

This War: What Ukrainians Know... And What I Have Learned.

Robert Gamble

Anecdotally, the war seems to be going well for Ukraine. What does it mean for this war to go well? Almost six months in, I am as shocked and mystified by what is happening as I would be if the Armed Forces of Jacksonville, Florida attacked Savannah. Every day, I read stories of local victories, but I know Ukraine is reluctant to share stories of defeat; it's hard to judge. Language is always a problem. "They repositioned," in lieu of "They fled." We have estimates: soldiers dead or injured, mostly Russians. We don't get troop movements. Recently, Zelensky berated his generals for speaking with journalists about strategy--for good reason. I read reports about the Russian Army: outdated weapons, lack of trained soldiers, and low morale, but I wonder if this is news to encourage Ukraine and de-moralize Russia.

At this moment in the war, there's a dark cloud with the Russian buildup of troops (25,000 soldiers, an estimate from BBC and others) on the east side of Nikolaev. This is to keep Kherson and begin the assault to occupy Nikolaev. This morning, I read (on BBC), that Ukraine is positioning troops in response. Large numbers are difficult to hide. A showdown, it seems. If the Russian Army prevails at Nikolaev, Odessa will be next.

This would be a bloody fight. Odessa has one million people, and several hundred thousand are eligible to shoulder a weapon. Odessians will be desperate to protect and defend. Odessa is predominantly Russian-speaking; one imagines residents siding with Russia, but a bloodline kind of loyalty to the city of Odessa comes first. Attempts in the past to rally Odessians toward Russia have failed.

If Russia occupied the city, they would soon control the entire coast of the Black Sea. But even to begin that assault will be demoralizing for any Russian who has vacationed in Odessa. Many have. Who would be eager to sight artillery onto the newly restored and beautiful Opera House? And all those French-designed and restored buildings protected by cherubs and gargoyles. Who could level a canon at them?

On the other hand, many Russian soldiers were recruited from Syria and Chechnya. Those who vacationed in Odessa would be people of means, officers, E-5, and above. The Russian army does not have a large percentage of people of means. The pay is terribly low and most Russian soldiers come from rural Russia. Never seen the city. Not even McDonald's.

Someone said, *why doesn't Ukraine just give up*, save all those buildings and people, but Russian occupation means change-of-government in every city? Every Mayor loyal to Ukraine would be gone. It means Russian ownership of all natural resources, wheat,

coal, sunflower seeds, and more. It means Russian oligarchs come in and buy up land and buildings, invest, remodel and make the profits: property at bargain prices, the long-term end of Ukrainian sovereignty, and the expansion of the Russian economy. It will go the way of Czechoslovakia in '68, a culture of informants and lies, driven by fear. Read Milan Kundera's "Lightness of Being."

Here's how it works: a well-known member of the community, the Director of the privately funded medical center has written articles online supporting the continued independent status of the medical center, or the owner of an oil and gas drilling company has written articles online on the benefits of private ownership of oil and gas production and the need for lower taxation.

The new Mayor of Odessa, (now appointed not elected, by the new Governor of the region, also appointed not elected by the office of the new President of the nation), with the help of professionals, looks into the past lives of the director and owner. Going way back to college, they find some damaging information on each, some sex or money scandal, and soon there is someone in the office of the president of the medical center and someone having lunch with the owner of the oil and gas company. "Be reasonable, you are a reasonable man. Why throw away your life and career? Think of your family. Simply write another article that retracts your former opinions and leans toward the new Mayor's direction of thinking, Say, for example, these enterprises need to be nationalized and public taxation increased to further fund the government. Do that, you can keep your job, and no one will ever open this file."

There's no need to yank teeth or fingernails. With anyone working with children, it's very easy. Post their photo and an official-looking article claiming they are a convicted pedophile. They will do whatever you wish to have this deleted from the Internet. It sounds clumsy and ridiculous but soon everyone is afraid that they will be next. It only takes a few examples. These are simple tactics for controlling populations. It won't happen right away, but in time everyone who is anyone can be manipulated. *Listen to me. The leadership in Ukraine, even normal people in Ukraine, know all about this.*

Not long ago, I heard that as refugees arrived in the west, Europeans were surprised to discover that Ukrainians have iPhones, wear fashionable (though not always expensive) clothes and drive new Mazdas, Mini Coopers, and Peugeots. In 17 years, Ukraine climbed out of the darkness of the mid-2000s.

In 2005, I saw only a few mothers pushing strollers with babies in the park. Economic and political uncertainty put a damper on the birth rate. Now on weekends, the sidewalks of downtown Izmail literally look like Disney World with parents and children of all ages in motion. Annual income from small businesses between 2010 and 2020 years more than tripled.

Ukraine knows it cannot lose this war. In 2001, there was little to lose. In 2003, animosity toward Russia led to the Orange Revolution. Now there is so much to lose. Ukraine is running on pride as a nation. Gone is a country Russians thought of as the land of dumb farmers. That ended when the enormous convoy of Russian tanks, trucks, and artillery got stopped, shot up, and sent back to Russia on the highway to Kyiv.

What I have learned.

I've been a student of peacemaking and an advocate of non-violence since the war in Central America. I love all that anti-war literature and music from the '60s and early '70s. Yes, I lean left. But this is not working in Ukraine. Standing for non-violence in this war is like giving the peace sign to an approaching hurricane.

America must help Ukraine not only with humanitarian assistance but with every weapon we have: Every gun, cannon, rocket, drone, jet, bomb, every ex-marine, or US Army volunteer teaching Ukrainians how to fight. And I am aware that inside those tanks and trucks we blow up are human beings, but Ukraine (and we) are up against a man who has no regard for human life: for Ukrainians or his own Russian soldiers who are dying so that the rich and powerful in Russia stay rich and powerful.

This is a war for Ukraine to protect her country and people, and preserve their dignity in the deepest and most basic sense of the word. If Ukraine prevails, she will stand on the stage of world democracies wearing Olympic Gold. A global sigh of relief will whistle in the Western World. If Ukraine is defeated, darkness will settle not just on Ukraine but on every neighbor of Russia, on America, and England as well.

It is a different world. A US Army veteran came to Ukraine to volunteer for me in 2007. He graduated from West Point in the late 1980s. He told me, even then, that the US Army had stopped planning for a classic land war (WW II) with Russia. Regardless of the outcome in Ukraine, even if the Russians return home, to fight another day, the Russian war machine will have the experience it needs. I am certain our own military has already begun planning; this kind of war on a larger scale is a very real possibility.

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