into the city, so "Next year in Donetsk" might be more apt. "Nah," they said, "it will all be fine!" A few weeks later they probably all fled. It was the same in Bosnia and Herzegovina just before the war in 1992. People said that since everyone knew that tens of thousands would die, there would be no war.

I met a teacher who told me that she veers between panic and shrugging it all off. In January Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky said that the Russians might try to occupy Kharkiv, which alarmed people here. President Joe Biden was said to have told Zelensky a few days later to "prepare for impact," though that was later denied. But then you think about it rationally, which of course Putin may not be doing, and you wonder how he could hope to seize a city of some 1.5 million people, let alone much of the rest of Ukraine.

In Kharkiv's history museum there is a section devoted to World War II. Battles here were as bloody and devastating as anywhere in Europe. Millions of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians were killed or starved to death. Then something caught my eye: a panel explained that by the time the Red Army expelled the Germans from Soviet Ukraine in 1944, it numbered 2.3 million men. Putin has amassed anywhere between 150,000 and 190,000 on Ukraine's borders, we are told, not all of whom of course will actually fight. Some are quartermasters, mechanics, and cooks. One of the videos circulating on social media, also allegedly from Belgorod, showed army mobile kitchens—identifiable by the chimneys poking out from under their tarpaulins—flowing past in a convoy.

In Lviv, in western Ukraine, I saw Ukrainian soldiers practicing with new antitank missiles that the British had given them. Some commentators scoffed that, in the face of overwhelming Russian military might, these were symbolic. Oh no, said the Ukrainian soldiers, these were great for the 200-400-meter range, which they did not possess, and were especially suited for urban warfare.

When he talks about Ukraine, it is clear that Putin believes many Russian myths and has outdated views about its people. He published a long essay last year on the "historical unity" of Ukrainians and Russians. But what he and even many liberal, intellectual Russians may not appreciate is that Ukraine is not the same place it was when Mikhail Bulgakov grew up in Kyiv at the beginning of the last century. It is not the same place it was at independence in 1991 or at the time of the Orange Revolution in 2004, nor is it the same country that was wracked by revolution and war in 2014.

In Lviv, Odesa, Kharkiv, and finally Kyiv, something struck me for the first time after many years of coming here: their post-Soviet feel has finally been cast off. That is not the case in smaller Ukrainian towns, but for the first time these big cities feel like anywhere else in Europe.

Unlike Russians, Ukrainians have not needed visas to visit Europe's twenty-six-country Schengen area since 2017, and thanks to cheap flights millions have done so. Most young Ukrainians, who have no memory of the Soviet era (for which you need to be close to forty), are now just like other Europeans. They are no longer people from Russia's periphery who mentally, culturally, and socially orbit Moscow. I can imagine that older Russians like Putin, if he knows this, must hate it. It relates directly to the wise maxim of Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former US national security adviser: "It cannot be stressed enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire." As the links that have bound Russia and Ukraine for centuries slowly snap with every passing year, no wonder Putin is worried and thinks this is his last chance to suborn and subordinate.

And Putin's war since 2014 has made a big difference here. There are no longer direct flights or trains between the two countries. At Hoptivka, Lieutenant Colonel Yuri Trubachev of Ukraine's Border Guard Service told me that before 2014 some 25,000 people crossed there every day. Now that figure is 2,500, and even if you discount the effect of Covid it is symbolic of the frayed ties. While I was there a two-mile line of trucks was waiting to enter Russia. A driver told me they had been there for perhaps three days, and it was the same to enter Ukraine. There is no logical reason for this, but as Taras Danko, a professor of international business in Kharkiv, noted tartly, "You need the cooperation of the border authorities and for that you need the cooperation between states, not talk of one state invading another."

The imposing Soviet-style façade of the main government building in Kharkiv has a giant Ukrainian flag mounted across it. In front of it stretches the city's vast Freedom Square, one of the largest in Europe. In the middle people twirl happily around an outdoor skating rink. At the far end there's no trace of the Lenin statue that still stood here in 2014, close to Derzhprom, the famous constructivist building, which was finished in 1928 but looks like it could have been built today.

On May 1, 2014, I was inside the government building while it was being besieged by pro-Russian protesters waving little flags of the "Kharkov Republic" that they believed was about to be created alongside the ones in neighboring Donetsk and Luhansk. Pensioners waved Soviet flags and some people had the black, yellow, and white flag that the Russian Empire used until 1883. The building was ringed by riot police. It was not the first time that pro-Russians had attempted to storm it, but in the end they could not muster the numbers and dispersed. Many of the people in such demonstrations were not locals: they had been bused in from Russia.

In those chaotic weeks entire parts of the security services and administration in Donetsk and Luhansk defected to the pro-Russian cause, but in Kharkiv things turned out quite differently. Later it emerged that the crucial moment had come when Gennadiy Kernes, the powerful mayor, had opted for Ukraine, probably on the advice of one of the Ukrainian oligarchs who did not want to lose his assets if Russia seized control. Until then he had opposed the Maidan Revolution, which in February had kicked out Viktor Yanukovych, the pro-Russian president.

Once Kharkiv was saved for Ukraine—like Odesa, though for partly different reasons—Russia's aim of seizing Ukraine from within collapsed and, apart from Crimea, which it annexed, it was left with parts of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas region, which it now has to support financially. Since then Ukraine's security services have been purged of Russian sympathizers, and Kharkiv has changed, like much of the rest of the country. Tens of thousands of locals have gained combat experience fighting the Russians or their proxies on the Donbas front line. Behind them stands a network of committed volunteers. Denys Kobzin, the head of the Kharkiv Institute for Social Research, explained to me that if soldiers lack something, they put out a call on social media, money is raised, and the volunteers deliver the item. In this way tens of thousands are mobilized, beyond those under arms, in defense of the country.

Socially the city has changed too. It is hard for foreigners to understand, but for many in places like Kharkiv, the question "Am I Ukrainian or am I Russian?" did not matter much until 2014, especially because in a city so close to the border, many people have friends and family on the other side. But, Kobzin told me, the events of 2014 forced many to decide, and the majority, though not all, opted for Ukraine.

As time went on, other developments began to change the situation too. No one knows the numbers exactly, but tens of thousands of people from Donetsk and Luhansk came to settle here. Kharkiv's economy is growing, or it had been until now. It is, as it has been since the founding of the university here in 1804, a major center for higher education, and graduates don't have problems finding jobs. Much if not all of the old Soviet-era heavy machinery and defense industry has gone, but its place has been taken by hundreds of IT companies and smaller enterprises producing everything from consumer goods to processed food.

Another important change is that now almost all schools that once taught in Russian have switched to Ukrainian, which has helped nurture a new generation proud to be Ukrainian. It is often said that older people tend to harbor more positive feelings toward Russia because they are nostalgic for their happy Soviet youth, and conflate the USSR with Russia. But the world looks different if you can fly to Barcelona for the weekend for €30.

Like Kharkiv, Odesa is mostly Russian-speaking. Like Kharkiv, which side it would support in 2014 was uncertain. Ukraine is a country with strong regional identities, and Odesa has one of the strongest. More than one person laughed and told me that if they went abroad and people asked them where they were from, they would instinctively say Odesa before they said Ukraine.

On May 2, 2014, fighting broke out in Odesa between Maidan supporters and pro-Russians. The latter retreated into the old Trade Union building, near the city's very grand central station, and when

Molotov cocktails were exchanged it caught fire; forty-two died inside. While pro-Russians have since then constructed a myth of Ukrainian Nazis incinerating them in a modern-day pogrom, that is clearly nonsense, like Putin recently babbling about an imaginary Ukrainian genocide against Russian-speakers. But that day was still significant. The fire was a tragedy, while for those who aimed to carve out a new Russian imperial "Novorossiya" from half of Ukraine and link it to Russia, it was the moment their plans collapsed.

Those with pro-Russian sentiments have not gone away, but as it became clear that Odesa could not be plucked from Ukraine like Crimea, without a shot being fired, and as fighting engulfed the Donbas, most here decided that they would not die for Putin, nor did they want to see their home turn into a battlefield. They have also aged, and younger people who have only ever lived in an independent Ukraine tend to be more at home in it, unless they come from particularly anti-Ukrainian families.

Some young Odesans also have direct experience of what the end of Ukrainian rule can mean. Evgenia Afonina, a first-year philosophy student, came to the city at the age of fourteen when her family fled separatist-controlled Donetsk. They are Ukrainian, and her parents told her and her younger sister "to keep quiet about that." The anti-Ukrainian atmosphere in Donetsk was "very aggressive," she said. Her family eventually left because her parents did not want her younger sister to be indoctrinated in a Donetsk school. They were also frightened of Izolyatsia, once a modern art and cultural center in a converted factory, but after 2014 [a prison and a byword for terror by the separatist authorities](#).

After the May 2 fire, pro-Russian activists fled to Crimea or Donbas or Russia. In Odesa, as in Kharkiv, the mayor, Gennadiy Trukhanov, who had tilted to the anti-Maidan, pro-Russian side (which he now denies), changed his position, and today he is very clear: Odesa is part of Ukraine and Putin should keep out.

When I went to see him, he was holding a meeting with local security chiefs and municipal officials. They watched power points about bomb shelters, and Trukhanov, a former military man, discussed asking Germany for help in replacing their defunct air filtration systems and the US for emergency communication equipment in case, as seems likely, all communications are cut by the Russians.

I discussed with Oleg Brindak, his deputy, what he expected to happen if there is a Russian attempt to take the city. What worried him most, he said, was that about one third of the city council were pro-Russian, and they might try to rabble-rouse and seize buildings if there was conflict. I wondered if they could try to mount a local coup and take over the town hall. Brindak laughed and asked if I could imagine the mayor giving up power just like that. Trukhanov has some legal problems. He has been charged with corruption and accused of being a former mafia member. "Lies," he said when I questioned him about this, before launching into a lengthy diatribe against a local oligarch he claimed was responsible for cooking all this up. True or not, the tough guy reputation of the burly shaven-headed mayor does rather precede him.

Odesa is in many ways the city of Russian imagination. I stayed on Mayakovsky Street. Pushkin was exiled here, and I saw where Isaac Babel lived. Outside the town hall there is a cannon salvaged from a British ship that ran aground in 1854 and was destroyed by Russian forces defending the city during the Crimean War. Today, according to the analyst Hanna Shelest, it is hard to predict how Odesans would react if war comes, and "most don't even want to think about it," but in the main people just want to be left alone to make money. It was ever thus, she said.

Artem Fylypenko, the head of the Odesa branch of the National Institute for Strategic Studies, told me that "the majority of people are neutral" and that their main concerns were higher salaries and lower taxes. Still, he added, attitudes had shifted in Odesa in the last few years, especially as anti-Ukrainian TV channels spreading Russian propaganda were gradually taken off the air. I was told the same thing in Kharkiv by Maria Avdeeva, who studies Russian disinformation and propaganda. The shutting down of pro-Russian stations has led to criticism of Ukraine in the EU and the US for restricting free speech, but as she points out, Ukraine is at war and the media are one of "the tools of war."

With the sociologist Viktoria Balasanian I discussed what being pro-Russian even means anymore. One thing is certain, she said: a liking for Russian literature, music, TikToks, and YouTube videos hardly means you want Odesa to become part of a renewed Russian empire, any more than speaking English means Dubliners want Ireland to rejoin the United Kingdom. Still, old-fashioned snobbish prejudices continued to permeate even the younger generations in Odesa, "who think culture can only be in Russian." At the same time more than 91 percent of young people in the traditionally pro-Russian south considered themselves Ukrainian, only a little less than the 98 percent in other, traditionally more Ukrainian, regions.

When we talked, Fylypenko was wearing a tie, because he was going to participate in a TV panel; it was quite likely that he would be speaking Ukrainian while the others spoke Russian. Balasanian showed me research that found that 61 percent of young Ukrainians in the south spoke both Russian and Ukrainian with their families. The languages are close, but Russians find it hard to understand much in Ukrainian. Fylypenko said that he planned to join Ukraine's brand-new Territorial Defense forces, which are aimed at securing critical infrastructure and buildings away from the front lines, thus releasing men from the army and other branches of the security forces to fight.

Capturing Odesa would be hard, mused Fylypenko. We discussed the White Russian amphibious landing here in 1919, which had British naval support and succeeded thanks to a coordinated uprising in the city, and a Soviet diversionary amphibious landing in 1941, but now, he said, Putin was in a pickle. If it came to fighting and civilians died, it would destroy his concept of Russians and Ukrainians being one people. A week later, in the market in Kharkiv, I asked people if they feared an attack, and with astonishing unanimity they scoffed and said they did not, but one woman became aggressive and demanded to know if I had a brother. When I said I did, she replied, "Well would he attack you? No! So, Russia will not attack us!" Still Fylypenko cautioned me against assuming everyone was rational. One of his acquaintances had surprised him by saying, "I am against the EU because it is full of gays!"

Balasanian said that research showed that Ukrainians were peculiarly pessimistic. "People always say things are getting worse and worse," she said, even if they are not, and when there was a change in leadership people were "full of hope for a year" before reverting to a mood of gloom. As for Russians, she says, too many continue to think of Ukrainians through the prism of daft and old-fashioned stereotypes. "Either we are good, happy peasants or nationalist Banderites," she said, referring to Stepan Bandera, the controversial Ukrainian nationalist leader who had both allied with the Nazis and been imprisoned by them.

If you look for him, you can see Bandera everywhere. There are streets named after him, there are statues of him, and his face is spray-painted on walls. All this is grist to the mill of Russian propagandists, and it is lamentable that many Ukrainians do not know that his men not only fought the Soviets but killed Jews and Poles too. But harping on about Bandera is a distraction. Unlike in many Western countries, the far right has made little headway here and, in a country once infamous for its pogroms, Zelensky, a Jew, was elected president with 73 percent of the vote.

People who want to talk about Bandera usually also want to talk about the staunch nationalism of western Ukraine and Lviv, its biggest city. But people in Lviv want to talk about the future, not the past. Around its glorious former Austro-Hungarian center new suburbs are sprouting. Like Kharkiv it is a major IT center and, says Stepan Veselovskyi, the head of the Lviv IT Cluster, an industry lobby group, the sector employs 30,000 people, who in turn create another 40,000 jobs. Since Ukraine has not held a census since 2001, no one knows exactly how many people live in the country. Officially there are 746,000 in Lviv, but Mayor Andriy Sadovyi thinks the real number is close to a million. About a million Ukrainians work in neighboring Poland too, but mostly they come and go rather than settling there, and if people leave Lviv, he says, then others come from poorer parts of Ukraine to fill their jobs.

Across large parts of Central and Eastern Europe populations have been dropping because of low fertility rates and increasing emigration, but as Lviv has become part of the European and global economy and begun to boom, it has joined a string of cities across the region that have halted these gloomy demographic trends. Nowhere, unless it is destroyed by Putin, is a bright future for all Ukraine

as visible as in Lviv. Indeed, says Sadovyi, the quality of life in his city has risen so much that "life expectancy here is seven years higher than in the rest of the country." According to the latest statistics, a Ukrainian's life expectancy is 71.35 years—ten years less than the average in the European Union.

After I left Lviv, embassies began evacuating there from Kyiv on the assumption that it was far from any potential military action and that if an invasion came, attacking it would be a step too far even for Putin. But Sadovyi is not complacent. After all, the Russians and then the Soviets captured Lviv in 1914, 1939, and 1944. On the way into his office I noticed a copy of a biography of Golda Meir. When I asked him about it, he talked of his admiration for Israel and said that after the Holocaust the Jews had drawn the conclusion that "they could only rely on themselves," which was a "model" for Ukraine as well as Finland and Switzerland, countries he also admired.

He told me he was sending four hundred teachers and municipal officials to learn to shoot. I went to see the teachers at the shooting range, where they were giggling like teenagers and taking pictures of one another. But asking them to train seemed to me a shrewd move. Quite apart from sending a message locally that the Russian threat was real, their pictures would soon spread over social media and be seen by friends and family in Russia, which would send a message to them too. Most Russians and Ukrainians may not believe that a major war is coming, but a stream of images of ordinary Ukrainians learning how to shoot is part of the information war.

In Kyiv I met the novelist Andrey Kurkov in a wine bar. He told me he was writing a series of detective stories that begin in Kyiv in 1919, when the country was wracked by civil war. One of the reasons he wanted to write them, he said, was that Ukrainians don't know much about this period of history. The Germans occupied Kyiv in 1918 and in 1919 came the Bolsheviks, the Whites, Ukrainian forces, Poles, and the Bolsheviks again. Then we discussed whether Putin would go so far as ordering an attack on the entire country, including Kyiv. "It is unlikely," he said, "but I can imagine twelve Russian officers drinking wine here!"

We talked about his book *Grey Bees*, which was first published in 2018 and tells the story of Sergeyich, who is one of only two people left in his village in the dangerous gray zone that separates separatist regions from Ukrainian government control. Kurkov said he had done some of the research in the town of Sievierodontesk, which lies in the government-held part of Luhansk. In 2015 he reckoned that 90 percent of the population there was pro-Russian; now that figure was perhaps no more than 30 percent because people had seen how miserable life was in the breakaway "republics."

An hour after we talked Putin recognized them as independent states and Russian troops were reported to be moving in, raising the question of whether he would now try to seize militarily those parts of the region, like Sievierodontesk, that remain under Ukrainian control. Putin rambled and ranted that Russia had been robbed when the Soviet Union collapsed, that Ukraine had been created by Lenin, and that it had "never had a true tradition of statehood."

Two days later Ukraine declared a state of emergency. An attack was reported to be imminent. The streets of Kyiv were very quiet. Everyone was holding their breath.